

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Mental Health in Liverpool

What Children and Young People Told Us



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Introduction

In March 2020, Liverpool, along with most of the world, went into lockdown as a response to the Coronavirus/Covid-19 pandemic.

The impact was felt in many ways and will continue to be felt for many years to come – economically, socially, politically and personally. Physically and mentally.

As the reality of lockdown became clear, Healthwatch Liverpool decided to ask people about how the changes to their lives were affecting their mental health. And, over several months, we continued to ask people about the longer-term mental health impacts of Covid-19, and their concerns for the future.

We developed an online survey based on feedback from local people of all ages, and we ran it from June 2021 to January 2022.

We have grouped what people told us into a series of reports (covering 'Executive Summary and Recommendations', 'Key Findings', 'Children and Young People', 'Disabled People', 'Case Studies' and 'Additional Data') all of which can be found on our website www.healthwatchliverpool.co.uk/Covid-MH-Report.

As part Healthwatch Liverpool's wider survey about the impact of Covid-19 on local people's mental health we wanted to make sure that we listened to how children and young people coped during the pandemic. We wanted to know what things helped them, and what prevented them from maintaining good mental health and emotional wellbeing. We did this because we wanted to make sure that their opinions were heard by the people who design and provide mental health services targeted at children and young people in Liverpool.

Early findings from UK studies of the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in relation to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic show that some children and young people's mental health and wellbeing has been substantially impacted during the pandemic.

Young people who have never previously experienced mental health difficulties have begun to report them, and those who had previously reported difficulties said that their symptoms had been made worse by a series of lockdowns and uncertainty around their present and future lives. These findings also show that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were likely to experience particularly poor mental health during this period.

In addition, evidence suggests that services which support children and young people have been harder to access due to lack of funding, reduced or inadequate staffing levels (including due to staff sickness and self-isolation), and higher demand since the initial lockdown in March 2020¹.

We wanted to know whether children and young people in Liverpool were having similar experiences to those elsewhere in the country.

¹ Source: www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-mental-health-and-wellbeing-surveillance-report/7-children-and-young-people

What We Did

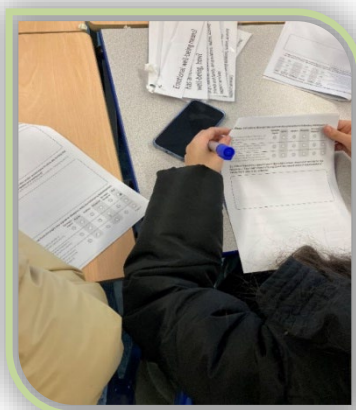
During November 2021 we visited two schools in Liverpool, one in the north and one in the south. We chose these areas as they had several differences from one another, reflecting differences in health and financial circumstances across the city. However, the feedback we got from the participants indicated that their experiences were broadly similar across the schools despite their different locations.

During these visits, we spoke to 112 young people aged 16-18. We ran workshop sessions for both schools with the aim of providing the students with information and advice about mental and emotional wellbeing, whilst also gathering feedback and data for this project.



We based the sessions loosely around the themes of our online survey about the impact of Covid-19 on Liverpool people's mental health, but we gathered information through exercises and activities such as word clouds, group discussions and bingo. Some young people filled out the online questionnaire during the sessions, and this data is included in our ['Key Findings' report](#).

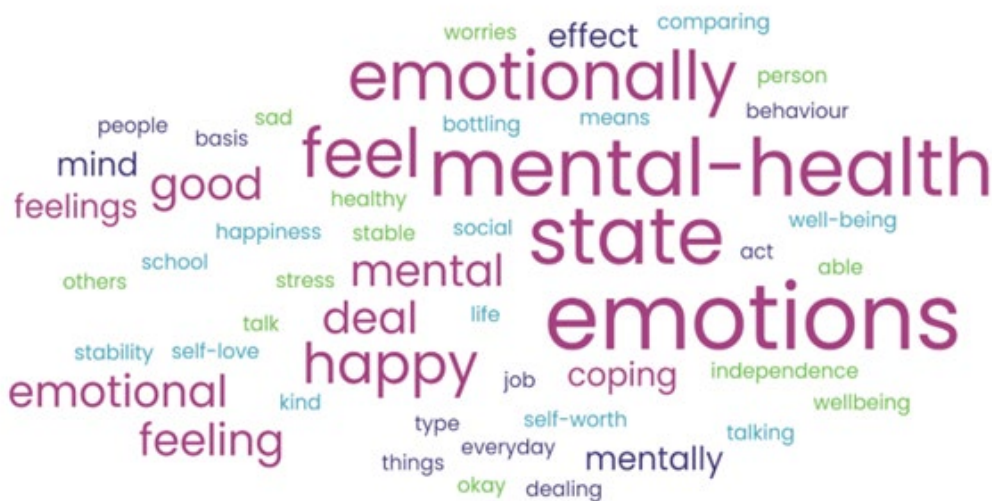
This report focuses on information that was gathered during the face-to-face sessions at the two schools.



