# IN OUR OWN WORDS

# Surrey Young People's Peer-Led Research Programme

Doing Research *with* Young People Instead of About Them

Surrey Youth VO!CE

NIHR | Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey and Sussex

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL

# Welcome to the In Our Own Words Comic Book

Greetings from us!

We are excited to present this comic book, a collection of stories by our youth researchers. This series is part of the In Our Own Words programme by Surrey County Council, aimed at amplifying young voices and involving them in research. This year, neurodivergent young researchers explored mental health and support services in Surrey. Learn more about the programme here: In Our Own Words - Youth Researchers - Surrey County Council.

## Our Comic Book Journey

Our young researchers wrote their own comic stories and collaborated with a professional illustrator. Each six-panel comic strip reflects their creativity, hard work, and the impact of the In Our Own Words programme. These comics present their research findings and personal journeys, highlighting the importance of lived experience in research.

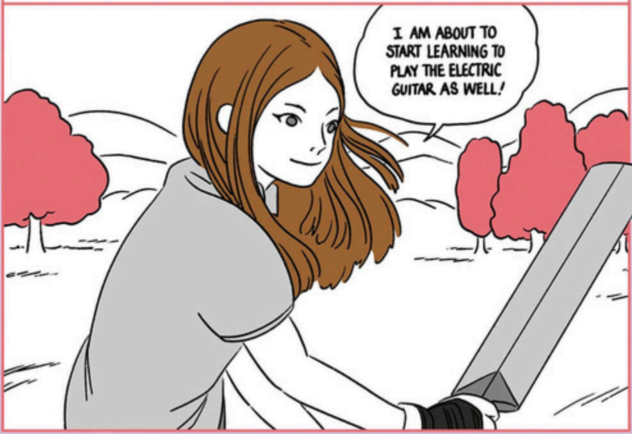
## Call to Action

We invite you to explore the world of our youth researchers and discover the power of youth voice. As you read these stories, we hope you feel inspired to share your own experiences and join the conversation. Celebrate the voices of young people and their impact on our understanding of the world! We'd love to hear your thoughts on these stories. To give feedback or get more information, email us at user.voice@surreycc.gov.uk.

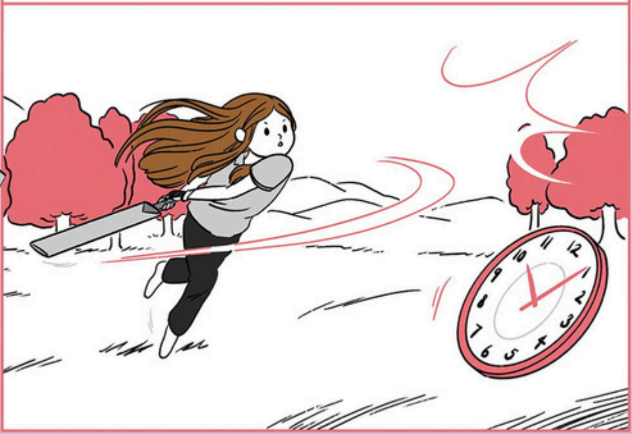
**Amber**
She / Her
(14)

# Impact of Diagnosis Waiting Times within Schools

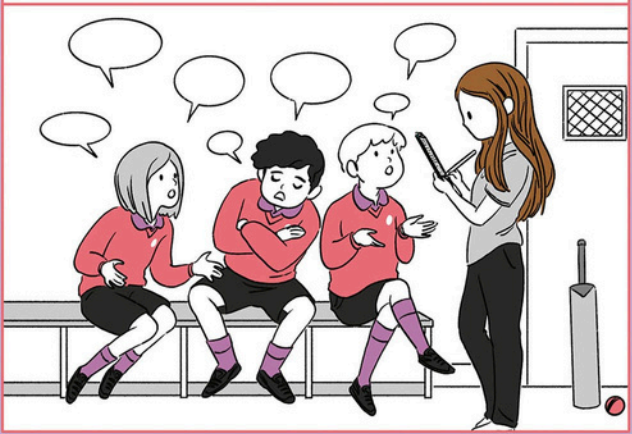
Hi! My name is Amber. I am currently going through an autism diagnosis. I love playing cricket and tennis. I enjoy listening to music and sometimes drawing. I watch anime sometimes and read manga on occasion.



