



Element Society Speak Up

April 2026



Element Society: Speak Up

What is Speak Up?

Speak Up is Healthwatch Sheffield's micro grants programme, offering funding of £1000 - £1500 to not-for-profit, voluntary, and community sector groups. The purpose is to run a project which will reach out to people across Sheffield, and hear what matters to them in relation to health and social care.



By working with groups which are already trusted partners in their communities, we can make sure we're hearing from even more people, including those whose voices aren't often heard by decision makers. This year's projects all have a focus on the voices and experiences of children and young people.

Element Society

Element Society is a youth-led charity based in Sheffield that empowers young people to create positive change in their lives and communities. Since 2013, it has supported thousands of young people, particularly those facing barriers such as poor mental health, inequality, or limited opportunities, through workshops, social action projects, and skills-building programmes. By building confidence, amplifying youth voice, and tackling issues that matter to young people, Element Society plays a key role in helping them navigate challenges, including how they engage with and access services that support their wellbeing.



Healthwatch Sheffield

Healthwatch Sheffield helps adults, children and young people influence and improve how NHS and Social Care services are designed and run. We're completely independent and not part of the NHS or Sheffield City Council. We want to understand your experiences, and help your views to influence decision-makers in the city.



About this project

Background

Element Society received a Healthwatch Sheffield “Speak Up” small grant to deliver a youth-led engagement project with young people in Sheffield aged 14–19. The project explored how young people experience key health and care services as they begin to take greater responsibility for their own health.

The project focused on the areas specified in the funding application: GP access, mental health support, A&E and urgent care, walk-in centres, sexual health services, and crisis responses. Young people were actively involved in shaping which services and topics were prioritised, the questions asked, and the creative methods used to share their experiences and recommendations with professionals.

By involving young people directly in setting the agenda, the project ensured that the findings reflect the lived experiences and priorities of those navigating health and care systems. Feedback and discussion included experiences across GPs, A&E, walk-in centres, and crisis or urgent support, reflecting the full range of services young people might try to access.

Who we spoke to

The engagement involved 18 young people, the majority aged 14–19, with a small number of 20–22-year-olds included intentionally. These older participants had very recent experience of transitioning into adult health services, which added valuable insight while remaining closely aligned with the project’s focus on young people beginning to manage their own healthcare.

Participants represented a broad range of backgrounds and lived experiences, including:

- LGBTQ+ young people, offering insight into the specific health and wellbeing challenges they face.

- Young people from racially marginalised and minority ethnic backgrounds, highlighting cultural experiences and potential barriers to accessing care.
- Care-experienced young people, sharing experiences of navigating health services with reduced family support.
- Neurodiverse young people, including those with SEND and mental health needs, who highlighted challenges around communication, inclusion, and reasonable adjustments.

The group reflected the marginalised communities prioritised in the funding application, including young people with SEND, mental health challenges, care experience, LGBTQ+ identities, and racially marginalised backgrounds. This ensured the findings were grounded in lived experience and captured perspectives from those most likely to face additional barriers when accessing health and care services.

What we did

The project used a range of youth-led engagement methods designed to ensure young people actively shaped both the focus and the format of the work. After the initial workshop, young people chose which health topics should be prioritised, based on what felt most relevant and pressing in their own lives.

Methods included:

- Questionnaires, allowing young people to share experiences privately and at their own pace.
- Individual interviews, led by young people's priorities and areas of concern.
- Workshops, where young people set the agenda and guided discussion topics.
- Visual recordings, including:
 - A "Top Tips" video, where young people decided the format, tone, and key messages for professionals about accessing health services.
 - Role-play activities, designed and performed by young people to demonstrate what respectful, youth-friendly appointments should look like.



These methods ensured that young people were not just participants, but active decision-makers in how their experiences were explored and shared.

Creative Engagement

Creative engagement activities were used to give young people ownership over the direction of the sessions and to ensure that quieter voices were equally heard. The post-it note “idea walls” were intentionally used to allow young people to set the agenda, highlight what mattered most to them, and identify shared priorities across different health topics.

