

“Growing up today”

Digital habits, physical activity and vaping: unpacking their impact on mental health in Gloucestershire youth

Neighbourhood health and wellbeing insights – June 2026



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Key findings

“Adults today don’t understand that young people also struggle with mental health”

- Social media is an important way for young people to stay connected and feel included, but it also brings emotional pressure, affects sleep, and raises safety concerns, leaving some young people feeling anxious or drained without knowing where to turn for support. Longer lengths of time spent on social media per day was linked to increased levels of anxiety due to experiences on social media, and lower wellbeing. Accessing social media in smaller quantities was linked to more positive impacts on wellbeing.
- Out of the three behavioural factors we explored, physical activity was the most beneficial in promoting positive mental health in young people. We found throughout our survey and engagement that it helps reduce stress and improve mood, but barriers such as school workload, low confidence, cost, and transport often make it hard to be active regularly.
- While most young people we spoke to did not vape, there was a perception that it is common, and many had experienced being peer pressured into trying it. Those that did vape said they do it to cope with stress or fit in socially, often despite believing it is harmful and feeling unsure where to go for support if they want to stop. We found that young people want education on the risks of vaping and support to stop vaping without judgement.
- Friends are the main source of support for young people, while a significant number keep worries to themselves and very few turn to professionals, often due to fear of judgement, lack of trust and concerns about being listened to. Several young people we spoke to had developed their own strategies to reduce their vaping or social media use as they did not feel they could ask for help from the adults in their lives.
- Young people consistently valued safe, non-judgmental spaces, trusted relationships and honest conversations, and said support works best when it starts early and focuses on understanding their experiences rather than reacting only at crisis point.
- Young people expressed feeling that they understand what helps their wellbeing, but when barriers such as time pressure, confidence, cost and access block healthy coping options like exercise, some turn to less healthy strategies, highlighting the need for earlier, more trusted and youth-friendly support.

Executive summary

This report shares what young people across Gloucestershire told us about how social media, physical activity, and vaping affect their mental health. We heard from 120 young people in-person and a further 44 through our online survey. Their stories and views offer a clear message: young people want honest conversations, early support, and adults they can trust to listen without judgement.

Social media is a major part of daily life for most young people. It helps them feel connected, entertained, and up to date with friends, but it also brings emotional pressure. Many described feeling anxious, left out, or tired from using it late at night. Some had direct experiences of online harm or safety issues and said they often did not know where to turn for help. Most said they would talk to friends rather than adults about online worries, usually because they feared being judged or not taken seriously.

Physical activity was one of the most positive influences reported on mental health. Young people said exercise helps them feel happier, calmer, and more in control. However, many face barriers such as tiredness, schoolwork, confidence issues, or costs that make it hard to stay active. They said they would like more flexible, inclusive, and affordable opportunities to move in ways that feel enjoyable and stress-free.

Vaping was widely recognised as harmful but common. Many young people said it is easy to start and difficult to stop because it becomes a habit or a way to cope with stress. Social influence plays a big role—friends vape, so others join in. Some said they use vaping for comfort or relief when they do not have access to emotional support. Although they understand there is likely to be a risk and are concerned about this, there is uncertainty about what the risks are. The young people we spoke to said they want more practical help to manage stress and break habits, rather than only being told that vaping is bad.

Overall, the findings show that young people's mental health can be shaped by the mix of their online experiences, physical activity, and coping strategies like vaping. They are asking for support that feels real, respectful, and relevant to their lives. Services, schools, and communities can respond more effectively by:

- Talking openly and confidently about digital wellbeing and online safety
- Making activity options more accessible and varied
- Providing honest education and practical help around vaping and stress
- Building trusted, non-judgemental spaces where young people can ask for help early

Background and methodology

This project was developed to better understand the experiences of young people in Gloucestershire and how everyday factors such as social media use, physical activity, and vaping shape their mental health and wellbeing. We are focusing on these three key issues as we have heard from young people that these are topics they feel affect their mental health. Across local conversations and wider public health discussion, these issues are often considered separately. However, for many young people, they are closely connected to stress, coping, confidence, relationships, and access to support.

The project aimed to explore these topics through young people's own words and experiences. It focused not only on behaviours and attitudes, but also on the wider context around them – including what young people enjoy, what they struggle with, what influences their choices, and where they feel able to turn for help. A central aim of the work was to identify practical insights that could help services, schools, and community organisations respond more effectively.

Engagement took place between February and April and used a mixed-methods approach to gather both personal experiences and broader patterns across Gloucestershire.

Who took part?

120

Approximate number of young people engaged in person

44

Online survey responses

11–18

Age range of survey respondents

Where engagement took place

In-person engagement took place across a range of youth and education settings, including:

- Blackbridge Community Youth Hub
- Ruardean Youth Club
- Blakeney Youth Club
- The Door Youth Project Dursley
- The Door Youth Project Stonehouse
- Chipping Campden School
- Queer Futures Gloucestershire

We are grateful to all the groups, settings, and staff who supported this work and helped create spaces where young people could share their views openly and honestly.

Methods used included:

- focus groups
- semi-structured interviews
- interactive workshops
- an online survey

The online survey was shared through Healthwatch's website, social media channels, newsletters, and wider professional and community networks to help reach a broader range of young people across the county, including those not in education settings.

