

Let's talk health

Consultation insights report

September 2026

Healthy North Coast acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands across our region, and pay our respect to Elders past, present and on their journey. We recognise these lands were never ceded and acknowledge the continuation of culture and connection to the land, sky and sea. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Land's First Peoples and honour the rich diversity of the oldest living cultures.

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THANK YOU!

Healthy North Coast would like to thank all the young people and community stakeholders who participated in the *Let's talk health* consultation. By sharing your insights, experiences and perspectives, you have helped us better understand the health and wellbeing needs of young people across our region. Your contributions will play an important role in shaping future priorities and actions to support the health and wellbeing young people and their communities.

Executive summary

In August and September 2026, Healthy North Coast delivered *Let's Talk Health*, a region-wide consultation project to understand the health needs of young people living on the Mid North Coast and North Coast of NSW. Across 14 online and in-person workshops, 130 young people and 36 community stakeholders shared what was needed in the North Coast health system to support young people's health and wellbeing. In particular, workshop participants identified what is working well and what needs to improve across services that provide support in:

- Mental health and wellbeing
- Work and education support
- Physical and sexual health
- Alcohol and other drugs
- Social support.

Health and wellbeing are important to young people, now and into the future. When young people were asked if they thought about their health in the future, 96% responded yes. Top concerns were:

- Mental health and emotions
- Diet and nutrition
- Money
- Exercise
- Alcohol and drugs.

Strong messaging throughout all workshops was that young people are not just seeking more services. Rather, services need to be easier to access, affordable, available when needed, visible, youth-friendly and delivered in ways that make young people feel safe and respected. Young people have been very clear about what they value and want when accessing health and wellbeing services. They want to see more focus on prevention, education and building life skills, access to community and youth spaces and support that is available before needs get more complex.

Key themes from the workshops support these needs and suggest actions for Healthy North Coast and other organisations that support young people on the North Coast.

Young people experience difficult, delayed and uneven access to services. All workshops highlighted barriers that young people face when trying to access health and wellbeing services. Service systems are seen as difficult to navigate, expensive, fragmented and often unavailable when needed. Other barriers included long waitlists, high costs, limited transport options, inflexible service delivery, limited access to health specialists and a lack of local services.

Trust, confidentiality, transparency and respect are enablers of engagement. Young people consistently described the importance of feeling safe and respected. They want to feel confident that their information will be handled appropriately when accessing services. Community stakeholders also emphasised the importance of trust-building, transparency and choice when it comes to health services for young people.

Schools, universities and community spaces were identified as gateways for support. A common theme throughout all workshops is that support should be embedded within places that young people already access. In particular, schools were identified as useful locations for promoting, delivering and connecting young people to support.

Choice, autonomy and control are important for young people accessing support. Many young people wanted greater autonomy in health decisions and support pathways. They want to be involved in decisions about their care, disclosure of information and family participation.

Stigma, judgement and fear prevent early help seeking. Many young people discussed the experiences of stigma, embarrassment and fear of judgement when accessing services. These concerns affected young people's willingness to access support, particularly for mental health, alcohol and other drug use, sexual health and help-seeking more generally.

Gaps in navigation, awareness and health literacy affect young people's access to services. Young people frequently reported not knowing what services exist, what support they provide or how to access them. Community stakeholders similarly identified service navigation as fragmented and confusing.

Young people described a need for services that are youth friendly and person centred. Experiences of staff and service quality varied across headspace centres. Some young people described headspace as helpful, welcoming and supportive, while others reported feeling judged, misunderstood, or said that services were not trauma informed. The environment, staff behaviour and relationship-building were recurring themes.

Young people described wanting to learn life skills and prepare for the future. Both young people and community stakeholders highlighted the importance of addressing issues before they escalate. There was strong support for more information about practical life skills, mental health literacy, alcohol and other drug education, healthy relationships, employment preparation and transition support.

Young people described wanting access to safe places in their community and opportunities to participate in free, fun activities. Many young people shared that they want to be able to access free and fun activities in their local communities. They also highlighted the importance of having safe, comfortable and welcoming spaces where they could be themselves.

The following recommendations present proposed actions to respond to the needs of young people to provide more effective and equitable health and wellbeing services.

1. **Improve early access to affordable and timely support**
2. **Strengthen youth-friendly service navigation**
3. **Embed trust, confidentiality and consent as core service practices**
4. **Increase flexible, place-based and outreach service models**
5. **Strengthen youth-friendly and person-centred practice across services**
6. **Support flexible approaches to family, carer, partner and friend involvement**
7. **Address stigma and fear of judgement in help-seeking**
8. **Expand practical life skills, prevention and health literacy supports**
9. **Strengthen integrated referral pathways and warm handovers**
10. **Use place-based insights to inform local service planning**

Findings from the *Let's Talk Health* region-wide consultation will inform current and future health and wellbeing services on the North Coast. Healthy North Coast will report back to young people and community stakeholders on what it heard and how the findings will be used.

Background

In August and September 2026, Healthy North Coast delivered a region-wide consultation project to understand the health needs of young people living on the Mid North Coast and North Coast of NSW. The insights identified what is working well and what needs to improve across services that offer support in:

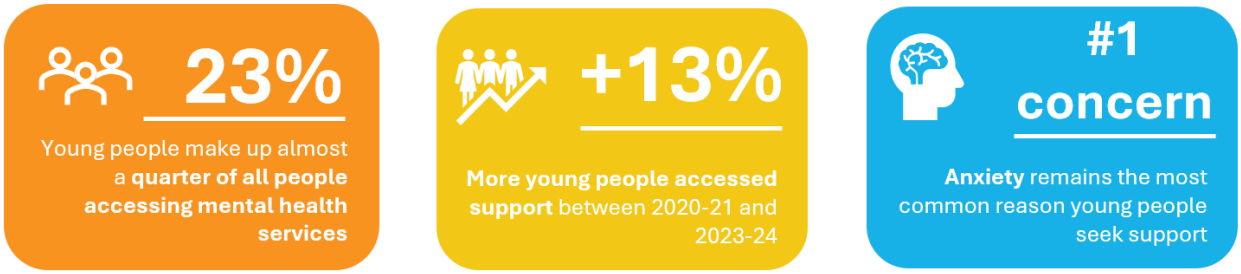
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Work and education support
- Physical and sexual health
- Alcohol and other drugs
- Social support.

