



'Where They Began, Where They Are Now'

Evaluating the Impact of
Young Healthwatch Volunteering

April 2026

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Executive Summary

The 'Where They Began, Where They Are Now' project was established to explore the longer-term impact of volunteering with Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (YHW), with a particular focus on how early engagement influences personal development, career pathways and life choices. By reconnecting with former volunteers and capturing their reflections, the project provides evidence of the lasting value of youth voice and meaningful participation within health and social care.

This report draws on insights from 10 former volunteers, combining four in-depth qualitative interviews with six detailed survey responses. Participants, now aged between 19 and 26, reflected on periods of involvement ranging from three months to three years. While the sample size is modest, the findings offer a rich and compelling account of the sustained impact of volunteering over time.

The evidence demonstrates that YHW plays a significant role in developing transferable skills, building confidence and providing exposure to real-world experiences.

For some, this impact is clearly measurable, directly strengthening applications to competitive higher education pathways, including Nursing and Dentistry. For others, the benefits are more developmental, with volunteering described as a **“support system where I got to meet and learn from a range of likeminded volunteers and professionals.”**

Across all responses, volunteering is consistently characterised as accessible, flexible and purposeful. Participants emphasised the value of a **“friendly environment”** and the importance of feeling able to contribute to **“something bigger.”** These experiences not only supported individual growth during their time with YHW, but also helped shape future ambitions, confidence and direction.



Young Healthwatch volunteer undertaking a work placement at Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire

Introduction

Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (YHW) provides young people with meaningful opportunities to engage with health and social care systems, contribute to community-led research and influence local services. Through a combination of volunteering, training, events and project-based activity, participants are supported to develop transferable skills, build confidence and gain a deeper understanding of the systems that shape their communities.

The 'Where They Began, Where They Are Now' project was developed to explore the longer-term impact of this involvement by reconnecting with former volunteers and capturing their reflections over time. While the value of youth engagement is often measured in the short term, this project

takes a more longitudinal perspective, seeking to understand how these early experiences continue to shape individuals' personal development, decisions and future pathways.

A key strength of this work lies in its youth-led and co-produced approach. Four current YHW volunteers played an active role in shaping the research process, working alongside the Youth Engagement Officer to design the interview and survey questions and contribute to the analysis of interview transcripts. This collaborative approach ensured that both the areas explored and the findings generated are grounded in lived experience and authentically reflect the perspectives of former volunteers.



Young Healthwatch volunteers conducting a 15 Steps Review at Keech Hospice



Methodology

This project adopted a qualitative research approach, combining semi-structured interviews with survey responses to capture both in-depth reflections and broader insights from former Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (YHW) volunteers.

The development of the research tools was co-produced with young people. Four current YHW volunteers worked collaboratively with the Youth Engagement Officer to design both the interview and survey questions (see Appendix A). This approach ensured that the questions were relevant, accessible and reflective of lived experience, enabling participants to articulate their perspectives in a meaningful and authentic way.

In addition, these volunteers played an active role in reviewing interview transcripts and survey responses, identifying key themes, patterns and impactful quotes. This collaborative process strengthened both the authenticity and depth of the analysis, while also providing valuable research experience for current volunteers.

Data collection comprised:

- ◆ Four in-depth qualitative interviews
- ◆ Six survey responses from former volunteers

Survey participants reflected on their experiences of volunteering between the ages of 15 and 18. All respondents have since progressed into academic or professional pathways, including roles in research, healthcare and community leadership.

The inclusion of survey data enabled the triangulation of findings, reinforcing themes identified within the interviews—particularly in relation to skills development, career progression and personal growth.

All responses were analysed using a thematic approach, with recurring ideas grouped into key themes and patterns. Particular emphasis was placed on the use of direct quotes, ensuring that the voices and lived experiences of participants remain central to the findings.

While the sample size is relatively small, the consistency across responses provides a strong early indication of the impact of YHW. These findings are intended to be exploratory and will be further strengthened through ongoing data collection.

The Findings

Early Engagement and Motivations for Volunteering

Across both interviews and survey responses, there is a clear and consistent pattern in how young people first engage with Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (YHW). School-based outreach, particularly assemblies, workshops and careers fairs, remains the most common entry point. These are complemented by word-of-mouth referrals through **“friends and family”** and partnerships such as the **“BLMK Health Care Academy,”** highlighting the value of both formal and informal recruitment pathways.

School visits appear particularly effective, reaching young people in a familiar environment at a formative stage. As one participant recalled, **“Amy [previous Youth Engagement Officer] came into our school and did a talk about YHW,”** illustrating how direct engagement can reduce barriers and position volunteering as accessible and relevant.