Young people decided which issues to explore in more depth, what messages they wanted professionals to hear, and how those messages should be communicated. The session concluded with a group-led review of the idea walls, where young people identified patterns, reflected on similarities and differences in experience, and agreed key themes to carry forward.

This approach reinforced the project’s youth-led ethos and ensured the findings reflected young people’s priorities, language, and lived realities, rather than adult assumptions.

Findings

Workshop one: general feedback

Young people spoke about positive experiences they’ve had:

- Families have supported young people to understand how to navigate the health system.
- Online systems help less confident young people to book appointments without needing to call.
- A social prescriber worked well for one young person.
- Mental health apps can be helpful.
- Kooth is viewed positively, young people felt they could use it after hearing about it in school.
- Young people think the NHS being free is brilliant.

They also told us about the barriers they've faced:

- Young people feel they won't be taken seriously if attending the GP alone.
- School medical rooms are ineffective; injuries were dismissed (e.g., broken toe, broken finger).
- "A&E takes too long due to being understaffed and underpaid."
- Waiting times for appointments are long.
- Neurodiversity waiting lists are too long; families are having to go private so young people can get support.
- Women's health concerns are sometimes not believed by GPs.
- GP receptionists are perceived as "scary."
- "Sexual health stuff is embarrassing."
- Unsure what sexual health support is available.
- Young people lack confidence in going to the GP alone.
- A young person reported needing to find a new GP who was more experienced to resolve their health issue.
- Mental health support for young people is poor.
- The health system is difficult to navigate when parents have limited English.
- Sometimes the GP talks to the parent instead of the young person, even when the young person is the patient.
- Young people often do not know where to go for health problems beyond basic GP appointments.

Workshop two: Post-It Note "Idea Walls"

Young people took part in a creative activity where they wrote down their thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences on post-it notes and placed them under topic headings around the room. This created visual "walls" filled with authentic insights into each health area.

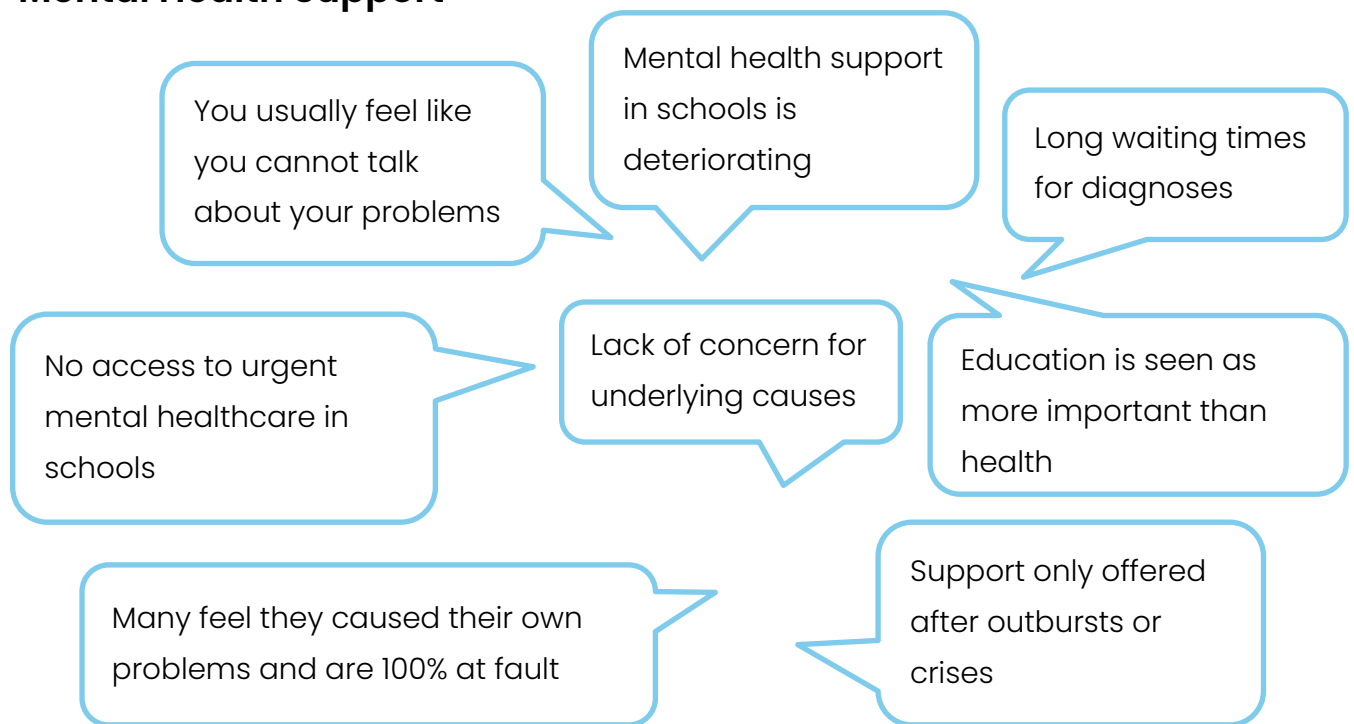
This method:

