



Empowering young women:
Improving sexual health awareness and
services across Reading and Wokingham
Borough

healthwatch
Reading
healthwatch
Wokingham Borough

health
watch
YOUTH

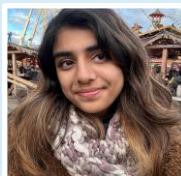
About Healthwatch Youth



Healthwatch Youth was launched in February 2023 to listen to the views of young people in Reading and Wokingham Borough.



We have 8 young volunteers who collectively bring a wide range of skills and lived experience.



Our volunteers come from diverse backgrounds and ethnicity.



Our volunteers are passionate about health and social care and want services to improve for young people.

Why we did this project

The theme of sexual health and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) was investigated on feedback that *“sex education in school was very limited.”* [Please click to read the case study.](#)

The youth team's experiences reflected inconsistencies in sexual health education, highlighting the need for further investigation.

Healthwatch discussions on women's health and access to services (in relation to BOB ICB's women's health strategy) revealed significant gaps in information and support, along with Healthwatch's understanding of women's sexual health needs across Reading and Wokingham Borough.

This report aims to:

- Raise awareness of young women's sexual health well-being.
- Understand challenges faced when accessing local sexual health services and identify gaps in information and accessibility.
- Improve communication between services and young people.
- Increase awareness about available sexual health support.

Why it matters

UK



166,899

new STI diagnoses in young people in 2023.

Young women may be more likely to be diagnosed with an STI due to sexual mixing by age and gender – some young women may have older male partners. ¹

Reading

8%

Whilst young people living in Reading make up **10%** of the population, they have the highest rates of STI diagnoses and represent a significant percentage of new STI cases.

In 2023, the STI rate in young people in Reading was **8% higher** than the England average.

"The rate of all new STI diagnoses (excluding chlamydia in under 25s) in Reading was 559 per 100,000 population in 2023 which is significantly higher than the England rate of 520 per 100,000 population." ²

Wokingham Borough

43%

In 2020, the STI diagnosis rate for young people in Wokingham Borough was **41% lower** than the average in England.

However, the **STI testing rate** (excluding chlamydia in under 25s) for young people in the borough was **43% lower** (2,578.4 per 100,000) than the England average and **36% lower** (4,549 per 100,000) than the South East average (4,007 per 100,000). ³

How we did it



A combination of

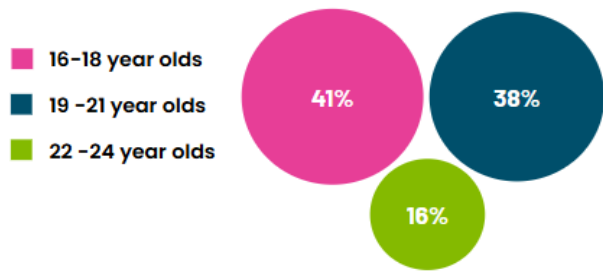
- Face-to-face engagements and online survey
- Support from third sector organisations
- WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and X

Local engagement

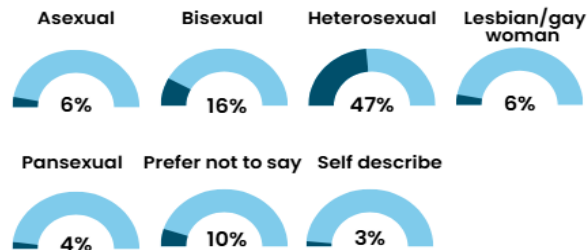
- Bracknell and Wokingham College (Freshers Day and Sexual Awareness Week)
- Kimel Café, Wokingham Borough
- P3 charity youth hostel, Wokingham Borough
- University of Reading (Fresher's Day, Sexual Health Awareness Week and Community Food Market)
- Florey Clinic Health Bus
- Wokingham Leisure Centre (Carnival Pool)

