

‘ Happy in our Heads’

Children and young people’s views on
Community Mental Health Services’



COUNSELLING

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1. Report Summary

In January 2006, the "Our Health, Our Care, Our Say" White Paper highlighted that Primary Care Trusts had "more to do" to improve access to services provided by CAMHS. This report summarizes the outcomes of a consultation that was undertaken with vulnerable children and young people in Sunderland to find out their views with regard to the accessibility of services.

The consultation methods used were non-intrusive and took into consideration the needs and abilities of the participants. Children and young people were very positive about their experience of involvement and plans are in place to feedback the outcomes of the consultation in a format that is young person friendly and easy to understand.

The research process has revealed that the majority of children and young people are able to articulate their needs and want to be listened to. They value the opportunity to voice their views and suggestions about services they use, however are often disappointed when their opinions and ideas do not appear to make a difference. They want their views to be considered when services are being planned or reviewed.

The outcomes of the research provide a range of suggestions to improve the way information and support services are provided for children and young people who are experiencing issues affecting their mental health. Children and young people have suggested that to effectively meet their needs services should:

- Be based within community buildings that are easily accessible and user friendly. The ideal building would have a range of other services, activities and opportunities available to young people so that their anonymity and confidentiality is protected.
- Be open at times when access to other support services are not available i.e. evenings and weekends.
- Be responsive to the individual needs of children, young people and their families. Access to information and support should be readily available at the time at which it is most needed. Waiting times for appointments should be minimal.
- Employ friendly staff who are approachable and non-judgemental.
- Employ workers who know how to communicate effectively with and are interested in working with children and young people.
- Have a range of information available that is up-to-date, uses clear and simple language and is presented in a user-friendly format.

2. Background & Context

“Children's mental health is the strength and capacity of children's minds to grow and develop with confidence and enjoyment. It consists of the capacity to learn from experience and to overcome difficulty and adversity. It's about physical and emotional well-being, the ability to live a full and creative life and the flexibility to give and take in friendships and relationships.”

Young Minds

There are many definitions of children's mental health, however the above definition is considered appropriate as it emphasises the nature of health, rather than that of illness. Understanding this allows us to see that there needs to be provision not only for the treatment of mental health problems and disorders, but also for their prevention and for the promotion of mental health within children and families and more generally throughout the community. The emphasis in promoting children's mental health is on building resilience in children, rather than on treating problems and disorders. Of particular importance is the encouragement and teaching of emotional literacy and intelligence thereby increasing the capacity of children and young people to understand and manage feelings and thoughts about themselves and others.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are a comprehensive range of services that are available within local communities, towns or cities, to provide help and treatment to children and young people who are experiencing emotional or behavioural difficulties, or mental health problems, disorders and illnesses.

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service was launched in Sunderland in September 2004 as a direct response to the Children's National Service Framework which included the mental health and psychological wellbeing of children and young people as one of its 11 standards. Standard 9 covers the mental health and psychological wellbeing of children and young people. It states:

“All children and young people, from birth to their eighteenth birthday, who have mental health problems and disorders, have access to timely, integrated, high quality, multidisciplinary mental health services to ensure effective assessment, treatment and support, for them and their families.”

The standard outlines the following vision for the future:

- An improvement in the mental health of all children and young people

- That multi-agency services, working in partnership, promote the mental health of all children and young people, provide early intervention and also meet the needs of children and young people with established or complex problems.
- That all children, young people and their families have access to mental health care based upon the best available evidence and provided by staff with an appropriate range of skills and competencies.

The CAMHS in Sunderland aims to have a positive effect on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children and young people who are experiencing or who are at risk of developing, emotional, behavioural and psychological difficulties by offering a range of preventative intervention strategies that include the provision of consultation and advice, assessment, and individual/group/family work on a short term basis. The service aims to promote resilience against the development of mental health problems at an early stage in the hope of preventing any further behavioural, emotional or psychological distress.

In 2004 the Children Act, provided the legislative spine for developing more effective and accessible services focused around the needs of children, young people and families. Local Authorities responded by implementing plans for the development of Children's Trusts which aimed to bring together all services for children and young people to provide more integrated and responsive services that focused on improving outcomes for all children and young people. Until May 2006 Sunderland Counselling Services, an independent voluntary organisation, had provided counselling services for children and young people with funding from Sunderland Children's Fund. The service was based within a youth club building in the west of the City, however, this arrangement was revised under new arrangements for the delivery of integrated services and the counselling services for children and young people were incorporated into CAMHS. The service was subsequently relocated to the Carley Hill Education Centre, an old school building in the north of the City. Workers are now line managed by CAMHS and operate within their policy framework, although salary payments continue to be the responsibility of Sunderland Counselling Services until funding from the Children's Fund expires in March 2008.

