

# Impact Report

The Student Voice:  
Real Talk on Mental Health

Friday 10 October 2025, 1 - 5.30pm

VOICEBOX  
Cheltenham Literature Festival  
Montpellier Gardens  
Cheltenham  
GL50 1UL



**VOICEBOX**



# Introduction

On Friday 10 October 2025 (World Mental Health Day), VOICEBOX, in partnership with Howden, hosted **The Student Voice: Real Talk on Mental Wellbeing** at The Times and Sunday Times Cheltenham Literature Festival. The event brought together students, experts and campaigners for an open and honest discussion on mental health and wellbeing.

The forum created a space for lived experience and professional insight to meet, exploring the realities of youth mental wellbeing and what effective, inclusive support should look like in education and beyond. Attendees were aged 16 - 30 and joined in person and online.

**This report captures the key themes, challenges and recommendations that emerged from the conversations.**

Here, we summarise insights from the three sessions held during the forum, offering a reflection on the issues that matter most to young people today.

Through this report and our wider work, VOICEBOX aims to ensure that young peoples' voices shape policy and the future of mental health services.

Thank you to all who contributed to this important dialogue and helped advance the conversation around youth mental wellbeing.

# Running Order Summary

**The Student Voice: Real Talk on Mental Wellbeing** included three sessions designed to explore a range of mental wellbeing topics and navigating life as a young adult.

Attendees contributed to the discussion by sharing insights in-venue, via Slido and through multiple choice activities.

**Leave No Mind Behind: Including Young People in Decision-Making**

**Panellists:**  
ZeZe Sohawon  
Conor Warren  
Dr Cassandra Lovelock  
**Host:** Dr Ally Jaffee

**BRB, Figuring Out My Life**

**Panellists:**  
Sophia Kaur Badhan  
Abigail Foster  
Dr Ally Jaffee  
**Host:** Gaby Mendes

**Adele Zeynep Walton: Navigating Life Online**

**Panellist:**  
Adele Zeynep Walton  
**Host:** Charli Clement





# Session One: Including Young People in Decision-Making

Contribute to the conversation on how mental health services can better serve young people. Hear from our panel as they share lived experiences and expertise and add your voice to the conversation that will highlight why involving young people in shaping mental health services leads to better outcomes for everyone.

## Headline Insights

This session demonstrated that young people are not waiting to be rescued, they are ready to lead. Participants called for shared power, practical collaboration and mental health systems designed with them, not for them. Embedding their insight can transform services into inclusive, responsive and preventative models.

- **Young people want to be active partners in shaping mental health policy:** not just consulted, but co-designing systems and language.
- **Authentic representation matters:** inclusion must go beyond tokenism and create real decision-making power for youth voices.
- **Language and framing influence whether young people seek support:** accessible, stigma-free communication is essential.
- **Digital spaces are double-edged:** providing connection but also contributing to anxiety, comparison and misinformation.
- **Co-production, intersectionality and empathy** emerged as core principles for a next-generation mental health strategy.



# Session One: Key Themes

## **Youth Co-Production, Not Tokenism**

- Mental-health services and research must be co-designed with young people, not simply consulted on.
- “Nothing about us, without us”: shared power from planning through to evaluation.
- Avoid symbolic inclusion of one youth or lived-experience voice; diversity within lived experience matters.

## **Language, Power and Accessibility**

- Over-academic or clinical jargon excludes students; plain language builds trust.
- Shift from deficit language (“What’s wrong with you?”) to empathy-based questions (“What happened to you?” / “What matters to you?”).
- Transparency about aims and limitations keeps youth engagement authentic.

## **Digital Mental Health and Misinformation**

- Students increasingly seek mental-health information via TikTok, Instagram and other online spaces.
- These platforms democratise help-seeking but also spread misinformation and harmful, glamorised portrayals of self-harm or in-patient life.
- Clinicians and credible advocates need visibility and algorithmic support to counter false or unsafe advice.



