

Press Release

Turning insight into action: piloting a new approach to community mental health support for children and young people in Somerset

Children and young people's mental health continues to be a priority across Somerset. Increasingly, evidence shows that early intervention, prevention and community-based support are essential if young people are to receive help before needs escalate.

However, many of the organisations best placed to deliver that early support (smaller voluntary and community groups) often face barriers accessing NHS funding opportunities.

In 2025, NHS Somerset Integrated Care Board (ICB), working in partnership with Spark Somerset and the Children and Young People's Mental Health VCFSE Network, set out to test a new approach.

The result was the Children and Young People's Mental Health Innovation Fund, a £50,000 pilot designed to support smaller voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) organisations to deliver creative, community-based mental health support for children and young people.

The pilot represents an important step towards more inclusive commissioning and a broader provider landscape for early mental health support.

Listening to the Sector and to Young People

The Innovation Fund did not emerge in isolation. It followed extensive engagement across the system.

Insight from the report [Support for Children and Young People to Understand Their Feelings and Mental Health in Somerset](#) highlighted ongoing challenges for young people and families in navigating services and accessing early support. Many described relying on informal networks or community organisations rather than formal services.

At the same time, conversations within the Children and Young People's Mental Health VCFSE Network highlighted barriers faced by smaller organisations when attempting to access NHS funding opportunities.

These challenges, and the system response to them, are explored further in Spark Somerset's recent blog:

[How listening turned insight into impact – creating simpler, fairer funding opportunities for smaller charities in Somerset.](#)

The blog describes how sector feedback, combined with greater understanding of NHS procurement processes, helped shape a shared ambition: creating funding opportunities that are fairer, more accessible and proportionate for smaller organisations.

Testing a More Inclusive Commissioning Approach

In response, NHS Somerset ICB and Spark Somerset worked together to develop the CYP Mental Health Innovation Fund.

The aim was to test whether a small, proportionate funding model could help unlock new ideas from community organisations that are often deeply embedded within local communities but rarely engage in formal commissioning processes.

The fund was intentionally designed to:

- Provide accessible entry points for smaller VCFSE organisations
- Support innovative community-led approaches to mental health and wellbeing
- Reach children and young people who may not access traditional services
- Generate learning to inform future commissioning models

The fund was established as a pilot, recognising that short-term project funding is not a long-term solution, but can provide valuable insight into how the system can better work with community organisations.

A Collaborative and Proportionate Process

Applications were invited from VCFSE organisations across Somerset, with projects eligible to receive up to £10,000.

A multi-agency assessment panel, including representatives from the ICB, the voluntary sector and system partners, reviewed submissions using a proportionate scoring framework. Panel members were asked to assess applications in ways that recognised the scale and capacity of smaller organisations rather than expecting the level of detail often required in larger procurement processes. Importantly, the pilot also included direct involvement from young people.

Following the initial funding recommendations, a Young People's Panel was convened to review the selected projects and provide feedback on how they could be delivered in ways that feel accessible, relevant and safe from a young person's perspective.

Rather than re-making funding decisions, the panel helped ensure that lived experience informed how projects evolve during delivery and provided valuable insight into what young people value in community mental health support.

Strong Interest and Eight Funded Projects

The response from the sector exceeded expectations. In total, 26 applications were received from organisations across Somerset, demonstrating both the creativity within the voluntary sector and the level of unmet need for early mental health and wellbeing support.

Following panel assessment and moderation, eight organisations were awarded funding, supporting a diverse range of community-based initiatives designed to reach children, young people and families in different ways.

The successful organisations and their projects are:

Creative Minds Taunton – *No Girl Left Behind – Good to be Me: Belonging, Wellbeing and Voice*, a creative wellbeing programme supporting girls aged 11+ through expressive arts and peer connection.

Home-Start West Somerset – *Feelings Together: Supporting Big Feelings Before Big Steps*, an early emotional wellbeing programme for children aged 3-4 and their parents and carers.

“Feelings Together is a new six-week emotional wellbeing programme designed for children aged 3-4 and their parents or carers in West Somerset, the programme supports children’s emotional readiness for starting school through fun, inclusive, play-based group sessions. Each session follows a calm, predictable structure that helps children feel safe and confident. Activities include a welcoming routine, emotion-focused play, simple regulation strategies, supported parent-child interaction, and a gentle closing. Alongside the children’s activities, parents and carers take part in short, practical discussions that build confidence in supporting their child’s emotional development at home. The programme responds to a clear local need. In parts of West Somerset, children often begin school facing challenges linked to rural isolation, deprivation, and limited access to early support. Many families report worries about their child’s emotional regulation, social confidence, and navigating possible SEND needs. Feelings Together fills this gap by offering early, community-based support that strengthens children’s emotional skills, builds parental confidence, and helps families feel connected and supported before school begins. Shaped by feedback from local parents, carers, and early years practitioners, the programme provides a welcoming, non-judgemental space where families can learn together, build resilience, and prepare for a positive start to school.” **Clare Pound, Manager, Home-Start West Somerset**

In Charley’s Memory – *1:1 Support for Children and Young People with Families on Low Incomes*, expanding access to counselling and drop-in wellbeing support.

