

Sheffield Foyer: #SpeakUp project report

Exploring the barriers to accessing sexual health services and information for homeless young people



#SpeakUp: Sheffield Foyer

What is #SpeakUp?

#SpeakUp is Healthwatch Sheffield's micro grants programme, offering funding of £2000 to not-for-profit, voluntary, and community groups. The purpose is to run a project which will reach out to people across Sheffield, and hear what matters to them in relation to health and social care. By working with groups which are already trusted partners in their communities, we can make sure we're hearing from even more people, including those whose voices aren't often heard by decision makers.



Sheffield Foyer

Sheffield Foyer provides accommodation, training and support to help young people who have been affected by homelessness to live independently and find a pathway into employment. Our team currently supports 60 young people across the city.



Healthwatch Sheffield

Healthwatch Sheffield helps adults, children and young people influence and improve how NHS and Social Care services are designed and run. We're completely independent and not part of the NHS or Sheffield City Council. We want to understand your experiences, and help your views to influence decision-makers in the city.



Introduction

Why did we carry out this project?

The residents at Sheffield Foyer are homeless young adults, aged 16–25. Through our work with them, we have found that some residents do not understand the importance of sexual health, and can struggle to access sexual health services in Sheffield. This can be due to financial difficulties, issues with access and travel, or a lack of knowledge and understanding. We wanted to explore exactly what these barriers are, and what additional resources might help people to better care for their sexual health.

What did we do?

We wanted to reach out to our young people in a variety of ways, to explore their understanding of sexual health, and provide opportunities for them to learn and talk about sexual health in a fun atmosphere.

We supported **21 residents** to fill in a survey, and held several follow up chats to learn more about people’s answers. We also hosted an activity day where residents could engage with the topic in different ways.

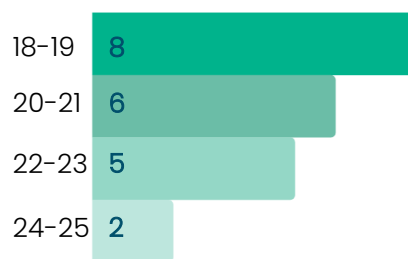
Who did we speak to?

What is your gender?



8 people were men,
13 people were women.

What is your age?



Our service supports people aged 16–25.

What is your sexual orientation?



18 people were heterosexual.
3 people were bisexual.

What is your ethnicity?

White British	13
Black African	3
Mixed – White and Black Caribbean	2
Asian – Pakistani	2
Asian – other	1

What is your religion?

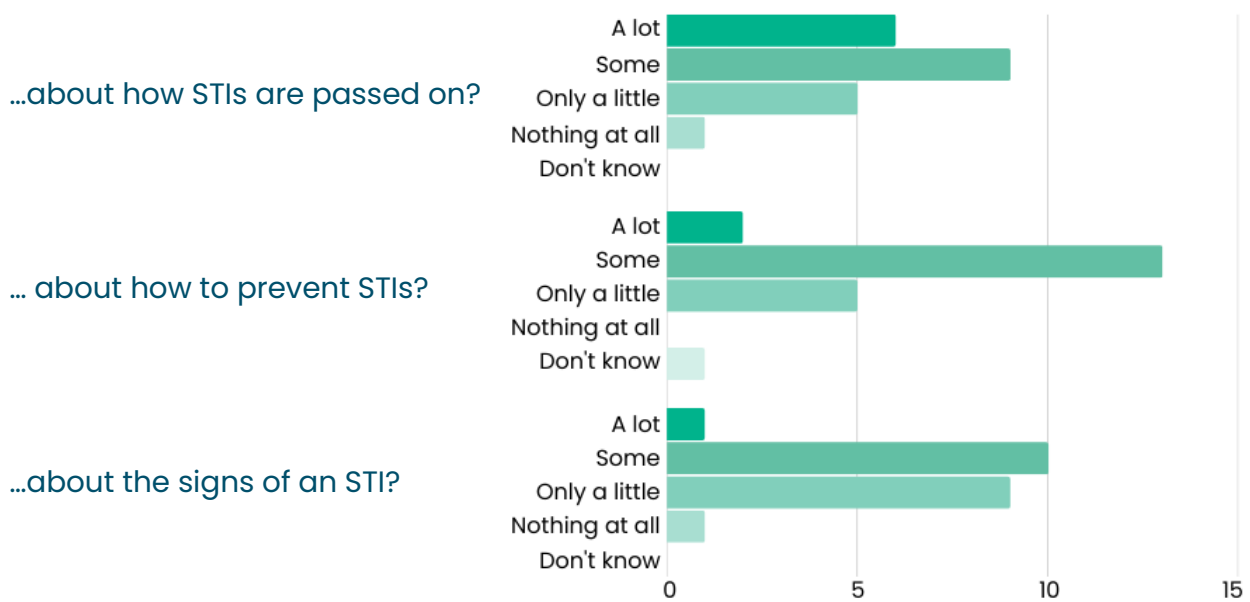
Christian	6
Muslim	3
No religion	11

Findings

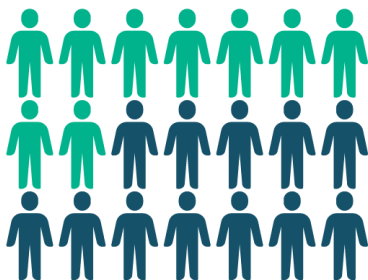
Sexual health: knowledge & understanding

Through the survey, we found that knowledge and understanding of sexual health topics is varied. We asked some questions to gauge how the young people would rate their own knowledge.

