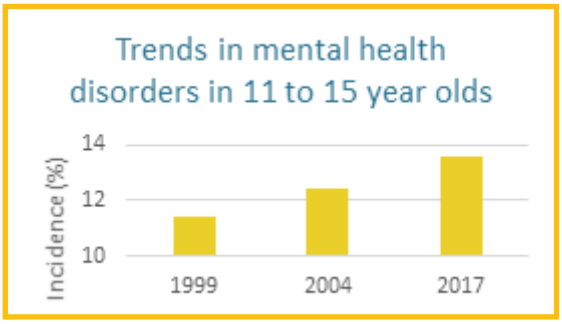
Learnings and Insights from delivering digital mental health support

What We Know

Delivering digital mental health services that work

We hear all the time about a crisis in mental health services for young people. Face to face support can be hard to come by, with rising demand and short supply. How can digital services step up to fill the gap?
The Mix has learned from three years of dedicated research and 24 years of service, not to mention the priceless advice of our volunteers and beneficiaries. We have thought hard about how to deliver mental health services that work for young people in a digital world. Here's what we know.



> **I am very grateful for this service. I think you may very well be saving lots of lives of young people who need to be supported and reminded that there is always hope and that they are never alone. Thank you.**

The Mix service user

Executive Summary

What we know – the context

When people tell us when and how their mental health problems started, things like relationships, exams and even current or historical abuse dominate the stories. For young people life is full of transitions – for example to new schools or workplaces – which can have a huge impact on mental health.
And the scale of the problem is growing, as NHS Digital data shows. The Department of Health reports 'a growing crisis' in provision as it fails to keep up with demand.

Why should this be the case? There's a sense in public discourse today that technology could be driving a rise in mental health problems.

We think digital technology is here to stay, and we want it to be part of the solution. New digital habits may be a double-edged sword, but the benefits can be huge.

Digital mental health services have the potential to play a very important role on a number of counts. They can prevent mental health problems or contribute to important early intervention by:

- **Reaching vast numbers fast and in a highly cost-effective way**
- **Bringing mental health -awareness to young people where they are, 24 hours a day**
- **Making young people feel safe, in a familiar and anonymous space**
- **Online mental health services can remain a first port of call, introducing and connecting young people to face-to-face support pathways, or they can remain part of a young person's blended therapy throughout their journey.**

What we know

The insights

The Mix reaches millions of young people each year through multi-channel services including the provision of information, counselling, peer support community and a helpline – each via a combination of text, telephone, webchat or online.

Over the last three years, with the support of the National Lottery Community Fund, we have been digging methodically into this wealth of experience to develop the insights in this report. Our recommendations are based on data from our own services, feedback from our users and best practice from our partners:

Choice is key

1 Young people are used to choosing how, where and how much to interact.

Don't just listen - change

2 Listen authentically and commit to constant evolution.

Enable easy access

3 Minimise delays and barriers at all costs Be creative with triage: consider bots and AI.

Invest in tech

4 Evolve with technology, and work hard on integration for a frictionless experience.

Value volunteering

5 Volunteering engages users, harnesses their enthusiasm and scales your reach to boot.

Be part of the pathway

6 Complement existing services; collaborate closely with others.

Whatever the service, we recommend that they be

- Holistic Acknowledging the interlink between mental health and other areas of life.
- Co-designed with service users To ensure they are fit for purpose.
- Flexible and accessible Working around young people's lives.
- Anonymous Or at least offer anonymity, reducing psychological barriers to seeking help.

Who we are

The Mix is a free, confidential information and support service for under 25s, helping over 2 million young people in the UK each year.

Whatever issue a young person is facing, The Mix is always here for them - online, over the phone or via social media. We connect young people to experts and their peers to talk about everything from money to mental health, homelessness to jobs, break-ups to drugs and more.