Why this approach mattered

Using multiple methods made it possible to:

- hear directly from young people in their own words
- allow anonymous participation through the survey
- balance personal experiences with broader trends

Discussion – findings

Section 1 – ‘Being Online as a Young Person’

Social media is recognised as a part of everyday life and we found that it is used for young people to stay connected, message friends and family, and to view online content. However, many also described emotional strain, self-consciousness, and exposure to negative or distressing content being harmful. This research therefore highlights the effects that social media can have on young people mentally.

Emotional impact: a mix of positive and negative

Young people described positive effects such as:

- **feeling connected**
- **laughing and relaxing**
- **escaping boredom**
- **staying involved in friendships**

“It helps with socialising outside of school.”

At the same time, many described negative effects, including:

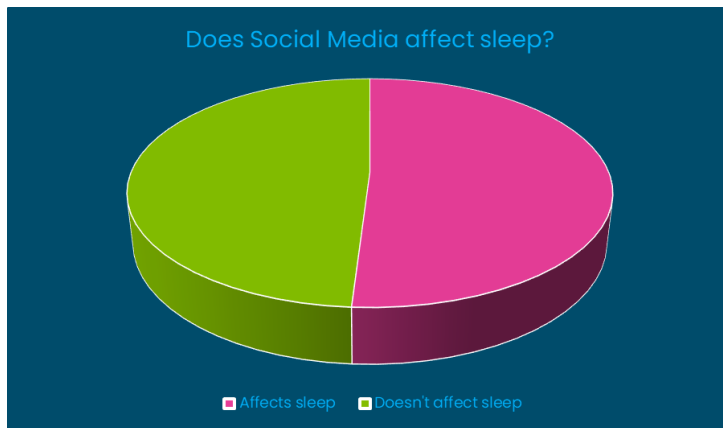
- **feeling self-conscious or compared to others**
- **feeling left out**
- **exposure to negative or upsetting content**
- **arguments or conflict online**
- **feeling worse after spending too long scrolling**

“If I’ve been on it for too long, I feel worse.”

Several young people said they were aware that social media affects them emotionally but still found it difficult to limit their use because of its importance in friendships and daily communication.

Sleep and tiredness

More than half of the survey respondents said that social media affects their sleep either sometimes or all the time. Many described staying up late messaging friends or watching videos, even when they knew they were tired.



"I spend too long on it at night."

We found that the young people did not always connect poor sleep with social media use, instead describing tiredness as part of school stress or lack of motivation. Not all young people reported poor sleep because of social media use. This might mean that social media does not affect their sleep but could also indicate that the impact of social media may be underrecognised by some young people.

Stress, anxiety and online pressure

Our survey findings show that 41% of the young people who responded have felt anxious or stressed because of something on social media. Qualitative engagement provided insight into what causes this stress, including:

- embarrassing photos or videos being shared
- fear of being excluded or ignored
- online arguments and fallouts
- exposure to distressing news
- pressure to present a certain image

"Sometimes I feel left out if I don't know what's going on."

Online safety and harm

Online safety was one of the biggest concerns raised by young people.

Young people shared experiences or worries about:

- being contacted by strangers
- being sent inappropriate or sexual messages
- friends being targeted or harmed online
- photos being saved, shared or altered
- artificial intelligence being used to change images

"Even if you delete stuff, it can probably be found somewhere"

"I was sent nude photographs by a stranger"

"Being contacted by strangers, predators scare me"

Some young people described being approached by a predator online and feeling unsafe. Others said seeing friends go through harmful experiences online made them more cautious about who they interact with.

Access to support

Despite experiencing stress, anxiety or safety concerns linked to social media, many young people said they would not talk to an adult or professional about these issues.

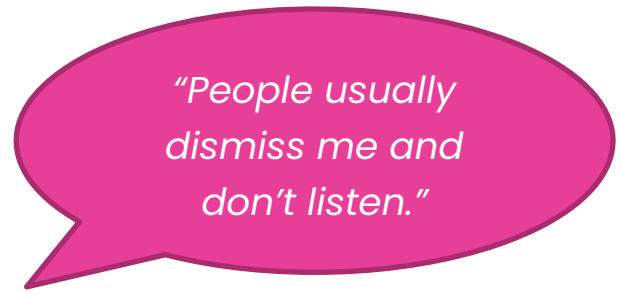
Our survey findings show that:

- many young people would only talk to friends

- 42% of respondents said they would not feel comfortable talking to anyone about social media worries

Barriers included:

- fear of being judged
- worry about adults overreacting
- lack of trust
- concerns about confidentiality



Young people were more likely to feel comfortable talking in trusted, non-judgemental spaces, such as youth clubs or with specific adults they know well.

Mental wellbeing

From our survey data, we found that young people reporting lower wellbeing scores (1 and 2 on a scale of 1-5) were notably more likely to report higher social media use, with 83% spending four or more hours on social media per day compared to just 22% of those reporting higher wellbeing scores (4 and 5 on a scale of 1-5). This was also reflected in feedback on negative experiences of social media use: 66% of the lower wellbeing respondents said social media affects their sleep and 66% reported feeling anxious or stressed because of something on social media, compared to 38% and 22% respectively among those with higher wellbeing.

