

Vaccine hesitancy among young people in Central Bedfordshire

October 2021





COVID-19
Vaccine

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Introduction

For the majority of the country the Covid-19 vaccination has become part of our everyday lives. Initially, first doses of the vaccine were offered to people aged 80 years and over including frontline health and social care workers and all residents in care homes. Specific cohorts of the population were then subsequently invited to receive the vaccine with the aim of vaccinating the majority of the population as quickly as possible.

During the summer of 2021, the younger generation were also offered the vaccine. In May 2021, 30 year olds were offered the vaccine¹ and in August 2021, 16 and 17 year olds were offered the Covid-19 vaccine². For those age 30 years and older this represented a six month period after the initial roll out of the vaccine and for 16 years and above, this represented eight months after the initial roll out³. The time gap has, understandably, given a platform for the anti-vaccination hype in the younger generation to gain momentum, through the mainstream media, and possibly more crucially, via social media.

Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok or Twitter are popular arenas for young people to share their views and observe trends in a quick-fire method, and where small topics get blown out of proportion due to the speed the news can travel. This goes some way to understanding why 'vaccine hesitancy' has been more prevalent in the younger generation in a relatively short time period. There are of course positive news stories shared on these spaces, however, the speed with which information is created and shared can have a detrimental effect on a young person deciding whether to have the vaccine or not.

In August, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) research found that 16 to 29 year olds were the most hesitant age group, with 8% reporting vaccine hesitancy compared with 5% and 2% in those aged 30 to 49 years⁴.

Vaccine hesitancy is defined as *'having been offered a vaccine but declined the offer; are very or fairly unlikely to have the vaccine if offered; are neither likely nor unlikely to have the vaccine if offered; don't know; or preferred not to say'*⁵

¹ The BBC published an article on 26th May 2021 about young people in their 30's taking up the vaccine. [Covid vaccine: 30 and 31-year-olds in England now invited - BBC News](#)

² On 15th August the government published information stating that all young aged 16 and 17 years old in England would be offered the vaccine in the next week [All young people aged 16 and 17 in England to be offered vaccine by next week - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

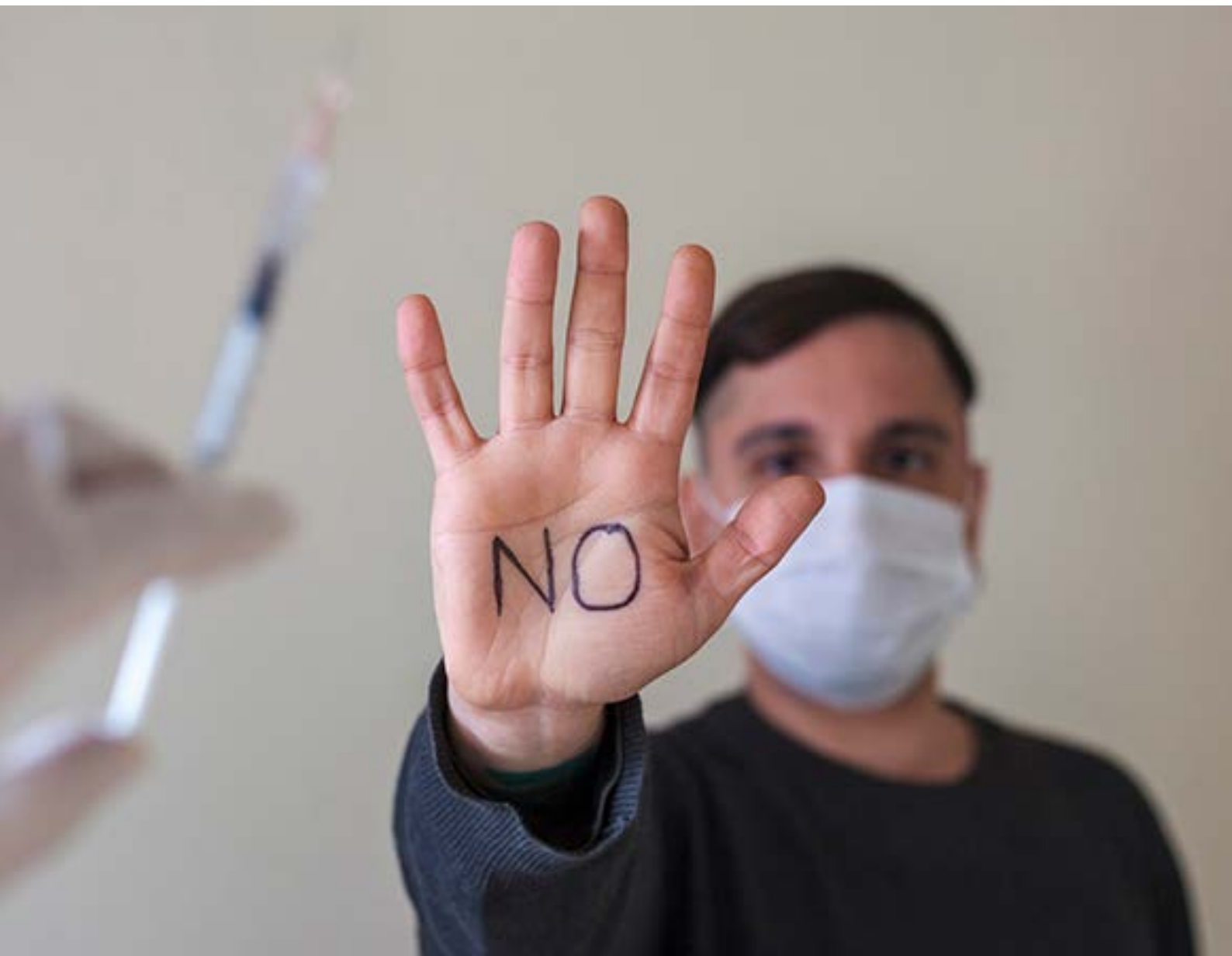
³ Wikipedia last updated this page on 17th October 2021 which goes over the Covid-19 vaccination in the United Kingdom. [COVID-19 vaccination in the United Kingdom - Wikipedia](#)