47% of our users said that The Mix was the first place they'd turn to for support

Choice is key

In online mental health support, if we don't offer what someone wants, they go elsewhere. In particular, lack of choice will turn a substantial proportion of potential users away. We need to differentiate our services in a way that works for young people, and market them smartly.

For today's young people, choice online means

- Options for multi-modal communication.
- A highly interactive experience which tailors a personalised route through the service.
- Plenty of links to related sources of information, so that they can come and go.
- The ability to explore information at a variety of depths.

For those who are only able to offer a limited service, it makes sense to be even more deliberate: understand the audience for the service and match that with the most appropriate channel.

Through our services, we know that:

Immediate channels are great for support during emergencies.

Investing in building a strong and trusted youth brand facilitates cross-channel interaction and reduces 'bounce' (leaving the service after only one interaction)

There are strong gender preferences for different channels: men prefer immediate channels, being most likely to use phone (50%), while female users prefer webchat (53%)

At The Mix: Immediate counselling

For many years, The Mix has offered phone counselling: a structured process comprising eight sessions up to 50 minutes long, provided by the same counsellor and taking place at the same time and day each week. We went on a journey to optimise how we use our channels:

Jobs, break-ups to drugs and more.

Findings

1 We found that with phone counselling the channel was limiting our reach: access was restricted to referral and younger users were often deterred by using the phone.

Webchat

3 So in 2018 we introduced webchat counselling for users who were uncomfortable with phone counselling, struggled to access the phone service due to mental health issues like anxiety or simply sought greater anonymity.

Data

5 We then found that webchat comes with its own particular user group. It has appealed especially to LGBTQi users, who are twice as likely to use webchat (33%) compared to telephone counselling (17%). Our research suggests this might be down to the disinhibition effect of digital and anonymous services.

We learned to accept a certain level of silo and channel drop-off: contacts through messenger rarely move from their chosen channel; likewise, discussion of mental health on social media does not often translate to phone contacts. Each is doing its job, and acknowledging this behaviour helps us to market our services better.

For 42% users this service provides their first experience with counselling

Don't just listen: change

To continue providing relevant, timely and useful services we must commit to listening authentically. This means not only seeking and trying to understand young people's voices, but also iterating continuously based on what we hear.

Whether it's knowing how to promote a service, understanding how it's being used or scoping users' needs and developing new services – we must put the voice of young people at the centre.

Along with traditional methods of listening like focus groups and youth boards, we have applied our data focus to the task and picked up some lesser-known ways of hearing our users, including:

Comments

1 making it possible to comment underneath articles helps to build a community of engaged users and provide them with further information, but beyond that, it helps us as delivery organisations to better understand what our users are looking for.

Social Media

2 We are present on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Instagram. We do use these channels to promote The Mix services and run campaigns. But if we only used them to talk at young people instead of listening to them, we would be missing a huge learning opportunity.

Analytics

3 To make data informed decisions, we must ensure that we are capturing meaningful data (think web form fields, or Google Analytics) that we can easily process. Committing to a regular processing & reporting cycle will make sure these insights inform service development.

Build in regular feedback loops based on users' voices in all their various forms, and commit to constant evolution.

78%

Found it relevant to them.

82%

Trust our information or advice

If we don't... We win users and their trust, and co-produce even more impactful services.

If we do... We risk losing young people to our services – they stick to what they know and love

We risk losing users' trust and attention when they are with us, as they feel 'talked at'

At The Mix: Agile

Typically, when implementing a new service, we use agile principles at The Mix.
The Agile philosophy is particularly suitable for the digital youth sector. It:

