

Director of Public Health Annual Report 2022/2023

Children and young people's mental health and wellbeing in a
changing world



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Introduction: Director of Public Health

I am very pleased to welcome you to my independent Annual Public Health Report 2022/2023 for West Sussex.

Public mental health is a key part of our work in public health and is focused on improving mental health and wellbeing and preventing mental illness. Mental health is vital to public health, and mental wellbeing is important to our quality of life and our capacity to cope with the ups and downs in life. It is also protective against physical illness, unhealthy lifestyles, and social inequalities. A large number of evidence-based approaches to preventing mental illness and promoting mental wellbeing are now availableⁱ. This growing evidence-base has informed, and continues to inform, Government policy decisions and actions.

A significant policy review, fundamental in driving changes across the national health and care system over the past decade, is Professor Sir Michael Marmot's review, ["Fair Society, Healthy Lives; The Marmot Review," \(2010\)](#), aiming to improve health and wellbeing for all and to reduce health inequalities. Focusing on children and young people in his policy objective **"Give every child the best start in life"**, he emphasised the need to build the resilience and wellbeing of young children across the social gradient, as part of his priority objectives.

So where are we now? "Give every child the best start in life" continues to be at the heart of health, care, and education for children and young people, ensuring services meet their needs, supporting them to maximise their capabilities.

With regards to resilience, data shows us that nationally, the majority of children and young people are thriving. However, we also know that for some children and young people, mental ill-health is a significant challenge and there are many different reasons for this. We have seen significant increases in demand for mental health support for children and young people across all services, nationally and locally,ⁱⁱ with this increase starting before the COVID-19 pandemic. There are, however, early signs that mental health conditions in children are beginning to stabilise, albeit at high rates.ⁱⁱⁱ

This report will explore what we know about children's mental health and wellbeing both nationally, and locally in our West Sussex population, drawing upon information and data that is gathered regularly, to build a picture of need and identify services and support to meet those needs. It will also highlight how the County Council and partners support children and young people to grow and flourish during these important years, with listening to their voices at the heart of understanding their views and needs better, providing a snapshot of our work in this area. It closes with a look to the future, reflecting on learning during this time and how our experiences will inform our future work.

This work will contribute to the delivery of [Our Council Plan](#) and its four priority outcomes, as well as the [Sussex Health and Care Improving Lives Together Strategy](#):

Our Council Plan priorities:

- *Keeping people safe from vulnerable situations*
- *A sustainable and prosperous economy*
- *Helping people and communities to fulfil their potential*
- *Making the best use of resources*

Underpinned by a cross-cutting theme of protecting the environment

We will work closely with our partners across the health and care system in Sussex, including the NHS, district and borough councils, the voluntary and community sector, Healthwatch West Sussex, and more, to achieve this.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on the great strides that have collectively been made in improving awareness of mental health and wellbeing throughout our society. Whilst we have areas to improve and learn, this will continuously evolve as we progress on this journey, but our commitment to do this with our partners remains strong, to make a difference to children and young people's lives across the county.



Alison Challenger
Director of Public Health

Foreword: Councillor Lanzer, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing

I am delighted to welcome this independent annual report focused on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing in a changing world. There have been many changes over the past few years, such as the pandemic and lockdowns, ways of working, and increased online learning, impacting our residents and communities in different ways, particularly children and young people during this time.

Listening to children and young people's voices is a reoccurring theme throughout this report, highlighting the importance of understanding their views and including them in the thinking and planning for local services to meet their needs. I am particularly pleased and thankful for the reflection from the Chair of the West Sussex Youth Cabinet, discussing the Cabinet's own campaign supporting children and young people's mental health in the county, a key manifesto area for them.

Our County Council and partners across the health and care system in Sussex work closely together to improve the health of children and young people and reduce inequalities. This is driven by our local strategies including the [West Sussex Joint Health and Wellbeing](#)

[Strategy](#), which adopts a lifecourse approach, identifying our priorities across three themes - Starting Well, Living and Working Well and Ageing well, and the [Sussex Health and Care Improving Lives Together Strategy](#), which identifies children and young people as an area of focus.

As Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing and Chairman of the West Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board, I am aware of the vast amount of collaborative working taking place locally by our staff, partners, and communities, to support our children and young people's health, and I welcome the opportunity to share a snapshot of this fantastic work with you in this report.

I wish you an enjoyable read.



Councillor Bob Lanzer

Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing
Chairman, West Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board

What do we know about children's mental health and wellbeing?

Mental health and wellbeing can often be challenging to explain. In the UK, the NHS defines having mental health as *"a positive state of mind and body, feeling safe and able to cope, with a sense of connection with people, communities and the wider environment"*^{iv}. Mental wellbeing means feeling good, both about yourself and about the world around you. It means being able to get on with life in the way you want^v.

Mental illness or ill-health refers to when there is the presence of a diagnosable mental health condition in someone's life, such as anxiety or depression. Even in the presence of a diagnosable mental health condition however, someone may still experience mental wellbeing ups and downs, as well as a worsening or easing of their symptoms as they go through their day-to-day life. Mental health conditions and mental wellbeing both influence how we experience the world and function within it. In this report we are discussing mental health in its broadest sense, this includes children and young people's emotional, psychological and social wellbeing.

Why is positive mental health and wellbeing important?

Positive mental health is important at every stage of life from childhood and adolescence through to

adulthood. A child reaching their developmental and emotional milestones acquires positive social skills and develops healthy ways to cope with life challenges^{vi}.

Children achieving a good level of development are those achieving the expected level within the following early learning goals: communication and language; physical development; personal, social, and emotional development; literacy; and mathematics^{vii}. In children and young people, mental health and wellbeing will show itself differently, depending on their age and stage of development. In a toddler, for example, positive mental wellbeing may show itself in their communication, sociability and close bonding with a caregiver. In pre-school aged children positive mental health and wellbeing can be reflected in their school-readiness. In a teenager it may be being able to communicate their feelings and manage stresses such as exams and schoolwork in a positive way.

Babies and young children who are mentally healthy are well positioned to have a good quality of life and function optimally at school, home and in community life. Experiences and relationships in the early years such as safe play, and consistent, sensitive and attuned interaction from parents and carers, and breastfeeding have been shown to improve maternal sensitivity, infant bonding and behaviours^{viii ix}. Mental health in the early years requires everyone in communities working together to create safe and stimulating environments for children and families to play and develop positive relationships with each other and between families and friends^{x, viii}.

What does the data tell us?

Data shows us that nationally, the majority of children and young people are thriving. With this in mind, it is important for us to continue to promote positive actions that keep minds healthy in order to prevent ill-health. However, we also know that for some children and young people, mental ill-health is a significant challenge and there are many different reasons for this.

In trying to understand the experiences of our community's mental health and wellbeing, information and data are gathered nationally and locally, and used to build a picture of need for services and support. This report looks at information that is gathered regularly. This is done so for some public services, such as developmental checks for two to two-and-a-half-year-olds, and referrals to mental health support, but not others. Information is not routinely gathered on positive mental health and wellbeing for example. This report provides the data that is readily available on diagnosable mental health conditions such as eating disorders, where information is routinely gathered and analysed for 2022/2023 and beyond. We would have liked to be able to provide more information on positive mental health and wellbeing in a more holistic sense, but this was not available for this report.

In 2021, the Children's Commissioner conducted The Big Ask^{xi}, the largest ever survey of children and young people in England, which had more than half-a-million responses. While most children (four in five) said they were happy or okay, one in five children said that they

were worried about their mental health. This made poor mental health children's biggest worry overall.