- Encouraged reflective and open conversation.
- Allowed quieter participants to contribute comfortably.
- Highlighted common themes, concerns, and positive experiences.

- Helped young people see shared experiences.
- Gave them ownership over the activity.

The session ended with a group review of the idea walls, where young people discussed patterns, surprises, and shared insights. This collaborative reflection provided a deeper understanding of how young people engage with and perceive health services.

Mental Health Support

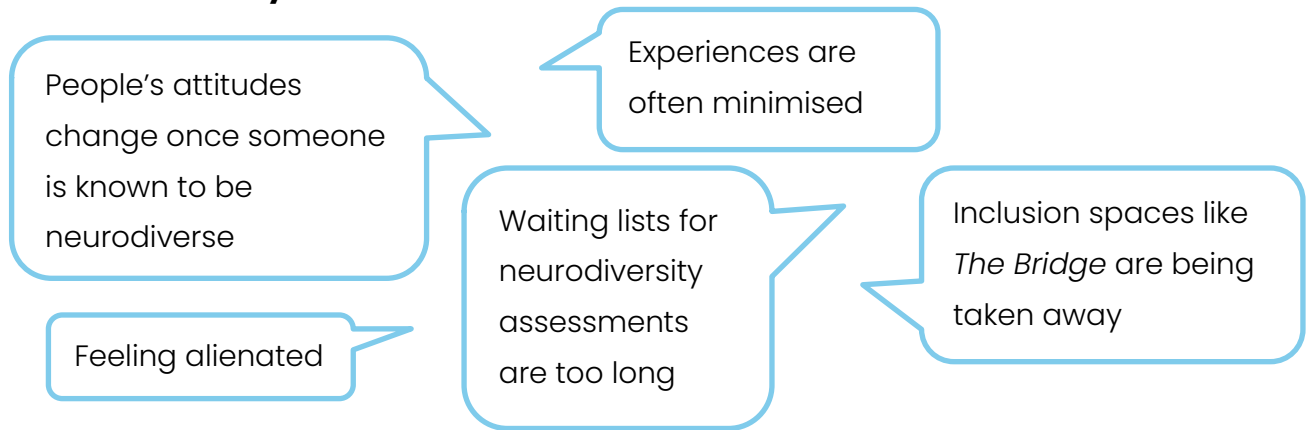


Young people reported that schools place academic achievement above wellbeing. Many do not feel able to talk about their problems, due to fear of being dismissed or because no consistent support is available.

They also felt that mental health provision in schools is declining, with long waits for assessments and a tendency for support to be reactive rather than preventative. Underlying causes such as stress, bullying, and home pressures are often overlooked.