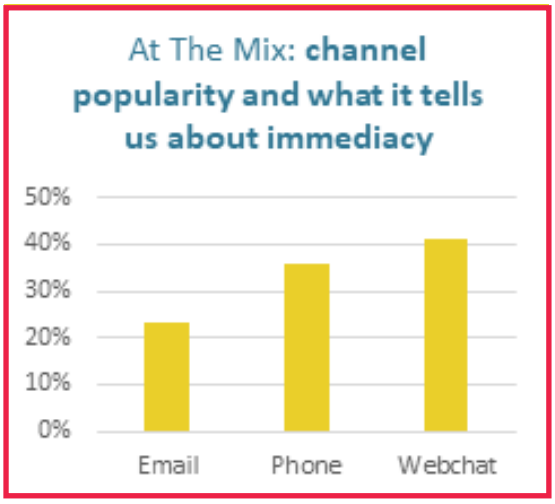
- Welcomes changing requirements, even late in a project, through regular review cycles
- Delivers regular iterative change in existing products frequently, as well as new
- Puts users, and staff who understand the users, at the centre of projects
- Encourages self-organising teams which run based on personal motivation

We frequently review service data to iterate rapidly, and make sure that users' feedback is regularly incorporated. This means that every few weeks new improvements can be introduced to meet users' needs.

Enable easy access

Immediacy is key to engaging young people: they expect both to access our services immediately and to reach the most appropriate support for them quickly and easily. This means that if we're busy, there is a waiting list, or they have to read a long article, we may lose our audience.

Minimise barriers to entry through creative methods of triage. Consider AI bots, machine learning or artificial intelligence to route young people based on their needs as quickly as possible.



At The Mix: Chatbots

We have developed two chatbots, which make tailored, detailed one-to-one support available instantly to young people.

Sexual consent bot

Introduced in response to insights from our users' behaviour. Having published several articles on sexual consent on The Mix website, people still kept asking questions about their situation in the comments section under those.

Domestic violence bot

Developed in order to help identify an abusive relationship. This bot was co-created with young women with experience of abusive relationships, allowing insight into appropriate language and tone.

Bots work well for these topics because

They are conceptually and legally complex issues, with multiple permutations. People come seeking 'yes' or 'no' answers to specific situations, requiring interactivity

And yet the topics are loaded with fear of moral judgement, making it hard to talk to a person

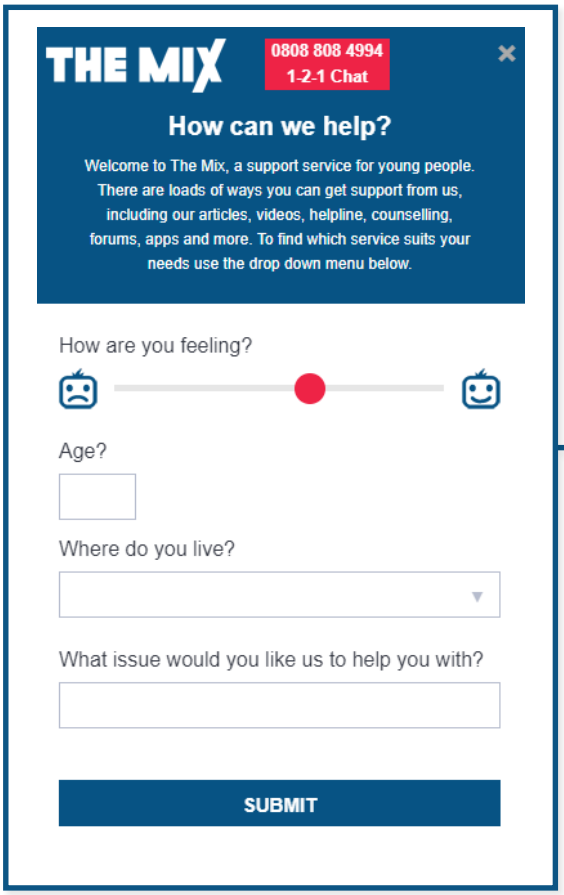
Bots were able to do what neither factsheets nor discussion boards could: modify tone and outcomes significantly for different scenarios, while retaining complete confidence in neutrality.

