

Include+ and Space Youth Services Exploratory Project 2025

‘What is the most accessible and inclusive way for you as a young person in 2025 to access digital wellbeing support that is relevant for you?’

Space’s Digital team with the support from Include+ conducted an exploratory project working alongside young people who predominantly spend most of their free time online with the purpose of enquiring as to if current wellbeing services within rural Devon are appropriate for them. In this report we will be sharing the key findings and learnings during the project.

Aims and Objectives

This 10-week program combines online activities with open-access youth sessions.

The primary goals of this research are to empower young people to share their experiences and:

- Examine existing support for youth well-being and mental health.
- Capture the voices and perspectives of young people.
- Approach service design with an emphasis on inclusivity.
- Address challenges such as rural isolation and limited access to youth work in Devon.

This initiative will focus on the needs of young people across the vast rural areas of Devon, aiming to identify and remove barriers to effective digital well-being support. It will explore aspects unique to our rural county, such as:

What does a lack of reliable internet access mean for a young person? Is school-only access to technology sufficient? How do we ensure individual dignity while designing an inclusive service? What defines a "good" service? Are young people perfectly happy with what exists?

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Space's digital team actively engages with a significant number of neurodiverse and LGBTQ+ young people who offer invaluable and creative insights. Their perspectives will be central to this work. The digital team collaborated with a focus group to consider the development of resources for both physical and digital use throughout Devon. This involved questionnaires distributed in open-access youth clubs, online, in schools and further education settings, and through targeted support with young people. Encouraging a comprehensive approach ensures a wide range of voices and information to inform the pilot program.

Key Objectives:

- Young people will voluntarily participate in the program.
- They will articulate and share their collective experiences.
- They will engage creatively in problem-solving.
- They will share their stories and learning journeys.
- They will design impactful resources.

Outcomes

Project Report: Youth Consultation on Digital Wellbeing and Mental Health Services

This report details a project focused on gathering feedback and lived experiences from young people regarding existing technological tools and their needs in the realm of online wellbeing and mental health services.

Key Activities:

- **Consultation and Design Sessions:** Ten co-designed sessions will be conducted with young people to ensure their voices are meaningfully captured at their own pace and in an easily understandable way. An additional two sessions can be added if needed.
- **Youth-Led Survey:** 75-100 young people will participate in a survey, designed by young people, focusing on online wellbeing and mental health services.

Project Outcomes and Impact:

During the consultation and design sessions, the insights from young people will directly inform the project's direction. This could manifest as:

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- A social media campaign
- An online support group
- A design for a new app
- A podcast

Whatever the young people design will be shared. Staff will provide support in the early stages if a clear direction is difficult to define and will encourage and assist young people in sharing their stories and ideas.

Success Criteria

- **Understand barriers:** Gain a clear sense of barriers informed by young people's lived experiences and their impact.
- **Empower voice:** Enable young people to articulate what would help their mental health and/or ability to access online wellbeing services.
- **Inform technology use:** Gather insights from young people on how technology could support their wellbeing, including any desire for offline support.
- **Collaborate on design:** Work with young people to create a clear plan/design for an inclusive online wellbeing service, based on their and their peers' needs, using qualitative research to inform decisions.
- **Sustain engagement:** Achieve sustained engagement in the focus group.

Timeline

- **Prior to Week 1:** Planning and promotion of the sessions.
- **Week 1:** Introduction to inclusivity and strategies for creating inclusive online spaces.
- **Week 2:** Exploration of existing online wellbeing services, including their advantages and disadvantages. Assessment of whether current needs are met and brainstorming for improved solutions.
- **Week 3:** Idea presentations where young people share their proposed solutions.
- **Week 4:** Selection of ideas for a theoretical service. Development of a questionnaire or poll for peer feedback, promoted both in-person and through the online youth centre.
- **Week 5:** Review of research results and consideration of necessary adjustments.
- **Weeks 6-9:** Design and development work.
- **Week 10:** Project wrap-up and final review.

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Milestones

- Successful promotion and recruitment for the sessions.
- Official launch of the sessions.
- Generation of initial ideas from young people.
- Validation of ideas through peer polls and discussions.
- Mid-project review to ensure alignment with the brief and identify areas for change.
- Completion of a detailed Design Proposal for a youth-led, inclusive wellbeing project (e.g., a session, resource, or peer support group).
- Documentation of project outcomes and observations.