What can impact children's mental health and wellbeing?

A child who is reaching their development milestones at the expected age can often be described as 'thriving'^{xii}. Information gathered on those living in the UK show us that experiences and the ability to thrive and develop well during the early stages of childhood are closely linked to health throughout the rest of life. For instance, strong communication and language skills in the early years are linked with success in education, higher levels of qualifications, higher wages and better health. Inequity, or differences in experience in homelife, finances, social support, health, and other factors can have a lasting effect on children and young people's development, mental health and wellbeing^{vii}. Children who grow-up in a home which experiences pressures on their finances, health or other challenges will already have started to feel the effects of this on their lives by the time they reach two-years-old which, can persist and deepen during their school years^{vii}.

Nationally it is estimated that one in five children aged eight to 25-years-old had a probable mental health conditionⁱⁱⁱ. In England and locally, in West Sussex, we have seen significant increases in demand for mental health support for children and young people across all services; GP practices, NHS specialist mental health services, voluntary sector, independent sector, digital providers as well as in schools and hospitals^{xiii}.

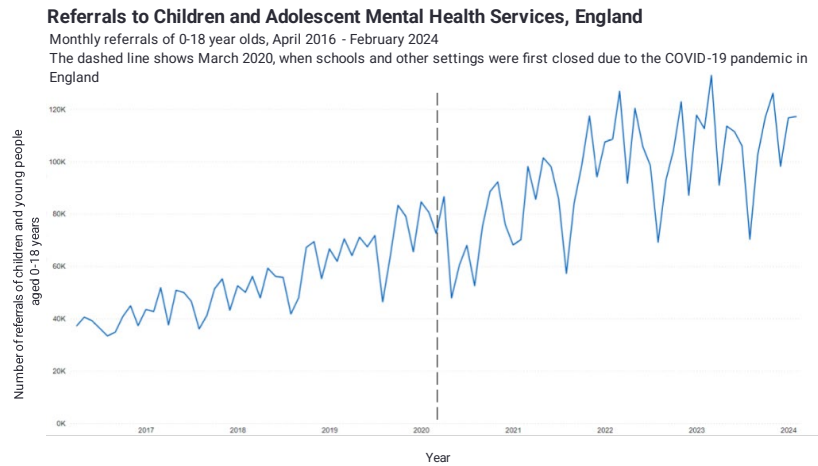


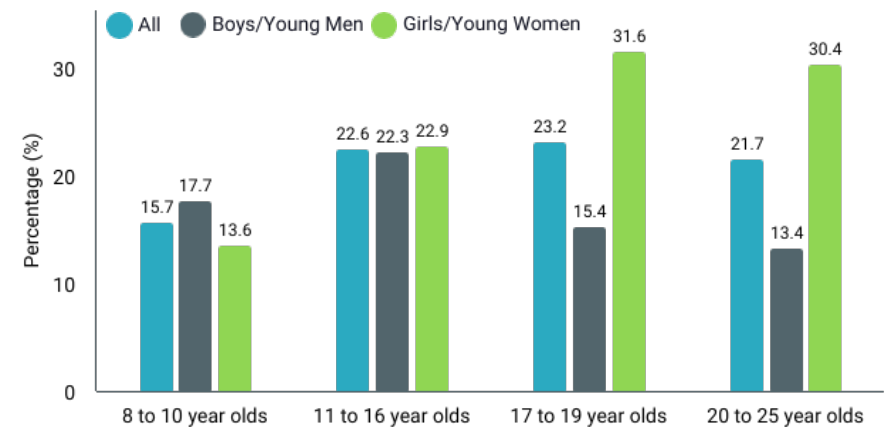
Figure taken from NHS England's Mental Health Monthly Statistics Dashboard. Available from: <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrjoiOTdjYzFyTUZmEwMj00ZTA2LTkxOGUIMDZmMmZjMThiZGNhliwidCI6IjM3YzZmM1NGlyLTg1YjAtNkdmNS1iMjlyLTA3YjQ4ZDc3NGVIMyJ9> [accessed April 23rd 2024]

The above graph shows the increase in referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in England. The rise started before the COVID-19 pandemic and has continued to rise, although there are early signs that mental health conditions in children are starting to stabilise, albeit at high rates. Locally, we have also seen an increase in demand for specialist mental health services for children and young people, mirroring the national trend.

In West Sussex there are estimated to be 35,700 children and young people aged eight to twenty-five-years-old with a mental health condition. As shown by the graph opposite, boys under the age of 11 have higher rates of probable mental health conditions. Girls aged 11 and over, and young women have significantly higher rates compared to boys and young men.

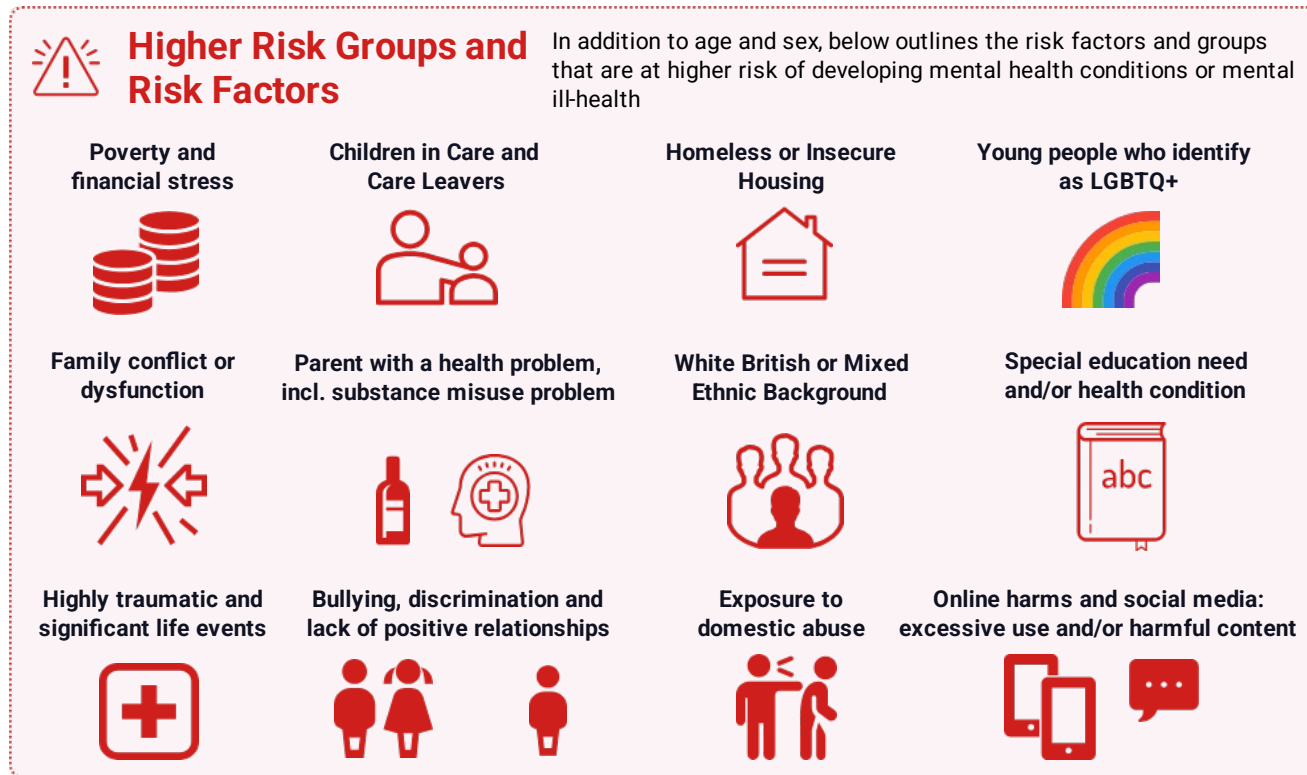
In younger age groups, there is less difference between boys and girls, but by 17 years, prevalence is far higher amongst young women.

