



**Somerset's**  
**BIG**  
**Conversation**  
**2025**

The voices and experiences of **people**  
**and communities** across Somerset

**Produced by Kat Tottle**

Engagement and Insight Lead Officer, NHS Somerset

January 2026

## Foreword

**I am pleased to introduce this report, which brings together the voices and experiences of people and communities across our area. Over recent months, we have listened closely to what matters most to local people, patients, carers and staff, and this insight now forms a strong foundation for the next stage of our work.**

This report reflects our commitment to openness, partnership and meaningful engagement. It demonstrates how lived experience continues to shape our priorities and our approach to improving health and care.

This engagement programme was not a task completed from behind a desk; it was built through community visits, conversations, relationships and time spent with people across our communities. The insight came from online digital engagement and being out in communities around the county – in village halls, community centres, market squares, cafés and local events – speaking with our diverse people and communities, hearing the lived experiences of patients, their loved ones, carers, young people and also our healthcare colleagues.

One moment that has stayed with me was a conversation with an older person in West Somerset who quietly placed a heart sticker on our feedback board before saying, **“I just want to be cared for close to home, by people who know me.”** It captured the simplicity and sentiment of what so

many told us, focusing on the value of quality care, provided in spaces chosen by patients, with trusted, positive relationships between patients and NHS colleagues. We certainly heard a lot of feedback about compassionate, quality and impactful care being delivered by hard-working colleagues across the county.

This report also reflects the power of partnership – between communities, community organisations, healthcare teams, commissioners and system leaders. I would like to thank my NHS Somerset communications and engagement colleagues for all of their hard work, as well as the many colleagues and teams from across Somerset’s health and care system.

I would also like to particularly thank the six voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) organisations who worked closely and collaboratively with us, engaging with their members and communities to ensure that their experiences and ideas were recorded.

Finally, thank you to every person who contributed and shared their lived experiences, concerns and ideas. Your voices are the heart of this report, and they will continue to guide our next steps.

### **Kat Tottle**

Engagement and Insight Lead Officer,  
NHS Somerset



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# 1. Executive Summary



## Introduction

Somerset's Big Conversation 2025 was a large-scale engagement programme running from May to October 2025, comprising an interactive roadshow, online activity, and bespoke involvement work with people from local Core20PLUS55 communities. It built on the success of Somerset's Big Conversation 2024 and NHS Somerset's engagement programme for the Government's 10 Year Health Plan over the winter of 2024/25.

Together, these earlier conversations highlighted three key shifts that matter to local people and underpin the new national 10 Year Health Plan: moving care closer to home, increasing the use of digital tools, and strengthening prevention and early help to keep people well. This year's programme was designed to explore these shifts in greater depth, with a particular focus on the future of community and neighbourhood services across Somerset.

The reach, scale and diversity of this programme give the findings a strong mandate. Engagement took place across more than 50 locations and included urban, rural and coastal communities, younger and older people, carers, disabled people, people who are offline or have limited ability to use digital services, parents, families and seldom-heard groups reached through targeted work led by Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise partners. Thousands of contributions were gathered through public events, online

activities, surveys, social media, outreach and community-led sessions, creating one of the most comprehensive insight bases ever generated by Our Somerset, the local Integrated Care System (ICS).

### Who we engaged with

**As part of Somerset's Big Conversation 2025, we engaged with 3,947 people through nine different engagement approaches, covering both digital and face-to-face activities.** Engagement took place in 50 locations across the county, making this the largest insight-gathering exercise undertaken by NHS Somerset.

Across these approaches, **we analysed over 8,339 individual pieces of qualitative feedback.** This provides a robust evidence base for understanding what matters most to people in Somerset.



We engaged with **3,947** people through **nine** different engagement approaches, covering both **digital and face-to-face** activities

## 1. Executive Summary

### A wide range of engagement methods were used, including:

- **Public events:** 1,893 participants across 33 events, generating around 5,000 pieces of individual feedback through a range of methods, including hands-on activities and written comments.
- **Online survey:** 1,247 people completed the survey, providing 865 free-text comments
- **Digital scenario activities:** ('Pauline's Story' on care choices after a hospital stay and the 'Somerset Pound' spending priorities exercise): Approximately 340 participants, casting 678 votes.
- **VCFSE-led sessions:** 192 people took part across seven community-led activities, generating 1,035 pieces of feedback, including from seldom-heard groups.
- **Health Inequalities pop-ups:** 73 items of feedback collected across supermarkets, Talking Cafés and community hubs.
- **Carers and Citizens Hub sessions:** 39 participants contributing 78 pieces of feedback.
- **Social media:** 125 comments submitted online.
- **Direct emails and anonymous feedback** shared at events (posted into a box): 20 contributors providing 20 pieces of feedback.



### Who we heard from:

Through our engagement opportunities, we heard from a broad cross-section of Somerset's communities, including:

- **Older adults** – a significant cohort, supported by both the volume of older people attending public events and the online scenario data where 24% of participants were aged 65+.
- **Children and young people** – including LGBTQ+ young people and those supported by youth organisations.
- **Carers, unpaid family supporters and people with long-term conditions** – strongly represented, particularly in VCFSE, carers and mental health engagement sessions.
- **Disabled people and neurodivergent people** – including participants from learning disability, autism, recovery and mental health groups.
- **People living in rural, coastal and remote areas** – with issues relating to travel, access and distance raised frequently.
- **Digitally excluded individuals** – people with poor or no internet access, or low confidence using digital tools and online systems.
- **People experiencing inequalities** – including people in Core20PLUS55 of low-income households and people reliant on public or community transport.
- **Seldom-heard groups** – including LGBTQ+ communities, Gypsy community members (via anonymous feedback box at events), people experiencing homelessness, survivors of trauma and people with serious mental illness.
- **Adults and young people experiencing mental ill-health** – strongly represented across VCFSE feedback, online surveys and event feedback.

## 1. Executive Summary



### A balanced picture – what people told us is working well

Across all engagement pathways and activities, people shared many examples of high-quality, compassionate care, emphasising the dedication and professionalism of staff and the difference this makes to their wellbeing and recovery.

Despite challenges being raised more often, people at our engagement events repeatedly expressed deep affection and gratitude for the NHS – many drew hearts on feedback boards, some became emotional when recounting positive experiences, and **more than once did we hear “I wouldn’t be here without the NHS.”** People praised community hospitals, local Minor Injury Units (MIUs) / Urgent Treatment Centres (UTCs), GP practices, pharmacy teams, district nurses, reablement staff, mental health workers, youth services and voluntary groups for providing personalised, trusted and community-based support.

This strong connection to the NHS was also clear in the spending priorities activity, where many people struggled with the idea of choosing where the NHS should spend less money to enable it to move money to other priority areas. Several people said they wanted to give “more money to everything,” showing how highly they value local services and how difficult it feels to reduce investment in any area of care.

People across the county highlighted strong relationships, continuity of care and services that feel safe, local and joined-up. These strengths form a vital foundation for future improvement and underline the importance of protecting the staff, local services and community-based care models that people value most. Feedback shows that staff commitment, local knowledge and the quality of personal relationships remain some of the greatest assets in Somerset’s health and care system.

### Understanding feedback patterns – negativity bias

When people take part in engagement, they are often more likely to speak up when something has been difficult, confusing or not working well for them. This means we naturally hear more about challenges than positive experiences. That does not mean people have lost confidence in the value of the NHS – many people also shared positive experiences, as above.

This report includes positive and negative feedback. While challenges appear more frequently and provide more public insight on opportunities for improvement, we also highlight the positive experiences people told us about, because they show what is working well and what matters most to local people.



People across the county highlighted **strong relationships, continuity of care and services** that feel safe, local and joined-up.

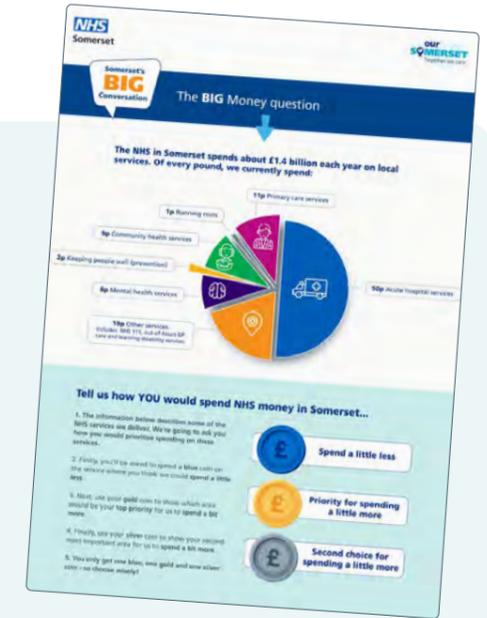
## 1. Executive Summary

### At in-person events and in online engagement, two eye-catching interactive tools were front and centre. Here we highlight how they sparked rich conversations and yielded fascinating feedback.

We wanted to bring to life two important topics facing our system and enable people engage with them in an accessible way. We worked with clinical and finance colleagues, respectively, to co-design Pauline’s Story and The Somerset Pound – both of which led to some great conversations and feedback.

#### Pauline’s Story – choosing where to recover after a hospital stay

We invited people to make hands-on choices based on a realistic scenario of an older woman recovering after leg surgery, encouraging them to consider the practicalities of discharge, rehabilitation, home-based care and support from community services. By asking participants where Pauline should recover, we generated conversation and rich insight into what people value most: reliable home-based support, timely



therapy, strong communication, and the ongoing importance of care and effective relationships and communication with clinicians and NHS staff for those who live alone or far from acute sites.

#### The Somerset Pound – spending priorities in a challenging financial climate

We showed people how we spend our money now and asked people to choose an area where we could spend less before asking them to select two areas where they would like to see more money spent. People understood the financial pressures facing the NHS and engaged thoughtfully, despite finding the idea of reducing spending challenging.

Across online and in-person engagement, people prioritised more investment in local and community-based services and advocated better joined-up care. The activity provided fascinating insight into how people want limited NHS resources to be used.

#### Alex Cameron

Associate Director, Communications, Engagement and Marketing, NHS Somerset





## Setting the scene

**Meaningful engagement with the public is essential to shaping NHS services that truly reflect the needs of people and communities in Somerset.**

By involving people, patients, families, and frontline staff early and consistently, the NHS can design services that are more responsive, accessible, and sustainable.

Our engagement work helps uncover local insights: whether they are challenges around transport, gaps in mental health support, or ideas for improving urgent and primary care that data alone can't surface. It builds trust, strengthens relationships, and empowers communities to play an active role in improving their own health and wellbeing. When people feel heard and involved, they are more likely to use services appropriately, support change, and champion initiatives that benefit the wider population.

We launched this engagement during a year of challenge for the NHS nationally and locally, but the public still strongly support the NHS and its founding principles. Therefore, we need to modernise and we need to make sure the public are placed firmly at the centre of this journey.

As we focus on our future as a strategic commissioning organisation delivering the three shifts set out in the NHS 10 Year Health Plan, it is even more important that we work with local people, stakeholders and staff to shape and improve services for the future.

### Charlotte Callen

Director of Communications, Engagement and Marketing, NHS Somerset



## Key findings

The following key findings were derived from all feedback across all of our nine engagement approaches. Themes were ranked using frequency of mention, strength of sentiment when responding and consistency across the various demographic and geographic groups.



### 1. GP access, continuity and communication remain a central priority

People strongly value their GP teams, praising compassion, professionalism and the quality of care once they are seen. At the same time, many described difficulty getting through on the phone, navigating online systems and securing timely appointments. People want primary care to remain local, familiar and with good continuity, supported by clearer, more reliable routes to access.



### 2. Community hospitals and UTCs play an important role in local, accessible care

People consistently highlighted the strengths of community hospitals – including calm environments, familiar staff and shorter travel distances that make services easier to reach. People valued having UTCs, clinics and rehabilitation closer to home. Concerns were raised about reduced UTC hours, uncertainty about future services and the impact of having to travel further when local options are unavailable. Overall, people want these local facilities protected and strengthened so care remains close to their communities.



### 3. Staff were widely praised, workforce pressures affect reliability and consistency

Across primary, community and acute services, people spoke with warmth about staff who are kind, skilled and go "above and beyond." Alongside this, workforce shortages can lead to delays, missed visits, reduced therapy and less predictable care. People want staff to have enough time and support to deliver the safe, reliable care they value.



### 4. Home-based care and reablement work well when services are reliable and joined-up

Many people appreciate recovering at home, valuing personalised care, familiar surroundings and support that helps them regain independence. This works best when visits are on time, communication is clear and therapy is consistent. Confidence drops when support is rushed or missing, so people emphasised the need for robust, well-coordinated home-first pathways.



