



Key Issues Impacting Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing in Northern Ireland

Engagement Report November 2023
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Introduction

The NI Mental Health Champion (MHC) set out a primary action within the 2022-23 Business Plan to engage with people with lived experience, professional groups and groups representing those with lived experience of poor mental health or users of mental health services. The MHC acts as a focal point for the discussion around well-being, mental health, and suicide and uses such engagement to inform her actions. Engagement focuses on five key themes, one being Children and Young People.

The Northern Ireland Youth Well-being Prevalence Survey published in late 2020 found that 12.6 % of young people (aged 2-19) in Northern Ireland met the criteria for any mood or anxiety disorder. Prevalence rates were higher among children living in an area of deprivation, living in a single-parent household, being in receipt of benefits and living in urban areas. Higher rates were also associated with poor health and additional educational needs:

- Disordered eating: 1 in 6 (16.2%)
- Self-harm: 1 in 10 (9.4%)
- Thought about/attempted suicide: 1 in 8 (12.1%)

The prevalence of mental illness in the youth population in Northern Ireland (NI) is broadly consistent with that of other regions in the UK. When the prevalence study was published, the rate in the NI youth population was higher for anxiety and depression disorders, although updated data in other regions since Covid has seen that gap reduce.

There is an absence of post-Covid population prevalence data for mental health in young people in Northern Ireland, so it is difficult to compare figures in other regions directly. However, a recent survey conducted by the NI Mental Health Foundation found that nearly four in ten (39%) young people (18–24-year-olds) indicated that anxiety had affected their day-to-day life to a great or moderate extent. Figures were also higher for males (34%) compared with females (27%), those living with a long-term health condition (51%) and single parents (46%).

The latest Mental Health Report states that mental ill-health in NI has an estimated annual cost of £3.4 billion. NI's child and adolescent mental health services receive only 7.7% of the annual budget, less than 10% of the UK average. These figures reflect the NI trend to underinvest in mental health. Underinvestment in child and adolescent mental health services is a primary concern. Service design and delivery were subject to a rights-based review by Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner published in their Still Waiting report. Findings from this report show that young people are not routinely consulted for their care or when developing the services and policies that shape access.

Defining mental health and well-being

Mental health is a term that captures a continuum of emotions from happiness and satisfaction with development across the lifespan to expected negative responses such as sadness, grief, or anxiety to life stressors. Current definitions incorporate the concept of psychological functioning, defined as a person's ability to achieve goals within themselves and their environment; ability refers to an individual's behavioural, emotional, and social skills and overall mental health. The core components of positive mental health relate to a feeling of well-being, and emotional well-being embodies a sense of satisfaction and happiness in one's life. Psychological well-being relates to a person's ability to respond functionally to life stressors and social well-being, which comes from feeling valued in a broader community.

Mental Health and Well-being WHO definition:

“ A state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her abilities can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and contribute to his or her community.”

The link between stress and mental ill-health

Physiological responses to stress or distress are recognised as the underlying pathways that lead to the patterns of feelings and behaviours that characterise mental illness. The amount or intensity of stress required to trigger the onset of a disorder is dependent on the level of vulnerability a person possesses. Critical neurological, biological, social, and emotional development periods in early life shape an individual's stress response.

The HPA axis regulates the body's response to stress, creating a pathway to produce cortisol, controlled by the release of hormones. Cortisol is the stress hormone, triggering physiological changes such as increased heart rate, supplying the body with enough oxygen to move quickly during the fight-flight or freeze response and reducing inflammation. When cortisol levels return to pre-stressor levels, the HPA axis can deactivate.

The fight-flight response triggered by activation of the HPA axis is a healthy response to stress that allows a person to face or avoid the stressor and return to feeling safe and calm afterwards. However, over-activation of the HPA axis can cause physical and psychological problems. HPA axis dysfunction means the stress response is prolonged within the body, damaging the body systems seen as non-essential in times of stress, such as the inflammation immune response or hormone production. It causes irritability, frequent illness, chronic tiredness, and exaggerated stress responses. People with HPA axis dysfunction are at increased risk of developing hypertension, obesity, fertility issues, muscle weakness, and cardiovascular disease. Chronic or long-term stress over-stimulates the HPA axis causing sensitisation. It has been linked to mood disorders such as depression and anxiety as a person struggles to regulate the body's stress response.

Genetics and early-life environments can increase a person's likelihood of experiencing HPA axis dysfunction, creating innate vulnerabilities for developing physical and mental health problems. Trauma exposure (particularly in childhood) can lead to the development of unconscious "triggers" that also activate the person's stress response system in a way that can be maladaptive and interfere with daily life.



Figure 1: HPA activation behavioural responses

Gaining a deeper understanding of young people's mental health in NI

There is a need to understand the things and situations young people find worrying, which could elicit the stress response. Doing so can aid the development and direction of specific supports to reduce stress and increase emotional regulation skills. Capturing the opinions and experiences of young people in this area gives us data that would inform the development of early intervention work and the provision of targeted support. It is relevant to the following policy areas in Northern Ireland specifically:

- [Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031](#)
- [Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030](#)
- [Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework](#)

The Office of the Mental Health Champion undertook a programme of research in young people's mental health, the aim of which was to understand the factors affecting the mental health of children and young people in NI. To this end the Mental Health Champion developed a module within the Young Life and Times (YLT) and Kids' Life and Times (KLT) 2023 surveys with a series of questions on mental health and wellbeing and help-seeking behaviour. The engagement activities described in this report were

fundamental part of this process, shaping the development of the questions and response options.