Initial Questions for Young People

- **Current Service Usage:** Do you currently use any digital wellbeing services? What are their pros and cons, especially regarding inclusivity and service delivery?
- **Delivery Models:** Is digital-only delivery the most effective option? Could digital services better supplement in-person experiences, and how would this work for those not living near physical locations? Is human interaction essential, or would an AI chatbot be more accessible/preferable?
- **Digital Access in Devon:** What is your experience accessing the internet in Devon? Is it easy to get online? Do you have sufficient internet speeds and device access for online wellbeing services? Do shared or monitored devices affect your likelihood of seeking online support?
- **Ideal Service Design:** What kind of digital wellbeing service do you aspire to have access to?
- **Inclusivity:** What does inclusivity mean to you? What makes a service inclusive? Which online platforms are most inclusive (considering access, algorithms, etc.)? What is the best, most inclusive way to host a wellbeing service for young people, and what limitations might that impose?

Project Overview

During the initial stages of the project it was important to work with young people in order to identify in their own voices what they believed real issues affecting young people are in 2025. Taking into account the vast geographical spread of young people throughout Devon who access the online youth club and the varying degrees of need or privilege this was an important part of the conceptual beginnings of the project.

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During the first few weeks we positioned the project within the Hyperfixation Station Sessions, a session for young people who are neurodivergent to make, create, gain skills, and navigate the complexities of being a neurodivergent young person.

As we learnt quickly however the members initially were less interested in speaking about these topics during the sessions. Initially the starting conversations focused around “What areas in your life do you wish you had support with?”, “what apps do you currently use or where do you go for support?”, and finally “what issues do they feel impact young people in Devon?”

In reflection there could have been several factors in this being slower to engage the group with. Firstly the nature of where young people were engaging, as members were in their own homes, they may have lacked the confidence to speak up about topics related to their wellbeing through fear of getting into trouble, the timing and place may have been a wrong fit for their needs at this point as well meaning an agile approach to take the questioning into different locations. Secondly the group may lack the awareness around these topics, or have been actively able to self address them. Finally the project fell during a period with a lot of focus around wellbeing and mental health with young people accessing youth services supported by Space, which could have also led to consultation fatigue where young people openly have been reporting their weariness of continuously being involved in consultation.

Forest School July 2025

In July we were able to go on a forest school residential in conjunction with our team in Okehampton, the key theme for this project being to allow young people who may be neurodivergent or struggle with anxiety to step away from their day to day lives and learn forest skills with some young people they may have only met online, or whom may only attend face to face open access youth club delivery in their own time.

During this time of disconnecting and reflection we were able to work with the group to consult about how they reflect upon their own wellbeing and what tools they use in the virtual world to help manage and regulate their own health and wellbeing. This workshop benefitted in using some of the core members of the design workshops but allowing them to work in face to face settings rather than their usual online youth clubs, allowing for a difference in voice.