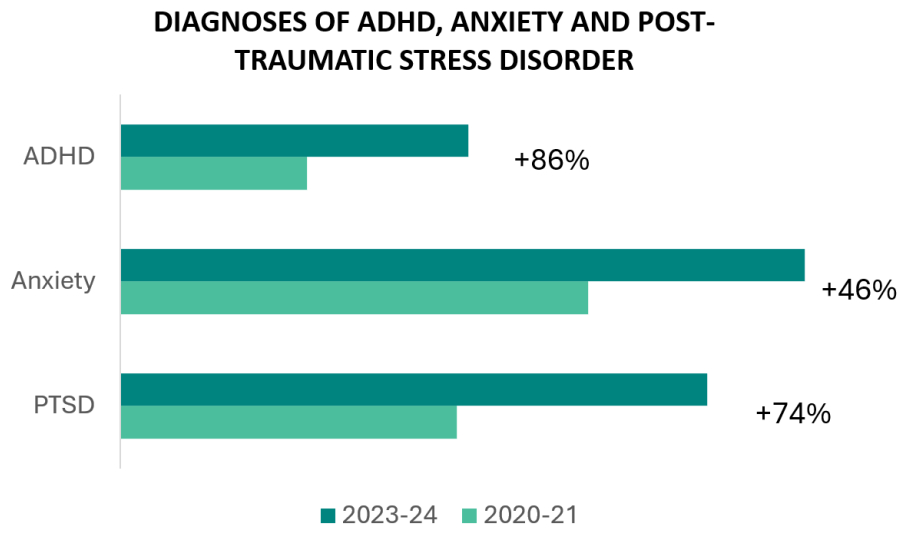
As part of our core operating requirements, Healthy North Coast looks at the health needs of people across the North Coast to understand what our community needs to receive the right care, in the right place and at the right time. This involves looking at:

- Local, state and national health data
- Reviewing and evaluating services and gaps
- Talking to local communities.

Across the North Coast, young people aged 0–24 make up about 26% of the region's population. However, in the most recent Comprehensive Health Needs Assessment (2025-2028), only 7% of responses were from young people aged 18-30 who shared what services they use and what their communities need. This result showed that Healthy North Coast needed to hear directly from young people about what they need to support their health, now and into the future.

To support these conversations, local and regional data were examined to understand which services young people were accessing. In 2023-24, 1,520 young people aged 0-24 accessed a mental health service commissioned by Healthy North Coast. This group represented almost a quarter of all people accessing commissioned mental health services. The main reasons for seeking help were anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These have all increased since 2020-2021.





However, most services accessed by young people are not specific to children and young people. Consultation participants said that young people are increasingly seeking support from services that are not always designed for them. Available 2023-24 service data reflect this finding:

- 17% of all treatment episodes were classified as child and youth services
- 83% were delivered through broader mental health programs

In addition, young people on the North Coast experience higher rates of distress than the NSW average. Between 2015 and 2025, mental health related emergency department presentations among young people aged 12–17 were consistently higher on the North Coast than the NSW average. Presentations involving self-harm and suicidal ideation made up the largest proportion of emergency department presentations for this age group. Among young adults aged 18–24, presentations involving self-harm and suicidal ideation were higher in the Mid North Coast Local Health District.

The data indicates that:

- Mental health support is an important area of need for young people
- Anxiety, trauma and neurodivergent support needs were prominent among reasons for seeking help
- Young people are not always accessing services designed for them
- Participants and service data suggest that access may be more challenging in regional communities and for specialist care
- Further work may be needed to understand what prevents young people from getting the right help early.

The *Let's Talk Health* consultation series was held across the North Coast to better understand what young people need to be well, now and into the future. Information collected through the consultations will inform current and future service design and commissioning.

Consultation purpose and outcomes

The *Let's Talk Health* consultation engaged young people, families, carers, service providers and community stakeholders to gather insights and inform the current future commissioning of services for young people across the North Coast. Young people were actively involved in planning, designing, facilitating and analysing the consultation notes. This approach embedded lived experience throughout the process.

The consultation outcomes included:

- Meaningful engagement of young people in co-design and co-planning
- Youth, community, and stakeholder perspectives informing service development and service uplift
- Improved understanding of how the headspace Model of Care is experienced across the region
- Identification of opportunities to strengthen accessibility, integration, and responsiveness of commissioned services.
- Evidence-informed insights to support future commissioning and service uplift

Consultation approach and methods

A mixed-modality consultation approach was undertaken to support equitable participation and capture the perspectives of young people and community stakeholders across the North Coast. Consultation activities were delivered both in-person and online, recognising the geographic diversity of the region and providing different ways for people to participate.

The consultation sought input from three key groups:

- Young people (12-25)
- Parents and Carers
- Service providers and community stakeholders

Young people from across the North Coast participated in *Let's Talk Health*, providing insights into a range of health and wellbeing needs and experiences across the region. A detailed overview of the demographics of participating young people is provided in Appendix 1.

A total of 130 young people participated in seven in-person and two online workshops. The in-person workshops were held in Coffs Harbour, Grafton, Port Macquarie, Lismore, Ballina and Tweed Heads. A workshop was made available in Kempsey, however, no young people attended.

Community stakeholders participated in three workshops: one online and two in person, held in Coffs Harbour on the Mid North Coast and Ballina in Northern NSW. In total, 36 community stakeholders attended. Two online sessions were offered for parents and carers; however, no registrants were able to attend. An online survey was also available for people who could not attend a workshop, giving parents and carers a more flexible way to participate.

The workshops sought to explore interconnecting elements of health and wellbeing and the services that offer support in:

- Mental health and wellbeing
- Work and education support
- Physical and sexual health
- Alcohol and other drugs
- Social support.