Motivations for joining YHW reflect a combination of practical ambition and personal interest. Many participants were initially driven by the desire to gain **“work experience opportunities”** or to strengthen future applications by building something that would **“look good on the CV.”** This was especially evident among those seeking to **“gain exposure into the industry when the opportunity rose”** before committing to further study.

Alongside these practical motivations, participants expressed a genuine interest in contributing to their communities. This included a desire **“to learn more about mental health”** and to **“give back and get involved in something new.”** The social dimension also played a significant role in sustaining engagement. Being surrounded by peers with shared interests created a welcoming and supportive environment, described by one participant as a **“support system where I got to meet and learn from a range of likeminded volunteers and professionals already working in health and social care.”**



Young Healthwatch volunteers taking part in their monthly meeting – November 2024

Learning and Real-World Exposure

A prominent theme across all responses is the value of hands-on, real-world experience. Volunteers described being actively involved in projects that connected them directly to people, services and community issues, moving beyond observation to meaningful participation.

One participant described **“visiting GP practices and clinics to assess accessibility,”** noting that this made the experience feel **“purposeful.”** Opportunities such as these provided practical insight into how services operate, helping to build confidence in professional settings that might otherwise feel unfamiliar.

First aid training events were consistently highlighted as particularly impactful. Participants emphasised both the skills gained and the wider significance of their contribution, with one respondent reflecting on the importance of **“providing a service which could potentially save lives.”**

Other activities, including work addressing period poverty and engagement with healthcare environments, were described as **“a real big eye opener.”** These experiences broadened participants’ understanding of social issues and inequalities, reinforcing the value of experiential learning in developing awareness and perspective.



Young Healthwatch volunteers undergoing first aid training in their ‘Don’t Stop the Beat’ Project

Skills Development and Personal Growth

The findings demonstrate a strong link between participation in YHW and the development of both practical skills and personal confidence. Notably, these skills are not delivered in isolation but are embedded within real activities and interactions, enabling organic and sustained development.

Communication and teamwork emerged consistently as key areas of growth. Participants described increased confidence in engaging with others, collaborating on projects and contributing ideas. One participant reflected that volunteering **“developed a lot of skills... communication skills... teamwork,”** while another highlighted the importance of working in an environment where they could **“have real influence on projects.”** This sense of ownership and contribution supports the development of independence and self-efficacy.

Written communication also featured as a significant outcome, particularly in relation to report writing. For some, this addressed existing challenges, with one participant noting that they learned how to **“put words that are in my head down on paper.”** These skills also translated into academic settings. One student described how YHW provided a “plethora of ideas” for a college essay on mental health, enabling them to feel **“well acquainted with the topics.”**

Alongside skill development, participants reported broader personal growth, including increased empathy and awareness. Several described becoming **“more aware of others”** and more open to different perspectives. One participant reflected that the experience demonstrated **“that I need to help others if I’m capable.”** The environment itself was described as **“friendly... no toxicity,”** creating a space in which individuals felt comfortable **“constantly meeting new people and hearing about their experiences”** As one respondent summarised, YHW **“made me value the importance of staying connected with your community and talking to people from different backgrounds.”**

Influence on Career Pathways and Aspirations

Participation in YHW has a clear and varied influence on career development, often shaping both direction and confidence in future choices. For some, the experience acted as a direct catalyst. One participant noted, **“I got inspired to study nursing,”** while another explained, **“volunteering with YHW made me realise my passion for working in community settings and working with people. This has led me to my current path as a dental student.”**

For those already considering careers in healthcare, YHW reinforced existing ambitions and provided practical support. The experience was described as a **“support system”** that offered relevant examples, considered **“vital”** and **“crucial during my application and interviews.”**

In competitive application processes, this exposure proved particularly valuable. Participants referenced drawing on their experiences in **“UCAS personal statement[s]”** and noted that it **“allowed [them] to speak more confidently and authentically about their interests.”** For others, the impact was less about a specific profession and more about refining personal values, with one participant stating that the experience **“definitely cemented”** their interest in healthcare, while another expressed a desire for a role that would **“directly impact someone’s life.”**

Employability and Professional Confidence

A consistent outcome across all responses is increased confidence in professional environments. Participants described feeling **“more prepared”** for employment, **“more comfortable”** working with others and **“more confident”** in their overall abilities.

This translated into tangible outcomes. One participant noted that volunteering **“definitely helped me land interviews,”** while another reflected that it made them feel **“more comfortable working on similar projects in the future.”** Beyond specific career pathways, YHW contributes to broader employability by developing interpersonal skills, adaptability and a sense of responsibility.



Project with Medequip

The experience also supported access to part-time employment, with one respondent highlighting its role in **“finding part-time work and summer jobs, which have helped when trying to subsidise the cost of university.”** Participants recognised that volunteering demonstrates to employers that individuals **“have good people skills and are dedicated to a cause,”** reinforcing its relevance across a wide range of sectors.