^{4 & 5} The Office for National Statistics (ONS) published this article on 3rd September 2021 around hesitancy in younger adults, [Coronavirus vaccine hesitancy in younger adults - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire young volunteers wanted to undertake a short research study into vaccine hesitancy amongst the young people in our area and to explore the reasons behind it.

With support from Healthwatch England and local providers, a short snapshot survey was created and widely distributed across Central Bedfordshire. Questions included whether they have been offered the vaccine, if they have chosen to have the vaccine and why they felt young people were choosing not to have the vaccine.

The main aim of the survey was to gain some insight into whether young people from our area were choosing to have the vaccine, or not, and/or the reasons why they felt other young people were hesitant about having the vaccine.



Methodology

In September 2021, Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire created a short snapshot survey to find out more about vaccine hesitancy amongst young people in our area. The survey was posted on HWCB's website, widely promoted via social media and featured in our weekly e-bulletin and Newsletter. The survey was also promoted directly via Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire volunteers with their friends and family.

All young volunteers were also encouraged to contribute their feedback individually, expressing their views as to why they felt there has been vaccine hesitancy amongst young people, the results of which are included in this report.

The survey ran for 4-5 weeks and 29 people completed and submitted their responses. The survey questions were based on potential reasons for vaccine hesitancy and more importantly, any ideas the young people had to encourage more young people to take up the offer of vaccination. The remaining few questions were demographic; respondent's gender, ethnicity, age and geographical location.

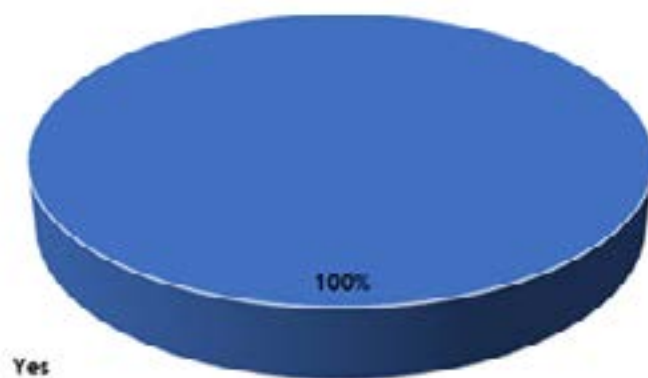
A full copy of the survey questions can be found in the Appendix.

A full analysis of the survey results is given in the following pages, and any additional comments provided by respondents have been included.

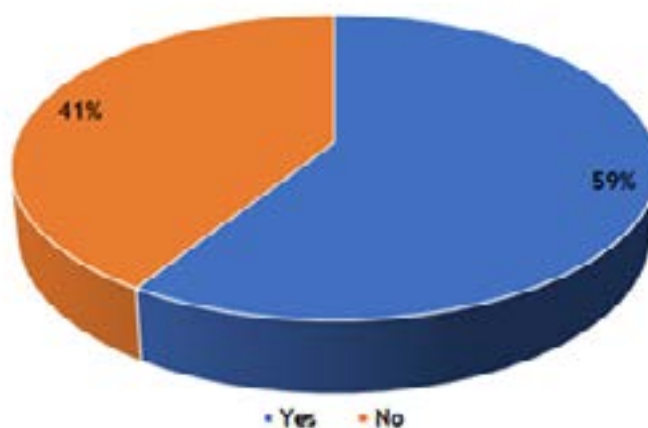


Analysis of survey results

In **Question One**, people were asked if they have ever been offered the Covid-19 vaccination and 100% of those who completed the survey confirmed that they had.