A personal challenge is the long waiting times, and I have been waiting over a year for a diagnosis so far. It's been tricky without the right support, and diagnosis for something specific is expensive and stressful.

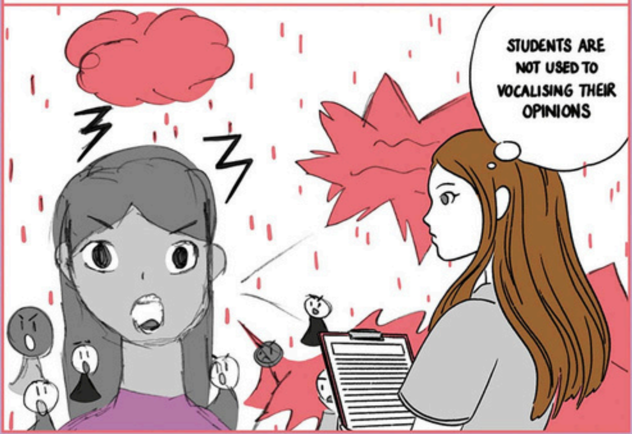


I'm researching the impact of waiting times for diagnosis within schools. I did this by designing two surveys: a survey for teachers, and a survey for students containing both open and closed questions.

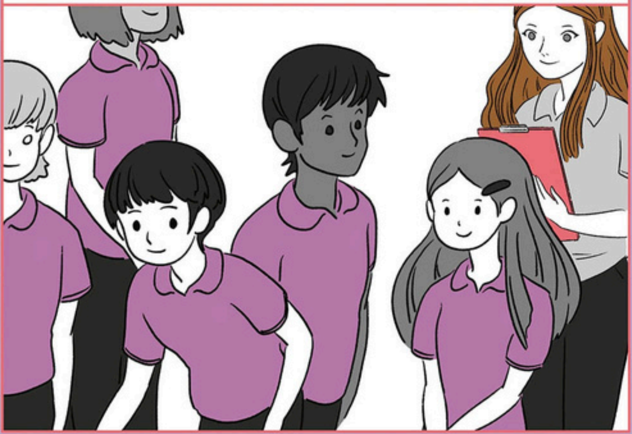


In the survey, I found that teachers had strong opinions and they feel there should be more support in place for students waiting for a diagnosis.

I didn't receive as many responses from students as I would have liked but enjoyed hearing from others with a similar experience to me. Students who gave feedback feel there's a lack of support for those without diagnosis.



From my findings I think there should be a service to support those waiting for a diagnosis. The topic deserves more awareness, and I believe it should be acted upon.



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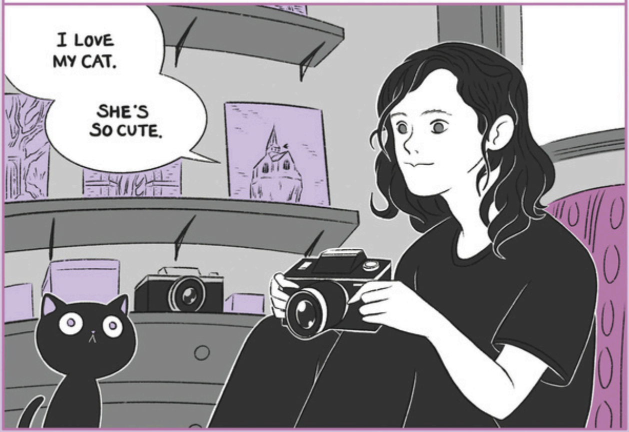
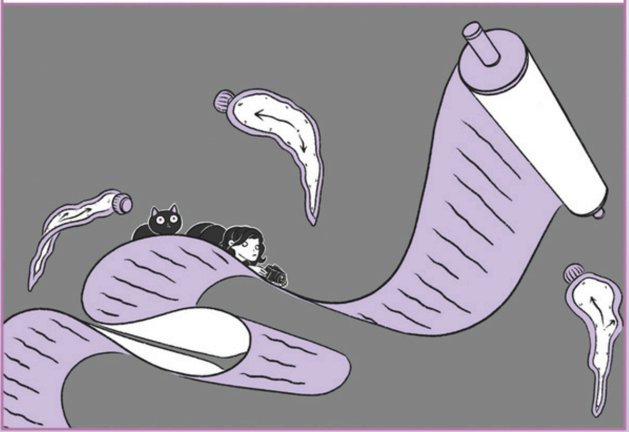
**Ash**
He/ Him
(15)