The drive for immediacy also challenges us to diversify how young people can access our services by reaching beyond our own platform – for example to make links with other service providers or with social media outlets. Young people are less likely to move between online platforms, so the delivery of services requires us to reach young people in the spaces they choose, not just our own platforms. As providers of vital mental health services, we need to make sure they're able to access who we are and what we do easily.

At The Mix: Triage beyond borders

The Mix uses a digital triage tool pinned to website.

A young person might be looking for something specific or just not sure what support they want. This triage tool simplifies a young person's journey and takes them directly to relevant digital support at The Mix.



Triage tool embedded on website

This is also embedded across numerous 3rd party websites, including Universities, and means

Young people can access trustworthy sources of support wherever they are

The Mix can offer huge numbers of new pathways for users to reach The Mix and learn more about the needs of different users

Other organisations import The Mix's expertise into their own service, strengthening their offer with up to date and accessible information and support

Invest in tech

Why do we offer mental health services online? There are a number of very good reasons.

Young People go online first.

They're more likely to take their mobile phone when they run away from home than their wallet.

Using digital technology enables young people to connect with their issues quicker.

The social restrictions that normally inhibit face-to-face interactions are often loosened in digital contexts, making way for important breakthroughs.

Young People's needs are not nine to five.

Young people tend to seek support outside of office hours when traditional face to face services are not always available.

To maintain this impact, we must keep finding new ways to connect with young people digitally in the places and the ways that suit them.

National reach, accessibility, data aggregation, service promotion, automation – the new uses for digital technology goes on. As it evolves, we must continuously scan the horizon for the next trends.

How to win at digital development

How to win at digital development

Whatever the next requirement – whether it's service user or volunteer facing, data capture or marketing – we need to allocate reasonable cost to make the most of it. Keeping these three pillars of sound digital service provision in mind will ensure success.

1 Young people tend to seek support outside of office hours when traditional face to face services are not always available.

2 Involve service users at all stages of development and launch

3 Make sure you are building on a robust foundational infrastructure

Other tips for the development phase:

- Tap into pro bono offers or user support for new technologies – there is plenty available, and you are offering potential exposure to new audiences for them.
- Focus hard on systems integration: ensuring a frictionless experience is key.
- Pilot innovative prototypes with a group of early adopters: small numbers of engaged (and forgiving!) service users.
- Share your experiences and ask for advice across the sector – doing so can win you inside information and potential cost savings.
- Invest in Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). Our research shows that young people place most trust in services that can be found on Google. But their algorithms can easily change – and with them, your reach will change too. So if you want to be found: keep up.

At The Mix: **systems integration**

Until mid-2017 our data for the telephone, email and webchat helpline were on different systems, preventing us from understanding the various user journeys across our services.

Bringing all the helpline channels into one platform enabled us to better understand user interactions across channels and to deliver a more coherent service. Any agent can pick up a case and access all associated information, meaning that users do not need to repeat themselves and we avoid repeating the same signposts. Reporting is also more accurate, so that we can better prove and improve our impact.

Value volunteering

Volunteering is a gift that goes both ways, between an organisation and its service users. For the providers of digital youth services, it…

- Enables a cost-effective scaling of our services in a sustainable way
- Allows us to reach some of the people most in need in a way that staff might not

For those service users who volunteer their time, it helps to develop their skills, expand their horizons and feel part of something bigger. In a way that suits each volunteer – light touch or full commitment – each progresses on a valuable social development journey from helped to helping

At The Mix: **The 'Social Development Journey' in action**

At The Mix, offering support to others has always been part of the blended support model for those who use our service.

Mike, who is 21 years old and is part of our amazing Community team, discovered the magic in this model as a service user. He first came across The Mix three years ago while looking for some advice, and wound up joining the community.

About six months into joining the community, Mike started volunteering as a general chat moderator. He quickly started to realise that volunteering with The Mix was something he loved doing, and also that he wanted to make a career out of this kind of work. After taking part in some face to face workshops and doing a work placement at Mix HQ, he was asked if he was interested in a nine-month apprenticeship. He jumped at the chance. Once that came to an end, he applied for a job.