The CAMHS Counselling Service was set up to expand the range of early interventions offered by Community CAMHS by providing a citywide service for children and young people aged between five and nineteen years, including those with disabilities and special needs. The service has a referral system through which workers from other agencies can refer children and young people who are experiencing difficulties as a result of bullying, domestic violence, family breakdown or bereavement. Parents/carers of children in need of support and young people aged between 16 and 18 years of age are able to contact the service directly for help.

3. Purpose of the Report

This report was commissioned by Sunderland Children's Fund. It aims to document the outcomes of a piece of research that was undertaken by the staff of the Young Peoples' Counselling Service. Workers set out to find out the opinions of children and young people in relation to about accessing information and support services using a simple survey. The outcomes have been collated by Solutions 4 Consultants and are presented in this report.

It is envisaged that the report will be used to inform future decision-making processes, leading to the improvement and further development of CAMHS for children and young people across the City.

4. Methodology

The CAMHS Counselling Services organised an event to mark World Mental Health Day on October 10th 2006. The purpose of the day was to raise awareness around emotional health and looking after yourself. Children and young people from schools in the north of the City were invited to attend, however take up was not as good as anticipated. The majority of children and young people that did attend were not in mainstream education and had been identified as being in need of additional support for behavioural issues.

The consultation exercise was one of a number of activities that were available on the day. Workers designed a simple questionnaire that could be used with children and young people in a "Big Brother" setting. A room was transformed to look like the Big Brother Diary Room. As children and young people queued to go into the room, they were informed that their responses would be anonymous and that nothing they said would be recorded. In the room a black screen separated the worker from the young person, however participants could see themselves on a television screen. The worker asked a series of questions through a voice changing microphone and manually recorded the responses onto the surveys. The only identification young people were asked to provide was their gender and their age.

Adults who attended the World Mental Health Day event were also given the opportunity to take part in the consultation. Twelve adults, seven of whom identified themselves as "professionals" provided responses to the same questions.

Following up a request from the event workers ran a similar “Big Brother” consultation session with a group of young carers at Sunderland Carers Centre, using exactly the same format and asking exactly the same questions.

A further seven young people who are current users of the counselling services completed the survey before or after their session with the worker.

In total the views of 51 children and young people were gathered and have been collated to inform the content of this report.

5. Outcomes of the Consultation

5.1 Children and Young People

The following table highlights the age and gender of children and young people who participated in the survey.

Age	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	Total
Male	4	5	5	1	4	3	4	1	0	0	0	27
Female	0	0	0	5	5	3	2	7	1	0	1	24

Q1. What type of things do you need to keep you feeling well?

Regular interaction with friends and good relationships with family members are the key factors that children and young people have identified as being necessary to “keep them feeling well.” Opportunities to participate in physical activities and going to youth clubs also ranked highly in the comments made by children and young people. Some individuals also identified the need to have time on their own in a private space.

Q2. What’s the best way for you to get information about services?

Opinions relating to accessing information varied significantly, indicating that information should be available in a range of formats (internet, leaflets, TV adverts, text service, young people’s directory, and telephone directories. Young people suggested that general information on a range of youth related issues should be available from a number of different venues that included schools, youth centres, GP surgeries, public transport, and libraries.

There were a number of other points made in relation to the accessibility of information:-

- The need to raise awareness amongst parents/carers and teachers, whom the majority of children and young people seem to approach in the first instance for information.
- The need for information to be written in language that is easy to understand.
- The need for agencies who work with children and young people to have information that is up to date.
- Young people, particularly older young people (over the age of 14) often turn to friends for advice and support. Others, (approximately 15%) prefer to research information on the internet.
- A number of suggestions were made relating to the need to include maps (with public transport routes) on publicity materials to help people to work out how to get to places providing information and support.
- The experience of some children and young people is that when information is given out in schools it is given only to pupils to whom it relates which can lead to certain pupils being stigmatised.

Q3. Where's the best place for services to be?

The vast majority of responses stated that children and young people would prefer to access services from a venue that is close to where they live so that they do not always have to be accompanied by parents/carers. Approximately 30% of young people acknowledged the difficulties associated with travelling to other areas of the City to access services, and their main concerns can be summarised as:

- The cost of using public transport. For most families who do not have access to a car, a visit to the Centre requires them to travel on two buses. At certain times of the day, some young people reported having to travel on three buses to get to the Carley Hill Education Centre. The cost can be prohibitive for low income families, particularly when adult and other siblings have to accompany the child/young person that has an appointment.
- Personal safety issues. Some young people expressed that they would not feel safe travelling to certain areas of the City on their own, particularly after school or at night.

