



Workshop with young people about sexual health
Report

Young Minds:

Suite 11, Baden Pl, Crosby Row, London SE1 1YW

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Disclaimer

Please note that this report relates to discussions that took place on the 5th February 2015. Our report is not a representative portrayal of the experiences of all young people, only an account of what was contributed during this discussion.

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Background

Healthwatch Southwark is a champion for the patient and public voice. We want people's voices to count towards improving services. We know that some groups are 'seldom heard' and therefore we aim to engage with the communities in a targeted manner. According to the [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment \(JSNA\)](#) there are approximately 60,000 young people aged under 19 in Southwark and this younger population is projected to grow by 25% over the next 20 years. Yet the voice of young people is seldom heard.

YoungMinds is a charity working to improve the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. It is committed to empowering children and young people with mental health problems so that they are able to share their experiences with the aim of improving services and outcomes for people.

Sexual health was identified as a priority area for Healthwatch Southwark, through public and stakeholder consultation. Within this area, we were keen to hear the views and experiences of young people. The [Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham Sexual Health Strategy](#) prioritised young people as a 'high risk group' and also recognised that people with mental health difficulties are vulnerable to poor sexual health.

Aim of the workshop

The aim of the community focus group was to understand where young people turn to find information about sex and what their experience are of accessing sexual health services. We also want to understand what influences young people and their sexual behaviour (e.g. mental health), to understand who young people choose to talk about sex, what services they are aware of and how they think they could be improved.

Healthwatch Southwark want to inform services about what works well and doesn't work well for young people when they access public services, we will feed up findings as appropriate.

Methodology

YoungMinds hold regular hub meetings with young people to discuss issues around their health and wellbeing. Healthwatch Southwark was given a 45-minute slot at one of the hub meetings on 5th Feb 2015. The meeting was attended by 14 young people, a mixture of male and female attendees of different ethnic backgrounds aged between 17 and 21.

We planned a workshop style session, starting with introductions and explaining what Healthwatch Southwark is, as a group we set ground rules for the session so everyone could participate and when the group was ready we read out statements to the group to vote on with 'Agree' and 'Disagree' cards. The statements were designed around how young people go about and feel about accessing information, services and support. A discussion took place around the themes which are outlined below. We asked the group to give us feedback on the session which they thought was 'interesting' and 'fun'.



Findings

1. Access to services and information

We wanted to understand how young people find the information they need and what it is like for them to use mainstream sexual health and mental health services. We put 6 statements to the group which were followed up by group discussion. The group were asked if they agreed or disagreed if:

- **Young people can access mental health services without fear or judgement** (12 agreed, 1 person was unsure) - A discussion followed about how much YoungMinds have impacted on how these young people feel about accessing services, the group support one another and are informed about how they can challenge bad practice if they come across it (if they feel judged by a member of staff at a mental health services, they would raise a complaint)
- **Young people can access sexual health services without fear or judgement** (3 agreed, 10 disagreed) - Those who agreed commented that when they had used a clinic that they felt fine about going in, others commented that they *“felt funny about going into clinics”*
- **Young people know what sexual health services are** (5 agreed, 8 disagreed) - A discussion followed about what the group thought these services might be *“Clinics”* and Healthwatch encouraged the group to think about their GP / Pharmacies / schools / colleges. Participants commented that support was available for the physical aspect - *“lots of services about STIs and contraception”* but young people felt that there was a lack of emphasis and information about *“emotional support”* referring to the emotional side of relationships.
- **Young people know how to access information, support or services relating to sexual health**

(13 disagreed) - The group felt that it was not clear where they could go specifically for sexual health support. A discussion followed to explore what other places we might go to for information and support for other health conditions and talked if they could also be used for sexual health support (GP, Pharmacy, internet etc)

- **Young people have a good understanding of sexual health, or sex education** (5 agreed, 8 disagreed) - A conversation followed about sex education in schools and how it didn't seem to meet the needs of the young people. Some comments included *"the teacher was too shy to talk about sex"* and *"they only talk about the biology of sex, not the emotional side"*
- **There are lots of services that help young people to have healthy relationships and safe sex** (5 agreed, 8 disagreed) - A discussion followed about services being available to promote safe sex but not as many to support healthy relationships.

2. Behaviour and influences

We wanted to understand young people's perceptions of the behaviours of young people and to explore what is in their life that influences their behaviour and actions. We put 5 statements to the group around what behaviours and influences young people face followed by some discussed. The group were asked if they agreed or disagreed if:

- **The mental health of young people does not influence their sexual behaviour** (1 agreed, 12 disagreed) - A discussion followed around how mental health is very much connected to sexual behaviour and that young people can be misled by more sexually experienced people when they are *"in a low place"*
- **Young people face a lot of peer pressure and this can affect their sexual behaviour** (13 agreed) - The group were all in agreement that peer pressure can affect a young person's sexual behaviour. Discussions took place about what factors affected this behaviour, from complicated home situations, cultural background, peer pressure and popular culture.
- **New technology encourages promiscuity** - The group felt technology gives people means but does not *"encourage behaviour"*. Discussions took place about different attitudes, *"a girl can't sleep around but a boy can."* There was also a discussion around how society thinks young people are overly susceptible to new technology without giving young people credit for *"saying no"* when they wanted to.
- **It is ok to be in a sexual relationship without emotional involvement** (12 agreed, 2 disagreed) - A discussion followed around some young people wanting to explore their sexuality and that *"adults forget that they did this too at our age"*