How much do you know...



Most people felt they had some understanding of these topics, but there were many who didn't feel as confident, or still felt they could learn more. People felt least confident in how to recognise the signs and symptoms of an STI. In follow up chats with some of our residents, they confirmed there was a general lack of understanding around this.



To explore this further, we also asked people if they were currently having safe sex, ie using condoms and/or contraception.

9 people told us they were – though may not be using both. 5 said they were not, and 7 told us they would rather not say.

We also presented some common beliefs and misbeliefs, to further understand where people might need more education:

Do you agree or disagree with these statements?	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
STIs are nothing to worry about unless you have sex with lots of people	9	11	1
Unless you have a lot of sexual partners, you don't need to use condoms	7	14	0
You can wear two condoms at the same time for extra protection	4	16	1
Using birth control might make you unable to have children in the future	5	7	9
You can get the morning after pill to try to prevent a pregnancy	13	4	4
You need a doctor's prescription to get the morning after pill	10	8	3
The best way to protect against <i>both</i> STIs and unplanned pregnancies is to use a condom and another form of contraception	18	2	1

There are some positive findings here – for instance a broad understanding that using a condom plus another form of contraception is the best way to protect against STIs and unplanned pregnancies.

However, there are also some more concerning findings – for instance nearly half of people believing you don't have to worry about STIs unless you have a lot of sexual partners, or a third believing that you don't need to use condoms unless you have a lot of sexual partners.

Nearly half of our respondents said they didn't know whether birth control has an effect on your future fertility – highlighting another area where more education is needed.

In follow up conversations with residents, there was a general lack of understanding about the seriousness of preventing STIs, and the potential health consequences of contracting one.

Accessing information & education about sexual health

We asked some questions about where people would get information about safe sex from, and who they speak to about sex and sexual health.

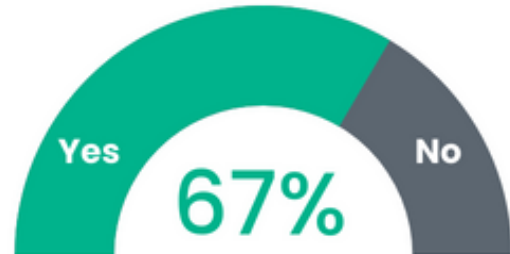
- Only around half (10 people) said they would know where to get more information on having safe sex
- 6 people said they almost never spoke about sex and safe sex with a partner
- Most people get their information about sexual health from friends and family, but many also use the internet, speak to staff at the Foyer or at school/college.
- No one told us they got their information from pornography. However, no one told us they got their information from health professionals either:

Where does your information about sexual health come from? (Select all that apply)	
Friends and family	11
Staff at the Foyer	7
School/college	9
Internet	8

Accessing sexual health services

We wanted to find out about our residents' knowledge of STI testing, and whether they are engaging with sexual health services. We asked a range of questions to explore people's understanding, experiences, and comfort levels with the topic.

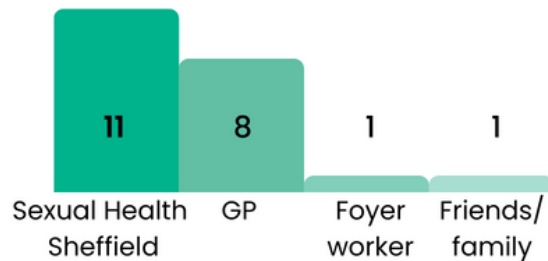
Are you aware of the services of Sexual Health Sheffield?



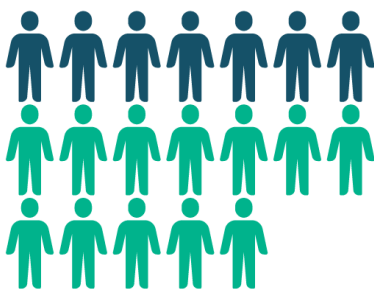
Have you been to Sexual Health Sheffield?



If you believed you had an STI, who would you contact first?



We would like to see higher levels of engagement with sexual health services. Sexual Health Sheffield appears to be relatively widely known and trusted, but even so, not many people have visited them for screening or advice.



We also asked people how often they get a sexual health check – 7 of the 19 people who responded to this question said they had never had an STI check.

Barriers to accessing sexual health services

We wanted to explore what people felt the main barriers were to accessing sexual health services – and what might have put people off making an appointment:

Have any of these reasons kept you from getting tested for STIs? (Select all that apply)	
It is too expensive to get there	6
You are afraid of what people might think	4
You are embarrassed	4
You do not think you are at risk	3
You do not want to know if you have something	3
You do not know what is involved in getting tested	3
You are worried about what the test would involve	3
You do not know where to go to get tested	2
You do not know what it means to have a positive test	1

People expanded on some of these issues when we spoke to them in more detail. Many of the young people we work with receive Universal Credit, and with limited income they have to prioritise how they spend their money. Travelling to a sexual health check isn't considered the highest priority for many.