### 5. Transport, rurality and distance influence people's ability to access care

Local clinics, community hospitals and outreach services were praised for reducing travel and helping people stay connected to care. For others, long journeys, infrequent buses and high transport costs made accessing services difficult, particularly in coastal and rural areas. People want more reliable, affordable options that reduce inequality and avoid missed appointments.



### 6. Discharge and recovery pathways can work well, but are inconsistent

Positive experiences were described when discharge planning was clear, equipment arrived on time and follow-up care began smoothly. However, others reported gaps such as missing equipment, unclear communication or delays in starting home care and therapy. People want more consistent, well-coordinated transitions between hospital, community teams and home-based care.



### 7. Digital tools are helpful for some, but many still need non-digital options

People who are confident online appreciated using digital systems for quick tasks like prescriptions and simple queries. For others, especially those with limited digital confidence or poor connectivity, online forms felt confusing or inaccessible. People want a balanced approach where digital routes improve convenience without replacing the option to speak to someone directly.





**8. Preventive support and early help are valued and seen as essential to staying well**

People welcomed activities and services that help them remain independent, active and connected – including social prescribing, wellbeing groups and community-based support. They also described gaps in early intervention and difficulty finding information about help before issues escalate. People want more local, easy options to avoid unnecessary deterioration or crisis.



**9. NHS dentistry is valued where available, but access remains extremely challenging**

Most feedback on NHS dentistry focused on the difficulty of registering, long waits, cancelled appointments or travelling long distances, with many relying on private care they cannot afford. People want fair, local access to essential dental treatment. People praised the quality of NHS dental care and the reassurance of routine check-ups where they could access them.



**10. Mental health support brings big benefits, but access needs to be earlier and more consistent**

Compassionate mental health workers, supportive community groups and youth services were described as lifelines for many people. Yet long waits, high thresholds and limited local provision often meant help arrived too late. People want more timely, joined-up and inclusive mental health support for both adults and young people.



For more detail on these key findings, see Section 5 - Key findings: Further detail

**How insight was analysed – assurance on methodology and use of artificial intelligence (AI)**

This report has been written using a structured, human-led methodology supported by AI technology. To ensure accuracy, safety and transparency, the Engagement Team has developed a new AI Verification Framework with 11 core principles covering data cleaning, anonymisation, thematic analysis, human oversight and auditability. The framework was developed through learning from previous engagement work, in-depth research, and alignment with ICS, NHS England and national guidance on the safe and ethical use of AI.

**AI was used only to support the organisation and synthesis of large volumes of feedback.** It assisted with grouping similar comments, checking consistency across feedback findings highlighting recurring topics. **At no stage did AI make decisions, generate themes autonomously or interpret findings without human review.** Every theme, conclusion and interpretation in this report has been created, verified and approved by experienced human analysts within the NHS Somerset Engagement Team.

This approach ensures that all outputs are robust, transparent and fully traceable. It strengthens the pace, consistency and auditability of analysis while maintaining human judgement as the guiding factor throughout. It is also in line with Government intent for the public sector to use AI to improve efficiency. All feedback processed by AI was fully anonymised in line with NHS data protection standards, and a full audit trail has been retained as part of our commitment to integrity, accountability and public trust.

**Next steps**

**This findings report brings together overall findings alongside detailed thematic, geographical and demographic analysis from all engagement.**

It will now be shared with colleagues across Our Somerset, including Boards and leadership teams, operational teams, strategic leads and system partners, to ensure the public and patient voice continues to shape service development and, in the case of NHS Somerset, its pivotal role as a strategic commissioner.

We will also share the insight we heard from each voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCFSE) organisation who worked collaboratively with us, to enable them to gain an even better understanding of their service users' experiences of healthcare across the county.

The insight from Somerset's Big Conversation 2025 will directly inform the community services programme, the development of neighbourhood teams, primary and urgent care improvement work, and the wider ICS strategy and delivery plans. This forms part of our ongoing commitment to a clear and transparent 'you said, we will' and 'you said, we did' approach.

We are committed to demonstrating how this engagement has made a difference. **Over the coming year, we will work with colleagues and partners to develop and share public updates showing the actions taken in response to what Somerset people told us.** Our intention is to publish this update during 2026 so that people, patients and communities can see the impact of their contribution.



## 2. Context



**Somerset's Big Conversation 2025 was designed to build a clear and robust understanding of what matters most to people as the health and care system continues to evolve. It forms part of a long-term commitment to listening to people and placing lived experience at the centre of system decision-making. It built upon the following activity, which informed our methodology this year:**

### → Somerset's Big Conversation 2024

Somerset's Big Conversation 2024 provided learning on how people prefer to engage. People valued in-person conversations, local visibility, and simple, informal activities that were easy to take part in without booking or necessarily using digital tools, as well as engagement that reached rural, coastal and seldom-heard communities. This feedback led to a roadshow this year that covered both the whole county but also more targeted, communities and involved a wider range of engagement opportunities and activities. We placed a stronger emphasis on meeting people where they are.

### → Somerset's 10 Year Health Plan engagement (winter 2024/25)

Engagement for Somerset's 10 Year Health Plan reached thousands of people and highlighted three key shifts people underpinning Government thinking. This

programme used a mix of online, in-person and targeted outreach approaches, creating a broad and inclusive understanding of local priorities. These insights directly shaped the focus of Somerset's Big Conversation 2025 and informed the areas explored in greater depth.

### → Continuous engagement and insight

Throughout the year, continuous insight from ICS partners, voluntary and community organisations, Healthwatch Somerset, local councils, patient groups, carers, clinicians and community leaders helped refine the 2025 programme. These ongoing relationships helped identify participation gaps, barriers to access and the needs of particular groups, ensuring a more inclusive and responsive engagement approach grounded in lived experience.

### → Building an inclusive programme shaped by ongoing relationships

Regular collaboration across the system strengthened the design of Somerset's Big Conversation 2025. Close working with the VCFSE sector, local authorities, young people's services, carers' networks and community leaders ensured that a wide range of perspectives informed the programme and that engagement was tailored to the needs of different communities.

This year we placed a stronger emphasis on meeting people where they are

## 2. Context

### → Ensuring all engagement activity aligned to strategic workstreams

Every engagement question, activity and feedback mechanism was mapped to a specific work being undertaken across our ICS. This ensured that insight gathered directly informs ongoing system programmes and supports strategic decision-making.

### High profile topical and ongoing health service issues

**In some cases, we found evidence to show that topical issues affecting local communities reported in local media influenced the feedback we received. These issues included the following:**

#### Community hospitals

Work by Somerset NHS Foundation Trust to carry out 'test and learn' programmes at three community hospitals – Bridgwater, West Mendip (Glastonbury) and Frome – which involved the temporary closure of some of the community hospital beds to test alternative ways of caring for certain patients – prompted increased local interest, including fears about potential permanent reductions in community bed numbers. Somerset FT is also engaging with local partners in Burnham-on-Sea and Crewkerne about services at the community hospitals there.



#### Maternity services

In May, Somerset FT made the difficult decision to temporarily close its Special Care Baby Unit (SCBU) at Yeovil Hospital, leading to widespread media coverage and concern from local people and stakeholders. In October 2025, Somerset FT announced the unit would reopen in April 2026.

#### Stroke services

Following a full statutory public consultation in early 2023, NHS Somerset made a formal decision in January 2024 to provide hyper acute stroke units (HASUs) at Musgrove Park Hospital in Taunton, Dorset County Hospital in Dorchester, an acute stroke unit (ASU) at both Musgrove Park and Yeovil hospitals and a TIA (Transient Ischemic Attack) service seven days a week at MPH and five days a week at YDH. This decision continues to attract stakeholder interest.

#### Issues affecting local GP surgeries

At the time of our visits to Wellington, there was local concern about the impending closure of one of the town's GP practices – Luson Surgery – with patients moving to the town's other practice, Wellington Medical Centre. Local people were keen to talk to us about their thoughts and some people referenced it as they made their selections in our Somerset Pound activity, for example. In Minehead, general practice has been a prominent local issue since January 2024 when the CQC rated the previous operator inadequate (a situation which has since been turned around by the present operator, One Medicare).

### 3. What we did

**Between May and November 2025, Somerset's Big Conversation delivered one of the county's largest engagement programmes.**

A mixed-method approach enabled people to participate in ways that suited them, combining public events, online activities, VCFSE-led sessions, targeted outreach and flexible feedback routes. Across nine engagement approaches, 3,947 people contributed over 8,339 pieces of feedback, including feedback from targeted communities such as Core20, rural, coastal and urban areas across Somerset.

We made local people, partners and stakeholders aware of Somerset's Big Conversation 2025 through a coordinated, county-wide publicity campaign. Information was shared through NHS Somerset's website, social media channels and newsletters, alongside targeted messages through GP practices, community hospitals, libraries, Talking Cafés and voluntary and community sector (VCFSE) networks.

Parish and town councils, Healthwatch Somerset, community groups and partner organisations were asked to promote the engagement through their own channels, helping us reach diverse communities across the county. Posters, banners and printed materials were distributed to public venues, while event schedules were publicised in advance to encourage attendance at the 33 local roadshow events. VCFSE organisations

also helped spread the word through their trusted networks, ensuring people who are seldom heard – including those experiencing rural isolation, disability, mental health challenges or low income – were aware of opportunities to take part.

We also contacted local stakeholders, including Somerset Council members and MPs and encouraged them to promote the programme.



### 3. What we did – overview of engagement activities

#### Across our nine engagement approaches

1. Public community events  
**1,893 people**  
**5,000+ pieces of feedback**



2. Online surveys  
**1,247 respondents**  
**865 comments**

3. Online interactive activities – 'Pauline's Story' and 'Somerset Pound'  
**340 participants**  
**678 votes/comments**

4. VCFSE-led engagement  
**192 participants**  
**1,035 contributions**

5. Health inequalities targeted engagement  
**96 people engaged**

6. Digital communications engagement – website and social media  
**121 people**  
**125 comments**

7. Email inbox – direct feedback submissions  
**9 emails**

8. Online engagement using feedback platform 'Mentimeter'  
**39 participants**  
**78 contributions**

9. Events anonymous feedback box at public events  
**11 submissions**



Total across all nine engagement approaches  
**3,947 people engaged overall**  
**More than 8,339 pieces of feedback\***



### 3. What we did – overview of engagement activities



\*The total of over 8,339 pieces of feedback was reached by combining all contributions gathered across every engagement method, including public events, online activities, surveys, VCFSE-led sessions, health inequalities outreach and digital engagement. Each comment, vote, response or interaction that met the agreed definition of 'feedback' – as set out in the AI instruction block and applied consistently across all feedback was counted once. After cleaning the feedback data to remove duplicates, non-feedback entries and blank responses, the final verified total across all nine engagement approaches was over 8,339 pieces of genuine public feedback.

#### Across our nine engagement approaches

##### 1. Public events and community roadshow

We visited 50 locations including markets, festivals, community centres and community hospitals, using interactive tools like Pauline's Story, the Somerset Pound and comment boards. Both Pauline's Story and the Somerset Pound were co-designed with clinicians and commissioning and finance colleagues.

##### 2. Online survey

Co-designed with commissioning colleagues and widely promoted. 1,247 responses received.

##### 3. Online interactive tools

Widely shared digital versions of Pauline's Story and Somerset Pound, enabling structured public votes and comments.

##### 4. VCFSE-led engagement

Six organisations engaged seldom-heard communities through creative and accessible approaches, supported by an innovative small grant scheme.

##### 5. Health inequalities engagement

Targeting informed by Community Services Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) public health data and Core20PLUS5 priorities.

##### 6. Digital communications engagement

Feedback received via website, social media and online interactions.

##### 7. Email inbox

Direct written submissions for people who preferred private feedback.

##### 8. Mentimeter sessions

An interactive digital tool used at events and workshops that allows participants to give instant feedback, vote on options, answer questions, and share comments anonymously using their phone or a tablet.

##### 9. Anonymous feedback box

A route for anonymous feedback available at all public events.



### 3. What we did – overview of engagement activities

#### Digital communications engagement

##### The 2025 digital communications campaign for Somerset's Big Conversation achieved strong reach, high engagement and meaningful online participation across multiple platforms.

The campaign used a dedicated website landing page, two interactive "gamified" webpages (the Pauline's Story care scenario and Somerset Pound game), and four social media channels – Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Nextdoor – to spark conversation and drive people to share their views. These channels were supported by a series of organic social media posts, paid advertising, real community quotes, direct survey questions, and locally focused images that helped make the campaign feel relevant and personal across Somerset.

##### Organic posts reached over 44,000 people with an average engagement rate of 4.8%, well above national benchmarks, while paid ads extended reach to over 99,000 people, generating

##### 11,500 engagements and 4,300 clicks at a cost of only £250

Interactive content – particularly the Pauline's Story scenario and Somerset Pound game – performed strongest, driving high click-through rates (5-9%) and encouraging people to explore different care options and spending choices. Engagement was highest among older people, especially women aged 55+, while younger adults and men under 45 were less responsive online, highlighting a key area for future improvement.