Many young people internalise blame for their struggles. They want earlier, more compassionate, and better-informed mental health support from schools.

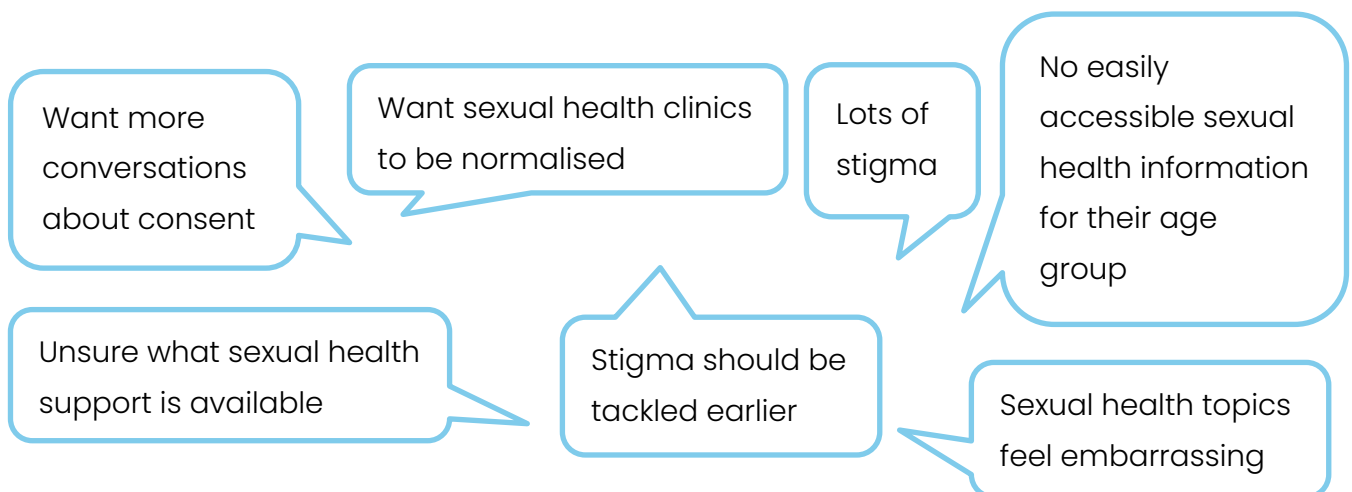
Neurodiversity and Inclusion



Young people described feeling excluded or misunderstood due to neurodiversity. They said people's perceptions shift, often negatively when someone is identified as neurodiverse. Their experiences are sometimes dismissed, and the removal of inclusion spaces reduces their sense of safety and belonging.

Long waiting lists force families to consider private assessments just to access needed support.

Sexual Health Awareness



Young people said stigma keeps them from asking questions or seeking sexual health support. They want earlier, open, and relatable conversations about sexual health, consent, and healthy relationships.

Normalising sexual health clinics and increasing visibility of services would help reduce embarrassment and confusion.

Communication and System Navigation



Young people often find healthcare environments intimidating and unclear. Friendly communication, staff introducing themselves, and straightforward explanations help build trust.

Not knowing what will happen next can create anxiety. Young people want simple, accessible information, ideally available online. Digital tools also help less confident young people access services independently.

They value parental involvement but want to feel more empowered and informed when attending health appointments.

How Could Technology or Schools Help?

- Anonymous surveys and digital tools can help young people share experiences safely.
- Clear, youth-friendly online information would support independence.
- Online booking systems would make accessing GP appointments easier.
- Schools should teach what different health services are and how to access them.

What Would a Youth-Friendly Version of Services Look Like?

Young people want:

- Relaxed, one-to-one conversations.
- Welcoming, non-judgemental environments.
- Clear, simple, step-by-step information.
- Easier access and wider availability.
- Staff who understand young people and avoid stereotypes.
- Better sexual health information.
- Training for professionals on supporting young people accessing services independently.

