

# Hearing the Unheard: Transforming Mental Health Care for Older Adults in Southampton

## A Roadmap for Improving Elder Mental Health in Southampton



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This project was funded by the Centre for the South (CftS), a policy institute founded under the University of Southampton.

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## Find out more

For additional information on improving mental health services for older adults in Southampton, please visit:

<https://www.centreforthesouth.co.uk/activities/bridging-the-gap-improving-mental-health-services-for-older-adults-in-southampton>



We welcome your thoughts, suggestions, and partnership opportunities. Please feel free to reach out to us via email for any inquiries or further discussions: [southamptonmentalhealthstudy@gmail.com](mailto:southamptonmentalhealthstudy@gmail.com)

# About the collaboration

To ensure our research is comprehensive and aligned with the community's needs, we have partnered with Compassionate Cuppa CIC, a key organisation with deep roots in Southampton. This collaboration emerged from a shared commitment to enhancing mental health services for older adults in the area. By leveraging Compassionate Cuppa CIC's established networks and familiarity with local service providers, we have been able to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including healthcare professionals, community leaders, and directly affected individuals. Together, we have combined our diverse expertise to address critical gaps in mental health support, ensuring that our approach is both innovative and community-focused. This partnership has been instrumental in recruiting participants and gaining insightful perspectives that shape our ongoing efforts to advocate for and implement effective mental health solutions.

# Executive summary

This policy brief is the result of a collaboration between the University of Southampton (Department of Gerontology/Faculty of Social Sciences) and Compassionate Cuppa CIC.

## BACKGROUND

In Southampton, a substantial proportion of older adults suffer from common mental disorders, yet many do not utilise available mental health services effectively. This policy brief explores the barriers and facilitators to mental health service utilisation among older adults, based on qualitative interviews with both service users and providers.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Barriers to Access:** Older adults face significant barriers including long wait times, misinformation about services, and social stigma surrounding mental health. These factors severely restrict their access to necessary care.
- **Provider Challenges:** Service providers indicate challenges such as digital exclusion among older adults, physical accessibility issues, and insufficient funding, which impede the delivery of effective services.
- **Service Preferences:** There is a strong preference among older adults for face-to-face interactions and personalised care, which are currently underprovided.
- **Provider Recommendations:** Service providers suggest enhancing community engagement, improving the visibility of services, and increasing staff training to meet the needs of older adults better.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Enhance Service Accessibility:** Implement fast-track options for urgent care, increase the number of accessible service points, and improve digital literacy among older adults to bridge the gap in service utilisation.
- **Strengthen Community Engagement:** Utilise community centres and public spaces for service delivery and information dissemination to make mental health support more visible and accessible.
- **Tailor Services to User Preferences:** Expand face-to-face service options and develop personalised care plans that reflect the specific needs and preferences of older adults.
- **Policy and Funding Enhancements:** Advocate for increased funding dedicated to mental health services for older adults and promote policies that integrate mental health services with other community care services.

## CONCLUSION

This study underscores the need for targeted improvements in mental health service provision for older adults in Southampton. By aligning services more closely with the expressed needs and preferences of this demographic, and by addressing the systemic barriers identified by providers, it is possible to enhance the overall effectiveness and accessibility of mental health care for older adults.

# Thank you

We are profoundly grateful to all the participants who generously shared their time and experiences, contributing significantly to this research. Special thanks to Ling Salter, for their collaboration and invaluable support throughout the study.

I would also like to acknowledge the diligent and insightful contributions of Valentina Hinojosa, whose assistance was instrumental in conducting the interviews.

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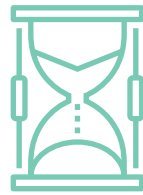
**Image source:** Photo by Fei Wang, captured during a visit to St Denys Community Centre in March 2024.

A welcoming yard at St Denys Community Centre, Southampton, adorned with vibrant decorations. This image illustrates the potential of community spaces to foster social connections among older adults.



# Recommendations

Informed by prior research and interviews/discussions with attendees and stakeholders, we recommend the following:



## 1 Enhance Access and Reduce Wait Times

- **Establish Fast-Track Services:** Implement fast-track systems for older adults experiencing mental health crises to ensure immediate care and support, reducing the detrimental impact of long wait times.
- **Increase Service Points:** Expand the number of accessible mental health service points in community centres, libraries, and other public spaces where older adults frequently visit.