What we found out

1) Definitions

We asked students at both schools to tell us what 'mental and emotional wellbeing' meant to them. Below is a word cloud of their answers, which highlights both positive (stability, happiness, self-love, self-worth, healthy) and negative aspects (worries, bottling, comparing, sad, stress) of mental health.



One young person explained wellbeing as:

"How you are feeling emotionally, having good mental health and being able to talk about stress or worries"

2) Data Targets

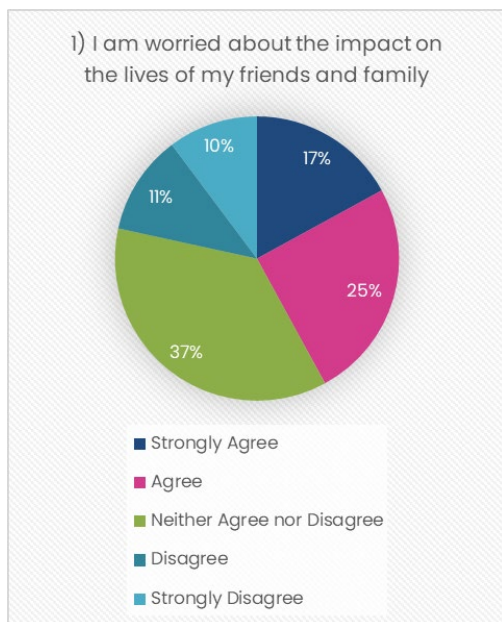
One of the ways we gathered information from the students was by asking them to respond to a set of statements posted on targets. They put stickers on a section of the target that corresponded to their answer (Strongly Disagree in the middle and Strongly Agree on the outside). They then discussed the answers together. An example from one group session is shown below.



At School One we met with 5 groups of Year 12 students across the day. Each session lasted 30 mins and included between 12 and 18 young people. At School Two we met with 34 students in two groups, one from Year 12, and the other from Year 13. Each session lasted 1.45 hours.

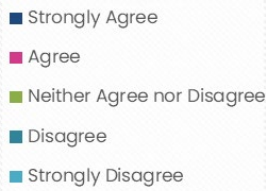
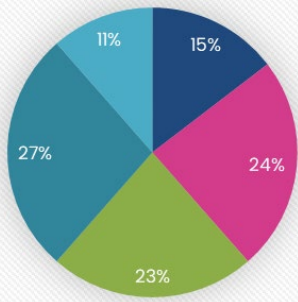
The combined responses are shown in the charts below.

Impact of the pandemic: What do you think?



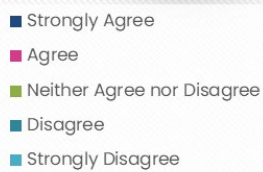
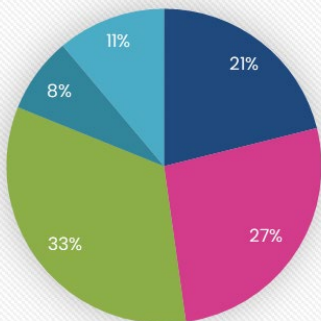
Overall, 42% of the young people were worried or very worried about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their loved ones. However, 37% had no particular feelings about this and 21% said they had few or no concerns.

2) I am worried about the impact on my family life

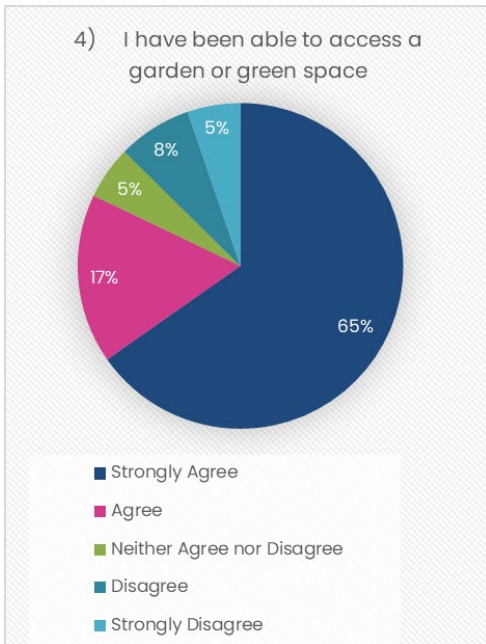


39% were worried or very worried about the pandemic's impact on their family life, but an almost equal number (38%) had few or no concerns. Almost a quarter (23%) had no particular feelings about this.