Workshop discussions explored participants' experiences of accessing services and what they needed in their communities. Key areas included:

- Getting in the door
- Awareness and engagement (community stakeholder only)
- Feeling safe
- Our supports
- Working together (community stakeholder only)

- The right kind of help
- Supporting early intervention (community stakeholder only)
- What is working
- What is missing

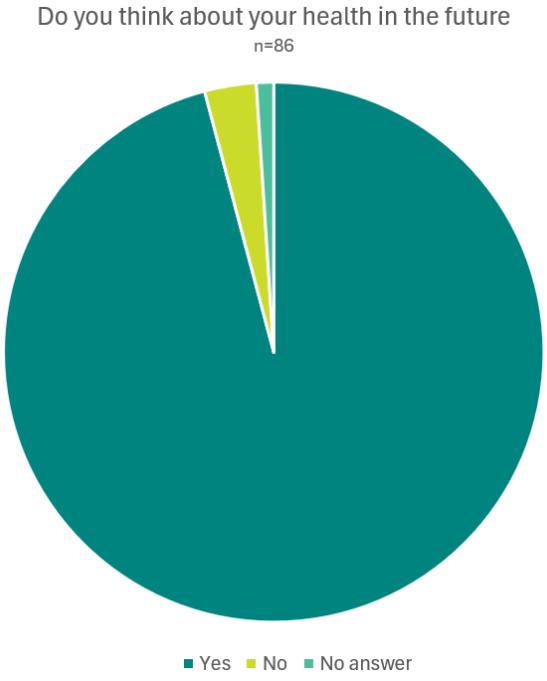
Slido, an online survey tool, was used during the in-person youth workshops to enable young people to contribute anonymously and provide another way to share their experiences and perspectives. To recognise young people's experience and expertise, and in line with Healthy North Coast's Stakeholder remuneration procedure, all young people were reimbursed for participating in the workshops.

Following the workshops, three Healthy North Coast staff members and one young person completed a comprehensive thematic analysis of the consultation notes. Involving several reviewers brought different perspectives to the analysis and supported the identification of recurring themes across participant groups and locations. The following section presents the findings.

Consultation insights

Health and wellbeing are important to young people, now and into the future. When asked whether they thought about their health in the future, 96% of young people responded yes. The top identified concerns were:

1. Mental health and emotions
2. Diet and nutrition
3. Money
4. Exercise
5. Alcohol and drugs



A comprehensive list of health concerns is provided in Appendix 2.

When young people were asked what they would change about health and wellbeing services in their region, the top responses were:

- Easier access to health and wellbeing services
- Cost is a significant barrier—young people want more affordable or free services
- Increased availability of services, workers or supports when needed
- More education and information about services so they can understand what support exists, where to find it and how to access.
- Mental health support across a range of needs, including counselling, grief support, suicide and stress management
- Young people are strongly interested in practical, age-appropriate information that helps them understand health risks and make informed choices. This includes information about sexual health, consent, contraception, alcohol and other drugs, vaping, body image, healthy relationships, recognising abuse and practical life skills.

I would like to see help and support easier access to services for youth with school, work and extra curricular and how to manage the stress along side gambling, drug and alcohol, sexual, mental and physical health. – Young Person, Coffs Harbour

Across all responses, young people were clear that access involves more than if a service exists. They also need to be able to reach the service, understand how to use it, trust the people providing it and feel comfortable seeking support. Flexibility, respect, privacy, confidentiality and choice consistently emerged as qualities that young people value when accessing health and wellbeing services.

These insights demonstrate that young people are looking for accessible and affordable services alongside earlier support, practical information and positive service experiences that offer them choice and make them feel safe, respected and understood.

The following sections explore these findings in detail across the workshop discussion areas, core areas of health and locations.

Workshop discussion areas

Each workshop was structured around six (youth workshops) or eight (community stakeholder workshops) core discussion areas. These areas invited participants to share insights, experiences and ideas on the needs and service requirements to support the health and wellbeing of young people. The questions varied depending on the stakeholder group to ensure they were appropriate and relevant.

Getting in the door

All workshops explored what helps young people access services, where and when they would like to access them, and what makes access difficult. Young people described a range of barriers to accessing health and wellbeing services when they need them. These included service costs, stigma and judgement about help-seeking, long waitlists and unclear service pathways.

Somewhere easy to reach and affordable – Young person, Online workshop

Long wait times make it difficult to get support when we need it – Young Person, Port Macquarie

A lack of flexibility often discouraged young people from accessing support. Young people identified opening hours and service locations as key issues. They asked for longer opening hours that fit around school, study and work, and for services in places they already visit. Suggested options included after-school, early-morning and weekend appointments. Young people also wanted a choice of service delivery—online, in person or by phone—because different options suit different people and circumstances.

"*Where young people are already hanging out*" – Young Person, Ballina

Service providers and community stakeholders described how the complexity of the service system created further barriers for young people accessing services. Solutions discussed included integrated referral pathways, enhancing awareness of services with care navigation and supported access.

Awareness and engagement (community stakeholder only)

The three community stakeholder sessions explored how aware young people and their families were of services available in their region. Participants said that young people need clearer, more visible and easier-to-navigate pathways to information and support. Although perspectives varied, participants consistently identified gaps in health literacy and service navigation among young people and their families across the North Coast.

"Lots being put out there but can be diluted because there is too much information – Community Stakeholder

Awareness was viewed as relational and service providers described the importance of word of mouth and promoting service information through networks that young people already know and trust. Participants suggested having a central place to find out information about available services. In addition, dedicated outreach and service navigation roles, supported by reliable funding, were seen as important to help young people connect with the right support.

Feeling Safe

Across all workshops, young people were clear on what makes services feel welcoming and safe.
The environment, staff behaviour and relationship-building were recurring themes. These included:

- Comfortable and inclusive physical spaces
    - Warm lighting, clean, comfortable furniture and things to do while you are waiting (fidgets etc).
    - They asked for non-clinical, casual service environments that are easy to access for all people (ramps etc).
    - They want to see colour and artwork on the walls. Spaces should be inviting and sensory friendly.
    - To see themselves represented in the space both in symbols (Aboriginal flags, LGBTIQ Welcome here sign) and staff (Aboriginal staff, LGBTIQ staff, staff with disabilities and young workers).
- Staff should be friendly, welcoming and non-judgemental
    - Many young people identified staff as key enablers of access to health services. From walking in the door and receiving a friendly welcome from reception staff to ongoing service delivery, young people want to feel valued and respected.
    - Staff need to be upfront with young people about what information needs to be shared and why. Informed consent, privacy and trust are important factors in helping young people feel safe when accessing services.
    - Informed consent should be maintained throughout a client's journey. Staff should continue to check that young people understand what information needs to be shared and why.

"*Ask for consent upfront, check understanding, explain the benefits of sharing info, what stays between us and other parties involved*." – Young Person, Grafton

Service providers and community stakeholders highlighted the importance of inclusive, youth-led design and supported pathways as key elements of safe and inclusive services. Trauma-informed care, together with family, peer, and social and emotional wellbeing support, was also seen as strengthening safety. Giving young people a choice about where and how they receive support was considered another way to make services safer.