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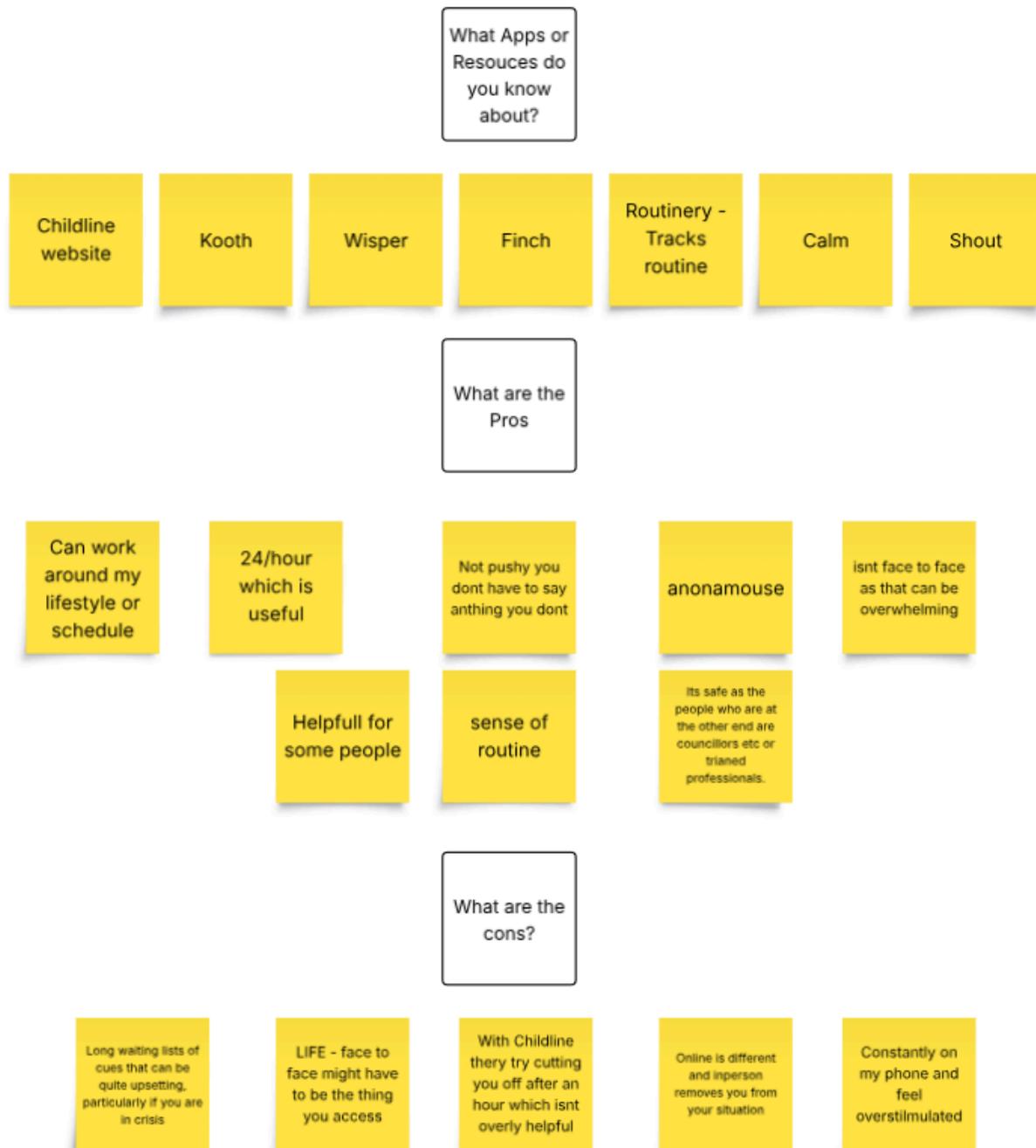


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This work continued to our online sessions where similar questions were conducted in order to help shape what the consultation questionnaires could look like. The results were similar, highlighting a positive awareness from young people about where to go for support and what already exists.

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Apps I use
Finch
Matt YW

What do I need help with?
ie.
Sleep
PLanning
Managing stress
Anxiety
Matt YW

What would be good questions to be asked. We dont want it to be just boring grownups asking questions you are the expert of being a teenager
Matt YW

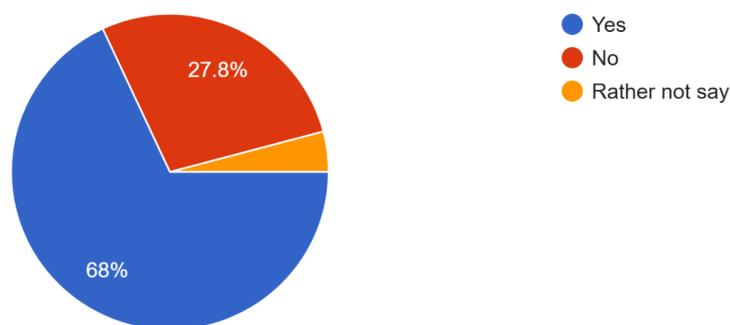
I prefer accessing support..
in person
online
on apps
anonumously
Matt YW

Findings From Survey

As a large part of the exploratory process of this project we set the target to question between 75 to 100 young people across Devon to ask what their current understandings of wellbeing support look like and what they may be accessing as follows are the results from 97 individuals who live countywide.

Have you ever used any wellbeing services before?

97 responses



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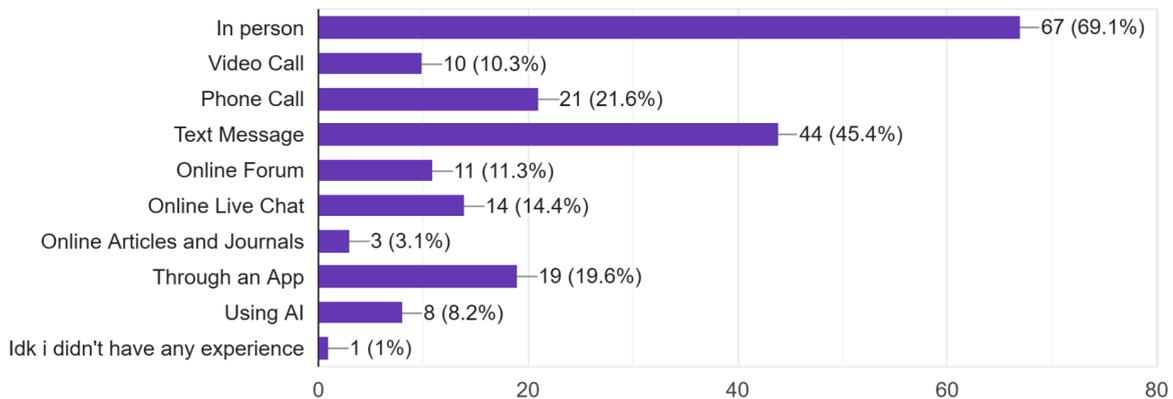
If you have used a wellbeing service before, was it helpful? For example: Kooth; NHS website; Childline; youth club, etc