Social media comments reflected a mix of constructive debate, concerns about access and communication, and strong views on local services. The campaign's dedicated webpage attracted 1,593 visitors, mostly through organic search and direct links, showing good cross-channel visibility from in-person events and wider communications.

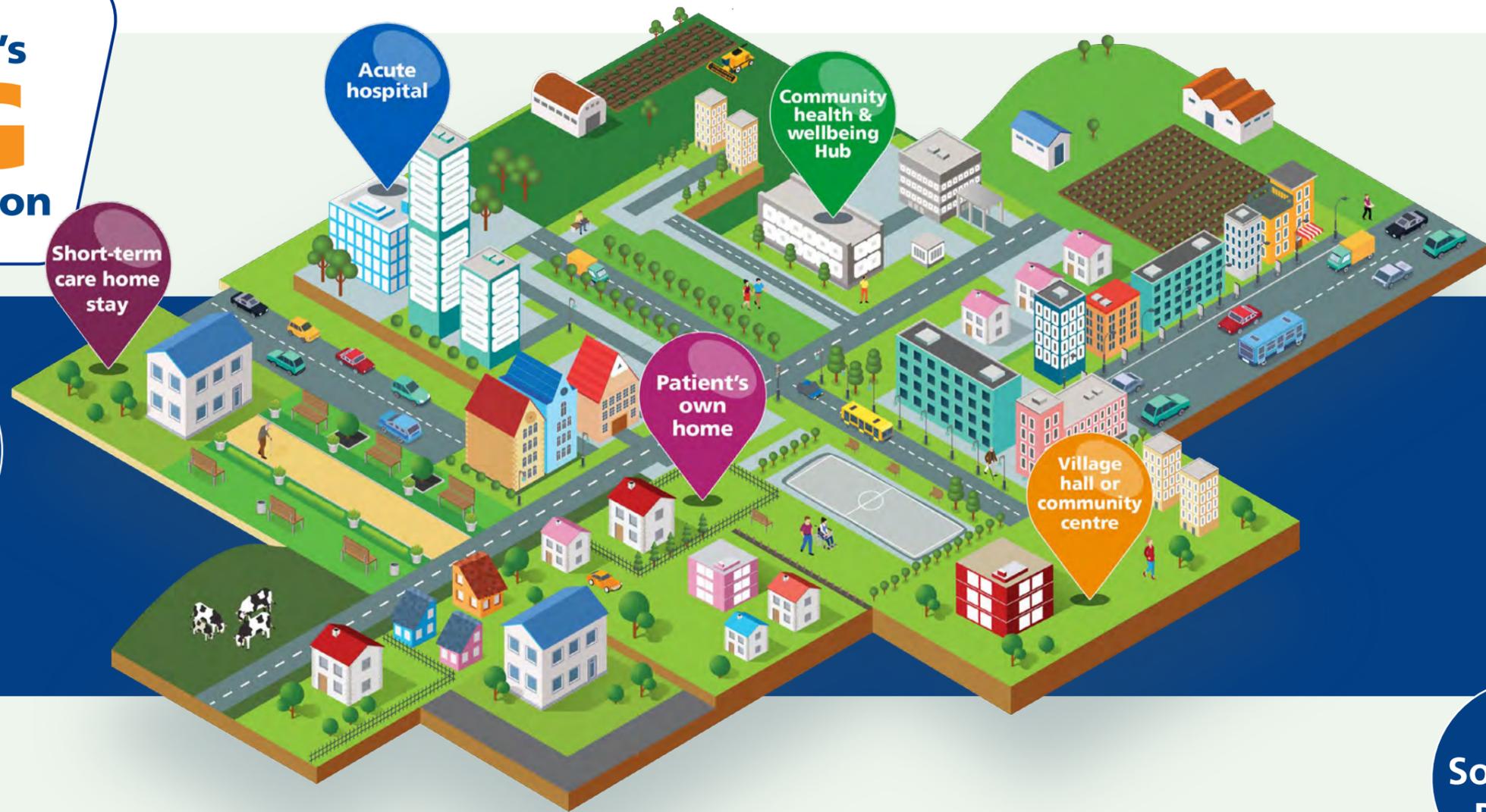
Overall, the digital activity demonstrated that interactive, transparent and locally grounded online content builds trust, encourages participation and strengthens engagement across Somerset's communities. All of the feedback heard has contributed to the overall analysis, top themes, priorities and consideration of next steps outlined in this report.

See Appendix B for further information.



Somerset's  
**BIG**  
Conversation

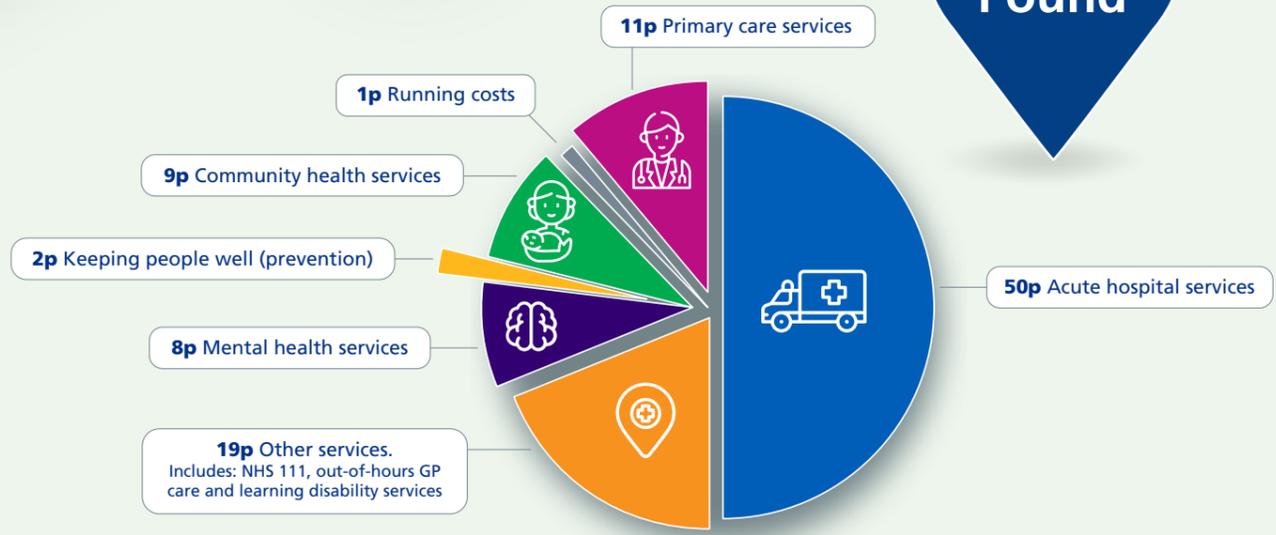
Pauline's  
Story



At our in-person events and in our online engagement, two interactive tools, using these eye-catching graphics, were front and centre



Somerset  
Pound



### 3. What we did – overview of engagement activities



#### Who we aimed to reach

The roadshow focused on involving people who often face barriers to engagement, including disabled people, carers, young people, low-income households, people who are offline or have limited ability to use digital services, minority ethnic communities, neurodivergent people, and those living in rural or coastal areas.

#### Who we heard from – a summary of respondents' demographics

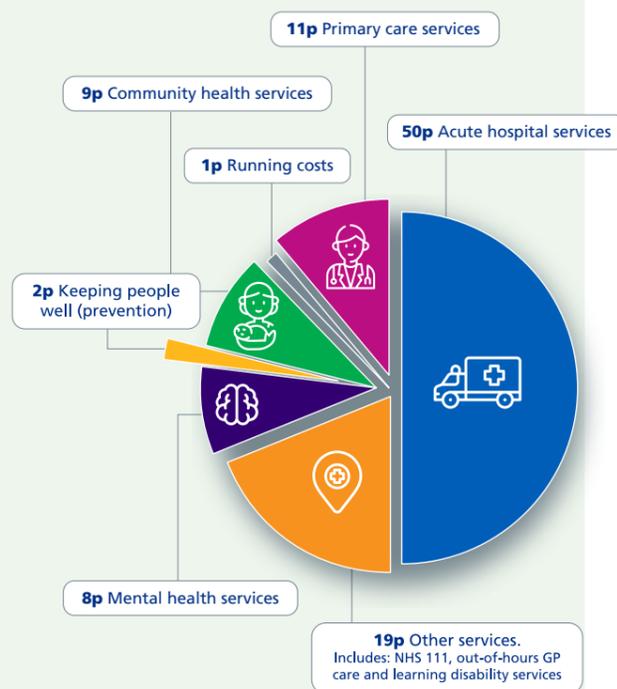
The 3,947 people who took part in Somerset's Big Conversation 2025 reflected a broad cross-section of the county's population.

Across 3,947 participants, the strongest demographic picture comes from the online survey (1,247 people), which shows engagement was highest among women (62%), older adults (45-64: 36%; 65+: 33%), and people living with long-term conditions (32%). Most participants identified as White British (93%), reflecting Somerset's population profile, while carers made up nearly a quarter of respondents. Geographically, engagement covered all former district areas, with the largest share from Taunton Deane and West Somerset. Although not all engagement strands collected demographic data, the available information shows broad participation across Somerset's rural, coastal and urban communities, with consistently strong input from older adults, carers and people with complex or ongoing health needs.

#### Participation included:

- **Older adults**, who formed a significant proportion of public event attendees.
- **Children, young people and families**, engaged through VCFSE partners, youth organisations and online tools.

- **Disabled people and people with long-term conditions**, including those supported by carers and community groups.
- **Carers and unpaid family supporters**, many of whom described challenges in navigating multiple services.
- **People living in rural and coastal communities**, who shared strong insight into transport barriers, digital exclusion and limited service choice.
- **People experiencing inequalities**, including those from Core20PLUS5, low-income households and people with limited digital access.
- **Neurodivergent people and individuals with learning disabilities**, supported through accessible, creative VCFSE-led engagement.
- **Adults and young people experiencing mental ill-health**, engaged through community mental health organisations



### 3. What we did – overview of engagement activities

#### Online survey – demographic information

Across Somerset's Big Conversation 2025, thousands of people took part, and a demographic overview of who we spoke to at each event and in each workshop was noted. However, detailed, reliable and rigorous demographic information was captured most consistently through the online survey, which provides our clearest picture of who contributed online.

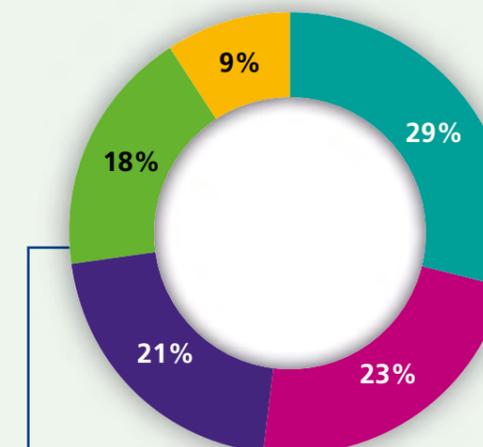
#### Demographic Statistics – from online survey

##### Age

- 19% aged 75+
- 41% aged 55–74
- 23% aged 35–54
- 6% aged 25–34
- 2% aged 16–24
- (9% prefer not to say)

##### Gender

- 66% women
- 32% men
- 2% other / prefer not to say



#### Geography

Representation from all five former district areas:

- 29% South Somerset
- 23% Taunton Deane
- 21% Sedgemoor
- 18% Mendip
- 9% West Somerset

#### Disability / Long-Term Condition

- 54% reported a disability or long-term health condition
- 32% identified as having mobility issues, chronic illness or fluctuating conditions

#### Carer Status

- 28% were unpaid carers
- 9% cared for someone outside their household

#### Ethnicity

- 95% White British / White Other
- 5% minority ethnic backgrounds (reflective of Somerset's population profile)

#### Parent / Guardian

- 22% were parents of children under 18
- 8% had children with SEND or additional needs

### 3. What we did – overview of engagement activities



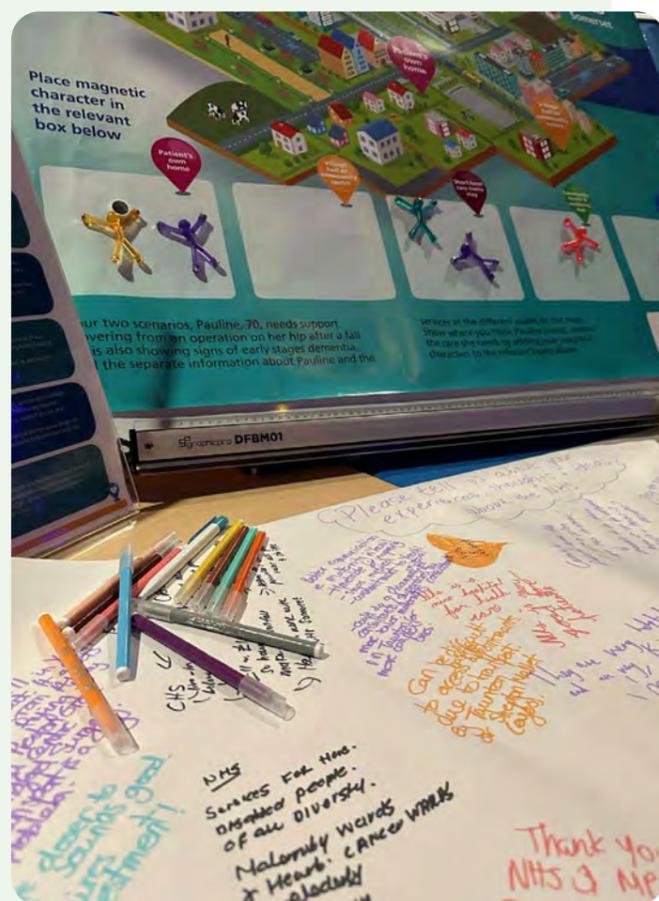
#### Public engagement events – demographic information

Across the 33 public events, we heard from a wide mix of people, including older adults, carers, people with long-term conditions, parents, working-age adults and those living in rural and coastal areas.

