

How young people access health information in Dorset

A report and project co-produced with Healthwatch Dorset youth volunteers

September 2026



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About us

Healthwatch Dorset is your health and social care champion.

We listen to your experiences of using local health and care services and hear about the issues that really matter to you. We are independent and impartial, and your feedback is confidential. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice to help you to get the care and support you need.

As an independent statutory body, we have with the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care. This report is an example of how your views are shared.

Healthwatch Dorset is part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch across the country. We cover the geographical area of Dorset, which includes the unitary authority areas of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) and Dorset.



Background

We read the Healthwatch England blog and report: [AI and algorithms in healthcare – what are the risks and opportunities for the NHS?](#)

The report found that while most men turn to the NHS most often for information on staying healthy, one in five are now using platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube and almost one in 10 are using artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots. They found that younger men and men from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to seek information on staying healthy from sources outside the NHS.

We wanted to find out more about where young people in Dorset get their health information, so we contacted the researcher of the project to inform our focus and develop our project questions.



In addition, our local board decided that in 2025/26, Healthwatch Dorset would focus on the digital divide and how the NHS communicated with users. This work formed part of that overall project into the increased use of digital devices for NHS communication.

Our aim

This project aimed to identify where young people get their health information from, including knowledge of different services, access to reliable information and managing long-term conditions. To achieve this, we conducted a survey that targeted these key themes and generated in depth insights from those aged 16–30 across Dorset. The youth volunteers working on this project helped to push engagement with the survey among their peer groups.

What we did

Healthwatch Dorset visited two local colleges of further education in Dorset and Bournemouth University to recruit young volunteers who were interested to work with their peers on this project.

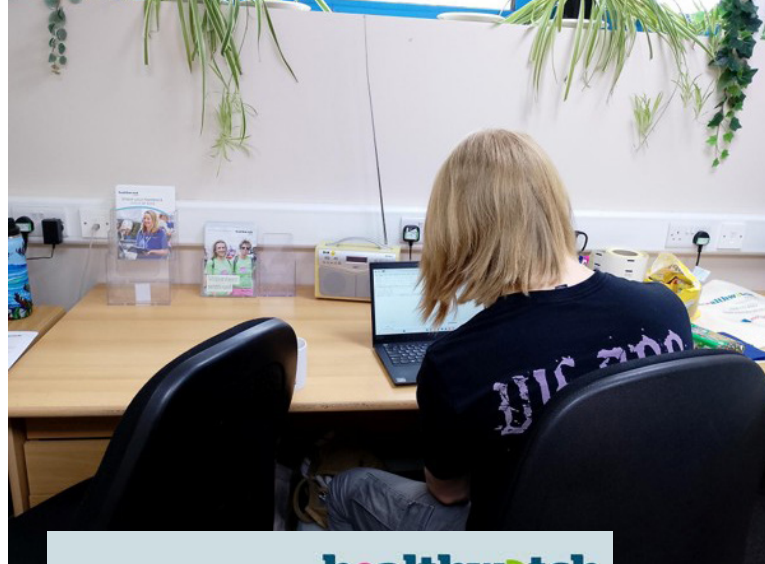
Initially, the volunteers looked into where the NHS is spending its advertising budget and what the general engagement is with NHS advertising.

They studied the NHS SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) and trialled test searches for different conditions. They also looked at NHS adverts and general health information across different platforms.

It was decided to use the survey methodology. The youth volunteers also helped to co-produce the project, firstly by developing and trialling the survey questions.

We made a poster containing a QR code linked to the survey, which we shared with local secondary schools. Our young volunteers also helped to promote the survey amongst their peers and we also shared it on our social media. After the survey closed, we provided training in data analysis skills, identified the key themes and recommendations, and used these insights to develop this report.

This report was drafted by our youth volunteers and edited and produced by Healthwatch Dorset.



Key findings

- 73% of young people surveyed said they sourced their health and wellbeing information online.
- The most common media used to find health information was TikTok (51%) and AI (33%). These were trusted predominantly through checking against multiple sources or verified accounts.
- Most young people said that they felt confident in sourcing health information across different NHS services though instances of extreme lack of confidence were apparent throughout.
- Only 24% of young people ensured that health information which they read online was from a trusted source (for example, NHS or BBC), or they cross reference using different sources.



Normally [by] how many followers it has and comments.