# Session One: Key Themes

## **Early Prevention and Education**

- Mental-health literacy and self-care should be taught from school through to university.
- Prevention is more effective than crisis response: embed psychoeducation and emotion-regulation teaching into the curriculum.

## **Peer Support as a System Essential**

- Lived-experience roles should be formally funded, trained and embedded across inpatient, community and school/university settings.
- Peer-to-peer models create trust, reduce stigma and support continuity of care.

## **Equity, Neurodivergence and Cultural Competence**

- Current systems force marginalised groups to “fit” existing models instead of adapting care to them.
- Services must meet people where they are: in community, faith and online spaces.
- Neurodivergent students need anticipatory adjustments and post-diagnosis follow-up.



# Key Challenges

## **Tokenism and Power Imbalance**

- Youth participation is often limited to symbolic panels without real influence or follow-up.
- Lived experience is undervalued compared to professional expertise.

## **Systemic Delays and Gaps**

- Long waiting lists for autism and mental-health assessments (often 4+ years).
- Poor post-diagnosis support and fragmented transitions between services.

## **Inequity and Lack of Representation**

- Marginalised groups (racially minoritised, autistic, LGBTQ+) face cultural and structural barriers to access.
- Services frequently describe these groups as “hard to reach” rather than recognising they are “easy to ignore.”

## **Digital Harm and Unregulated Influence**

- Young people exposed to unsafe or triggering mental-health content.
- Clinicians constrained by professional regulation while influencers face none.

## **Communication and Trust**

- Overuse of academic and bureaucratic language alienates young people.
- Lack of honesty about timelines and what support can realistically deliver reduces engagement.



# Key Takeaways and Opportunities

## For Policymakers:

- Mandate genuine youth co-production across mental-health policy, design and evaluation with funded youth advisory panels.
- Invest in prevention: early-stage education on mental health, emotion regulation and safe digital literacy.
- Reduce waiting times and ensure post-diagnosis follow-up for autism and mental-health pathways.
- Fund culturally competent and autism-informed care across all youth and higher-education services.

## For Universities, Colleges and Schools:

- Integrate mental-health and wellbeing education into the curriculum.
- Provide adjustments for neurodivergent students even before formal diagnosis.
- Build co-created, student-led campaigns instead of one-off consultations.
- Create clear referral pathways and “warm handovers” between school/campus counselling and NHS services.
- Use plain, empathetic communication. Ditch jargon, focus on what matters to students.

## For Students (16 - 30)

- **Your voice counts:** Ask how your input will shape outcomes.
- **Be critical online:** Follow credible clinicians and charities; avoid harmful “day-in-the-ward” or glamorising content.
- **Ask early:** Reach out before crisis - schools, universities, GPs and peers are valid first steps.
- **Protect your story:** Share your lived experience only when it feels safe and on your terms.
- **Support peers:** Small actions like listening, signposting, normalising help-seeking can make big change.



# Session Insights

## Who Are Your Mental Health Role Models?

Attendees cited a wide range of mental health role models, including public figures, writers, personal connections and advocates. The most valued traits were honesty, vulnerability and lived experience.

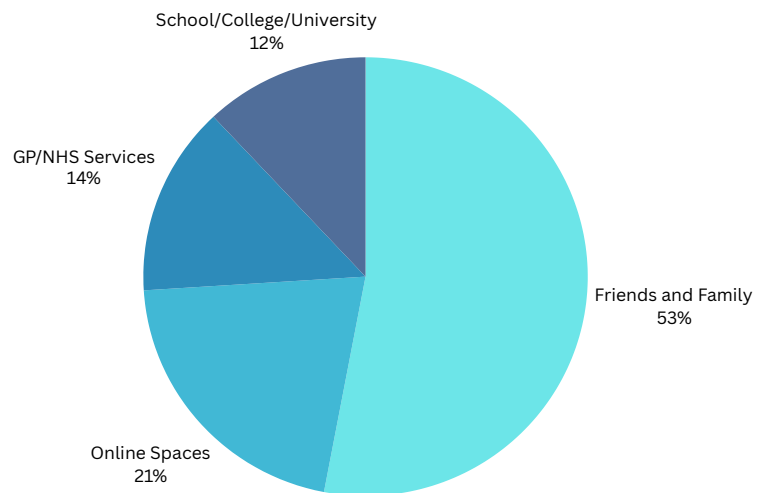
Category	Examples	Insights
Public Figures & Celebrities	Dr Alex George, Stephen Fry, Robin Williams, Emma Thompson, Ruby Wax, SZA, Matt Haig, Noah Kahan	Public advocates valued for authenticity and openness about struggles.
Writers & Creatives	Matt Haig, Sarah Kane, Ruby Wax, SZA	Creativity as a form of self-expression and empathy.
Personal Connections	Dad, Nan, Students, Myself	Personal experience and emotional support highly influential.
Professionals & Advocates	Satveer Nijjar	Lived-experience educators appreciated for realistic awareness.