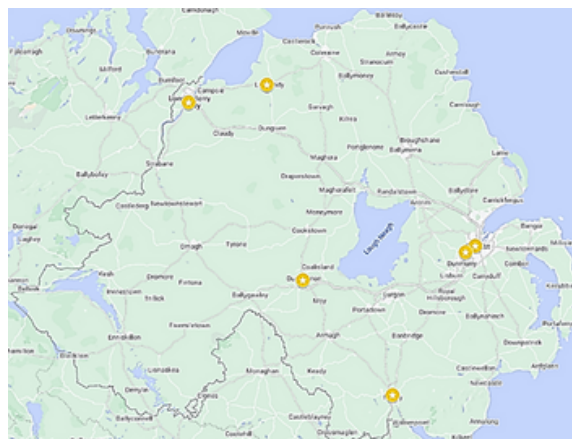
Methods

The purpose of the engagement activities was to offer time and space for young people, particularly those who did not typically to participate in such workshops, to have their voices heard. To this end the Mental Health Champion sought to hold engagement workshops within the Community and Voluntary sector of Youth Work though established a partnership with Youth Work Alliance.

Youth Work Alliance is a voluntary membership organisation linking voluntary youth services across Northern Ireland. It has partnerships with Education Authority, Department of Education, Department of Justice and Department of Health. Youth Work Alliance hosted each engagement workshop across the region in their North-West, Mid Antrim and Belfast hubs which the Mental Health Champion Research Officer facilitated. Youth Work staff remained on-site to check in with the young people throughout the discussion and provided additional support.

We want to thank each young person who participated anonymously. Their candour and openness to discuss mental health and well-being was inspiring. We are also very grateful to Youth Work Alliance and the following member youth clubs who participated in the workshops:

- @YesOurSpace Transition Youth Project
- St. Teresa's Youth Club
- St. Peter's Immaculata Youth Club
- Townsend Youth Project
- Dungannon Youth Resource Centre
- Roe Valley Residents Association
- St. John Bosco Youth Centre



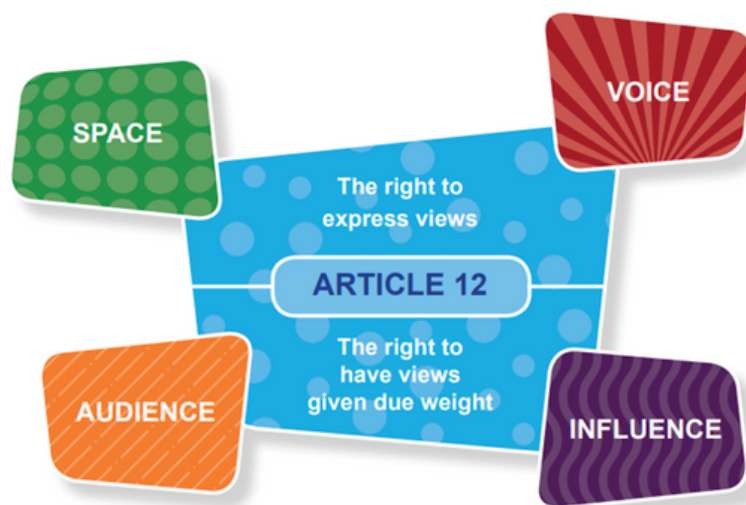
Participants

The eighty-nine young people (64% female, 36% male, ranging from 9-18 years) who participated in the engagement workshops did so anonymously therefore demographic information was not recorded. However, through discussions with youth work staff and the information shared by participants, we are aware that many of the young people have lived experiences of:

- Living in areas of deprivation
- Poverty
- Social services and being a child looked after
- Kinship care (living with family but not a parent)
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- Having additional learning needs
- ADHD, Autism
- Grammar school/Secondary school/Integrated school/EOTAS/Training College
- Newcomer children
- Contact with youth justice
- Drug or alcohol misuse within the household

Conducting the workshops

The workshops were arranged and conducted in line with Northern Ireland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY): Participation with Children and Young People: Advice to public bodies. Figure 2, taken from the NICCY documentation shows how this applied to Article 12 of the UNCRC: The right to express views and the right to have views given due weight:



This model provides a way of looking at Article 12 which is intended to focus decision-makers on the distinct, although inter-related, elements of the provision.

SPACE: Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views.

VOICE: Children must be facilitated to express their view.

AUDIENCE: The view must be listened too.

INFLUENCE: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Figure 2: Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

Participating youth clubs hosted the session, ensuring the space was safe, comfortable and familiar for young people. Prior to the workshop, the Mental Health Champion Researcher Officer, Dr. Nicole Bond was introduced to the groups by the Youth Work staff, who remained on-site throughout the session to provide additional support as needed. The purpose of the discussion was clearly outlined, and each young person understood their participation was voluntary. Youth Work staff communicated any additional needs the young people participating had and ensured the facilitation method was suitable. The Mental Health Champion Research Officer is trained in safeguarding protocols and has experience of engaging with young people at different age groups.

Participating young people understood that their discussions would help to inform the questions within the 2023 KLT and YLT surveys that the Mental Health Champion Office funded. They expressed that they would like their discussions to be shared openly and used to inform mental health provision for all young people in Northern Ireland.

This report captures and summarises the views and opinions of the young people within the workshops. It details the questions included within the KLT and YLT showing how these emerged from those discussions. Initial findings from those questions can be viewed in a recent report by the Mental Health Champion: [Factors Affecting Mental Health and Wellbeing in Children and Young People in Northern Ireland](#). This report provides a wider context and qualitative explanation as to why those questions are so important in shaping mental health services for young people.