They stressed that stereotypes, like assuming all autistic young people wear ear defenders are confusing and unhelpful. They want individualised, respectful support.

Individual Interviews

We spoke to some young people on a more individual basis. They gave some additional feedback about services and the support they had received – things that work well and things they find difficult:

- GPs often look at the parent instead of the young person.
- GP surgeries are not open on Saturdays.
- Do not know where to go for non-GP health problems.
- Would like a website to book appointments.
- Found Kooth approachable after a school assembly.

- Lack of age-appropriate sexual health information.
- Want professionals to receive training on supporting young people accessing services alone.
- Want more open-minded and youth-aware medical staff.
- Think the NHS being free is brilliant.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires highlighted the importance of listening and ensuring young people feel heard. Key points included:

- How anxiety affects attending appointments.
- The importance of having someone accompany them for support.
- Waiting times being triggering.
- Need for reasonable adjustments for mental health.
- Feeling that gender may influence how they are treated.
- Feeling judged or perceived as “attention seeking”.
- “Our trauma does not mean we do not know our bodies.”
- Difficulties explaining what they need.
- Needing supportive stress guidance.
- Feeling like they need guidance on navigating health services.
- Information required about different options.
- Schools providing guidance on how to book GP appointments.
- Fear of being judged.
- Need for better ways to explain things.
- More support for neurodiverse young people when getting prescriptions.

Audio/Visual Recordings: Top Tips Video and Role-Play Activities

Young people contributed to recordings to provide guidance on how health services could better support them. This included a “Top Tips” video and role-play exercises demonstrating their ideal appointment experiences.

Top Tips from Young People



1. Be kind – it may be a young person’s first time accessing appointments independently.
2. Smile – small gestures can make a big difference.
3. Engage with us – ask why we are here and listen to our concerns.
4. Give reassurance – especially after the appointment.
5. Introduce yourselves – make your presence and role clear.
6. Be honest about waiting times – transparency helps reduce anxiety.

These tips provide clear, practical advice for healthcare professionals on how to create a welcoming, supportive, and youth-friendly environment.

Next steps

Codesigned Outputs

As part of this project, young people codesigned a set of practical outputs to communicate their experiences, priorities, and recommendations to professionals and decision-makers. These outputs were shaped directly by young people’s lived experiences and the themes they identified throughout the engagement.

The codesigned outputs include:

- **“Top Tips for Supporting Young People” video**
A short video scripted, structured, and presented by young people, sharing clear and practical advice for healthcare professionals on how to make services feel more welcoming, respectful, and youth-friendly.
- **Role-play scenarios and scripts**
Young people developed and performed role-play scenarios showing what positive, youth-friendly health appointments should look like, including how professionals communicate, introduce themselves, explain next steps, and offer reassurance.

- **This written report**

This report brings together the findings from workshops, questionnaires, interviews, and creative activities. The themes, focus areas, and key messages reflect the priorities identified by young people and are presented in language that remains true to their experiences.

Together, these outputs ensure that young people's voices are not only heard but shared in practical, accessible formats that can inform service design, training, and decision-making.

Recommendations Generated by Young People

Based on their experiences and feedback, young people suggested the following improvements to make health services more youth-friendly. These are aimed at improving healthcare experiences for young people across different services, rather than focusing on one service in particular:

- Staff should introduce themselves and explain their role clearly.
- Be honest about waiting times and next steps to reduce anxiety.
- Use clear, simple language and avoid jargon.
- Make it easy to book appointments online as well as by phone.
- Ensure parents/carers can support where appropriate, while still addressing the young person directly.
- Provide earlier, proactive mental health support in schools, rather than only after crises.
- Shorten and simplify pathways for neurodiversity assessment and support.
- Normalise sexual health clinics and provide age-appropriate information and conversations about consent.

These recommendations reflect the priorities and lived experiences of the young people themselves, highlighting practical ways to improve accessibility, communication, and support within health services.