97 responses



How do you like to access support? You can choose as many options here as you like

97 responses



These results show strong indication that young people do prefer in-person settings for accessing support, however those who only have the option to attend online formats preferred text format or phone calls over other methods. There were interesting findings however where young people indicated that they could be inclined to access AI as a tool, or forums, which may have been dismissed by professionals on the assumption that this would not resonate with them.

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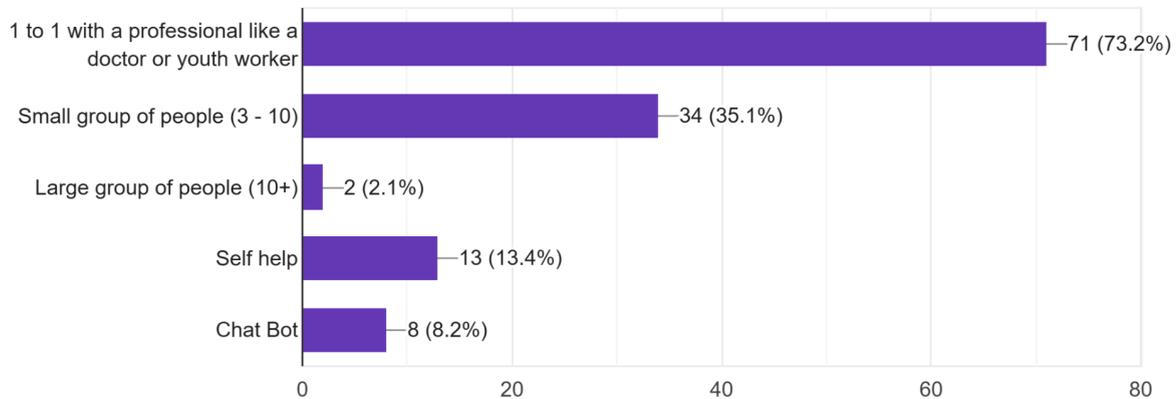
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Do you prefer 1 to 1 support, or talking with more people? You can choose as many options here as you like

97 responses



In this category young people resoundingly stated that they would prefer 1 to 1 support with professionals over group work potentially learning towards anxiety around meeting other young people or not wishing to share their issues within a safe space. However 34 stated that they would be willing to try this, leaning towards small group models being a valid approach to engaging with young people.