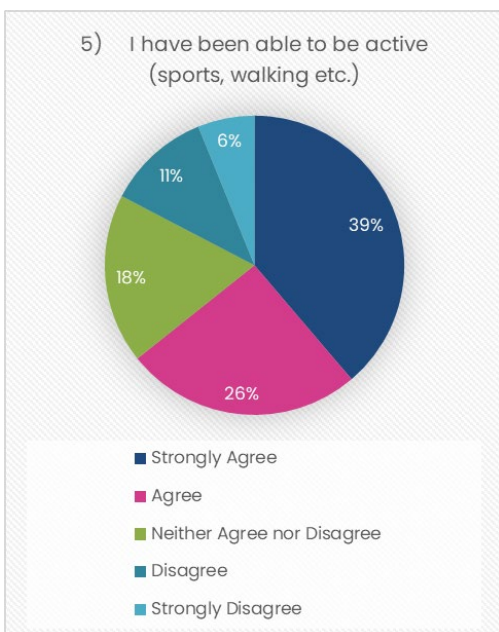
3) I was able to spend enough time with my friends and family



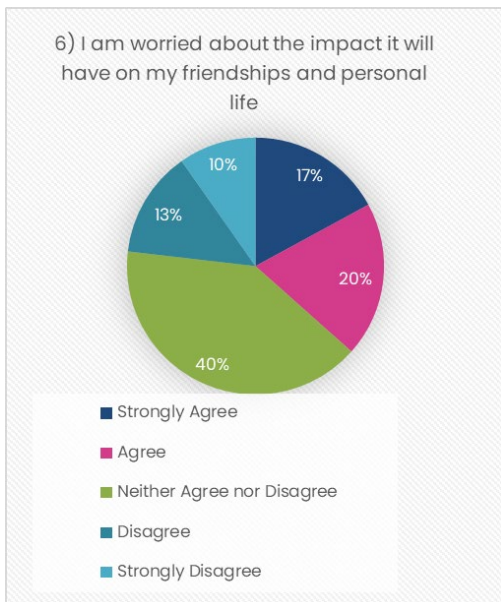
Almost half of the young people we spoke with (48%) felt that they had been able to spend enough time with their loved ones, but nearly a 5th (19%) had not been able to, with 11% strongly disagreeing. A third (33%) had no particular opinions about this.



A significant majority had been able to access gardens or green spaces during lockdowns with 65% agreeing strongly about this and a further 17% agreeing. However, 13% did not feel they had sufficient access to outdoor spaces/nature, and 5% felt particularly strongly about this.



65% either agreed or agreed strongly that they'd been able to be active but 17% did not feel they'd been able to be active enough. With 6% feeling strongly about this – a similar number to those who had not had access to gardens or green spaces.



The largest group of students (40%) did not have any strong opinions on how the pandemic might affect their friendships or personal life, but almost as many (37%) did have concerns, with 17% being particularly worried about this. Almost a quarter (23%) were not particularly worried about this.

3) Covid-19 and Emotional Wellbeing

We also asked the groups of students a series of questions about their emotional wellbeing, which produced the following responses.

a) Do you feel that the pandemic has affected your emotional well-being? How?

Almost all groups said that their emotional wellbeing had been affected, but for different reasons. Some said that their mental health had been positively affected for reasons such as: having more time to spend with family, being away from school which made them feel less stressed about schoolwork or having more time to focus on hobbies like exercise. For some, the time alone was welcomed. However, many others said that the pandemic had negatively affected their mental and emotional wellbeing, mainly due to restrictions having an impact on their social lives, being separated from other family members and the time spent at home alone making them feel lazy, unmotivated and unproductive. Some said they dealt with the first lockdown better than the second.

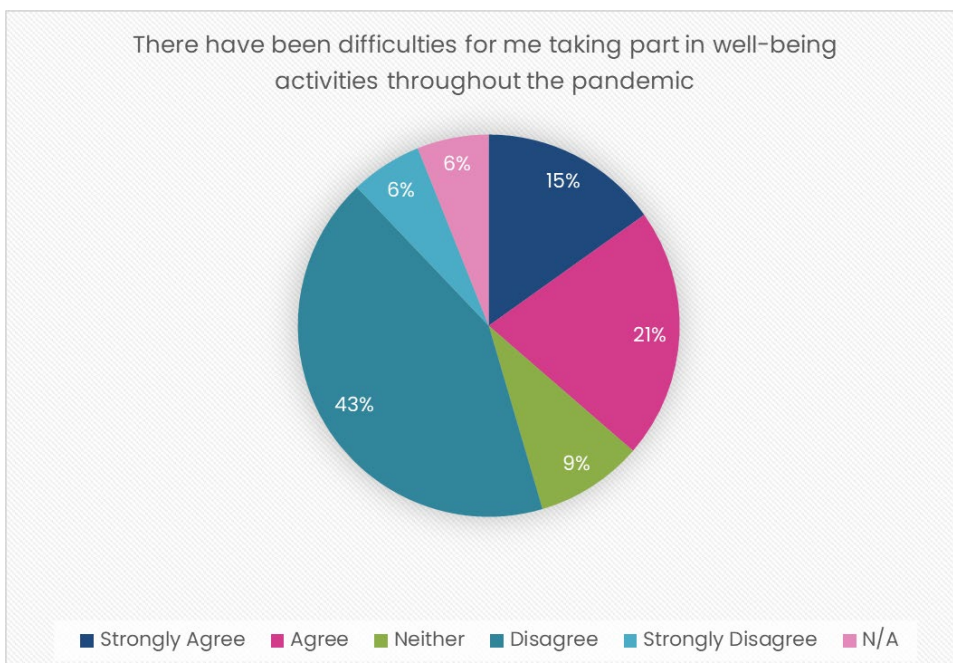
"It caused us to become lazier and more unmotivated. It also caused some of us to develop more anxiety which puts us at a disadvantage to do our work"

