

Shout Out for SEND: Active Waiting in Mental Health Services

June 2026

getting worse forgotten about unknown timer
too late no support exhausted waiting sad
struggling to cope overwhelming waiting
timers sad limbo octopus sad
high risk endless frustrating sad
hopelessness helpless timer
sad lonely despair too late too late
infuriating depressed
difficult anxious give up sad
timer sad decline unheard
despair frustrated gloomy
limbo lonely
octopus confusing stuck gloomy timer
decline dead end endless stair feeling
too late drowning feeling painful abandonment
anxious exhausting pointless no end date

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Contents

Page

Introduction

1

What does waiting feel like?

2

Ideas for CAMHS emails

3

Videos & Content

7

Support while waiting

11

Comments from our guests

13

What next?

15

Introduction

Shout Out for SEND worked with CAMHS to explore how the experience of waiting for mental health support or diagnosis could be improved.

Key messages from young people

- We want clear, simple information about what is happening and what comes next
- Communication should feel human, honest and clear
- Support during waiting should be visible and helpful
- Content should be short, engaging and use real voices
- We want to feel kept informed and included while we wait

Areas to build on:

Communication (emails)

- Make language clearer, less formal and easier to follow
- Be upfront about next steps and timelines

Content (videos/resources)

- Keep it short and engaging
- Use real people and lived experience

Support while waiting

- Provide clearer updates and next steps
- Make support easier to find and more flexible

Read the rest of the report to see our practical, realistic ideas for improving the waiting experience.

What does waiting feel like?

To kick us off, our CAMHS guests asked us what comes to mind when we think about waiting for support or services.



Our responses show that waiting often feels long, confusing and frustrating, with many of us describing feeling stuck, overwhelmed and unsure what's happening.

Words like hopelessness, exhaustion, loneliness and no support highlight the emotional impact, with some people feeling forgotten or left behind.

We also used more creative words like gorilla, which captured the feeling of something building up inside - like a heavy presence that grows the longer you're waiting without support.



Auto Reply Emails

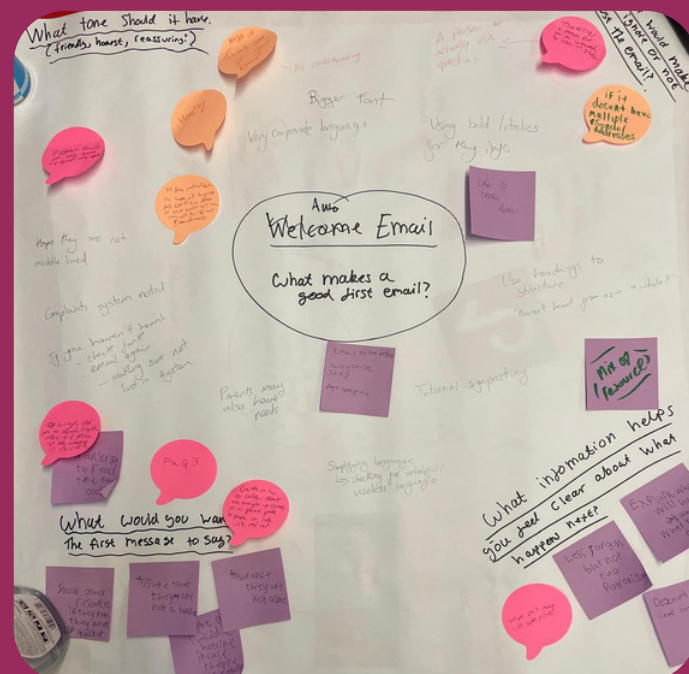
What we did

We looked at two real examples of CAMHS auto-reply emails and compared them. We talked about what works, what doesn't, and what a better email should look like.

What we think

Overall, emails don't always feel like they are written for young people. They can feel too formal, too clinical, and sometimes unclear - especially when it comes to what happens next.

We want emails that feel more human, easier to understand, and more supportive, with clear information and reassurance.





Auto Reply Emails: What we said

What helps make emails clear

- What this means with bullet points
- Explain what will happen and what to expect
- Descriptions with links on how to find out more
- Less jargon but not too patronising
- Frequently asked questions
- A transcript to read the e-mail out for people who can't read or are visually impaired

What emails should feel like

- The emails we saw had very corporate language
- It feels medicalized the fonts and language feels like it is an illness or that something is wrong with me that you can be cured of neurodiversity
- Maybe not thank you for your e-mail at the start as its could be condescending
- Simplifying language; checking for unhelpful/ useless language
- Honesty is so important
- Bigger font



Auto Reply Emails: What we said

What helps people feel supported

- Assure them that they are not a burden
- Assurance that they are not alone
- Maybe a suicide hotline in case they're having negative thoughts
- Guides on how to talk about the brought up issues or a general guide [for trusted adults?] so people can talk while they wait

What would make emails easier to use

- For the e-mail to be better it needs to have links categorised and be age specific
- Internal signposting
- Using bold/ italics for key info
- Use headings to structure, for example 'haven't heard from us for a while?'