Mike's role is primarily to oversee the discussion boards and live chat sessions, as well as looking after the volunteer teams helping us run these services.

> **"I ended up sticking around on the community after discovering what a warm and friendly place it was. Although I didn't realise I needed [it] at the time, the community helped me through a difficult relationship, depression and long-term anxiety that I'd never properly addressed before"**
>
> *Mike - now a member of staff at The Mix*

"If you use volunteers purely because they are cheap, they'll leave."

We can enhance our chances of keeping volunteers with high quality face to face training, plenty of positive reinforcement and ongoing interaction, particularly when they're remote. Engagement needs to be frictionless and flexible for success.

A combined model of volunteers and staff may look like this

1 Users — Service users who are passionate about the cause need a progression pathway

2 Peer Support — (E.g. discussion boards) Are halfway to volunteer commitment levels

3 Volunteers — Volunteers occupy a special position of trust and rapport with both staff and users, working with passion and communicating with authenticity

4 Staff — Volunteering is organised and bolstered by a team of dedicated staff

For youth organisations who use volunteers, support from staff and trained professionals is a vital element of our schemes' success.

At The Mix**: Users, volunteers, or both?**

At The Mix discussion boards, our moderators are a blended team of staff, volunteers and community users.

Moderating for safety and success

Most discussion boards and chats are supported by moderators whose primary task is to keep the conversations within boundaries, and to keep the space safe. However, people often seek support from moderators themselves. A trusting team will strive to tip the balance towards peer support.

When should we be hands-on?

In a lively social space, things like tone of voice can provoke impulsive reactions, progressing quickly to conflict. **Moderate preventively to build users' confidence not to react.**

- **Training users to understand conflict** through workshops or e-learning, makes them more aware of the part they may play in conflict and develops personal skills to boot
- **Being consistent** in dealing with inappropriate posts helps to protect the service, while it might also offer users a little helpful stability.
- Reminding users regularly that the more **personal information** they share the more identifiable they are helps prevent safeguarding and confidentiality.

When should we be hands-on?

Having a strong, clear **Code of Conduct** and set of Community guidelines creates the right environment for trust.

- **Letting users know what they can offer** – even if it is 'only' empathy – to empower them to respond before moderators do.
- Encouraging engaged community users to **'give back'** to the space that helped them by responding actively and progressing towards moderation helps to build peer support.
- A cautious approach to moderating and safeguarding doesn't mean we shouldn't **be brave**. In fact, it makes it safe for support organisations to touch on sensitive or taboo topics that no one else is prepared to tackle.

Be part of the journey

Our best response to the breakdown in the supply of mental health provision is a collective one. Connecting to and complementing the on and offline mental health landscape as a whole drives the greatest value. Understanding where our digital service has the most impact on that pathway helps us to fulfil a need rather than reinvent the wheel

> **I used to do bereavement counselling when I was younger, when I was 11 and then they said that I was ok and didn't need it anymore then when I was 12 the depression started…I feel at ease knowing I have got it out released a weight of my chest…You may have saved my life. I will always be in debt to you for the rest of my life and I will remember you always .Thank you, I am so grateful to you.**

TheMix helpline user

At The Mix: **Partnerships with Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs)**

In 2017, The Mix connected with some London CCGs to pilot a new commissioning partnership.

By getting The Mix to help with routing and signposting, as well as bespoke content, CCGs were able to provide easier access to mental health, wellbeing and lifestyle support to prevent the escalation of mental health issues amongst young people in their areas.

For example, City & Hackney CCG had information which led them to explore a focus on disordered eating. The Mix created an area on the website dedicated to information on ground services that the CCG provided in this space. We used Search Engine Optimisation techniques to maximise its visibility to any young people Googling certain issues in certain geographies.

We have more to write about and we become higher in searches.