"We didn't feel lonely due to the technology we have today which allowed us to still remain in contact with friends and family virtually. It also allowed the family who live in our houses to come closer together by watching movies and playing board games together"

b) What have you of your family been doing that has helped you with your mental and emotional wellbeing?

The groups suggested various things that they and their families had been doing to help them mentally and emotionally throughout the pandemic. Many said that organising activities to do with their families on a regular basis helped them. Keeping in touch with friends via video call or phones also helped the students with their mental wellbeing. Exercise, spending time with pets and taking up new hobbies also benefited many. Being outdoors was mentioned several times. As discussed above, over half the young people said that they strongly agreed they had been able to access a garden or green space throughout the pandemic, however there were still 13% who either disagreed or disagreed strongly that they had been able to access green space during lockdowns.

When asked how strongly they agreed with a statement about difficulties taking part in wellbeing activities during the pandemic, over a third (36%) either agreed or agreed strongly that this had been an issue for them. However, almost half (49%) felt that the pandemic had made little impact.



c) Is there anything you have not you been able to do/would have liked to do, during the pandemic to maintain your mental health and wellbeing?

When asked about things they felt they couldn't do to maintain their mental health/emotional wellbeing, most students gave answers such as see friends and family in person more, be able to take part in their usual hobbies/clubs, go on holidays or trips away with their families and be able to exercise in groups or in gyms. It was clear that, at this age, socialisation and hobbies were also a reliable activity that helped them maintain their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

d) What has stopped you doing the things you wanted to do?

Although many answered this question with an obvious answer; 'the pandemic/lockdown restrictions', some also said that the things that stopped them doing the activities that helped their mental health included being anxious about

spreading the virus to their families, not having enough money, and their schoolwork taking up too much of their time as they felt their teachers gave them more work than usual. Some also said that they felt unmotivated and unproductive, that they were procrastinating and that they were worried about the uncertainty of their future.

4) Accessing services and support

We asked the students at one school to let us know any types of support they (or a friend) had accessed during or before the pandemic. We asked them to put their hands up for each question depending on whether they agreed or disagreed.