# Waiting Times for Young LGBTQ+ People

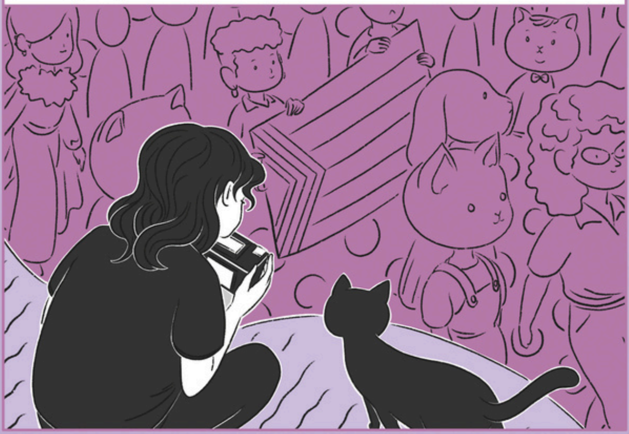
Hi! My name is Ash. I got diagnosed with autism and ADHD when I was twelve. I enjoy listening to music, and I'm also really into creating photography and art, and I really just love doing anything creative in general.



I have met a lot of other people like me once I finally understood my autism, and I've made great friends who understand me as who I am. But being on long wait lists for different services made me feel overwhelmed and more stressed about getting the help that I needed.

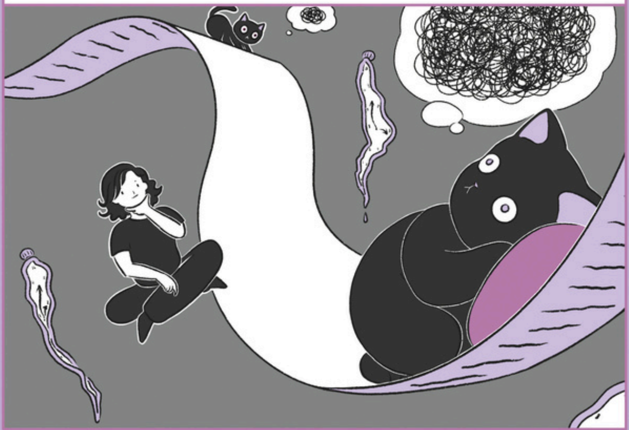


I am researching the effect that long wait times have on LGBTQ+ young people. I wanted to investigate how other people like me are also impacted by this. I want to see if there is possibly a way to make waiting times less stressful for the young people on them.



I designed an online survey where I asked questions that I would have wanted to be asked about being on waiting lists. Initially, I had too many questions so I narrowed these down. I'm happy with the responses I received which were very detailed and of good quality.

Results showed that the longer the waiting time, the more negative the experience, and that people developed more ideas for improving their experience the longer they waited. I found this interesting.



I think there should be text updates to show where people are on the waiting list. There should also be co-creation brainstorming groups so young people's ideas can be shared with decision-makers.

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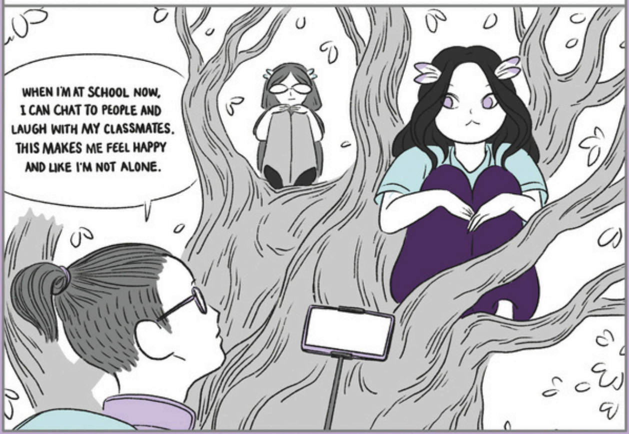
**Ems**
She / Her
(15)