Key insight

Young people consistently described social media as having a mixed impact on their wellbeing. Many have experienced anxiety, sleep disruption and online harm, but did not know where to turn for support.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the insights young people have shared with us.

- Public health should work with schools and PSHE leads to include digital wellbeing as a routine part of conversations with young people from 11 years old.

- Current resources should be expanded upon to reflect the concerns of children and young people around managing online pressures and recognising unhealthy social media habits.
- Review practitioner training for youth workers, counsellors, and early help staff in schools to have realistic conversations about social media with young people about how social media can affect sleep, mood and self-image.
- Work with schools and youth services to provide a signposting resource, that clearly sets out what young people can do if they experience online harm, including how to report content, who to talk to and how to access support without judgement. Promoted through youth clubs, schools, and social media channels used by young people.

Section 2 – ‘Moving More, Feeling Better’

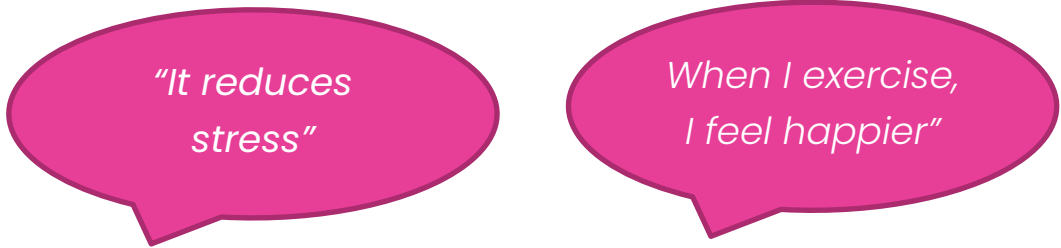
Across our three main topics, physical activity was seen to be the strongest protective factor for young people’s mental health. Across survey responses and qualitative engagement, young people consistently described exercise as something that improves mood, reduces stress and supports emotional wellbeing.

Out of the three areas we explored, physical activity emerged as the strongest protective factor for young people’s mental health. Across discussions, survey responses, and engagement activities, young people consistently described movement as something that helps them feel happier, calmer, and more able to manage stress.

For some, physical activity was structured, such as PE, the gym, rugby, horse riding, darts, or ice skating. For others, it was more informal, including walking, running around town with friends, riding a bike, or simply being outdoors. This suggests that young people benefit from a broad understanding of physical activity, not only formal sport.

Exercise always makes me feel better – I just don’t have time or energy after school.”

Many young people linked physical activity directly to emotional wellbeing. They described exercise as helping them "clear their head", reduce stress, and take their mind off difficult situations at home or school. One young person described using the gym as a coping mechanism, so they did not have to think about problems at home. Others said that being outdoors or moving with friends made them feel generally happier.

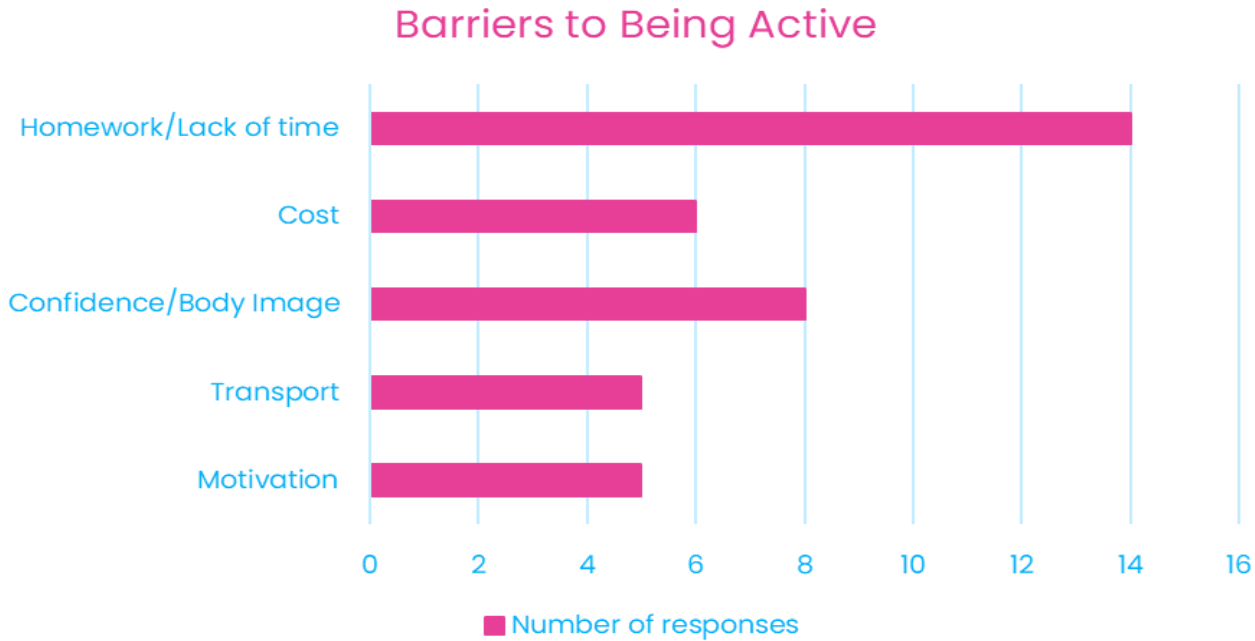


For some young people, physical activity also appeared to provide routine, distraction, and a sense of control. At the same time, young people were clear that knowing exercise is good for them does not always mean it feels easy or accessible. Several barriers were identified, including tiredness, low motivation, homework pressure, cost, confidence, and limited local opportunities. One 13-year-old boy said that PE once a week always makes him feel better, but that he does not have the motivation to be active outside school.

