

# In Our Own Words

## Youth research recommendations

As part of the In Our Own Words programme, a group of neurodivergent youth researchers took part in a yearlong project, designing and leading social research about the topics most important to them. They were trained by professional researchers from the University of Surrey and collected other young people's experiences of mental health, wellbeing, service use and access to support.

These are the recommendations that each of the youth researchers came up with. They are written, as far as possible, in the youth researchers' own words.

### **Evie's recommendations – The Impact of Diagnosis on Support at School**

- Increase teacher awareness and understanding of diverse processing needs to make sure all students receive appropriate support and that teachers understand each neurodivergent young person as an individual.

### **Marianne's Recommendations – Autistic Girls' Experiences of School in Surrey**

- In the In Our Own Words project around "Autistic girl's experiences of school in Surrey", 70% of young people in the survey reported that they mask their autism. Education around masking should be prioritised for teachers but also peers and other students. This is to encourage more open conversations around masking where greater understanding can be created towards the experiences of autistic people, particularly girls, and how to support them.
- Every young person should have access to sensory support items, such as fidgets, in classrooms to help them focus and manage sensory challenges. Despite reports from young people that fidgets have been banned in some schools, these tools should be made available by all teachers, ensuring that the decision to offer them is not left to individual schools.
- Noisy classrooms and behaviour can be disruptive to neurodivergent young people, as well as other students. Classroom environments need to accommodate everyone's learning needs and peers have the responsibility to support appropriate classroom behaviour.

### **Amber's Recommendations – The Impact of Diagnosis Waiting Time, Understanding Student and Teacher Perspectives**

- Schools should be informed when a student is on the waitlist for a clinical or mental health diagnosis. Additionally, teachers and school leadership teams should receive training on "How to Support Students Whilst They Are Waiting" to ensure that sensitive, helpful support, understanding, and empathy are given by school, improving the waiting experience for students within the school environment.
- Reasonable adjustments should be prioritised and available to students waiting, as well as those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), such as learning breaks and time-out cards to provide immediate relief to students so they can cope in schools.
- For students who are waiting, there should be support groups in schools to create a community for sharing experiences, resources and building social connections. These groups can directly feedback to school senior leadership teams or student councils so the voice of neurodiverse students can be represented, and their ideas used to make the school a more neurodivergent friendly environment.
- Systems or ways for providing regular updates on the diagnostic process need to be prioritised to keep families informed and reduce anxiety for young people on the waitlist.

### **Jordan's Recommendations – Teacher Training on Neurodiversity**

- Update teacher training on neurodiversity annually, designed by neurodivergent young people. This ensures that training is relevant and reflects the latest understanding and strategies. To make sure this is helpful for schools and teachers, training should consider the needs and resources of individual schools. For example, training from specialist schools should not be applied to mainstream schools. Instead, best practice techniques and methods should be shared between schools with similar environments.
- Increase teacher awareness and understanding of diverse processing needs, and how profiles may change with co-morbid conditions, to ensure all students receive appropriate support and are seen in an individual and holistic way.

### **Ash's recommendations – Wait times, Neurodivergence and the LGBTQ+ Community**

- There should be more support groups available to people on the waiting list.
- Some sort of co-production / brainstorming group should be made, because we can't fix the problem of the long wait list times, but we can give young people on those waiting lists a space to share their issues and propose their ideas on how their experience could be less stressful. This is especially important for young people from the LGBTQ+ community as they will have their own unique experiences and challenges.
- The NHS or Mindworks should give updates to the lengths of waiting lists by either text or email.

### **Reneé's Recommendations – The Impact of Mental Health on Education and Work-Based Avoidance**

- Non-attendance: Practical actions
  - To increase overall attendance by offering more adaptable scheduling options.
  - Develop and promote flexible timetables to accommodate different students' needs.
- Non-attendance: Psycho-social actions
  - Foster a culture of empathy and psychological safety concerning emotionally based school non-attendance challenges to make sure students feel safe and supported when discussing attendance concerns.
  - Education and training for teachers to reduce the use of scare tactics regarding attendance to create a more supportive and understanding environment for students.
- Reasonable adjustments are non-negotiable and should be actively implemented by all staff within a school. Reasonable adjustments should be applied universally, not just for those with formal diagnoses to promote inclusivity and support for all students.
- Recreational activities both inside and outside of school should be promoted and encouraged more widely to help students to explore different options and engage. Social prescribing support could be brought into schools to help students directly. Ensure recreational activities foster a beginner and neurodivergent friendly environment as disabled and neurodivergent

students are more likely to feel excluded in these spaces despite the positive impact on wellbeing.

- More training and resources are needed to educate teachers, students and families on educational processes such as Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP's) and other relevant procedures. There should be a particular focus on developing targeted information, resources, and training for underrepresented groups or groups that may experience barriers, such as boys and people of colour, working with young people and professionals from these communities. Advocacy campaigns or education towards children and young people, parents, carers and families may be needed to empower them to speak up when resources and information is needed. Research suggested that parents and carers may not feel comfortable or confident to raise their voices as they felt 'overpowered' by teachers. This is to make sure all students, including those from minority groups, receive good support and resources.

### **Ems' Recommendations – Time off School and the Impact on Social Relationships**

- A whole-school approach is needed for awareness and support around Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), including young people and teachers. It is not just the responsibility of the young person who is off school - friends and peers of the young person experiencing EBSNA also need support with understanding what their friend is going through and how to help them.
  - Call to Action: Schools to educate young people on EBSNA and how to support their friends and peers to address the identified misunderstanding and insensitivity towards students going through EBSNA.
- Young people need more personalised support when returning to school. Re-entering school is hard. "Once you stop attending it's 1000x harder to go back because of the anxiety around what people are going to say when they see you again".
  - Call to Action: Schools to support young people experiencing EBSNA with the tools and social script for how to manage conversations/interactions with friends and peers when returning to school. It addresses the identified feelings of anxiety around what to say to friends/peers when returning to school.



## Youth Researcher recommendations – Police Perspectives: Interactions with Neurodiverse Young People

- To improve interactions between Surrey Police and neurodivergent young people, the \*Pegasus Scheme should be more widely promoted and simplified. This scheme, which helps individuals communicate with the police by pre-registering their information, needs better awareness among both police officers and the public. Information about the scheme should be delivered to young people in schools. Simplifying the scheme, such as allowing information to auto-populate by giving a name or number instead of remembering a PIN, can make it more accessible and user-friendly.
- Regular and comprehensive training for police officers on neurodiversity is essential. This training should be delivered or supported by neurodivergent young people to ensure it is relevant and effective. Officers need practical advice on understanding neurodiversity and how best to communicate with neurodivergent individuals. This will help build trust and improve interactions.

\*The [Pegasus Scheme](#) is a service for individuals who may find it difficult to communicate with police or other emergency services. It allows them to pre-register their information, which is then stored securely by the police. This means that in an emergency, they can simply say "Pegasus" and provide their PIN, and the police can quickly access their details. The scheme is open to anyone who has an additional need, disability or health condition that may make communication difficult.