# EBSNA’s Impact on Relationships

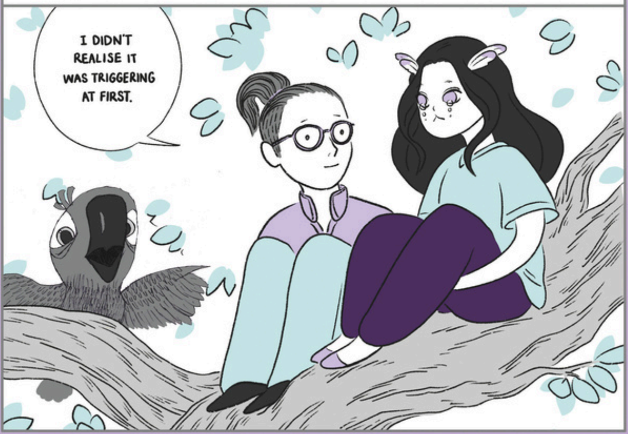
Hi, my name is Ems. I am autistic and I was diagnosed when I was twelve. I make vlogs documenting my life and love going to the cinema with my sisters.

When I was off school because I was struggling with my mental health, I lost all of my friends, including my closest friend. It’s so hard to maintain friendships when you never see anyone. I felt painfully lonely and disconnected from my peers.

I investigated if there are ways to support young people in their relationships while they are having time off school, and how secondary schools can help students experiencing Emotionally Based School Non Attendance not to feel alone and disconnected.



Initially, I planned on speaking with a focus group but had trouble finding participants. So I conducted a survey which received good responses. I was upset at the responses at first because I was reading experiences similar to what I went through.



The results didn’t surprise me. I found that people struggled to maintain friendships, and some lost friends. People were worried what their peers would say while they were away and if their friends would make new friends during their absence.

I don’t know what form it could take yet, but there should be a tool to help peers return to school; Education and awareness to improve reintegration. Perhaps there should be a social script to help people returning to school.

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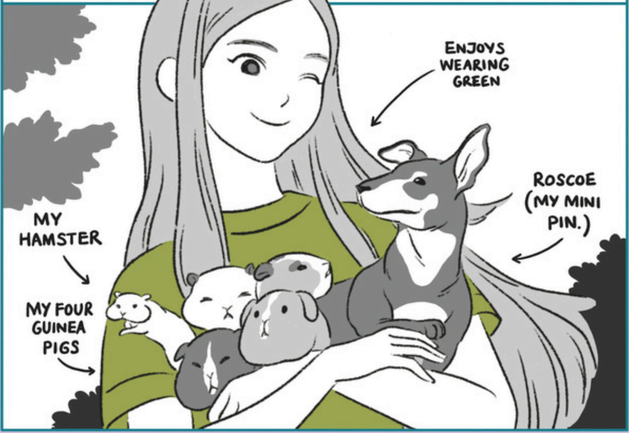
**Evie**
She / Her
(15)

# Impact of Diagnosis for Students

My name is Evie. I am autistic and was diagnosed at thirteen. I'm really interested in animals, and enjoy roller skating. My favourite singer is Arianna Grande.



After my autism diagnosis, I found I didn't get much help at school. Teachers didn't understand my diagnosis, so nothing really changed. I want to help everyone get the support they feel that they need so they are happy and understood and can achieve well in school...

...so I have been researching the impact of before-and-after diagnosis support students receive in mainstream schools. My mum supported me in designing an online survey to send out to people. Together, we designed questions based around things which are important to me.

By being a youth researcher, I challenged myself by going to new surroundings and meeting new people and learning things I wouldn't have had the opportunity to learn.

Feedback from students was more negative than I thought it would be. I found most people did not enjoy going to school and felt that teachers tend to assume they know about a neurodivergent student's situation.

