

Introduction

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCB) is the local consumer champion promoting choice and influencing the provision of high-quality health, social care and wellbeing services for all across Central Bedfordshire. HWCB has significant statutory powers to ensure that the voice of the consumer is strengthened and heard by those who commission, deliver and regulate health and care services.

HWCB engages and consults with all sections of the local population so that a wide cross section of views are heard, understood and acted upon. Everything they say and do is informed by their connections to local people. Healthwatch is the only body looking solely at people's experience across all health and social care. As a statutory watchdog their role is to ensure that local health and social care services, and the local decision-makers, put the experiences of people at the heart of their care.

Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire was developed to give young people a voice so they can be a part of shaping health and care services for the future, this includes school nurses, local GP Practices, hospital care and social care, plus community groups designed to support young people.

The activities and projects developed by Young Healthwatch Volunteers helps to keep young people in Central Bedfordshire informed about what is happening locally within health and social care services. Young Healthwatch volunteers share tips that they can pass on to other young people, including information about local support groups, and they share their experiences about the best way to get the support they need. HWCB champion the voice of the young person and are guided by what they think, feel and believe.

For the purpose of this re-evaluation I visited the project and met with four young people involved in the project. I would like to thank Keira, Karen, Liam and Isabelle for taking the time out to meet with me and gather the evidence to write this report.

Two of the young people I met with have been involved in the project for a significant amount of time and two are new members. I initially asked the group how they heard about Healthwatch and got involved. All of them said they heard through school.

“Anyone can join. There are a few forms to fill in but that’s it!”

“We meet on a monthly basis unless we are doing projects in-between and we meet”.

I asked the young people who decides the projects they work on and was told: ***“We do! If it isn’t a project we come up with, they ask us if we want to do it”.***

“If you take part in projects you get some form of reward like an Amazon voucher and this hoodie and things like this, a thing to not have to touch doors during Covid” (showing me)

“They always cover our travel too and we have snacks and pizza sometimes”.

“It’s really good as we get asked our medical experiences and can share them so we can learn and make recommendations to help improve medical and the health care side of things”.

Opportunities for Dialogue resulting in Change

Home Schooling Report

During the initial lockdown period, Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire volunteers developed a survey asking school children in their local area to voice their thoughts and opinions on how their schools had reacted to the Covid-19 crisis. One of the Young Healthwatch volunteers led on this project and produced a comprehensive report of their findings, which reflects an honest, true account of life in lockdown for the young people of Central Bedfordshire.

This report raised awareness of how young people's mental health had been neglected during the Covid-19 lockdown. The young volunteers report showed that young people needed more communication to help guide them through their schooling during the pandemic. The final report was sent to all the local schools involved, to the local authority, government providers and shared on their website and via social media. The young volunteers are currently in the process of carrying out a follow up report to observe education needs following the easing of lockdown restrictions.

Keira informed me that she had been involved in the follow up research and report that was done. ***“We compared the results from the last finding to this one. We found that young people had been really struggling in the lockdown due to not having access to laptops or computers to do work”.***

“We got to do the survey too and promoted via word of mouth, social media, our what’s app group and through schools. We made a booklet and put it on our website. Eleanor (their worker) contacted people in the council to pass on the feedback”.

“From the findings there was a general feel that online schooling didn’t work and just telling pupils what work they have to do and get on with it we recommended they do more live lessons with video and interactive messaging and chat. Schools also provided a lot more people access to laptops”.

“In lockdown mental health became a big issue so we wanted to make people aware and less stressed and worried”.

Emerald Centre Review

The Emerald Centre is a sexual assault referral centre (SARC) committed to helping and supporting anyone who has suffered sexual violence and/or abuse. The care that is provided covers the whole of Bedfordshire and includes those of any gender.

Young Healthwatch volunteers reviewed the Centre's website, and a PowerPoint story board, using the '15 Steps' methodology, to see if the information provided was accessible from a young person's perspective. ***"They contacted us and they did a virtual tour and talked about what to do. Some young people went to visit too. We made recommendations based on how we felt going around and anything we want to change. We gave them suggestions based on within the first 15 seconds of entering people have to form a repour"*** Following their report of the virtual visit, and the easing of lockdown restrictions, the young volunteers were invited to visit The Emerald Centre, in a safe and structured way, to review accessibility for young people with the aim of creating the patient journey through the service, and for the final part of the assessment to be completed.