Rates of probable mental health conditions by age and sex, West Sussex, 2023



Reference: NHS England, Children and young people survey, 2023

Characteristics or factors that are shown to be linked to an increased likelihood of developing a mental health condition as a child or young person are shown below.



Early years and childhood development

The Healthy Child Programme

Scientific studies tell us how important relationships and bonding is for young children. Relationship and bond develops as a response to early parenting, particularly in a child's first and second years of life. Those who have a strong relationship and bonding to a parent or carer have been shown to develop better in their emotional, social skills, behaviour and school achievement, which all contribute to their mental health and wellbeing as they grow.

One aspect of how the West Sussex County Council (WSCC) Public Health team supports child development is through the Healthy Child Programme (HCP), which supports the health and wellbeing of families and children aged 0 to 19-years-old. The HCP includes Health Visiting and School Nursing services and focuses on supporting families and carers to enable children and young people to have the best possible start in life. This includes having conversations with expectant parents about their mental health, providing support and signposting to other health services where needed.

In line with the government approach for a child's best start in life focused on action in the [first 1,001 critical days](#), health visitors who are specialist community nurses, conduct health reviews of children (0 to five years) and provide specialist one-to-one support for families who need it to help strengthen relationship and

bonding. The health reviews that take place at one year and two to two-and-a-half years provide an opportunity to raise any concerns regarding a child's development and/or issues relating to their health and wellbeing. This can include for example concerns about a child's speech, which can be referred to a specialist service if needed.

Family Nurse Partnership

The West Sussex Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) service is a home visiting programme of Family Nurses who work with vulnerable, young, first-time parents to provide intensive, early support from pregnancy until the baby is up to two-years-old (dependent on need). Evidence shows that through developing a positive relationship, Family Nurses support parents to build positive bonding with their child, improve child development and support school readiness.

This FNP case study illustrates how Ellie (not her real name) interacted with the programme

Ellie has a history of experiencing poor parenting herself, significant trauma and has experienced abandonment many times in her life. Her Family Nurse has focused her work with Ellie around warm and responsive parenting, stimulating the baby, play and supporting mental health and healthy relationships.

Ellie has worked well with FNP during pregnancy and since having her baby girl. She is able to recognise when her mental health is in decline and seeks immediate support when she needs it. Ellie wants life to

be different for her baby. Ellie has shown that despite her experience of a lack of continuity of care when she was young, she can be a consistent kind and loving caregiver to her baby.

Other services supporting young children and families

There are many other services that WSCC deliver to support young children and families in West Sussex. These include targeted support for parenting, managing trauma and strengthening attachment to support children and families and build their resilience to prevent the escalation of issues to services such as social care, the police, and the NHS.

Many children will have been supported in their preparation for school by attendance at pre-school and other early years settings. Early speech, language and communication are recognised as signals of a child's wellbeing. Children with good speech, language and communication skills are better able to manage emotions and communicate feelings, to establish and maintain relationships, and to learn to read and write. Without support, children and young people with speech, language and communication needs are at risk of poorer outcomes throughout their life, affecting their educational attainment, employment opportunities and social and emotional mental health^{xiv}.

Through the development of the WSCC Early Years Strategy, Early Years Practitioners have highlighted the increase in demand for support for children's social and

emotional development. It is essential that we as a council are focusing on getting the right support for children in this age group and developing their mental health and resilience to enable them to thrive throughout life.



School age children

From the year of their fifth birthday, children have the opportunity to broaden their horizons and flourish in school, developing their social, emotional, language and learning skills. During this time in their lives, primary and secondary school aged children experience intense educational and social learning, both formally and informally from school, family, and peers. Schools are important settings for strengthening and protecting children and young people's mental health wellbeing.

Children and young people spend a large proportion of their time in educational settings, which means that this is a key setting in which vulnerabilities and struggles in mental health and wellbeing can show themselves. These settings can work to support and develop children and young people, and for some the nature of the social and educational environment can exacerbate underlying struggles.

Children and young people in West Sussex aged 11 to 15-years-old were asked for their views on mental health and wellbeing (see box opposite: Our children and young people's voices survey (2023)).

Our children and young people's voices survey (2023)*

They told us who they received most of their mental health support from:

- 68% said family
- 21% said friends

When asked who they got the least amount of support from:

- 44% said teachers
- 45% said school staff members

When asked how they would like to talk about their mental health and wellbeing concerns:

- 64% said one-to-one
- 34% said in a group

**Results based on 47 participants.*

These findings show us the importance of ensuring there is support available for families, friends, teachers, school staff and communities about how best to try to support children and young people, as well as to help them feel supported in their positive mental health and wellbeing.

Schools have told us they have seen the declining mental health of their pupils locally and nationally over recent years. This has had a real impact on staff in-school, children, young people, and their parents. This has been observed particularly following the COVID-19 lockdowns and in relation to the impact of cost-of-living pressures.

Whole school approaches to mental health and emotional wellbeing

When whole school approaches to mental health and emotional wellbeing are in place, they can help children and young people to feel happy and well at school, ready to learn and engage. In West Sussex, this programme of a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing is called Thought-Full.

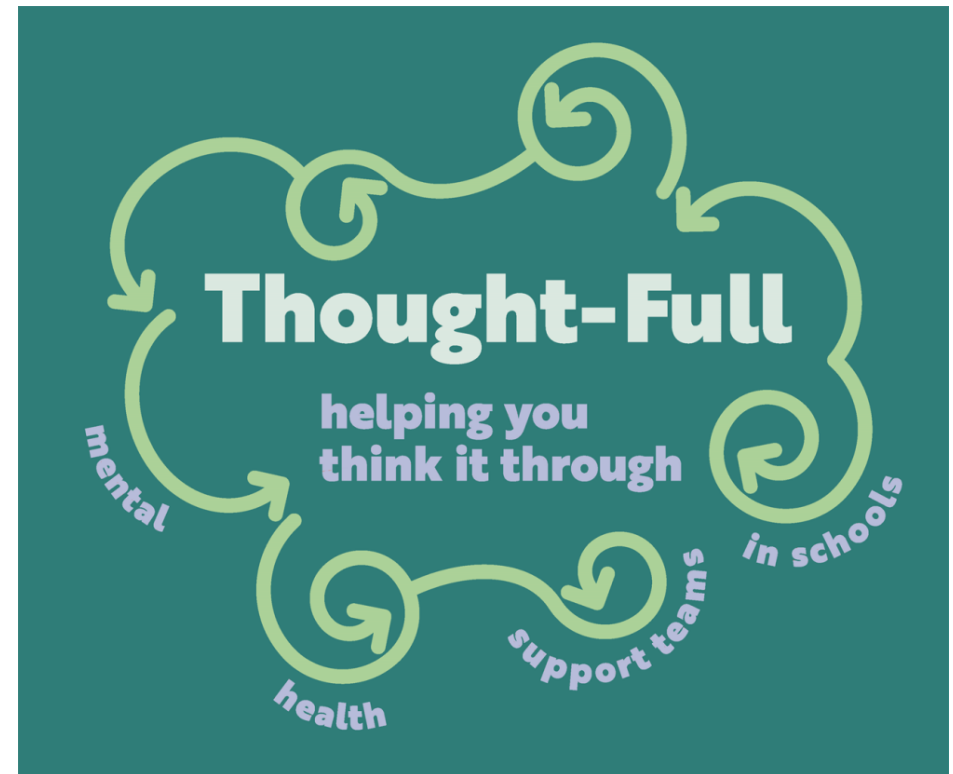
"We provide training and support for school staff and are delighted that our Thought-Full service (Mental Health Support Teams) is now reaching more than 55% of children and young people attending West Sussex schools."