Because events were held in markets, high streets, Talking Cafes, community hospitals and town centres, they attracted people who may not usually take part in NHS engagement, including people who are digitally excluded, people on low incomes, neurodivergent individuals, disabled people and those linked to community groups. Although detailed demographics were not recorded for every attendee, observational evidence shows that public events successfully reached a broad cross-section of ages, backgrounds and local communities, helping ensure voices not captured through online methods were heard.

#### Limitations

The above information was used when designing our targeted engagement activities in October. We knew that some groups remain under-represented, including some minority ethnic communities, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, people without digital access or who faced challenges with travel who did not attend events, and people experiencing homelessness. These limitations reflect both participation patterns and gaps in method design, which will be considered for future engagement programmes.



Public events successfully reached a broad cross-section of people, whose voices were not captured through online methods



### 4. Key findings: further detail



#### As highlighted in the Executive Summary, feedback from Somerset's Big Conversation 2025 led to ten key findings across all engagement approaches.

These key findings are ranked based on frequency of mention, strength of sentiment when responding and consistency across the various demographic and geographic groups.

They were identified through a structured, human-led process that used AI to consider frequency, strength of feeling and consistency across all nine engagement activities. As in-house specialists who had co-ordinated and run events, we reviewed and validated each theme to confirm that it accurately represented what people across Somerset had told us.

The ten key findings offer a clear and compelling picture of what matters most to people across Somerset. While each finding highlights challenges within services, collectively they indicate signs of a health system under pressure, communities striving for more reliable and local support, and a public that continues to deeply value compassionate staff and community-based care. Importantly, the themes also reveal strong alignment between what people say they need and the direction of current system priorities, particularly around strengthening neighbourhood services, improving access, and investing in prevention and early help.

#### 1 GP access, continuity and reception-led triage

##### What people value

People praised the compassion and professionalism of GP staff and valued continuity with clinicians who know them well. Once people secured an appointment, most reported feeling listened to and well cared for.

##### What people want improved

The most common concerns were long waits for appointments, difficulty getting through on the phone, and digital systems that feel complex or inaccessible. People described frustration with having to explain their issue to reception staff before getting an appointment, cancelled appointments and limited continuity, particularly for those with ongoing conditions.

##### Who said this

Raised most strongly by older adults, carers, people with long-term conditions and people who are offline or have limited ability to use digital services, particularly in rural and coastal areas.

##### In your words

**"Either can't get through to surgery or a very long wait – sometimes 7 or 8 weeks."**

**"Too much form filling just to get a telephone call."**

**"My appointment was cancelled four times before I was finally seen."**



## 4. Key findings: further detail



### 2 Community hospitals

#### What people value

People consistently described community hospitals as calm, familiar and local places where recovery feels safer and more personal. Local, community settings of care, UTCs, rehabilitation services and the continuity offered by longstanding teams were viewed as essential, especially for older adults and rural communities.

#### What people want improved

People were concerned about limited community bed availability, reduced UTC hours, uncertainty about future provision and the impact of travelling long distances when local services are unavailable. Confusion about bed allocation and weekend cover for certain services were common issues.

#### Who said this

Raised strongly by older adults, carers, disabled people and rural/coastal communities in West Somerset, Sedgemoor, Mendip and South Somerset.

#### In your words

**"Minehead Hospital is a lifeline – without it we'd be cut off."**

**"Closing beds will break families – we can't travel miles every day."**

**"Being close to home meant my family could visit."**



### 3 Workforce pressures and reliability of care

#### What people value

People praised the kindness, professionalism and resilience of staff across primary, community, mental health and acute services. Individual workers were frequently described as going "above and beyond," even under extreme pressure.

#### What people want improved

Concerns centred on staff shortages affecting continuity, reliability and timeliness of care – including late or missed home-care visits, reduced therapy availability, overstretched community teams and burnout. People linked workforce gaps directly to delays in discharge and inconsistent follow-up.

#### Who said this

Raised most by older adults, carers and people receiving home-based or long-term condition support, especially in rural and coastal areas.

#### In your words

**"Staff are doing their best but there just aren't enough of them."**

**"My carers come late or not at all because the team is overstretched."**

**"Therapy stopped for weeks because there weren't enough physios."**



## 4. Key findings: further detail



### 4 Home-based care, reablement and 'home first' confidence

#### What people value

Many welcomed recovering at home when visits were reliable, therapy was consistent and communication worked well. People appreciated staff who supported rehabilitation, helped them regain independence and provided personalised care.

#### What people want improved

People raised concerns about missed visits, rushed care, lack of weekend cover, poor coordination and feeling unprepared after discharge. People supported "home first" only when services could guarantee safety, reliability and timely therapy.

#### Who said this

Raised strongly by carers, older adults, people with mobility issues, and those living alone or in rural areas.

#### In your words

**"I'm not against being at home, but only if the care actually turns up."**

**"So long as adequate care facilities are in place... it may be better for them to recover in their own familiar surroundings."**

**"Home first is acceptable when appropriate support is in place; otherwise, people look to structured community options."**



### 5 Transport, rurality and difficulty reaching services

#### What people value

People appreciated local clinics, community hospitals, UTCs and outreach services that reduced travel. Community transport, voluntary drivers and neighbours were praised for enabling essential appointments.

#### What people want improved

Transport barriers were one of the most universal issues raised. People described infrequent buses, expensive taxis, long journeys to acute hospitals and missed appointments due to unreliable transport. Rurality was seen as a major driver of inequality.

#### Who said this

Raised across all demographics, with the strongest feedback from older adults, disabled people, low-income households and rural/coastal areas.

#### In your words

**"If you don't drive, you simply can't get to hospital appointments."**

**"The buses don't run when I need them – I had to cancel physio."**

**"Travel costs make it impossible to attend regular appointments."**

#### 4. Key findings: further detail



### 6 Discharge processes and recovery pathways

#### What people value

Positive experiences were described when communication was clear, equipment arrived on time and therapy or carers started promptly. People valued staff who prepared them and their families well for going home.

#### What people want improved

People frequently reported inconsistent discharge processes, lack of follow-up, late or missing equipment and delays in home-care or therapy starting. Many felt unprepared or unsafe after discharge and unsure who to contact when support broke down.

#### Who said this

Raised strongly by carers, older adults, people with reduced mobility and those living alone.

#### In your words

**"We were sent home without any of the equipment we were promised."**

**"No one turned up for two days after discharge – we felt abandoned."**

**"The communication between hospital and home care didn't join up."**



### 7 Digital access, online tools and the need for non-digital options

#### What people value

People who are confident online found digital tools helpful for quick tasks, repeat prescriptions and accessing simple advice. Some valued the convenience of online forms and virtual support.

#### What people want improved

Digital-only routes created significant barriers for older adults, disabled people, those with poor connectivity and people with low digital confidence. Online forms were often described as stressful, confusing or inaccessible. People were clear they still need the option to speak to a person.

#### Who said this

Raised mainly by older adults, disabled people, carers, low-income households and rural communities.

#### In your words

**"I can't use the online forms – they're too complicated."**

**"I like being able to do things online, but not everyone can."**

**"Making communication easier, faster and providing patients better, clearer access to empower ownership over one's healthcare is a good thing."**



#### 4. Key findings: further detail



### 8 Prevention, early help and staying well

#### What people value

People welcomed support that keeps them independent, connected and able to manage long-term conditions – including social prescribing, community groups, and proactive health checks.

#### What people want improved

People described gaps in early support, limited local activities, delayed access to help and difficulty finding information about what's available. Many wanted more easy-to-access community-based options to prevent issues escalating into a need for care in an acute hospital.

#### Who said this

Raised strongly by older adults, carers, people with chronic conditions and those experiencing isolation.

#### In your words

**"If there was help earlier, I wouldn't have ended up in A&E."**

**"We need more in the community to keep us active and connected."**

**"People don't know what support is out there – it's hard to find."**



### 9 Access to NHS dentistry

#### What people value

Where NHS dentistry is available, people praised the quality of care and the reassurance of routine appointments for adults and children.

#### What people want improved

The majority of feedback focused on an inability to access NHS dentistry at all. People reported long waits, no registration options, cancelled appointments, high private costs and travelling long distances for treatment.

#### Who said this

Raised consistently across all demographics, with particular concern from families, low-income households and older adults.

#### In your words

**"There are no NHS dentists taking patients – nowhere at all."**

**"I had to travel miles and still pay privately."**

**"Happy with all NHS services and have GP and dentist."**



## 4. Key findings: further detail



### 10 Mental health support for adults and young people

#### What people value

People shared positive experiences of compassionate mental health workers, supportive community groups and inclusive youth organisations. Trusted relationships were highly valued.

#### What people want improved

People described long waits, having to reach a severe need before support is offered, unclear pathways and limited early help. Young people highlighted a lack of accessible local support and delays in counselling. Adults reported inconsistent follow-up and gaps between services.

#### Who said this

Raised by young people, parents, carers, adults experiencing mental ill-health and VCFSE partners supporting these groups.

#### In your words

**“We waited months for support and by then things had got worse.”**

**“There’s nowhere for young people to go when they’re struggling.”**

**“Mental health [services] is the reason I’m still here – it needs more investment.”**

**“The community garden project lifted my mood and gave me mental space to focus on other parts of my life.”**



## 4 Key findings: further detail

### Spotlight on spending – seeking public views on how the NHS should spend its money

Throughout the 2025 programme, two main interactive tools were used at our engagement events and online – Pauline’s Story and the Somerset Pound. Here we focus on the Somerset Pound. For more on Pauline’s Story, see the Community Services section of the report.

#### The Somerset Pound

In January 2025, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Wes Streeting, made it clear that the NHS must “live within its means” and that “the culture of routine overspending without consequences is over.” He also emphasised that “tough decisions need to be made and local systems should feel empowered to make them.”

Recognising that Somerset will have to make difficult financial decisions now and in the future, we set out to understand how local people think NHS money should be used. We worked with finance colleagues to design a simple engagement activity – the Somerset Pound – which was available as a hands-on activity at our events, and as an online ‘game’.



#### How the activity worked

Using a script, engagement colleagues encouraged participants to use three coloured coins to indicate their spending preferences:

- **Blue coin** – to show their choice on where to spend a little less
- **Gold coin** – their top priority for spending a little more
- **Silver coin** – their second choice for spending a little more

Participants were shown a pie chart setting out how we currently spend our money and were asked to consider five areas of healthcare when choosing:

- **Acute hospitals**
- **Primary care (GP practices, dentistry, pharmacy and optometry)**
- **Mental health services**
- **Community services**
- **Prevention / “keeping people well”**

## 4 Key findings: further detail



### Somerset Pound - outcomes across all engagement approaches

Service Area	Top choice to spend a little more (gold)	Second choice to spend a little more (silver)	Spend a little more (gold + silver)	Spend a little less (blue)	
Acute hospitals	54	62	116	111	
Primary care	88	86	174	35	
Mental health	63	63	126	36	
Community services	97	79	176	37	
Keeping people well	24	27	51	122	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>326</b>	<b>317</b>		<b>341</b>	<b>984</b>

#### Key insights:

- Most blue coins (spend a little less): keeping people well (122) and acute hospitals (111).
- Most gold votes (spend a little more): community services (97) and primary care (88).
- Combining the choices to spend a little more (silver + gold) showed that community services (176) and primary care (174) were, again, the most popular.
- When it comes to acute care, people are conflicted – 111 selected it as an area where investment could be decreased slightly, perhaps recognising that the sector currently receives about half of NHS Somerset’s budget and there is Government direction to ‘left shift’ spending from treatment to keeping people well. Meanwhile, 116 people selected it to receive a little more money, showing how important people view acute services.
- The highest silver votes were similar across primary care (86), community services (79), acute hospitals (62).