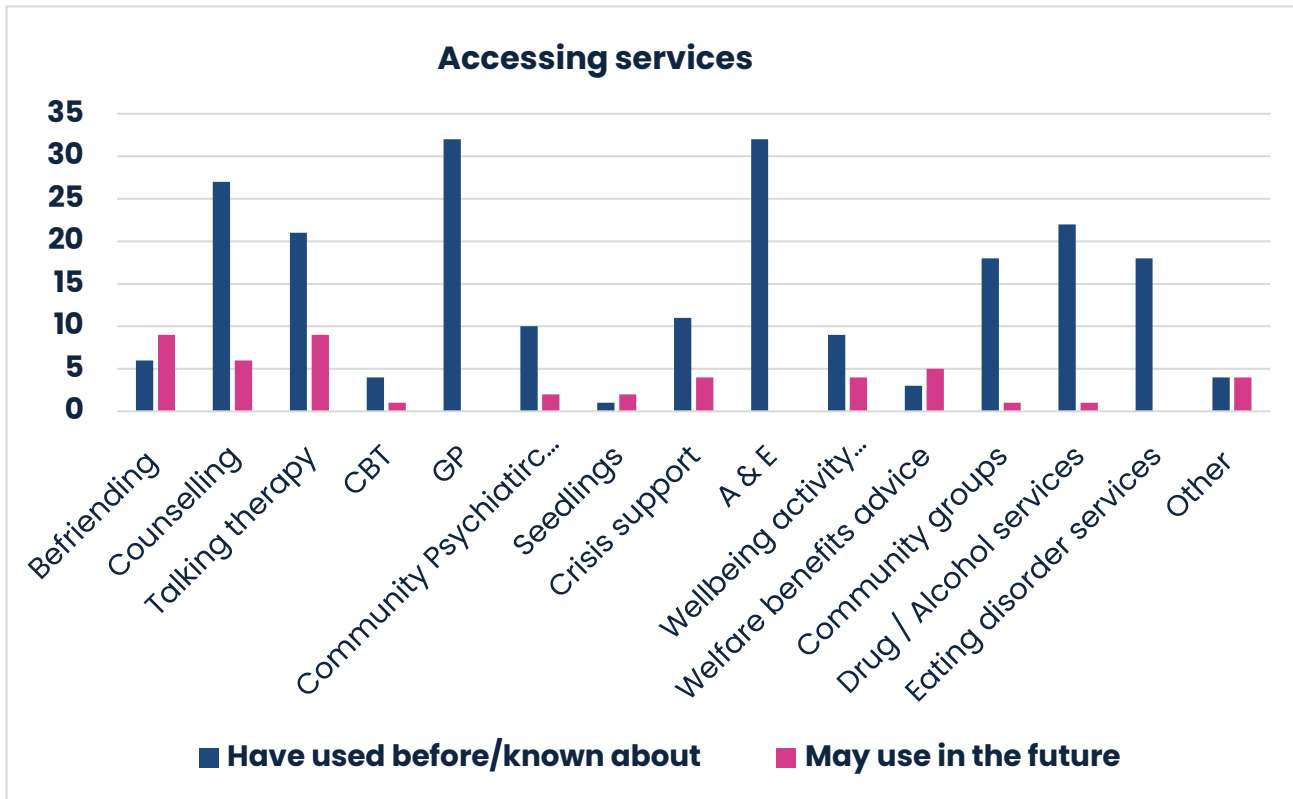
Of the 2 classes we spoke to, 10 (29%) students said they or a friend had accessed support before the pandemic. This number increased to 13 (37%) in relation to support accessed during the pandemic. Nearly half of all students (49%) said they would know who to go to for support if they needed it and 12 (34%) knew where they could go for support. Of those who continued to receive support during the pandemic, 4 said they were worried about the privacy and confidentiality of the support whilst they were at home and attending online appointments.

Have you or a friend accessed support for emotional wellbeing/mental health before the pandemic?	10 (29%)
Have you or a friend tried to access support for emotional wellbeing/mental health during the pandemic?	13 (37%)
Did you know who you could go to for support?	17 (49%)
Did you know where to access support/services?	12 (34%)
Were you worried about privacy during an appointment (if it was virtual)	4 (11%)

Support Services Bingo

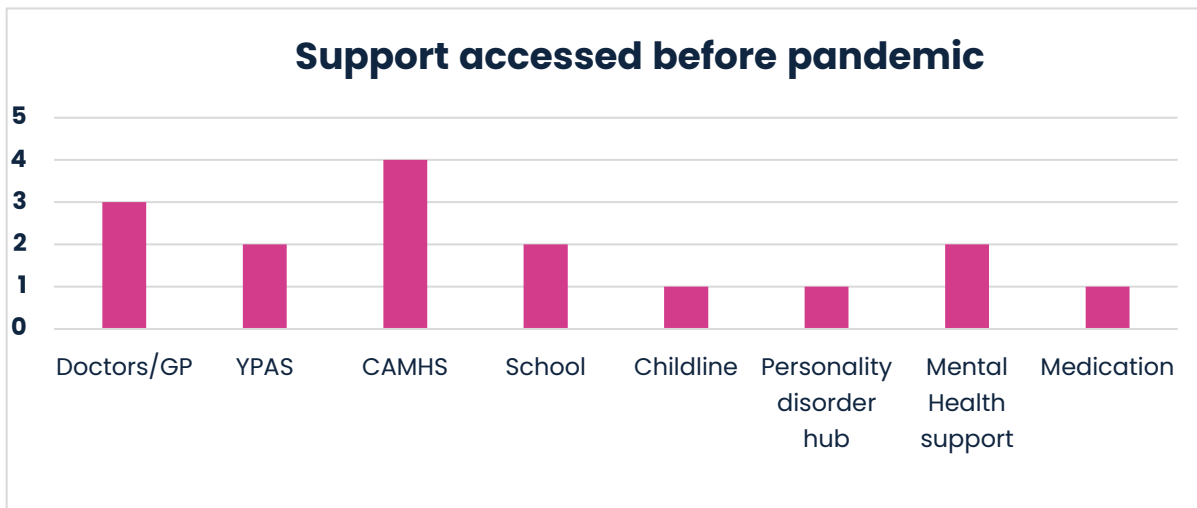
We asked students to fill out a bingo sheet with how many mental health services they had heard of or used. After the game was over, we also went through each service they'd listed, discussed what it did and then asked whether any of the students might consider using these services in future now that they had learned about them. The current most-used services were GPs and A&E, followed by counselling, drug and alcohol services and talking therapies.

