

## **ST ALBANS YOUTH COUNCIL, SUPPORTED BY YOUTH CONNEXIONS**

The St Albans Youth Council (SAYC) is a group of young people aged between 11-19 years of age from across the district of St Albans, in Hertfordshire. The SAYC meet at the Civic Centre in St Albans, and these youth councillors work alongside and present their concerns to the District Council.

Young people have a very positive experience of being involved in the youth council, and can find it very therapeutic. Volunteering in this way can be very beneficial for young people and for their peers, but in order to encourage them to get involved, it is very important to consider how volunteering is presented to them.

### **Identifying Young People's Concerns**

Following a number of suicides in the areas, the SAYC, supported by Youth Connexions surveyed 1,800 pupils in and around the St Albans District and aimed to identify the issues faced by pupils; and what prevents or deters them from seeking counselling. They found that:

- High numbers of young people suffer routinely from stress associated with school life (bullying and exam pressure)
- A smaller but significant number of young people within the District may be in need of support for more serious issues such as self-harm and eating disorders
- Based on our sample, over half of all secondary students are unaware of any provision in their school for counselling
- Poor signposting and long waiting lists will prevent many young people from getting the support they need.
- A significantly high proportion of school pupils would consider their teachers a first option when asking for advice should they require support with a personal issue.

The SAYC conducted a follow-up survey in 2013, which was completed by a further 977 people. It built on the previous survey and was also sent out to teachers. They found that:

- 2 students in every class are effected by self-harm
- Over half of teachers noticed an increase in students seeking help
- 99% of students would approach their teacher if they were troubled, rather than a member of the school's pastoral care team
- 59% of teachers have no training in how to deal with a student's mental health
- 79% of teachers without training wanted it
- 60% of teachers with training, wanted more

Schools across the County are now getting involved with this research and are repeating this survey in their areas. SAYC look forward to producing a new report that includes data from staff and students across schools in Herts later this year.

### **Influencing the District Council**

The young people from the SAYC were so concerned about the funding difficulties of a local youth counselling service that they presented a letter to the District Council stating their concerns; and asked the Council what they were going to do to prevent suicides in local young people.

As a result of this, the District Council has set aside £15,000 of ring-fenced money to promote mental health and wellbeing. This ring-fenced money will be used to deliver stress reducing and goal setting workshops that demonstrate why the 5 ways to wellbeing are so important.

### **Stress Reducing and Goal Setting Workshops**

Youth Connexions are leading on this work, and they found that young people were learning about the 5 ways to wellbeing, but did not fully understand why they are so important. It was difficult to run sessions on promoting wellbeing using this approach if young people didn't fully understand it. So, Youth Connexions and the SAYC have developed a workshop, which can be delivered at a time convenient to the school, to demonstrate why the 5 ways to wellbeing are so important. This workshop explains what stress is and what happens throughout the body when stress is experienced; helps students understand how having enough sleep, healthy eating and so on improves wellbeing; and how wellbeing pathways work and can break the cycle of stress. These wellbeing workshops also help to identify what the young people are currently finding stressful. Youth Connexions have piloted these workshops in a few schools in Hertfordshire and they have been well received, by both students and teachers.

They have also developed a method, using Theory of Constraint tools, which enables young people to set their own goals and break down what might be seen as a large task into manageable chunks. The young people in the pilot project were year 13 students and they unanimously said that UCAS applications, getting grades for University, and finishing work were stressors for them at that time. The Theory of Constraint tool, the Ambitious Target, helped each young person to establish their goals and develop a bespoke plan, which identified any obstacles and detailed how they would work towards achieving them.

The length of these workshops vary depending on the age of the students, the issues they want to discuss, and the size of the group, but they are usually about 75 minutes, and will be delivered by Youth Connexions staff. The aim is to deliver them to all secondary schools in St Albans and Harpenden, and to faith and community groups. If successful the aim is to roll it out across Hertfordshire

For more information contact [debi.roberts@hertfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:debi.roberts@hertfordshire.gov.uk)

<https://stalbansyouthcouncil.wordpress.com/mental-health-report/>

More information about 5 Ways to Wellbeing –

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/improve-mental-wellbeing.aspx>

<http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/research/well-being/ways-well-being>

For more information about The Theory of Constraints –

<https://improvement.nhs.uk/documents/2175/theory-constraints.pdf>