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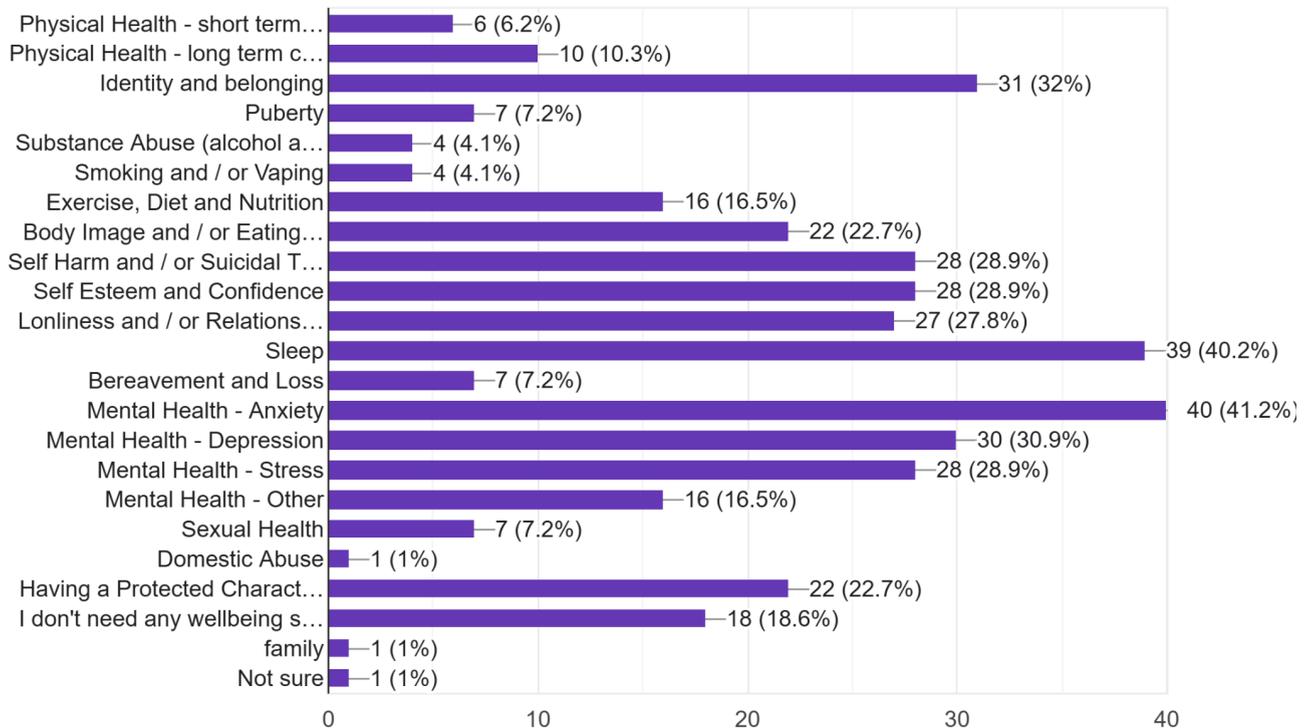
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What sort of things would you like help / support with? You can choose as many options here as you like

97 responses



From the survey top three themes raised were as follows

- Mental health and Anxiety (41.2%)
- Sleep (40.2%)
- Identity and Belonging (32%)

These themes from a front line delivery perspective seem to fairly represent common themes that appear within both open access and online youth club sessions, however they also link into the experiences of young people who spend more time online or prefer to spend their free time at home. Exposure to screens for longer periods of time, gaming and schoolwork impacting sleep routines, seeking identity and looking for connection and belonging also fit with this, as well as struggling with anxiety. With young people turning to online resources to help sculpt their identities and navigate their journeys into adulthood these results are unsurprising, indicating real gaps where young people are seeking support or interventions.

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The lowest scoring results through the survey are as follows:

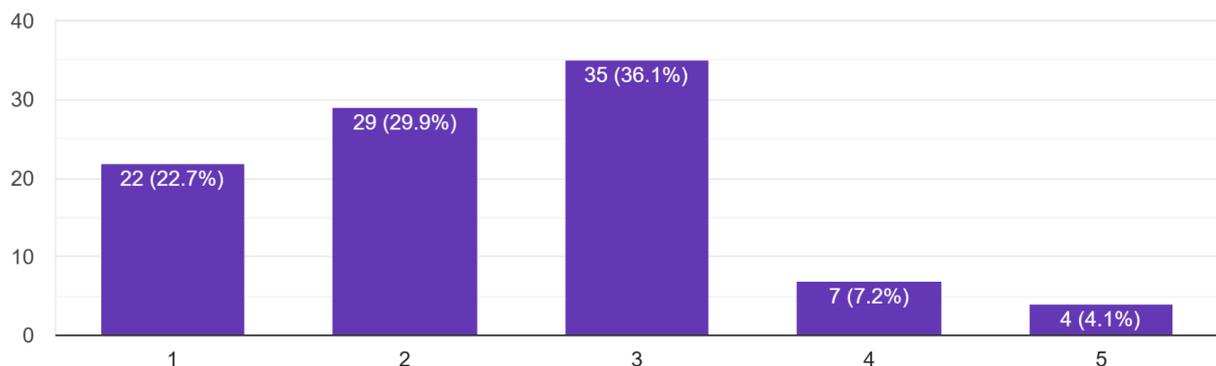
- Family (1%)
- Domestic Abuse (1%)
- Substance abuse (4.1%)
- Smoking and Vaping (4.1%)

Families and Domestic abuse scoring the lowest from the results could mean young people in Devon are not experiencing issues in this area. It could also potentially indicate that young people accessing services online may not be comfortable to discuss these topics due to fear of consequences of being found out, as if their technology is being overseen by family members this may put them into danger. This could also speak of safe spaces being so important for young people, indicating an in person provision to discuss topics such as domestic abuse of family troubles being more crucial. What this could also indicate is that young people are already adequately signposted in these areas and therefore know where to go and who to turn to.