Question Two asked if respondents had chosen to accept the vaccination offered. A fairly high majority (59%) confirmed they had taken up the offer of a vaccine although just under half (41%) of those who completed the survey confirmed they had not had the vaccine.



In **Question three**, if respondents had answered 'No' to question two, they were asked for more information as to why they had not accepted the vaccine. Comments included the following:

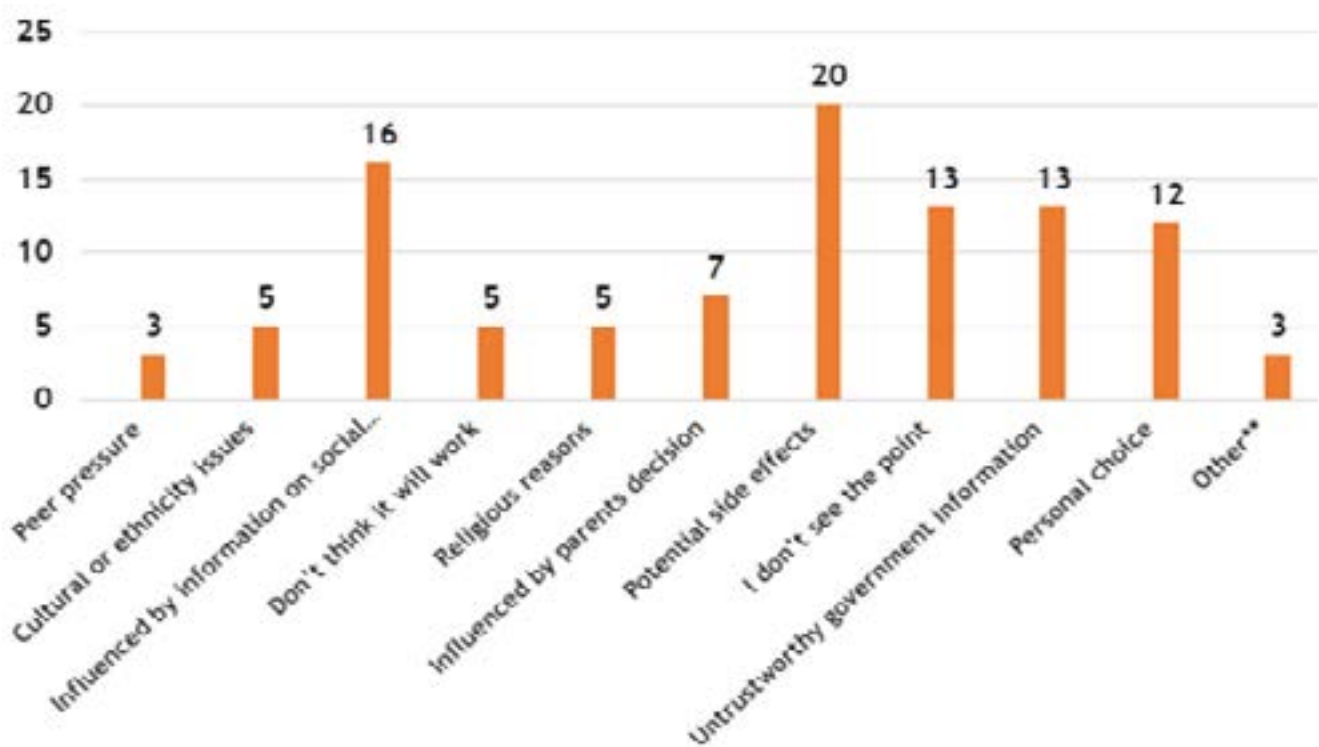
- 'The vaccine is still within clinical trials, for the virus itself younger people if healthy are able to fight the virus with our own immune system. I am for the vaccine for those who are vulnerable or the elderly, but the government has failed to highlight that the vaccine isn't needed to survive the virus or to prevented you from catching it. Our own immune system is designed to fight viruses and colds, the vaccine strips away the natural immunity and strength of our own bodies. Vaccines have never been required to fight previous pandemics and this has been forgotten.'*
- 'Don't trust the trials.'*
- 'Because it simply isn't a deadly virus and I believe it should be optional.'*
- 'I'm not a gullible idiot.'*
- 'Because there is no long-term safety data. Because it is new vaccine technology, only tested on humans in 2020. Because the risk of dying from contracting SARS-CoV-2 for a young healthy person is around 0.0001%, much lower than the risk of vaccine injury. The risk of dying from SARS-CoV-2 for a person over 80 with two comorbidities is around 2%, so roughly the same as influenza (1%). The vaccine does not prevent transmission or infection, so it's not really a vaccine in the traditional sense. I have taken every vaccine available to me in my life, but I won't be taking this one. If you read the vaccine trials, you'll see that absolute risk is only reduced by a nominal amount. There is an article in the Lancet explaining this.'*
- 'Having looked at the information on the Yellow Card scheme it seems there is more risk of taking the jab than dying of Covid.'*
- 'Pointless in a young person and too many risks/unknowns associated.'*
- 'You don't need to vaccinate a whole population against a virus that doesn't kill everyone.'*
- 'I do not want to part of an experimental trial that is leading to genocide and passports.'*

