



Young people and mental health

Understanding and accessing support in Northumberland

Background

This report details and concludes the findings of a research project conducted by sixth-form students at Queen Elizabeth High School, Hexham, on behalf of Healthwatch Northumberland. This project aimed to investigate mental health and the provision of mental health support for young people in Northumberland. This report was written by the team of students.

What we did

Our main approach to research involved two surveys: a student survey and a parent/carer survey. These surveys, which were completed by students and parents/carers of students at Queen Elizabeth High School between January and March 2025, sought to gather insights from both young people and their parents/carers about their experiences of mental health care provision for young people in our region.

Crucially, both surveys were anonymous, allowing respondents to share their experiences and opinions freely. Our findings and suggestions based on these data, are recorded below.

What we found

Mental health in students

When students were asked 'How frequently do you feel stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed?', the most common response (43%) was 'frequently'. This level of frequent stress could indicate unknown or unidentified mental health challenges faced by students. Over 20% of students who responded feel their sleep is negatively affected by their mental health.

However, it does appear that students have a good awareness of the symptoms of mental health problems and the importance of maintaining good mental health. For example, when asked 'On a scale from 1 to 5, how important do you believe maintaining good mental health is in general?' (where 1 was 'not important' and 5 was 'very important'), the average score was just over 4. In addition, when asked about their knowledge of mental health, the most common response (64%) was 'I know the names of some common mental health conditions, and I would recognise some of the symptoms if I saw them in a friend'.

Nonetheless, the fact that 30% of students answered 'I know the names of some common mental health conditions, but I wouldn't recognise the symptoms in a friend' indicates that there is more work to be done in educating students on recognising symptoms that could indicate poor mental health.

Mental health resources: awareness and accessibility

The mental health resource most known by parent/carers was 'school pastoral support' (almost 95%), followed by 'GP' (87%) and 'Children and Young People's Service' (74%). The least well known mental health resource was 'The Mix', with only one parent indicating that they were aware of this service. This was closely followed by 'Growing Healthy' (7.5%) and 'Papyrus' (11%).

The average number of known mental health resources was 4 per respondent. In the student survey, over 90% of students knew that support was available through the school pastoral service, whilst only 33% were aware of 'The Mix'. These results clearly indicate that there is good awareness of some mental health resources available to young people, but the work of other organisations is less well-known amongst both students and parents/carers.

Additionally, when asked to 'rate the availability and accessibility of mental health resources if you needed support' (on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 = not available or accessible at all, and 10 = completely available and accessible with no difficulty at all), students' average rating was only 5.7. Whilst this rating suggests that mental health support is moderately accessible, it would suggest that more could be done to ensure the accessibility and availability of support.

With the majority of students knowing that mental health support is available through the school pastoral service, only around 27% of students who responded suggested that they have ever accessed this support.

This is despite the fact that, when asked to rank their mental health on a scale from 1 to 10 over the past six months (where 1 was 'poor mental health' and 10 was 'good mental health'), the average score was less than 5. This could indicate a reluctance or inability to access such support.



Seeking support

Nearly 25% of parents/carers who responded felt that their child would be most likely to seek mental health support from a family member, followed by a friend (13%). Whilst it could be reasonable to suggest that these figures are influenced by bias, just under 35% of students also felt they would be most likely to seek support from a family member (this was the most frequent response).

Over 42% of parents/carers felt their child would be least likely to seek mental health support from the NHS website, followed closely by a GP (41%). Surprisingly, over 62% of student respondents suggested they would not seek support from the school nurse service. It is unclear if this is due to an unwillingness to approach the service, or uncertainty over how to approach it or what support the service could offer.

Parents and carers suggested a range of support that they felt should be available for young people. Responses included:

- **A Hexham Youth Initiative drop-in session once a week in school for anyone to go in over lunch**
- **Drop-in help in school or psychological therapists available in school**
- **On-site school counsellors in every school. Students can be referred or self-refer. I have worked in this capacity in an overseas international school, and it made a huge difference to students to have someone who wasn't a teacher/was independent of their academic studies to work with them**
- **School could link with the adolescent/transitions lead at North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board and/or join the Child Health and Wellbeing Network North East and North Cumbria**
- **More assemblies etc. on the subject**
- **Discrete support that can be accessed in a discrete way for those that are less able to speak up, or maybe have peer support groups in school, like a talking circle incorporating crafts**
- **Staff training in dyslexia, nurturing a trauma-informed approach for all children regardless of known history**
- **Strategies to support improving self-esteem from first school**

Students also made some suggestions:

- **'Time'**
- **'Advice from people'**
- **'Being more empathetic/sympathetic'**
- **'Taken seriously'**
- **'Learning and development'**
- **'Proper therapist'**

Whilst the students' responses may lack detail, it appears that they do not feel that they are lacking the option of support, but rather that how support is delivered could be altered.