The services students were most likely to use now that they had information about them were befriending and talking therapies.



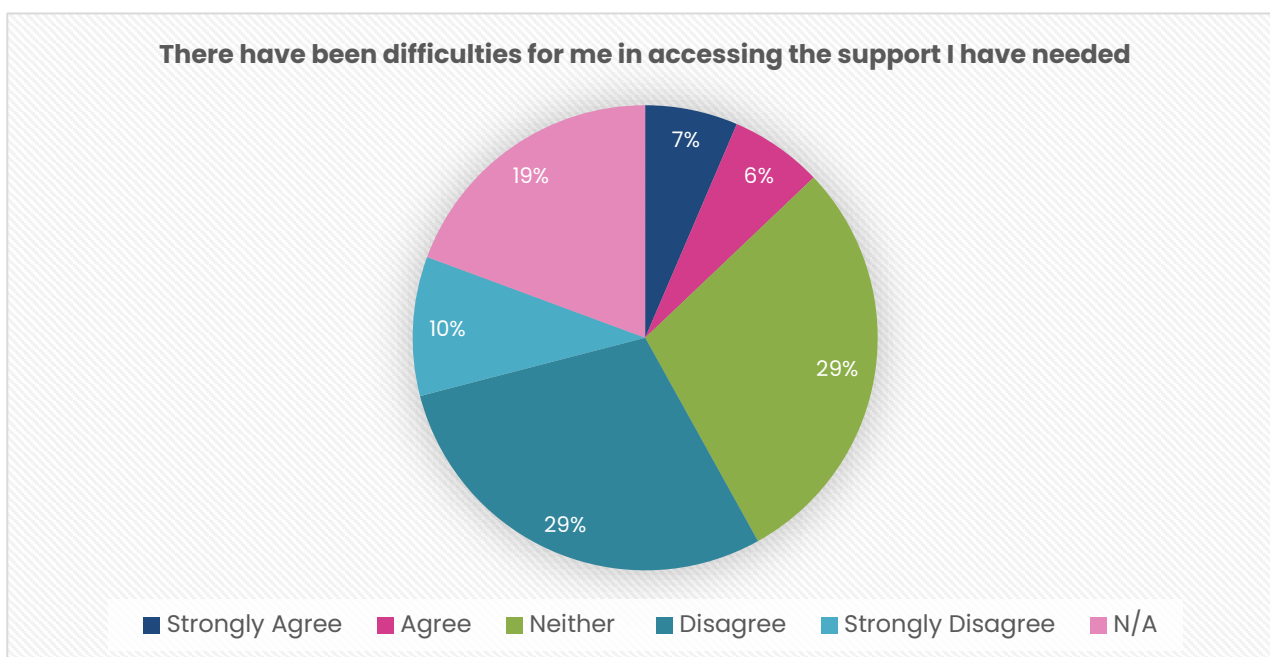
We asked groups of students to write down what other types of support they had accessed before the pandemic. The most popular service that students had accessed was CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services). Students had also gone to their GP, YPAS (Young Person’s Advisory Service), their school, and other mental health support organisations for help.

Those that felt confident enough to disclose told us that during the pandemic they had accessed counselling for the first time. One said their mental health support had carried on throughout the pandemic, but moved to online, and another told us that they had tried to go to their GP for support but didn’t manage to make an appointment.



What stopped young people from accessing the support they needed for their mental health?

We asked whether the students agreed that the pandemic had made it more difficult to access mental health support, and 13% said that it had to some extent, whereas 39% said it hadn't made much, if any, difference.



When we asked about the things that stopped or deterred students from seeking help for their mental health, they gave a range of answers. The main things the students listed were being embarrassed, not having money for paid support, waiting lists for NHS services, fear of being judged or not believed by parents or their school, fear that the service wouldn't be confidential, and Covid restrictions.