These are genuine comments from some of the young people that completed the survey. Clearly, some have quite extreme views, and it is difficult to determine how much research they have undertaken, or from what source, to reach their conclusion.

In **Question Four**, people were asked why they thought some younger people are deciding not to have the vaccination. A list of possible answers was given in which they were asked to 'tick all that apply' or they could add their own individual comments.

The majority of respondents stated they felt this was due to '*possible side effects*', (total of 20 indications), with the next highest number (16) who felt this was because they were being '*influenced by information on social media*'. Other popular answers were '*don't see the point*' (13), '*Untrustworthy government information*' (13) and '*personal choice*' (12).

Other reasons highlighted were '*influenced by parents' decision*' (7), '*religious reasons*' (5), '*don't think it will work*' (5) and '*cultural or ethnicity issues*' (5). Interestingly, '*Peer pressure*' scored fairly low on the list (3).



Other comments received for this question were as follows:

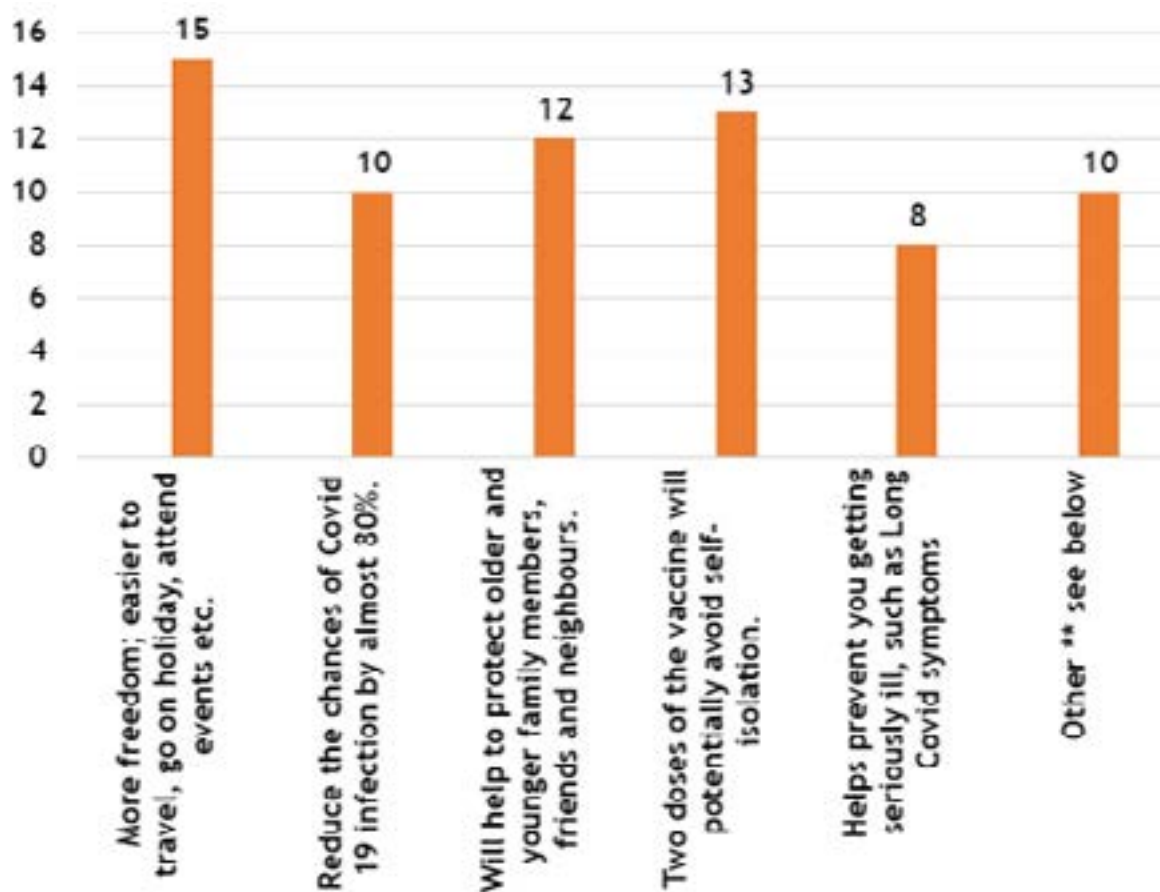
'Unknown fertility issues.'