The workshops took an informal approach allowing discussions to flow organically. Young people summarised key points on all or a combination of flip-chart paper, using whiteboards, individually on paper or spoken aloud with the facilitator taking note of discussion points. Each group expressed differences in opinions and experiences, but conversation focused on:

- Young people's perspectives on mental health and wellbeing
- Home
- School
- Community
- Online environments
- Peer/friendship groups
- What prevents young people from seeking support
- Experiences of current services
- What young people want in Mental Health Services

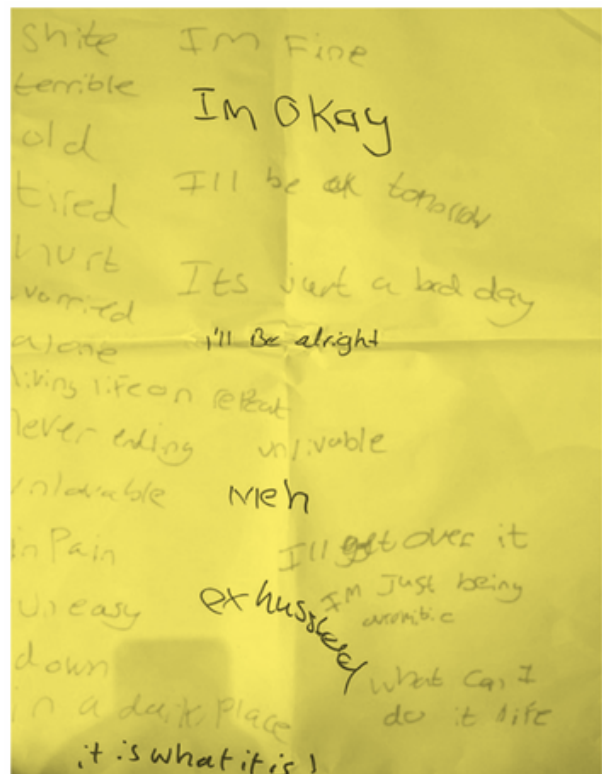
These discussions are summarised in this report, direct quotes are provided in some instances and pictures of written contributions illustrate the direct contributions during the workshops.

Young people's perspectives on Mental Health and Well-being

Participation young people they were clear that young people would not use phrases such as "How is your mental health" feeling it was too formal and vague. They suggested alternative ways for adults to ask relevant questions:

- Do you feel down regularly?
- Would you know where to go if you need help with your mental health?
- Are you happy with your headspace?
- Are you feeling like yourself?

When asked what mental health was, the young people said they understood it to mean the connection between their emotional and physical health and could include depression for example. However, they also said that they did not talk about Mental Health much outside of school or the youth club; they would not discuss it with friends. They shared phrases or statements young people can make that would indicate something was concerning them or they needed support, such as "I feel brutal", "I hate my life", "I'll get over it, I'm just being dramatic". They felt that young people quickly pick up on these phrases when their friends say them, but adults do not always know to be concerned. Often, they feel that adults ignore these statements or assume they are being dramatic.



Another key insight emerged when discussing how we should best encourage help seeking and direct young people towards support. The groups discussed that most adults point towards teachers, parents, social workers, youth workers and other professionals as sources of support. They are given a list of people they should and can talk to for support. However, they are rarely asked if they feel comfortable or safe talking to any of those people. Their reasons for those concerns differ depending on the environment, school, home, community, online or among peer groups which are discussed further in those sections in this report. However, the primary message the young people wanted to

communicate was that it had to be a discussion. Participants discussed the importance of having a range of adults with whom they could discuss issues related to their mental health, especially if they had already talked to a trusted adult but were told they spoke to the wrong person. While the young people understood that other people could be in a better position to help, they felt adults were often unaware that the people they were directing young people toward were sometimes the cause of their concerns. In those instances, the conversation should not be "speak to this person"; instead, it should be "Would you feel comfortable speaking to this person? If not, why not." Many young people felt this approach would illicit a deeper conversation about what was happening and help identify achievable actions to access the needed support.

Home environment

Young people considered the concerns at home that could impact mental health and well-being. They quickly listed domestic violence, abuse in all its forms, neglect, parental mental health, and substance abuse as issues that can impact some young people. However, the relationship dynamics at home became a primary focus for discussion.

Parent/Guardian's relationship with each other

The groups discussed the diverse types of family makeup, two-parent, single-parent, lone-parent, co-parent, living with guardians or other family members. For each, they spoke on how parents' relationships with each other impact the young person's well-being. Elaborating that young people feel the absence of a parent even when separated parents have amicable relationships, and they get to see both at separate times but never together. When the relationship between parents is not amicable, young people feel stuck in the middle, playing mediator between them. Older siblings said they often take over organising meetings or visits between houses as it is easier and less stressful. The groups discussed the difference between arguing/ fighting among parents and domestic violence. While they understood the difference, they spoke of how continual arguing or poor relationships between parents is stressful, and young people can feel it is their fault as they feel their parents only attempt to communicate because of them.

Additionally, young people spoke of how their parent's relationship with each other can impact their well-being in two-parent households. They expressed that sometimes parents are together when they should not be; other times, the stress parents feel about work, bills, and health can be directed towards the children, who get confused about where it comes from and can feel they are to blame. One young man spoke of parents who cannot parent well "Bad parents, like; they are not bad people; they just cannot manage the stress of being a parent".

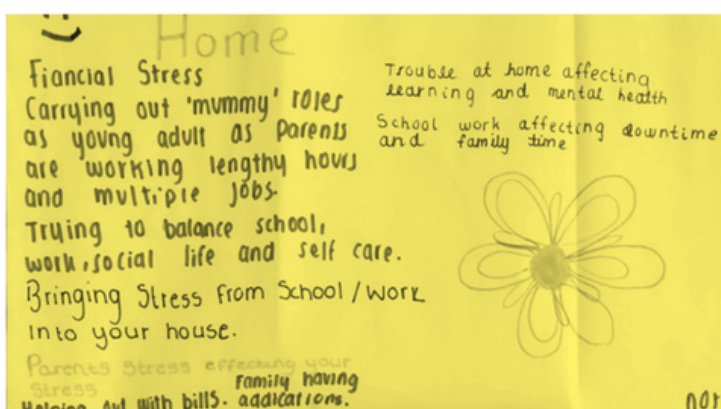
Sibling relationships

Young people expected that sibling relationships could be a source of stress and support. Siblings understand home life better than anyone else, so if there are issues, they understand that. However in many cases were a cause of worry and stress. The groups spoke of sibling arguments, fighting over belongings and tv time, for example. However, throughout the discussion, it emerged that how other family members interact with each child impacts their relationship. Participants spoke of feeling pressure to do well in school or sports because other siblings had or hadn't, so parents put extra pressure on them. Others spoke of always being blamed for things a sibling had done, and the expectations of having different rules for each sibling created tensions between siblings.