Auto Reply Emails: What we said

What builds trust (or breaks it)

- Traceability; a person that could be contacted by people and ask burning questions a person to actually ask questions to make you feel less alone
- If it doesn't have multiple sender addresses

Follow-up and staying in contact

- When to e-mail again
- If you haven't heard; check junk, e-mail again, make sure we are not lost in the system

Wider thoughts

Alongside the main themes, we also shared a range of additional ideas and reflections:

- Different emails for self referral or appointments
- Complaint system noted
- Parents may also have needs which need to be considered
- A mix of resources



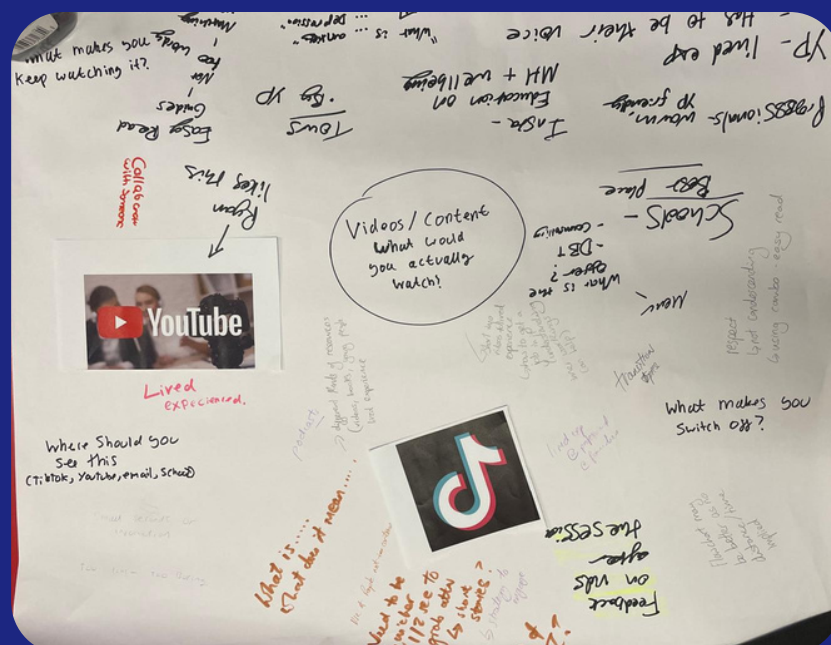
What we did

We explored ideas for videos and content CAMHS could create for young people while they are waiting.

We talked about what we would actually watch, what keeps our attention, and what makes something engaging.

What we think

For content to work, it needs to be something young people would choose to engage with. That means it needs to be short, interesting, and feel real. We don't want content that feels boring, overly scripted, or not relevant - we want something that reflects real experiences and speaks to us properly.





Videos & Content: What we said

What makes content engaging

- Too long means too boring, so small seconds of information
- Needs to be quicker first half to grab attention; short stories, and the strategy to engage people
- Short info videos and lived experience

Real people and lived experience

- Lived experiences
- Use people real people, not cartoons
- When young people do lived experience videos, it has to be their voice
- Tours of centres and services by young people

Tone and how it comes across

- Made with respect; not condescending, using a combo with easy read
- Having professionals on videos but make sure they're warm, young person friendly, and not condescending



Videos & Content: What we said

Where and how to share content

- It's tricky, but schools can be one of the best places to get young people to watch videos
- There is amazing Instagram community where there's lots of education on mental health and well-being, you could tap into that
- Using YouTube can help

What content should cover

- Videos on what is... anxiety, what is... depression, keep it simple
- I want to see a menu of what can be offered to people what is the offer? For example DBT, counselling, talking therapies, etc