'Don't think they will get Covid.'

'Not needed in young people.'

In **Question Five**, people were asked what benefits of having the vaccination would help younger people to decide to go ahead. Respondents were given a list of possible answers and were able to tick more than one answer, or they could add their own individual comments.

One of the most popular answers was *'more freedom, easier to travel, (go on holiday, attend events etc)* (15). Another popular answer was *'Two doses of the vaccine will potentially avoid self-isolation'* (13), closely followed by *'will help to protect older and younger family members, friends and neighbours'* (12). A further 10 indications were given for *'reducing the chances of Covid-19 infection by 80%'*. The least popular answer was *'helps prevent you getting seriously ill, such as Long Covid symptoms'* (8).



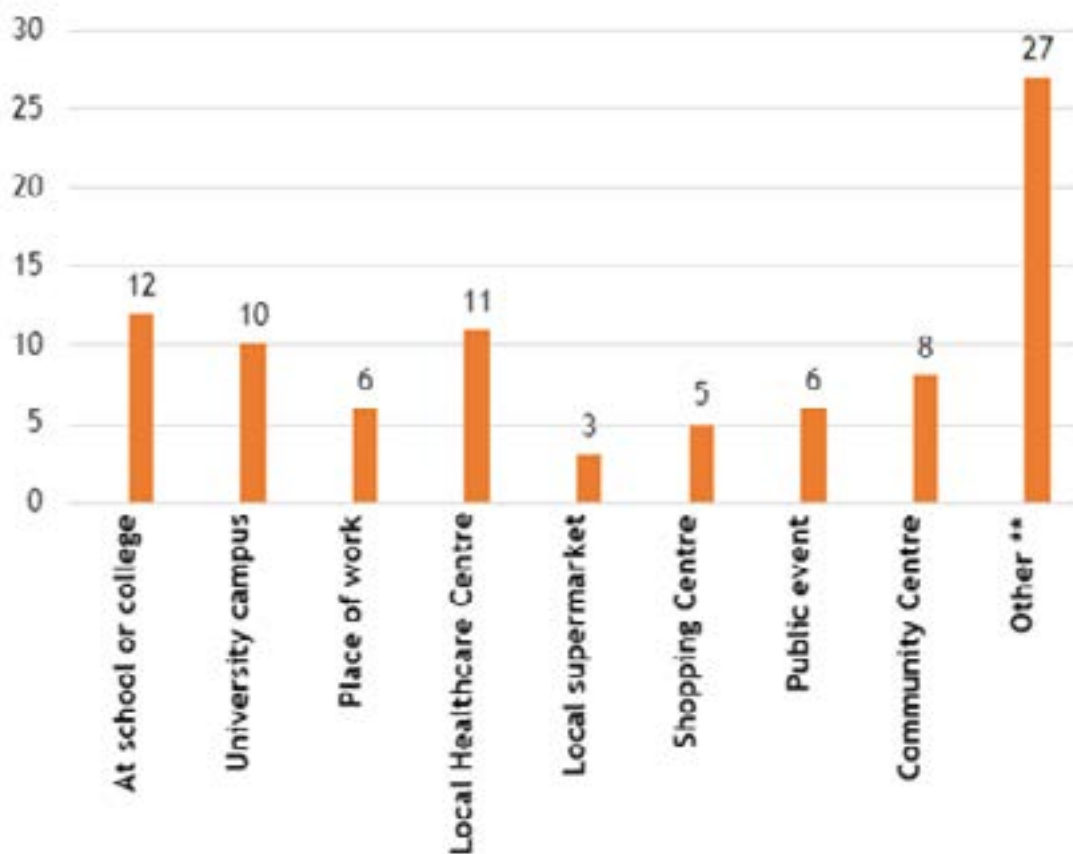
Additional comments received in answer to this question were not positive or an indication of the positive benefits to having the vaccination, however they are included here as a guide to the thinking some young people have in relation to vaccine choice:

- 'It is a personal choice.'*
- 'Don't see benefits -none, it should be completely up to you!'*
- 'This is propaganda and coercion.'*
- 'None of the above are proven, so no, no amount of coercion or bribery, such as freedom or avoiding isolation will make me have it, if it was for a disease which was dangerous, blackmailed into taking it to go uni, on holiday, concerts.'*

In **Question Six**, young people were asked where they thought younger people would prefer to have the vaccine. Once again respondents were given a choice of answers and were encouraged to tick more than one answer or to add their own individual comment.

