

Summary report: *Young Voices on Sexual Health*

The full report is available on our website.

Over the summer of 2016, Healthwatch Southwark engaged with 105 young people aged 13-25, via workshops and surveys, to find out about their experiences of sex education and information, access to services, and where they prefer to go for support.

A large majority of the young people agreed that they knew how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unwanted pregnancy. Most of the groups were able to list a variety of methods between them, and nearly all survey respondents listed condoms. However, some young people did not have detailed knowledge of a range of methods.

A majority of respondents agreed that it is easy for young people to get information about sexual health. Many were distrustful of information on the internet, but several would use the NHS website. Several people felt that information was available only to those who actively sought it.

However, while slightly over half of respondents agreed that their school/college provide(d) good information and education about sexual health, over a third actively disagreed. Some schools focused on puberty or pregnancy prevention and gave little else. Others went into more detail and provided information in a variety of ways.

Participants in at least three groups attributed their schools' reluctance to provide good sex education to religion or culture. Other elements affecting the quality of sex education included teachers' discomfort, having a teacher of the opposite sex, and limited and repetitive information. One group had had very poor experiences and were therefore adamant that sex education should be provided by parents, not schools.

People from four different schools said they had had some information on **healthy relationships**, although this was often limited or too late. Many people wanted more education about abuse, rape, consent, and gender roles/responsibilities.

We discussed **at what age young people should be educated about sex**, and met with a range of responses from age 7 to age 14. People in all groups felt that sex education should be taught progressively, and some wanted refreshers as they got older.

We wanted to find out whether young people felt they could ask for support around their sexual health from those close to them. **57% of young people said they would feel comfortable talking to friends about this, but only 38% to parents.** Some were very

open with their friends about sex, and saw this as part of modern culture. A few were close to their families and felt able to talk about this. However, reasons for not talking to friends included feeling that sex ought to be private, or that friends would ‘joke about’, be judgemental, or not have helpful information. Reasons for not talking to parents included feeling uncomfortable, or parents being opposed to their children being sexually active - again often because of cultural backgrounds.

We also wanted to know how accessible sexual health services might be to young people. **58% would feel comfortable talking to health professionals if they needed support around sexual health, and 22% would not.** While some felt embarrassed, many recognised that professionals ‘are more experienced’, ‘have the knowledge’, and ‘know what advice to give.’ A couple of people mentioned confidentiality concerns if talking to the GP or school nurse.

Some groups discussed their **personal interactions with different professionals.** One person had had poor experiences at the sexual health clinic, feeling judged even when they had gone for a check-up to be responsible. Others however had found professionals mostly respectful. Generally young people were positive about using **sexual health clinics**, due to not having to wait for an appointment, and relative anonymity - though others felt awkward because people would know why they were at the clinic, and some mentioned queues.

Recommendations

We asked the young people themselves what advice they would give to commissioners and providers when they consider how best to support young people around sexual health, in terms of education in schools, health professionals, preventing people from being embarrassed to seek help, and sexual health services in general.

Bring experts into schools to deliver sex education. Young people felt this was more comfortable and that the speakers would be better informed and prepared to deal with the topic. They could also raise awareness of the services they provide. However, better training for teachers is also needed.

Be creative and engaging with sex education. Ideas included asking young people about their pre-existing knowledge, discussions rather than traditional lessons, and multimedia approaches.

More sustained/refreshed education is needed. There were mixed opinions about when sex education should start in schools. However, what young people did agree on was that sex education should be built up gradually according to the age/maturity of the students. Some also wanted refreshers as they got older.

What about the social aspects of sex? Young people want education in schools to cover emotional aspects of sex as well as looking at the experiences of people of different genders and sexualities. More education on healthy relationships, consent and abuse is needed. Social media plays a large role in young people's lives and should also be discussed.

Deal with stigma and taboos. Several people agreed that general social attitudes need to change in order for people to talk about sexual health, and to encourage people to seek out services. This should be encouraged by schools and the media as well as when professionals interact with young people.

Promote sexual health services. Sexual health services should publicise themselves better, including in the community and schools and on social media, and encourage people to get tested.

Offer anonymous help. Many people wanted an anonymous sexual health service, or at least anonymous information sources they could trust.

Make services friendly for young people. Empathy and a non-judgmental attitude towards young people were seen as key - staff should recognise that the people attending services are the people who are trying to be responsible. They must also give information clearly and allow young people to ask questions.