

# Wavemakers Project

**What young people are telling us about  
health, education and the future**

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# Executive summary

## Healthwatch Wiltshire – Wavemakers Project

As part of the Wavemakers project, Healthwatch Wiltshire engaged with over 800 young people across secondary school and further education settings to understand what matters most to them in relation to their health, wellbeing, education and future. What young people shared was not a list of isolated concerns, but a clear picture of pressure building over time – from worries about fitting in, to anxiety about exams, illness, safety and adult life.

## What young people told us

Belonging and rejection, mental health pressures, exam stress, family illness, safety and uncertainty about the future all featured consistently across conversations. Young people described carrying adult-level responsibilities at increasingly younger ages, often without feeling confident that support systems would respond early or effectively.

- “Always been scared of not fitting in and getting bullied”
- “I am just scared.”
- “What am I doing with my life?”

## Next steps: the Wavemakers approach

In response, Healthwatch Wiltshire will continue the Wavemakers project as a peer-led approach, supported by training, ongoing support and block work-experience packages hosted on school and college sites. This enables young people to shape conversations with their peers, build confidence and skills, and ensure lived experience feeds directly into local decision-making.

# Introduction

Wavemakers is a developing youth-led project from Healthwatch Wiltshire, designed to put young people's voices at the heart of shaping local services. It aims to create opportunities for young people across Wiltshire to share what matters most to them about their health, wellbeing, and wider lives. Through future workshops and conversations, Wavemakers will amplify these voices while also encouraging young people to get involved in volunteering—building confidence, gaining life skills, and boosting their CVs and UCAS applications. Insights will be shared in creative, accessible ways such as soundbites, podcasts, and social media, helping ensure young people are heard by decision-makers and the wider community.

This report brings together insight from engagement with over 800 young people across secondary school and further education settings. It focuses on detailed qualitative feedback gathered during freshers sessions held in September 2025 at Salisbury College and Trowbridge College and then at a carers fair in February 2026 at Abbeyfield School, Chippenham.

What emerges is not a series of isolated concerns, but a picture of pressure building over time – from early worries about fitting in, to deeper questions about identity, safety and the future.

## The Wavemakers model

Wavemakers are young people aged 16–25 who are supported by Healthwatch Wiltshire to engage their peers in conversations about mental health, wellbeing and access to support. This includes:

- Training workshops to build confidence, communication skills and understanding of health and care systems
- Tools and support to enable safe, meaningful peer-led conversations
- Flexible ways of sharing insight, including blogs, vlogs, soundbites or social content
- Experience that adds value to CVs and supports employability
- Opportunities to influence change in local health and wellbeing services

## Block work–experience opportunities

Alongside peer-led engagement, Healthwatch Wiltshire will offer block work–experience packages, designed to be hosted directly on school or college sites where possible.

These placements will:

- Provide structured, meaningful work experience delivered in blocks
- Reduce barriers such as travel, confidence and competing responsibilities
- Support skills development in listening, engagement, analysis and communication
- Create clear pathways into Wavemakers participation
- Support schools to meet wellbeing, citizenship and employability aims

This directly responds to young people’s anxiety about the future and feeling unprepared for adult life.

# Who we spoke to

The insight within this report is based on engagement with over 800 young people as part of the Wavemakers project. Our main engagements were in Freshers’ Fairs at Wiltshire College (Trowbridge and Salisbury) and a careers fair at Abbeyfield School in Chippenham. Together, this has captured a broad and diverse range of voices from young people aged 11–19, reflecting different education settings, backgrounds, and lived experiences across Wiltshire.

## Salisbury College

Engagement with 16–19 year-old college students on 8 September 2025, focusing on mental and physical health, family relationships, education, future plans and wider system-level issues.

## Trowbridge College

Engagement with 16–19 year-old college students on 11 September 2025, exploring personal health and wellbeing, exams and coursework, family relationships, safety, finances and concerns about adult life.

## Abbeyfield School

Engagement at a careers fair on 11 February 2026 with pupils aged 11–16 (Years 7–11), exploring worries, fears, and what matters most at different stages of secondary education. Responses were analysed by year group to understand how concerns change as pupils move through school.

# What young people told us

## Belonging, relationships and feeling accepted

Across all age groups, concerns about belonging were central. Younger pupils (11–14 year-olds) spoke about friendships, bullying and fear of being judged. Older students (14–16 year-olds) described deeper worries about identity, relationships and whether they are worthy of care and connection.

