



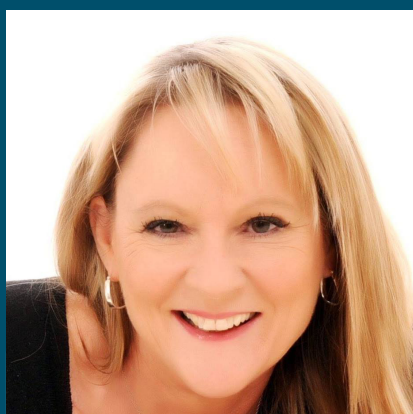
Speaking up for better care

Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire
Annual Report 2025/26

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Chief Executive Officer
Diana Blackmun

“Young people bring a perspective that no report, dataset or performance measure can provide. Their lived experiences offer vital insight into what is working, where barriers exist and how services can be improved. Throughout this year, young people in Central Bedfordshire have influenced research, shaped resources, challenged assumptions and helped drive meaningful improvements across health and social care.

As health and care systems continue to evolve, listening to young people must become a routine part of decision-making, not an occasional exercise. The achievements highlighted in this report demonstrate that when youth voice is placed at the heart of service design and improvement, better outcomes are achieved for individuals, communities and the wider system.”

A message from our Director

This year has been another inspiring chapter for Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire. Our volunteers have shown outstanding passion, creativity and commitment, ensuring young people's voices are not only heard, but acted upon.

From shaping SEND resources and influencing mental health research, to leading service reviews and improving health literacy, our young volunteers have helped drive real change across health and social care.

Their lived experiences and ideas have strengthened services, challenged barriers and improved understanding of the issues affecting young people locally.

What stands out most is the confidence and leadership our volunteers continue to develop. Whether working with decision-makers, contributing to research or co-producing resources for their peers, they have shown the powerful impact young people can have when given meaningful opportunities to lead.

I am incredibly proud of everything they have achieved this year. Their work has influenced local services, strengthened partnerships and helped create more inclusive and accessible support for young people across Central Bedfordshire.

As the wider Healthwatch landscape changes, it is more important than ever that young people continue to have opportunities to shape the decisions affecting their lives. This report clearly demonstrates the lasting value and impact of youth voice within our communities.

To every volunteer, partner organisation and supporter who has contributed to this work, thank you. Your commitment, energy and belief in the power of young people continue to make a lasting difference.



Director & Young
Healthwatch Portfolio
Holder

Alison Newnham



“Young people are not just the future of health and care improvement; they are already driving change today.”

About us

Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire is your local health and social care champion.

We work with NHS leaders and decision-makers to ensure that young people's experiences and feedback directly shapes the care they provide.



Our vision

Young people driving change in health and social care.



Our mission

We put youth voice at the heart of health and social care. By empowering young people to lead, we deliver youth-led projects that identify key issues, influence services and improve experiences for all. Through participation, co-production and active engagement, our volunteers regularly visit services, provide feedback and lead local events that reflect the issues that matter most to young people.



Our values are:

We are committed to upskilling young people, building transferable skills, fostering critical thinking and confidence, encouraging teamwork and community, and supporting social development. We value empowerment through knowledge, motivation and lifelong learning. Above all, we are dedicated to improving awareness, access and experience of health and social care for young people.

A year of making a difference

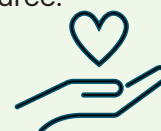
Over the past year, we have been listening to stories and creating opportunities for our Young Healthwatch volunteers, collaborating with partners to improve health and social care services across Central Bedfordshire. Here are a few highlights:

Spring

Shaped the redesign of the HUC 111 Call Centre leaflet by sharing young people's views, improving clarity, accessibility and understanding of available support.



Shared young people's perspectives during the development of the SEND Local Offer Young Persons Zone, contributing to a more accessible and engaging online resource.

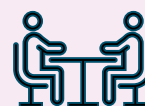


Summer

Volunteers shared experiences of mental health support with Cambs Children's Services and Bedfordshire Hospitals Psychology Team, helping to identify gaps and influence improvements to inclusive services.



