

Adolescent health in Tower Hamlets

In 2018 and 2019, we engaged with adolescents in Tower Hamlets in multiple ways, including:

- The Young Influencers' project, involving BAME young people in service design around health and well-being;
- A mental health survey, with 131 respondents;
- A survey around education, future planning and mental health, with 102 participants;
- Semi-structured interviews on dietary habits, with 28 young people;
- A workshop with 15 participants carried out in January 2019, on access to services and digital inclusion;
- A workshop with 10 participants carried out in April 2018 on the topic of online GP consultations; and
- Targeted outreach at events relevant to adolescents, such as school fairs and open days.

We estimate that we spoke to a total of **346 adolescents aged 14 to 18**.

What we have learned

Attitudes to healthy living

28 young people took part in semi-structured interviews about their diet.

We found that *half of them ate fast food at least once a week, nearly two thirds ate sweets daily and just under half preferred water to other soft drinks*. Girls had somewhat better diets than boys: they ate fast food and sweets less often, and they drank more water.

The *cost of food* was the chief influencing factor for respondents: fast food is more affordable than healthier options, which makes young people more likely to choose it. Convenience and easy access were also factors influencing the behaviours of the heaviest fast food consumers.

Around a quarter of respondents mentioned *peer pressure/socialising* as a factor that influences their fast food consumption and saw going to fast food shops with friends as a social occasions; slightly less brought up the *availability of food at home* and how the example of adults in their household, good or bad, influences their dietary choices.

- *“I used to eat fast food four times a week, but I’ve cut down a lot. I used to have it with friends or on my own, but now if my friends don’t go, I won’t go so now it’s more of a group thing.”*
- *“I eat fast food probably once a week, almost every Saturday. My mum has work Friday night, she gets tired and no one can be bothered to cook.”*
- *“My parents always look for a healthy variety of foods for the family and we always have a massive selection of fruit at hand.”*

Around two thirds of respondents agreed that fast food and takeaway restaurants that provide cheap, readily available food lack healthy options, but the majority were resigned to it or didn’t mind.

- *“At almost every local PFC there are no healthy options such as salads, it’s just fatty foods. I don’t really care about options as I do order the same thing every time anyway.”*

Half of respondents thought that they eat a balanced diet. Surprisingly, those who thought their diet was balanced were more likely to eat fast food weekly or more (but less likely to eat sweets daily).

While most respondents had at least some awareness of how to prevent diabetes, only a minority were actively taking steps to improve their diet and lifestyle. Most thought this is something they may need to do in the future rather than a current priority. Those who thought they ate a balanced diet and those who did not were equally likely to think they are prone to diabetes.

Engaging with health information

In January 2019, as part of Health Week, 15 young people took part in a workshop about engaging and interacting with health services.

All participants were either “sort of confident” (6 out of 15) or “very confident” to access health services on their own. None of them felt that they lacked confidence in this respect.

Their awareness of digital tools such as NHS Go and Health Help Now was poor, but once they had tested out the apps they were open to using them if necessary. Apps to seek out information were seen as more useful than those that, like Moodpath, track health-related metrics.

They also had poor awareness of health services, such as Step Forward, that exist specifically for young people. Generally, participants strongly felt that while apps and websites could be useful for broad advice, they cannot substitute specific advice from a medical professional- a role that they associated primarily with GPs.

Young people are open but wary about digital health tools - they want to know exactly how they will be helped and why it's better than the original health services. Confidentiality is continually a large concern for young people, and they don't feel that it is taken into account enough in service design.

Primary care

Consistently across our research activities we found that *GPs are the first port of call when it comes to most health-related issues, including mental health*. The one notable exception that came up in discussions at the January workshop was *teenage pregnancies*. Overall, boys are more likely than girls to rely on GPs than on other medical services for any problems, including mental health.

Overall, young people had positive experiences with GP and dental services.

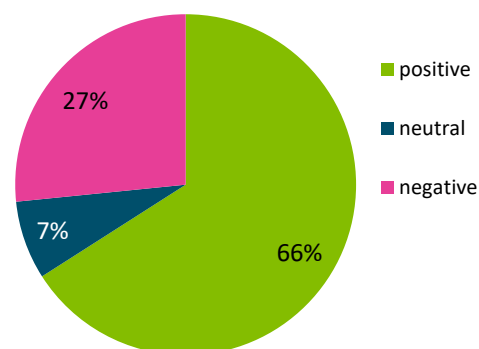
- *Very approachable, kind clinician. Felt like I had the time to appropriately explain difficulties. Reassuring that she checked with colleague when unsure.*
- *Quite pleasant, nothing to complain about. Appointment was late by a few minutes- it was a routine dental appointment; those are set by the dentist with one month notice or less.*
- *I have a drug addiction. The GP surgery is helpful. It helped me cope with situations very well, made you feel comfortable. They can improve by giving advice on stopping addiction.*

Most young people felt that they received appropriate information about their condition from doctors.