## 2 Improve Information Dissemination and Awareness

- **Community Information Campaigns:** Launch regular information campaigns in community centres, churches, and senior centres to inform older adults about available mental health services and how to access them.
- **Enhance Digital Literacy:** Partner with local organisations and libraries to offer digital literacy programs tailored for older adults, helping them access online mental health resources.



## 3 Tailor Services to Older Adults' Preferences

- **Expand Face-to-Face Interaction Options:** Increase the availability of face-to-face mental health services, reflecting the strong preference among older adults for personal interaction.
- **Develop Personalised Care Plans:** Ensure that mental health services are tailored to individual needs, taking into account the specific preferences and conditions of older adults.



## 4 Strengthen Community-Based Mental Health Support

- **Utilise Community Hubs:** Use community centres and other local hubs to provide ongoing mental health support, making services more accessible and less stigmatised.
- **Foster Community Engagement:** Encourage the creation of peer support groups within community settings to provide emotional and practical support, leveraging the trust and familiarity of these environments.



## 5 Address Systemic and Funding Issues

- **Advocate for Increased Funding:** Work with policymakers to increase funding specifically earmarked for mental health services targeting older adults, ensuring sustainable and effective service provision.
- **Promote Integrated Service Models:** Advocate for policy changes that facilitate the integration of mental health, social services, and healthcare for older adults, aiming for a holistic approach to wellbeing.

# The problem/challenge

In the bustling coastal city of Southampton, there's a silent crisis unfolding. A significant proportion of the city's older population wrestles with common mental disorders'. These mental disorders include conditions such as depression, anxiety and dementia'. If not properly treated, these disorders can have a serious impact on the overall health and quality of life of older persons. They increase the risk of physical illness, impair independence and lead to social isolation. This stark reality underscores the pressing need for effective mental health services tailored to the unique needs of older adults.

However, despite the availability of effective interventions like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), there's a notable gap in their utilisation among older adults<sup>23</sup>. This disparity paints a clear picture - the mental health needs of older adults in Southampton are not being met adequately.

This under-utilisation of mental health services by the older population can be attributed to a multitude of factors. Resource constraints, complex referral systems, societal misconceptions, and age-related stereotypes have all been identified as contributing causes<sup>47</sup>. Yet, despite this knowledge, there is a lack of empirical evidence specifically addressing the barriers to service utilisation among older adults in Southampton.

Furthermore, the perspective of service providers is often overlooked in the literature. This is a significant oversight as their front-line experience and insights could offer valuable clues in understanding and addressing the issue at hand.

In response to this pressing issue, our project is stepping up to the plate. We aim to bridge this gap by exploring the experiences and challenges faced by older adults in accessing mental health services. But our exploration does not stop there. We also aim to shed light on the viewpoints of service providers.

This dual approach could reveal underlying issues and potential mismatches between service provision and user needs. By doing so, we contribute significantly to the development of more effective mental health services for older adults in Southampton.

# The work we've done

Our project has taken a proactive approach to addressing the gap in mental health services for older adults in Southampton through comprehensive research and robust community engagement. We conducted a series of in-depth interviews with two distinct groups: older adults experiencing mental health challenges, and service providers who are not affiliated with the NHS but are integral to the community mental health landscape. This dual approach enabled us to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives, highlighting both user challenges and potential service mismatches.

In addition to structured interviews, our research methodology included extensive fieldwork at community centres. We not only participated in community activities but also engaged in informal, yet insightful, conversations with both attendees and key stakeholders, including service providers and community centre managers. These casual discussions complemented our formal interviews by providing additional context and insights, enhancing our understanding of the practical challenges and opportunities within the mental health support framework.

The qualitative research design of our study, utilising thematic analysis of interview transcripts, enabled us to deeply understand the nuanced experiences and needs of our participants. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online, tailored to accommodate the comfort and availability of the participants, ensuring rich, detailed narratives that inform our findings and recommendations.

By integrating formal research methods with informal interactions, we adhered to a co-production approach, ensuring that our findings are not only informed by direct user and provider experiences but are also reflective of the broader community context. This approach has not only gathered substantial data but also built stronger relationships with stakeholders, paving the way for future initiatives and policy interventions aimed at enhancing mental health services for older adults in Southampton.

# What did we find?

Our investigation into the mental health services available to older adults in Southampton revealed significant systemic and operational barriers that hinder effective care. Through qualitative interviews and casual conversations with service users and providers, we identified critical issues and potential solutions that can significantly impact policy and practice. Here are some key findings and implications:

## BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SERVICES

**Long Wait Times:** Delays in receiving appointments can exacerbate mental health crises, with many older adults unable to access timely support.