Who was involved

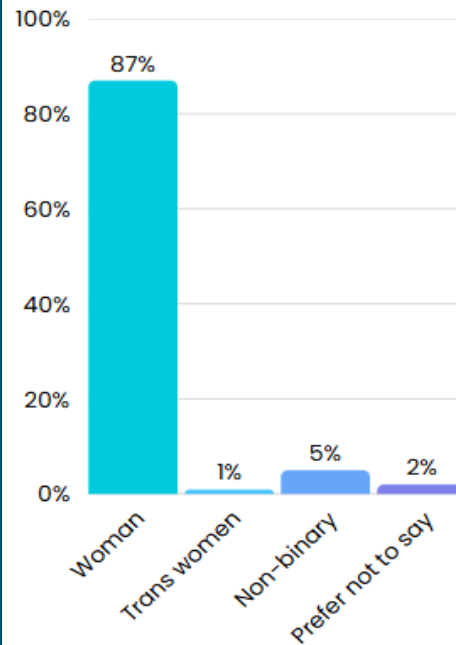
Age of participants



Sexual orientation



Gender



To view localised demographic data, please click on the areas below:

- [Reading](#)
- [Wokingham Borough](#)

Please note, these are not mandatory survey questions. Not all survey respondents are included in the demographic data and it may not add up to 100%.

What we found

Sexual Health Education

"We were only taught about how to remain safe during heterosexual intercourse, in fact when I asked about lesbian sexual health I was removed from the sessions."

Sexual Health Services

"I was sexually assaulted when I was a child. The person that assessed me was a man, I was not offered a female nurse."
"The only reason I found out about free contraceptive pills is because they was advertising it on Instagram."

Sexual Health Barriers

"Every time that I go to the GP is a different doctor that I have to talk and it makes it very awkward that I have to explain sexual concerns. It would be better if there was one main GP where I could contact about my concerns."

Sexual Health Education

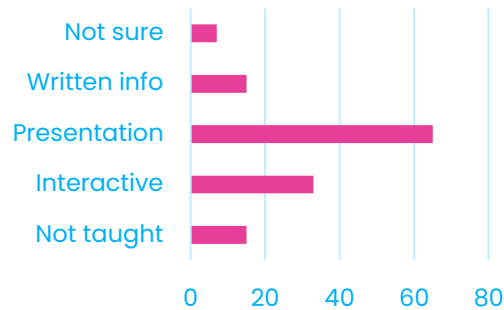


“Getting students to do exams on sexual health so they properly understand”

“Not taking students out on trips the day they plan this education, it meant I missed out as I was at a CV and Job Skills day and no alternative was offered”

“Literally only had a 1 day session in year 9 and maybe some tutor time – need to refresh each year”

Education received in schools



Education helpfulness



82% received sex education in school and **91%** found it helpful. However, they thought there were some gaps.

- **Inclusivity:** lack of LGBTQ+ sex education, including safe sex practices for queer relationships and specific topics such as same-sex relationships and oral health.
- **Consent and relationships:** need discussions on consent, navigating relationships after trauma and addressing the emotional and social aspects of sexual health.
- **Access and practical information:** where to access resources (e.g. clinics, trauma help), proper use of contraceptives (e.g. condoms), and understanding normal anatomy and bodily functions.
- **Breaking taboos:** removing the discomfort and stigma around discussing sexual health within education, especially for teachers and students.

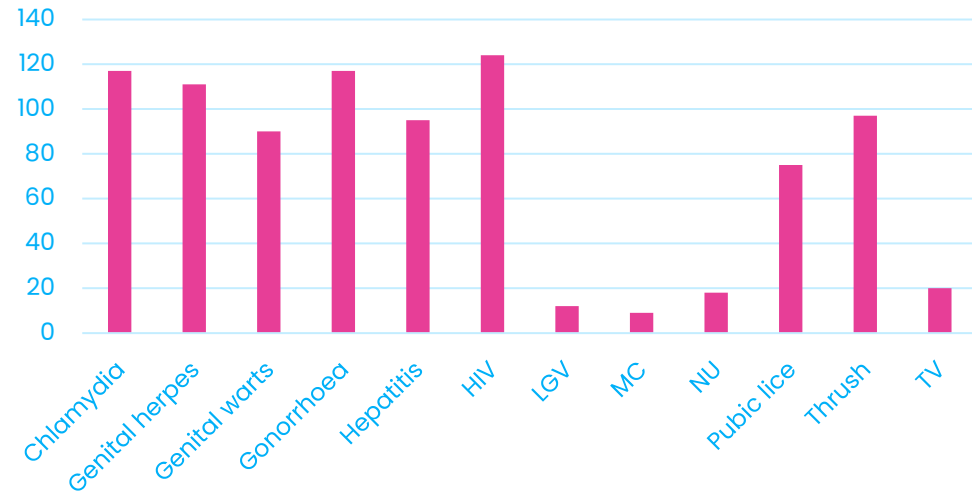
Sexual Health Education

"[Education]...very limited in its information and not particularly useful to teens and young adults who are actually or want to be sexually active. Such as not mentioning how STIs can be transferred through non penetrative intercourse or some kinds of contraception (such as chemical ones which just stop pregnancy)."