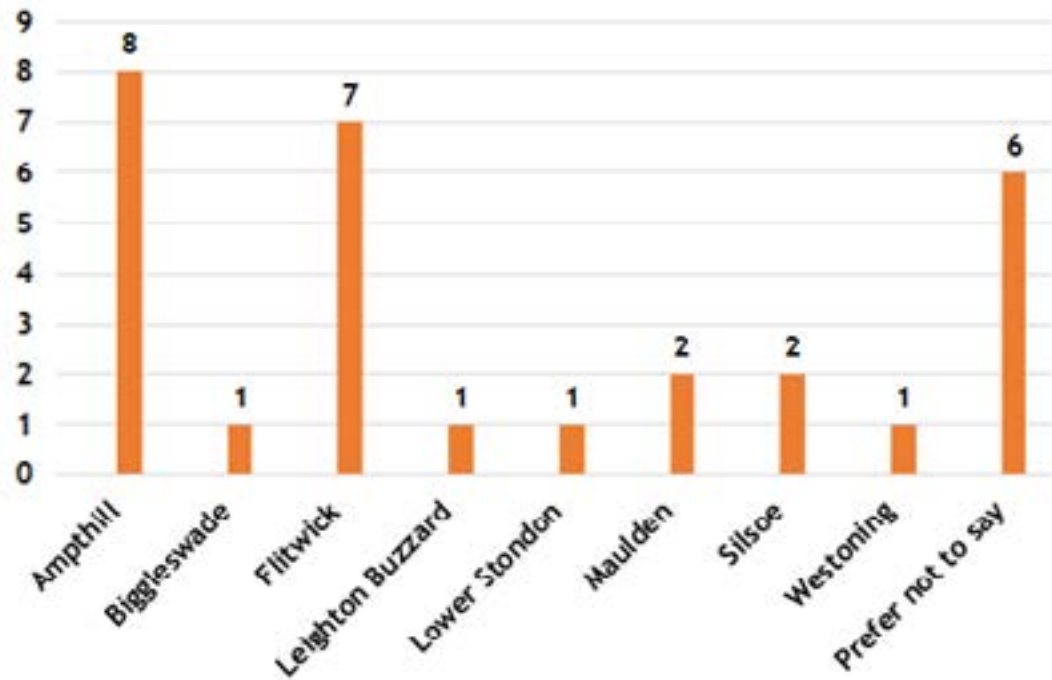
Interestingly the majority of young people gave their own comment in regard to this question, two of which said that *'injections should only be given by fully trained medical staff'* and *'many young people are not this stupid'* which does not really answer the question but again is included for reference.

The most popular answers given were *'at school or college'* (12), *'a local healthcare centre'* (11), *'university campus'* (10) and *'a community centre'* (8). Other young people said, *'place of work'* (6) would also be best, with others indicating a *'public event'* (6), and a *'shopping centre'* (5). The lowest number of answers was a *'local supermarket'* (3).

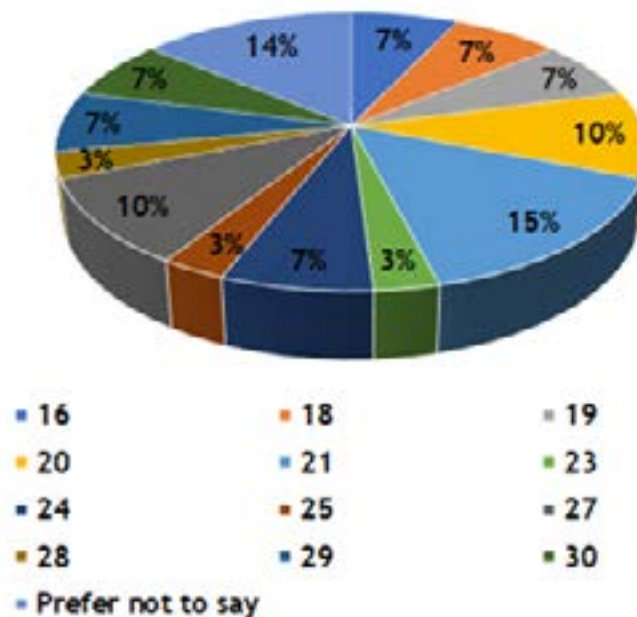


The remainder of the questions related to demographics; where they lived, their age, gender and ethnicity, as follows:

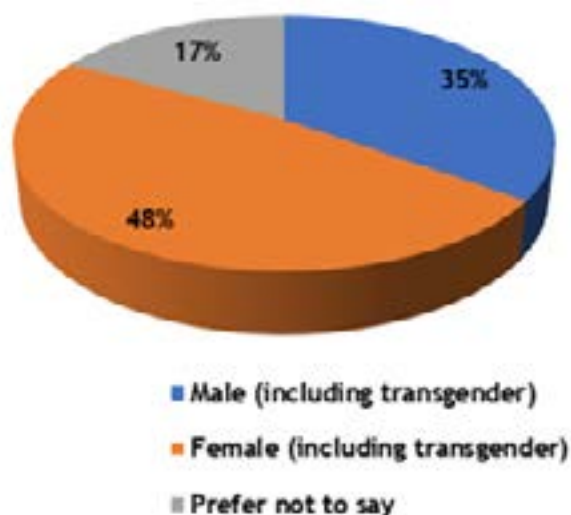
Question Seven asked which area of Central Bedfordshire people lived in. The majority came from Ampthill (8) and Flitwick (7). Six people preferred not to say and the rest were fairly equally spread across Maulden, Silsoe, Westoning, Lower Stondon, Leighton Buzzard and Biggleswade.



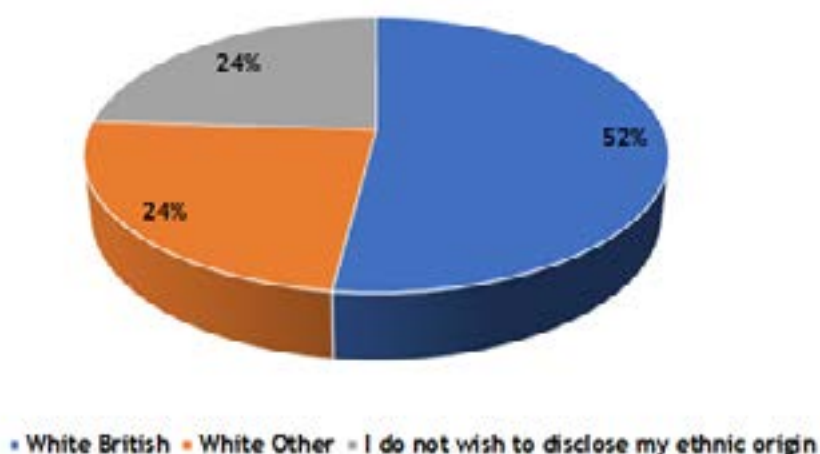
Question Eight asked how old people were and the age ranged from 16 to 30 with a slight majority at age 21, (15%). 14% of respondents preferred not to give their age.



Question Nine asked the gender of each respondent. The majority of respondents were female (48%), with 35% male and 17% who preferred not to say.



In **Question Ten**, the survey asked the ethnicity of the respondents. Over half of the respondents were 'white British' (52%), 24% were 'white other' and 24% did not want to disclose their ethnic origin.



Summary

Interestingly, all the young people that answered the survey had been offered the vaccine but only 59% decided to accept that offer. When asked why they had not accepted the vaccine a common theme emerged which related to feelings of being fit and healthy, not being a deadly virus and questionable clinical trials. Additional comments included *'I'm fit and healthy with an immune system. Worked all throughout the pandemic and not a sniffle'* and *'I don't need it, if I get COVID I'm not going to die of it'*.

When asked why they thought younger people had been hesitant to take the vaccine the clear majority said it was because of possible side effects, a close second was the pressures of social media. Other reasons given were *'untrustworthy government'*, *'personal choice'* and *'they didn't see the point'*.

To encourage more young people to take up the vaccine, respondents to the survey felt fairly strongly that young people's opinion could be changed if they believed they would have more freedom to travel and attend events, as well as receiving two doses which would reduce the need to self-isolate.

The most popular choices as a suitable place to encourage younger people to receive the vaccine were in school, university and local health care centres.

A range of young people from various villages and towns across Central Bedfordshire answered this survey. The majority were from the towns of Ampthill and Flitwick and the most common ages of those who completed the survey, were 21 and 27 years old. Just under half of the respondents were female, and 17% preferred not to indicate their gender.





Conclusion

It is reassuring that all the young people who answered this survey had been offered the vaccine however, it is concerning that just under half declined the offer.

A possible reason for the increase in the anti-vaccine movement amongst the younger generation could be because the students have recently returned to school and college, and are now more aware of social media campaigns and word of mouth, via their friends, which highlights and spreads the anti-vaccine message more quickly.

According to Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes Integrated Care System (BLMK ICS), *'Since the start of the vaccine programme, we have seen isolated pockets of disruptive and challenging behaviour from anti-vaccine campaigners, including in schools, often fuelled by online and offline misinformation including posters and letter campaigns as well as in physical protests.'*⁶

Some key themes that emerged from this survey, as well as from the Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire volunteers themselves, included distrust of the vaccine and the unknown risks or possible side effects, which is also supported by a recent survey from the Office of National Statistics, *'primary factors for increasing vaccine hesitancy included distrust of vaccine (safety and content); distrust of government and of those encouraging vaccine take up; concern about known and unknown side effects (including on fertility); and belief it was unnecessary for those at low risk of harm from the virus.'*⁷ This could be because not enough time has passed for young people to feel comfortable that there is minimal risk.