In addition to a review of the Centre's website and PowerPoint presentation, used in training for other stakeholders, Young Healthwatch Volunteers also reviewed the guidance and leaflets that are given to patients after completing their assessment.

The final two reports prepared following their review and visit were sent to The Emerald Centre, the local authority and placed on their website and shared via social media. Volunteers were also invited to present their findings to all staff at the Centre via an on-line team meeting. Report recommendations highlighted have since been actioned by staff at the Centre. These include modifying their Story Board and presentations; creating new ones for males, females and teenagers.

They have also been given the green light to place a walk-through virtual tour and photos on their website. They are in talks with their IT department to add a 'Live Chat' function on their website so young people can message if unable/unwilling or are just not comfortable contacting the Centre by phone.

Changes made were a direct result of the project and will ensure the Centre is more accessible, and approachable, to younger people, and will consequently support more people affected by sexual violence and abuse.

'Think Ninja' Review

During lockdown one Young Healthwatch volunteer reviewed 'Think Ninja', over a period of 14 days, recording their findings of each day in a diary. ***"It was mainly one person who did this over lockdown. They went on the app and recorded things based on 15 steps and went to a meeting to discuss it after"***. This is an App developed for young people to help self-manage their mental health.

The diary provided a powerful account of how the App can have a positive impact on a young person's personal wellbeing. The full report of the volunteer's findings was published on Healthwatch's website and advertised via social media to support other young people to manage their mental health.

The report was very well received by key stakeholders; the Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group said: ***"I also found the review really useful. Please can you feedback to the young volunteer that owing to the review I have since included the App in a list of online resources for GP's across Bedfordshire, Luton and***

Milton Keynes - which will hopefully mean that many more young people are signposted to use it.”

Following publication of the report, the CEO of Think Ninja requested a meeting with the Young Volunteer and brought along one of his leading psychologists. They discussed how the App could be improved for young people, such as colour scheme, language, activities and music. The report was also shared with their Board where the Young Volunteers ideas were discussed further, and changes implemented as a result.

Pen Pal Scheme

During lockdown many older people felt isolated, especially in care homes when visits became very restrictive. As a result, the young volunteers developed a project which initially involved writing to residents in care homes, which included sharing their poems and drawings too. The project was facilitated via care home Managers, who identified residents who wanted to be involved in the project, and during 2021 the scheme was expanded to include other voluntary organisations that support older people, Good Neighbour Schemes and Domiciliary Care agencies

“We were initially approached by a new care home that had set up to do some intergenerational work as there had been a show on the tv about some toddlers meeting with elderly people and the benefit of it. At first, we planned to go in once a week but then lockdown came so we couldn’t visit. We looked at how we could still meet with people but realised things like video calls wouldn’t work so one of us suggested having pen pals. One of the group Valentino had a pen pal throughout lockdown and they would write to each other. His last letter said how amazing she would be and make a great lawyer in the future!”

The pen pal scheme enabled younger volunteers to reach out and connect with older people within their community. The project supported lonely and isolated individuals through a very challenging and uncertain time. It also helped the young volunteers to improve their communication skills, gain confidence in writing, and building relationships, while supporting vulnerable members of the community. The project was managed utilising several different care homes with each receiving regular letters and pictures. These were then shared with all residents and some residents began writing on a 1:1 basis, establishing links and a bond with the young volunteer. Feedback from Care Home Managers highlighted how the letters ***‘relieved the boredom and loneliness and helped the elderly residents reminisce about their younger years, whilst hearing about life from the young volunteer’s perspective’***.

A local preschool and their primary age siblings also joined in, providing pictures which were sent with our letters. Feedback from teachers at the preschool included: ***‘We wanted to thank you for allowing us to be a part of your wonderful initiative to help support the elderly community during this tough and lonely time’***.

They had been teaching the preschool children the impact that lockdown could have had on some of their neighbours and how important it is that we work together to let them know that they were in their thoughts.