- 82% of people reported knowing to use the NHS 111 number despite the majority having no experience using it.
- Outreach of NHS advertising was reportedly mixed; it had been most commonly seen on TV (36%).
- A more person-centred care approach was preferred, with 31% wanting emergency medical staff to have access to their medical history and some (16%) extended this to personal information. With more shared notes so young people don't have to keep re-explaining their background.



Explain what exactly is happening to me- explain point blank.



- Young people are not relying on the NHS for help with their health conditions. Among those with long-term medical conditions there were differing experiences on how it was managed by the NHS.

What people told us

Sources of health information

Young people appear to be digitally orientated when sourcing their health and wellbeing information, with 73% of young people accessing it online. This is disproportionate to those using non digital services to access health information, for example, from doctors, parents or school/college (22%).

The most common media used to find health information was TikTok (51%) and AI (33%). This use of short form content suggests that young people prioritise efficiency and ease of access when searching for medical support. This is of concern as information outside of official NHS channels may not be verified. Although, 38% of young people reported verifying health information against multiple credible sources and 24% reported examining if it is endorsed by NHS or BBC.



Only trust credible sources and show skepticism towards any statements not backed up with, facts, statistics, or research.



I rarely trust it and never take it as gospel - always look into it further.



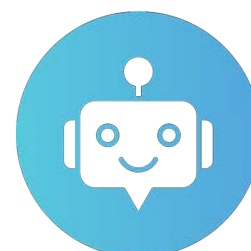
However, 62% don't verify sources of health information.



Normally how many followers it has and comments.



I would have to see multiple posts about it to trust it.



Confidence

When it came to getting NHS health information directly, young people said that they felt most confident accessing it via their GP (33%) or Accident and Emergency Departments (31%). They were less likely to use other NHS services such as pharmacies, Minor Injury Units and Urgent Treatment Centres. This may be explained by the 43% of respondents who said they did not know when to use a Minor Injury Unit or Urgent Treatment Centre.



Therefore, there is still a clear need for improvement in feeling confident in how to use an NHS service to get health information. Furthermore, 11% of young people told us that they felt very unsure about how to get health information from any NHS service. This further demonstrates a necessity for education in where to access credible information.

NHS 111

In contrast, 82% of young people surveyed reported that they knew what NHS 111 was used for. Although 49%, said that they still wouldn't feel confident to use it. Of those who had used it, a common experience was that it was informative and useful.

I would use it again I had a good experience was very useful.

NHS support advertising

Regarding reach of NHS advertisements there were mixed responses. Most people said that they had never or rarely seen an NHS advert. While 29% said that when they had seen NHS adverts it was on TV, which we found surprising considering previous large number of responses on the use of social media to source health information. This indicates that NHS advertisements do not reach young people equally, potentially because of different media consumption.

Not often - sometimes on the screens at bus stops.

Rarely see information.

Education

When asked to make recommendations on improving the reach of health information, many young people recommended inclusion in school curriculums.

Put things into the national curriculum and make it more accessible and prevalent.

An NHS advertisement for HPV vaccination in Dorset. It features a young man with curly hair and headphones around his neck. The background is blue and purple. Text includes 'Vaccinating Dorset', 'Click here if you missed your free HPV vaccination.', 'Not sure? Contact your GP surgery.', 'AGAINST HPV', and the URL 'staywelldorset.nhs.uk/vaccinations'. There is also a graphic of a hand holding a syringe.

Other recurring suggestions were social media campaigns, exposure to medical systems and practice drills, for example, phoning 111. Key areas to consider included how to 'recognise' medical issues and 'awareness' of different services.

Mental health

As part of this survey, we were interested in how the NHS could improve its approach to mental health support among young people. There were common suggestions of rearranging the systems such as eConsult or CAMHS to make it easier to access support.

Other recurring responses included advocating for the needs of young people and providing safe inclusive spaces for support either in person or online.

There were different barriers to receiving mental health support reported by the young people in the survey. This included confidence, access, stigma, being taken seriously and parents.

It was also identified that a more personal approach of care was preferred by young people. When asked if there was an emergency what information they would like to be shared, 39% answered: 'medical history including any medications or mental health issues'. Alongside this, 20% said they would like personal information including their lifestyle/preferences to be shared.

Knowing the process, making the first step or knowing how to make the first step, thinking that they may not be 'unwell enough' or taken seriously. More advocacy and maybe champions who talk about their experience?

I have heard many bad things about CAMHS in Dorset as people feel they don't take you seriously... I think there's less of a stigma about getting help nowadays but I think the greatest barrier is convincing people they are worth helping or that they will be taken seriously?.