Substance abuse and smoking or vaping come closely behind these as areas where young people were less likely to want support. This might indicate that young people are aware of the negative effects of these things, or that schools and youth services are already meeting these needs. Alternatively it might link into the fact that young people spending more time in their homes may simply be less exposed to these themes.

How intense would you prefer a service to be? Would you rather a service be only there when you look for it, or would you prefer a service that has more routine and sets tasks for you to complete?

97 responses



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How would you like your successes to be measured and / or rewarded? For some people, seeing how far they've come is really important. How should that be shown?

97 responses



If you could create a wellbeing service, what would it be like

- **Atmosphere and environment:** The service should be informal, casual, friendly, calm, welcoming, and fun, while also maintaining a good level of seriousness and routine, and offering a safe space for expression.
- **Service format and content:** Preferences include group chats for venting, general meet-ups, **1-on-1 counselling** (weekly, in-school, or long-term help with multiple therapies), **accessible online or in-person** services, and a choice of service formats and lengths. Topics should cover mental and physical health, online safety, sexual wellbeing, general awareness, and help with school and life.
- **Staff and interaction:** Staff should be experienced, have expertise, be chilled, kind, listen to feelings, avoid intrusive questions, and ideally have personal experience with mental health struggles. The service should be free.
- **Accessibility and availability:** The service should be accessible, available for long hours, non-mandatory, and offer the ability to talk at any moment. Some respondents wished to see photos of the place and people beforehand.
- **Unique or specific features:** Ideas include incorporating food, having a puppy present, using games (like FIFA) for information, having a chatbot website that turns chats into forums, using a tracker to see progress change, and a system to teach that helping others doesn't need a reward.

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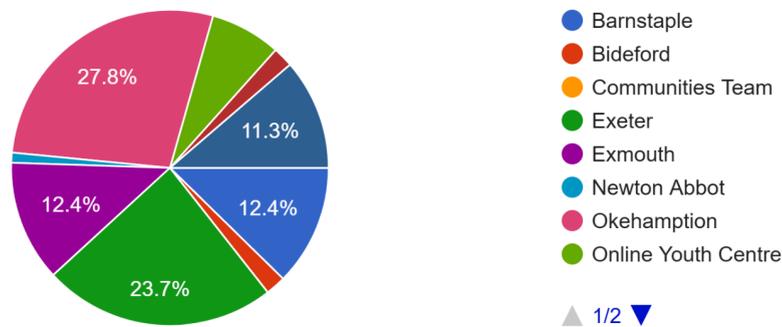
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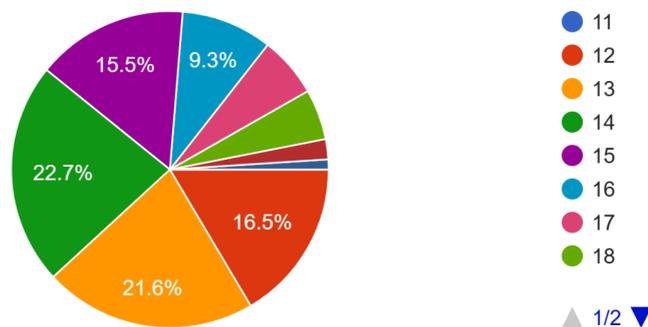
Where is your nearest SPACE Youth Centre? The centre with the most survey responses will win a small prize!

97 responses



How old are you? This will help us work out what sort of age range would use the service

97 responses



2 Responses being 19 years old ,1 Selecting prefer not to say. This shows a fair split of age demographics filling in the survey and reflecting the typical ages of young people accessing Spaces services wherever they may be situated, streetbased, in clubs, and online.

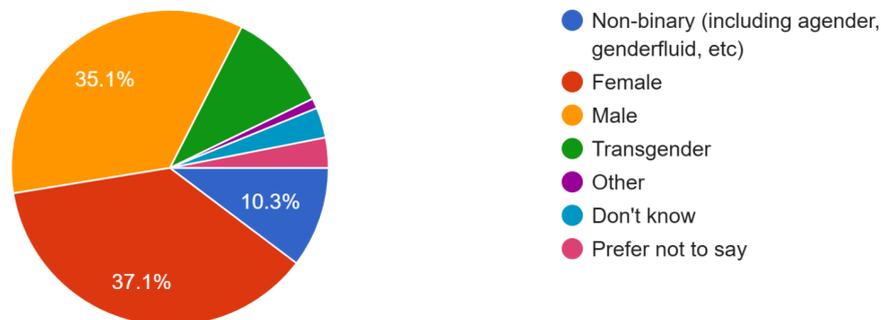
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How would you describe your gender identity? This will help us work out if any particular gender identity is more likely to use a wellbeing service, o... group of people aware that wellbeing services exist
97 responses



Barriers to engagement

As this project was delivered predominantly online with hybrid or in person elements there were some key learnings which presented as barriers to engagement from young people.