Older young people spoke of feeling like an additional parent to younger siblings. Many in the groups cared for family members while parents worked additional jobs. During the pandemic, caring responsibilities also extended to the school day, as they helped younger siblings with schoolwork. At the same time, parents worked from home or took on additional jobs.

Relationship with their parents or guardians

The pressure that young people feel in school and in peer relationships can also impact young peoples' relationship with their parents. Those in the workshops also spoke of feeling under pressure at home to take care of siblings, help mediate arguments, and also manage their performance at school. They emphasised that the stresses their family faced at home, such as financial stress, were prioritised in the family and home environment and that their concerns were not taken seriously. This left them feeling that they were not seen as important. In that context, participants felt disconnected from their parents. Some young people felt that even when they get on with their parents, it can feel as though their parents do not know them or they are not interested in them.



Some young people do not know how to communicate with their family and do not think they would realise when they are experiencing distress. They experience many demands at school, home, and work, which takes up a lot of their time. Young people in this position spoke of all these things leading into each other; concerns at home feed

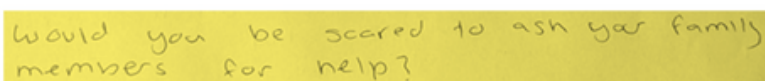
into school life and vice versa. Some work additional hours to help with financial pressure at home but were concerned about how much this can impact schoolwork. Young people

discussed that these concerns could make it difficult to talk to parents or ask for support.

Interestingly, many older young people spoke of missing time with their parents. Work pressures meant parents were home less often, and activities to increase family time focused on younger children. They missed spending recreational time with their parents. However, they did not know how to voice this as they understood their families were under a lot of pressure. They felt the focus was always on what they had to do for the family rather than what they wanted to do as a young person.

How they feel at home

For most participants, their home was a safe space. However, this was not the case for everyone, and many in the groups spoke of friends' homes which they knew were unsafe. Young people said they needed to feel safe with someone or be in a safe place before they could talk about anything bothering them.



Would you be scared to ask your family members for help?

This raised interesting questions about how young people can access support. Many felt that their concerns about home life would be relayed to their parents or guardians. Others were worried that talking to social workers or teachers would cause additional issues at home. Some expressed the protectiveness of their families and did not want to share concerns in case it got people into trouble.

Concerns for outside agency involvement were particularly pronounced for the newcomer young people. There was pressure at home due to finances; many were not entitled to benefits, faced home and food insecurity, and had a lot of caring responsibilities for younger siblings. They had social service involvement before and understood that they could raise concerns but did not want to, fearing they could be taken from their families. They felt their families were doing their best to keep them safe and supported. However, they still worried about losing their home or not having enough to eat, which impacted their well-being. They worried their parents or families would get into trouble if they spoke about those worries to anyone other than their family.

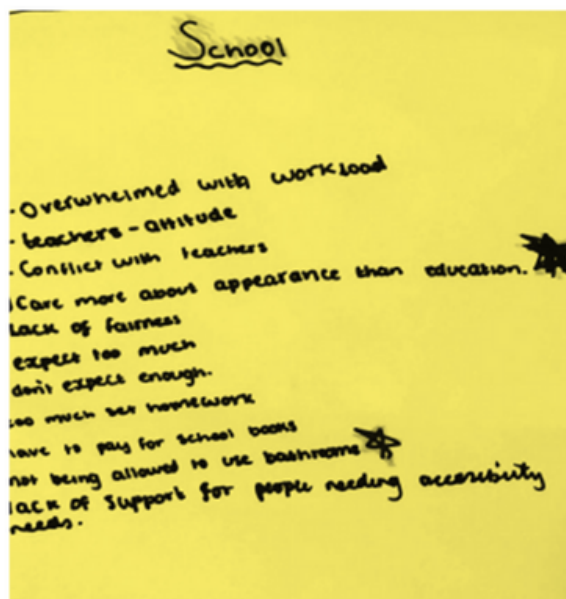
Further, regarding newcomer children, many spoke of being placed in the middle of wider family issues by professionals. There is a language barrier, young people speak English, but not all their parents do. When schools, social services, or housing, for example, have concerns about home life, they use the oldest young person in the family as a translator. In this context, they are not only being told directly what the concerns are but must relay this information to a parent and other professional bodies.

School environment

When discussing school life, all the groups were quick to point out exam pressures, the length of time spent on homework and constant deadlines as issues that impact the well-being of young people. As the conversation developed, the reasons behind those concerns emerged:

The weight of expectations

Exam pressure and the expectation of superior results were the primary focus during these discussions. The pressure came from school and home, and most young people expressed that they feared failing and letting others down. After the school closures when they felt they had to know everything and sit exams after missing almost two full years of in-classroom teaching. Although they felt the school recognised it was a challenging time for them, there was a constant expectation that they would get on with it, even when they felt overwhelmed with the workload.



In contrast, some young people spoke of how teachers and the school had exceptionally low expectations of them. There was an assumption that they could not/would not do well in their exams, so they did not push for work to be completed or try to encourage them to do more. Lack of encouragement led to feeling left behind and failure, impacting academic performance. It can impact how people view themselves and their capacity to achieve their goals.

