



Southwark Health and Wellbeing Board

Summary of HWS's engagement on sexual health



Background

Sexual health was identified as a priority area for Healthwatch Southwark through public and stakeholder consultation. Within this area, we were keen to hear the views and experiences of young people.

The Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham Sexual Health Strategy prioritised young people as a 'high risk group' and also recognised that people with mental health difficulties are vulnerable to poor sexual health.

We approached YoungMinds, a charity working to improve the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people, and attended a meeting where we were given a 45 minutes slot to run a workshop.

At our public forum in March 2015, the discussions that took place at this workshop were presented by two young people. The [presentation](#) can be found on our website as well as the full [public forum report](#) where further discussions took place around sexual health.

The Healthwatch Southwark team also visited two sexual health clinics in Southwark to talk to people about their experiences of using these services.

This update provides a summary of the findings from each of these activities.



Workshop with young people on sexual health

What we did...

At the YoungMinds workshop we spoke with 14 young people - a mixture of male and female attendees of different ethnic backgrounds aged between 17 and 21. We spoke to the group about:

- Their views and experiences of using sexual health services
- What influences sexual behaviour
- What ideas they had for improving sexual health services

We put statements to the group on the theme of sexual and mental health amongst young people. Each participant was given a voting card which they used to indicate if they 'Agreed or Disagreed' with the statements.

What young people told us about access to services and information...

We wanted to understand how easy young people thought it was for them and their peers to access sexual health and mental health services. The group of 14 were asked if they agreed or disagreed with some statements:

- 12 agreed that they can access mental health services without fear or judgement (all attendees were involved with YoungMinds)
- 3 agreed that they can access sexual health services without fear or judgement
- 5 said that they know what sexual health services are
- 13 thought that young people know how to access information, support or services relating to sexual health
- 5 said that young people have a good understanding of sexual health (or sex education)
- 5 agreed that there are lots of services to help young people to have healthy relationships and safe sex

In relation to where to get information, the internet was high on the list, lower down was doctors, teachers, clinics and no one said they would turn to parents. Some felt that teachers knew less than they did or were too embarrassed to talk freely which makes them feel unable to ask the questions they really wanted to. Comments were made around sex education in schools being more about biology of sex rather than the emotional side, which they would like to talk about more.

What young people told us about behaviour and influences...

We wanted to understand young people's perceptions of the behaviours of young people and to explore what is in their life that influences their behaviour and actions. The group of 14 were asked if they agreed or disagreed with some statements:

- 13 agreed that youth face a lot of peer pressure and this can affect their sexual behaviour
- 12 agreed that it is ok to be in a sexual relationship without emotional involvement

Discussions took place about attitudes towards sex, and it was generally felt that if you were having safe sex then it was ok - regardless of being in a relationship.

Who young people talk to...

We were interested in who young people talk to about sex and where they go to for information and support around sexual activity. The group of 14 were asked if they agreed or disagreed to some statements:

- 5 people said that youth are able to talk to their peers about their sexual health
- 5 said they are able to talk to adults about their sexual health
- 5 agreed that young people were free to be open about their sexuality
- 11 people agreed that it's taboo to talk about sex

Cultural barriers were discussed – some said that different cultures have different ideas about what is acceptable to talk about and do.

What's important to young people...

Consent was raised as being important, as well as getting information, getting free contraception and having better knowledge about sexual health. It was felt that education in schools could be improved and that there should be more focus on emotional relationships rather than just biological aspects of sexual health.

Sexual health services and professionals should feel able and confident to talk about sex with young people, as this can affect whether a young person will engage in future conversations and seek advice.

What young people recommended...

Improved services for young people:

- *"Waiting rooms should be more relaxed and have different spaces for privacy"*
- *"Separate guys and girls, as girls don't want to know what guys might think of them"*
- *"More places to get free contraception"*
- *"Free contraception with C Card from all pharmacies [not just local ones]"* – as they might be identified.