- **Sexing is typical behaviour** - participants felt it would be for people that were interested in it. The group discussed the risk of getting inappropriate messages from someone they didn't know - *"some people send pictures and you don't know who they are from"* and *"sometimes you just don't want to see those things."*

3. Who young people talk to

We were interested in who young people talk to about sex and where they go to for information and support around sexual activity. We put 4 statements to the group around who young people talk to. The group was asked if they agreed or disagreed if:

- **Young people are able to talk to their peers about their sexual health** (5 agreed, 9 disagreed). The group thoughts that talking to peers could sometimes give incorrect information and that young people wouldn't talk with their friends about sexual health as such. Some comments that were made:
 - *"Sometimes I would"*
 - *"It's a taboo subject"*
 - *"Depends on the person and the issues"*
 - *"I can talk to my friends about things but if I need to, I can go to the doctor or the pharmacy for information"*
- **Young people are able to talk to adults about their sexual health** (5 agreed, 9 disagreed). A discussion took place about what kind of adults they would speak to (doctors, nurses, and teachers). One young person said, *"I'd talk to an adult I trusted."* Another young person commented that it would need to be a professional as *"in my community, you don't have sex until you are married"*
- **Young people are free to be open about their sexuality** (5 agreed, 9 disagreed). A discussion took place about peers openly disclosing their sexuality and it *"not [being] that much of a big deal"*. Some other comments that were made:
 - *"Depends on the community you are from"*
 - *"It might be different in different circumstances, with your friends or your family"*
 - *"You might feel okay with your friends but at school it could be different"*
- **It's a taboo to talk about sex** (11 agreed, 3 disagreed). A discussion took place about how it is still a taboo to talk about sex, the group thought that the setting was important to the way young people would open up to conversation about this. Some comments that were made:
 - *"In a group of friends it is ok"*
 - *"Not at Church!"*
 - *"Depends on the situation"*

4. What sexual health services do young people know of/go to for support?

These were the services the group told us about:

- Sexual health clinic
- Doctor's surgery
- Pharmacies
- Youth clubs
- Camberwell Sexual Health Centre
- C Card scheme - *"you can get free condoms and the morning after pill"*

When asked how they knew about these services, the group told us:

- Google
- School sex education - did not cover morning after pill, STDs and consent
 - *"PSHE teacher covered different types of contraception"*
 - *"Sex education is about STIs and puberty, if you want any more information you need to find it yourself"*
 - *"School nurse informed [me] about sexual health and had lots of posters on her wall"*
- Havens (Rape crisis) Camberwell sexual assault support

The main reason given for using these services was to *"get free condoms."*

5. How could these services be improved?

5.1. Sex education - need for more information

- *"Better sex education in schools"*
- *"Sex education should start younger at primary school"*
- *"More focus on emotional relationships"*
- *"Explain more about morning after pill"*
- *"School is restrictive, they don't talk about everything"*
- *"They should teach young children the underwear rule"*
[\[http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/underwear-rule/\]](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/underwear-rule/)

5.2. Better facilities and access

- *"Waiting rooms should be more relaxed and have different spaces for privacy"*
- *"Separate guys and girls, as girls don't want to know what guys might think of them"*
- *"More places to get free contraception"*
- *"Free contraception with C Card from all pharmacies [not just local ones]"*

5.3. Not feeling judged

- *“Adults just think we are at it all the time”*
- *“Staff should not judge and be supportive”*
- *“If staff are open its easier to talk to them”*
- *“Age matters when it comes to the person you are talking to about sex”*

5.4. Building a relationship / continuity

- *“Building up relationships with professionals that young people would want to talk to about sex”*
- *“Under 18s have a fixed GP who they see all the time, this helps”*

6. Links between mental health and sexual behaviour

All felt that there was a link between the mental health of young people and their sexual behaviour. Discussions took place about whether they felt it would make you more sexually active or less sexually active. The young people said that if you have low self-esteem or if you have things going on, you might not look after yourself, which could affect your sexual behaviour. Some comments made:

- *“Some mental health illness leads to more sexual activity and alter behaviour”*
- *“Some mental illnesses may lower sex drive”*

7. What is important to young people about sexual health?

The group were asked to share one thing that was important to them as a young person. 7 of the 14 young people said that **consent** was the most important thing for them. Other things that were mentioned were getting information, getting contraception (for free) and having better knowledge about sexual health, see diagram and comments below.

What is important for Young People



Message to take back to those responsible for sexual health services

The group was asked to share a message that they would like Healthwatch Southwark to take back to the people responsible for providing sexual health services.

- **Young people need more information:** Better sexual health education in schools, this needs to start earlier and should talk more about puberty and what to expect. Emotional relationships should also be talked about more and not just biological aspects. Professionals working with young people should be well informed and confident in answering questions about sex.
- **Service providers should be aware of different religious and cultural attitudes** towards sex and how this is discussed.
- **Young people need more awareness about consent and rape** - people are missing out because information is omitted for fear of upsetting people.
- **More choice and easier access to services** - some young people don't like going to local GP/pharmacy because they may bump into someone they know
- **Service providers should have open attitudes towards sexual orientation** - *“Not everyone is straight.”*