#### Blue coin and the choice to spend less

We know through our conversations at in-person engagement events that allocating the blue coin to spend a little somewhere was a challenging decision and often took people a long time. A number of people declined to allocate the blue coin and recorded their reasons on the feedback sheet. In one instance, a local MP who was taking part refused to allocate the blue coin and instead wrote on the feedback sheet: ‘Take money from profits of banks and energy companies and not NHS services’.

#### In your words

**“It’s really hard to cut anything – all of these matter.”**

**“I don’t want to spend the blue coin if it affects essential care.”**

**“Everything is important; how do you choose?”**

## 5. Feedback from different parts of Somerset



### The key findings above show what mattered most overall across Somerset’s Big Conversation 2025.

This section builds on those findings by segmenting our audience – highlighting what was most important to people in different parts of Somerset using the same method of combining the frequency of comments, the strength of feeling, and the consistency of feedback across engagement approaches.

For this purpose, we have chosen to use the five former district council areas that were in place pre-2019, as many people still use them to describe where they live in Somerset.

Each section includes general findings and a focus on general practice because it generated the highest volume of feedback and the strongest emotional responses across Somerset’s Big Conversation.

### 1. West Somerset

#### General findings

In West Somerset, the strongest and most consistent themes were transport barriers, long travel distances for hospital care and difficulty accessing services without reliable cars or public transport. People expressed very strong emotional attachment to community hospitals and UTCs, which were frequently praised as trusted, local and essential given the area’s isolation. Digital exclusion also appeared often, particularly among older adults, shaping how people experience the wider system. Concerns about NHS dentistry and youth mental health support were raised frequently and with notable emotional weight.

#### General practice

General care feedback in West Somerset centred on concerns about access, especially difficulty using online forms or navigating phone systems. However, people consistently highlighted the value of trusted relationships with local practice teams, describing GPs and reception staff as kind and supportive once contact was made. The frequency and consistency of comments about digital access challenges suggest this is the key barrier for many residents, rather than dissatisfaction with care itself.

The strongest and most consistent themes were transport barriers, long travel distances for hospital care and difficulty accessing services



## 2. Sedgemoor

### General findings

Sedgemoor generated some of the highest volumes of feedback, reflecting rapid population growth and pressure on local services. People often spoke positively about community hospitals and local urgent care, while concerns about transport in rural villages were raised repeatedly. NHS dentistry emerged as a major challenge, particularly for families, appearing frequently and with strong emotional tone. Residents also shared a balanced view of system pressures, recognising where staff were doing their best in difficult circumstances.

### General practice

Primary care feedback was dominated by difficulties getting through by phone, appointment availability and the strain on busy practices. Despite this, people frequently praised staff for their friendliness, professionalism and support, especially once they were seen. Sedgemoor residents expressed a desire for more responsive access routes, but comments were framed within an understanding of the pressures teams face. The strongest positive sentiment centred on feeling heard and cared for by local clinicians.



## 3. Taunton Deane

### General findings

Taunton Deane residents raised the most feedback about hospital and specialist care, showing how important Musgrove Park Hospital and specialist services are locally. People expressed strong positive sentiment about the professionalism, expertise and kindness of hospital teams, alongside frustration about waits and cancellations. Digital access generated more positive sentiment here than elsewhere, particularly among commuters and younger adults who found online systems convenient.

### General practice

Primary care themes in Taunton Deane showed a balanced picture, with both appreciation and concern appearing frequently. Many residents highlighted high-quality care, good clinical advice and professional reception teams, reinforcing the value placed on local practices. Concerns focused mainly on demand, availability and the pressure on appointment systems, but these were framed by an understanding of the volume of people using services in a busy urban area. Positive experiences once seen were a strong and consistent theme.

## 4. South Somerset

### General findings

South Somerset feedback highlighted very strong themes around mental health and neurodiversity support, particularly among young people and parents. Rural transport difficulties, especially travelling to Yeovil Hospital, appeared frequently and with emotional intensity. People expressed high trust and appreciation for community hospitals and UTCs, which were viewed as reliable and accessible. Prevention and wellbeing activities were mentioned more often here than in any other district, reflecting strong local interest.

### General practice

Primary care feedback reflected the importance of continuity, compassion and supportive reception teams, with many residents describing positive relationships with their practices. At the same time, concerns about waiting times, delayed referrals and challenges accessing mental health or neurodiversity pathways emerged consistently, especially among families. The tone of comments suggested people value their practices but feel let down by system pressures that delay access to the support they need.

## 5. Mendip

### General findings

Mendip residents discussed a wide range of services, but the strongest and most consistent themes related to mental health support, community-based services and transport barriers. Voluntary and community organisations received particularly high praise, reflecting strong local reliance on VCSE support. Feedback also highlighted variation in community service availability and interest in prevention and wellbeing hubs, which were viewed positively across different parts of the district.

### General practice

Mendip residents placed significant value on long-standing GP–patient relationships and the personalised care offered by practice teams. While people shared concerns about appointment availability, follow-up delays and access to mental health support through GP routes, these comments were generally balanced with recognition of how hard local staff work under pressure. Positive sentiment was especially strong where continuity was maintained and people felt known by their practice.

South Somerset feedback highlighted very strong themes around **mental health and neurodiversity support**

## 6. Focus on community services



## 6. Focus on community services

**Fit for the Future: 10-Year Health Plan for England was published by the Government in July 2025. The plan sets out three major “radical shifts” for the NHS: hospital to community, analogue to digital, and sickness to prevention.**

These national priorities closely align with NHS Somerset’s own direction of travel and will remain central to our work over the coming years.

Previous engagement programmes in Somerset have consistently shown that community services – including those provided through community hospitals – are particularly important to local people. Some community hospital beds in Somerset have been temporarily closed for several years, and people have been clear that they want to be involved in decisions about how community services should be delivered in their area.

Reflecting this, a key aim of Somerset’s Big Conversation 2025 was to gather insight to inform the planning of future community services and to understand public views on the national shifts from hospital to community and sickness to prevention.

The importance of community services emerged as a major theme across the programme. In the online survey alone, over 62% of free-text comments referenced at least one aspect of community-based care.

### Summary of findings

**People described community services as essential and closely linked them to safe, timely care closer to home. This section explores what we heard about community hospitals, community beds, reablement services, home-based care, neighbourhood teams and primary care as part of the wider community system.**

- Community services were widely viewed as the infrastructure that keeps people well, supporting prevention, avoiding unnecessary hospital admissions and enabling safe discharge.
- **Primary care remained central to how people understand community services.** Respondents expressed strong trust in staff across GP practices and pharmacies, though many described access challenges – particularly around appointments, waiting times and contact routes.

- People consistently prioritised maintaining and strengthening community hospitals and **improving access to therapy and reablement**, ensuring reliable home-based care, and improving coordination between health and social care. Across all engagement, people spoke about the need for consistent visits, timely therapy and confidence that support would be available when required.
- Community hospitals were often described as vital local assets, with some participants calling them “lifelines” – particularly in rural and coastal areas where travel to acute hospitals is more difficult. There was strong interest in community beds and **community hospitals were referred to as trusted, local spaces for recovery, rehabilitation and step-down care**, particularly in rural and coastal areas where travel to acute hospitals is more difficult.
- There was a desire to improve coordination between health and social care. Coordination issues were raised across all engagement channels. **People described repeating information to different teams**, unclear discharge planning and confusion about who was responsible for follow-up. They valued joined-up communication and smoother transitions between services.
- People wanted fair access for rural, coastal and isolated communities. People highlighted the challenges of long travel distances, limited buses and high transport costs when services are not available locally. **Feedback emphasised the importance of protecting local community hospitals and improving transport options to ensure fair access.** Feedback from carers, older adults, disabled people, young people and those in more deprived areas highlighted how gaps in transport, digital access, home care and community support can increase pressure on those already carrying the greatest burden.
- While experiences varied across localities and demographic groups, the overarching message was clear: **people in Somerset want well-resourced, coordinated community services** delivered by local teams who understand the communities they serve.



**Community services** were widely viewed as the infrastructure that keeps people well

## 6. Focus on community services



What 'community services' means to people

Across all engagement approaches, people consistently described community services in terms of proximity, safety, dependability and trust. At engagement events, we explained community services as those close to where you live.

People described community services as:

- reliable, accessible and local
- places where recovery feels safer and more personal
- services that support independence and dignity
- alternatives to acute care that reduce travel and stress
- a vital link between GPs, hospitals, home care and social care

In your words

"Community services mean knowing help is close by."

"It's about feeling safe and not being miles from home."

"Good community support is what stops people going back into hospital."



"Good community support is what stops people going back into hospital."



## 6. Focus on community services

### Pauline's Story – a centrepiece for engagement on community services

#### Why we developed this activity

For this activity, we focused on one aspect of community care – recovery, reablement and rehabilitation after a hospital stay due to a fall. We were keen to know what people thought about the various places this care could be delivered and so presented them with brief information about advantages and disadvantages and asked them to make a choice.

A second question asked respondents to use the same information about those locations to choose where Pauline could get support following a diagnosis of early stages dementia.

#### How the activity was used

- Pauline's Story was used at in-person public events, where our teams used a script to guide conversations and invited people to place a 'Pauline' character on a magnetic board to show their choice.
- It was also promoted online as an interactive digital 'game', allowing participants to work through the scenario step by step and leave free-text comments.
- Pauline's Story was included as an activity in the Mentimeter online feedback work for VCFSE and other targeted groups in October.

**The five options for the two questions – supported by information about the advantages and disadvantages of each – were:**

- At home
- At a local village hall or community centre (delivered through neighbourhood working)

The scenario encouraged people to **weigh up practicalities, risks and personal values**, resulting in more reflective and realistic feedback than a standard survey question.

- At a Community Health and Wellbeing Hub (similar to a community hospital)
- A short term (NHS-funded) stay in a local care home
- At an acute hospital (like Yeovil Hospital or Musgrove Park Hospital in Taunton)

The scenario encouraged people to weigh up practicalities, risks and personal values, resulting in more reflective and realistic feedback than a standard survey question.

A total of 786 people took part in the Pauline activity across the four engagement opportunities.

## 6. Focus on community services

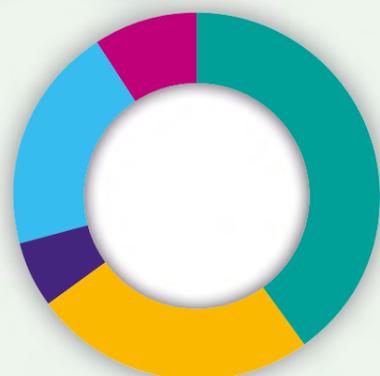
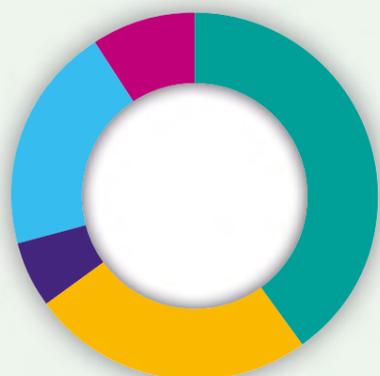
A total of 786 people took part in the Pauline activity across the four engagement opportunities.

### Quantitative findings

Participants by engagement opportunity

- Online engagement activity: **357 participants**
- In-person public events: **374 participants**
- VCFSE and workshop settings: **53 participants**
- Health Inequalities Mentimeter (carers and citizen hubs): **2 participants**

Total participants: 786



### Q1 Where should Pauline recover after her hospital stay following a fall?

	Home	481	40%
	Community health and wellbeing hub	296	25%
	Village Hall / community centre	72	6%
	Short term care home stay	247	20%
	Acute hospital	119	9%

### Q2 Where should Pauline get support after her diagnosis of early stages dementia?

	Home	184	18%
	Community health and wellbeing hub	310	30%
	Village Hall / community centre	281	27%
	Short term care home stay	196	19%
	Acute hospital	61	6%

## 6. Focus on community services

### What people told us

#### Question 1. Where should Pauline recover after her hospital stay following a fall?

- **The data shows that when it comes to reablement and rehabilitation, there is strong support (40%) for recovering at home.** The home setting was associated with comfort, familiarity, maintaining independence and a faster recovery. However, in our conversations with people, they often made it clear that they only supported this if home services were reliable, coordinated and well-resourced.
- Taken as a whole, community settings (home, health and wellbeing hub, village hall and short-term care home stay) received the vast majority (91%) of support, with remaining in an acute hospital only attracting around 10%.
- One in four people chose the health and wellbeing hub (25%), indicating faith in community in-patient beds.
- One in five people opted for a short-term care home stay (20%). In our conversations, it was apparent that there was some variation in people's approach to the care home stay depending on whether they imagined themselves (less likely to choose) or an elderly relative (more likely to choose) as the recipient of the care.
- When we were aware that the participant was a health and care professional, they were very likely to choose home as Pauline's destination.