- *I went into the GP because I was experiencing stomach ache. The doctors were nice and did the tests appropriately. The doctor explained my condition well.*

Some, however, report being rushed or dismissed by doctors.

Opinion of primary care services
(94 issues)



- *I went to see my G.P because my ears were hurting a lot. Doctor was rude to me and not considerate.*
- *The appointment was fast, only had to wait for 10-15 minutes, however I didn't feel like the doctors listened to what I had to say and rushed the appointment. They just suggested for me to take paracetamol without listening to my problems.*
- *I went to my GP for a regular check-up. Everything was normal. There weren't many patients waiting. The doctor was explaining things very quickly; I felt like he was rushing. To improve, the doctor should talk at a normal pace so we can understand what they are saying*

Adolescents often allow their parents to deal with scheduling their medical appointments rather than doing it themselves. Through discussions at the workshop in January 2019 we found that adolescents have limited knowledge of how to register with a GP or the fact that they can do it themselves rather than going through their parents. This could explain a relatively low uptake of online booking among adolescents- even if they would have the necessary internet literacy, their parents, who deal with appointments in practice, may not.

While open to the idea of *looking up reliable health information online*, both our focus groups of teenagers were reluctant when it comes to having online consultations with GPs. Concerns include *confidentiality/privacy, reliability and technical issues* (for example, those that could be caused by a lagging internet connection). Online consultations were seen as mostly useful for very minor issues such as skin rashes or verifying whether engaging in sports with a minor injury is safe, but unsuitable for more serious issues. They also thought of online consultations as something useful for working people or for house-bound disabled people, rather than for themselves.

Participants to the January workshops were also open to the idea of a *health and well-being hub* co-locating multiple primary health, community health and youth services under the same roof, but felt that it *could not replace traditional GP services*. This could indicate that a *policlinic-style health hub that includes GP services*, tailored to the needs of young people but not necessarily targeted exclusively at them, may be the best model for adolescents to access primary and community healthcare.

Mental health

We conducted *two surveys* with adolescents around their mental health; we also received a small amount of feedback through our usual channels.

The vast majority of young people believed that *thinking about and planning their future* can be stress-inducing and that providing better support for planning their future would improve their mental health. Over half of survey respondents had considered accessing mental health support due to this stress, but only just over a third actually did.

Young people were most likely to talk to *close friends* about their mental health and well-being. Around a third never discussed it with anyone.

More than half of respondents *looked up mental health information online* but only a few used apps such as Headspace or Moodpath to manage their mental health and wellbeing. However, when given a chance to try out the Moodpath app, around half of the young people we spoke to expressed potential interest in using it in the future. The concept of “speaking” to an app rather than a person in order to receive bespoke mental health advice was appealing to some, but off-putting to others.

A GP surgery or integrated youth health centre are the places where young people would feel most comfortable talking to a professional about their mental health. Boys were more likely to prefer a GP surgery to any other setting, while a youth health hub would be preferred by girls.

There were important *gender differences* in adolescent behaviour around mental health and well-being. Girls were more likely than boys to *talk to someone about their mental health and well-being* (40% of boys and only 20% of girls said they never talked about it to anyone). Girls also used mental health websites, forums and apps more; while boys were more likely than girls to believe they don’t need mental health resources, describing themselves as being “in good mental health” or “not struggling”.

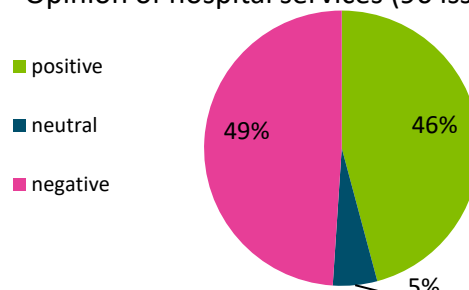
Hospital services

Most adolescents we spoke to used hospital services for injuries or for ongoing long-term conditions. The opinion of adolescents who have used hospital-based services is *mixed*, and broadly similar to that of the general population.

Positive feedback was given on the competence and attitude of clinical staff. Complaints revolve around poor support, long waits and communication between professionals.