This suggests that motivation is not the only issue. Young people may understand the benefits of exercise but still face practical or emotional barriers that make regular activity difficult.

Barriers to being active

Of the survey respondents who told us that they faced barriers to being more active, a range of factors were mentioned, including:



One young person said that they enjoyed playing football but wished there were more facilities at school, as the public facilities/grounds that they wanted to use were often taken up by others. Others said they wanted more opportunities for young people outside of school and youth clubs, suggesting that access remains uneven across different communities.

There was also evidence that some young people want more flexibility and more inclusive ways to be active. Not all young people are drawn to organised sport, and several examples from the findings show that activities such as walking, reading outdoors, biking, ice skating, and spending time with friends can all support wellbeing in meaningful ways.

We also found that access could be influenced by parent's interests and their financial situation, as one person enjoyed horse riding as a hobby, but their friends felt as though this was too expensive of a hobby and not inclusive to all.

Mental wellbeing

The relationship between physical activity from our survey data shows that young people who reported higher wellbeing scores were considerably more likely to enjoy physical activity (78% vs 50% for the lower wellbeing respondents). This suggests that enjoyment, rather than frequency may be an important factor, and that services focused on helping young people find activities they genuinely like could be of greater benefit than approaches focused on increasing activity levels alone.

Key insight

From the three areas we looked at, physical activity appeared to be the clearest protective factor for young people's mental health. Many young people already recognise that movement helps them feel happier, less stressed, and more able to cope. However, practical barriers, low motivation, lack of confidence, and limited access often prevent them from being active as regularly as they would like.

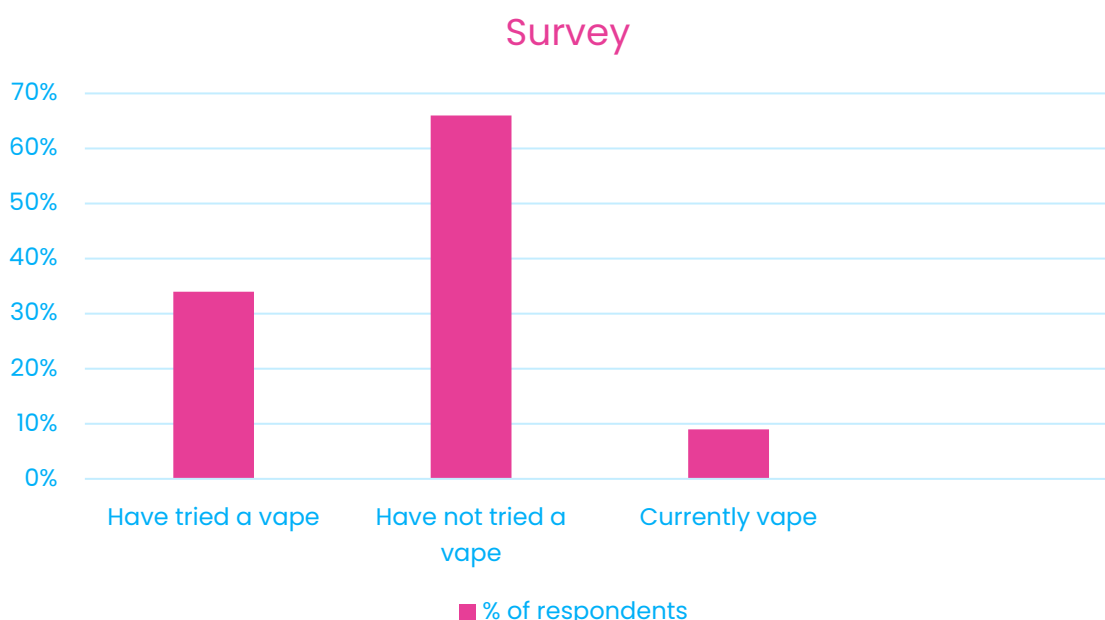
Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the insights young people have shared with us.

- Recognise physical activity as part of emotional wellbeing support, not only physical health. CAMHS and primary care to routinely ask about physical activity and refer to local opportunities as part of wellbeing support.

- In line with the Neighbourhood Health model, continue to invest in more opportunities outside school and youth clubs, especially in areas where access is limited. Public Health and Children’s Services, working alongside the VCSE sector, to explore more funding of low-cost activities for 11–18s in low-participation areas. This should include non-competitive, drop-in formats like walking groups. This will remove cost and confidence barriers that young people told us about.
- Activity options should be communicated in accessible, youth-friendly ways. This can be through social media, peer outreach and information shared directly through youth clubs. Based on our findings, promotion should emphasise enjoyment, social connection and mental health benefits.