The home setting was associated with comfort, familiarity, maintaining independence and a faster recovery.



Overall, community settings were the favoured locations at 94% with only around one in 20 (6%) choosing an acute hospital as appropriate.



**Question 2. Where should Pauline get support after her diagnosis of early stages dementia?**

- **At 30%, the most popular option was in a local community health and wellbeing hub, closely followed by 27% choosing a local village or community hall.** This suggests that people recognised Pauline needed services to help her stay well and manage her condition – such as peer support groups, support from VCFSE organisations and advice – and felt this support should be convenient and local.
- Overall, community settings were the favoured locations at 94% with only around one in 20 (6%) choosing an acute hospital as appropriate. These settings were viewed as safer and more structured alternatives to home that still feel local and non-medical, reducing the stress and travel burden associated with acute hospitals. This indicates support for Somerset and Government strategy to deliver a Neighbourhood Health Service.
- These patterns indicate broad support for Somerset’s and the Government’s direction of travel toward neighbourhood health services that strengthen local support, prevention and community-based care.
- The same preference patterns appeared across online participants, attendees at public events, VCFSE groups, younger and older people, and carers.



**Focus on types of community services**

**A. Community hospitals**

Across all engagement activities, people displayed high levels of enthusiasm about their community hospitals, describing them as calm, familiar and local places where recovery feels safer and more personal.

Being close to home, supported by staff who know the community, was described as central to people’s confidence, wellbeing and rehabilitation. People consistently emphasised the value of local settings of care, urgent care access, rehabilitation services and the continuity offered by longstanding community hospital teams, often describing these services as essential – particularly for older adults, carers, people in rural and coastal areas, and those with limited transport options.

At the same time, people were not opposed to recovering at home or receiving care closer to home, provided important conditions are met. They stressed that home-based care must be reliably staffed, consistently delivered, well-coordinated with reablement and therapy, available seven days a week, and supported by clear communication across health and social care. A “home first” approach was therefore welcomed only when it feels safe, dependable and fully supported with the right resources.

**In your words**

“Being able to recover close to home makes such a difference. It feels safer and less overwhelming.”

“The staff in our community hospital know us and know the area – that familiarity really matters.”

“Rehabilitation works better when it’s calm and personal. You get that in a community hospital.”

“Without our community hospital, people would struggle. It keeps care local and dignified.”

**Main concerns**

Comments expressing concerns about community hospitals appeared across multiple feedback, including public events, social media, the inbox and VCFSE feedback. Across these sources, recurring issues included:

- Perceived or real reductions in bed numbers
- Closure risks or service downgrades
- Travel difficulty when local facilities are unavailable
- Pressure on urgent treatment centres
- Limited weekend or out-of-hours provision

**In your words**

“If our community hospital closes or loses beds, where are people meant to go?”

“When the local unit is shut, the travel is impossible for some of us – especially older people.”

“UTCs are stretched, and reduced hours mean more people ending up in A&E.”

“There’s hardly any weekend cover. It feels like services are being chipped away bit by bit.”

## 6. Focus on community services

### Home-based care and reablement

People supported a “care at home first” approach if services were staffed, reliable and joined-up.

#### Key issues raised

- Inconsistent home-care support
- Limited reablement capacity
- Delays waiting for therapy
- Lack of weekend provision
- Pressure on carers
- Variable communication with families

#### Positive reflections

Where home-based services worked well, people praised:

- Caring, skilled staff
- Good communication
- Tailored support
- Continuity of carers

#### In your words

“Care at home is brilliant when it works – but it must be safe.”

“Reablement is amazing but you can’t get it when you need it.”

“My carers are wonderful, but they are rushed off their feet.”

People described primary care as the foundation of community services

### Primary care as part of community services

Public feedback made it clear that most people experience “community services” primarily through their GP practice and wider primary care team.

In the online survey alone, difficulty accessing GP appointments was the single strongest theme, with 865 free-text comments analysed and GP access repeatedly identified as a key issue. People described primary care as the foundation of community services: the place where needs are first recognised, where care is coordinated, and where ongoing relationships with trusted staff develop.

#### Key issues raised

People talked about primary care as:

- The main gateway into the wider NHS and community services
- The place where long-term conditions are monitored and managed
- A key source of reassurance, advice and signposting
- A critical link between home, community hospitals, acute care and social care

When primary care worked well, people described GP practices as “anchors”, and staff across GP practices, community nursing and pharmacies featured frequently in positive feedback.

## 6. Focus on community services



### What is working well

Alongside concerns, there was strong positive feedback about:

- **Trust in staff** – positive examples of compassionate, skilled GP teams, pharmacists, reception staff and community nurses appear consistently across the online survey, social media and event feedback.
- **Continuity of care** – especially valued by older adults and people with long-term conditions. Older adults formed 33% of all survey respondents, and many praised long-standing GP relationships.
- **Proactive monitoring** – noted across free-text comments, particularly for people managing ongoing conditions supported by GP teams and community nursing.
- **Supportive reception and care navigation** – survey data shows significant positive sentiment related to reception staff who listen, explain processes and help people understand how to access the right care.

These strengths underpin wider confidence in community services and show what people value and want protected.

What people want to see improved

- **Access to appointments** – the strongest theme in the online survey and widely reflected across public events, social media and the anonymous feedback box.
- **Telephone and digital systems** – digital and telephone access issues were core parts of feedback, including long phone queues, automated systems and challenges with online forms.
- **Clarity about how the system works** – many people asked for clearer information on triage processes, same-

day care routes, referral pathways and follow-up.

- **Face-to-face options** – requests for more consistent in-person appointments were common, especially among older adults, people with disabilities, and those with digital access barriers.

Importantly, across all engagement opportunities, people balanced criticism with empathy – acknowledging staff pressures even while describing practical barriers.

### What this means for community services

Feedback suggests that any future model of community services will need to:

- **Treat primary care as a core part of the community system**
- **Strengthen access, communication and continuity in ways that reflect workforce pressures**
- **Improve links between GP practices, community hospitals, home-based care, mental health and social care**
- **Ensure digital tools are balanced with inclusive, non-digital routes – an issue highlighted by digital exclusion concerns across the survey, public events and social media feedback**

By addressing these issues, the system can build on high public trust in primary care staff while improving access, navigation and joined-up care – all of which strongly shape people’s day-to-day experience of community services.



## 6. Focus on community services

### Variations by demographic group

**Feedback from different demographic groups provided important insight into how community services work in practice and where the greatest pressures are felt.**

#### Carers

**Feedback from carers was sought through both general public engagement and targeted engagement.**

At events, we spoke to many paid and unpaid carers and in October, carers organisations who are part of our engagement network were contacted about the small grant scheme to fund bespoke engagement with certain groups (see below). We also worked with Somerset Council colleagues to ensure that parent carers had the opportunity to share their feedback, as well as with Healthwatch Somerset, who helped to promote the engagement opportunity through the Carers Strategic Partnership Board, comprising representatives of Our Somerset partner organisations and those with lived experience.

Structured feedback came through the dedicated carers online Mentimeter feedback tool in October 2025, where around 10 unpaid carers took part. The feedback included insight from people supporting partners with dementia, caring for children with additional needs, juggling work and caring responsibilities, or managing multiple caring roles across generations. Carers spoke openly about:

- The pressure of repeating their story
- The strain created by limited weekend or evening support
- The importance of reliable home-based care and accessible community hospitals.

Carers also contributed extensively through public events, informal conversations, and the community roadshow. While demographic data was not collected at every setting, analysis of written comments makes it clear that many attendees identified themselves as unpaid carers. People frequently used phrases such as “I look after my mum,” “I’m caring for my husband with Parkinson’s,” “I care for my disabled child,” or “I’m supporting my neighbour daily,” indicating a strong presence of carers across the engagement programme. From the number of qualitative pieces of feedback we recorded, we estimate that we spoke to approximately 45-60 unpaid carers.

Carers often contributed insight about gaps in coordination, the pressures of managing complex care at home, and the value of trusted local services. These contributions add depth to our understanding of how pressures in primary care, transport, digital access and community services directly impact those who take on caring roles. Carers consistently described gaps in coordination between hospital discharge, community therapy and home care, and emphasised how inconsistent communication can increase anxiety and risk for the people they support. They also praised individual staff for their compassion, continuity and local knowledge, and valued community hospitals, neighbourhood teams and responsive primary care when it was available

While this programme recorded valuable feedback from carers, we recognise that their voices need to be heard even more strongly in future work.



## 6. Focus on community services



### Older people

**In the online survey, 24% of respondents were aged 65+, and this group was also well represented at public events.**

Older people placed strong emphasis on:

- The value of local community hospitals and UTCs
- Challenges created by long travel distances
- The importance of continuity from familiar staff
- Difficulty using digital systems

Transport barriers and digital exclusion featured prominently in older adults’ feedback, alongside strong appreciation for community nurses, GPs and rehabilitation staff.

### Parents and families

**Parents engaged through the online survey, public events and urgent-care Mentimeter activities.**

They valued:

- Local, child-friendly urgent treatment centres
- Clear aftercare between hospital, primary care and community teams
- Continuity for children with long-term or complex needs
- Avoiding long trips for follow-up care

Families described the practical pressures of balancing travel, appointments, multiple children and work, emphasising the importance of accessible community-based support.

### Disabled people and those with long-term conditions

**In the online survey, a significant proportion of respondents identified as having a long-term condition (reported in survey demographics), and this group contributed some of the most detailed feedback.**

They highlighted:

- The importance of reliable home-based care and community nursing
- The impact of delays in therapy, reablement and specialist community support
- Transport and mobility barriers when services are far from home
- The value of staff who understand their condition and communicate well

### Young people

**Young people were strongly represented through VCFSE-led engagement, youth organisations, Mentimeter sessions and health inequalities outreach. These channels collectively engaged over 230 young people across multiple settings.**

Young people emphasised:

- The need for accessible, local mental health and wellbeing support
- Safe, youth-friendly community spaces
- Trusted relationships with youth workers or community teams
- Frustration with unclear mental health pathways or long waits

## 6. Focus on community services

### VCFSE sessions

VCFSE-led engagement provided deep, high-quality insight from people who are often under-represented, especially disabled people, neurodivergent people, carers, people with trauma histories and those with complex mental health needs.

### Key points raised

- Strong emphasis on barriers to independence, including gaps in community support.
- Insight into the needs of people with neurodivergence, sensory sensitivities and communication needs.
- Positive feedback about trusted community spaces offering safety, understanding and tailored support.
- Calls for more accessible, person-centred community mental health and wellbeing support.

### In your words

**“When support is tailored to me, I can actually make progress.”**

**“The community group is the only place I feel truly understood.”**

**“I need consistency – new staff every week makes it hard.”**

### Health inequalities (HI) targeted engagement

Health inequalities targeted engagement brought insight from people least likely to engage online or attend events.

This included low-income households, older adults, people with mobility issues and those living in isolated rural areas.

### Key issues raised

People talked about primary care as:

- Transport and distance were major barriers to accessing community hospitals or therapy.
- Participants described language and communication challenges, especially for newer communities.
- High levels of digital exclusion made online pathways impractical.
- Feelings of social isolation increased reliance on local VCFSE groups and community hubs.

### In your words

**“I can’t get to appointments if there’s no bus – it’s that simple.”**

**“Sometimes I don’t understand the letters I’m sent.”**

**“I don’t use the internet – I need someone to talk to.”**

**“The local hub is the only place I see people some weeks.”**

## 6. Focus on community services



### Feedback from the areas around the county’s community hospitals

These are 13 community hospitals in Somerset: Bridgwater, Burnham-on-Sea, Chard, Frome, Minehead, Shepton Mallet, South Petherton, West Mendip (Glastonbury), Wellington, Williton, Wincanton, Crewkerne, Dene Barton (Cotford St Luke).

For each of those areas, this section gives a summary of what we heard on any subject across all engagement approaches. It draws from feedback collected in the geographical area, mention of the given area in general feedback or where a relevant home location was given by the respondent. Naturally, the amount of feedback we received for some areas was less than others. In some cases, feedback may be based on a relatively small sample size.

→ **People in the Bridgwater area told us** they are experiencing growing pressure on the UTC and community services, making it harder to be seen quickly. Transport to Musgrove Park Hospital was a major challenge for those without a car, while staff were consistently praised for their kindness and professionalism.

