

BE YOURSELF: EVERYBODY ELSE IS TAKEN

Our digital project for young people

Overview

Healthwatch Dorset is the local independent consumer champion for health and social care. It's one of 148 local Healthwatch organisations around England, who all work to ensure that the voice of the consumer is strengthened and heard by those who commission, deliver and regulate health and care services. The Healthwatch network was established by Act of Parliament and given statutory powers. But each local Healthwatch organisation is independent of both national and local government, and of the NHS.

Usually, our reports are the result of specific investigations into local people's experiences of particular health or care services. This report is a bit different.

Our starting point (in 2016) was the wider context of wanting to hear from younger people about their lives, about what it is like to be them and what are the health and wellbeing issues for them. Be Yourself was a digital project created to allow younger people to talk about their lives and personal experiences in any way that suited them.

The project was widely advertised on social media (including our first significant use of Instagram). We loaded people's submissions onto a Pinterest board, where they are open for all to see.

We also directly approached organisations around the county, ranging from schools and colleges to youth groups.

As a result, we received over 150 contributions in a wide variety of mediums - including images, painting, blogs, vlogs, films, poetry. Each contribution has given us an insight into how young people are feeling.

As the project grew, we undertook engagement with schools, colleges, universities and community groups. We ran school assemblies, creative workshops and small focus groups, where we discovered the stresses young people face, the pressure of social expectations, their fears and their general overview on opening up about their problems. These groups consisted of 1-2-1 chats, games, artwork and group discussions. They gave young people the opportunity to talk about their story and highlighted how being listened to really helped.

Emilia Chase, then our Children and Young People's Officer, also wrote a blog, highlighting and reflecting on some of her meetings with young people (hwatchdorset.wordpress.com).

Thank you

Thanks to everyone who has taken part in this project, including:

- Over 600 children & young people
- Volunteer Centres & Children's Centres
- Weymouth College
- The Arts University, Bournemouth
- Bournemouth University
- Bournemouth & Poole Colleges
- Dorset County Hospital & Poole Hospital
- Space Youth Project
- The Chatterboxes
- YMCA Bournemouth
- VInspired
- Dorset Youth Association
- 0-19 Forum
- Poole Young Carers
- Oak Academy, LeAF Studio, Poole High School, Oakdale Junior School, Tregonwell Academy, Bourne Academy, Avonbourne, Thomas Hardy School, Highcliffe School, Yewstock School and many, many more.

Key themes

There were some of the key themes that became plain as more people got involved.

In terms of how people were describing their lives, we were struck, in particular, by two themes.

The first is the depth of emotion and feeling, expressed in recurring words such as -

understand me: stop bullying me: rage:
fear: hate: invisible: drowning in
endless thoughts: depression: anxiety:
sad: alienated: broken: worthless:
isolated: rejected: inferior: ashamed:
vulnerable: worthless.

And profound statements like this:

“We all make mistakes. Unfortunately,
for me, being me was mine.”



The second is the positive messages people wanted to give to others:

“Don’t bottle it up. Talk about it. Be brave. Beat it.”

“Be supporting and accepting towards anyone you meet.”

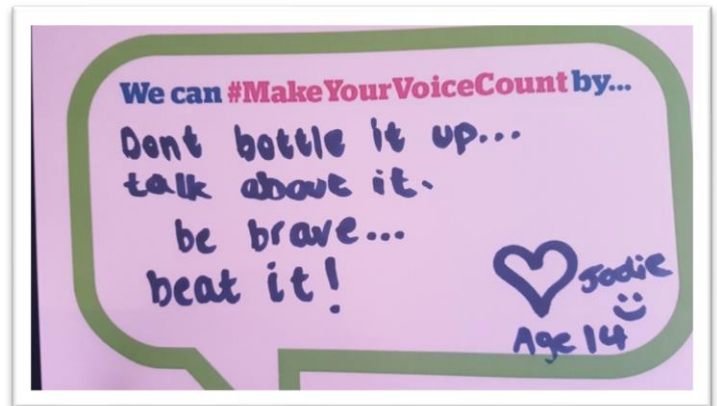
“Don’t be quiet and keep it all in. There are always people that want to listen.”