"This grant will enable us to pilot an innovative community drop-in service at our new high street location and provide essential free counselling for those on the lowest incomes in our community and across the county." – **Jamie Scanlon, Chief Operating Officer, In Charley's Memory**

Make the Sunshine – *Magic in the Making*, an inclusive creative programme supporting children and young people with SEND through dance, movement and sensory activities.

"Make the sunshine are delighted to have been commissioned through the Innovation Fund to offer bi-weekly dance sessions for young people with SEND. We've seen had so many amazing responses to our trial sessions and workshops during our pilot and are really excited to work with families to expand this vital provision locally. We were especially pleased that decision making for this fund has been made by young people themselves." **Louise, Lappin-Cook, Director, Make the Sunshine**

NeuroConnect – *Somerset Targeted Family Support Project*, delivering trauma-informed wellbeing support for neurodivergent children, young people and their families.

"We feel very privileged to have been chosen to deliver a project we are really passionate about via the funding; allowing families to access support where currently there are barriers and we are looking forward to piloting approaches which can be evaluated within the fund. We look forward to working alongside our VCSFE colleagues to address gaps and enhance the collaborations already in place." **Catherine Eveness, Founding Director, NeuroConnect**

Somerset Youth Theatre – *Somerset Youth Theatre Co. @ Bridgwater Arts Centre – Things We Want to Say...*, using youth theatre and creative expression to build confidence, belonging and emotional literacy.

"We are absolutely delighted to be able to support young people in the Bridgwater area, using Theatre & Creativity as a vehicle to increase positive mental health and well-being, in partnership with NHS ICB - working together to make a difference. We are excited to carry out early youth consultations to hear from young people around opportunities and programming - putting young people at the heART of decision making. Please do reach out to find out more at info@somersetyt.com." **Selina Keedwell, CEO/ Creative Director, Somerset Youth Theatre CIC**

The Balsam Centre – *The Youth Café*, providing a safe, youth-led space offering wellbeing support and community connection for young people in South Somerset.

The Space – *Building Parent and Child Resilience*, supporting children aged 4-9 and their families through therapeutic and wellbeing activities in rural Somerset.

"NHS Somerset ICB's Innovation Fund supports The Space's Building Parent and Child Resilience project to deliver concurrent therapeutic sessions for children and

psychoeducational support for parents, tackling escalating anxiety, emotional distress and poor school attendance through early, community-based intervention. By embedding resilience-building capacity within families and schools, the project offers a scalable, evidence-informed model that strengthens inclusion, reduces pressure on overstretched services, and aligns directly with NHS Somerset ICB's prevention and accessibility priorities.” **John Pimblott, Chair of Trustees, The Space**

Together, these projects will begin delivery from April 2026, providing a range of early intervention and community-based mental health support across Somerset.

Early Learning for the System

Although delivery has not yet begun, the pilot has already generated valuable learning for the local system.

First, the level of interest from the sector demonstrates a strong appetite among community organisations to contribute to children and young people's mental health support when funding opportunities are accessible.

Second, the process reinforced the importance of proportionate commissioning approaches that recognise the realities faced by smaller organisations.

Finally, involving young people directly in the process has provided valuable insight into how services should feel and operate from the perspective of those who use them.

For Rose Firth, Head of Localities and Commissioning for Children's Health at NHS Somerset ICB, the pilot reflects a broader shift in how systems work with communities:

“Smaller community organisations often have deep relationships within the communities they serve. Through this pilot we wanted to test how the NHS can work more effectively alongside those organisations to support children and young people earlier, before difficulties escalate.

The response from the sector has been incredibly encouraging. The quality and creativity of the applications demonstrate the strength of Somerset's VCFSE sector and the important role it plays in supporting young people's mental health.”

Looking Ahead

As projects begin delivery, learning from the Innovation Fund will be captured alongside feedback from children, young people and participating organisations.

This insight will help shape the next phase of work, including how NHS Somerset and system partners design future commissioning approaches that better support community-based, preventative mental health support.

In a system increasingly focused on prevention, neighbourhood working and stronger partnerships with the voluntary sector, the Innovation Fund provides a practical example of how listening to communities can translate into tangible change.