Benefits to CCGs:

Tap easily into The Mix's huge reach and high trust levels

Less clinical environment and tone removes barriers for certain groups of people

Prevention/early intervention potentially saves money and harm: fewer referrals into statutory CAMHS services

Benefits to The Mix:

Links to the ground work we usually wouldn't be able to help our beneficiaries access

Association with the NHS strengthens positioning as valid and trustworthy source

Adds to The Mix's body of content, which improves SEO status, and vice versa

After a successful pilot, The Mix is in conversation with these CCGs again as they work on wholesale digital transformations, to work out how we can be part of a holistic digital solution.

Innovation doesn't always have to be about creating new products and services. Forging new partnerships can leverage existing services by directing them to people who need them most.

There is an art to making connections effectively and sensitively

1. Those who offer multiple services must take extra care, working up end-to-end user journeys to plan routes in and out of the service.

2. Make it clear in a way that works for young people what the service asks of them and what its benefits are.

3. In respecting confidentiality, digital support services may not be able to partner as effectively with emergency services, but they can co-operate together for smooth case management.

Support on suicide

The Mix's articles discussing suicide do not allow comments as posting under a web article is not the best support for an actively suicidal person. At the same time, we know that we need to help them to access suitable support. This is a much better place, for example, to link to emergency NHS services, emphasise the benefits of seeking help from your GP and signpost to other organisations like the Samaritans

Being part of the pathway isn't just about making links with other mental health services. Taking a holistic approach within our own services – one that sees each user as a whole person – is the key to making a difference

Top 6 topics Discussed

- Depression 19%
- Anxiety 18%
- Feelings and Emotions 18%
- Suicidal Ideation 15%
- Relationships 14%
- Family 11%

43% of The Mix's helpline users talk about mental health as the main issue for which they are seeking support. But plenty of other inter-related issues come up in the top 8

> **"I have thoroughly enjoyed …the service The Mix has provided me and couldn't recommend it enough. I feel considerably happier and mentally healthier."**
>
> TheMix user

Mental health issues are often intertwined with a set of life problems such as relationship problems, stress, bullying or homelessness. Acknowledging this means providing more rounded content and support. For example, The Mix offers web content on anything from. These holistic and varied topics drive usage to the more supportive elements, and present a real life context for them.

The Future

It takes a lot to stay relevant: we need to move as quickly as the young people we serve and the technologies they use. At The Mix, our ambitions for the next few years are sky high

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Our two chat-bots were just the beginning. Using AI and our wealth of existing data we will introduce:

- Triage for helpline contacts, ensuring those in the most need reach a human as quickly as possible and maximise our internal workforce's time.
- Intelligent channel shifting. We will use AI to suggest a channel based on availability. For instance, when the volunteers on the phones are engaged and those on webchat are free, webchat will be suggested.
- Cross-platform content packaging, providing bespoke results based on users' triage and previous contacts. This means bringing together localised signposting, specific expert articles, forum posts and national organisations into a single unique package.

DATA AND SYSTEMS

Not only gathering but also using and publishing data will improve our services and contribute to sector-wide understanding. We will:

- Combining our data with other organisations to be able to see wider trends, get better insights into the effectiveness of our own service and plan our next steps together.
- Further digitising the helpline, removing manual work entirely.
- Personalising the journey through our services for the majority of our young people
- Replacing manual pinch points in our service delivery with automated systems

PARTNERSHIPS AND REACH

We will be where young people are when they needs us, making sure their voices are heard. We will:

- Meet young people wherever they go next, engaging them for example through digital and social channels to engage them for more accessible support and anywhere we can engage them for more accessible support
- Reach out to adults and policy makers to break down stigma around mental health and what it means to be young. We will strive to have positive influence on youth policy
- Reach out to other sectors and build new corporate partnerships to share expertise at the sharp end of digital technologies

Join us on the next leg of our journey!

Contact info@themix.org.uk

Visit www.themix.org.uk