Section 3 – “Vaping – More than just a vape”



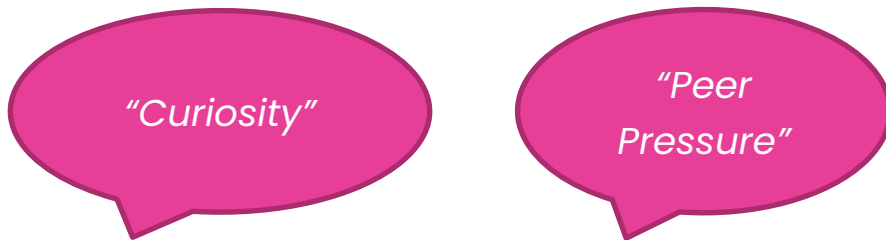
While physical activity was often described as a healthy way of coping with stress, vaping appeared in many conversations as a less healthy coping behaviour shaped by pressure, habit, and limited support. Vaping was identified as a significant issue in young people’s discussions about wellbeing, stress, and influence. Although many young people viewed vaping negatively, it was also described as common, socially normalised, and closely linked to coping with pressure. This suggests that vaping is not only a health issue, but also part of a wider picture involving stress, habit, peer influence, and gaps in support.

Survey findings showed that many young people believe vaping is harmful, and the qualitative findings reinforced this. Across different groups, vaping was often described as risky, addictive, and something that could quickly become difficult to stop.

Why young people start vaping

Young people described a range of reasons why vaping begins. This included curiosity, peer pressure, boredom, stress, fitting in, and the influence of social environments. The majority of young people who disclosed to us that they currently or previously vaped said they vape/vaped to relax or cope with stress.

One 13-year-old boy said he started vaping because of peer pressure. Another young person said they tried vaping at 12 “just to try it” and later became addicted. A 15-year-old girl described starting out of curiosity at 13 and now vaping every day, saying she needs it to feel “normal”.



Young people also described vaping as appealing because it feels easier to hide than smoking, smells less obvious, and can become part of a routine. Some said it gives them “something to do” or something to hold, suggesting that the physical habit can be part of the appeal as well as the nicotine itself.

Vaping, stress, and coping

One of the strongest themes in the findings was the relationship between vaping and stress. Many young people described vaping not simply as a social behaviour, but as a way of coping with emotional pressure, school stress, or mental health difficulties.

In one group, young people directly linked vaping to stress, lack of therapy, and not having enough support. One said they used vaping because they did not have access to help for their mental health. Another described a cycle in which stress led to vaping, which then caused regret and more stress.

“I get stressed, so I vape, then regret it and feel bad, which makes me stressed so I buy a vape, and vape again — it’s a cycle.”


These statements suggest that for some young people, vaping is filling a gap where emotional support should be. This does not mean vaping is seen as healthy or positive, but it does show why messages about risk may not be enough on their own.

A 15-year-old girl who vaped every day said she understood vaping was bad but would find it hard to stop. She also said she wished she knew more about the negative side of vaping and wanted more support and awareness. This highlights the tension between knowing something is harmful and still relying on it to cope.

Addiction, habit, and difficulty stopping

Many young people described vaping as addictive, habitual, or hard to stop once it becomes part of daily life. This was especially clear in the personal accounts shared during the engagement.

One 13-year-old boy described becoming addicted after trying vaping at 12. He said he felt isolated and lonely, had no support, and eventually quit by himself at 13, despite finding it very difficult. Because his parents smoked and this was normalised, he said he did not know how to get the support or education he wanted due to being unable to have discussions about quitting at home.



*"I was drowning
when I needed
support."*

Others spoke about vaping as a habit connected not only to nicotine, but also to routine and physical behaviour. One young person suggested that support should focus on helping young people break habits, not only telling them vaping is harmful. We heard that approaches taken to young people vaping within schools feels punitive when what they want is understanding and support to stop. Another described putting barriers in place for themselves, such as only vaping outside or going to places where they could not vape.

Peer influence

Peer influence was consistently described as one of the strongest reasons young people vape.

Survey and group findings both pointed to the importance of social influence. Young people said vaping happens because “friends do it”, because it is seen as part of social life, or because it helps people feel included.

One group said packaging should be changed to make vaping look less attractive, which has started to be implemented, but young people still find the colours of vapes “attractive” – they told us there should be stronger health warnings and less youth-friendly design. Others commented that vape shops are everywhere and hard to avoid, making access and visibility part of the problem.

Confusion, education, and awareness

Although vaping was widely seen as harmful, many young people showed limited knowledge about its specific risks. In one group discussion, only one person was able to give a reason why vaping is harmful when prompted, explaining the negative effect it can have on fitness training. Some even said that it was worse than smoking but could not explain why they believed this.

Young people said they get information about vaping from a range of places, including siblings, school, GPs, pharmacies, the NHS, government websites, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat. However, young people shared that they don’t believe it is consistent, trusted, or always remembered.

What young people said would help

When asked what would help reduce vaping among young people, the responses went beyond simple punishment or anti-vaping messages. Young people suggested:

- stronger ID checks
- less attractive packaging
- higher cost
- clearer education about risks
- more support for stress
- better counselling
- more knowledge among teachers
- support to break habits
- practical tools or guides to help cut down

One young person said more flexible school deadlines would reduce their vaping, even if it would not stop it entirely. Another said better counselling could help because vaping was being used in place of emotional support.