Worked with Link to Change to strengthen local partnerships and increase awareness of the support available for young people in the community



Autumn

Delivered the "Choose You" workshop on smoking and vaping, helping young people challenge misconceptions, understand health risks and make informed choices through interactive activities.



Redesigned the Young Healthwatch flyer with input from young people, making it more accessible, engaging and reflective of their experiences and priorities.



Winter

Worked with a colleague from Plain Sailing Motivation to explore personal drivers, build confidence and develop strategies for sustaining motivation in education and future career pathways.



Contributed to Beds Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust doctoral research on sickle cell disorder in education, with two volunteers helping ensure the research reflected young people's experiences and perspectives.



Working together for change

We partnered with a range of organisations to ensure young people's voices inform service design and delivery, including Cambridge Children's Hospital, NHS England, HUC, Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Central Bedfordshire Council, the SEND Engagement Team and BLMK Integrated Care Board.

By collaborating with these partners, we have been able to influence service development, contribute to research and ensure that young people's lived experiences shape decisions that affect their health and wellbeing.



Health Innovation East – Amplifying youth voice through collaboration:

Working with Health Innovation East, we explored ways to embed young people's voices in service design and innovation. During a collaborative meeting, we shared insights from our engagement work across Central Bedfordshire, demonstrating how lived experiences can meaningfully shape local services. We also presented our Youth-Led Research and Mental Health Project report, highlighting key findings and recommendations developed directly from young people. This collaboration represents an important step towards ensuring future innovation is evidence-based and truly reflective of young people's needs, experiences and priorities.



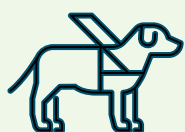
BfB Labs – Co-designing Mental Health Support:

We partnered with BfB Labs to support the development of an innovative therapeutic game designed for young people aged 16–25 experiencing low mood and depression. Volunteers played an active role in user testing and providing constructive feedback to ensure the tool is engaging, accessible and relevant to real-life experiences. Their insights are directly shaping the final product, helping to create a resource that is meaningful for young people seeking digital mental health support. This collaboration highlights the value of co-design, ensuring that new solutions are built with young people.

We've also summarised some of our other outcomes achieved this year in the Statutory Statements section at the end of this report.

Making a difference in the community

We bring young people's experiences to healthcare professionals and decision-makers, using their feedback and perspectives to shape services, improve care and build a more inclusive local community. Here are some examples of our work in Central Bedfordshire this year:



Dogs on Duty: Driving Awareness and Inclusion for Assistance Dog Users

Inspired by a local incident in Leighton Buzzard, the Dogs on Duty campaign raised awareness of the discrimination and barriers still faced by assistance dog users. Through the "Walk Alongside Day," volunteers worked with assistance dog users to engage local businesses, share guidance and encourage conversations around accessibility and inclusion. By listening to real-life experiences, the campaign helped challenge misconceptions, improve understanding of legal responsibilities and encourage businesses to make positive changes to their policies and staff awareness. The project also helped assistance dog users feel more supported within their communities, while empowering young volunteers to build confidence and advocacy skills through meaningful community action.



Patient-Led Assessments of The Care Environment: Bedford and Luton & Dunstable Hospitals

Volunteers took part in the 2025 national visits at Bedford and Luton & Dunstable Hospitals, bringing valuable youth perspectives into assessments of local healthcare services. By highlighting the experiences and priorities of younger patients and visitors, their feedback helped identify ways to improve accessibility, communication, and the overall care environment. Through this work, Young Healthwatch volunteers played an important role in helping services become more inclusive, responsive and supportive for the wider community.

Listening to your experiences

Services can't improve if they don't know what's wrong. Your experiences shine a light on issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

This year, Young Healthwatch has continued to listen to the experiences, ideas and concerns of young people across Central Bedfordshire. By hearing directly from our communities, we have been able to highlight what is working well, identify barriers and inequalities, and ensure that young people's voices help shape improvements to local health, care and support services.

"Thank you so much for the swift report - we welcome the feedback and will take on board the improvements that have been suggested. Our General Manager is implementing the action plan and will be happy to keep you informed of the progress/improvements that we have taken on board."