"Young people need choice regarding where they meet with workers." – Community Stakeholder

Our supports

Many young people wanted greater autonomy in health decisions and support pathways. They want to be involved in decisions about their care, disclosure of information and family participation. Young people expressed different views and preferences about involving parents, family members, partners and friends in their care. For some, friends, family and trusted adults play a key support role, and involving them enables a shared understanding of what the young person is experiencing. For others, independence, privacy,

confidentiality and choice are important to their sense of autonomy and safety. Services should be responsive to each young person's needs and use identity-affirming, plain-language and non-judgemental communication when involving others in their care.

"*My friends and family can support me by listening to by concerns, helping me understand my healthcare options, attending appointments with me if I choose and encouraging me to make informed decisions that are right for me*" – Young Person, Online

Stakeholders highlighted that flexible, youth centred approaches work best when supporting young people. Giving young people choices can build trust and strengthen engagement with support. Early intervention, outreach and responsive peer-led models were also seen as ways to build trust and make the most of the first contact.

Working together (community stakeholder only)

Community stakeholders highlighted the importance of services working together to provide coordinated and consistent support for young people. A single point of entry, clear referral pathways, navigation support and warm handovers were suggested to make it easier for young people to access supports and reduce the need to retell their story. While collaboration is occurring, it is inconsistent throughout the region and often occurs 'by chance'. Clearer structures, regular and strategic interagency coordination and shared ways of working were seen as important for improving collaboration and providing more consistent and integrated services for young people.

The right kind of help

When asked what help young people need most in their community, participants frequently called for practical, flexible and holistic support that goes beyond clinical services. Young people want face-to-face and peer-based support, as well as free and fun activities that feel relevant and are easy to join.

"*Stuff to do that isn't drugs/alcohol – live music, safe spaces for young people*" – Young person, Lismore

"*Getting outside and being active* "– Young person, online

Young people frequently said they want to learn life skills and receive practical information and help with mental health, alcohol and other drugs, housing, employment, education and preparing for the future. Examples included cooking, budgeting, driving, study skills, career guidance and stress management.

"*Support with addictions i.e. gambling, drugs & alcohol, sexual & mental health help", education about mental health, support in school, life skills*" – Young Person, Coffs Harbour

Supporting early intervention (community stakeholder only)

Early intervention and prevention are critical to support young people before their needs become more complex. Schools and families were identified as important partners in recognising concerns and connecting young people with support. However, participants noted that schools do not always have the capacity or resources to provide early intervention or help young people navigate services, while other barriers can also make it difficult to engage parents and families.

Participants also identified gaps in services for children under 12 years of age and emphasised the importance of introducing age-appropriate conversations about mental health, drugs and alcohol and sexual health

earlier. Strengthening prevention, education and pathways to support could help young people build knowledge and skills, recognise when they need help and access services before concerns escalate.

What is working

Where they were available in the community, young people highlighted the benefits of free, flexible and youth-centred services that made them feel heard and supported. They valued more open and frequent conversations about health and mental health. School-based support, mental health services such as headspace, free activities and community-based programs were identified as working well. Peer support, informal community settings and opportunities to engage through schools and existing activities were seen as important ways to make support more approachable.

The services that stand out are those where staff genuinely listen, show empathy and make us feel supported throughout our journey—not just during one appointment. – Young Person, Port Macquarie

What is not working

Young people identified gaps in accessible, affordable and inclusive support that responds to their different needs and circumstances. Key challenges included:

- Long wait times
- Limited specialist services
- Cost of services
- Lack of transport and cost of travel
- Lack of appropriate services in their community

Young people frequently asked for more safe and inclusive spaces, dedicated supports for LGBTIQ young people, life skills education, education on diet and nutrition, financial education, employment advice and opportunities, sexual health and women's health and the transition into adulthood. Moreover, young people emphasised the importance of being listened to, taken seriously, treated with respect and dignity and being involved in decisions about their care. Young people want to have access to holistic support that recognises their broader needs.

Safe and free spaces & activities for in between age – where welcomed and not judged, not have to talk to someone, just hang out – Young Person, Lismore

Service providers and community members identified workforce shortages, service gaps and fragmented referral pathways as key barriers to providing timely and coordinated supports for young people. Gaps were identified between demand and available services for:

- alcohol and other drug services,
- eating disorder support,
- young people whose needs fall within the 'missing middle'[1],
- supports for young people experiencing neurodivergence,
- young people with complex needs

Additional barriers identified included limited family support, access to transport, outreach and affordable supports. Inconsistent funding, complex referrals and service capacity limits were seen as contributing to gaps

[1] The 'missing middle' are young people whose needs may be too complex for low-intensity support, but do not meet the criteria for specialist services.

in continuity and coordination of care. A need for clearer referral pathways, warm handovers, flexible outreach and stronger navigation supports was identified to help young people access and move between services.

Core areas of health

Using the headspace model as a guide, core areas of health were explored to extract and understand the specific service gaps for young people.

Mental health

Across all workshops, young people highlighted the need for mental health support that is easy to reach, low cost, youth friendly, built on trust and responds to a wide range of needs. Young people expressed that they want to access services that are non-judgemental, explained clearly and delivered by people who listen, follow up and understand youth experiences.

Stigma, fear of judgement, long wait times and a lack of appropriate services were seen as barriers to seeking help. This concern was also raised for young people with complex needs, particularly when they were not eligible for more intensive support. Service providers likewise described gaps for young people who experience complex needs, neurodivergence, post-hospital needs or co-occurring concerns.

Overall, young people want to be listened to, taken seriously and given greater choice about how, where and from whom they receive support. They want options that include face-to-face, online, phone and community-based services. Participants called for mental health support to be normalised, youth friendly, built on trust and more holistic, with more opportunities to engage with youth peer workers.

Earlier intervention, peer and community connection, continuity of care and more holistic support were seen as important for normalising help-seeking and ensuring young people can access the right support when they need it.

Physical and sexual health

Young people highlighted the need for affordable, accessible and youth-friendly physical and sexual health care that is built on trust and respect. They raised both service access gaps and the need for credible, age-appropriate education about physical and sexual health. Cost, long wait times, travel and limited access to GPs, specialists and oral health services were identified as key barriers to getting support.

Young people asked for health professionals who listen, provide non-judgemental and inclusive care, respect privacy and consent, and involve young people in decisions about their health. They also called for earlier and more practical health education, including information about sexual health, contraception, body image and healthy lifestyles. Greater access to specialist, outreach and affordable services was seen as important for ensuring young people can get the information and care they need, when they need it.