Tanya Procter, Commissioner for Health and Wellbeing in schools, WSCC

Key aspects of a **whole school approach** include:

1. Promote respect and value diversity
2. Promote resilience
3. Student voice
4. Staff development
5. Identify need and effective interventions
6. Work with parents and carers
7. Targeted support

Although children and young people spend a large amount of their time in school, they also experience support and challenges from their home and social lives. It is therefore important that support is available across a child's whole day, with consistency in and out of school hours. With that in mind, the **whole school approach** to mental health and wellbeing looks to educate and support the school, the child and their parents/carers with improving mental health and wellbeing as the goal.



To deliver the whole school approach in West Sussex, the following initiatives have been put in place:

- **Senior Mental Health Leads** – 80% of schools have established the role of a [senior mental health lead](#) to lead the [whole school or college approach](#), give advice to staff, and liaise with external specialist services, such as educational psychologists, to help children and young people to get the right support and stay in education.
- **Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs)** provide support for children and young people with mild to moderate mental health issues. In West Sussex, we call MHSTs “Thought-Full,” a name chosen by children and young people. In September 2023, it expanded from six teams working in Chichester, Bognor Regis, Worthing, Mid Sussex and two Crawley sites, to nine, with the addition of sites in Horsham, Littlehampton, West Worthing, and Adur. Each team is commissioned to work with a reach of 7,000 to 8,000 pupils in primary, secondary, special, and alternative settings.
- **Mental Health Ambassador Programme** - created by Thought-Full, so that children and young people could get involved and influence this work in their schools. The programme supports schools to train pupils to become ambassadors for mental health and wellbeing. There are separate programmes for primary, secondary, and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) settings and all are based on using the [5 Ways to Wellbeing](#) (1. Connect, 2. Get Active, 3. Take notice, 4. Learn, 5. Give).
- **Therapeutic Thinking training** has been provided to support staff in schools to take a therapeutic approach, to analyse behaviour and put plans in place that strengthen mental health, wellbeing and behaviour in their setting. This training has been delivered to 88 schools across the county.
- **The Educational Psychology Service for children and young people in West Sussex** support includes development of [wellbeing and safety plans](#) to help children and young people

who need them to develop abilities to take action themselves to improve their mental health and wellbeing, to increase feelings of balanced thinking and to develop active coping skills to deal with challenging thoughts and feelings safely.

- **Tools and guides for schools, parents and carers** have been produced covering a range of topics and approaches for improving mental health and wellbeing including a ‘thriving in education guide’ for schools, a reflective tool for schools to use to assess their own strengths and areas for improvements and an eating difficulties [practical guidance and toolkit for schools and colleges across Sussex](#) ^{xv}.

Case study: Parent anxiety (Thought-Full Service)

Providing support at school and at home in a joined-up way, being equally supportive, has shown to have benefits for children’s mental health and wellbeing. This case study about the Thought-Full service is an example of a service that does this.

The issue

Schools had raised concerns that parental responses and anxiety were often being discussed as contributing factors to children and young people’s anxiety. Parents were frequently looking to them for help to reduce their child’s anxiety, without necessarily understanding their role in this or why we experience anxiety.

The intervention

In response to these concerns, the Thought-Full service provided courses to educate parents about anxiety, including:



Signs and symptoms of anxiety



What the function of anxiety is (normalising feelings)



How they can support their child to expand their window of tolerance and build resilience

The impact

Parents attending the training reported high levels of satisfaction and that the training helped them to understand:



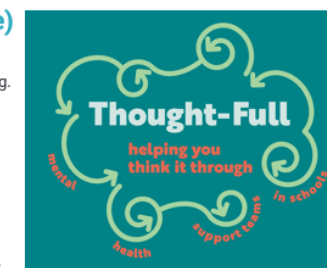
Anxiety and how it can reach a ‘peak’ and come back down again



Strategies to help resolve anxious situations

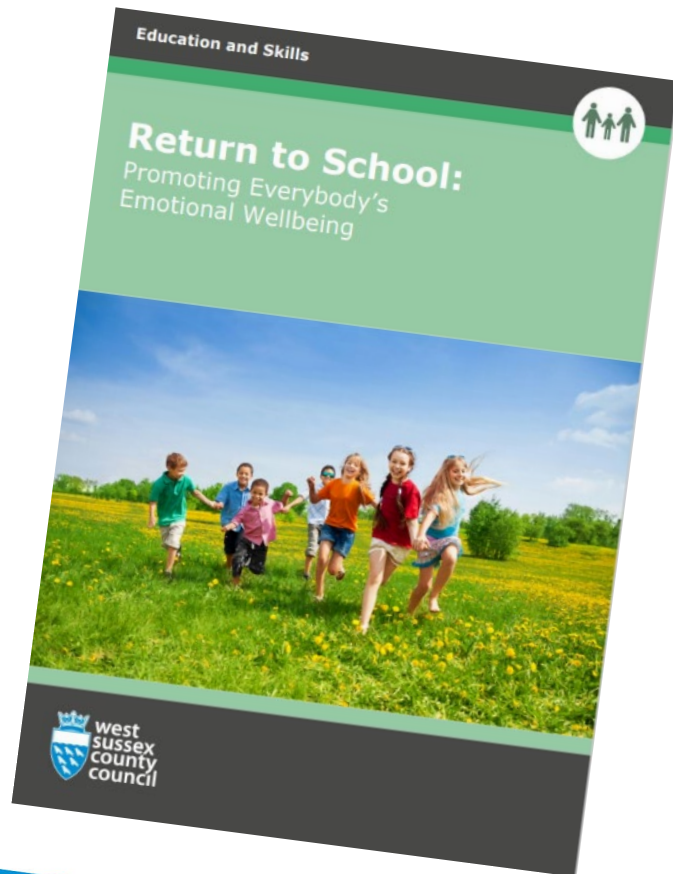


The reality that it is ‘normal’ to feel a level of anxiety in certain situations.



COVID-19 Pandemic

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across society are widely recognised, including the impact on our mental health and wellbeing. The diagram overleaf illustrates the significant number of changes to education settings from March 2020 to March 2022, affecting children and young people, including changes to the educational environment with the introduction of online learning, and impacts on examination schedules.