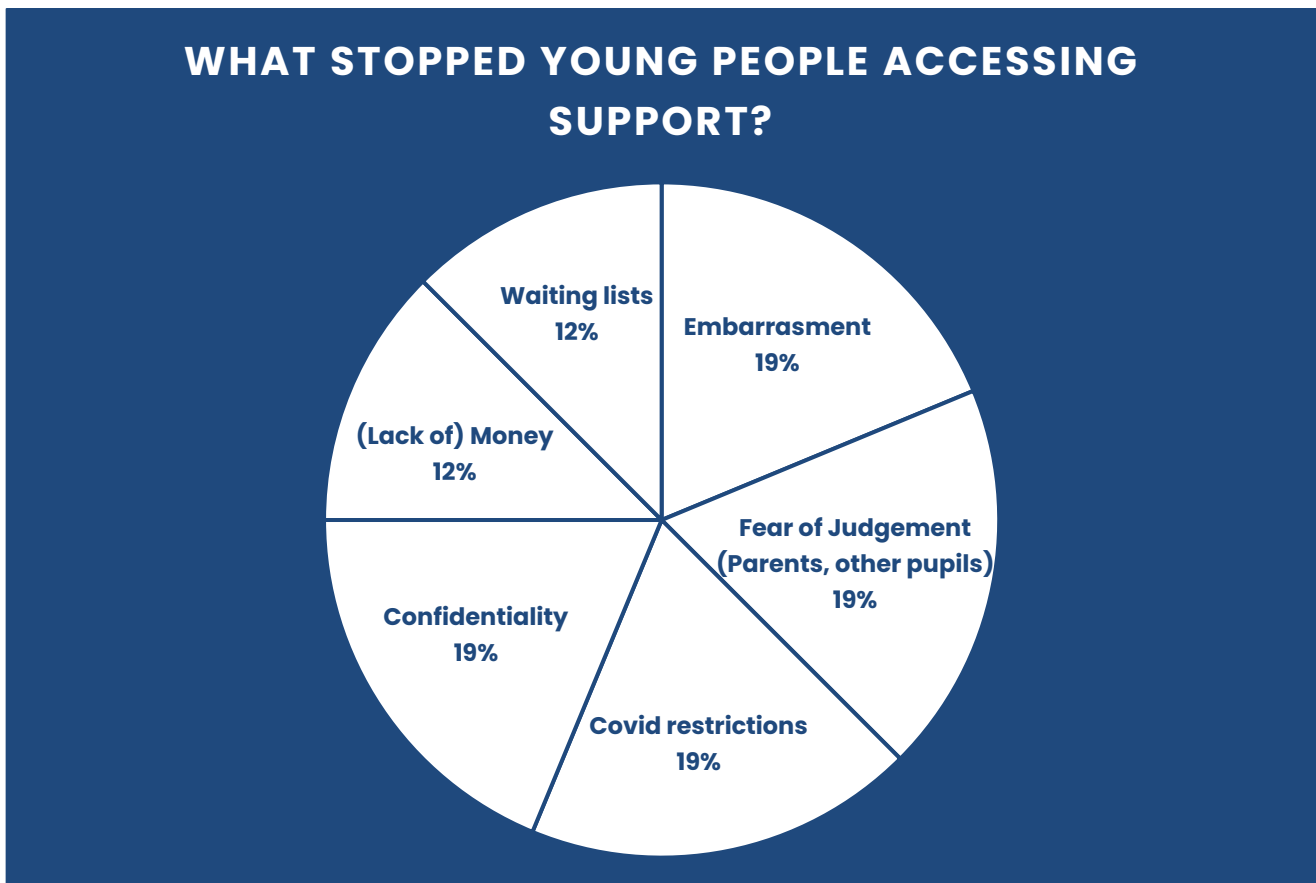
Other students said they didn't have the confidence to seek help, they couldn't get to services due to lack of transport, they feared nothing would be done if they asked for help, and that the types of services (un)available in their area restricted them.

Comments from students during this activity included:

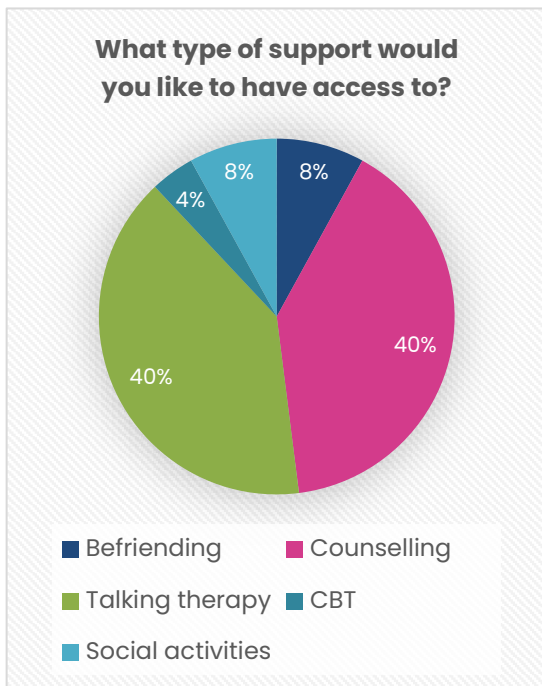
“When you call a service and calls are not answered or responded to it can be frustrating, make you feel alone, disappointed, not bother calling again.”

“You are told that you are too old for a service, but not given an alternative to go to.”