Maintaining good mental health

When parents/carers were asked to select the factors that they felt were most important in maintaining good mental health, 'getting sufficient sleep' (79%), 'regular contact with family' (62%), and 'exercise' (60%) were the factors most cited as 'very important'. 'A healthy diet' was the factor least chosen as 'very important' (50%).

However, only 33% of students who responded said 'family relationships' 'very much' have a positive impact on their mental health, with 'friendships and social life' being cited by 40% and exercise by 32%.

The factors that students felt had the most negative impact on their mental health were also investigated. When asked 'How much do you feel the following factors have a negative impact on your mental health?', 'academic studies' (27%), 'sleep quality' (17%), and 'social media and physical health' (8%) were most commonly specified as 'very much having a negative impact'.

Students were also asked about strategies to safeguard their mental health. The four best strategies (reported as 'it supports my mental health') were:

- **Exercise (76%)**
- **Hobbies (72%)**
- **Socialising/social contact (65%)**
- **Spending time alone (63%)**

The four worst strategies (reported as 'it doesn't support my mental health'), were:

- **Substance use (59%)**
- **Staying up late (57%)**
- **Eating unhealthy foods or binge eating (54%)**
- **Self-harming (44%)**

These responses closely follow the recommendations of the Mental Health Foundation (2025), which suggests some strategies to support the mental health of young people. These include connecting with others (such as family, friends, and classmates), finding a flexible and realistic routine, and exercise. Given this, students appear to have a good awareness of the strategies that could be implemented to improve their mental health.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is clear that there is a level of demand for more contact time with trained mental health professionals from both students and parents/carers. Whilst it may not be possible to implement such support within school, students (and parents/carers) could receive greater direction to mental health support offered outside of school. This could include resources such as The Mix, which the majority (67%) of students stated they were not aware of, along with Young Minds and Kooth.

Additionally, promoting habits such as getting sufficient sleep and reduced exposure to social media, both of which were identified as contributors to poor mental health could improve mental health amongst young people. This could be achieved by introducing students to ways to implement these habits into everyday routines, such as setting timers on social media apps or reminders to go to bed.

Whilst these recommendations would not resolve all mental health challenges faced by young people in our community, they could help to address many of the key issues raised by students and parents/carers in this piece of work.

Next steps

To provide improved signposting to the mental health support available to students, Healthwatch Northumberland has updated its website to include a new young people's webpage with an array of resources tailored to the needs of young people and their parents. This webpage will be promoted to students at Queen Elizabeth High School through posters displayed within the school and to parents/carers and school staff through school communications.

This report will be published on the Healthwatch Northumberland website and shared with students, staff and parents/carers at Queen Elizabeth High School, along with relevant organisations and services. We hope this research will help to inform the decisions of policymakers within our region, allowing for a more targeted approach to improve the mental health of young people throughout our communities

References

Mental Health Foundation (2025). Looking after your mental health: a guide for young people. Available at [mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

Appendix

Response demographics

	Students	Parents/carers
Age		
13-14	29.1	0
15-16	43.6	0
17-18	20.9	1.9
19-20	3.6	0
25-49	0	47.2
50-64	0	49.1
Prefer not to say	2.7	1.9
Sex		
Male	40.0	3.8
Female	48.2	96.2
Other	8.2	0
Prefer not to say	3.6	0
Sexual Orientation		
Straight or heterosexual	61.8	98.1
Gay or lesbian	5.5	0
Bisexual	12.7	1.9
Pansexual	4.5	0
Not sure	7.3	0
Other	3.6	0
Prefer not to say	4.5	0
Ethnicity		
White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/White Irish	83.6	100
White: Gypsy, Roma/Traveller/Irish Traveller	0.9	0
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	1.8	0
Mixed or multiple ethnic group (White/Black Caribbean/White/Black African,/White/Asian,Any other mixed or multiple ethnic background)	5.5	0
Arab	1.8	0
Asian/Asian British (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Chinese)	0	0
Other ethnic group	5.5	0
Prefer not to say	1.8	0
Religion		
Christian	26.4	43.4
Muslim	0.9	0
Jewish	2.7	0
Buddhist	0	0
Hindu	0	0
Sikh	0.9	0
No religion	61.8	52.8
Other	3.6	0
Prefer not to say	2.7	3.8

Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?