"I feel like they're afraid to go into detail on the topic. I get it's an embarrassing subject to some, but you can't take any half measures when it comes to safety"

"Needs to be less like an information dump just because they need to tick it off the curriculum"

STI awareness



Recommendations

1. Sex education programmes to be reviewed and developed with direct input from PH and SH services. Programmes to include peer-to-peer education models and LGBTQ+ sex education.
2. PH to guide educators to deliver regular interactive, inclusive, non-judgmental and youth-friendly SH programmes and refreshers. [Support U](#), [Fumble](#) and [Gender Identity Research & Education Society](#) can be leveraged for training to support skills, knowledge and confidence to deliver LGBTQ+ sex education.
3. PH to create SH information packs (leaflets, SH services, list of helpful apps, free contraception etc) to be handed out.
4. Option of school referrals to SH services, provide regular updates on SH via posters on noticeboards in common rooms, leaflets, information screens and on social media channels.

Sexual Health Services

84%

were unaware they could call 0118 322 7202 for free contraception.

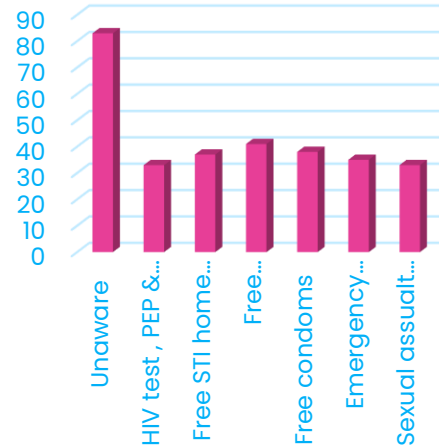
70%

young women aged 16-25 have never attended any sexual health check-up/screenings.

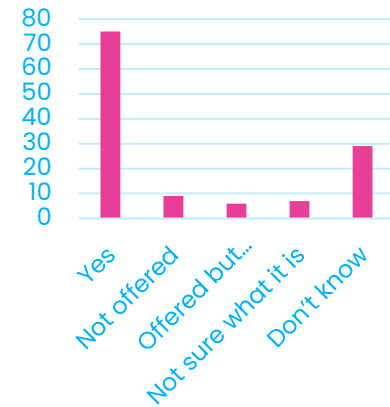
56%

have taken the HPV vaccine

Florey Clinic services

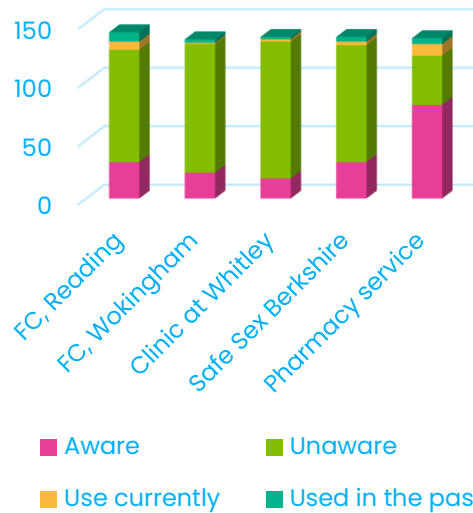


HPV Vaccine uptake

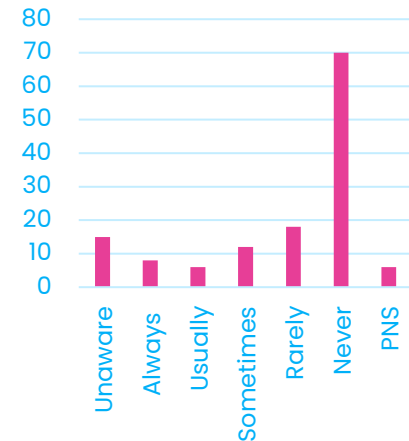


Reasons for not having the HPV vaccine: can't remember, not required, unable due to medical reasons, can cause paralysis.