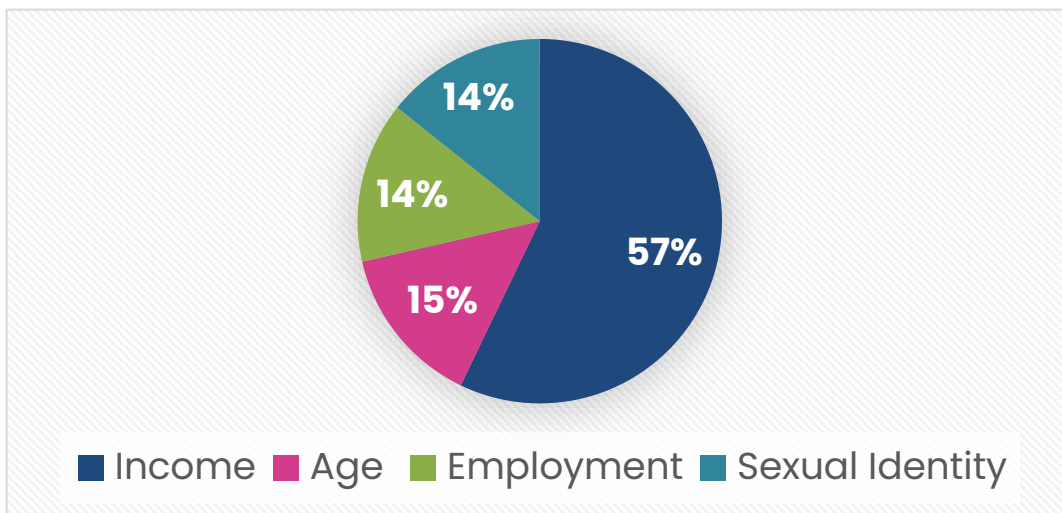
“They said I was coping, but I wasn’t.”



We also asked students who hadn’t accessed support, but would like to, what type of support they might consider accessing now that they are aware of it. Talking therapies and counselling were the most popular choices, with 40% of those we asked saying they’d like to have access to one or both of these.



We asked whether students felt that any other factors may have affected their ability to access mental health and wellbeing support services throughout the pandemic. They told us that income/lack of money (57%) was the biggest barrier to accessing the support they would like. However, age, employment status and sexual identity were also cited as factors by several of the young people.



Other answers given included a lack of information, and postcode, as some services are only available in certain areas.

7 out of 26 (27%) told us that their financial situation had been impacted as a result of the pandemic. Although 3 young people said that they had got a job during the pandemic, others told us that they had become worse off financially.

"I have not been able to get any work due to the pandemic"

"My mum and stepdad haven't been able to work"

"I was unable to work which led me to rely on my parents however they were struggling too"

Conclusions

Like many other groups in Liverpool and across the country, we found that the young people we spoke with have struggled to maintain their mental and emotional wellbeing throughout the pandemic.

Many were worried about their own futures and the lives of their families and friends due to Covid-19. One significant concern was that young people were not able to do the things they normally did to help them feel happy, connected to others, supported, and fulfilled.

Some individuals were better able to access or take part in activities that they felt supported them with their mental health than others were. Some students who spoke with us mentioned things that were out of their control, such as money, having a family member who was vulnerable, or not having easy access to open and green spaces to socialise, which made them feel they weren't able to support themselves in the same ways others could.

There were exceptions, however. Some young people welcomed the time alone to do things they didn't usually have the time or space to do when attending school regularly.

When discussing barriers to accessing mental health care and support, young people told us there were a number of things that deterred them such as cost, waiting lists, and shame or embarrassment around accessing this kind of support. Although some young people told us that they would know who to go to if they had concerns or were struggling with their mental health, many were unaware of professional organisations that could support them.

We found that many young people, unless they had an ongoing and/or diagnosed mental health problem, were unsure of the different types of support that are available to them. This is something that we would recommend schools and healthcare institutions become more aware of, in order to ensure that young people have ways to access to counselling, talking therapies and other support options even if they do not feel comfortable going to a teacher, GP, parent or carer about their mental health concerns.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone who took the time to share their stories, experiences, and information through surveys, workshops and interviews for this project. Their contributions were anonymous, but very much appreciated.

About Healthwatch Liverpool

Healthwatch Liverpool is the independent champion for people who use health and social care services in Liverpool. We're here to make sure that those running services put people at the heart of care.

One of our main purposes is to understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services and to speak out on their behalf.

As part of a national network made up of local Healthwatch organisations in every local authority area of England (and Healthwatch England, the national body) our work contributes to a nationwide perspective on health and social care services.

At Healthwatch Liverpool we also provide a dedicated information and signposting service which helps to put people in touch with services and activities that can help maintain and improve their health and wellbeing.

All our reports about the mental health impact of the Covid-19 pandemic are available online at www.healthwatchliverpool.co.uk/Covid-MH-Report.

If you require a copy of the report in another format or language, please contact us and we will do our best to help.

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