

IN OUR OWN WORDS

surrey young people's peer-led research programme

In Our Own Words endeavours to empower young people to delve into the realm of mental health research. The project equips youth researchers with the tools and support needed to conduct social research on mental health and wellbeing in their local communities.



What's In Our Own Words?

In Our Own Words endeavours to empower young people to delve into the realm of mental health research.

The project recognises the value of neurodivergent young people as **lived experience experts**. The initiative trains and supports young people to become researchers to understand other young people's experiences of mental health and wellbeing as well as mental health services. It's a **peer-led project** where young people are responsible for determining the research directions and priorities.

Taking place from March to October 2024, Youth Researchers are trained by professional researchers from Surrey University's Department of Sociology, learning skills in social research.

Supported by professional researchers and a personal mentor, the Youth Researchers are nurtured to design and lead their very own study on a **mental health or wellbeing topic** that they are passionate about.

The topics are inspired by the Youth Researchers' personal experiences, and often challenges, associated with their neurodivergence and accessing the support or gaining the understanding they need. They are passionate about their research helping **improve services** for their community.

Surrey County Council applied for an ARC KSS funding opportunity, as part of the **Starting Well** theme to develop a programme to support young people to engage with mental health research.

Taking a partnership approach, we connected with a number of Surrey based organisations including service providers **Mindworks** as well as **Surrey University** and user voice organisations **Healthwatch** and **Surrey Youth Focus**.



Lucy Pearson—Programme Manager, User Voice and Participation Team, Surrey County Council

The stars of In Our Own Words

Youth researchers:

11 **neurodivergent young people** applied and were selected as 'youth researchers'. Aged 12 - 18, all youth researchers are **autistic**. For all young people, this was their first experience or contact with research.

Co-production group / peer mentors:

Lived experienced experts, previously engaged with user voice and participation opportunities (aged 19 - 26). Recognising the importance of being peer-led at all levels, we recruited a co-production group to design and develop the programme as well as mentor the youth researchers.

The motivation for impact

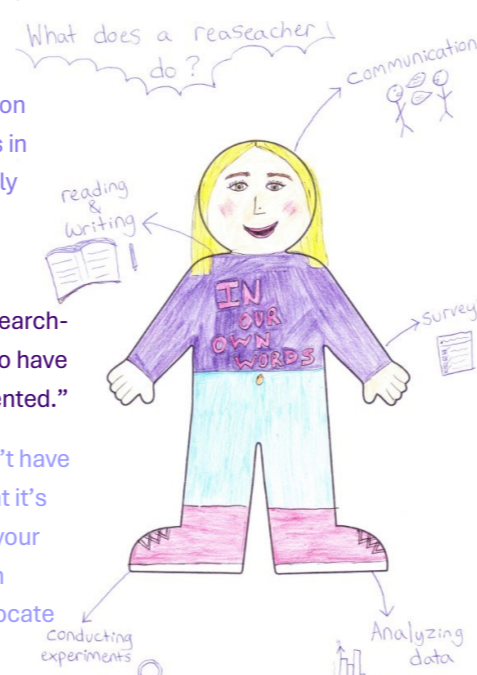
From the very beginning, the youth researchers were motivated by their own experiences to make a real impact and make a positive contribution to the neurodivergent community...

"I have got a natural interest in mental health and wellbeing. I have overcome hurdles in this area myself and would like to use what I have learned to give back to the community."

"As a neurodivergent teenage girl, I've had a lot of negativity in my life, which has made me very resilient and given me the passion to help others. In my early years in education, I was treated severely differently so I am passionate about mental health"

"I want to gain experience in researching and advocating for groups who have less of a voice/are under-represented."

"I am to become that voice I didn't have during my teen years. I know what it's like to be at your lowest point of your life. All I want to do is become an inspiration, a role model, an advocate on mental health."



Research projects

Once their projects are completed in September 2024, youth researchers will present their findings and recommendations to leaders and decision makers in Surrey to influence service development and school-based support for neurodivergent young people. The topics are...

The impacts of mental health on education and work-based avoidance.

What do you think about autism?

The impacts of diagnosis waiting time.

Community safety and interactions between neurodivergent young people and the police.

The impact of diagnosis on support at school

Wait times, neurodivergence and the LGBTQ+ community

Autistic girls' experiences of school in Surrey

Visiting the past to change the future: neurodiversity at school.

Time off of school and the impact on social relationships



Meaningfully involving young people in research

"Different experiences matter" - E (15)

Be **inclusive**, try to understand the needs of the wider community instead of a smaller group of young people. Experiences, particularly of services and mental health, are as diverse as young people themselves.

"Small Changes, big impact" - M (15)

Young people (particularly who are neurodivergent) can meaningfully participate and really want to, you just need to be prepared and open to listen to their needs, and make **adjustments** to remove possible barriers to engagement. Co-produce with young people to ensure needs are met.

"Listen" - L (23)

Young people are experts in their own experience. Sometimes they feel that their needs, views and values are not listened to by the 'adults in charge'. Think about how you can show you are listening, both during and after your engagement. **Feedback Loops** are great—'you said, we did'.

"Put yourself in our shoes" - A (16)

Research may feel natural and a safe space to you, but this isn't necessarily true for young people. Look at the **Lundy model of child participation (2014)** and reflect on your own practises.