These comments reinforce a wider finding across the report: young people often use vaping in the context of stress, pressure, and limited support options.

Mental wellbeing

Our survey data showed that young people who reported lower wellbeing (1 or 2 out of 5) were more likely to have tried a vape (50%) compared to those with higher wellbeing (27%), and were also more likely to be currently vaping (16% vs 5%). Although the sample was fairly small and these figures should be treated with caution, they are consistent with what we heard through our qualitative engagement, that vaping is often used as a way of managing stress or difficult feelings, pointing to the importance of addressing underlying wellbeing rather than vaping behaviour in isolation.

Key insight

Vaping is often understood by young people as harmful, but that awareness alone is not enough to prevent use. For some, vaping is linked to stress relief, habit, peer pressure, and a lack of accessible emotional support.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the insights young people have shared with us.

- Recognising that there is a lack of longitudinal research on the potential harms of vaping, PHSE leads and Public Health should expand on current educational resources to address young people's specific concerns about vaping. From our findings, honest and clear conversations should continue to be developed, and they should start at a younger age. Resources should address support around addiction, acknowledging that vaping can be used as a coping mechanism for stress and should include information about where to get support.
- The development of pathways supporting young people who are vaping must acknowledge the connection between vaping and unmet mental health needs to enable more clear and timely accessible routes through school nursing teams to organisations such as Young Minds Matter and VCSE sector organisations providing support to young people.

- Young People raised concerns about the ease of accessing vapes. Increasing public awareness of reporting routes for illegal vape sales could better enable statutory services to take enforcement action.

Conclusion

The findings from this report paint a clear and consistent picture: young people in Gloucestershire are navigating a set of pressures that affect their mental health every day. Social media, physical activity, and vaping are all connected to how young people manage stress, seek connection, and cope when support feels out of reach.

Young people told us they understand what helps them feel better. They know that exercise lifts their mood, the unknown potential risks that vapes have, and that late-night scrolling affects their sleep. Yet understanding alone is rarely enough. What gets in the way are the practical barriers like cost, transport, confidence and workload – and the emotional ones, including fear of judgement, peer pressure, lack of trust, and simply not knowing where to turn.

What young people are asking for is not complicated. They want adults who listen without overreacting. They want spaces where they can talk honestly without fear of the consequences. They want support that meets them where they are – early, consistently, and on their own terms.

The voices gathered through this research should serve as a call to action for services, schools, and communities across Gloucestershire. When healthy coping options are inaccessible, young people will find other ways to manage. By removing barriers to activity, improving digital wellbeing support, and addressing the unmet emotional needs that often underlie vaping, we can help young people build the resilience and confidence they need to thrive.