**Misinformation and Lack of Awareness:** Confusion about available services often leads to unmet needs, with older adults and their families unaware of potential support options.

**Stigma Associated with Mental Health:** The stigma surrounding mental health discourages many from seeking necessary support, contributing to social isolation and reduced quality of life.

“When you’ve got mental health issues, you need to be dealt with immediately. You can’t wait three weeks. A Doctor’s surgery appointment in two weeks’ time? That’s not good enough.”

(LG, an older adult who intended to use the service)

“I didn’t know about it until now. When I called my GP, they said they had a mental health nurse, but she wasn’t on-site, which I think is a bit misleading.”

(LG, an older adult who intended to use the service)

“I was so upset because her behaviour...I needed to talk to somebody. I wasn’t suicidal, but I needed to talk.”

(BP, an older adult who have used the service)

“I’m quite busy as it is...don’t need to go to things like that.”

(KS, an older adult who has mental illness)

“The idea that older life is just a bit rubbish and that’s just how it is...the default shouldn’t be that it’s bad,” noted RB, a service provider.

“A lot of older people would not perceive the issues they have as worthy of troubling a professional.”

(MR, a service provider)

## IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE

These barriers directly affect the daily lives of older adults, leading to prolonged suffering and decreased life satisfaction. The lack of timely support not only worsens health outcomes but also amplifies social isolation.

“I don’t have a support network. My friend moved to New York, so I don’t have anyone nearby.”

(MT, an older adult who intended to use the service)

“I didn’t know where to go...It was my daughter, I just needed to talk to somebody.”

(YT, an older adult who intended to use the service)

## PREFERENCES FOR SUPPORT

There is a clear preference among older adults for face-to-face interactions and immediate support options. Participants expressed a desire for more accessible information about services, ideally shared through community centres and local networks.

“I think it’s when a face-to-face really,” mentioned RS, an older adult who have used the service

## CHALLENGES IN SERVICE DELIVERY

**Digital Exclusion:** Many older adults are excluded from digital-based solutions due to limited digital literacy.

**Physical Accessibility:** Mobility issues often prevent access to physical locations where services are provided.

**Funding Limitations:** Insufficient funding remains a significant barrier to sustaining and expanding services.

“Digital exclusion...older people are less likely to have gained digital literacy...a lot of information has gravitated online,” mentioned by LS, a service provider.

“Health and immobility factors mean they don’t have the physical means to get to certain places,” said by MW, a service provider.

“Funding...there’s less money and greater demand.” mentioned by LS, a service provider.

## EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES SUGGESTED BY SERVICE PROVIDERS

Increasing face-to-face service options, utilising community centres for outreach, and personalising care to meet individual needs were highlighted as crucial strategies.

They advocate for better allocation of resources towards mental health services for older adults is crucial. This includes funding for services that are specifically designed to meet the needs of this demographic.

They emphasise that strengthening community-driven initiatives can help provide localised and accessible support, reducing reliance on larger bureaucratic structures.

Our findings suggest that addressing these identified barriers and implementing the recommended strategies can significantly improve the mental health support framework for older adults in Southampton. We expect these changes to enhance the quality of life and increase the engagement of older adults in community life, ultimately leading to better health outcomes and reduced social isolation. Through ongoing collaboration with community centres and continuous engagement with stakeholders, we aim to foster a more inclusive and effective environment for mental health care provision.

“Community centres could access the network and let people know about everything that’s going on,” mentioned by RB.

“Providing flexible ways of engaging with someone...a combination of mentoring, coaching, and counseling.” (PS)

“Ensuring accessibility...considering venue locations, physical accessibility, and modes of communication.” (PS)

“Many of the grants from the local authority or health service have been cut back, affecting capacity to provide services.” (SK)

“Age UK used to operate from this building...but that funding got cut and they left.” (MR)

“We rely on volunteers, but recruitment is tough due to economic constraints.” (DH)

“Poverty affects different levels of people...those just above the criteria for support often struggle the most.” (DH)

“It’s really important to go to people. Don’t expect people to come to you necessarily.” (AC)

“Using word of mouth and ensuring you are reaching out to them as opposed to the other way around.” (LH)

# Authorship & references

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## AUTHORSHIP

**Fei Wang, PhD, MSc, BA**

Lecturer in Gerontology

Department of Gerontology

Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Southampton

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