Alcohol and other drugs

Concerns about access to, use of and support for alcohol and other drugs (AOD) were raised repeatedly. Participants frequently called for earlier, practical and age-appropriate AOD education and support that is non-judgemental and focused on reducing harm.

Young people want clearer information and education about alcohol, drugs and vaping, with conversations starting earlier and taking place at school or in other places young people already visit. They also identified a need for more youth-specific and anonymous AOD support options, including peer-based services and help for

young people experiencing addiction. Options could include 12-step programs or groups for young people and peer workers to reduce stigma and barriers to access, and to support harm minimisation.

Safe conversations, accessible services and positive community activities were seen as important for reducing stigma, supporting informed choices and helping young people access AOD support when they need it.

Work and study

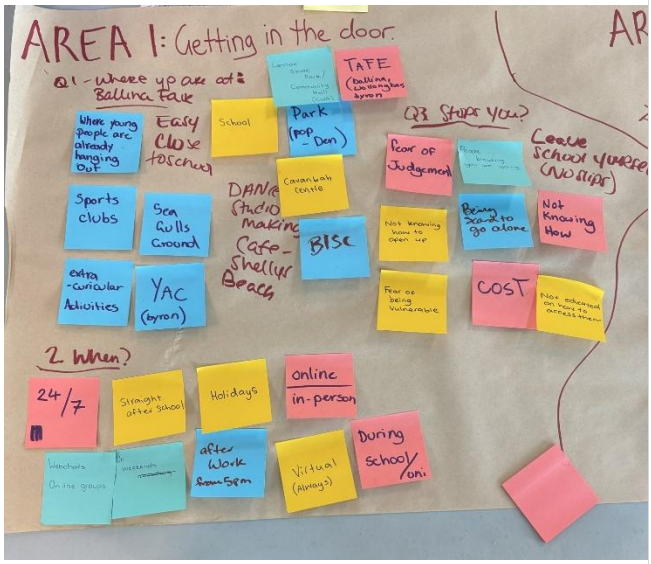
Participants frequently raised concerns about the effects of school pressure, study loads, insecure employment and career uncertainty on health and wellbeing. Young people also highlighted the need for practical support to prepare for work, study and independent adult life.

Young people wanted clearer information about education, training and employment pathways, including careers counselling, apprenticeships and opportunities to gain real-world experience. Young people also identified a need for practical life skills, such as budgeting, diet and nutrition, navigating services and managing the transition to young adulthood, particularly in the context of cost-of-living pressures. Schools, TAFEs, workplaces and community settings were seen as important places to provide flexible support that connects education and employment with broader health and wellbeing needs. Young people often shared that due to the current social and economic climate, they want help to feel more prepared for their future.

Location snapshot

Ballina

Young people in Ballina highlighted the need for flexible, safe, affordable and youth-friendly support that is easy to access in places where young people already spend time. Cost, long wait times, transport, fear of judgement and concerns about privacy were identified as barriers to seeking help.

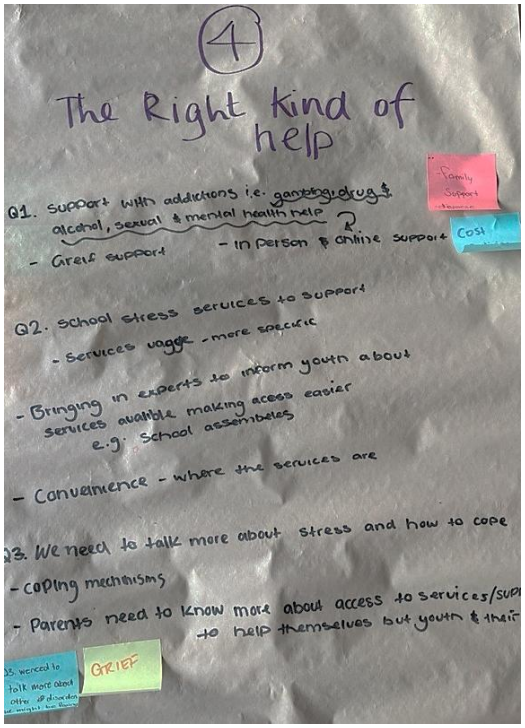


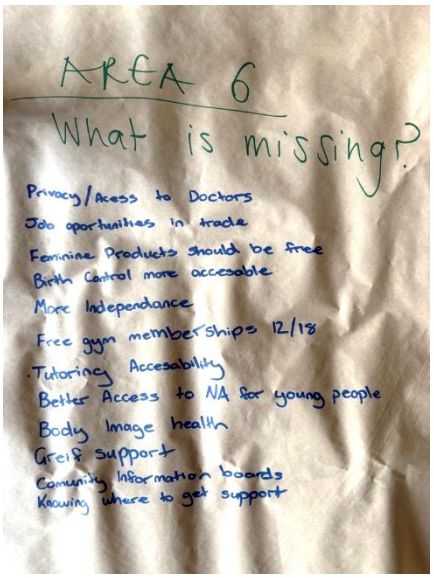
Some young people will not want to talk about their feeling straight up. But other activities can help to open up – Young person, Ballina

Support should be embedded in schools, recreation spaces, shopping centres, community venues and informal youth gathering spaces. Services in Ballina should aim to reduce stigma and practical barriers by being discreet, welcoming and designed with young people, and by offering support such as food, transport and face-to-face options.

Ballina young people value non-judgemental workers, practical and activity-based support, and having choice and consent around family involvement and information sharing. More visible, flexible and accessible local services, alongside stronger support for mental health, alcohol and other drugs, vaping and body image, were seen

	as important for helping young people seek support earlier and feel comfortable accessing care. Overall, services in Ballina should: 1. **Offer accessible and flexible support** Young people want low-cost services with shorter wait times, flexible hours (before or after school, during school, after 5 pm, on weekends and during school holidays) and a choice of face-to-face, online and community-based support. 2. **Provide safe, trusted and youth-friendly services** Privacy, consent, trust and non-judgemental support were seen as important. Young people want welcoming services where they feel comfortable accessing help and have greater choice in their care. 3. **Support where young people are** Young people valued support located in schools, recreation spaces and community settings they already use. Visible, place-based and activity-focused approaches could reduce practical barriers and make it easier to seek support. These approaches could include age appropriate play therapy, adventure therapy or support through sports clubs.
Coffs Harbour	Young people in Coffs Harbour highlighted the need for trusted, accessible and flexible support that provides connection and continuity of care. Young people valued safe spaces, peer support and workers who listen, build trust and provide ongoing follow-up, rather than support ending after a single contact. Privacy, confidentiality and having greater choice in accessing services were also important, alongside clearer pathways to help young people find the right support.