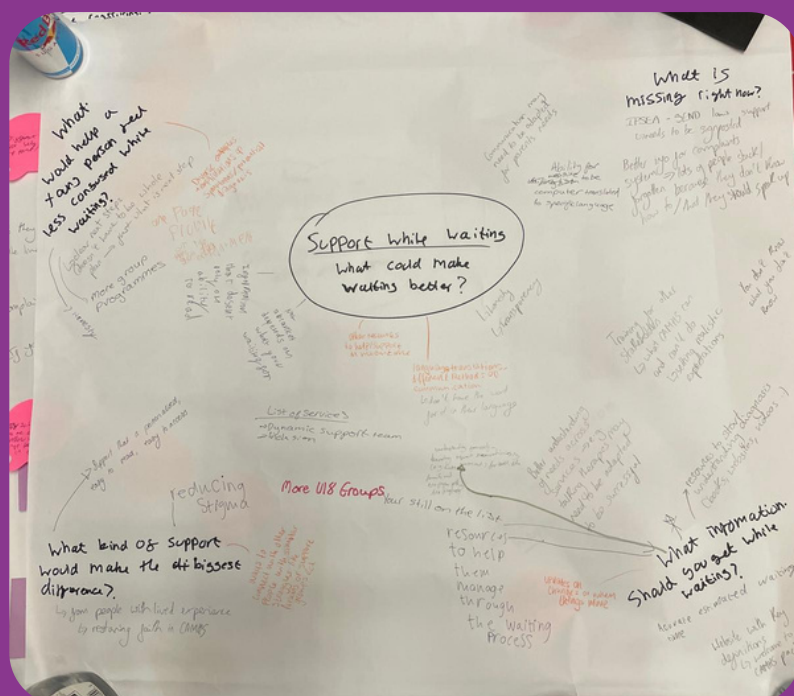


Videos & Content: What we said

Wider thoughts

Alongside the main themes, we also shared a range of additional ideas and reflections:

- Lots of different kinds of resources: videos, books, young people lived experience, podcasts
- Flow chart may be better [instead of a roadmap video] as no distance and time employed on the journey video
- Lived experience videos some with professionals some with families some with young people
- Transition options
- Easy read guides not too wordy and that match up with what's being told elsewhere
- Collaborate with others
- Get young people to feedback on the videos after the session
- How to get a job in it; understanding inner workings can help





Support While Waiting:

What we said

What would help make waiting clearer

- Clear next steps - doesn't have to be whole plan, just what is the next step
- Being told you are still on the list to keep you updated
- Updates on changes or when things move forwards
- Accurate estimated waiting time

What kind of support would make the biggest difference

- Support that is personalised, easy to read, easy to access
- More group programmes
- More under 18 groups
- Ways to connect with other people with similar struggles like forums or support groups, ETC
- From people with lived experience who can restore faith in CAMHS for people waiting
- Reducing stigma



Support While Waiting:

What we said

What information should be shared while waiting

- Website with key definitions, welcome to CAMHS pack
- Resources to start understanding diagnosis; books, websites, videos
- Understanding yourself; learning about neurodiversity, for example links to videos, books, for both the family and the person receiving a potential diagnosis
- Better understanding of needs across services, for example talking therapies may need to be adapted to be successful
- Resources to help manage through the waiting process

Making support more accessible

- Information that doesn't rely on the ability to read
- Language and translations, different methods of communication, for when they don't have the words
- Ability for website to be translated for specific languages
- Communication may need to be adapted for parents needs

Support While Waiting: What we said

Making support feel more personalised

- Not a blanket idea, depends on what you are waiting for
- One page profile of the person you are going to see at your appointments

Wider thoughts

Alongside the main themes, we also shared a range of additional ideas and reflections:

- List of services; dynamic support team, inclusion team, etc
- Honesty
- Transparency other resources to help support you in the meantime
- IPSEA; SEND law support needs to be signposted
- Better info for complaints system, lots of people stuck/forgotten because they don't know how to/ that they should speak up

Comments from our guests

“Thank you for having as guests at your event - it was so beneficial to hear all your thoughts and ideas in person and in a space where you were all confident to share what you feel. In my role I don't have day to day contact with the families and young people we work with so opportunities like this to meet and talk openly with young people really helps me with all pieces of work I work on.

For the auto reply emails I'll review all the comments Sam has sent through and then work with our teams to come up with some options on the different wordings we could use - Sam can then share them with you all to see which ones you think we should use.”

Adam Harris,
Service Improvement Coordinator, Bucks CAMHS



“I want to echo my thanks for including and inviting us. We felt welcomed and it was a well-run session. I know a lot of thought went into these discussions. The feedback and ideas shared were extremely valuable. Following the session, I have asked our Active Waiting Group to review the discussion and agree what actions we can take forward over the next 3 to 6 months.”

Andy Fitton
Head of Buckinghamshire CAMHS



What next?

After our meeting, here are the next steps to make sure our voices make an impact:

Andy, Adam and Jo

Andy, Adam and Jo will take away what we've shared and use it to shape their next steps - including thinking about how communication, content and support can better reflect what we said about clarity, tone and what helps while waiting.

In 3 months time, they will also come back to the group to share what has been achieved so far, so we can see where our voices are making a difference!

Sam

Sam will use this report to push this work forward by:

- Sharing it with key colleagues across CAMHS and health
- Making sure our ideas are used to inform ongoing work on communication and support while waiting