Positive feedback

Opinion of hospital services (96 issues)



- *I went to the doctors because I broke my elbow. The doctor was nice and forced me up with support for my hand.*
- *I had surgery on my knee. The consultant was brilliant. The nurses were also very friendly.*
- *I have come to the hospital to remove my feeding tube. It went very smoothly and the doctors where very nice.*
- *I had my MRI done, just waiting for my results. It has been a good experience. I have no suggestions for improvements.*
- *I have come to the hospital today for a scan. The staff are friendly and gave me all the medical advice I need.*
- *The staff treated me really well, calm and reassuring. They made sure I understood everything. I had hand therapy for three months, which really helped my condition - fixed flexion deformity. They answer my question and make sure I understand. I see the same consultant which is great, thank you for all the help and support.*
- *My friend fell off his Segway and broke his arm and had to have surgery - he had to stay in hospital for 48 hours. The staff were alright as they were friendly and gave my friend lots of advice.*

Mixed feedback

- *I broke my hand after falling off my trampoline. Staff here are very friendly. I think the treatment times could be quicker.*
- *I have been regularly coming to hospital for the past 2 years for my gut problems. The staff always attend to my needs and the food was better than expected; it was nice. However, I think the service needs to be quicker. For example, test results should come faster.*
- *When I went to the hospital and saw the doctor straight away and they tested my urine for cancer. The doctor was okay but I felt very awkward when he said "that's an impressive amount". I think the doctors shouldn't say awkward things.*

Negative feedback

- *She had asthma that day in the evening and she called the hospital and they told them to come ASAP. When they arrived, poor help was provided, and it actually took 40 minutes for them to finally see them and whilst the nurse was helping she kept getting side tracked and conversing with colleagues.*
- *The wait was very long. They were not responsive, and it seemed like they did not want to look at it. At the hospital the staff need to have a better attitude and be a lot quicker when responding.*
- *My friend has a sudden asthma attack. He used his inhaler, but he then said his chest was hurting. His parents then took him to the hospital but he had*

to wait a very long time to be seen; he was waiting in a lot of pain. The service needs to be quicker.

- *I have had a blood test and urine test and it turns out I have a urine infection. Instead of prescribing me medication, the doctors told me to go to my own GP, to take the urine test again and have my GP prescribe antibiotics instead. I don't understand why the hospital doctors can't just prescribe the antibiotics since they have already diagnosed me.*
- *I went to get a blood test and the waiting time was very long. Even after I got my bloods done, the waiting time for the results were also very long. This resulted in me missing an appointment. I think, the waiting times need to be improve.*
- *They should inform patients of cancelled appointments, it's a waste of our time.*

This detailed feedback has been relayed to our outreach team by a 14 years old girl staying in the paediatric inpatients ward of the Royal London Hospital.

As a whole, my experience has been alright, it's as good as it could be, given the circumstances. The staff are nice as a whole. Sometimes it seems like there is a lack of communication, particularly between staff. For instance, a couple of days ago, I was having a line taken out, and the doctors didn't find out the line had been taken out until 36 hours after it had been done. So that got us thinking that maybe procedures were being delayed because the staff weren't communicating effectively, which is annoying particularly when it's painful stuff.

The day to day care on the ward is very good, but when it comes to longer term planning, that is where sometimes it's not as great. It also seems like things are sometimes pushed to the next shift - that's what happened with the line being taken out, which means everything takes longer. Everything always slows down at weekends. I understand that emergencies happen, but it can be frustrating when you're in here for a long time. Also, they tell you things are going to happen and then they don't. They'll tell us that they're going to finish rounds and that "We'll be back in half an hour to do x y and z" and then it takes a couple of hours. The nurses do always come in and say that they're chasing this or that, so it makes you feel like you can't chase it up, even if it's something painful.

In terms of talking to me as a young person, mostly they're good about speaking to me and not just my mother. The nurses mainly talk to me, the GPs talk to both of us, especially when it comes to important decisions.

Nurses change every few days, which is ok, although I definitely have my favourite. We get a TV and there is a play specialist. I don't really use them - I have my own art stuff, but they're nice and always come in and offer.

Because I've got an infection, tutors can only come to me. In the past I've gone to the school rooms. Now the teacher comes around and this time they left me a laptop. They come a couple of times a day, but since they've left the laptop, we've done other sessions on our own. My teachers talk to my school and get the work that I'm missing.

The patient wifi doesn't work - it never has. The staff logged me into their wifi, but that's the first time this year that has happened and we've had internet. The food is better than it was a few years ago, but it could definitely be a bit better. Also, sometimes they'll mess up my order or it will be late. One night I didn't get any food - it was our first or second day here, and we missed the dinner order, so the staff said they would put it in with the evening staff - that was at five. The staff switch at eight, so it didn't get put in until then, and we had to chase it. In the end I only got a sandwich and a pack of crisps at about 10 pm. That was a one off, but there are quite a lot of delays and experiences of pushing it off to the next shift.

GPs and consultants are alright. They always ask if you've got questions and they're ok if you do have them. But I find that sometimes - actually almost all of them - only look at things from like a medical point of view. Like they don't always stop to consider things from my point of view or think how something will affect me - it's only a medical choice. I've brought it up with the nurses and they're like no - the GPs should consider your point of view. I guess every nurse and doctor has a different bedside manner, but with the doctors I don't think it's just bedside manner, it's getting them to think about stuff from a different perspective. They are really nice doctors, and I get enough time with them, it's just getting them to understand my perspective.