	Gaps were identified in accessing specialist mental health and alcohol and other drug services, particularly for young people with more complex needs and those living outside larger centres. Young people also want education and earlier support through schools and community settings about life skills, sexual health and AOD harm-minimisation information, to help young people make informed choices and seek help earlier. *Education of the reasons why you shouldn't do certain things, not just that you shouldn't* – Young Person, Coffs Harbour  Overall, services in Coffs Harbour should: 1. **Build trust, connection and continuity** Young people valued safe spaces, peer connections and trusted workers who listen and provide ongoing support. Consistent follow-up and feeling connected beyond a single appointment were important aspects of care. 2. **Provide clearer and more accessible pathways to support** Young people wanted greater choice, privacy and easier ways to navigate services, including clearer entry points and support to access specialist care. Regional access, service availability and gaps for young people with more complex needs were key concerns. 3. **Have earlier conversations and provide practical information and support** Young people want education and prevention support delivered through schools and community settings, about life skills, sexual health, alcohol and other drug harm minimisation, and health information from trusted sources.
Grafton	Young people in Grafton highlighted the need for timely, accessible and youth-friendly supports that are available locally and respond to holistic social, health and wellbeing needs. Barriers such as cost, transport and limited access to GPs and specialists were identified, alongside the need for stronger mental health, alcohol and other drug, vaping and gambling supports.



Grafton young people want local youth hubs, school and community-based services, and greater choice in how support is accessed, including immediate online options alongside face-to-face care that helps build trusted relationships.

Building connections through fun first makes you more likely to get involved or go see them afterwards – Young Person, Grafton

Grafton young people value privacy, informed consent, peer and youth-led approaches, culturally safe services and welcoming spaces where young people can connect. Earlier intervention, practical life skills, safe activities and support with basic needs such as food and transport were seen as important for strengthening wellbeing and helping young people access support earlier.

Overall, services in Grafton should:

1. **Be timely, local and accessible**

Local youth hubs, school and community access points, affordable services and a mix of face-to-face and online options were seen as important.

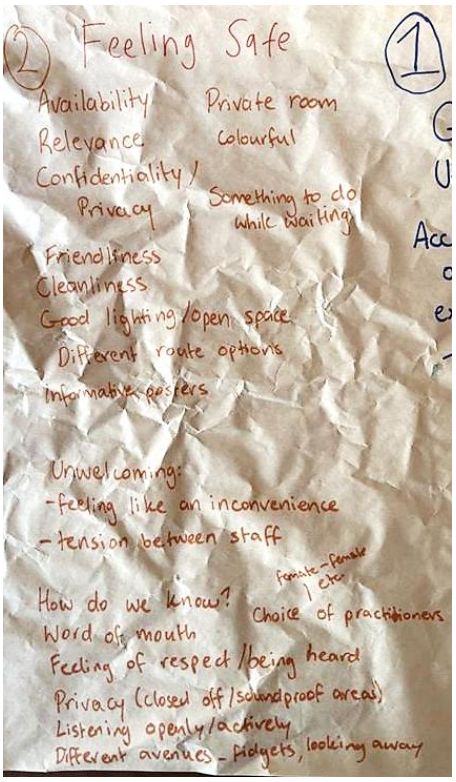
2. **Provide safe, trusted and youth-led supports**

Young people valued privacy, clear consent, peer workers, youth-led programs and friendly workers who can build trusted relationships. Safe and welcoming spaces for social and cultural connection were also identified as important.

3. **Focus on early intervention and practical supports**

Young people wanted earlier support for mental health, alcohol and other drugs and vaping, alongside practical life skills and positive activities. This includes awareness of what health supports are available, gambling support and more available mentor support. Addressing barriers such as food, transport and affordability was also seen as an important part of supporting wellbeing.

Port Macquarie



Young people in Port Macquarie highlighted the need for affordable, timely and easy-to-access services that fit around their lives. This includes services outside usual office hours—for example, early mornings, after 5 pm or on weekends. Cost, long wait times, transport difficulties, stigma and limited awareness of available services were identified as key barriers to getting support.

Not sure which services to access due to lack of knowledge – Young Person, Port Macquarie

Young people wanted more flexible ways to access care. This includes services that do not always require a GP referral, local or supported access to specialist services, outreach services, after-hours options, and a choice of face-to-face, online and phone supports.

Port Macquarie young people also valued welcoming, youth-friendly services that provide privacy, consistency, follow-up and peer support. Earlier support through schools, alongside practical life skills, transition support and AOD harm-minimisation education, was seen as important for supporting young people's health and wellbeing as they move into adulthood.

Overall, services in Port Macquarie should:

1. **Provide affordable and timely access**

Young people identified cost, long wait times and transport as significant barriers. Affordable services, alternative referral pathways and outreach or travelling services were seen as ways to make support easier to access.

2. **Offer flexible, youth-friendly and consistent care**

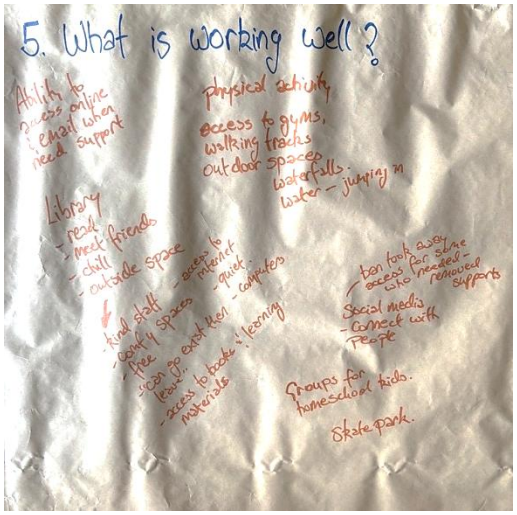
Young people wanted greater choice in how support is accessed, including face-to-face, online, phone and after-hours options. Privacy, welcoming environments, continuity of care and reliable follow-up were also important.

3. **Focus on early intervention and practical supports**

Young people valued school-based support and earlier education about mental health and alcohol and other drugs. Participants also wanted practical support with life skills and the transition from education into work and independent adult life.

