

# Young People Focus Group Report: A Happier and Healthier Berkshire

## About the focus group

**Who:** Healthwatch Reading spoke with 10 young people between 17 and 18 years from a local school as part of their personal, social health and economic education lesson (PHSE) Their teacher was also in attendance but did not contribute.

**Why:** We are helping local people inform a new joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Reading, Wokingham and West Berkshire that local councils will oversee from 2021-2031.

**How:** The discussion was held via Zoom to be COVID-19 safe and included interactive voting.

**When:** January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021 for 1 hour.

## Top priorities

The young people anonymously voted from a list of 11 priorities proposed by public health officials for the new strategy. They ended up with 4 priorities because the last two gained the same number of votes. Their fourth priority was of their own choosing, not one of the original 11, but one that most young people thought was important, these were:

1. **Good mental health and wellbeing for all children and young people.**
2. **Build strong, socially connected communities.**
3. **To stop unfair differences in health between different groups of people.**
4. **Measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 before and after we get vaccinated.**

### Priority 1: Good mental health and wellbeing for all adults

The group felt strongly that young people should have access to mental health services. Some felt that the emphasis on mental health was greater at primary school than at secondary school. At primary school they had been given the ChildLine number numerous times. Although teachers often provided good support some felt that the process to then get further support was not as quick as might be required. They felt the transition from child to adult was a difficult time for some and early intervention was needed. They were generally not aware of where to go to access help other than through teachers.

**‘In terms of secondary school, it (mental health support) starts to drift off, little bit less talked about. You have school nurses, they were less frequent which people didn’t really use. Especially now, college years it’s a lot less support...you have to find support yourself’.**

‘I think teachers do a good job in school; I know from experience that I have always been able to send an email saying I’m not feeling too good today, though I know from different schools that they do not have the same relationships’

‘You got school counsellors which can reach out to, but you *first* would go to your GP and speak to your teacher and then a meeting would be set up...support needs to be instantaneous’

‘I have gone to teachers in the past but feel quite guilty...they have so much on their plate. Relying on them to talk to us, they don’t make me feel like that, but you can’t help but think they have so much on their plate, surely something else should be there’.

‘as a man..I think that I personally would find it very difficult to talk about..you don’t really bring it up’

‘If I couldn’t go to any of the teachers, I don’t know if there is anyone else in school, I would speak too’

‘Since we have been in 6<sup>th</sup> form, we have a meditation session which is good I feel like in the 6<sup>th</sup> form stage there is so much pressure on this age group and a lot of adults don’t realise the pressure that we’re under’.

Chose mental health ‘Because mental health can arise to any age group, poor mental health can also lead to many other conditions, so it is important ‘

## **Priority 2: Build strong, socially connected communities.**

The young people listed this the second most important priority because they felt access to support was limited, for young people and older people. They felt that isolation led to poor health outcomes.

‘When you are in school and you are having a bad day, it just takes one teacher to ask if you’re ok and that starts a conversation..... whereas if you’re working from home it takes a lot more to call the GP or make an appointment to see someone’.

‘My grandmother is reasonably old; she has had lots of health conditions the past couple of years. Especially since lockdown and prior to that it has been difficult for her to reach out and find support. She would call up the GP to book an appointment with the GP, wait weeks, she has to travel herself. I feel like there isn’t a lot of support for the really young or the really old, especially to really old’.

‘As a nation, when people get older, they get forgotten about’.

‘Little or no social connections. I like the idea of ‘Get Britain Talking’ .... I do feel it needs to be more focused on’.

### **Priority 3: To stop unfair differences in health between different groups of people.**

Half the young people saw this as a priority but did not specifically outline any examples why. They thought this was equally as important as priority 4.

### **Priority 4: Measures to prevent the spread of COVID 19 before and after we get a vaccine.**

Most young people felt that COVID-19 had adversely affected them. The effects of COVID-19 especially on people’s mental health and they are worried about how long it will continue.

**‘I choose COVID 19 as one (priority) because I don’t think enough is being done by the government or Council. Enough is not being done to prevent it in Reading’.**

**‘I think the government should make it clear on what message they are putting out to the public. In terms of COVID-19, like exams and other things, because some people don’t understand if they should be staying at home or going to work, if there are exams or not’.**

**I wouldn’t be complaining here, we are really thankful to have the NHS. I tried to make an appointment with the GP and was 3 weeks before I could speak to someone, not complaining, I understand it’s a difficult time.’**

**‘feel that other problems on the poll (list of priorities) are increasing as a result of COVID-19, such as mental stress’.**

### **Personal reflections on health and wellbeing**

There were two main themes that came through from the group discussion regarding health and wellbeing in our community.

#### **1.Information and advice issues**

They felt that more information was needed on how to access help other than what was available at school and should include information about health and diet.

The also felt more information was needed on mental health support services.

#### **2.Health and being healthy**

They felt it needed to be acknowledged the pressures and stresses young people were under and support to cope with that was needed.

Several young people felt that during lockdown they needed a routine including diet and exercise to stay healthy. They raised concerns about being safe whilst exercising outdoors and some mentioned it could become boring exercising alone.

## Suggestions for change

The focus group’s main suggestions for improvements were:

- Access to 1-1 sessions at school when required or regularly.
- Professionals such as doctors and teachers to proactively and regularly talk to young people about their mental health.
- Access to information about activities and exercise.
- Using sports lesson at school to discuss exercise and diet.
- Schools to help provide information on services such as mental health support services.

## What happens next?

Public health officials will consider the findings of a range of focus groups being held in Reading, Wokingham and West Berkshire as well as results of a wider public survey, before finalising the strategy to apply across the three areas.

Previously, Reading has had its own strategies, from 2013 to 2016 and 2017 to 2020. Progress on the current eight priorities is overseen by the Reading Health and Wellbeing Board which includes public health, NHS, council, Healthwatch and voluntary sector members and is open to the public to listen to or attend.

For background information visit this [webpage](#)