Returning to school after COVID-19

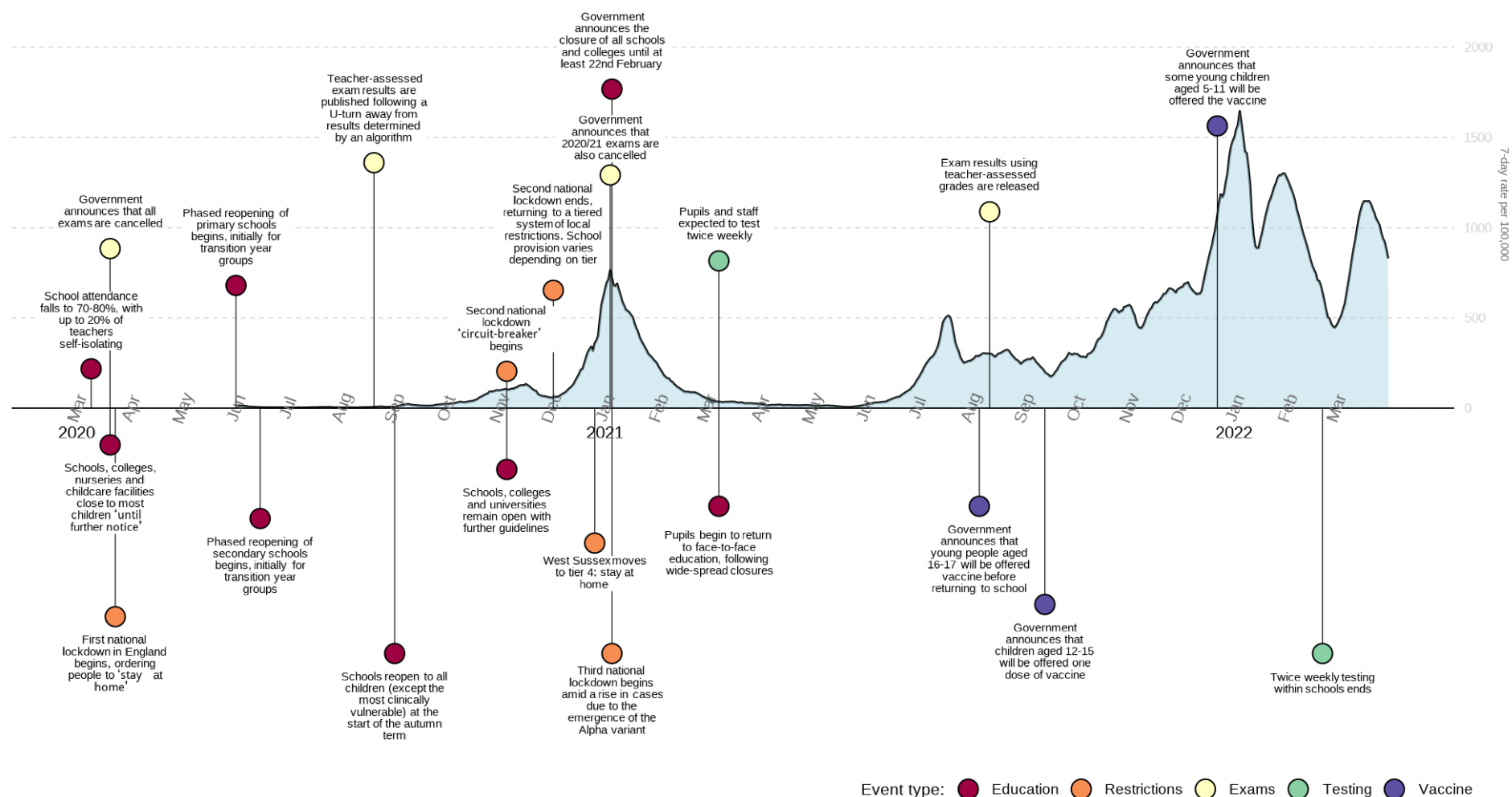
Schools and colleges are important settings for strengthening and protecting children and young people's mental health wellbeing.

To try to reduce the impact of lockdowns and COVID-19 measures on children and young people's health and wellbeing, public health and education colleagues worked together to provide consistent messaging and support to schools, students, and communities across the county, including information and guidance for supporting children and young people's mental health.

Together we developed a '[Return to School: Promoting Everybody's Emotional Wellbeing](#)' guide. With five key principles to promote recovery:

- A sense of safety
- A sense of calm
- A sense of self -and collective - efficacy
- Social connectedness
- Promoting hope

Rolling seven day rate of positive episodes of COVID-19 per 100,000 people resident in West Sussex; March 2020 to March 2022



Sources: Various UK Government coronavirus policy/guidance documents and the [UK Health Security Agency \(UKHSA\) data dashboard](#)

Information at the right place and right time

Provision of clear and up-to-date information is essential for ensuring children and young people, their families and those working with them know how best to flourish and to get support when needed. To do this, WSCC has worked with NHS and community and voluntary partners to develop campaigns, sharing practical evidence-based ideas for action and signposting local resources for support. An example of this was by making children and young people's mental health and wellbeing part of an online curriculum platform and wellbeing website pages for schools. This included content and lesson plans in relation to improving wellbeing and prevention of self-harm.

It is important young people know how to access support when they need it. The [E-Wellbeing website](#)^{xvi} is a digital wellbeing service for young people run by YMCA DownsLink Group. Their aim is for all young people to be able to access the right support and information around their emotional health and wellbeing, in the right place at a time that is right for them.

West Sussex Single Point of Access (SPoA)

It is essential that services are easy to access when young people need them. In 2022, a review was conducted by NHS Sussex and a new West Sussex Single Point of Access (SPoA) for emotional wellbeing and mental health support was launched on 1 June 2022.

Who delivers the SPoA?

Led by Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust's (SPFT) Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), the SPoA is delivered in partnership with the County Council's Youth Emotional Support Service (YES) and YMCA Dialogue.

What does the SPoA do?

It provides a single route for children, young people, families, carers and professionals to be directed to the right service, eliminating the need to refer to multiple services.

What difference has it made?

Access to services has improved, providing a joined up approach, and a simple self-referral route through which a young person or parent can self-refer, is available.

I-Rock: A Support and Advice Hub in Horsham

The [I-Rock](#) Horsham is a support and advice hub for young people aged 14 to 25-years-old who live in West Sussex, without the need for a referral. They offer a 'no wrong door approach', enabling young people to access a range of services to help with issues such as mental and emotional health, relationships, money and benefits, family problems, bullying, housing, education and employment. The service offers an open access, safe space, with trusted and approachable staff.

The service enables everyone to feel welcome and, so far, feedback from young people shows that the hub is helping to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

Youth Mental Health First Aid

Being trained as a Mental Health First Aider equips young people with the skills and confidence to spot the signs of mental health issues in a person, enables them to offer first aid and guide them towards the support they need.

WSCC Public Health supported two staff members from Collyers sixth form college to become Youth Mental Health First Aiders enabling them to deliver courses to others.

"Consideration of staff wellbeing within mental health first aid was especially good. The course will be fantastic for staff to develop their knowledge and skills supporting children and young people's mental health." College staff member

"Now I feel I could apply what I learnt and be the first line in 'holding' that student. I imagine my confidence to do this will increase with time and practice" College staff member

Your Mind Matters

The [Your Mind Matters](#) communication campaign was developed by WSCC and went live in October 2021. The campaign's aim was to raise awareness among children and young people, their families and professionals working with them on local and national services, training, and resources, that support young people with their emotional wellbeing and mental health.

Your Mind Matters used a strong brand and imagery and directed people to a central webpage, which had campaign information, resources, training, and events.

Adverts on train stations, bus stops and bus backs could be seen around the county but were focused on areas with larger student populations.