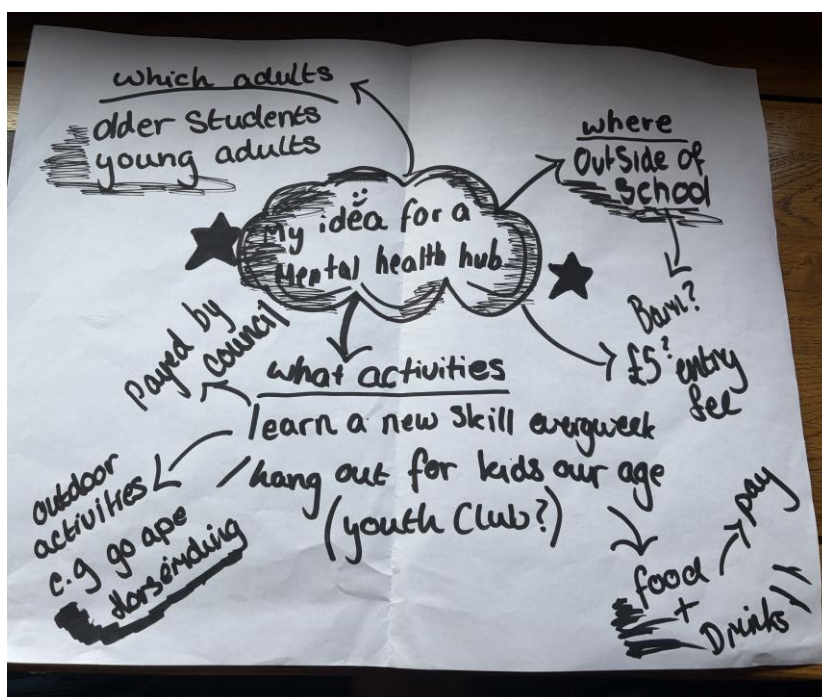
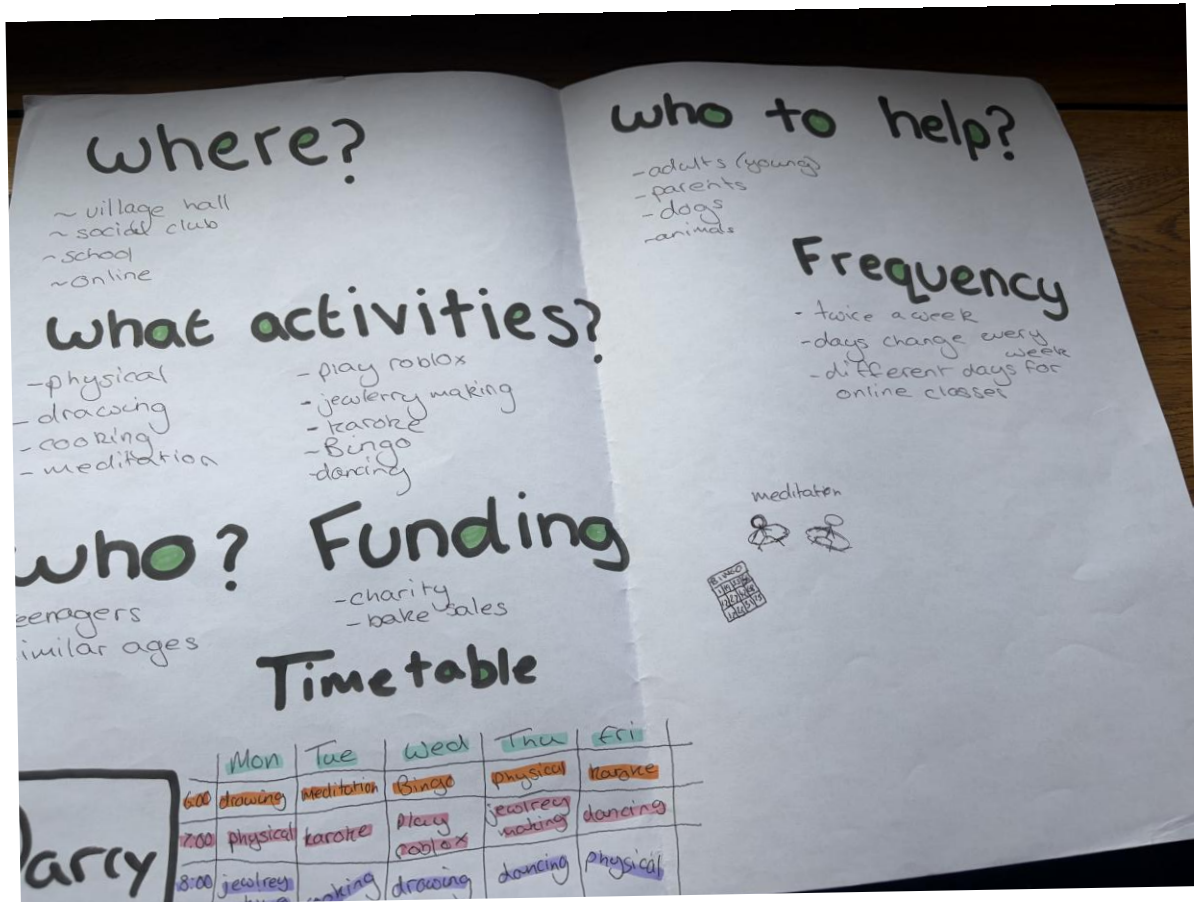
Ultimately, young people are not asking to be rescued – they are asking to be heard.