I feel unable to speak about it to a doctor, as it's a mental health struggle, which feels less important in comparison to normal health, so difficult to see a doctor.

Fear of stigma and being judged.

We could listen to young people who are struggling and offer individual support based on the individuals needs rather than just basic mental health support.

Young people were asked about any long-term conditions they had, including mental health, and how well they felt it was managed by the NHS. Of those who did have a long-term health condition, 44% of them reported that they felt that it was not well managed.

Several young people reported having engaged in self-monitoring or relying on support systems outside of the NHS.

Lack of access to resources, not being listened to or taken seriously to by doctors.

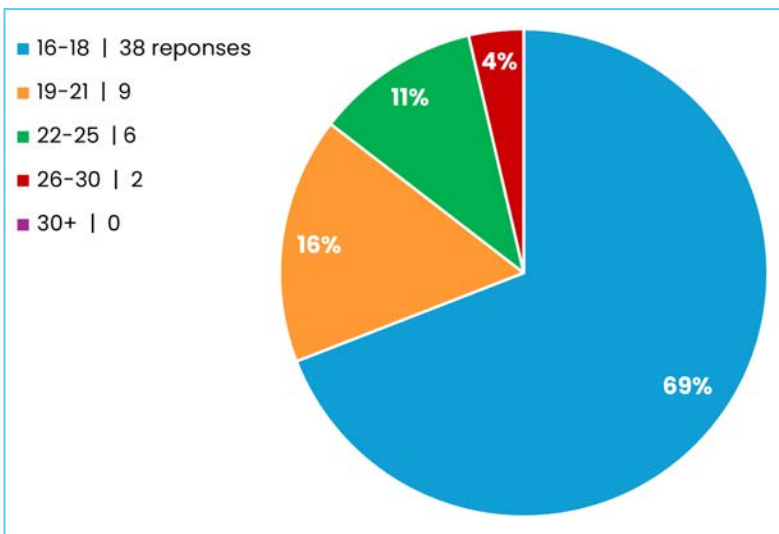
EConsult is rubbish; bring back in person appointments.



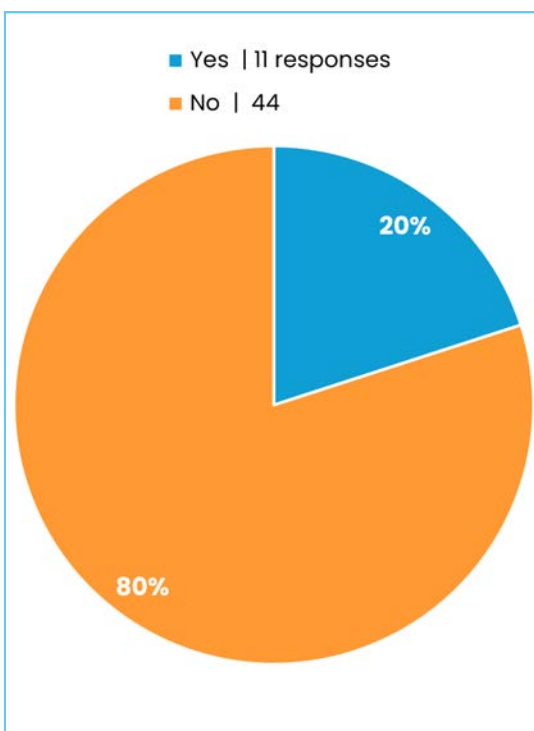
Demographic information

There were 55 respondents to the survey of which the following data gives full details of their demographic information.