Some young people, particularly those of secondary school age raised concerns about services being provided in schools as they feel uncomfortable about teachers being aware of personal issues. Many respondents were of the opinion that services for young people should be only

provided in schools as a last resort and that professionals from other agencies should then be brought in to provide a confidential service. One suggestion was to have a diary room in schools that is staffed by external agencies to provide confidential listening and signposting services. The majority of children of primary school age suggested that schools are a good place to offer services, however it is thought that their comments are likely to relate to the school that they currently attend.

Some young people suggested that drop-in services for young people wanting advice or information or who are experiencing health related issues could be developed from GP surgeries/health centres, which tend to be near to home. Other young people, particularly those in the 14-17 age range were concerned about confidentiality and the fact that other people living on their estates would recognise them which could lead to others being made aware of their issue.

Local youth clubs were also frequently cited as a good place to base services, and the following reasons were given:-

- Youth buildings are geared towards the needs of young people,
- Open evenings when young people would be most likely to seek information/advice or support
- There is usually lots going on during youth club sessions so a young person accessing support services would be less noticeable
- They are close to home
- There are no other adults (apart from workers) in the building who could inform other family members of the reason for a young person's attendance.

Some young people suggested that a Young Person's Building in the City Centre would be the most appropriate place to locate services because a city centre base would be easier to get to by public transport, young people would be less likely to be seen by other people that knew them, and it might also be possible to have different services based in one building. The need for such a building to be welcoming, and young person friendly was also highlighted,

"the building would need to have music, pool tables etc so you can relax more"

"it needs to have comfortable settees, music and a café area."

"it shouldn't be a council building"

The provision of support and information from sports centres was also suggested by three young people, again for reasons of anonymity.

Q4. What days and times would you want them to be open?

Most young people would like to have services available at night (between 6-9pm) and on a Saturday morning. Younger age groups suggested that services should be open after school while for the older age groups the most frequently cited response was a Friday night. It is recognised by the majority of children and young people that services do not need to be available every day of the week. Many of the suggestions recorded related one particular day and/or time of the week that would be most convenient for the individual participating in the survey.

Q5. What would make it easiest for you to contact services?

The majority of responses focused upon having services located either near to home or in a city centre venue so only one bus journey would be necessary.

The other key response related to having accurate and up-to-date knowledge about what services and support are available. Suggestions included a 24 hour telephone helpline, a young person's service directory, and a young person's website to tell them about the services available, where they are based, times they are open and a named person to contact.

5.2 Adult Participants

12 adults completed the survey; all were female and aged between 20 and 55.

Q1. What type of things do you need to keep you feeling well?

The responses provided by adult participants suggest that they are aware of mental health issues and the strategies needed to support positive mental health. Effective relationships with partners, friends, family and colleagues were identified as key factors in maintaining positive mental health. Adults are aware of the benefits of sharing concerns and "off-loading" to family and friends. Exercise, socialising, taking time off work and positive thinking were also identified as being effective ways of reducing stress. 25% (3) of the respondents stated they drank alcohol to combat stress.

Q2. What's the best way for you to get information about services?

All respondents stated that they would be likely to ask friends or colleagues, however 66% of the respondents, all of whom identified themselves as "professionals" also stated that they would use

the internet to access information about services. Parents are more likely to contact GP's, schools or the Counselling Service for information if friends/family are unable to help them. Little reference was made to the availability of leaflets, posters etc.

Q3. Where's the best place for services to be?

One respondent thought services for children and young people would be best placed in schools. The remaining respondents were of the opinion that services should be based within community buildings such as Children's Centres, youth clubs, family centres etc. The need for services to be non-judgemental and non-stigmatising was highlighted. Respondents also stated that universal services for children and young people should be available within the community as,

"it is often the case that those children and young who are in need of additional support require the involvement of more than one service."

Adults recognise that children and young people need to feel comfortable and need to have confidence in the workers. Continuity in terms of venue and staff were therefore highlighted as important factors when deciding upon appropriate locations.

Q4. What days and times would you want them to be open?

The views of adults and children and young people were identical. Services need to be provided on evenings and on Saturdays when children and young people are not at school.

Q5. What would make it easiest for you to contact services?