Comparison to peers

The groups spoke of their relationship with their peers in school. School resources focused on the prevalence of physical and emotional bullying and its impact on well-being. Interestingly, all the groups spoke of the high frequency of anti-bullying messages and talks within their schools. However, none thought it had any significant impact in reducing the level of bullying within the school.

However, they also discussed that the comparison of their academic abilities by teachers, even when said jokingly, would impact their well-being. They compare each other, and some expressed how certain groups within schools get away with breaking more rules

like uniform violations, for example, because they do well in class. Detention or sanctions for breaking the dress code are seen as punishment for "troublemakers". They feel the rules such as "girls cannot wear bracelets, but boys can wear watches" or "no piercings, but girls can wear a set of studs" are there to be used to punish specific students but otherwise are overlooked. These observed differences in how students are treated increased comparison and tensions between peer groups.

In comparing themselves to their peers, the groups discussed increased pressure to fit in, including engaging in risk-taking behaviours such as vaping or skipping some classes. However, they also discussed comparing uniforms and school supplies, explaining that everyone could tell when a uniform was second-hand, not clean, or well worn, or when they did not have new pens or school bags, for example. Mostly, no one says much about it, but it can be a focus of bullying. In addition to that point, some young people discussed that this is more pronounced in grammar schools.

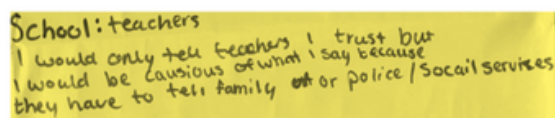
Conflicting messages about well-being

Every group had experience with the personal development classes, including class and school-wide discussions on well-being. Despite this, they all spoke of how those messages are worthless when told conflicting information or the school rules prohibit self-care. These discussions are best summarised in the direct quotes below:

- *"Not having an ear piercing will not make me learn math any better, but it does limit my personal expression."*
- *"Told to focus on reducing stress in one class, then told to push harder, deal with it and get the work done in another."*
- *"Talking about my mental health and being told it is not mental health because I do not have a diagnosis."*
- *"Telling them about stuff outside of school that's impacting learning, being told to leave it at the door and focus on my work."*
- *"Being forced to do revision classes after school when they know I have caring responsibilities."*
- *"Needing to use the toilet but having to explain why outside of set times ... having to tell a teacher you are on your period in front of a full class."*

Limitations of confidentiality

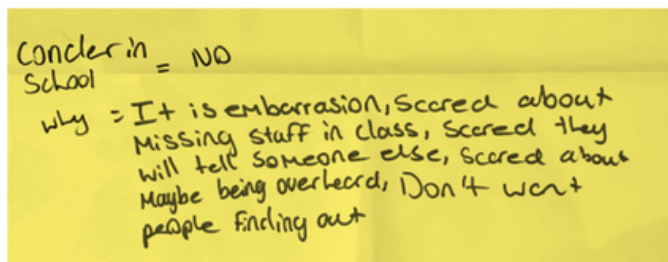
It was encouraging to hear that most young people had at least one staff member within the school they would talk to if they were concerned about their or a friend's mental health. However, the biggest concern for everyone was confidentiality.



School: teachers
I would only tell teachers I trust but
I would be cautious of what I say because
they have to tell family or police / social services

They wanted the space and time to talk about what concerned them without fearing that their parents would be involved or that other services would also have to be contacted. Some of the group had direct experience of this and felt it needed to be adequately communicated to them about when others would have to be informed.

The fear of others finding out was also a concern when using the school counsellor. Appointments are during class time, sometimes, teachers come to collect them, and everyone knows where the office is, so there is no anonymity. They spoke of teachers asking them afterwards about issues brought up during sessions or follow-up conversations with parents. Although some found the process helpful, they thought the focus was on something other than what they needed. In one example, a young



Concler in
School = NO
why = It is embarrassment, Scared about
Missing staff in class, Scared they
will tell someone else, Scared about
Maybe being overheard, Don't want
people finding out

person spoke of needing additional support with exam stress. A family member had passed in an accident a few years prior, but she felt it had nothing to do with her current concerns. Because teachers had informed the counsellors about the bereavement, this became the focus of the sessions, which, if anything, increased the level of distress.

Online environment

The conversations around the online environment brought up similar concerns that have been expressed about the internet for a long time. Social media can portray a false, overly positive, or filtered version of reality that many young people feel they need to live up to. Within the groups, young people spoke of needing to take a lot of selfies and pictures of themselves before sharing only the best ones. They spoke of needing to look the same as the pictures or be seen doing the same things. They are very aware that everything is documented and will be viewable to everyone as they grow up.

However, what was most concerning during these discussions was the frequency and ease they spoke of the dangers of the online environment, which have become commonplace and almost accepted by young people. These have been summarised below. Although they have all received online safety training, the consensus was that it is too basic; it is provided too late and does not cover the tip of the concerns impacting young people in this environment. Although they felt they could not avoid using the internet, they feared for younger siblings or family members entering that world.

Negative and threatening comments

Handwritten notes on a yellow sticky note: "online = bullying, scammers, inappropriate information, pedophiles, safety regulations".

Negative comments can come from strangers but also from

people considered friends. Comments are made publicly under posted videos or images or sent directly to the young person. These can become quite threatening, and with cyberbullying, there is no place to hide from it. Worryingly, all the young people shared those negative comments are a routine part of daily life. It impacts their well-being and how they view themselves. However, they all thought it could not be separated from the online experience.

Graphic and inappropriate images

Worryingly, all the girls spoke of getting inappropriate messages from adults, usually older males. They included inappropriate pictures of themselves and requested pictures. The girls said that they knew not to send any and found it funny most of the

Handwritten notes on a yellow sticky note: "Strangers texting young teenagers being creepy".

time. However, when asked about the frequency of this happening, multiple times daily, and it was worse on certain apps. They also discussed that inappropriate images were not always sexual; they were often overly violent and disturbing.