# Session Insights

## Sources of Mental Health Information

Attendees were asked where they go for mental health and wellbeing support or information.

Insight: Peer networks remain the dominant first source of mental health information. Formal services are underused, suggesting accessibility and trust barriers.



## Areas for Service Improvement



Attendees were asked which areas of mental wellbeing support could be improved.

Insights:

- Systemic delays remain a key frustration
- Need for culturally competent and creative approaches
- Young people want consistency and care continuity
- Support should feel relatable and accessible



## Session Two: BRB, Figuring Out My Life

Young adulthood can feel overwhelming. This session takes your prompts and questions to steer a conversation with our panel. They give the lowdown on thriving through this time, sharing tips and advice on everything from building self-confidence and setting boundaries, to managing money and choosing a path that works for you.

### Headline Insights

This session highlighted the lived reality of young adulthood in 2025: a generation facing uncertainty with resilience and humour, but still seeking permission to grow, fail and adapt without judgment. Practical support in finance, wellbeing and belonging can turn surviving into thriving, shaping a more compassionate, adaptable generation for the future.

- **Early adulthood is a phase of duality:** many young people describe “thriving and surviving” as coexisting realities.
- **Career, finance and mental health are intertwined:** uncertainty is not failure, it’s part of modern adulthood.
- **Authenticity and self-compassion are key:** students want permission to experiment, redirect and learn without stigma.
- **Digital comparison culture continues to distort self-perception:** progress-over-perfection resonates deeply as a counter-message.



# Session Two: Key Themes

## **Adulthood as a Work in Progress**

- Participants described early adulthood as a mix of “thriving and just surviving.”
- Career, finance and mental health challenges are intertwined; not linear problems to “fix” but ongoing balancing acts.

## **Career Discovery Through Experimentation**

- The “right path” is often found by trying things and course-correcting, not through a single life plan.
- Failure and redirection (e.g., switching careers, studying abroad, or leaving jobs that don’t fit) are normal parts of growth.

## **Financial Literacy as Mental Health Literacy**

- Young adults want practical education on budgeting, saving, credit and investment.
- Financial stress is a major source of anxiety: small consistent habits build control and confidence.



# Session Two: Key Themes

## **Social Media and Comparison Culture**

- Online spaces amplify comparison and self-doubt — students compare their “behind the scenes” to others’ highlight reels.
- Encouraging self-compassion, progress-over-perfection and authentic self-expression helps buffer against this.

## **Wellbeing and Emotional Regulation**

- Panellists stressed self-kindness, journaling (“brain dumps”), boundaries and authentic human connection offline.
- “Thriving” and “surviving” are both valid states; what matters is progress and self-acceptance.

Attendees sought practical advice on balancing passion and stability, building financial literacy, finding belonging and maintaining wellbeing in uncertain career paths.

# Key Challenges

## **Unrealistic Expectations and Pressure to ‘Have it Figured Out’**

Many feel pressure to map their life early and fear failure or deviation from traditional success paths.

## **Gaps in Life-Skills Education**

Students report frustration that schools rarely teach practical topics like credit, taxes, mortgages, or investment basics.

## **Belonging and Connection**

Many students struggle to find “their tribe,” especially in early university life. Surface-level friendships and digital substitutes leave people feeling isolated.