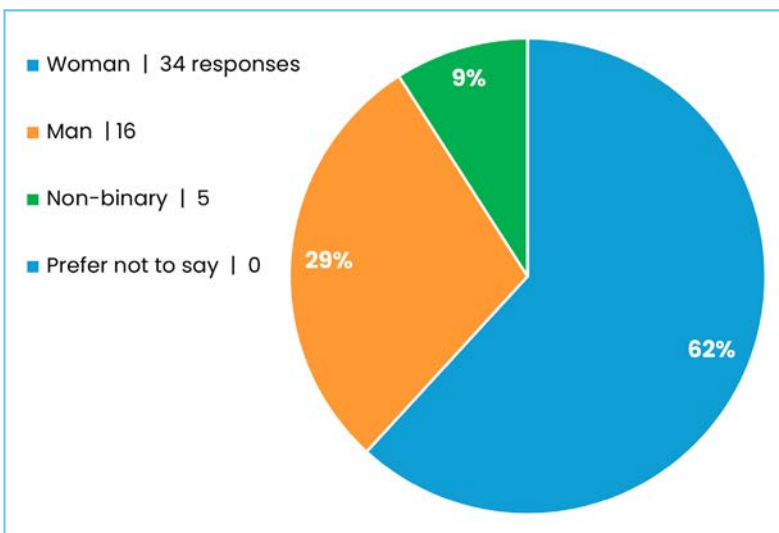
Please tell us your age



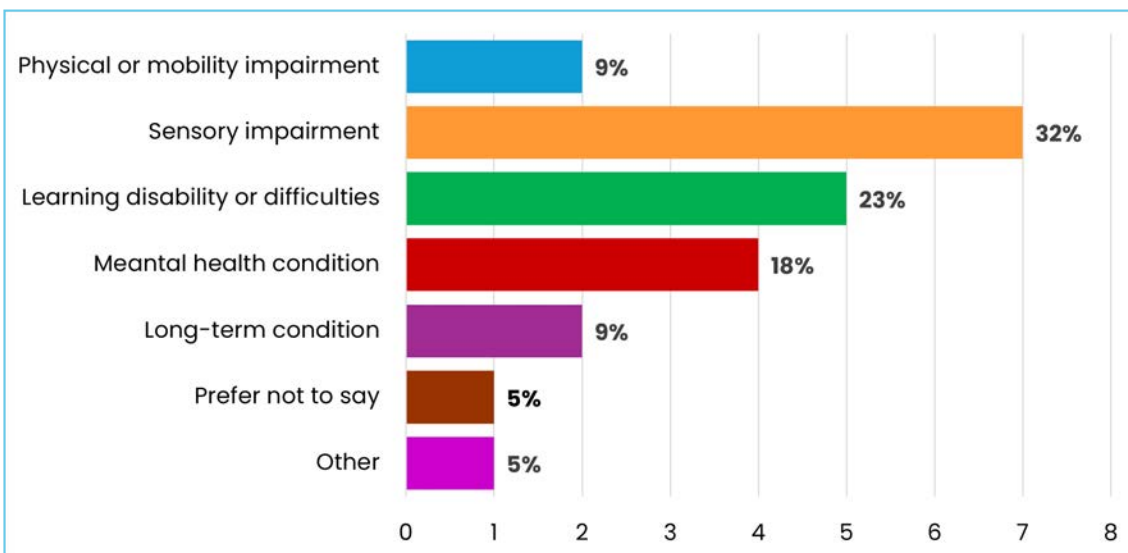
Do you consider yourself to have an impairment?



What is your gender



Please state the type of impairment that applies to you. This can be more than one.



Recommendations

Based on the results from this survey we suggest the following positive recommendations:

1. Increase the availability of NHS-verified information on short-form platforms such as TikTok and AI-powered media.
2. Collaborate with schools to help young people recognise when they may need medical advice and understand how to access the most appropriate service.
3. Work with schools to strengthen young people's ability to identify and verify reliable health information.
4. Improve access to services that reflect young people's preferences and address the barriers they face.
5. Develop and implement care plans for people with long-term health conditions, prioritising those who feel their needs have been overlooked by the healthcare system.



Next steps

These findings will be shared amongst NHS Dorset and Dorset Healthcare to help improve young people's access to verified health information and their experiences within the NHS.

Stakeholder comment

Dr Dean Spencer, PLACE Director – Dorset

“NHS Dorset welcomes this report and would like to thank Healthwatch Dorset and the young volunteers who co-produced this important piece of work. The findings provide valuable insight into how young people are accessing health information and services and highlight both the opportunities and challenges presented by the increasing use of digital and social media platforms.

“It is clear that many young people are using social media and emerging technologies to support their health decisions, and we must ensure that trusted NHS information is easy to find through the channels they use every day.

“We are grateful to Healthwatch Dorset and the young volunteers who have shared their experiences and ideas, and we will use these findings to help improve communication, health literacy and access to services for young people across Dorset.

“NHS Dorset looks forward to working with Healthwatch Dorset and wider partners to consider the report's recommendations and identify opportunities to strengthen the provision of trusted health information and improve young people's experience of accessing care across Dorset.”

Acknowledgements

We are hugely grateful to our volunteers, Korbyn, Raymond and Georgia who have co-produced the project and for Georgia for writing this report.



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