- Lack of interest from young people - Due to other projects being conducted within the service happening over the last year covering similar themes, some young people struggled to resonate with the concept of wellbeing. Also the demographic as indicated in the survey highlighted that they would prefer in-person sessions and resources, and therefore struggled to conceptualise how or what an online resource could look like. This could have also been linked to the lack of wishing to access support from their own homes due to fear or worries that they may get into trouble for disclosing, which linked closely to common threads whilst delivering online youth group sessions where some topics are hard to approach.
- Lack of understanding - For some members it was very difficult to conceptualise what a wellbeing service could look like, for some they would be accessing already well established support routes such as Kooth, CAHMS and support front their communities.
- Geographical gaps in data. Due to SPACE's physical youth centres being located only in 7 towns in Devon, and with busy teams it was difficult to collect data from certain areas of the county, however, this could also reflect either young people

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feeling there is adequate provision in their area, or not taking an interest in the survey.

Observations from the Sessions.

Although we aspired to deliver ten design and brainstorming sessions as per the proposed timeline, based on assumptions as to what young people would want as a programme there were multiple instances where this was not achievable or young people did not wish to proceed with the activity. This required a much more youth influenced curriculum of activities to best match their needs.

The nature of extreme participation when it comes to exclusively online or digital work sessions perhaps reflected this as young people were able to disengage at will. Gaining voice might have been much easier when working with young people in person.

This also reflected that young people attend their online youth club sessions for fun and didn't necessarily resonate with talking about a heavy schedule of wellbeing in their free time. Particularly with individuals who are at home and may wish to traditionally leave the house to access support, which was accounted for within the survey results we found.

Another reflection of this project was it falling at the same time as multiple other wellbeing themes projects being conducted by Space. Young people are being consulted regularly at present around crucial topics such as wellbeing and are experiencing fatigue or disaffection due to this. When they are in a place where they come to unwind and relax they are being asked to think a lot more frequently which is having adverse affects. Asking them to follow external links has also been indicated and observed, indicating the lack of willingness for young people online to break norms or break out of their comfort zone. Possibly reflecting the ways that social media apps are designed, also potentially highlighting a lack of technical confidence.

Where we did have some success as a counter to this was being able to take the questioning and the workshops into physical locations where young people were to help focus the steering groups.

Wrong Assumptions

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With this project we made the false assumption that the main cohort of young people who are traditionally very vocal about wellbeing would be passionate about being involved in a project regarding it. What we noticed quickly was that they actually ended up presenting quite a level of apathy towards design and would prefer a pre-made product, however there might be the risk of them disengaging.

Similar to when we present to the group what they would like to do as an activity in their online youth club session, when you present them with open options they struggle which ends up relying on the skills of the youth workers to steer conversations and activities to ensure that they were able to have their voice heard. This could also reflect the neurodivergent nature of the group. This might also reflect a lack of confidence from the members within the group.

Changes to plan

As mentioned previously this exploratory project needed to change direction as needed in order to best capture the voices of young people. This included the visiting of youth clubs or running consultation as mental health awareness days within Exeter college to best capture more information about what a service could look like. The extreme level of voluntary participation from young people within an online world resulted in changes of when the sessions were taking place needing to happen. Moving the sessions from evening to within our afterschool maker sessions proved to be more effective as the themes were based around creating an inclusive maker environment therefore questioning what an online wellbeing service could be was much more effective.

Key findings

During this project we had some interesting insight from young people about what they want from wellbeing services. We may, however, have naively assumed that creating or reinventing digital wellbeing services would be relevant for everyone. Young people vocalised that there is a clear preference in face to face support where possible, however an acceptance that in a rural county where resources are limited, accessing digital services would be acceptable.

Taking the key themes of:

- Mental health and Anxiety (41.2%)
- Sleep (40.2%)
- Identity and Belonging (32%)

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There is a market for being able to meet these needs, but as indicated young people would like the seriousness and intensity of the provision to be less formal. Apps such as Finch are already in regular use by members of the cohort. Finch works on wellbeing and introducing mindfulness. This app also has a level of gamification and community which meets the social needs of young people who may feel isolated or that they are the only ones who feel the way they do.

Members were reluctant to actively engage in the design process or creating the prepped resources; however some did mention they would access podcasts or be willing to try new apps should they meet their needs.