Clinics accessed



SH checks attended



Sexual Health Services



"I am aware of the Florey clinic and have used their services, but I didn't know about this number "

"I think what they [local SH services] are doing is really great already"

"I think space to come back to this information and trying to reduce the stigma is key"

How SH services can improve:

Raising awareness

- Remove stigma and increase accessibility
- Outreach for non-students in this age range
- Frequent pop-up events (not only Freshers etc.)
- Through student portals and regular seminars/talks
- PCNs to send regular SH checks text messages

Marketing and comms

- Regular social media campaigns
- Providing leaflets and posters at schools, colleges, universities, pharmacies, GPs, youth hubs
- Advertising campaigns at community events, digital displays at public spaces (bus stops, train stations)

Recommendations

- Work with local services to produce joined up, regular marketing/advertising campaigns to promote SH well-being.
- Where possible gender appropriate healthcare professionals should be made available.
- A local hub to provide safe, confidential and therapeutic space with access to gender appropriate staff and care.

Sexual Health Barriers



"Haven't had to discuss this so far but I don't imagine I'd be comfortable in that situation"

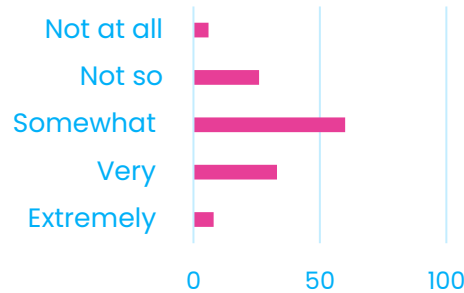
Only

30%

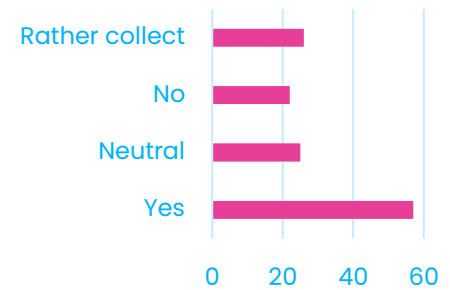
are very/extremely comfortable discussing sexual health with healthcare professionals

"I feel comfortable, but I would also appreciate the option to collect"

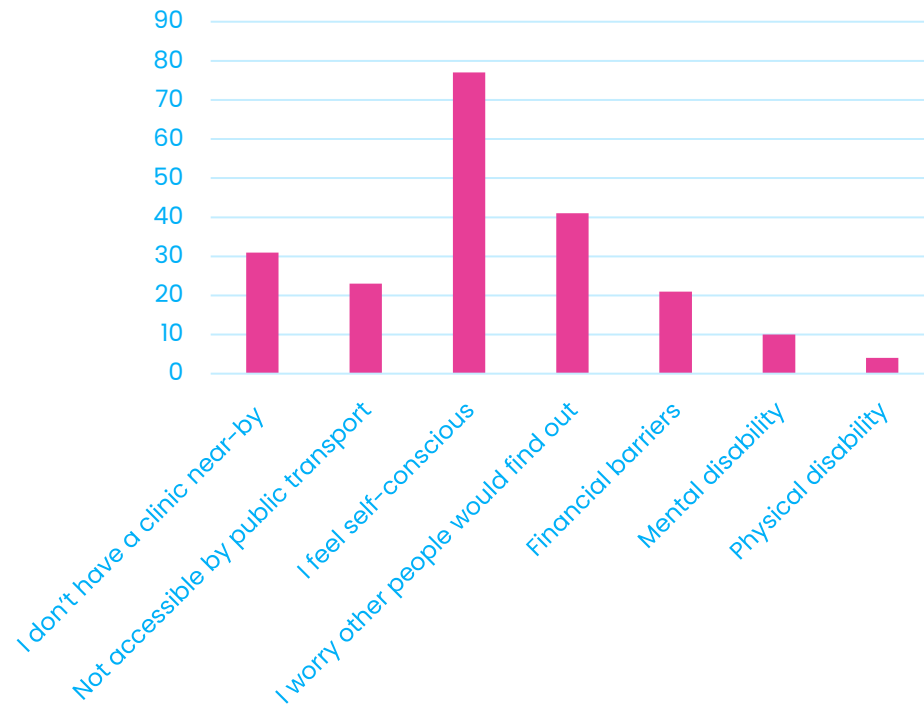
Comfort discussing SH with professionals



Comfortable receiving STI kit at home



Barriers accessing services



Sexual Health Barriers



"I'd rather suffer than talk about it with my GP - my GP don't listen to me about regular issues with non intimate body parts, Never mind intimate issues."