Knowledge and Understanding of Health Systems

In addition to personal and professional development, participants reported a deeper understanding of the healthcare system and the importance of community engagement within it. One respondent highlighted that volunteering provides opportunities to **“gain knowledge on the UK healthcare system and... influence change.”**

Engagement in specific projects, such as the **“Festival for Older People”** and **“Neurodivergent research,”** enabled volunteers to explore both the challenges and opportunities within the system. These experiences provided practical insight into how services operate and how young people can contribute to improvement.

Lasting Impact

One of the most significant findings is the enduring nature of the YHW experience. Participants reflected on involvement that had taken place several years earlier, yet continued to describe its influence as meaningful and lasting. As one participant noted, the experience had **“definitely stuck with me.”**



Group of Young Healthwatch volunteers

This sustained impact is further reflected in continued advocacy. Even after moving on to higher education, some participants remained engaged in promoting volunteering, with one noting that they **“returned back to my school to encourage students to volunteer.”**

Overall reflections were overwhelmingly positive, with one participant concluding: **“All I can say is, YHW has been an absolute highlight the last 3 years and I couldn't recommend it more.”**



Conclusion

The findings from this project demonstrate that the impact of Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (YHW) is both multi-dimensional and enduring. Rather than contributing to a single outcome, volunteering supports a combination of skill development, increased confidence, informed decision-making and a stronger sense of personal and social responsibility.

A notable feature across all responses is the consistency of experience. Despite differences in duration of involvement and subsequent career pathways, participants shared a common sense of having contributed meaningfully and having developed through that process. The opportunity to have **“real influence”** and to be part of something purposeful emerged as a defining aspect of the YHW experience.

Volunteering with YHW provides more than short-term engagement; it offers a foundation that continues to shape individuals as they progress into further education, employment and wider life choices. In this sense, YHW acts as a bridge between early aspiration and future direction, supporting young people to develop not only practical skills but also the confidence to use their voice and contribute within their communities.

This lasting impact is powerfully illustrated in the following reflection:



My name is Grace and I am writing for both myself and my fellow volunteer Khyem. For Khyem and I, being a part of Young Healthwatch has been a large part of our development from teenagers into young adults and helped us get into our dream university courses.

We both agree that being actively involved in amazing youth volunteered projects has not only contributed to our understanding of our community and healthcare but also improved our confidence and abilities as leaders and team players.

One of the several things I love about Youth Healthwatch is that our engagement officers excel at finding and involving volunteers within projects the volunteers are personally passionate about, such as this dental focused research project on primary school aged children and teeth brushing habits, and visiting a 111 call centre to give feedback on their work and informational brochures.



These projects- such as the NIHR Young People's mental health research project and presentation day, are always insightful and productive to partake in.

These tend to be once a month in person meetings, but they have compounded over the two years to provide me with loads of great opportunities to push myself out of my comfort zone.

For both Khyem (a first-year medicine student) and I (an aspiring biomedical science student who wants to be a corporate lawyer), these sessions have improved our abilities in communicating clearly and effectively, critical thinking and building our emotional maturity.

While incredibly helpful for our long-term career goals, the nurtured development of these soft skills proves that as a young person, your voice is valued and heard. I've also seen this especially in the types of projects we've been involved in. I see that my opinion is valued by the NHS, healthcare charities, and private companies like MedEquip who ask young volunteers for their input on the services they provide and change accordingly within reason.

Inevitably, our generation will gradually become both the patient demographic and healthcare providers, so it is vital that change happens quickly. YHW has been working so hard to give young people like Khyem and I a chance to give back to the community and companies, improve it, and better understand it. For that, I am forever grateful.

This reflection encapsulates the broader findings of the report: that meaningful youth engagement not only benefits individuals in the present, but equips them with the skills, insight and confidence to influence the future.



Recommendations for Strengthening Youth Voice in Health and Social Care Volunteering

Drawing on the findings of this project, the Youth Engagement Officer and current YHW volunteers propose the following recommendations to enhance the effectiveness and impact of youth volunteering programmes:

Embed co-production throughout

Involve young people at every stage, from design to evaluation, to ensure programmes remain relevant, meaningful and grounded in lived experience.

Prioritise meaningful, real-world engagement

Provide opportunities that enable direct interaction with services, communities and decision-makers. Practical involvement increases both confidence and the perceived value of participation.

Foster safe, inclusive environments

Create spaces where young people feel respected, supported and able to contribute openly. A positive environment is critical to sustained engagement and personal development.