## **Economic Uncertainty**

Young adults are navigating inflation, job insecurity and student debt, often while starting from low salaries or unpaid internships.

## **Comparison and Digital Fatigue**

Constant exposure to peers’ curated success on social media fuels anxiety, loneliness and burnout.

## **Stigma Around Change**

There’s still a stigma attached to “quitting” — whether that’s leaving a job, course, or relationship — even when change is healthy and necessary.



# Key Takeaways and Opportunities

## For Policymakers:

- Embed practical financial education (credit, saving, renting, tax, investing) into the national curriculum and HE systems.
- Fund career experimentation — internships, mentorship schemes and project-based credits that allow for exploration, not early pigeonholing.
- Support joined-up wellbeing provision connecting careers, finance and mental-health advice on campuses.
- Promote digital literacy and self-esteem education to counter comparison culture and misinformation.

## For Universities, Colleges and Schools:

- Normalise non-linear career journeys — allow students to switch courses or tracks without stigma or penalty.
- Integrate money management workshops into induction or life-skills modules.
- Offer structured networking support: reverse mentoring, alumni engagement, employer matching.
- Strengthen belonging and inclusion initiatives (peer mentoring, societies, accessible wellbeing spaces).

## For Students (16 - 30)

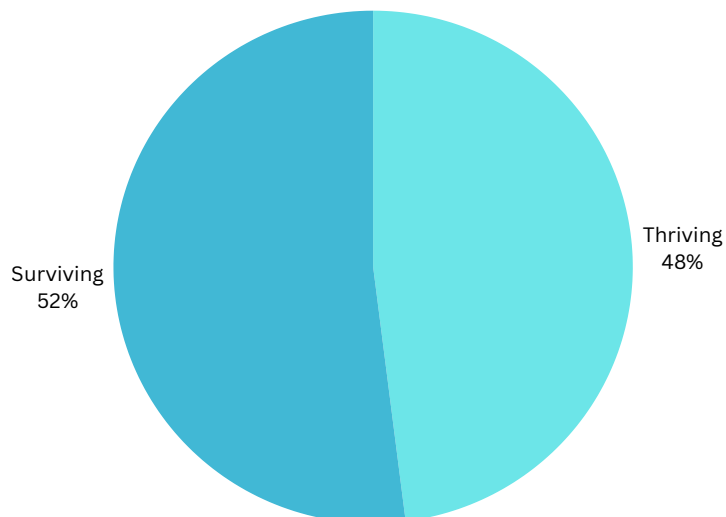
- **Experiment, don't panic:** each step teaches you what fits and what doesn't.
- **Reach out with purpose:** when networking, lead with what you can offer.
- **Start small with money:** automate savings, track spending, use student benefits smartly.
- **Protect your headspace:** unplug from comparison loops; focus on your "why."
- **Seek real connection:** invest in friendships that go beyond social media.
- **Progress beats perfection:** both good and difficult days are part of adulthood.

# Session Insights

## Current Wellbeing

Attendees were asked: Based on how you're feeling in this moment, are you currently 'thriving' or 'just about surviving'?

Interpretation: Half identify as coping rather than flourishing, reflecting a fragile balance between resilience and burnout.



## Biggest Worries

● Career / Study ● Finance  
● Health/Mental Health/Relationships



Attendees were asked: what is your current biggest worry when it comes to figuring out your life right now?

Insights:

- Uncertainty around direction and purpose.
- Financial insecurity as a stressor.
- Wellbeing intertwined with daily pressures.

# Session Insights

## Advice to Your Younger Self

Attendees and panellists were asked to share the one piece of advice they would give to their younger self.

## Answer Trends

- Self-compassion and kindness
- Authenticity and individuality
- Letting go of external validation
- Growth mindset and patience
- Pursuing passion and joy

## Sample Attendee Responses

"Strive for your own happiness, don't fit into other people's idea of happiness."

"I have always found this to be true: you will almost always regret not doing something, but you will almost never regret doing something. Put yourself outside of your comfort zone and find the joy in discomfort."