We noticed that situations matter when addressing wellbeing with young people, young people shied away from wanting to talk about their wellbeing in a busy online environment, meaning that the takeup on the design project was sparse, this ended regularly rethinking and planning to try new questions and activities. Although members had existing trusted relationships with the participants this did not necessarily translate to them being willing to engage in such a deep topic in their evening freetime, therefore perhaps better lending itself to closed groups and smaller numbers of members. In this instance we made the wrong assumption that we could replicate something that would have worked in person to fit young people online.

Accessibility was a major theme through the workshops, young people highlighted the importance of it needing to meet their needs and life styles, this also covered themes such as wanting anonymity when discussing or exploring themes that affect them. There was a level of distrust with regard to surrendering data when accessing support which showed a level of appropriate digital safety awareness, but also a wariness that others are watching, or more so people within their own homes may find out and they may get into trouble.

Everything taking longer when working online was a theme that was prevalent, as the nature of engagement is much less formal than having a group in a face to face setting we noticed that often plans were difficult to deliver sustainably due to the young people being able to have their focus captured elsewhere, or being pulled into other activities in their households such as looking after siblings or having to do chores. Whereas if members were in a face to face setting this would have been a much easier process.

Members who were actively engaged within the project reported frustrations regarding there being a lot of focus on wellbeing from professionals regularly conducting projects or questionnaires with little visibility to their voices being acted upon. Therefore in future this needs to be managed around when other work is being conducted in order to allow for more authentic work.

Young people seemed to be comfortable with what exists when it comes to self service of looking for information and guidance themselves, however did specify that there are distinct lacks of support for in person services, yet recognised there was little that could be done about this. They

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were also very vocal about certain services they felt did not work, but had few thoughts about how they could be improved.

Recommendations for future research

From our findings if we were to rerun these questions again there would be more of an emphasis on holding design sessions in person to promote more agency and ownership of the maker aspect. The informal nature of working online meant that keeping the focus of the group was a difficult balancing act. If we were to return to this online there would need to be serious consideration as to what the environment looks like, for instance, a zoom call or single use platform might be more beneficial to replicate a learning experience maintaining focus and allowing for better outcomes.

A broader reach of voice would have been preferable from young people to ensure this was appropriately captured as well as ideally reaching more rurally isolated young people to give authentic voice of their experiences, which may vary largely from young people who can access face to face provisions.

Expanding the results to multiple counties may give a broader set of suggestions or voices adding to the need for developing online wellbeing resources. Expanding out to cover the south west would give a richer field of views.

Working with a cohort of young people who are more interested in app design or digital media would have been of benefit to the project and for repeat we would consider this again.

A longer period of codesign at the beginning of the project to ensure youth voice is appropriately captured and they understand the key questions and resonate with them. Giving a set of more rigid starting conversations would help give a starting point for a future research project.

Summary

To conclude from the findings of this exploratory research piece. We noticed the importance of not presuming to know the answers for what young people willingly access in order to address issues such as wellbeing and health. In this study assumptions were proven wrong which will help to inform future practice. As a study we were able to obtain rich data from around the county of Devon helping to give an up to date snapshot for young people across a rurally isolated county, however, preferably, there would have been more of a diverse data set.

As a learning journey this proved as a good opportunity to evaluate how we engage with the design thinking process and allows us to reflect on how young people in virtual environments engage in topic based workshops, particularly when they are happening within their 'youth club' session. There is scope for further development of the core question and further exploration about how we can best meet the needs of young people, although we recognised that the pace of working with young people and building young people's interest in this kind of work is a much slower process

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than we had originally accounted for. There was a strong indication through both workshops and the survey findings that young people do indeed benefit on occasion from face to face project sessions, however this is not always a possibility for young people who lack transport or live in isolated areas, therefore a blend of approaches would be far more appropriate in future.

The survey results and conversations with young people during this research project strongly indicated that young people struggled with anxiety, sleep and identity and belonging. They also overwhelmingly stated that they would much prefer in person (69.1%), or text message (45.4%) based 1 to 1 work with a professional (73.2%) - counselling style services. We were unable to design or raise any solutions of how to fix this in a meaningful way as the survey was ongoing throughout the consultation. It would have been more beneficial to start with the survey in advance, then present young people with the results and build a service solution around that.

Although, in reflection, most young people who had previously accessed a wellbeing service responded that it had worked, or had at least worked "a little". The services young people indicated did not work for them were those such as CAHMS, indicating that, perhaps for the most part, wellbeing services that already exist are indeed working, but it is in the higher end of need that young people feel support is lacking.

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