Make skills development explicit

Actively recognise and articulate the transferable skills gained through volunteering, supporting young people to apply these in education, employment and wider opportunities.

Design for accessibility and flexibility

Ensure opportunities are adaptable to young people's varying commitments, reducing barriers to participation and widening access.

Strengthen progression pathways

Offer clear routes for continued involvement, leadership roles and progression into further opportunities, reinforcing the long-term value of engagement.

Build and sustain alumni networks

Maintain relationships with former volunteers to create a supportive network that can inspire, mentor and inform future cohorts.

Demonstrate impact clearly and consistently

Show how young people's contributions influence real change, reinforcing the importance of their voice and encouraging ongoing participation.



Young Healthwatch volunteers taking part in the Patient-Led Assessments of the Care Environment (PLACE) assessment at Bedford Hospital



Recognising Current Volunteer Contributions

Luton and Dunstable
National PLACE
Assessment
2025



THRIVE
Teamwork | Health & Wellbeing | Impact | Reliability | Ability | Excellence



Recognising Current Volunteer Contributions

The Youth Engagement Officer extends sincere thanks to the current Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (YHW) volunteers who contributed their time, insight and enthusiasm to this project. Their involvement was integral to ensuring the work remained authentically youth-led, with findings that are both credible and reflective of genuine lived experience.

Through their active participation in designing research tools and contributing to the analysis process, these volunteers played a key role in shaping both the direction and depth of the project. Their contributions not only strengthened the quality of the research, but also demonstrated the value of involving young people in meaningful, decision-making roles.

The following reflections highlight their experiences of being involved in the design and analysis of this work:



Being part of creating the survey questions was actually really interesting because it made me realise how much thinking goes into it. At first I thought you just ask what you want to know, but we had to think about how to word things so people would understand and give honest answers. It made me feel like my ideas actually mattered and that I was helping shape the project.

Jessica

I liked looking at the interview answers and trying to find patterns in what people were saying. It was a bit confusing but once we started discussing it as a group it made more sense. It helped me think more deeply and not just read things quickly. It also showed me how different people's experiences can still link together in similar ways.

Grace

It felt good to be trusted with something like this because it's not something you usually get to do at our age.

Temio

These reflections reinforce a key theme of this report: that when young people are trusted with responsibility and given the opportunity to contribute meaningfully, they not only add value to the work itself, but also gain confidence, skills and a stronger sense of ownership in the process.



Appendix A





Appendix A

The Interview/survey questions written by the young people:

1. Do you give consent for your name and current role (e.g. job or area of study) to be included in a report?
2. What is your full name?
3. How old are you currently, and how old were you when you volunteered with Young Healthwatch?
4. What are you currently studying or what is your current job?
5. What are your future career goals or aspirations?
6. How long did you volunteer with YHW?
7. How did you first hear about volunteering with YHW? (e.g. school/college, careers fair, social media, website, friends, etc.)
8. What motivated you to sign up for volunteering? (e.g. gaining experience, interest in healthcare, building skills, meeting new people)
9. What were your expectations before starting, and were they met?
10. Did your experience with YHW influence your career or personal goals? If so, how?
11. What skills did you develop during your time with YHW? (e.g. communication, confidence, teamwork, research)
12. Do you feel that volunteering with YHW supported your progression into your current role or studies? If so, how?
13. What was your favourite project or aspect of volunteering with YHW?
14. What did you find most challenging, and how did you overcome it?
15. Is there anything you would improve about the volunteering experience?
16. Would you recommend volunteering with YHW to others? Why or why not?
17. What advice would you give to someone considering volunteering in Health and Social Care?
18. If you could give one piece of advice to your younger self during exam season, what would it be?
19. How would you describe your overall experience with YHW in one sentence?
20. Is there anything else you would like to share about your time with YHW that hasn't been covered above?





Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (YHWCB) exists to make health and social care services work for the people that use them, especially young people.

Our role is to ensure that local decision makers and health and care services put the experiences of young people at the heart of their work.

We believe no one should be afraid to speak up because our opinion is as good as anyone else's.

Our volunteers have received appropriate 'Enter & View' training and are actively putting their learning into practice by visiting health and social care services such as hospital wards, surgeries and care homes. The young people will then be able to report their findings from their unique perspective. If you would like a group of YHWCB volunteers to visit your service please contact us.

A lot more information can be found on the Young Healthwatch website, here <https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/young-healthwatch>, including one volunteer who was successful in applying for nursing college after detailing her experience as a Young Healthwatch volunteer. She explains how pivotal being a volunteer with YHWCB was in supporting her application, showcasing the work she was involved in through YHWCB activities and projects.

If you are under 25, why not consider becoming a member of Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire? Get in touch for more information, email elli.margolius@healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk or call **0300 303 8554**.





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