Overall, I found that students want to find solutions, but teachers don't understand student's needs. There's a lack of cooperation. Students with similar needs should be put in the same class in order to feel much more supported.

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**Jordan**
They/ Them
(18)

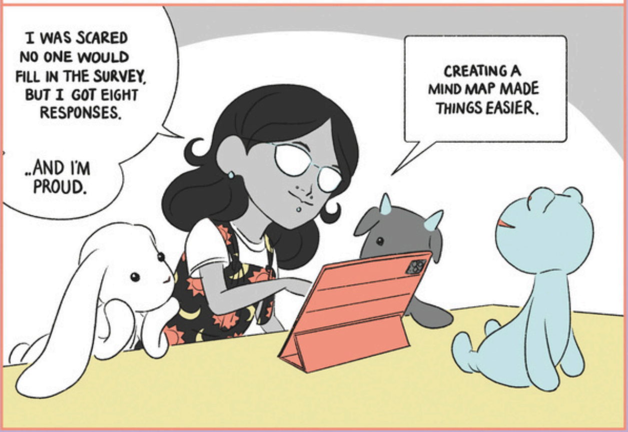
# Teacher Training on Neurodiversity

Hi, I'm Jordan. I am autistic and also have ADHD. I love anything to do with art. I am also a huge fan of Jelly Cats and have so many. Having lots of Jelly Cats makes me feel safe.

Growing up as an undiagnosed autistic really made me feel like an alien. I felt unseen during my time in the education system, pushed to the side and almost like I was left till last. I just want teachers to understand their students.

Regardless of having or not having an Education Health and Care Plan, students should still feel supported and listened to, so I've been researching if teacher trainings are covering topics like neurodiversity. It's important teachers are trained to best help support a student.

Designing an online survey was difficult because the target audience included teachers from both primary and secondary school. I started by brainstorming with another youth researcher then worked more independently to create the final survey.



I found that most teacher training in neurodiversity is mandatory. Three people had optional training, but most of the teachers had strong knowledge of autism.

Next time, I'd like to expand my research to college staff. A recommendation for improvement would be to train staff regularly, every September and to update the training as it can become outdated.

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**Marianne**
she/her
(15)

# Autistic Girls' Experiences of School

Hi! Marianne. I am autistic. I was diagnosed when I was seven years old, I love creating art, listening to music, and playing video games. I also love creating and writing stories. My favourite animals are cats, moths, jellyfish, and bats.

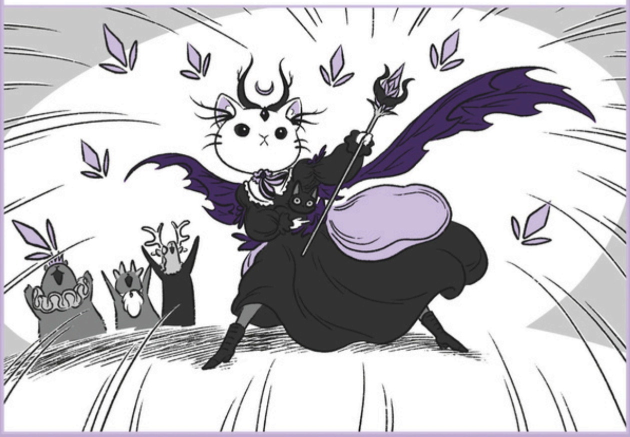
I was bullied a lot in school by other students for my autistic traits and never provided proper support by staff, even though they would give the other autistic students support because they thought I could manage it; because I was higher functioning than them.

I've been researching about Autistic girls' experiences of school in Surrey. With this project, I hope to provide schools with the proper training on how to help support girls with autism, decrease bullying in those with autism, and make sure they have a more positive school experience.

I designed my research survey with open and insightful questions to allow neurodivergent girls to more openly express their stories and ideas. This created a bigger picture of all the similar struggles a lot of girls face.

My research confirmed what I already knew was true. Many neurodivergent girls struggle with similirar problems in schools even to this day with bullying and misunderstanding or even neglectful staff.

You can make a difference to so many lives by listening to us and our stories. A small change and a little improvement truly makes a big impact.