### In your words

**“It’s getting busier every year; sometimes you can’t get seen when you need to.”**

**“If you don’t drive, it’s really difficult to get to appointments in Taunton.”**

**“The UTC staff are brilliant – they really put people at ease.”**

→ **People in the Burnham-on-Sea area told us** their hospital is essential for coastal communities, providing much-needed local care. Transport to Taunton was described as extremely difficult without a car, and many

expressed concern about reductions or changes to services over time.

### In your words

**“Without Burnham Hospital, we’d have nowhere local to go.”**

**“If you don’t drive, getting to Taunton is almost impossible.”**

**“It feels like we’ve lost more and more over the years.”**

→ **People in the Chard area told us** they value the personal, unhurried care from staff and rely on local clinics to avoid long travel to Yeovil or Taunton. However, limited public transport – especially early in the morning – creates barriers to accessing services.

### In your words

**“The care at Chard is always personal and unhurried.”**

**“Having clinics here means I don’t have to go to Yeovil or Taunton.”**

**“Buses are infrequent, especially early in the morning.”**

→ **People in the Frome area told us** that the UTC is highly valued and provides excellent, accessible care. While local provision supports recovery close to home, people felt that limited bed numbers mean some patients must travel further, and pressure on primary care affects wider access.

### In your words

**“The UTC in Frome is excellent – they really look after you.”**

**“There aren’t enough beds, so people get sent miles away.”**

**“It’s so hard to get a GP appointment, which puts pressure on everything else.”**



## 6. Focus on community services

→ **People in the Minehead area told us** their hospital is a lifeline because of rural isolation and long distances to acute care. Travel to Taunton was described as extremely difficult without reliable transport, and people strongly valued the community-focused support from staff.

### In your words

**"Minehead Hospital is a lifeline – without it, we'd be cut off."**

**"It takes hours to get to Taunton if you rely on public transport."**

**"The staff really understand the community – they're brilliant."**

→ **People in the Shepton Mallet area told us** staff are consistently kind, supportive and reassuring. Reduced UTC hours were a concern, meaning people sometimes had to travel further, yet local clinics were strongly valued for keeping care close to home.

### In your words

**"The staff at Shepton are always lovely – they make you feel at ease."**

**"It's hard when the UTC isn't open – we have to go further."**

**"It's great having clinics here so we don't need to travel."**

→ **People in the South Petherton area told us** they highly value the rehabilitation services and the calm, well-run environment. However, rural transport barriers make accessing the hospital difficult for people without a car.

### In your words

**"The rehab here is excellent – it really helps people."**

**"It's clean, calm and very well organised."**

**"Getting here without a car is really difficult."**

→ **People in the Glastonbury area told us** the UTC/minor injuries unit is highly valued and prevents long trips to Bath or Bristol. Transport barriers remain an issue for those without a car, but staff were frequently described as kind and caring.

### In your words

**"The UTC is fantastic – it saves a trip to Bath or Bristol."**

**"If you can't drive, it's incredibly hard to get to appointments."**

**"Staff here are always lovely – they really care."**

→ **People in the Wellington area told us** staff are consistently praised for being friendly, helpful and supportive. A reduction in UTC services caused concern, but people strongly valued the local clinics that reduce the need to travel to Taunton.

### In your words

**"The staff are brilliant – always friendly and helpful."**

**"We really need the UTC back."**

**"It helps so much having clinics here instead of going to Taunton."**



## 6. Focus on community services



→ **People in the Williton area told us** their hospital is essential due to rural isolation, with residents relying heavily on local care. Transport to Musgrove Park Hospital was a significant challenge, and people valued the familiarity and compassion of local staff.

### In your words

**"Without Williton, we'd have nothing local."**

**"It takes hours to get to Taunton by bus."**

**"The staff here know everyone."**

→ **People in the Wincanton area told us** staff provide friendly, personal care and local clinics are vital in reducing long trips to Yeovil or other acute sites. Transport barriers remained a concern, especially for those without access to a car.

### In your words

**"The staff are always lovely."**

**"I rely on the clinics here – it saves long trips."**

**"If you can't drive, getting to Yeovil is very hard."**

→ **People in the Crewkerne area told us** they value the caring, supportive staff and rely on local clinics to avoid long-distance travel. The loss of UTC services remained a notable concern.

### In your words

**"The staff here are always so kind."**

**"We need the UTC back."**

**"I'm grateful we still have clinics here."**

→ **People in the area around Dene Barton community hospital told us** staff provide kind, compassionate support and rehabilitation services make a meaningful difference to recovery. Transport to Musgrove Park Hospital was a particular challenge for those without a car.

### In your words

**"The staff at Dene Barton are wonderful."**

**"The rehab here is brilliant – it made a huge difference."**

**"Getting to Musgrove without a car is almost impossible."**



## 7. Feedback from targeted VCFSE engagement

Through a small grant scheme, six voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) organisations helped us engage with people whose voices are often missing from mainstream NHS engagement – including those facing poverty, disability, rural isolation, neurodivergence, bereavement, mental health challenges and social exclusion.

Using trusted relationships and familiar community settings enabled richer, more honest insight than we could have gathered alone. Although participation was partly self-selecting, we contacted a wide range of groups and reached communities that are typically under-represented.

This work engaged 192 people and generated over 1,000 pieces of feedback, contributing significantly to the overall themes in this report.

Across all six organisations, the feedback paints a consistent picture:

• **Local, relationship-based community support helps people feel understood, safe and connected.**

Participants consistently valued community groups, youth hubs and peer-led spaces as welcoming and non-judgemental. Trusted relationships and familiar environments made it easier for people to share their experiences openly, particularly those living with trauma, grief, autism, anxiety or long-term conditions.

• **People appreciate mainstream services but sometimes find them harder to navigate, especially when living with complex or multiple needs.**

Many valued the care they receive once in the system, but described times when processes felt difficult to access or understand. People said clearer pathways and earlier support would help them manage their needs more confidently and avoid reaching crisis points.

People appreciate mainstream services but sometimes find them harder to navigate



## 7. Feedback from targeted VCFSE engagement

• **People highlighted that factors such as rurality, disability, neurodivergence, low income, coastal isolation and LGBTQ+ identity can shape how easily they access or engage with services.**

Participants valued services that recognise these different contexts and adapt support accordingly. They also appreciated staff and organisations who take time to understand individual circumstances, communication needs, travel barriers or personal identities.

• **Staff were consistently praised, and people value joined-up, well-communicated care.**

Individuals spoke highly of clinicians, support workers and therapists who showed kindness and commitment. Where pathways felt fragmented or communication was unclear, participants said they would welcome more coordination so they can focus on their health without repeatedly explaining their story.

Individuals spoke highly of clinicians, support workers and therapists who showed kindness and commitment

• **Care at home is preferred when it feels reliable, well-resourced and supported by local services.**

Most people valued the comfort and familiarity of receiving care at home or in community settings. They felt this works best when teams have the time and continuity to offer consistent support, and when people can easily access advice, mental health input and transport when needed.





## 8. Next steps: You said – we heard – we will

### 8. Next steps: You said – we heard – we will

#### Summary

**The insight gathered through Somerset’s Big Conversation 2025 now forms a reliable evidence base for shaping future health and care services.**

The next steps focus on turning what people told us into practical action, informing how programmes plan, invest and redesign services. We will also continue to let the public know what we have done with their feedback through our ongoing “you said, we did / we will” commitments.

#### How findings will shape system programmes

Insight from the engagement will be shared directly with leads across community services, primary and urgent care, mental health, children and young people’s services, acute flow and discharge, digital, access, transport and health inequalities. Each workstream will use the feedback to inform redesign, improvement or investment decisions.

#### Strengthening neighbourhood and locality planning

Community-level findings – including detailed feedback from the 13 community hospital areas – will be used by neighbourhood-based teams, primary care networks and wider partners to support neighbourhood planning. This will help shape decisions about access, transport, community hospital development, prevention activity and local workforce considerations.

#### Informing the development of community services

Public feedback will directly influence work on developing community services in line with local strategy and the national 10 Year Health Plan to consider community bed capacity, reablement and therapy services, reliability of home-based care and integration between health and social care. The insight also helps identify where access is most affected by rurality, coastal isolation or deprivation.

#### Supporting prioritisation and future business cases

People across Somerset gave a clear mandate for investment in primary care access, mental health support, community hospitals, rehabilitation and neighbourhood-based services. These priorities will be used to shape business cases, commissioning plans and strategic investment decisions.



#### Ongoing involvement of the public, VCFSE partners and independent voices

We will share findings back with communities, work with VCFSE partners to co-design solutions and ensure there remains a clear and independent public voice. Engagement will continue to target groups most likely to experience inequality.

#### Strengthening engagement and insight, including the use of AI

We will continue to embed the AI Verification Framework to ensure that any

AI-enabled analysis remains transparent, accurate and fully overseen by humans. We will also keep improving engagement tools and methods to reach a wider and more diverse range of people.

#### “You said – we will – we did”

To demonstrate how feedback is shaping action, we will share clear, public-facing commitment and also updates on our actions, to show how the public voice is at the heart of everything we do.



## 9. Methodology: Use of AI technology for engagement findings analysis and reporting

**This report was produced using a structured methodology that combined detailed human analysis with carefully governed use of artificial intelligence (AI).**

This enabled the Engagement Team to analyse thousands of comments consistently and transparently, while ensuring the public voice remained central.

### AI Verification Framework

A dedicated AI verification framework – built around 11 principles, including human oversight, transparency, accuracy, fairness and alignment with ICS/NHSE guidance – ensured AI supported rather than replaced human judgement. These principles guided the safe, responsible and auditable use of AI throughout the project.

### Approved AI use

Only approved AI tools (Microsoft Copilot) were used, and only for defined tasks such as grouping comments or producing first-draft summaries. All themes, interpretations, quotes and narratives were created, checked and approved by the Engagement Team.

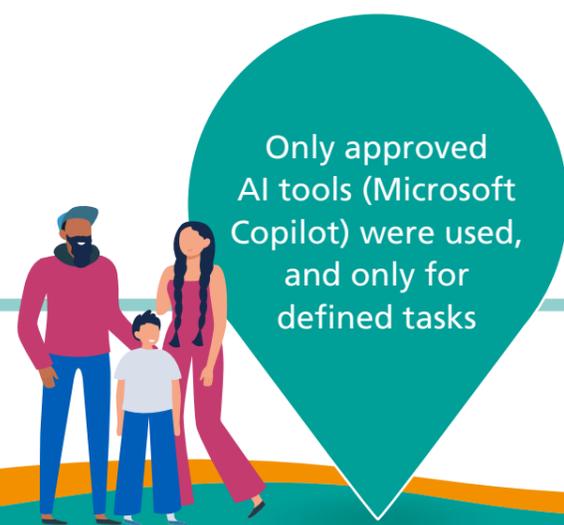
### Analysis process and oversight

Analysis followed a three-stage process of data review, thematic analysis and report drafting, with full human control at every stage. Regular checks ensured accuracy and consistency, and a clear audit trail was maintained. Human oversight ensured the findings accurately reflected what people across Somerset told us.

### Future development

The AI Verification Framework will continue to evolve as part of future engagement work, strengthening governance and ensuring AI is always used safely, transparently and under full human oversight.

For more information about the AI Verification Framework or the use of AI in this methodology, please contact **Kat Tottle, Engagement and Insight Lead Officer, NHS Somerset Engagement Team.**



Only approved AI tools (Microsoft Copilot) were used, and only for defined tasks

## 10. Contact us

**We are committed to continuing conversations with people and communities across Somerset as we develop and improve local health and care services.**

If you would like to share your views, ask a question or request further information about this report or any of our engagement work, email Kat Tottle, Lead Engagement and Insight Lead Officer, [somicb.engagement@nhs.net](mailto:somicb.engagement@nhs.net)

This report is part of an ongoing programme of engagement across Somerset. Everything you share helps us build a clearer picture of what matters most and where services can improve.



Somerset's Big Conversation 2025 website [www.somerset.icb.nhs.uk/somerset-big-conversation](http://www.somerset.icb.nhs.uk/somerset-big-conversation)

For more on the Engagement Team's work, visit: [nhssomerset.nhs.uk/my-voice/](http://nhssomerset.nhs.uk/my-voice/)

### Social media

Read news and find out about engagement opportunities on our social media channels:

 Facebook: NHS Somerset

 Instagram: @nhssomerset

 X (Twitter): @NHSSomerset

### Accessibility and alternative formats

If you need this report in another format, such as Easy Read, large print or an alternative language, please email the Engagement and Experience Team on [somicb.engagement@nhs.net](mailto:somicb.engagement@nhs.net)

## 11. Acknowledgements

Somerset's Big Conversation 2025 was made possible through the time, efforts and generosity of thousands of people, partners and organisations across the county. We are sincerely grateful to everyone who shared their experiences and ideas to help shape the future of health and care in Somerset. We also thank the following individuals, teams and organisations:

### **NHS Somerset (ICB) Communications, Engagement and Marketing team**

– thank you to communications and engagement colleagues for all of their hard work and expertise.