Over 20 months, the Your Mind Matters media content has:

- had more than 16 million views across social media.
- more than 829,500 views on campaign videos and 66,700 clicks through to the Your Mind Matters webpage and partner websites.
- 18,000 leaflets and *wellbeing plans distributed to young people through schools, libraries, family hubs, Youth Emotional Support Service, Mental Health School Teams, and youth groups across West Sussex.

**this refers to generic, rather than individual, wellbeing plans*

A feedback survey found 90.8% of people who'd seen the campaign found it helpful.



Young people's voice

Listening to the voice of children and young people is essential if we want to understand their views and meet their needs better. Co-production with young people not only provides opportunity to reshape services together, it also helps to foster trust, shared ownership and shows decision makers challenges and strengths from a real-life, personal perspective. Enabling children and young people to have a say, and working with them as equal partners can help services better meet their needs.

Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Provider Forum

To best support young people becoming adults, the 16-25 Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Provider Forum was established to bring together organisations to work on developing health, emotional wellbeing and mental health services for young people aged 16 to 25-years-old.

The forum enabled:

- sharing of best practice
- identification of gaps in and between services
- supporting the development of referral pathways and sharing of resources
- creation of a 16-25 Provider Directory to better share information on more than 100 services available throughout the county

Our young people's voices, from those who have experienced care

Care leavers on our West Sussex Care Leavers Advisory Board (CLAB) told us that care leavers often feel different and judged by others and that it can be challenging for young people in and leaving care to form relationships with carers and professionals. Experiences of being looked after can lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and low self-confidence. They reported challenges related to trusting carers, safety, feeling settled where they live and finding it difficult to form relationships with others particularly when being away from family and siblings and how this all affects their mental health and wellbeing. They developed the top tips below to try to help workers understand more about how they feel and how best to support them.

Top tips for professionals developed by West Sussex Care Leavers Advisory Board 2023

- Do what you say you are going to do – follow through on actions; not doing this can lead to frustration and young people asking for less support and services than they may need
- Show empathy and compassion – be sensitive and respond in a calm and reassuring way
- Discuss sensitive mental issues in the right environment – make sure the place is private with no distractions
- Give your full attention and time to the young person – make sure they feel important and valued
- Ask the right questions – ask about feelings in a sensitive, non-judgemental, and non-patronising manner and work at the young person's pace
- Consider culture – some young people from other cultural backgrounds may take longer to feel they can talk openly about feelings

Our young people's voices

In 2023 the WSCC Public Health team worked with the University of Chichester to seek feedback from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT+) young people, to support these communities.

How did we do this?

We undertook interviews and focus groups with young people, parents, and educators, to hear their thoughts on mental health and wellbeing.

What did we find out?

We heard:

- If LGBT+ young people are not feeling safe or comfortable within an environment, such as home or school, this dramatically impacts on mental health and wellbeing and can result in a young person taking risks, not looking after themselves and sometimes harming themselves.
- LGBT+ young people struggling with positive mental health and wellbeing told us this was due to many factors including:
 - a lack of self-acceptance
 - a loss of trust of organisations such as schools, colleges and the NHS
 - a fear of rejection by others
 - bullying
 - feeling the need to conform to social norms and hearing media reports of discrimination of LGBT+ people around the world

Improving mental health and wellbeing

They also told us about their thoughts on how to improve mental health and wellbeing:

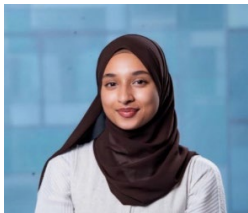
- through others and themselves being understanding and showing acceptance
- offering a chance for more visibility regarding history and awareness
- reducing isolation through engaging with LGBT+ adults and mentorship
- connecting with other LGBT+ youth
- looking after one's wellbeing and turning distress into empowerment

In summary, the research showed that providing safe communities for all, is essential for all children and young people to flourish.



Our young people's voices, from the West Sussex Youth Cabinet

Former members of the West Sussex Youth Cabinet reflected on children and young people's mental health in the last 18 months, which included their own campaign, a key manifesto area for the Cabinet. In this report, we also hear directly from the former Chair, Iffat Rahman



"I feel the attitude towards mental health has shifted in recent times, with a more open dialogue on the issue and more understanding that young people can and do face struggles in terms of their mental health. The Youth Cabinet over the last few years has played an active role in bringing more awareness and advocating for more support in these areas through our Health and Wellbeing Campaign that conducted surveys and worked with the NHS in forums to feedback on ways this can be incorporated.

I am very proud of my Cabinet for actively being involved in campaigning for more support and helping to shift the narrative of mental health in young people. We hope there will be a continued awareness more generally, and with that support for young people struggling with their mental health."

Iffat Rahman, former Chair, West Sussex Youth Cabinet

Why did the West Sussex Youth Cabinet include mental health in their manifesto?

There were many reasons the Youth Cabinet focused on this area in their manifesto, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pressure that many young people experience during

exam periods, and how the stigma surrounding mental health issues can make it difficult to ask for help.

"I'm doing my A-levels, and those in their GCSE years can find that very stressful and there's a lot of pressure that can really affect young people's mental health."

"The term started in 2022...that was right after COVID and lockdown. I think [mental health issues] had been on the rise a lot during that point."

What work did they do to support this?

The Cabinet designed and delivered a mental health and wellbeing campaign. They held a '[Free Your Mind on Mental Health](#)' workshop. They also created a podcast on reducing the stigma, a [video](#) with tips for young people to manage their stress levels and supported others with their mental health and wellbeing. The campaign was a success reaching many young people across the county.

What would they like to see prioritised in the future?

The Youth Cabinet want to see support for mental health prioritised for children and young people in the future. They report that young people are keen to seek help earlier for mental health issues before they reach a crisis, and to have more support in schools. They also felt that more specific mental health support for young people's diverse experiences was needed, for example for those who experience racial discrimination, as well as additional needs relating to neurodivergence.

"There should be more focus on links between mental health, racial equality, and racial incidents, especially in school."

"You want to talk to people who actually understand you..."

"It's more about communicating with the young person, saying yeah, we know you really need support right now, we don't have anyone on hand, this is the expected wait time."

Navigating a digital online world

Growing up now involves navigating not just the physical world around us, but the online digital and social media world through smart phones, game consoles, tablets, computers and other devices. This is widespread not just in the UK, but globally whereby the use of social media is nearly universal amongst teenagers^{xvii} and most children aged three to 17-years-old go online (at home or elsewhere) via mobile phones (69%) and tablets (64%), although the types of devices used varies by age of child^{xviii}. Digital, online spaces can have both benefits to protect young people's mental health, as well as the potential to cause harm^{xix}.

What does the evidence tell us?

The United States (US) Surgeon General's report published in 2023, highlights that despite the widespread use of social media among children and adolescents, there is not yet enough evidence to determine if its use is sufficiently safe — especially during adolescence, a particularly vulnerable period of brain development. Different children and young people are affected by social media in different ways based on their individual strengths and vulnerabilities and based on cultural, historical, and socio-economic factors^{xx xxi}.

Social media is considered to provide some benefits to young people who may feel marginalised, such as LGBTQ+ young people, and people with disabilities, as

it can provide positive or identify affirming content and be a space for self-expression, and help young people feel accepted. Young people struggling with their mental health may also want to, and find it easier to, talk to others online about what they are experiencing, and mental health support can also be provided by the NHS online^{xxii, xxiii}.

What do our young people think?