Although strangers sending these messages can be upsetting, the groups spoke of its use among friends. Friends or people they know will take pictures or videos of them doing

Handwritten notes on a yellow sticky note: "Group chats cause so much drama. Getting messaged by older men. Inappropriate images/videos. TIKTOK - Disturbing Video's - Creepy follow - (stalkers) - Stalking".

things they should not, like being at a party or being intimate with someone, and it can be used to extort them. Extortion is particularly pronounced when friend groups split up, or relationships end. Images can be shared so quickly that they can ruin reputations in seconds. Some groups had direct experience, and all were aware of situations needing police involvement where other minors shared inappropriate images of minors. At this point, the groups agreed that the safety talks provided by schools are not enough; they are happening too late and do not keep up with the current apps young people use.

The split-self

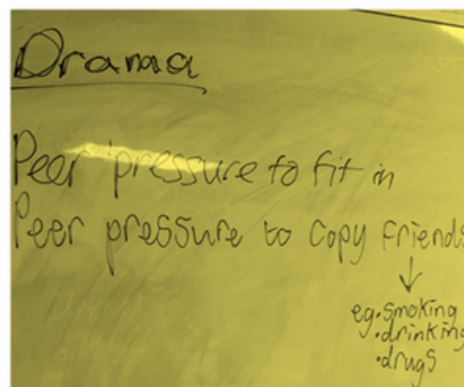
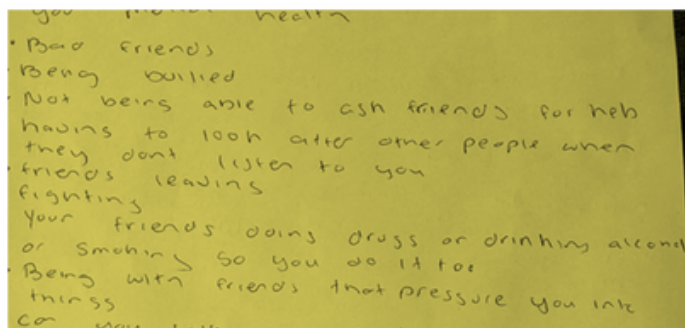
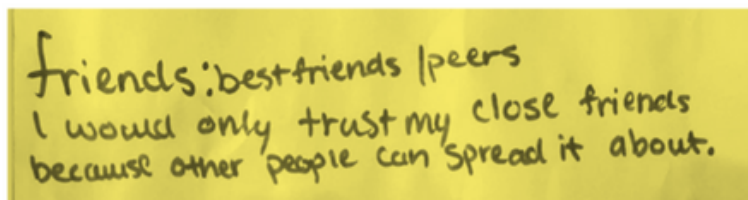
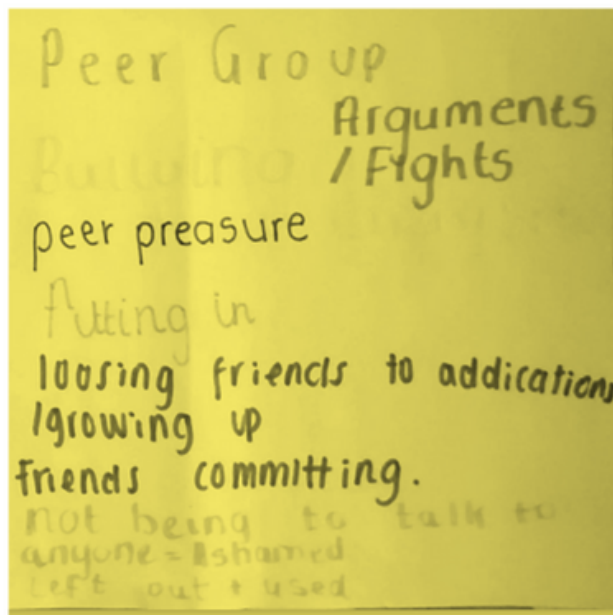
There was a general understanding that the online world is not real. The expectations of perfection or what others can say do not translate to real life. In its extreme, one group spoke of how friends they interact with in person can be negative and threatening toward you online. Things they would not say or do when they see you in person. In these

instances, people are expected to act as though online things did not happen and treat them as different people.

Peer environment

Many of the concerns present among peer groups have been discussed in the previous sections. Young people feel pressure to fit in with their peer group in school, in the community and among friend groups. Tension among friend groups can cause falling out. There are pressures to take risks, such as drinking or taking drugs, and they also fear being excluded from the group if they do not participate. Fake friendships are also a concern, where young people feel they cannot get away from people that have extorted them or threatened them because they are part of the larger group. Also, the issues around

sharing images and videos among friends have reduced young people's trust in their friends, as they fear their information will be shared should any arguments occur. It was apparent that all groups shared the same concerns about their peer groups, as highlighted below.



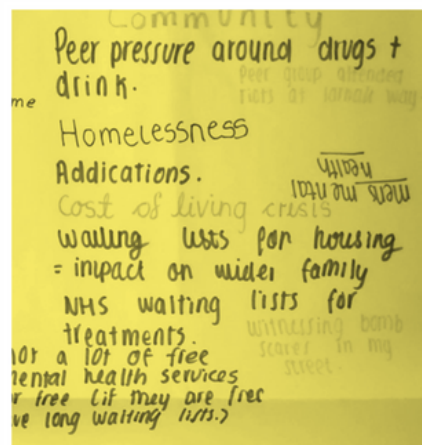
Community environment

The young people participating in these engagement events come from different communities across NI. While general concerns were expressed by everyone about their communities, some were specific to the smaller groups that participated.

Not feeling safe

All the groups spoke of the open use of alcohol and drugs in the area they live. There is pressure to be involved in it for some; for others, walking past used needles or empty bottles beside their homes, play areas or schools is common.