'Don't stop the Beat'

A grant funded project where Young Healthwatch Volunteers have been trained in CPR by the British Heart Foundation, with the intention to pass on their learning and train other young people in Central Bedfordshire. The aim being to enable young people to feel more confident, improve their resilience and be educated in key lifesaving skills. This project was specifically designed for young people by young people.

“Someone from BHF contacted Amy, our old worker to ask if we would be interested in the project and we all said yes”.

“We got trained up in CPR. We now train other young people what we learnt”.

“We learnt how to do CPR and resuscitate both adults and children and have run training at Central Bedfordshire College, Flitwick Youth Centre and the Grove youth Group”.

“This was something we wanted to do”.

This project has successfully delivered four sessions to date with at least nine more booked in at venues across Central Bedfordshire. Each session will involve training up to 20 young people in the lifesaving skill of CPR. The sessions are facilitated by Young Healthwatch Volunteers with support from HWCB's Youth Engagement Officer. The project has allowed young people who may be vulnerable or 'hard to reach' to have the opportunity to take part. It has provided all the young people involved with a focus and a common purpose, to benefit others by gaining lifesaving training, and to feel empowered and gain additional self-worth. Each volunteer receives a certificate for completing the session. The project has significantly helped the young volunteers, who delivered the training, to develop their skills, potentially for any future career paths in the health and care sector, as well as giving them vital confidence building experience.

“It's really good as we got certificates and use it on our personal statements for things like college and university”.

'On the Buses'

Young Healthwatch Volunteers developed a project, working with local transport providers, focussing on priority seating for disabled young people on public transport to spread awareness that not all disabilities are visible. This project was developed as one young volunteer in the group had been subject to verbal abuse for sitting in a disabled seat, even though she has a disability. Often referred to as a 'hidden disability', the Young Healthwatch group wanted to raise awareness of this issue. The project will include surveys, observations and posters/ signs on buses within the local area.

Due to Covid-19 the project could not go ahead until travel restrictions were lifted and the young volunteers felt comfortable to ride on the buses. Young Healthwatch Volunteers secured one well-known local bus company to join the project who have

agreed for the Young Volunteers to ride on some of their bus journeys to carry out their observations.

“We have been working with Stagecoach and Arriva as it was raised that young people with hidden disabilities are discriminated against so we wanted to do more research into this”.

“Molly one of our members has a hidden disability and said she is discreetly discriminated against when on buses. It was her idea for this project”.

“We rode our bus services for two hours to look at if we see discrimination for young people with hidden disabilities. We handed out surveys to passengers and drivers to fill in and observed people on the bus. It wasn’t long till we seen discrimination”.

“It was interesting to see that now a lot of people said they witnessed it, even though we seen lots. We have already sent the report to the bus companies and we are going to do a leaflet about hidden disabilities to raise awareness and how to recognise discrimination”.

Discussions with two other bus companies are currently taking place and we are hopeful they will also want to participate in the project, to enable the volunteers to gather as much information as possible. Young Volunteers will hand out a survey to members of the public on the buses, interview the bus driver and carry out a survey with ‘hard-to-reach’ and/or ‘hidden disability’ groups about their experiences on public transport.

At the end of the project the Young Volunteers will prepare a report based on their findings which will be shared with all the bus companies involved, local transport and council authorities, on their website and via social media. A poster will also be developed to be placed inside the buses to help raise awareness of ‘hidden disabilities’.

Schooling coming out of lockdown

Following on from the first home schooling report, as mentioned above, Young Healthwatch Volunteers have carried out a comparison report to observe any changes which may have occurred a year later.

A survey was sent out via HWCB’s social media channels and stakeholder groups, in addition to the Young Volunteers sharing within their networks. The survey included the same questions as in the previous ‘Home becomes School’ project although some new questions were added due to the changing environment.

The Young Volunteers are preparing the final report which will be shared with local schools, education authorities and other key stakeholders.

'15 Steps' follow up visit to Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (Bedford Hospital and Luton and Dunstable Hospital).

Previous visit arranged by Young Healthwatch Volunteers to the Luton and Dunstable Hospital had to be cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions however, hospital colleagues felt this needed to go ahead, as they were very keen to continue the project.

