

Young People's Mental Health Review - Children & Young People Select Committee

Notes from meeting with young people involved in the Big Lottery Headstart project Steering Group held on 23/10/2014.

Members of the Committee present:

- Cllr John Paschoud (Chair)
- Cllr Brenda Dacres (Vice-Chair)
- Cllr Jacq Paschoud
- Cllr Joan Reid
- Cllr Luke Sorba
- Cllr Alan Till

Young people present:

- Sara Dimitsu
- Kenya Fantie
- Leia Garwood-Stephenson
- Eden Snell
- Saffron Worrell

Officers present:

- Andrew Hagger (Scrutiny Manager)
- Caroline Hirst (Commissioner, Children & Young People)

Caroline Hirst outlined that mental health provision for young people is a statutory obligation, with this provision focussed around specialist services. There are 6 community teams that serve Lewisham, two generic teams, one focused on looked After Children, one on those involved in the criminal justice system, one for emerging psychosis and one for young people with disabilities.

Caroline Hirst outlined the background to the Headstart project, highlighting that the work is based on a strong partnership approach. The first bid was for £10k, which was successful and allowed scope to build and submit a second bid for £500k which was also successful. Work is now underway to use the funding secured to develop services and ideas in order to bid for the third and final round of funding, which could total £10m over 5 years.

There has been a young person's steering group in place from the start of the project to provide input on the direction for of the project. Provision is being rolled out based on priorities identified by the steering group. There have been directly youth-led elements to the project, including events, youth-led film and a commissioning budget for young people to spend. The involvement of young people has shown that people are passionate about mental health in the borough.

Issues identified and the mental health needs of young people.

In response to questions from the Committee members about the mental health needs of young people, the young people present provided the following information:

- There is a general lack of education about mental health, both amongst young people specifically and people generally. Because people do not know about mental health they are unable to properly understand and address it.
- Mental health problems can affect 1 in 4 people, so that could mean up to 5000 young people in the borough. 95% of the prison population have mental health issues.
- Previously, members of the group were not as aware of mental health issues as they are now, so did not understand its seriousness. The group acknowledged that they may not have been as compassionate with people due to this lack of understanding, which emphasised the need for more information and knowledge.
- Parents/carers may not understand their child's situation and have less knowledge about mental health issues, which could be due to a generational lack of awareness.
- The group felt that there were not enough services available and that it was important to offer a range of mental health services for young people. Young people may not know what services are available and accessible.
- The priority basis for services can sometimes be unhelpful. Because services are limited people may only get treatment and help if the situation is really bad, such as suicide attempt or serious illness. This can mean that prevention work to stop mental health issues becoming more serious could be missed.
- While it is important that there is mental health support in school, young people may want to access services outside school so they can be anonymous. There can be reluctance to go to a teacher, some may prefer to go to a school nurse instead, or to look on the internet for advice and help.
- However some young people may feel comfortable going to a teacher because they have a different relationship with and can be more detached. Having options available so young people can turn to wherever they feel most comfortable is important.
- The use of a helpline might depend on the age range. Older young people might use it, but younger ones who may not have as much independence may not, for example a 12 year old would probably still rely on their parents/carers. It can be difficult to for people to call a helpline, but it may be used as a last resort. It would also be better to be able to choose the person you talk to, rather than speaking to an anonymous person. For example a girl may feel more comfortable speaking to a woman about their problems rather than a man.
- It is not always easy to go to a parent/carer about mental health issues. Parents/carers could see their child having a mental health problem as a fault of their parenting, that they did not do the 'right' things for their child. Parents/carers can feel responsible, even if they are aware of mental health issues.
- Education for parents/carers about mental health issues would be useful and should start early, maybe at primary school level so there is good awareness from the start.
- The group felt that they would tell people they knew to go to the GP if they had a mental health problem, but only if it was serious. The danger is that if it is not serious then the GP may not offer much help or downplay the issue, which could result in that person feeling worse. If the issue was not as serious they would encourage people to talk to their friends first.
- Counselling can be very useful for young people to access, although it can depend on the individuals involved, some young people may not feel a connection to their counsellor. Young people can be flexible about their interactions and use a form of media, although meeting people face to face first is

important, so a relationship is established and then using different media such as email and texts feels ok.