**Our Somerset partners** – We extend our thanks to system colleagues, whose collaboration made this programme possible, including: VCFSE organisations; Healthwatch Somerset; NHS Somerset; Somerset NHS Foundation Trust; Primary Care Networks and GP practices; Somerset Council Public Health teams; health and care professionals, clinicians and multidisciplinary teams.

**VCFSE sector organisations who worked with us** - We are especially grateful to Somerset's VCSE organisations, whose trusted relationships and local insight helped us engage people who are often under-represented. This includes: VCFSE organisations funded through the small grants scheme, community groups, charities, faith groups and youth organisations and carers' organisations, peer support groups and volunteers.

**Community providers, event organisers and venues** – We also appreciated the many community venues, libraries, supermarkets, markets, festivals, community hospitals and local businesses who hosted us and helped make the engagement visible and welcoming.



We are sincerely grateful to everyone who shared their experiences and ideas

## 12. Appendices

### **Appendix A: Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) partners**

Six VCFSE organisations were funded through an engagement small grants scheme to carry out targeted engagement with communities whose voices are

often under-represented in mainstream engagement. Their insight forms a core part of this findings report. Below are further details of each organisation and a summary of their feedback. All feedback from these six groups has been included and helped to shape the findings shared in this report.



### 1. Minehead Eye

Website: [www.mineheadeye.co.uk](http://www.mineheadeye.co.uk)

Main contact: Paul Matcham

Email: [reception@minehead-eye.co.uk](mailto:reception@minehead-eye.co.uk)

Phone: 01643 703155

#### Overview

Minehead Eye is a youth and community centre serving West Somerset. It provides a skatepark, bouldering cave, media/IT suite, creative spaces and youth clubs designed to help young people and families build confidence, skills and connection.

#### Who they support

Young people and wider communities across West Somerset, including children, teenagers, families and SEND groups.

#### Examples of work

- Youth clubs and targeted youth support in schools
- Outreach youth work
- Health and wellbeing workshops and professional support
- Parent and toddler groups
- Community groups and digital café
- SEND Bloom group
- Home education sessions and classes

#### Additional information

Minehead Eye also runs inclusive SEND groups, holiday programmes and community outreach across coastal and rural West Somerset.



### Summary of Minehead Eye engagement feedback

Minehead Eye provides insight from coastal communities where distance, transport, and limited service availability shape almost every health experience. People describe long journeys to Musgrove Hospital, unreliable transport, and anxiety about ambulance delays. Young people report challenges from isolation, stigma and lack of local mental health support.

- “Musgrove is too far to be practical – especially when you’re unwell.”
- “For those reliant on buses, accessing services is incredibly difficult.”
- “We need more local options – everything shouldn’t require a long journey.”

#### What is going well

- Strong sense of community and value placed on local youth and community spaces.
- Appreciation for some emergency and hospital staff despite pressures.
- Recognition that community-based options (if available) would significantly reduce barriers.
- Three areas for improvement
- Lack of a “proper local hospital,” creating safety concerns.
- Poor or absent public transport to essential medical appointments.
- Long waits for mental health support, particularly for young people.

#### Three areas for improvement

- Lack of a “proper local hospital,” creating safety concerns.
- Poor or absent public transport to essential medical appointments.
- Long waits for mental health support, particularly for young people.



### 2. 2BU Somerset

Website: [www.2bu-somerset.co.uk](http://www.2bu-somerset.co.uk)

Main contact: Lisa Snowdon-Carr

Email: [lisa@2bu-somerset.co.uk](mailto:lisa@2bu-somerset.co.uk)

Phone: 07799 136 552

#### Overview

2BU Somerset is a specialist youth service for LGBTQ+ young people aged 11–25. It provides safe spaces, mentoring, workshops, early-intervention support and training for schools and families.

#### Who they support

Young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning people across Somerset.

#### Examples of work

- Mentoring and wellbeing support
- Safe group spaces
- Early-intervention and resilience work
- Awareness training for schools and families
- Peer-support and identity-affirming programmes

#### Additional information

2BU advocates positive identity, mental wellbeing, confidence-building and inclusion for LGBTQ+ young people.

#### Summary of 2BU engagement feedback:

2BU participants shared powerful insight into the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ and trans young people when accessing healthcare. They described supportive individual staff, but inconsistent practice, limited GP knowledge, long waits for gender care, and a frequent need to

“educate” professionals. Experiences of being misgendered, ignored or pathologised create anxiety and avoidance of care. Mental health needs are high, and support is often reactive rather than preventive.

- “Being trans often means becoming the educator in the room.”
- “It makes a huge difference when staff use my name and pronouns without any fuss.”
- “Access to mental health support is very difficult; you often only get help in crisis.”

#### What is going well

- Safe community spaces like 2BU where young people feel understood and affirmed.
- Some individual clinicians who use pronouns correctly, listen well, and show kindness.
- Peer support, creative spaces and youth-centred environments that reduce isolation.

#### Three areas for improvement

- GP and mainstream services need significantly better understanding of trans health.
- Long waits and unclear local pathways for gender-affirming care.
- Lack of mental health support that is trauma-informed, identity-affirming and timely.





### 3. Love Community CIC (GameChanger Project)

Website: [www.lovecommunitycic.co.uk](http://www.lovecommunitycic.co.uk)  
 Main contact: Becky Wright  
 Email: [info@lovecommunitycic.co.uk](mailto:info@lovecommunitycic.co.uk)  
 Phone: 07497 355 602

#### Overview

Love Community CIC is a strategic umbrella organisation supporting community-based initiatives across Somerset. Their mission is to reduce isolation, increase community engagement, support mental wellbeing, build confidence and help people learn new skills.

#### Who they support

Neurodivergent people, people with learning disabilities, autistic adults and young people, families, and wider community groups.

#### Examples of work

- GameChanger Project
- A digital and gaming-based project created for neurodivergent people, people with learning disabilities and autism
  - Uses video gaming and creative technology to build confidence and social connection
  - Open to everyone but designed with inclusion at its core

#### Additional information

Love Community CIC works county-wide with inclusive delivery models and strong partnership working across community settings.



### Summary of Love Community CIC engagement feedback:

Across two Love Community sessions, people spoke about the daily challenges of navigating GP access, long waiting lists, and siloed or inconsistent communication. Dental access is a major pressure, particularly for families on low incomes. Participants strongly favour investment in prevention, community support and local wellbeing hubs. They identify inefficiencies in poorly designed or over-medicalised services.

- “You shouldn’t have to go to the doctor multiple times just to get a referral.”
- “NHS dentists are almost impossible to find – it’s affecting our health.”
- “Local community support is what actually keeps people well.”

#### What is going well

- Positive experiences with specific GP practices or clinicians once people are actually seen.
- Strong appreciation for community groups that offer connection, confidence and stability.
- Recognition that community-based health and wellbeing hubs make care more accessible.

#### Three areas for improvement

- GP appointment availability and referral thresholds remain too high.
- NHS dentistry is inaccessible, expensive or not available locally.
- Poor communication between services leads to duplication and people feeling “lost.”

### 4. OpenStoryTellers

Website: [www.openstorytellers.org.uk](http://www.openstorytellers.org.uk)  
 Main contact: Charlotte Woodall  
 Email: [info@openstorytellers.org.uk](mailto:info@openstorytellers.org.uk)  
 Phone: 01373 454099

#### Overview

OpenStoryTellers is a community arts charity supporting people with learning disabilities and/or autism. Their work uses storytelling, creative arts, digital media and performance to help people build confidence, friendships, self-advocacy and communication skills.

#### Who they support

Adults with learning disabilities, autism, neurodivergence and communication needs.

#### Examples of work

- Storytelling workshops
- Creative arts and performance groups
- Digital media projects
- Self-advocacy initiatives
- Accessible communication activities
- Paid employment opportunities in creative roles

#### Additional information

OpenStoryTellers runs a social enterprise, Pigeon Productions, offering accessible media production, training and creative commissions.

#### Summary of OpenStoryTellers engagement feedback:

Participants emphasised the need for communication that is clear, direct and respectful. Many feel ignored, spoken over

or have information directed at carers instead of themselves. Accessible, sensory-aware environments and reasonable adjustments are not consistently offered. People fear losing autonomy, particularly around decisions about care homes or hospital stays.

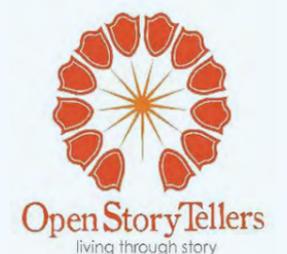
- “Sometimes doctors speak to my carer instead of me.”
- “I get told different things by different people – it’s confusing.”
- “I want staff to talk to me clearly and explain things properly.”

#### What is going well

- Creative and narrative approaches help people express their experiences safely.
- Some staff communicate well, take time and treat participants as equals.
- Positive experiences in community settings where people feel known and listened to.

#### Three areas for improvement

- Need for more accessible communication and direct engagement with the person.
- Services rarely accommodate sensory needs or neurodiversity-friendly practices.
- Fragmented care means people repeat their stories many times.



### 5. Seed of Hope CIC

Website: [www.seedofhope.org.uk](http://www.seedofhope.org.uk)

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#### Overview

Seed of Hope supports people experiencing mental health problems through recovery-based social and therapeutic gardening. They maintain community green spaces and use nature-based approaches to build confidence, hope and wellbeing.

#### Who they support

Adults living with anxiety, depression, trauma, long-term mental health conditions and social isolation.

#### Examples of work

- Therapeutic gardening sessions
- Peer-support groups
- Recovery-focused support
- Volunteering pathways
- Creative craft work
- Community garden management

#### Additional information

Seed of Hope operates multiple community gardens across Somerset and provides progression routes from volunteering to training and employment.



They also shared powerful participant stories illustrating the transformative impact of nature-based recovery.

#### Summary of Seed of Hope engagement feedback:

Participants describe long waits, inflexible talking therapies, and mental health provision that does not meet the needs of people with trauma, disability or multiple conditions. Community-based, nature-based and relational support is seen as life-changing. People want joined-up care that recognises how physical and mental health interact.

- “The community garden project lifted my mood and gave me space to think.”
- “It felt like a box-ticking exercise – if you don’t fit the model, you’re discharged.”
- “It’s no good telling me to take up running when I can’t walk properly.”

#### What is going well

- A gardening and recovery project is described as a “lifeline” for wellbeing.
- Staff in community settings are experienced as understanding, relational and non-judgemental.
- Positive examples of specialist teams who take a whole-person approach.

#### Three areas for improvement

- Mental health support feels crisis-weighted and formulaic.
- Services often fail to understand trauma and neurodivergence.
- Advice and care are often unrealistic for people with multiple conditions.



### 6. In Charley’s Memory (ICM)

Website: [www.incharleymemory.com](http://www.incharleymemory.com)

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#### Overview

In Charley’s Memory is a Somerset charity supporting young people aged 11–25 through counselling, early intervention, outreach and awareness training. The charity was founded in memory of Charley and is dedicated to preventing crisis and supporting emotional wellbeing.

#### Who they support

Young people, families, schools, and those needing mental health support and early intervention.

#### Examples of work

- 1:1 counselling
- Early-intervention mental health support
- School-based outreach
- Group programmes
- Mentoring
- Workshops and awareness training

#### Additional information

ICM works closely with families, youth services and education providers. Their support model focuses on resilience, recovery, prevention and continuity of care.

#### Summary of In Charley’s Memory engagement feedback:

Participants highlighted extensive gaps in mental health care, especially for young people and bereaved individuals. While staff are seen as caring, services feel overstretched, formulaic and hard to access unless someone reaches crisis

point. Carers report needing clearer communication and more reliable support for the people they care for. Early help and emotional support are frequently missing.

- “Mental health services need a major revamp – everything is crisis-first.”
- “We waited years for an ADHD assessment – it was supposed to be quicker than that.”
- “Support often disappears just when you need it most.”

#### What is going well

- Strong appreciation for individual staff who show compassion and commitment.
- Peer-based and community forms of support are valued and trusted.
- Emotional safety and continuity offered by VCFSE settings.

#### Three areas for improvement

- Lack of early intervention and trauma-informed mental health support.
- Waiting times for assessments, therapy and referrals are excessively long.
- Services often feel “box-ticking” and not adapted for complex trauma or neurodivergence.





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**2025**

**Thank you to everyone  
who took part in Somerset's  
Big Conversation 2025**