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**Renee**
She / Her
(20)

# Mental Health in Education and Work-Based Avoidance

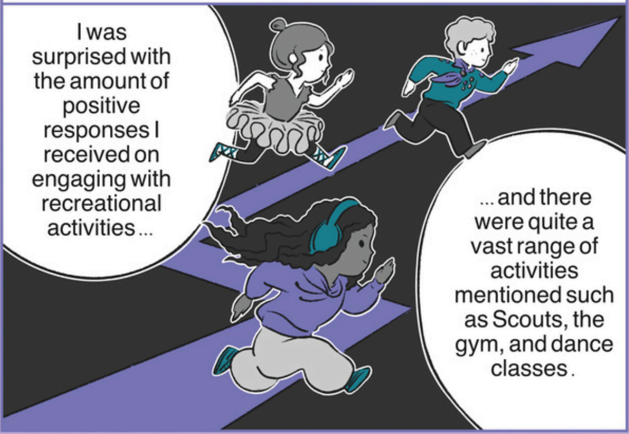
I'm Renee. I'm autistic and I was diagnosed when I was 17 years old. I enjoy playing games on my Nintendo Switch, reading books to relax and listening to music. I'm ambitious and active so you can always find me planning something new to do such as sport or where I should travel next!

I've found it hard to stay in college and school environments, so I always had low attendance. I find long hours of free time at college difficult and overwhelming as I like a semi-structured routine. I wish that I had been able to have a more structured timetable that was built for purpose.

I've been researching the impact of mental health on education and work-based avoidance for young people and how this can affect their attendance. How can schools and workplaces support young people with combating this?

I created two online surveys: one for parents and carers; and one for children and young people. I made sure that my questions were phrased in a respectful manner and gave space for answers. Whilst reading peoples responses, it was comforting to know that I'm not alone and others can relate.

From my results, I was able to learn that recreational activities can have a positive impact on wellbeing, along with the importance of understanding mental health and neurodiversity. Impactful adjustments can be low-cost such as rest breaks and whiteboard handouts for information.



There should be a booklet or information pack clearly outlining what reasonable adjustments can be made within schools and the workplace. This ought to mention recreational activities and self-care. Overall, there should be more awareness of mental health and neurodiversity.

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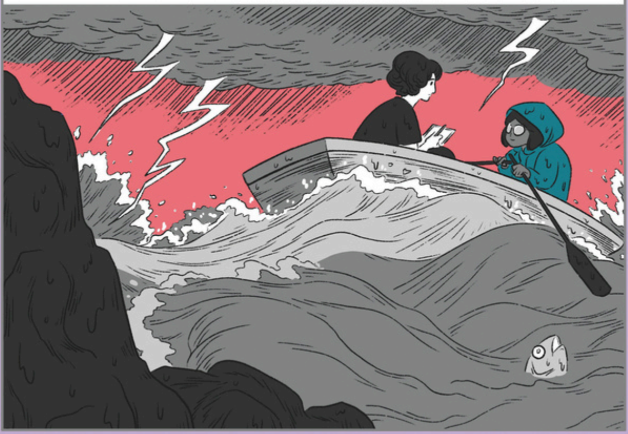
**Seren**
they/them
(12)

# Visiting the Past to Change the Future:
# Neurodiversity in School

My name is Seren. I have autism, which was diagnosed when I was eleven, and undiagnosed ADHD.

I really struggled in primary and secondary school, and I don't want others to go through what I went through.

I'm researching mental health in primary and secondary school-aged children. I've enjoyed getting to learn more about others' experiences. A trouble is that I'm reliving my trauma.



I conducted my research through online surveys, designing them to help people understand the difference between mainstream and specialist education support. I wanted the focus of the research to be conducted around treating people with kindness and respect.

I learned that it is really common for people to go through similar experiences to what I went through; that we all had a bad time. Our causes are different, and we all got to these mental health places through different routes.

Listening to us is important, you can't just say "oh you had a bad experience, it will be different next time...". Neurodiverse young people need to be taken seriously when we do tell people what's going on, otherwise we will turn more inward and lose confidence in the people we think should help us.

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