

Making mental health inclusive: supporting people with learning disabilities

Figures show that people with learning disabilities are twice as likely to have mental health issues as those without. A study in 2017/18 found that severe mental illness was 8.4 times more common in people with learning disabilities than in those without, and that 13.3% of people with learning disabilities have an active diagnosis of depression.

What did we do?

We listened to the views, insights and opinions of those with learning disabilities, as well as their families and carers, across Surrey.



32 parents and carers via an online survey



70 people with learning disabilities at **5** focus groups



Key findings

Recognition of emotional distress

- People with learning disabilities **rely on family and carers (and support staff)** to help them to recognise emotional distress.
- It is vital that carers (both paid and unpaid) are **well supported and equipped** to recognise and deal with changes in people's emotional wellbeing and know who to refer to and when.

Only **38%** of survey respondents felt the people they care for would recognise emotional distress in themselves. Similarly, the focus group attendees found talking about the things that made them 'happy' easier than things that made them 'sad'.

How and where do people get support for emotional issues?

- Relatives and carers may not know the most appropriate way to get help and support when they recognise emotional distress.
- There is **disparity in where people turn for initial help and advice** to deal with this distress.
- People are often **not turning to those with specific mental health training** or those equipped to direct them to the most appropriate sources of support.
- Professionals may also be unsure whether the support should come from learning disability or mental health services.

Effectiveness and accessibility of support

- When people do access support, there is no consistency in how effective it is.

Slightly less than **two thirds** of those who had accessed specialist support (**16** of the 26) felt that the intervention had a positive impact, either short or long term.

- Some believe that support services are not accessible.



"There was a long waiting time and inconsistency of therapists. The person I care for would only engage if the therapist established a rapport with him."

Surrey resident



- People told us that they would like services to be more coordinated and for mental health support and services to be better integrated with other areas of care.

The role of primary care

- Annual health checks delivered through primary care play an important role in identifying the support needs of those with learning disabilities.
- These health checks could be a good opportunity to Make Every Contact Count and check in on both the person and their carers' emotional wellbeing.

Only **a third** of survey respondents said that emotional wellbeing was included in their annual health check.

Across the board more needs to be done to ensure that the mental health of those with learning disabilities is appropriately monitored, that those caring for them are facilitated and supported to intervene where necessary and that the support offered is appropriate and tailored to the specific needs of this community.

Read the full report on our website: [Making mental health inclusive: supporting people with learning disabilities – July 2025 – Healthwatch Surrey](#)