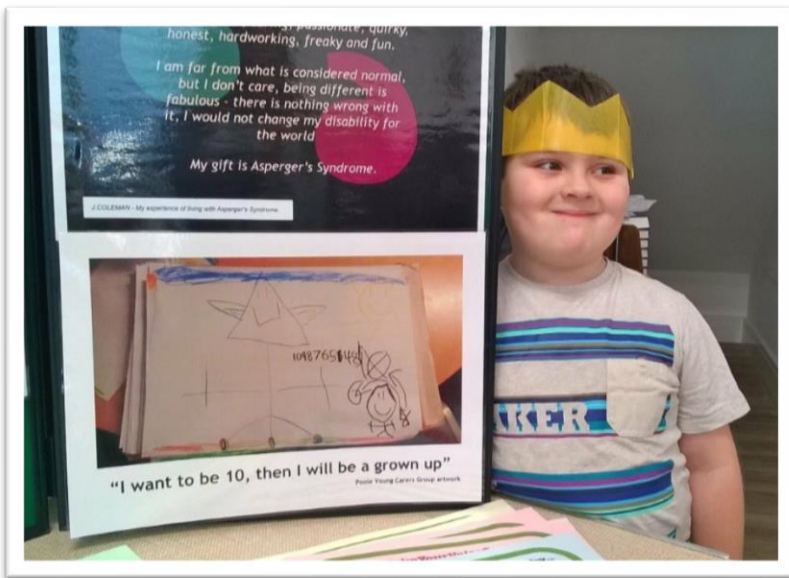
“Don’t let your mental health define who you are.”

“Hang around with the right people, because some people make you feel worse.”

“Tell people your problems so you don’t have to walk the path on your own.”

“Make sure that when you talk to people you are heard well and understood.”





When working with Poole young carers (some as young as 5), the most common issue that was raised was that teachers don't understand their circumstances and put extreme pressure on these young children, whose priorities are not the same as the average student. We also ran assemblies, both to encourage people to take part in our project and also, subsequently, for students to present their work.

Other common issues were:

- Teachers and students need more understanding of mental health and it needs to be taught at a younger age.
- Students would feel more comfortable with a person to talk to who is closer to their age. They feel that there is too much of a gap and they feel misunderstood.
- We found many instances of people being unable to access child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

Key messages

- The key is early intervention and raising awareness.
- Mental Health should be spoken about from a young age. The term "mental health" should be used so that it no longer becomes a taboo subject.
- Each year, as a young person develops, their understanding of mental health and stress should grow. They should be encouraged to open up and discuss how they feel, whether it's in a group environment or on a 1-2-1 basis.
- The creative workshops that we ran allowed young people to discuss their personal circumstances and express how they felt in front of their peers. By the end of the three-week workshop, their confidence had grown and they were more comfortable opening up about their mental health.

- This doesn't have to have a financial cost on a school. PSHCE (Personal Social Health and Citizenship Education) is already factored into the timetable and mental health can be slotted in.
- Health class can incorporate mental health lessons.
- Discussions on mental health can be incorporated into art, music and drama lessons, so those who don't feel comfortable talking have the platform to express their feelings in an artistic way without feeling judged.
- Schools should actively seek ways to create more before-school and after-school groups and summer schools, where young people with self-esteem and other issues could find support to open up and share. Parent workshops, too. A lot of mental health issues faced by young people are not only based in schools: external factors come into play too.

What happens now

We will share this report widely.

We will ask service commissioners to respond to it.

We will organise an exhibition of the submissions to travel round venues across the county.

We will encourage people to find out more and see the submissions for themselves:

[On our Pinterest board.](#)

[On our blog.](#)