Adult respondents provided a number of suggestions that are listed below in order of popularity:-

Services available on evenings and weekends (5)

Non-threatening and informal environment (3)

Free confidential telephone helpline and/or 24/7 text service (2)

No waiting times for appointments (2)

Drop-in services

Improved publicity so that people are more aware of the services and support that is available

Guaranteed anonymity

Approachable and friendly staff

"definitely not based in school buildings"

6. Analysis of Outcomes

- The methods that are used for consulting with children and young people can be very intimidating; particularly when the people consulting are the service providers themselves. The methods used for consultation need to be unbiased and young person friendly. The use of the “Big Brother” Diary room has proven to be a popular tool for consultation as it provides young people with anonymity and does not necessitate them having to write down their thoughts.
- The majority of children and young people are able to articulate their needs and want to be listened to. They value the opportunity to voice their views and suggestions about services they use, however are often disappointed when their opinions and ideas do not appear to make a difference. They want their views to be considered when services are being planned.
- Many children and young people have little confidence in the ability of decision-makers to act upon the suggestions made by young people. Some young people were keen to point out that they had been asked for their opinions on a number of different topics by different people but they had consequently seen no changes to the way in which services have been improved.
- Relationships with friends and family are considered to play a key role in positive mental health by people of all ages, including children and young people. This finding is similar to the findings of other studies concerning emotional resilience. Two of the three factors which have been found to be beneficial in promoting emotional resilience are a supportive family environment and extrafamilial peer and adult support (Jacelon, 1997, Stewart et al 1997.)
- The capability of children and young people to access information and services varies significantly according to age and ability. Children of a primary school age are likely to approach an adult known to them i.e. a teacher or a parent/carer for information, however, older young people are more likely to turn to friends or seek information from the internet, leaflets and other adult sources i.e. youth workers, key workers etc. Professionals are more likely to source information from friends, colleagues or the internet, however, the responses suggest that some parents may be more likely to approach a professional, and specifically teachers or GP’s for information. There is a clear need to ensure that information is updated regularly, is presented using language that is easy to understand and is widely circulated amongst all agencies that undertake work with children and young people.
- Opinion as to the most appropriate location for the delivery of services is divided.

Some children and young people would prefer to have services close to home to avoid the need for travelling and the associated costs. Personal safety when travelling to other areas of the City was highlighted as a concern by some young people. Locally based services would also afford young people the option of accessing services unaccompanied by a parent or carer.

Other young people would prefer to have services based within a city centre to protect their anonymity and avoid the risk of stigmatisation within their own community.

Adult opinion favours provision that is locally based and is delivered from community buildings.

- The type of building from which services are delivered is important to young people and adults alike. Although many children of primary school age suggested services should be based in local schools or GP surgeries, older young people prefer less formal environments such as youth projects or drop-in centres. There is widespread agreement that buildings need to be welcoming and young person friendly.
- Protecting anonymity and confidentiality are important issues for older young people when considering what services to use. The majority of young people of secondary school age are of the opinion that schools are not an appropriate venue from which to deliver support and information services for young people and raised concerns regarding teachers being aware of personal issues. It was suggested that services for young people should be only provided in schools as a last resort and that professionals from other agencies should then be brought in to provide non-judgemental and confidential services.
- Services for children and young people need to be accessible at times outside of school hours and when other services for children and young people are not accessible, i.e. evenings and Saturdays. It is recognised by the majority of children and young people that services do not need to be available every day of the week.

7. Points for Consideration

- Consultation should be an integral element of service planning and delivery across all areas of work. The methods used for consultation should be participative and enjoyable for those taking part. Children and young people should be made aware of the purpose of the consultation and should be informed of how the outcomes will be used. Arrangements to feedback the outcomes of the consultation to participants should be in place to help ensure that children and young people are made aware that their views have been

listened to. Mechanisms for providing feedback should also be child/young person friendly.

- To effectively meet the needs of children and young people, a mental health service for children and adolescents should:
 - Be based within community buildings that are easily accessible and user friendly. The ideal building would have a range of other services, activities and opportunities available to young people so that their anonymity and confidentiality is protected.
 - Be open at times when access to other support services are not available i.e. evenings and weekends.
 - Be responsive to the individual needs of children, young people and their families. Access to information and support should be readily available at the time at which it is most needed. Waiting times for appointments should be minimal.
 - Employ friendly staff who are approachable and non-judgemental.
 - Employ workers who know how to communicate effectively with and are interested in working with children and young people.
 - Have a range of information available that is up-to-date, uses clear and simple language and is presented in a user-friendly format.

- Children, young people and adults seek information and support from family, friends or colleagues, often as a first point of contact, yet there are few guarantees that the information they are given is accurate or appropriate. There could be potential to explore opportunities to develop peer counselling or peer support programmes which would help to ensure that information provided by peers is more consistent and accurate. It is also widely acknowledged that becoming involved in peer support helps young people to build their self-confidence and self-esteem, which in turn are recognised as key factors for positive mental health.

For further information on this report contact details:

**Judith Stokoe/Angela Wilson
Community CAMHS
Tel: 0191-5535206
Email: scsypcounselling@yahoo.com**

Or

**Norah Stevens
Children's Fund Participation Officer
Tel: 0191 219 3477
Email: norah.stevens@ssd.sunderland.gov.uk**