People also told us they were scared to find out if they already had contracted something – deeper prompting showed again that there was a lack of understanding about what could happen if you had an STI, which made people underestimate the importance of testing.

We also asked a related question, to find out what had stopped people who **had** wanted to make an appointment from doing so:

If you haven't been able to access a Sexual Health Service, why not? (Select all that apply)	
Had no transportation	9
No one was available to go along	6
Afraid of what the doctor would say or do	4

Didn't want parents to know about my sexual activity	4
Didn't know who to go see	4
Embarrassed	2
Thought the problem would go away	1
Didn't know how to make an appointment	1
Parent or guardian would not go	0
Worried about cost	0

Transportation was a big issue here – in further conversations people did tell us about the cost of transportation for people with limited funds, but also transport barriers relating to mental health issues and social anxiety. Many people did want Foyer staff, family members who weren't their parents, or friends to go with them to appointments but this wasn't always possible. Young people can have a chaperone accompany them into the appointment, provided by Sexual Health Sheffield, but there isn't formal support available for getting to and from the appointment.

Other people spoke about their mental health more broadly as being a reason why they weren't able to book and attend a sexual health appointment.

Both of these questions revealed that transport – both the cost and the practicality – was a significant barrier to accessing sexual health screenings.

We also heard that some people were registered at GP practices who had said they offered sexual health screenings – so people could get tested closer to home. However when they asked for a test, they were told to go to Sexual Health Sheffield instead.



18 out of 21 people said they would prefer to access Sexual Health services somewhere **more local**



18 out of 21 people said they were likely to go **more frequently** if Sexual Health services were nearer

Sexual Health Sheffield do offer free [self-testing kits](#) which can be posted out to people – these are for people who do not have any symptoms, and have not knowingly been in contact sexually with someone with an infection. This could help many of the young people to access regular screenings if travel is their major obstacle. Those who had heard of and accessed these kits had had largely positive experiences:

“It was quick and easy”

“Only used the wee sample, was not too bad”

“Easy to use and more comfortable with the self-test kit”

However, 15 of the people we spoke to hadn't heard about this service. When we asked about this in more detail, there were lots of reasons why people might not have known about it – common reasons given were a lack of access to the internet, or only having internet access in communal settings. People also spoke about social anxiety and depression as barriers to finding out.

We also asked people how Sexual Health Sheffield could improve – and what they would tell the service if they could share one thing. People told us they'd like to see:

- **Wider opening times** (with clearer information on the website about opening times)
- **More information on tests**, so people know what to expect when they arrive – for instance which tests might be used for which STIs or symptoms, and practicalities of the examination like the size of the swab collector.

Sexual health activity day

We ran an activity day at the Foyer, with the aim of fun activities helping people talk more freely about sexual health. Several activities were also designed to share information about sexual health and STIs, as a need for increased education about these things was identified through the survey. Activities included:

- Drunken condom challenge – residents wore ‘drunken goggles’ and were timed putting a condom on an applicator
- Wheel of STI – if the residents’ spin landed on an STI, they had to look at various symptoms and locate one which was correct for that STI
- Question or debate – a trivia game where residents could win a prize if they get a question right, or if they make good points in a related debate
- Pregnancy simulator and TENS – residents wore a backpack on their front with a watermelon in to imitate being pregnant, and could wear the TENS machine that simulates muscle contractions.

The activity day went really well, with many residents and staff getting involved in the activities. The feedback from the residents was very good, saying they enjoyed themselves and would like to do more activities and events like this.



“Our residents enjoyed it that much they got upset when we had to pack away the activities at the end of the event. From the staff perspective, we could see the enjoyment on their faces and residents taking on board what they have learnt.”

Staff member, Sheffield Foyer

Recommendations

Through this project we have identified several key issues relating to vulnerable young people and sexual health. Based on these, we have set out a range of recommendations for improvement.

There was a general lack of knowledge - and high levels of misinformation - among the young people we work with in relation to sexual health.

- More proactive work needs to be done to reach young people and present information to them in an engaging and accessible way. This could take the form of interactive activity days, or dedicated outreach work

There are practical barriers to sexual health testing and treatment, including location of services and ease of access. Possible ways to address this include:

- Bringing services closer to where people are - funding outreach roles to enable sexual health staff to go out to services like Sheffield Foyer; setting up hubs/outpost clinics; running a 'sexual health bus' or similar
- Helping people understand where they can go for sexual health information, testing and treatment - including clarifying whether particular GP practices deliver sexual health services
- Funding or supporting travel to sexual health appointments
- Staff who already work with vulnerable groups - for instance Foyer staff, medical staff who already visit - could be funded and trained to administer sexual health tests
- Self-testing kits could be provided in community settings like Sheffield Foyer; these could be given out to clients or completed with staff support on-site