Better education in schools - more information:

- *"Better sex education in schools"*
- *"Sex education should start younger at primary school"*
- *"More focus on emotional relationships"*

Relationships with staff and communication

- *"Staff should not judge and [should] be supportive"*
- *"If staff are open it's easier to talk to them"*
- *"Age matters when it comes to the person you are talking to about sex"*



Discussions around sexual health at our public forum

At Healthwatch Southwark's public forum in March 2015, two young people who took part in the workshop about sexual health presented some of the key discussion points.

70 people attended the public forum and 19 people took part in a discussion around sexual health - 10 of these were young people. Below is a summary of the discussions about sexual health.

Getting advice about sexual health...

It was felt that sexual health is not seen as equal to other types of health. People should be able to go to their GP about all health-related issues, and this includes sexual health. It was felt that assumptions are sometimes made when you do access your GP for such an issue. For example, depending on whether you are male or whether you are married with children, an STI test may not be suggested. It was suggested that health professionals should not avoid asking questions about sexual health.

Young people felt it was important for them to be able to speak about their sexual health problems, and health professionals should feel comfortable to approach this. Young people said they would find it easier to access services if they felt they were not being judged.

Awareness of sexual health and services available...

Suggestions were made to improve awareness of sexual health and services available, such as: appropriate hours for younger people to access services, improved online information about available services, more places to access free contraception.

The need to reduce stigma surrounding sexual health to encourage people to access services was discussed. It was felt that better promotion of sexual health is needed - through TV, leafleting, in GP practices and across other health services.

Access to sexual health services...

The group agreed that there are enough sexual health services in Southwark, but that they could be made more accessible e.g. more flexible opening hours. Location was also discussed - people preferred not to go to a service near their work or where they live in case they were seen by someone they knew.

The group discussed barriers to going to a service for advice and support. Stigma and discrimination were mentioned, particularly relating to age and sexuality.

When we asked what more could be done to keep young people sexually healthy, these were some of the suggestions made:

- Stop sex being a taboo subject. Sexual health should be considered to be as important as other health issues.
- Improved sex education in schools. Ensure that it targets both males and females from an early age. It should include information about emotional needs and relationships, as well as the physical side of sexual health.
- Sexual health checks should be more widely available.
- Improve the way parents and health professionals talk to young people about sexual health.



Visits to sexual health clinics in Southwark

Healthwatch Southwark visited two sexual health clinics in June 2015 and August 2015, to speak to people about their experiences. We visited Burrell Street Sexual Health Clinic, Guys and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, and Camberwell Sexual Health Clinic, King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust. In total, we spoke to 33 people.

Why were people there?

- (Routine) Check-Up: 23 people
- HIV check -up: 1 person
- Emergency Contraception : 3 people
- Advice & Free condoms : 2 people
- Coil or Implant fitting: 3 people

What did people think was the best thing about the experience?

- 10 people commented that the staff were friendly, and respectful.
- 7 people were pleased that they could be seen on the same day, and that they got results or contraception quickly.
- 2 people came away with more knowledge and reassurance about contraception.

Concerns about the service

- 10 people found the waiting times too long
- 5 people found the registration process confusing (1 person wanted clearer signposting or direction from their health centre to the sexual health clinic).

How people rated the service overall

- 11 found the service to be excellent
- 16 found the service to be good
- 5 found the service to be average
- 1 person did not comment

High rates of satisfaction with staff and facilities

- 31/33 people agreed that staff were friendly and helpful
- 27/33 people found the environment clean and comfortable
- 28/33 people felt that they were well listened to by staff

Some comments from the respondents

- *"The experience wasn't awkward at all. Thank you."*
- *"A nurse spoke to and gave me the necessary advice. So it made me feel great".*
- *"The nurse, they spoke to me about the injection and what side effects it may cause. They made me feel safe."*
- *The registration system is confusing and it takes the whole day to be seen. I have to take time off from work"*
- *"One time when I saw the doctor, he was so nice, talked to me, made jokes - it made me relaxed".*
- *"Came to the clinic at 6 pm and told that it was too late instead of saying we are fully booked today could you come another day. Otherwise find the rest of the services very good. Not sure what to do with the paper they give with the computer registration".*
- *"Along with the nurse who was with me, there was a man there too (which made me uncomfortable). Nurse was a bit aggressive when she found out I hadn't gone for a smear test!"*