- There is a concern that even though work is being done to build awareness and tell people to ask for help, the support and services aren't in place to then provide help when people look for it.
- There have been a mix of experiences with mental health services among the group, with some good and some bad.
- There is a need for lower level support through the transition period while waiting to access CAMHS services. Access to a mentor or an equivalent to help in the meantime would be useful.
- Mental health can flare up and then go away, it is not always a permanent thing. Long waits can mean that you are ok by the time you see someone, or it could mean that you drop off the list and never see anyone, so don't get any help.
- Advice for young people would be useful, such as teaching coping mechanisms and how to support friends.

Involvement of young people in the project

In response to questions from the Committee members about the involvement of young people in the Headstart project, the young people present provided the following information:

- While no young men could attend the meeting, there are young men involved in the steering group and the steering group is reflective of young people in Lewisham.
- There has been a recent event held in Lewisham about the Big Lottery Headstart project which involved a lot of young people.
- Members of the steering group have gone to schools to speak to young people to find out what mental health is in their opinion and find ideas on how to spend the budget available.
- Many of the group are involved with YoungMinds, a charity committed to improving emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. YoungMinds have identified 5 main pressures for young people, which include sexual pressure, bullying, unemployment, school stress and access to counselling.

The role of schools

In response to questions from the Committee members about the role of schools, the young people present provided the following information:

- The group talked in detail about school stress, including the pressure on young people about exams, grades and the pressure to do well. The feeling from schools is that school is all that matters and that grades are the most important thing. However the association with failure if people don't get good grades can stick and it should be more about valuing people, not just their grades.
- The education system could alleviate stress by spreading exams more widely across the year, so they are not all bunched together at once.
- The group's experiences outside experiences, for example being involved in the Headstart project and being involved in running for Young Mayor, showed that school is not all there is. When young people go to 6th form the emphasis changes, it is more about broadening horizons and young people are then told

that exam results alone won't get you into a university, you need a good personal statement.

- Pupils with the most obvious problems, for example those that are disruptive, get the most attention at school. However those that are struggling, but just about getting by, are then passed over. If you need to see a teacher you may be ignored in favour of the ones who are causing trouble.
- Some schools, such as Sydenham (Girls), have had a counsellor. Other approaches such as learning mentors could also be supportive.
- Every school has a bullying policy, but bullying isn't always easily spotted and policies are not always effective. The psychological impact of bullying can hurt and linger on into later life. Teachers should be well trained on picking up signs of bullying.
- There is a concern over lack of confidentiality in school. For example, a young person could tell a teacher about a mental health issue they have been facing, but then it can be quite obvious that knowledge of their issue has been passed to a number of staff and this has now changed their relationships. The group felt that separating out classroom and personal problems could be useful for teachers.
- Sessions in school about mental health can have an impact. Forest Hill Boys had a small workshop on mental health, a 1 day session with some follow-up that changed the mindset of young people. This was carried out by outside people, who can offer a different perspective.

Accessing services via digital technology

In response to questions from the Committee members about accessing services via digital technology, the young people present provided the following information:

- It is important to not rely solely on new technology and the internet to access and deliver services, although it can be useful.
- Online services, such as the online chat service run by Childline, can be slow and it can take a very long time to get responses.
- Face to face chats are still extremely valuable, with phone or other technology used after you are comfortable.
- There can be extremes in online interaction. Some people may be very blunt or almost rude, some may issue cries for help online, such as through social media sites.
- There are good and bad sides to online participation. It is possible to share information and raise awareness, such as promotion online around World Mental Health Day. However online sources can promote harmful things, such as sites that offer advice around self-harm that can almost sound as though they are providing 'tips'.
- Education about using online services and accessing information should emphasise selectiveness and being able to recognise the differences in information.
- Diagnosis websites aren't always useful as people may think that they have problem or condition that they don't have.