"I am a sex repulsed Asexual so I may be an outlier when it comes to talking about reproductive health to GPs and others without the anonymity of the internet"

"I think my discomfort comes for never having it discussed at school which me feels awkward and embarrassed "

Other barriers mentioned, include:

- No information about SH clinics
- Queer sexual health not as prioritised so people may not know about it and be less willing to help
- Gender dysphoria, time waste, parents, not sexually active

Recommendations

- To reduce barriers, healthcare professionals should support young women to attend appointments and engage by:
 - Taking concerns seriously
 - Respecting differences/inclusivity
 - Emphasising confidentiality
 - Fostering empathy
 - Having a non-judgmental approach
- Continuity of care:
 - Choice of preferred professional that knows previous history
 - Ability to request and see a gender appropriate healthcare professional across primary care services
 - Access to SH services through other support services e.g. mental health services
- STI test kits:
 - Increase access to STI test kits via a variety of collection points, such as postal lockers, vending machines and community pharmacies.

How we have made a difference so far

Increased awareness of sexual health services

Young women who completed our online survey, participated in engagement events or spoke to the youth team now have a greater awareness of local sexual health services, including the Florey Clinic.

"I didn't know there are support from the sexual health clinic"

"Unaware of the services available"

Empowerment

After engaging with the Healthwatch youth team and staff at events, and due the survey content, young people felt more empowered to take control of their sexual health and well-being through the knowledge they gained.

"I was not fully aware of this until now, thanks"

Community Engagement

The Healthwatch youth team have expanded its community reach, built new connections, and gained valuable confidence, knowledge and skills for future use. Increased visibility and engagement have strengthened existing local Healthwatch relationships.

"a unique experience that allowed me to collaborate with incredible people. The findings were an eye-opening experience that highlighted the lack of education on LGBTQ+ issues in women's sexual services, highlighting the need for awareness and change." Jeanet Sanchez, Healthwatch Youth volunteer

Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who completed the online survey and shared their personal stories.

Thank you to our partners, contacts, and networks across Wokingham Borough and Reading who shared our project and survey to help generate a strong level of interest and feedback.

Special thank you to our Healthwatch Youth team volunteers for their contribution:

- Aliyyah Kolaolukutun
- Andrea Dolcimascolo
- Jeanet Sanchez
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- Rose Keeble
- Sohini Basu

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- Alice Kunjappy-Clifton
- Asmita Irom
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- Natasha Khan
- Shamin Zafar
- Simon Shaw

Glossary

BOB ICB: Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire West Integrated Care Board

FC, Reading: Florey Clinic Reading

FC, Wokingham: Florey Clinic Wokingham

HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus.

HPV: Human Papillomavirus.

RBFT: Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust

PCN: Primary Care Network

PEP & PrEP: Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis

PH: Public Health

PNS: prefer not to say

SH: sexual health

STI: Sexually transmitted infection

Appendix

- 1** UK Health Security Agency: [Sexually transmitted infections and screening for chlamydia in England: 2023 report \(updated 4 June 2024\)](#).
- 2** Reading Council: [Annual Public Health Report 2024](#)
- 3** Wokingham Borough Council: [Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment 2022-2025](#) (page 58)

Next steps

Regulation 44 of The NHS Bodies and Local Authorities (Partnership Arrangements, Care Trusts, Public Health and Local Healthwatch) Regulations 2012 requires BOB ICB, Public Health Reading, Public Health Wokingham Borough and Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust (RBFT) within 20 working days to

a) acknowledge receipt; and

b) provide an explanation to Healthwatch Reading and Healthwatch Wokingham Borough of any action BOB ICB, Public Health Reading, Public Health Wokingham Borough and RBFT intends to take in respect of the report or recommendations, or an explanation of why BOB ICB, Public Health Reading, Public Health Wokingham Borough and RBFT do not intend to take any action in respect to that report or recommendation.

Healthwatch Reading and Healthwatch Wokingham Borough will update this report when responses about this report from **BOB ICB, Public Health Reading, Public Health Wokingham Borough and RBFT**, are received.

Healthwatch Reading and Healthwatch Wokingham Borough will revisit the recommendations in this report in 2026 to understand what actions have taken place.