Jo Meehan, Associate Director, Bedfordshire & Luton Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)



Seeing through their eyes – 15 Steps Review: CAMHS Beech Close

Last year, we championed the voices of children, young people and families to help strengthen and improve local Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provision.

Listening to local young people share their experiences, highlighted the importance of taking a closer look at this service, motivating us to carry out a focused review to better understand and improve their journey.

What did we do?

Five Young Healthwatch volunteers carried out a 15 Steps Review at Beech Close CAMHS in Dunstable, experiencing the service from a first-time user perspective. They spoke with staff, parents, carers and young people while observing the environment throughout. Their feedback highlighted strengths, including the welcoming staff and atmosphere, alongside opportunities to improve communication and make information more accessible.

Key things we identified



83%

of staff highlighted staffing pressures, including being under-resourced and managing high referral demand.

95%

of YHW volunteers felt the exterior of the building could be improved to create a more welcoming first impression for young people and families.

70%

of participating young people reported positive relationships with staff

What difference did this make?

The review made a meaningful difference by ensuring young people's voices were heard and their feedback acted upon. The findings and recommendations informed a new action plan, now underway to improve the experiences of young people using the service across Central Bedfordshire.

The cultural challenges of neurodiversity and mental health for young people

Young Healthwatch volunteers worked with the University of Hertfordshire to ensure research into neurodiversity, culture and mental health reflected the real experiences of young people. Their feedback helped shape research materials, improve accessibility and guide the development of a youth-led animation designed to make conversations around mental health more relatable and engaging.



“They think if you’ve got a mental problem, it’s a punishment or you’re seen as weaker or, you’re not going to make it very far. And that’s why people who have these problems are usually neglected quite a lot.”



“My family originates from Iraq in the Middle East. Mental health isn’t viewed as much there because it’s really overlooked. People have high expectations for their children.”

Through open discussions, storytelling, character design and recorded interviews, volunteers used their own experiences to conduct the voiceover of the final piece.



What difference did this make?

This project had a powerful impact on the young people involved, creating a safe space where they felt heard, valued and understood. By centring lived experience, participants gained confidence discussing mental health, neurodiversity and culture, while recognising how their voices can influence research and creative work. We plan to share the animation with schools, local government, education leaders, politicians, young people and the wider community to raise awareness and inspire ongoing conversations.

Empowering change through youth research

Here at Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire, we believe the best change happens when young people are not just listened to but trusted to lead.



"Involving young people in research is so important as their voices and experiences provide such valuable insight into their needs. This not only helps to shape the research to ensure it is relevant to them, but it also helps to shape future changes that will better support their needs."

**Jasmine Chavda, Research Fellow-Mental Health,
University of Hertfordshire**

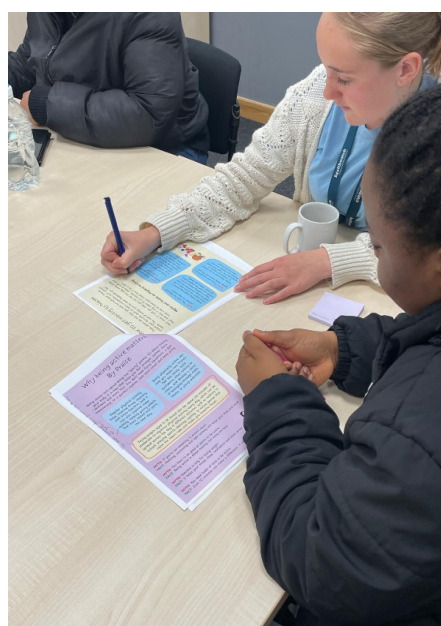


Improving Youth Health Literacy: The Healthy Lives Toolkit Project

This youth-led project brought together Young Healthwatch volunteers to research, write and design a health and wellbeing booklet created by young people, for young people. Through workshops, online mentoring sessions and collaborative discussions, volunteers explored the topics that mattered most to them, including motivation, nutrition, self-care and psychology. The final booklet, *'Your Guide to Feeling Good'*, combines evidence-based information with real experiences, myth-busting content, scientific facts and interactive activities to create an engaging and relatable resource for young people.