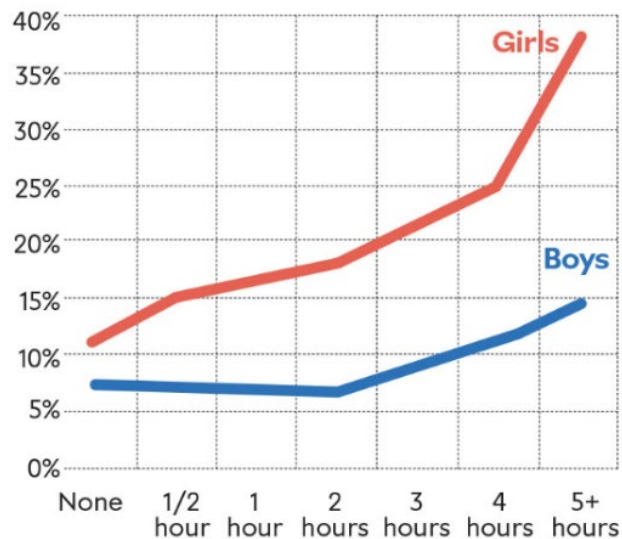
To understand this better locally, a Sussex-wide [youth-led research survey](#) was conducted on the use of these platforms to find out what young people thought ^{xxiv}. The survey found that:

- 85% said online mental health support was useful
- 66% of young people accessed online support for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic
- 60% of young people said they would like a mixture of face-to-face and online support in the future
- 27% were referred to online services by their GP
- 19% had existing therapy moved online due to the pandemic

Risks

As mentioned, whilst there are considered to be some benefits of social media to young people, there is also increasing evidence of the risks of the online world, as children and young people on social media are commonly exposed to extreme, inappropriate, and harmful content, and those who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of poor mental health including experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety^{xxv xxvi}.

Percentage of UK teens with depressive symptoms versus hours per weekday of social media use



Source: Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge created this graph from the data given in Table 2 of Kelly, Zilanawala, Booker and Sacker (2019), page 6.

The use of social media is increasing in younger age groups, almost a quarter of five to seven-year-olds in the UK have their own smartphone and overall use of social media sites or apps among this age group has increased year on year to 38% in 2024^{xxvii}. Online gaming has also seen an increase to 41% of children aged five to seven-years-old, higher than ever before^{xxvii}.

The [NSPCC](#) highlights the risks of social media (such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook) and chat apps (such as WhatsApp, Snapchat and Kik) for children and young people that includes oversharing, sharing your location, talking to people you don't know, sending or receiving inappropriate content, unrealistic sense of body image or reality and obsessive focus on likes and comments^{xxviii}.

Young people can be more exposed to hate-based content online^{xxix} and evidence from the US shows that among teenage girls of colour, one-third or more report exposure to racist content or language on social media platforms^{xxx}. Research shows there to be a relationship between cyberbullying via social media and depression among children and young people, with teenage girls/young women and sexual minority youth more likely to report experiencing incidents of cyberbullying^{xxxi xxxii} (as outlined earlier in this report, rates of mental health conditions are higher in girls and young women, and for those 17 - 25 years, prevalence is far higher). In addition, the effects of substituting social media activity for other forms of social interaction is not fully understood and evidence shows

that unregulated online journalism can unnecessarily increase anxiety in children and young people.

Research regarding the role the internet plays in acts of self-harm and suicide is rapidly evolving. In a landmark judgement in 2022, social media was ruled to have contributed to the case of a young person's suicide^{xxxiii}. A national enquiry into suicide deaths of young people in England identified that in 26% of deaths of those aged under 20, suicide content had been accessed on the internet^{xxxiv}.

The [Online Safety act](#) published in 2023 aims to make the internet safer by placing legal duties and responsibilities on online service providers to keep children and young people safe online by tackling illegal material and content that is harmful to children, conducting regular risk assessments and properly enforcing age limits.



How are we supporting young people in West Sussex to stay safe online?

- [West Sussex County Council](#) provides support to families, parents/carers and children and young people to stay safe online. There is a digital safety package for schools to equip school staff to feel more confident supporting children and young people with online safety advice and knowledge of how to teach key digital safety principles linked to the curriculum.
- Training looks at the physical and emotional impact and provides resources for teachers and parents.
- Topics include: media use, screentime, inappropriate content, oversharing, sexting/image sharing, sexual abuse imagery, social media, grooming into radicalisation and extremism and cyberbullying.
- Webinar sessions are also available for parents/carers and a monthly Staying Safe Online E-newsletter provides information around online mental health and wellbeing support.
- Sussex Police ran a project called SOLAH, which stands for 'safer online at home' to protect children and young people who are either uploading self-generated images to the internet or sharing indecent images of children between themselves or online.

Understanding mental illness in children and young people

This section and through to the end of the report, focuses on mental ill-health in children and young people.

Warning: It is important to communicate about this, however the content mentions self-harm, trauma, death, bereavement, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, and addiction, which includes reference to alcohol and drug use. **Please read with care.** There are details of where to find help at the end of this [link](#).

Most children grow up mentally healthy, but surveys suggest that more children and young people have problems with their mental health today than 30 years ago^{xxxv}.

Traumatic events can trigger mental health problems for children and young people who are already vulnerable.

Changes such as moving home, changing school or the birth of a new sibling, etc., may act as triggers. Some children who start school feel excited about making new friends and doing new activities, but some may also feel anxious.

Teenage years

Teenagers often experience emotional turmoil as their minds and bodies develop. Working out and accepting who you are is an important part of growing up. Some young people find it hard to make this transition to adulthood and may experiment with [alcohol](#), [drugs](#), or other substances, that can affect mental health.

The risk factors mentioned earlier in the report, change over time, and can make some children and young people more likely to experience mental health problems than others. However, experiencing them doesn't mean a child will definitely – or even probably – go on to have mental health conditions or problems.



Mental health conditions

The mental health conditions that most commonly occur in children and young people are^{xxxvi}:

- **depression** - this affects more young people today than in the last few decades
- **self-harm** - some young people who experience intense emotional pain may try to deal with it by hurting themselves
- **generalised anxiety disorder** - can cause young people to become extremely worried
- **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** - can follow abuse, witnessing something extremely frightening or traumatising, being a victim of violence, or severe bullying or surviving a disaster
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**- children who are consistently overactive, impulsive and have difficulty paying attention may have ADHD
- **eating disorders** - the numbers of young people who develop an eating disorder is small, but such conditions can have significant impact on physical health and development



Our children and young people's mental health and wellbeing

The majority of children and young people in West Sussex are thriving, but for a small number the impact of their own mental ill-health and wellbeing can result in self-harm, rates of which had been rising nationally and locally, for hospital admissions as a result of self-harm in 10 to 24 year olds. (Figure 1) ^{xxxvii}.

The data in Figure 1 is captured as part of routine data collection and indicates an evolving picture over the last decade on some of the more severe impacts of mental ill-health and wellbeing. Overall, it shows that rates of self-harm in children and young people in West Sussex have been consistently above the England average during this time, however, mirroring the national trend, rates in West Sussex started to decline during 2021/22.

Nationally the demand for support has risen significantly with the increase of young people needing urgent care for eating disorders increasing by 141% from March 2020 to June 2022^{xxxviii}.

Approximately 2,400 children and young people in the West Sussex aged eight to 19-years-old will have an eating disorder. Four times the number of young women aged 17-19 years in West Sussex have an eating disorder (21 %), compared to young men (5%)^{xxxix, xl}.