- “Always been scared of not fitting in and getting bullied”
- “That no-one will like me”
- “Not being loveable”

For many young people, the fear of not fitting in does not remain social – it becomes internalised and shapes confidence, participation and willingness to ask for help.

## Mental health as a constant thread

Mental health was raised consistently across all settings. Younger pupils often described fear or anxiety without having the language to explain it, while students from year 10 and into colleges explicitly named anxiety, panic, self-harm, eating issues and sleep problems.

- “I wish I understood panicking”
- “I am just scared.”

As young people get older, anxiety does not replace educational pressure – it runs alongside it. For many, worries about mental health are inseparable from worries about exams, performance and not letting others down.

Young people also described feeling that mental health is not always checked or followed up, particularly for those who are neurodivergent.

## Education, exams and fear of failure

Academic pressure increases significantly from ages 12–13 onwards (Year 8). By GCSEs (ages 15–16) and post-16 education, exams are experienced not just as assessments of learning, but as judgments about future success, self-worth and identity.

- “Not passing Maths and having to resit”
- “Worried about not being enough”
- “What am I doing with my life?”

College students spoke about balancing coursework, exams, jobs and future decisions, often while managing mental health challenges and responsibilities outside education.

## Family health, illness and adult-level responsibility

Alongside educational pressure, many young people are carrying responsibilities traditionally associated with adulthood. This includes worrying about family illness, employment and emotional wellbeing.

- “I feel worried for my grandad (he has cancer)”
- “I’m scared my dad will die”
- “I am worried about my mum and her health”

Some young people also described managing their own long-term health conditions alongside education, often feeling unsupported once treatment or initial interventions end.

- “My disability not going away”
- “Why does my body hurt all the time?”

## Understanding health and navigating support

Young people repeatedly highlighted gaps in health knowledge and access to early support, asking basic but important questions about their bodies and wellbeing.

- “I wish I understood panicking”
- “Period pain... endometriosis... the change”

Uncertainty about their own health often sits alongside anxiety about whether systems are set up to respond when something feels wrong.

## Safety and the wider world

As young people get older, personal worries increasingly overlap with fear about the wider world. Many spoke about violence, safety and global events shaping how secure they feel in everyday life and as they move into adulthood.

- “Being raped”
- “I’m worried about everyone’s safety as there is so much bad happening in the world”

These worries affect how safe young people feel moving through public spaces and planning for their futures.

# Next steps

## Continue developing the Wavemakers approach

Throughout this engagement, young people did not only tell us what was wrong. They told us they want to be listened to, to understand what is happening to their bodies and minds, and to be trusted to shape conversations with their peers. Many also spoke about wanting confidence, experience and support to navigate adulthood – not just advice from afar.

Building on this, Healthwatch Wiltshire will continue to develop the Wavemakers project as a peer-led approach to engagement, alongside practical opportunities that build confidence, skills and experience.

# What will happen next

## Strengthening access to young people

While engagement has been strong, Healthwatch Wiltshire has experienced ongoing challenges in accessing young people consistently across education settings.

In further education, high staff turnover can disrupt established relationships, meaning links into colleges can change or disappear quickly. In schools, more structured timetables and curriculum pressures can make it difficult to create space for external engagement, particularly for exploratory or discussion-based work.

In response to this, Healthwatch Wiltshire is adapting its approach to ensure engagement remains sustainable, flexible and respectful of existing pressures on education settings.

A key development has been increased collaboration with partner organisations already working in schools and colleges. By joining existing sessions and activity – and contributing where appropriate – Healthwatch Wiltshire can:

- Reduce duplication of engagement activity
- Minimise disruption to schools and students
- Reach young people in environments where they are already comfortable and engaged
- Add value to existing provision rather than creating additional demand

This more joined-up approach ensures that one visit can deliver multiple benefits, with more young people able to share their experiences while also accessing support, information or activities already in place.

This collaborative model will continue to underpin the next phase of the Wavemakers project, alongside the development of peer-led engagement and on-site work experience opportunities.

## Healthwatch Wiltshire will:

- Deliver block work-experience packages across BSW, strengthening relationships with education settings
- Speak to local organisations to learn where Healthwatch can help strengthen outreach and engagement
- Recruit and support Wavemakers across Wiltshire
- Share insight with commissioners, providers and decision-makers
- Use learning to shape future Healthwatch Wiltshire priorities and reporting



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