"Don't be too hard on yourself or others - everyone thrives on encouragement."

"Be kind to yourself - don't let others opinions about who you are and what you want to do limit you."

"Don't let the fear of disappointing others hold you back from doing what you actually want to do, not what others think you should do."

"Life is long, and there are so many days to live. There is TIME to work things out and find your own unique path. You are not in a rush."

"No one can be you better than yourself, you are special, you are worthy of good things. You've got this"

"Don't think of it as a final destination. It's a journey."



## Session Three: Navigating Life Online

Journalist Adele Zeynep Walton has channelled a personal loss into advocating for a safer digital world. She joins Charli Clement for a candid conversation on navigating life online. From endless scrolling to digital wellbeing, they'll unpack the highs and lows of social media, share experiences and insights and invite you to add your voice to the discussion on taking control of our digital lives.

### Headline Insights

Constant connectivity is taking a toll on young people's mental health, fuelling anxiety, loneliness and burnout. Profit-driven platforms and addictive design keep users hooked while eroding real connection and self-worth. Digital wellbeing isn't just a personal issue; it's a public health challenge. Rethinking how technology supports balance, community and care is essential to protecting a generation's mental wellbeing.

- **Digital and Physical Worlds Are Intertwined:** social, educational and professional experiences exist across both spaces.
- **Algorithms, Polarisation and Gendered Impact:** algorithmic targeting divides users and reinforces stereotypes; girls face body-image and self-harm content, while boys face misogynistic content.
- **The Mental Toll of Constant Connectivity:** average UK screen time is six hours; young people feel trapped between dependence and exhaustion.
- **Rediscovering Offline Community:** offline hobbies and third spaces support wellbeing.
- **AI, Therapy, and Emerging Risks:** growing use of AI for emotional support is dangerous.



# Session Three: Key Themes

## **The Digital and Physical Worlds Are Intertwined**

- Young people no longer live “online” and “offline” as separate realities.
- Friendships, careers, education and activism all operate across hybrid digital spaces.
- Any policy or wellbeing strategy that treats online and offline life as distinct will miss how students actually live.

## **The Cost of Profit-Driven Platforms**

- Current social media models are designed for profit not wellbeing.
- Addictive design features (infinite scroll, notifications, algorithmic loops) are linked to harm across a spectrum - from everyday loneliness and anxiety to catastrophic loss.
- Participants stressed that unregulated design, not individual weakness, drives much online harm.

## **Algorithms, Polarisation and Gendered Impact**

- Algorithms shape young people’s sense of self and worldview, curating echo chambers that can fuel division and extremism.
- Gen Z is now the most gender-polarised generation on feminism and equality, partly due to algorithmic targeting.
- Girls are shown more body image and self-harm content; boys are shown more misogynistic material.

## **Balancing Personal Responsibility and Platform Accountability**

- Individuals can make choices, e.g. muting, unfollowing, setting boundaries, but these actions alone cannot offset systemic design harms.
- Regulation and corporate responsibility are critical: tech must be treated like other industries where safety is non-negotiable.

# Session Three: Key Themes

## The Mental Toll of Constant Connectivity

- Average UK screen time is six hours per day; guilt and shame about this are widespread.
- Young people describe social media as both indispensable and exhausting.
- Mindful use—not moral panic—is key: grey-scale screens, notification control and “boredom literacy” were cited as useful habits.

## Rediscovering Offline Community

- Offline gatherings (crafts, walks, hobby clubs) rebuild “third spaces” outside school, home and work.
- Digital dependence for friendship and belonging can be replaced with intentional, joyful offline experiences.

## Misinformation, Speed and Responsibility

- Information spreads faster than reflection. Viral reward systems incentivise outrage over accuracy.
- Participants urged slower engagement, fact-checking and critical literacy before reposting.
- The stakes are high: misinformation can lead to real-world violence, harassment and harm.