Lismore

Young people in Lismore highlighted the need for inclusive, flexible and specialised support that can respond to complex and overlapping needs. Barriers to accessing care included cost, transport, long wait times and difficulty navigating services.



Lismore young people also identified gaps in specialist mental health, alcohol and other drug, neurodiversity and gender-affirming support.

Trust takes time and relationships take time to build – Young Person, Lismore

Lismore young people want services that are genuinely inclusive, non-judgemental and trauma-informed, with greater privacy, choice and independence in how they access support. Participants called for drop-in, school-based and outreach services, and for support that recognises the ongoing impacts of local experiences such as floods and housing instability. More coordinated, place-based services, clearer pathways and greater specialist capacity were seen as important to prevent young people—particularly those with complex needs—from falling through gaps in the service system.

Overall, services in Lismore should:

1. **Focus on providing inclusive and specialised supports**

Young people wanted services that respond to diverse and complex needs, including neurodiversity, gender-affirming care, co-occurring mental health and alcohol and other drug needs, and complex physical health concerns. Genuine inclusion, respect and non-judgemental care were particularly important.

2. **Support flexible and equitable access**

Cost, transport, wait times and service eligibility were identified as barriers to care. Young people wanted more flexible options, including drop-in, outreach and school-based support, alongside affordable services and greater access to specialists.

3. **Provide coordinated support for complex needs.**

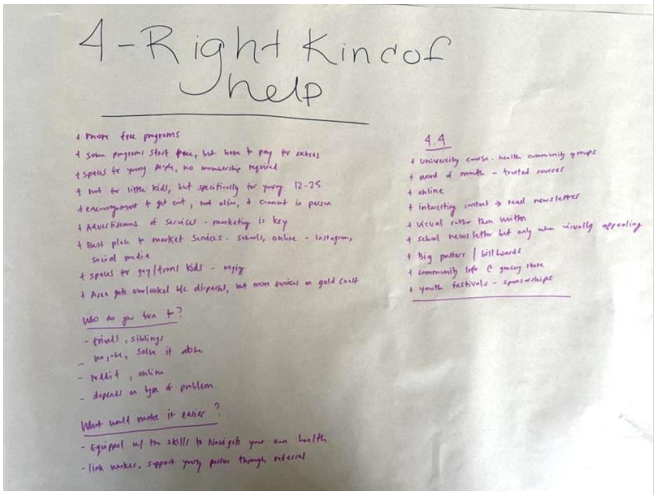
Young people described challenges navigating multiple services and gaps for those whose needs do not fit existing service criteria. Better coordination, continuity of care and clearer pathways were seen as important, particularly for young people experiencing overlapping health, social and housing challenges.

Tweed Heads

Young people in Tweed Heads highlighted the need for flexible, accessible and inclusive support built on trust, respect and genuine listening. Participants want to access free, youth-specific services available through schools, community settings and places young people already spend time, with options for after-hours and ongoing support.

Activities, not necessarily about health but connect kids, fun things to do for FREE – Young Person, Tweed Heads

Young people identified not feeling heard or taken seriously by professionals as a barrier to engagement. They emphasised the importance of health practitioners trained to work with young people, who build relationships, respect consent and give young people choice and control, including over the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and how personal information is recorded and shared.



Participants also highlighted the need for stronger LGBTIQ inclusion, peer support, family education and opportunities for social connection. Building trust, improving accessibility and providing safe, inclusive spaces were seen as central to helping young people feel comfortable engaging with services.

Overall, services in Tweed should:

1. **Build trust with young people so they feel respected and heard**

Young people want health professionals who listen, take their concerns seriously and build trust and rapport. Clear informed consent processes, transparency and greater control over their care and information are also important.

2. **Provide flexible and accessible local support**

Young people wanted free and easily accessible support available through schools and community spaces, with flexible options such as after-hours services. Digital access was valued, but limited internet connectivity means online services should not be the only option.

3. **Focus on developing inclusive spaces and connection, while prioritising choice**

Young people highlighted the importance of LGBTIQ inclusive and youth-specific spaces, peer support and social connection. Participants wanted services that respect individual needs and choices.

Recommendations

The following recommendations respond to the workshop consultation findings across young people, service providers and community stakeholders. They are intended to guide service improvement, commissioning, partnership development and future co-design activity across the North Coast.

1. **Improve early access to affordable and timely support.** Strengthen low-cost and no-cost early intervention options for young people, with a focus on reducing wait times and improving access to mental health, alcohol and other drugs, physical and sexual health, social and wellbeing supports. This should include practical access supports such as transport assistance, outreach options and clearer pathways for young people living outside larger centres.

2. **Strengthen youth-friendly service navigation.** Develop clearer, more visible pathways that help young people understand what services are available, who they are for, how to access them and what to expect. Information should be available in youth-friendly formats through schools, TAFEs, universities, libraries, community hubs, online platforms and trusted community networks.

3. **Embed trust, confidentiality and consent as core service practices.** Support services to clearly explain confidentiality, consent, information sharing, mandatory reporting and family or carer involvement. Young people should be supported to understand what can remain private, what may need to be shared and how their preferences will be considered wherever safe and appropriate. Informed consent needs to be maintained throughout a client's journey. This involves a clinician letting a young person know what has been or will be shared with parents or guardians. Where possible, young people should have the choice of who is involved in their care.

4. **Increase flexible, place-based and outreach service models.** Expand service delivery in familiar, accessible settings where young people already spend time, including schools, universities, TAFEs, youth centres, libraries, community spaces, sporting settings and outreach locations. Services should consider flexible hours, including outside business hours, on weekends and during school hours, as well as multiple contact options, including face-to-face, phone and online support, to fit around study, work, family and caring responsibilities.

5. **Strengthen youth-friendly and person-centred practice across services.** Review commissioned services against youth-friendly principles, including welcoming environments, inclusive and accessible spaces, non-judgemental staff, trauma-informed practice, continuity of care and follow-up after service contact. Reception and frontline staff should be included in youth-friendly practice development because they are often the first point of contact.

6. **Support flexible approaches to family, carer, partner and friend involvement.** Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches and be guided by the young person's age, consent, safety, support needs and preferences. Some young people value family, friends or trusted adults being involved, while others need greater independence, privacy and control over who participates in their care.