The community can be quite close, which usually makes them feel safe, but they are also aware of when fights or feuds are happening. Again, this does not directly impact them, but they can be caught up in it.

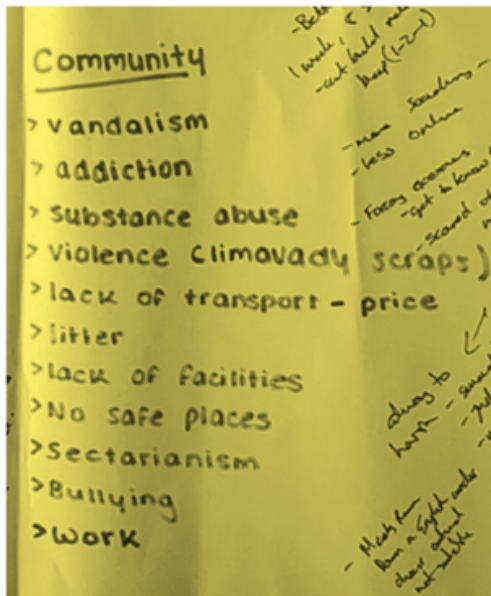


Many young people live in areas of increased paramilitary activity, some live on interfaces. They have witnessed rioting annually, have been evacuated because of bomb threats and are aware of punishment beatings/shootings in their area. Knowing how to stay away from these things means being constantly aware of what can happen to avoid them; other times, they can be caught up unintentionally. They do not feel they can talk to anyone about it or report it because they do not want to be labelled as a “tout.” Police presence can feel threatening or reassuring, depending on where the young people live.

Strangers can shout sectarian comments, racial slurs or threaten violence to groups of young people or individuals as they walk about on their own. The girls also expressed that they can be cat-called and harassed by older people. Racism in the community is a big issue for participating newcomer children. There can be gaps of time between incidents, but often, when it starts, it happens multiple times daily. This ranges from racial slurs to violence. There is a police phone in the community they can use to report incidents, but they feel only violent incidents would be recorded. These young people advised that they would not tell their families unless it was a violent incident also.

Access to service

Public transport is limited in some areas, predominantly rural areas. Some young people feel stuck in their local space, as going outside of it takes money for travel and activities. Others feel that public transport is not safe to use after it gets dark, and some girls spoke of not using it at all if they are alone.



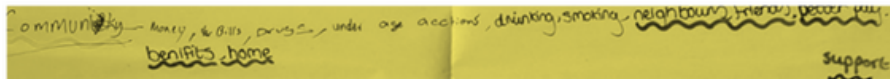
Most open play areas, such as parks, are built for younger children, and adults do not like when teenagers gather there. There are only so many spaces they can sit in groups without being told to move on, most places cost money. All participants engage with youth services and attend youth clubs and sports clubs. However, they also know that budget cuts will remove these services or reduce access.

Outside of services young people access, they spoke of family members being in chronic pain, on sick leave and needing additional care because of waiting lists for physical and mental health-based services. Some young people had direct

experience with social services, primary care and CAMHS. They said the wait for support was too long in each setting and often not what they needed. Appointments took them out of school or were too far away that they could not get there alone.

Poverty

The young people spoke of how everyone in their communities suffers at the moment. Everyone is struggling with money for food, bills, heat, and rent.



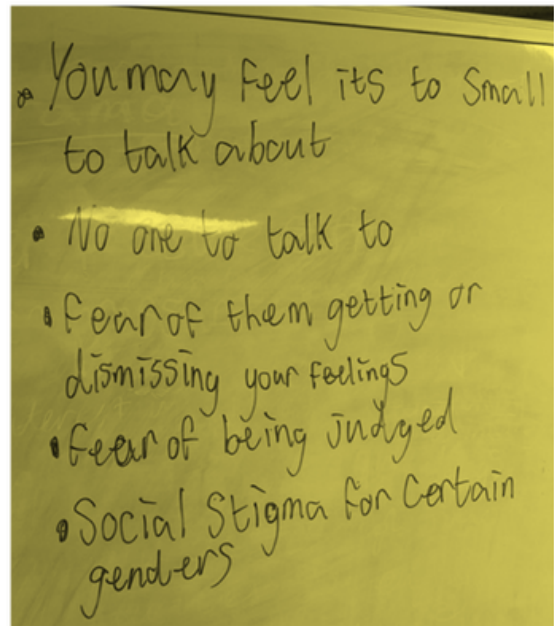
Many young people in temporary or private rent accommodations fear losing their homes or having to move somewhere else and lose their friends. They worry for their families and their neighbours. Poverty and lack of investment were also evident to them within their communities. They spoke of everything being run down or broken. Buildings sit boarded up and covered in graffiti. It makes feeling happy or safe outside of family or friend groups difficult.

What prevents young people from seeking support?

There are many reasons young people feel they cannot or should not ask for support for their mental health and well-being. The reasons identified in these groups are summarised as follows:

- Feeling others will think your problems are small and not big enough to need support
 - “Stupid reasons”

- Feeling crazy and wanting to hide it
- Everyone has their problems, so you should get on with your own
- Afraid people will not listen/if they have not before
- Not knowing how to ask or whom to ask
 - Not having anyone you trust to talk to
- Not having a supportive family/friends/people in your life
- Feeling like it will never get better
- Shame, and afraid of others shaming you for needing help
 - Fear of your feelings being dismissed.
- Being told to "man up" and get on with it – social stigma for boys/men
- Old-school religious beliefs (schools and families) it is not talked about
- Feeling like a burden
- Waiting too long to talk
 - Fear of being blamed for what is happening for not acting sooner
- Fear of being alone



Experience with current services

Some participants had direct experience using mental health and well-being supports at school and within the health sector.