Yes	82.7	98.1
No	12.7	0
Prefer not to say	4.5	1.9

Marital status

Married	n/a	73.1
Co-habiting	n/a	13.5
Divorced/dissolved civil partnership	n/a	9.8
Single	n/a	3.6

Number of responses

Student survey	Parent/carer survey
110	53

Student survey questions

1. On a scale from 1 to 5, how important do you believe maintaining good mental health is in general?

2. How would you rate your knowledge of common mental health conditions? [I know nothing about them; I know the names of some common mental health conditions, but I wouldn't recognise the symptoms if I saw them in a friend; I know the names of some common mental health conditions and I would recognise some of the symptoms if I saw them in a friend].

3. On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your mental health over the past 6 months? [1 = poor mental health, 10 = good mental health].

4. On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your mental health over the last 12 months? [1 = poor mental health, 10 = good mental health].

5. How frequently do you feel stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed? [Never; Rarely: happens very infrequently, such as once or twice a year or less; Occasionally: occurs irregularly, roughly once every 2–3 months; Sometimes: happens periodically, approximately 1–2 a month; Frequently: occurs weekly or more, but not daily; Always: a constant and daily experience; Unsure; Prefer not to say].

6. How much do you feel that your mental health negatively affects various areas of your life? [not at all; a little; quite a bit; very much; unsure; prefer not to say]. Note: these areas included studying, socialising, daily activities, sleep, relationships, and diet.

7. How much do you feel the following factors have a positive impact on your mental health? [not at all; a little; quite a bit; very much; unsure; prefer not to say]. Note: these factors included academic studies, friendships and social life, family relationships, social media, physical health, sleep quality, diet, exercise, and relationship with your partner.

8. How much do you feel the following factors have a negative impact on your mental health? [not at all; a little; quite a bit; very much; unsure; prefer not to say]. Note: these factors included academic studies, friendships and social life, family relationships, social media, physical health, sleep quality, diet, exercise, and relationship with your partner.
9. How do you feel about these strategies or habits (if any) in supporting your mental health? [it supports my mental health; it doesn't support my mental health; I am unsure if it supports my mental health; prefer not to say]. If you would like to, you are welcome to suggest positive strategies or useful techniques that you use and would recommend to others.
10. How would you feel about seeking support from each of these figures for mental health issues? [yes and I have sought support from them; yes, but I haven't yet sought support from them; I would not seek support from them; maybe; prefer not to say]. Note: these figures included a friend, a family member, a partner, a teacher or other school staff member, a school nurse, a mental health professional, an anonymous phone helpline, anonymous text service, the internet.
11. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the availability and accessibility of mental health resources if you needed support? [1 = not available or accessible at all, 10 = completely available and accessible with no difficulty at all].
12. Which of these mental health support services are you aware of or/and have you ever used them yourself for mental health support? [I am aware of but have not used mental health support available here; I am aware of and have used mental health support available here; I am not aware of mental health support available here]. Note: these services included GP, NHS website, Children and Young People's Service, Kooth, Be You, The Mix, school nurse, school pastoral support, other school staff member, and other.
13. Do your school teachers or support staff give mental health presentations in school? [Yes; no; not sure]. If you answered yes – how effective or informative do you feel they are? [scale from 1 to 10, where 1 = not effective or informative, and 10 = very effective and informative].
14. Does your school invite external services to give mental health presentations in school? [Yes, no, not sure].
15. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your school's efforts in raising awareness of what mental health support is available for young people? [1 = not effective or informative, 10 = very effective and informative].
16. Please indicate how much you feel the following factors might put you off seeking mental health support. [scale from 1 to 10, where 1 = not effective at all, and 10 = extremely effective].
17. Is there anything you can think of that would make accessing mental health support easier for young people either in or out of school?

Parent/carer survey questions

1. What mental health support or resources for your child are you aware of?
2. Please indicate how likely do you think your child would be to seek mental health support from the following if they need help.
3. Please indicate in your opinion how much you think the following factors might deter your child from seeking mental health support.
4. Is there any other support, either in or out of school, you can think of that you feel should be available for young people?
5. How do you feel your child's school does in raising awareness of mental health support for young people either in or out of school? – It doesn't look like these answers are included in the spreadsheet but, if I can recover the answers about school, say what the most common response was.
6. Please use this space to give any ideas or suggestions of anything you feel your child's school could do to improve awareness of mental health support available for young people.
7. What changes do you think could be made to make existing mental health support and resources more accessible to young people?
8. Please indicate how important you think the following factors are in maintaining good mental health.

A big thank you to the students who carried out this piece of work:



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