7. **Address stigma and fear of judgement.** Invest in youth-led, peer worker or co-designed activities that normalise help-seeking and reduce stigma around mental health, alcohol and other drug use, sexual

health, neurodivergence, body image and broader wellbeing concerns. Services should provide respectful, affirming and non-judgemental responses that help young people feel safe to seek support early.

8. **Expand practical life skills, prevention and health literacy supports.** Develop programs that respond to young people's interest in mental health literacy, alcohol and other drug harm minimisation, vaping, sexual health, healthy relationships, body image, financial literacy, employment, education pathways, housing readiness and transitions into adulthood. These supports should be practical, age appropriate and delivered in places young people already access.

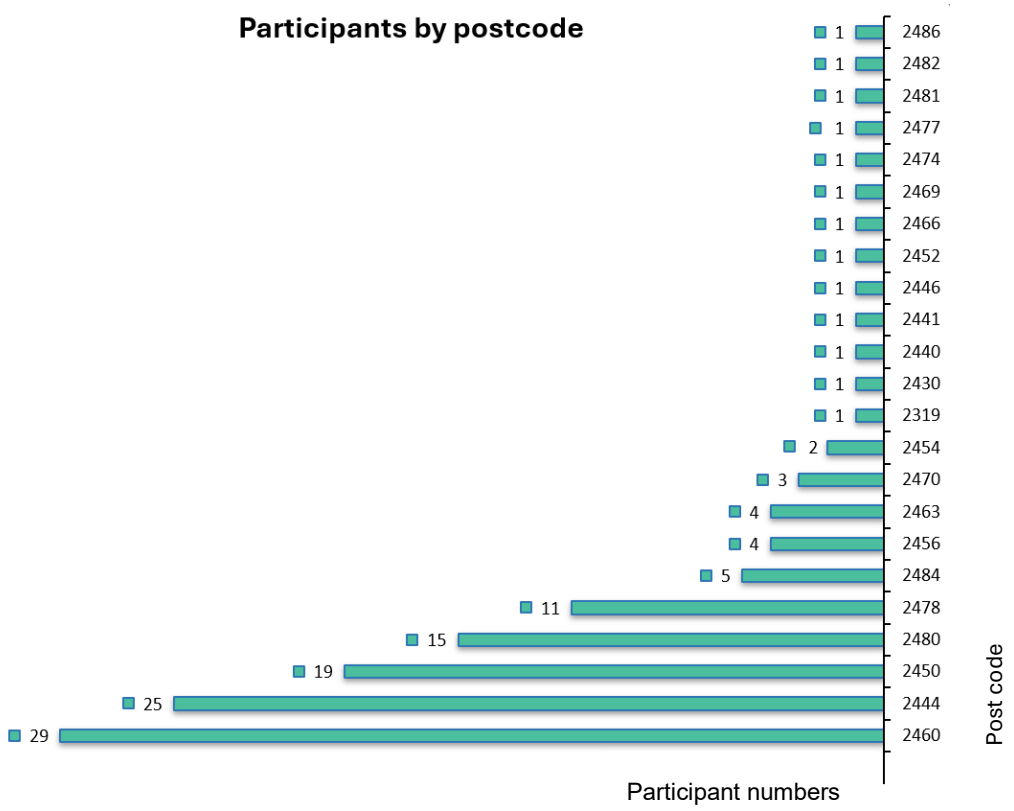
9. **Strengthen integrated referral pathways and warm handovers.** Work with service providers to improve coordination, referral clarity and shared ways of working so young people do not need to navigate fragmented systems alone or repeatedly retell their story. This should include single-entry or no-wrong-door approaches where feasible, supported navigation roles and stronger interagency collaboration.

10. **Use place-based insights to inform local service planning.** Tailor responses to the priorities identified across Ballina, Coffs Harbour, Grafton, Lismore, Port Macquarie and Tweed Heads. Local planning should consider differences in transport access, workforce availability, specialist service gaps, safe spaces, social connection, youth activities, cross-border issues and broader social determinants of wellbeing.

Healthy North Coast will report back to young people and community stakeholders on what it heard during the consultations and how the findings will be used.

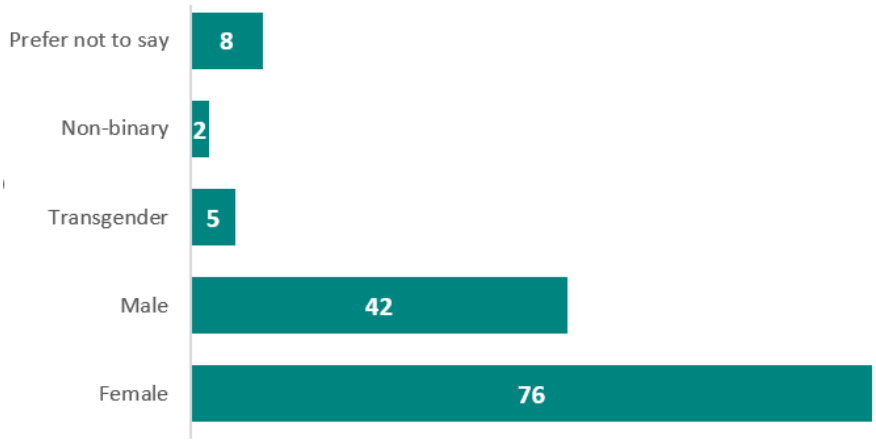
Appendix 1 – Demographics

A total of 130 young people attended the in-person and online workshops, representing 23 different postcodes. Grafton had the highest number of registered young people (29), followed by Port Macquarie (25) and Coffs Harbour (19).





Across all workshops, 24 young people identified as Aboriginal and participated in a workshop.



The cohort of young people who attended the workshops reflect a range of gender identities. Although female was the most selected response (76) followed by male (42). Transgender and non-binary young people were represented across the workshops.

Gender columns count every option selected, so they can add to more than the total.

Appendix 2 – Health in the future

What would have the most impact? Participants could select more than one response, so the percentages total more than 100%.

Category	Count	Ranking	Percentage of respondents
Mental health and emotions	71	1	73%
Diet and nutrition	68	2	70%
Money	60	3	62%
Exercise	55	4	57%
Alcohol and drugs	51	5	53%
Family and friends	50	6	52%
Smoking/vaping	48	7	49%
School, study and work	48	8	49%
Sun-exposure	39	9	40%
Being able to get help	36	10	37%
Housing	33	11	34%
Safety	32	12	33%
Culture and belonging	31	13	32%
Transport	19	14	20%
Regular check-ups	19	15	20%