Breaking Down Barriers to Health Information

Too often, health resources feel overwhelming, making it harder for young people to engage with important wellbeing messages. In response, we researched and created a peer-led resource that rethinks how health information is shared. By reducing barriers to understanding, the project gave young people accessible, relatable information they can use to support their own wellbeing and encourage more open conversations with others.



Showcasing volunteer impact

Our fantastic volunteers have given **123 days** to support our work. Thanks to their dedication to improving care, we can better understand what is working and what needs improving in our community.

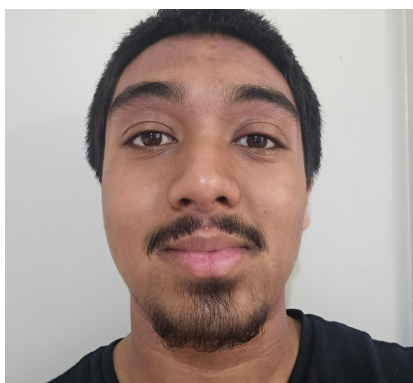
This year, our volunteers:

- Amplified the voices of local young people accessing health and care services, helping us reach and engage more young people across the community.
- Reviewed online and printed SEND resources to improve accessibility, clarity and relevance for young people and families.
- Carried out 15 Steps Review visits to local services, providing insight and recommendations to help improve young people's experiences.
- Supported community outreach and public engagement activities, raising awareness and strengthening connections with local young people and organisations.



At the heart of what we do

From finding out what residents think to helping raise awareness, our young volunteers have championed community concerns to improve care.



Raiyan

Raiyan joined us to help build his skills and practical knowledge as an aspiring future Dietitian. His favourite project was conducting research for the Healthy Lives Toolkit.

“Being part of Young Healthwatch has been a genuinely rewarding experience. From attending group discussions and meetings where I’ve been able to share my ideas and perspectives, to having the opportunity to contribute to research projects – it’s been far more than I expected. Young Healthwatch has given me a space to make a meaningful difference in our local community, and I’ve loved every moment of it.”

Isabelle recently joined Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire to develop her understanding of how positive change can be influenced within local youth services and to explore the wide range of opportunities available.

“Healthwatch has honestly been one of the best activities I’ve ever engaged in, even though I have only been part of Healthwatch for a short amount of time so far, I have had so many opportunities offered to me, each one has offered knowledge, experience and fun.”



Isabelle

Be part of the change.

If you've felt inspired by these stories, contact us today and find out how you can be part of the change.



www.healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.co.uk



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Future priorities

Over the next year, we will keep reaching out to every part of society, especially people in the most deprived areas, so that those in power hear their views and experiences.

We will strengthen our work with partners and the local Integrated Care Board to build a culture where young people's experiences directly shape more accessible, inclusive and responsive health and care services. Our top three priorities for next year are:

- 1. Reaching More Young Voices** – We want to hear from a wider range of young people across Central Bedfordshire, particularly those from underrepresented and seldom-heard communities.
- 2. Growing Volunteer Skills and Confidence** – Next year, we will expand training, mentoring and peer support opportunities to build volunteers' confidence, leadership and advocacy skills. By developing practical experience in communication, co-production and research, young people will be better equipped to influence local health and care services.
- 3. Creating More Opportunities for Youth-Led Change** – We will continue creating opportunities for young people to shape health and care services through research, consultations, campaigns and service reviews. By strengthening partnerships with local organisations, we aim to keep youth voice at the heart of decision-making and community change.



Statutory statements

Enter and view

Location	Reason for visit	What you did as a result
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) Beech Close Dunstable	To gather young people's feedback and experiences of CAMHS services.	Produced a report with clear recommendations that directly informed a new service action plan, now being implemented to improve young people's experiences and strengthen the quality and accessibility of care.