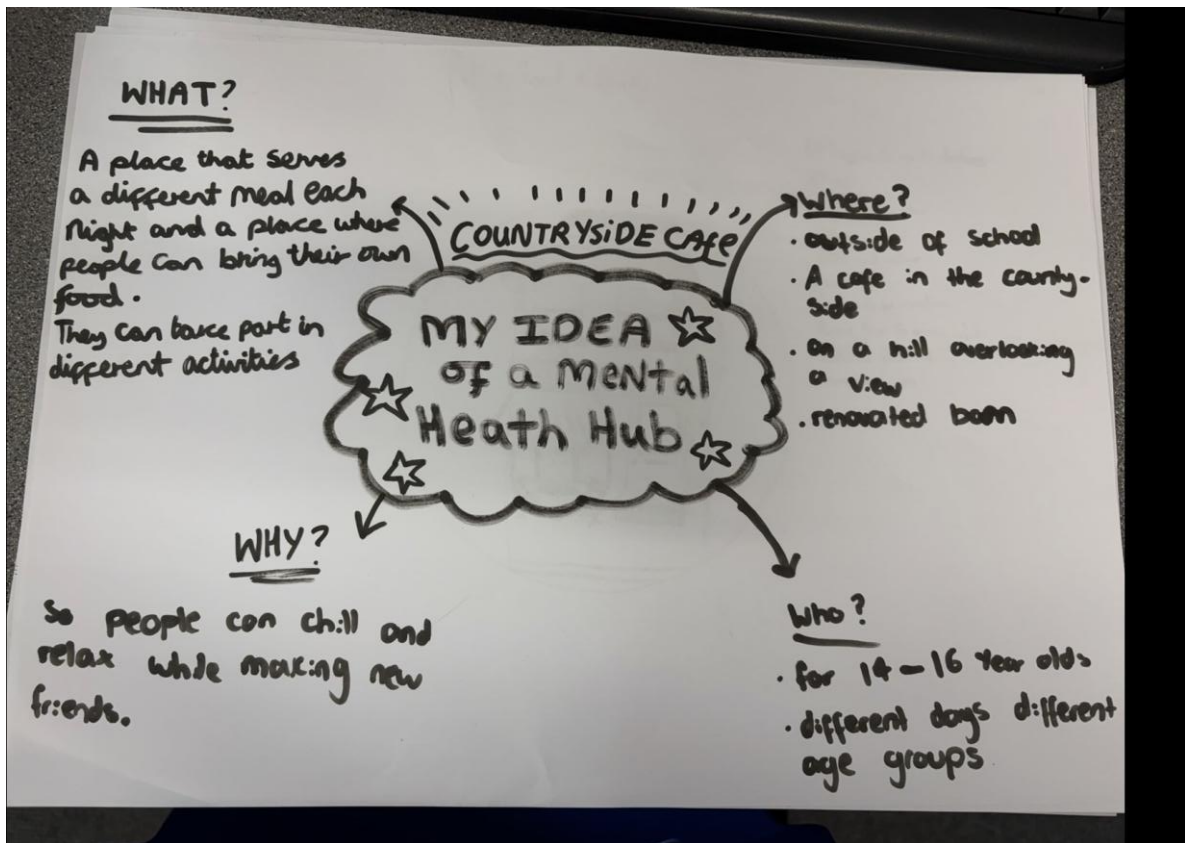
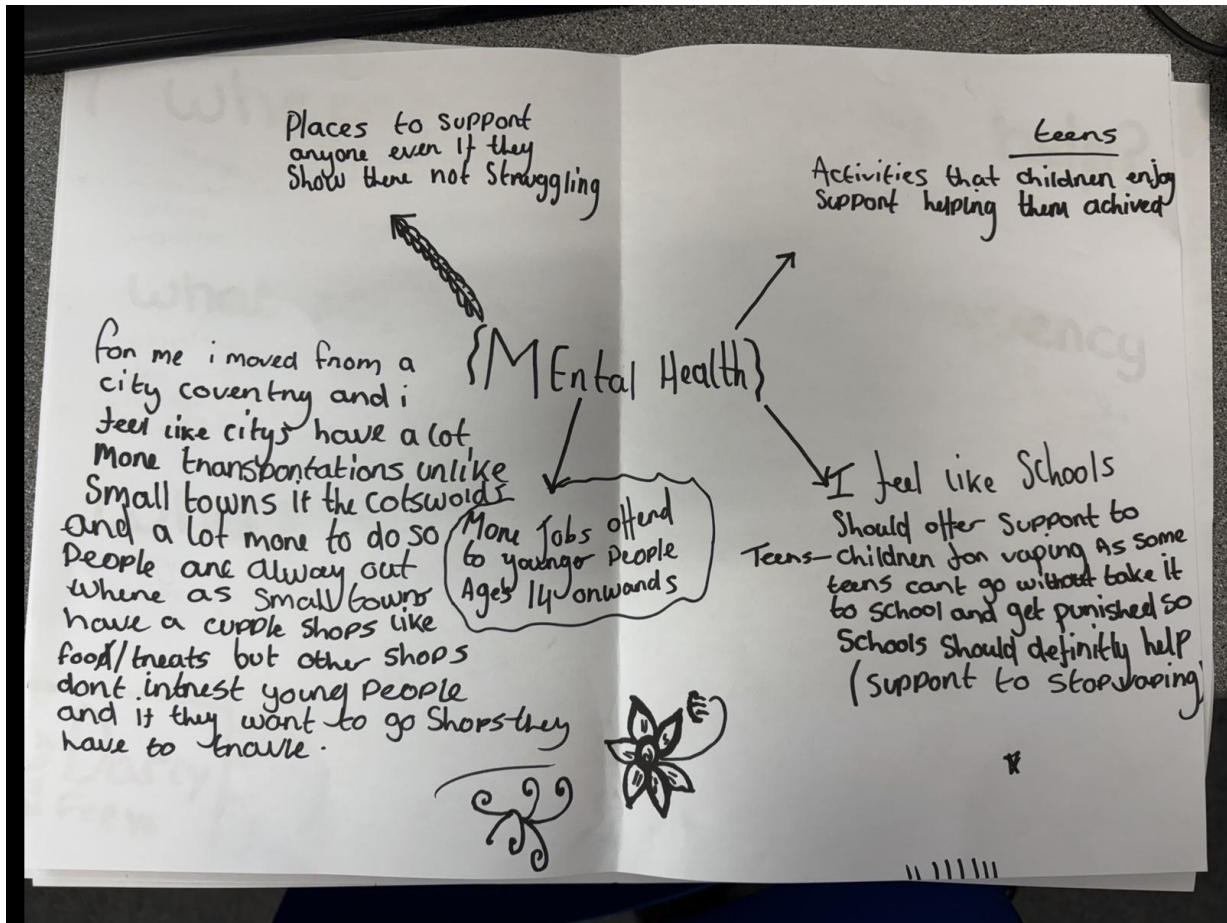
Provider response

The provider, who received this report ahead of publication, has not yet provided a response to our findings.

Appendix

Examples of what an ideal Mental Health Hub for young people would look like and include.







healthwatch Gloucestershire

Healthwatch Gloucestershire
The Vassall Centre
Gill Avenue
Fishponds
Bristol
BS16 2QQ

www.healthwatchgloucestershire.co.uk
t: 0800 652 5192
e: info@healthwatchgloucestershire.co.uk
X @HealthwatchGlos
f [Facebook.com/HealthwatchGloucestershire](https://www.facebook.com/HealthwatchGloucestershire)