At school, they report that spaces to take a break during the school day such as sensory or nurture rooms are not always accessible. Teachers use them for specific students, so others must leave. Conversely, other schools do not have them; there are multiple schools in small areas, so young people know a difference is being made. Some felt they needed to focus on the most critical issues when using the school counsellor, yet this did not happen. They often spent a substantial portion of the session going through depression screening tools or asking about self-harm when that was not a concern before talking about why they were there. Extending from this is the expectation that young

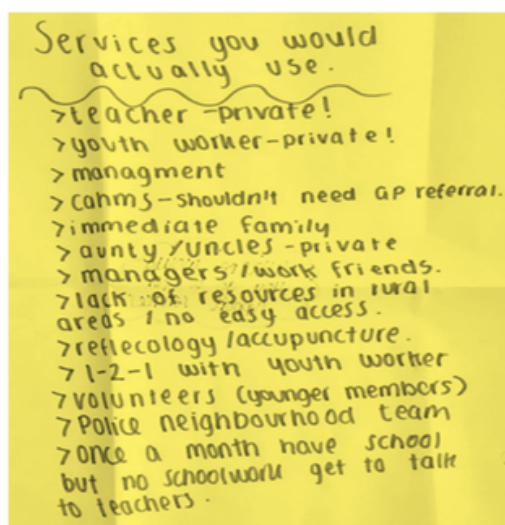
people can trust and speak openly during these sessions, yet often, the room is uncomfortable. They have no relationship with the counsellor and know their classmates know where they are going. In some examples, young people spoke of their information shared with other teachers and parents.

Those young people who had experience with CAMHS spoke of the long waiting lists causing more problems. The initial assessments were not tailored to their presenting

concern and often focused on the level of crisis a young person felt. Most young people who had engaged with CAMHS said they felt the service was trying to find the quickest way to end their sessions or move them on to someone else; this was more obvious for seventeen-year-olds.

What was prominent in this discussion was that young people felt they needed to be listened to when developing treatment plans. Although they understood that professionals had to ensure they were safe and there were no safeguarding issues, this focus often detracted from why young people felt they should be receiving support.

What young people want in Mental Health Services



Participants were quite clear on what they wanted from mental health and well-being services; their feedback has been summarised below.

- Somewhere accessible that they can get to within walking distance or without having to rely on others to transport them
- 24-hour/ non-judgemental support, either online or in person
- Allow for self-referral, not reliant on a parent or GP
- Confidential service, where parents and other adults are not informed of every detail unless absolutely necessary
- Create safe spaces within the school and the community to talk about mental health and learn more about it
- Put information on support services in communal areas where young people will see it
- Have the same support in every school, i.e., sensory rooms that anyone can access as needed

- Include additional support options, not just counselling services
- Well-being classes in schools include life skills such as managing bills and food shopping on a budget
 - Move from a focus on mental health to a focus on healthy relationships and emotional regulation skills
- Improve online safety and the means for young people to report issues
- Ease financial pressures on families
- Improve working rights for young people working and studying

In addition, young people would like the policy to focus on the following:

- Creating safe spaces in their communities, they can access recreation and development
- Invest in local areas and improve communal areas
- Protect access to youth services
- Reduce cost of living and increase access to benefits for all families in need
- Increase access to the internet, needed for schoolwork and to stay connected but create big gaps when access is restricted
- Focus on climate change and protecting the environment young people will inherit

Kids and Young Life and Times

The Kids Life and Times and Young Life and Times Survey fieldwork was conducted in March of 2023. The engagement sessions, in addition to a review of the literature, were instrumental in deciding on which questions to include that would best capture the key concerns. Kids Life and Times included the Kids Screen 10 measures for well-being, and Young Life and Times included the GHQ-12. All other questions within the Mental Health Champion Module were as follows:

The next few questions are asked on behalf of the Northern Ireland Mental Health Champion, a position set up by the government in 2021 with the aim of promoting mental health and well-being and improving mental health services.

1. Which, if any, of the following things make you feel worried or stressed?
(Please tick all that apply)

Problems or arguments at home/with my family	1
My parent(s)/carer(s) are worried about not having enough money	1
Having to provide care for a family member	1
Being under pressure to do well at school	1
Not getting help with my disability/learning needs	1
Problems or arguments with friends/peers	1
Pressure to wear the latest trends in clothing/makeup/sports gear	1
Not having safe places to hang out with friends	1
Pressure to get likes/positive comments on social media	1
Being sent unsuitable pictures/messages online	1
Other (please specify)	1
I never feel worried or stressed	1

2. Which, if any, of the following things make you feel worried or stressed?

(Please tick all that apply)

Parent/carer	1
Brother/sister/other family member	1
Teacher/other school staff member	1
School Nurse	1
Youth or community worker	1
Friend	1
Priest/Pastor/Minister	1
Other (please specify)	1

3. The following statements ask about things that might make you feel better when you are worried or stressed. How much do you agree or disagree with each statement? (Please tick one in each line)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know
Spending time with my family/carers	1	2	3	4	5
Spending time with my friends	1	2	3	4	5
Spending time with/looking after my pets	1	2	3	4	5
Doing sport, walking, cycling, dancing etc.	1	2	3	4	5
Spending time on my hobby (e.g., reading, making things)	1	2	3	4	5
Other (please specify)					

4. Which, if any, of the following things might stop you talking to someone about how you are feeling? (Please tick all that apply)

I would be worried that my parent(s)/carer(s) might find out	1
If I told my friends, I would worry that they might treat me differently	1
I wouldn't know who to ask for help	1
I wouldn't want anyone to know that something was wrong	1
Other (please specify)	

5. In general, how would you describe your mental health and well-being?
(Please tick one answer only)

Excellent	1
Very good	2
Good	3
Fair	4
Poor	5

6. What, if anything, do you think the Mental Health Champion could do to help improve the mental health and well-being of young people in Northern Ireland?

