

Young people's experience of counselling in community-based settings

Summary of new research from Youth Access

November 2020

This briefing gives an overview of key findings from [a study](#) looking at how counselling in the voluntary and community (VCS) sector is experienced by young people. It is for managers and practitioners working in Youth Information, Advice and

Counselling Services, and other providers and commissioners of mental health services for young people who would like to know more about young people's experiences of counselling within community-based settings.

Key findings

Young people's experiences of Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS) were overwhelmingly positive. During the study young people told us that;

- they valued the accessibility and flexibility of YIACS
- YIACS were welcoming, friendly and supportive
- they felt listened to, understood and accepted by YIACS counsellors
- it was the first time they had ever experienced being genuinely heard, respected and valued
- counsellors in these settings were knowledgeable, trustworthy, creative in their approach and easy to talk to
- the counselling they received led to long lasting and meaningful change in their lives

Background

This briefing gives an overview of findings from a research study which explored how counselling in the voluntary and community (VCS) sector is experienced by young people, aged 11-25. VCS services provide mental health support to young people outside of statutory and school settings, and playing an important role in supporting marginalised groups of young people, those with complex needs or those who do not meet thresholds for statutory services. These services are typically open access and offer a holistic, integrated approach which bridges the gap between child and adult provision. VCS services have reported an increase in demand in recent years, as the numbers of young people experiencing complex challenges grows, and statutory provision struggles to meet demand.

This research took place across nine Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS) in England. A total of 2,155 young people (aged 11-25) were referred for counselling over the course of the study, and 1,378 took part and were asked to complete the Experience of Service Questionnaire (ESQ). This briefing summarises their responses to the following free text questions on the ESQ; i) what was really good about your care, ii) was there anything you didn't like or anything that needs improving? iii) Is there anything else you want to tell us about the service you received? The full report of findings can be accessed [here](#).

Findings

What young people thought was really good

Young people said they felt listened to, understood and accepted by counsellors, and that this was a powerful experience. They described staff as being trustworthy, non-judgemental, warm and friendly. Many said it was the first time they had ever experienced being genuinely heard, respected and valued:

- 💡 "I felt for once that someone was actually listening to what I had to say."
- 💡 "I felt like for the first time I can remember I have been listened to."
- 💡 "I feel like it is one of the only places that I get heard."
- 💡 "Very sensitive, knowledgeable counsellor who understood and directed me through the process. This has been my most positive experience of counselling, and I am grateful for the opportunity."

Young people said counsellors in these settings were knowledgeable, creative in their approach and easy to talk to. Many commented on how they found the experiential elements of the work, such as art, games, journaling, goal setting, and worksheets, particularly helpful.

Young people appreciated being able to talk about what they wanted, at their own pace and without pressure to conform to an agenda:

- 🗣️ *"Having someone to listen who doesn't have their own agenda."*
- 🗣️ *"I felt that I was in control of the agenda and what I wanted to bring and talk about each session was up to me."*
- 🗣️ *"Allowed to ramble and not forced to talk about one particular subject."*

Young people said the services were welcoming, friendly and supportive, and that staff had created a safe and comfortable space which helped them to open up and talk about things they had not been able to share with anyone before:

- 🗣️ *"The staff are very open and friendly and make me feel at ease when I come here."*
- 🗣️ *"Always felt in comfortable environment when speaking to my counsellor."*
- 🗣️ *"I felt I was listened to and I cried every session but I felt comfortable and safe there."*
- 🗣️ *"I felt like I had a place I could go to share how I felt. To share feelings I didn't feel I could tell anyone else."*

Young people described how the support they received was truly centred around their needs, was flexible and easy to access:

- 🗣️ *"The sessions I've had have been tailored to suit my particular needs. A lot of attention was given to what did/didn't work for me, which was really helpful."*
- 🗣️ *"It was really helpful to be able to take a break and to be able to come back as often as I needed and to speak to the same person again."*
- 🗣️ *"Counsellor was really accommodating in fitting us in that suited school hours."*
- 🗣️ *"Really useful having appointments at home, fits in well with work and school times."*
- 🗣️ *"Help is there when I need it."*
- 🗣️ *"It was very flexible and accessible. I felt like I got more than I could have ever hoped for."*

Many young people described how the support and advice they received helped them to better understand themselves, and make sense of their feelings and behaviours, leading to long lasting and meaningful change in their lives:

- 🗣️ *"I was quite anti coming here but very glad I did as I feel it has genuinely turned my life around."*

- 🗣️ *"I have felt a massive difference in me from the first week to the last week and I received really good help and advice."*
- 🗣️ *"It's been helpful in the sense that I feel that by the end of the sessions I will have a sense of direction as to how I can cope with aspects of my life and understand the way I behave in the way I do."*
- 🗣️ *"It's been helpful to have space to explore why I do certain things, things make much more sense now."*

What young people didn't like or felt needs improving

Most (74%) young people responding to this question said there was nothing that they didn't like about the support they received. Those who did offered suggestions for improvement largely related to issues about the physical environment of YIACS and the facilities on offer, such as the need for more space in the building, better maintenance of existing space, more comfortable chairs and a brighter and more welcoming waiting area. There were also some concerns about access for disabled young people:

- 🗣️ *"You guys need a bigger building so you have more rooms for counselling. I thought it was a great service."*
- 🗣️ *"The chairs are really hard in the waiting area."*
- 🗣️ *"The waiting area is a bit dull and not very welcoming."*
- 🗣️ *"The waiting area was too cramped, I felt as though I lacked personal space."*

Some young people asked for shorter waiting times, different timings of sessions, including more in evenings and weekends, and longer or more frequent sessions, or longer term support. A few young people said they would have liked more direction and guidance from their counsellor.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates the important and impactful work YIACS are doing to support young people's mental health. Young people's experiences of counselling within community settings were overwhelmingly positive. YIACS were described as being young person-centred, responsive, welcoming and supportive. Many young people said the counselling they received led to long lasting and meaningful change in their lives, and few had any suggestions for improvement.



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Youth Access exists to make sure all young people have somewhere local to turn to whenever they need to talk. We work with both young people and our membership of Youth Information Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS) to ensure that young people in every community can access great quality support as they move into adulthood.