2025 – 2026 Outcomes

Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
Young People Zone for Central Bedfordshire Council SEND Local Offer	Contributed to the development of Central Bedfordshire Council's SEND Local Offer Young Persons Zone, improving accessibility, usability and relevance for young people with SEND. Feedback on the design, content and navigation helped shape a more inclusive, user-friendly platform that better reflects young people's needs, experiences and voices.
Just Ask Outreach Programme	Supported Just Ask outreach events to raise awareness of local health and care services while gathering valuable community feedback. Young volunteers shared information, answered questions and engaged with the public, helping strengthen awareness, trust and community engagement with local services.

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2025 – 2026 Outcomes

Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire's Away Day and Working Board Meeting	Led an interactive discussion on the connection between physical and mental health. Young people's contributions encouraged meaningful conversations and reinforced the importance of youth voice in shaping health and wellbeing priorities.
Pan Voice of the Child Conference	Explored young people's views on community safety through workshops led by Youth Parliament. Volunteers engaged with stallholders and schools, gathering insights into young people's experiences of local spaces and the issues affecting them most.
Integrated Neighbourhood Working Project	Took part in a workshop on local ICB structures and Integrated Neighbourhood Working. Volunteers developed a stronger understanding of decision-making processes, referral pathways and neighbourhood teams, building confidence to engage with local health and care systems.
Patient- Led Assessments of the Care Environment (PLACE) Bedford and Luton & Dunstable Hospital	Took part in the 2025 national PLACE visits, ensuring young people's perspectives were reflected in hospital assessments. Their feedback highlighted priorities for younger patients and helped inform improvements to accessibility, care environments and patient experience.

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2025 – 2026 Outcomes

Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
YHW Vaping and Smoking Awareness	Facilitated a session led by a Public Health Tobacco Control Practitioner, exploring the health risks and science behind smoking and vaping. Volunteers also provided feedback on the latest “Is Everything Okay?” campaign, helping shape its design and impact.
Renewed Appointment to Voluntary and Community Sector Leadership Team NICE	Reappointed to represent youth voice within a national leadership network of over 200 voluntary and community sector organisations. This role ensures young people’s perspectives continue to influence NICE guidance and national health priorities.
Festival for Older People 2025	Supported the Festival for Older People 2025 by promoting intergenerational understanding and improving awareness of local support services. Volunteers signposted attendees to relevant support, encouraged community conversations and gathered feedback to help inform future events.
Children and Young People – SEND Engagement	Shared feedback on the SEND Local Offer, helping identify barriers to access and communication for families. Young people’s input is supporting improvements to make information and support more accessible, inclusive and responsive to their needs.

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2025 – 2026 Outcomes

Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
Research Ambassador Network Essex	Joined the Healthwatch Essex Research Ambassador Network to strengthen the impact of youth-led research. This partnership supports more inclusive research approaches and ensures young people's experiences help shape improvements to health and care services.
Investing in Children Award	Proud to be awarded the Investing in Children Award, in recognition of our commitment to listening to young people and ensuring their voices help shape health and care services and long-term change.
NIHR Applied Research Collaboration East of England Research Fellowship	The Youth Engagement Officer was awarded the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration Research Fellowship, helping strengthen youth voice in mental health research and support the development of evidence-based services across Central Bedfordshire.
Community Dental Service Work Experience Visit	Observed appointments, supported reception and engaged with staff to understand how the Community Dental Service operates. Young people's feedback is helping identify opportunities to improve accessibility, patient experience and care for children with additional needs and SEND.

Statutory statements

2025 – 2026 Outcomes

Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
Healthy Lives Toolkit Project	Improved youth health literacy by co-producing an accessible wellbeing resource shaped by young people's experiences. The project reduced barriers to understanding health information and helped young people feel more confident accessing and using health advice.
Where They Began, Where They Are Now	Explored the long-term impact of volunteering with Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire, focusing on personal development, career progression and the value of youth participation in health and social care. The project also produced recommendations to strengthen youth volunteering programmes.
BLMK Health Care Academy Graduates	Three YHW volunteers graduated from the BLMK Health and Care Academy programme, highlighting Young Healthwatch's role in supporting progression into training, careers and future workforce opportunities within local health and care services.
Plain Sailing Motivation	Took part in a motivational development workshop with Plain Sailing Motivation, helping volunteers better understand the personal drivers and barriers influencing their motivation, confidence and wellbeing.

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