## AI, Therapy and Emerging Risks

- AI tools (like ChatGPT) are increasingly being used for emotional support or “therapy.”
- Reliance on non-human systems poses serious mental health risks, highlighted by real cases where young people received harmful or fatal advice from AI systems.
- The root problem: digital scarcity of accessible, real-world mental health support.

## Hope, Regulation and the Role of Government

- Countries like Australia and the EU are exploring bans on “addictive design”.
- Real change depends on listening to people with lived experience and bereaved families.
- Tech policy must move from reactive censorship to proactive prevention.



# Key Challenges

## **Unregulated Addictive Design**

Platforms profit from engagement, not wellbeing.

## **Algorithmic Division**

Polarised content shaping attitudes, identity and body image.

## **Digital Overload**

Constant information flow causing burnout, distraction and self-blame.

## **Under-Regulation of AI**

Increasing emotional reliance on unsafe tools without oversight.

## **Limited Offline Alternatives**

Fewer third spaces for connection and creativity.

## **Tokenistic Policy Involvement**

Tech governance rarely includes people with lived experience.

## **Generational Despair**

Perception that harm is inevitable online reduces hope and action.



# Key Takeaways and Opportunities

## **For Policymakers:**

- Enact regulation on addictive design features and ensure algorithmic transparency.
- Embed online safety and digital wellbeing education within schools and universities.
- Fund offline community-building initiatives (e.g., youth hubs, creativity clubs).
- Require inclusion of lived experience voices in tech policy and platform regulation.
- Establish clear accountability for AI systems in mental health contexts.

## **For Universities, Colleges and Schools:**

- Integrate digital literacy and wellbeing modules into induction and wellbeing programmes.
- Support student-led offline community projects to rebuild real connection.
- Offer safe, moderated discussions on digital culture, misinformation and AI ethics.
- Model healthy boundaries: reduce always-online cultures in study and work.

## **For Students (16 - 30)**

- Remember: the issue is design, not discipline. Don't internalise guilt about screen time.
- Curate your feeds; mute, unfollow, or limit exposure to distressing content.
- Create boredom: allow space for hobbies, daydreaming and real-world rest.
- Use social media to connect, not compare.
- Seek balance: log off without cutting off connection. Community happens offline too.



# Cross-Session Themes and Recommendations

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Insight</b>	<b>Recommended Action</b>
Authenticity and Openness	Role models and reflections emphasise vulnerability and honesty	Promote peer storytelling and lived-experience workshops
Access and Inclusion	Desire for faster, more diverse mental health care	Advocate for culturally responsive and flexible services
Connection and Belonging	Peers are the main source of mental health support.	Invest in community and peer-led programmes
Life Transition and Anxiety	Career and finance are key stressors	Integrate wellbeing into employability and life skills education
Self-Compassion Culture	Young people value kindness and non-linear growth	Shift wellbeing campaigns towards self-worth over productivity



# Conclusion

The discussions reveal a generation that values openness, authenticity and inclusivity. Young people are eager to co-create solutions, learn practical skills and redefine success in compassionate and sustainable ways. These insights should inform future programme design, service development and policy advocacy for youth mental health.

## **Next Steps:**

### **Disseminate and Share Learning**

- Publish and share impact report across Cheltenham Festivals' and partner networks, schools, universities and mental health organisations

### **Develop Future VOICEBOX Sessions Based on Findings**

- Use report themes to shape 2026 VOICEBOX sessions related to mental health. Include deep-dives into specific issues.
- Pilot student-led workshops and/or spin-off events to extend impact

### **Continue Co-Creation**

- Continue co-creating with practitioners and lived experience experts to ensure events are led by young people, for young people

### **Build Partnerships and Policy Influence**

- Collaborate with Howden and others to share data and advocate for better youth mental health support.
- Explore policy engagement opportunities via local councils and mental health networks

### **Practical Tools and Resources**

- Develop a 'tool kit' - free digital materials based on report insights

### **Evaluation**

- Follow-up survey for all attendees, embed findings into 2026 activity

# Thank you



## Get in touch

Want to learn more or partner with VOICEBOX?

Contact us:  
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# HOWDEN



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Changing Lives through Culture

# VOICEBOX