A follow-up visit to Bedford Hospital was arranged, specifically to review whether the hospital has actioned the recommendations, Young Healthwatch Volunteers highlighted in their previous report, following a visit to the children's wards at Bedford Hospital. Both hospitals would welcome a return visit by the Young Healthwatch Volunteers as they want to continue to build on the good relationship previously developed, and they also requested that the Young Healthwatch Volunteers review the new A & E ward at Bedford Hospital in addition to other services, including reviewing their outpatient information for young people.

"We looked at every aspect of a hospital day ranging from the food to A & E".

"Young people met with Bedfordshire hospital board and hoping to meet with Luton and Dunstable hospital soon".

Social media updates, blogs and podcasts

The young people continue to run social media accounts as Healthwatch understand this is a huge part of how young people communicate and get informed. The young people have written blogs about different areas of their lives that personally impact them, especially during lockdown.

"We all do blogs".

"Sometimes I do Instagram posts based on reports we publish and places we visit".

"I'm currently doing a blog to share my experience of being at school and doing my exams during Covid".

"I'm doing one now on visiting the A & E on my own for the first time".

"It's great being able to allow others to feel relieved by sharing how I feel when they are maybe feeling the same".

Some of the young people undertook podcast training as they feel that is a great way to express their feelings and manage their thoughts.

"We did podcast training as we wanted to know how to do them".

The young people will continue to write blogs about their experiences accessing health and social care services, and about the groups available in their community that support them. Their blogs will continue to be published on Young Healthwatch website and promoted via social media, to give other young people the opportunity to hear their views, and how reading about another young person's perspective can help them.

The young people will be looking to produce their own podcast based on their recent training which is a great way for the young people to give their voice and express their emotions and experiences in a safe environment.

“All social media is run by us. We even do posts for things like national ice cream day, wear yellow day, national happiness day and volunteer week”.

Courses

Members of the group are able to make requests on courses that would benefit them. The young people informed me: ***“We asked to do a course to help us with report writing as some young people were struggling and asked for it”.***

The Ready Trial

Another project the young people talked about was the ready trial.

“We have been helping out on another project that looks at physical activities and how it affects your mental health. We have looked at 3 aspects: socialising, light exercise and vigorous exercise. Some online and some face to face. We filled out surveys to say how we felt and got to speak with professors from the University of Hertfordshire and Psychologists”.

Additional Feedback

When I asked the young people if they could describe in a few words what being involved in the project means to them, I was told:

“Community”.

“It feels like you are actually helping to do something beneficial. It’s better than not trying to do something yourself as we all work together”.

“Visibility, being heard and seen, talking to people your own age and nice when you have common interests”.

“We support each other as well”.

“Feels like you are helping people and actually doing something!”

“It gives you a voice and a way to say something!”

Recommendations

The young people I met with suggested the following recommendations:

Promotion/Recruitment for group

The group would like to have more members. Suggestions were made on ways recruitment could be improved.

“More people would be interested if there were presentations in assemblies, seeing people in person or a demonstration of what we do”.

“I really enjoyed it when I saw young people delivering the CPR training on the video. That actually made me want to join”.

“They could also do fun activities when we go into schools. Maybe once a month”.

Links with other Healthwatch’s

The young people spoke positively about the work they have previously done with other Healthwatch’s in the country. ***“We would really like to continue this and work with others on the same projects and to find out what else they are doing. It would be good to do a quiz night every so often”.***

Connections to Healthwatch

The young people would like to connect more with the main Healthwatch group and board. ***“It is nice when we have visitors from the main group and board. It would be good to have more connections and work more closely”.***

Conclusion

I was extremely pleased to see the ways that young people continue to lead on areas of work they are interested in and want to improve. My report details multiple ways that their voice has resulted in a change.

All of the young people spoke extremely positive of their involvement in Healthwatch and the ways they get listened to and taken seriously.

When I asked the young people if they felt that Young Healthwatch should have its Investing in Children Membership renewed, everyone said 100% definitely.

I therefore have no hesitation but to recommend this.

Well done!

Eleanor Seed

Awards Manager

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