The results from the survey would also indicate that the locations preferred, which would encourage young people to take up the vaccines, are in places they trust and are familiar with. These include schools, university or local healthcare centres; places they most frequent or have visited over a long period of time. These locations may also be the most appropriate areas to advertise the benefits of taking the vaccine, as highlighted in the recommendations below.

⁶ 7th October 2021 article from Stakeholder Update Issue 35 - 07.10.21 email sent by BMLK CCG - <https://www.blmkccg.nhs.uk/>

⁷ The Office for National Statistics (ONS) published this article on 3rd September 2021 around hesitancy in younger adults, [Coronavirus vaccine hesitancy in younger adults - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk)

Recommendations

Key recommendations that emerged from the survey are as follows:

- ◆ Focus more on schools / universities / colleges for providing vaccine hubs.
- ◆ Tie up with travel agents and encourage them to provide booking information for vaccinations etc, or offer deals if vaccinated, same for events - some may have started to do this at time of print.
- ◆ Increase media information about the long term effects of 'Long Covid' - via social media which is the most used medium for information amongst young people.
- ◆ Recruit trail blazers who have already had the vaccine.
- ◆ Encourage more media and PR around the impact young people will have on others, not just themselves, if they do not take the vaccine.
- ◆ Focused training and education to parents, in particular certain ethnic groups.

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCB) will continue to support the younger residents of Central Bedfordshire with signposting, and the provision of information and advice regarding the vaccination programme.

This report will be shared with key stakeholders across Central Bedfordshire, Healthwatch England and NHS England, to help influence improvements in the uptake of the vaccine amongst the younger generation.



Appendix

Survey Questions

Question 1: Have you been offered the Covid-19 vaccination?

- ◆ Yes
- ◆ No

Question 2: Have you chosen to have the Covid-19 vaccination?

- ◆ Yes
- ◆ No

Questions 3: If you answered 'No' to question 2 please tell us why in the box below:

Question 4: Why do you think some younger people are deciding not to have the vaccination, tick all that apply or add your own comments in 'other'?

- ◆ Peer pressure
- ◆ Cultural or ethnicity issues
- ◆ Influenced by information on social media
- ◆ Don't think it will work
- ◆ Religious reasons
- ◆ Influenced by parents decision
- ◆ Potential side effects
- ◆ I don't see the point
- ◆ Untrustworthy government information
- ◆ Personal choice
- ◆ Other (please specify):

.....



Question 5: What benefits of having the vaccination would help younger people to decide to go ahead? Tick all that apply or add your own comments in 'other'

- ◆ More freedom; easier to travel, go on holiday, attend events etc.
- ◆ Reduce the chances of Covid-19 infection by almost 80%.
- ◆ Will help to protect older and younger family members, friends and neighbours.
- ◆ Two doses of the vaccine will potentially avoid self-isolation.
- ◆ Helps prevent you getting seriously ill, such as Long Covid symptoms
- ◆ Other (please specify):

.....

Question 6: Where do you think younger people would prefer to have the vaccine? Tick all that apply or add your own comments in 'other'

- ◆ At school or college
- ◆ University campus
- ◆ Place of work
- ◆ Local Healthcare Centre
- ◆ Local supermarket
- ◆ Shopping Centre
- ◆ Public event
- ◆ Community Centre
- ◆ Other (please specify):

.....

Question 7: Which area of Central Bedfordshire do you live in? e.g., Flitwick

.....

Question 8: How old are you?

.....

Question 9: What is your gender?

.....

Question 10: Please tell us your ethnicity

.....

About Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire is the local consumer champion promoting choice and influencing the provision of high quality health, social care and wellbeing services for all across Central Bedfordshire.

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCB) has significant statutory powers to ensure that the voice of the consumer is strengthened and heard by those who commission, deliver and regulate health and care services. HWCB engages and consults with all sections of the local population so that a wide cross-section of views are heard, understood and acted upon. Everything we say and do is informed by our connections to local people and our expertise is grounded in their experience.

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire is one of three local Healthwatch in the County of Bedfordshire and belong to a network of local Healthwatch. Healthwatch England leads, supports and guides the Healthwatch network which is made up of the national body and local Healthwatch across each of the 152 local authority areas in England.

Healthwatch is the only body looking solely at people's experience across all health and social care. As a statutory watchdog our role is to ensure that local health and social care services, and the local decision-makers put the experiences of people at the heart of their care.

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