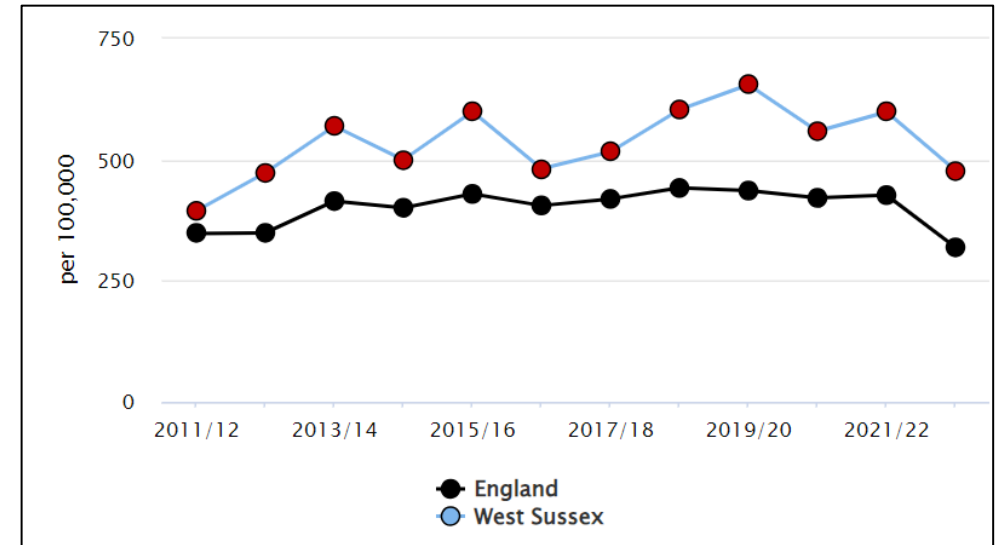


Figure 1: Hospital admissions as a result of self-harm (10-24 years), West Sussex in comparison to England rates. Source: Public Health Profiles, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID)

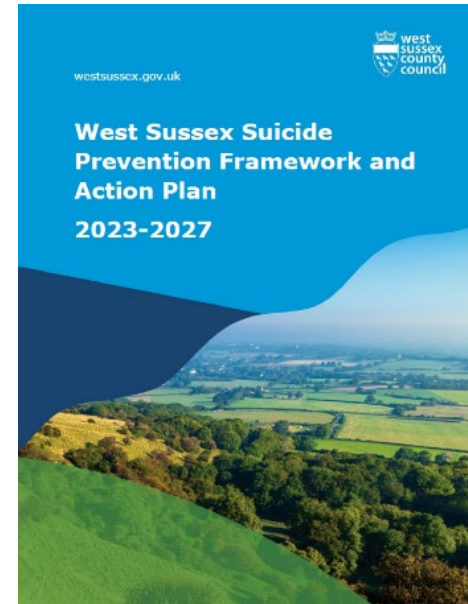


West Sussex Suicide Prevention Framework and Action Plan 2023-2027

Death by suicide in children and young people is, thankfully, rare. When a child or young person takes their life, the impact is profound and far reaching.

As part of the [West Sussex Suicide Prevention Framework and action plan 2023-2027](#) there is a system of response and support around those impacted by a death. These responses aim to support those affected, minimise trauma and strengthen community resilience. It includes access to support for bereavement support, which is particularly important as being bereaved through suicide increases risk of suicide in some people^{xli}.

The updated West Sussex Suicide Prevention Framework and action plan is in line with the action areas in the [national suicide prevention strategy 2023 - 2028](#).



Real Time Surveillance (RTS)

In 2021 the Real Time Surveillance (RTS) system was established, which informs WSCC, NHS and Sussex Police of a death where the circumstances suggest suicide might be the case.

What does the system do?

It provides timely data and enables these partners and others, to look at how best to respond and support our communities, including ensuring access to bereavement support for those affected.

There are policies in place to guide how partners respond to a death and a [toolkit](#) has been published to support schools and colleges in West Sussex following an unexpected death within their community of a student or teacher.

Although unexpected deaths in children and young people are uncommon, it is helpful to be prepared. A sensitive and considerate response, tailored to the person who has died and taking their family's wishes into account, can improve the long-term outcomes for those impacted.

Multi-agency Mental Health in Education Triage (MAMHET)

What does the service do?

With a focus on preventing and reducing risks of self-harm and suicidality, the MAMHET service in West Sussex brings together professionals to help identify and respond to presentations of children in school which might progress to the point of a mental health crisis, self-harm, or potential risk of suicide.

How does it work?

The triage service will seek to identify any individuals or groups of young people who might be at risk, to prevent self-harm and suicide and offers a person-centred approach to supporting them. A countywide service, it works with schools, colleges, the council, Sussex Police, and the NHS.

What difference has the service made?

Whilst providing much needed support to our young people, it has also increased our understanding of issues affecting them growing up in West Sussex and allows professionals to respond to their needs promptly.

Looking to the future

This report reflects on areas that have supported children and young people with their mental health and wellbeing in West Sussex, alongside some of the challenges. Learning from what has worked well and our experiences, is an essential part of how we can adapt support for our communities moving forward.

There is an ongoing commitment to continue to use learning to inform future projects and strategies, and to keep hold of what we know really works. There is so much more to understand in how public services can work together to address need. It's essential that ourselves, partners, and services, invite and take on board local learning. We have worked collaboratively to respond to and learn from areas of concern locally, we need to continue to do this, building on recent momentum for positive change.

Over the past few years there has been a positive shift towards greater awareness of the importance and impact of mental health and wellbeing, with more open and public dialogue. This is supporting our movement as a society towards reducing stigma and growing parity with physical health conditions, in our conversations and provision of care and support.

The importance of listening to children and young people, and the richness of information and understanding that comes from local voice cannot be overstated. Children and young people's voice should

shape our thinking, planning and delivery of local services and projects. We need to be good at listening, identifying concerns and risks at pace, dealing with, and providing support quickly.

There are numerous pressures at the moment, both nationally and locally, which are noticeable both in demand and population need for support services. Locally, collaboration between public sector partners continues to grow as we work together to meet these pressures as effectively as we can within current resources. We continue to talk about mental health, how to promote wellbeing, and focus on strong joint working and addressing pressures locally.

As we reflected in this report, social media is considered to provide some benefits to young people, however, there is also increasing evidence of the risks of the online world. At this time, not enough is known on the impacts of social media on young minds, or how to mitigate its harms, with the risks being a growing area of concern, and wider work needed to increase learning in this field.

And finally, reflecting back to Professor Sir Michael Marmot's policy objective "Give every child the best start in life," over a decade on, this remains at the heart of our work, building the resilience and wellbeing of young children across the social gradient. As an ever-evolving society, there is more to be explored nationally, and with the West Sussex population using local voice and information to better understand pressures and needs. **We will utilise our work so far**

**to generate further momentum in this area,
prioritising collective action and local
collaboration.**

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xlii Young, I.T., Iglewicz, A., Glorioso, D., Lanouette, N., Seay, K., Ilapakurti, M. & Zisook, S. (2012) Suicide bereavement and complicated grief. *Dialogues Clinical Neuroscience*. 2012 Jun; 14(2): 177–186. Available from: [Suicide bereavement and complicated grief - PMC \(nih.gov\)](https://doi.org/10.1186/1745-6215-14-177) [accessed 15 August 2024]