

## Written evidence submitted by the NHS Youth Forum (BYC 035)

### Introduction & Executive Summary

The NHS Youth Forum is a group of 25 young people from across England whose collective aim is to improve health services, communication and experience for all young people. We do this through raising awareness, running campaigns, creating resources, talking to youth about their experience and acting on feedback, presenting at local & national events, consulting on NHS, government or other health related policies and much more.

Our campaigns and research are wholly based on what young people are seeing, experiencing and feeling in their daily lives and the NHSYF has a wide insight into how life really is for youth based on the connections each member has within their local schools, colleges and community. As a result have a unified stance that there is not enough support or attention being given to mental health, eating disorders, body image and self esteem.

In our experience body image is a very personal and sensitive topic for young people to discuss as many YP have 'ideal' physical pictures to which they judge their own appearance on, influenced by the media, modelling, advertising, clothes, trends and what other young people are doing or saying, and it can feel embarrassing to share the fact that this constant comparison is driving the way we see ourselves with friends or family. How young people look at their physical appearance or weight is not based on a healthy standard they'd like to meet, but instead their self image is often determined by how closely it resembles this idea of 'attractive' looking a certain way.

There is nowhere in the school curriculum which currently allows children and young people to learn what 'healthy' truly means, as in, nothing that says being healthy is more than just a number on the scales, a size, particular body shape or look, but is actually something that's true when YOU feel vital, confident and comfortable in your own body. No one size fits all, but as children and young people are bombarded by more and more 'pictures' of how beauty looks they forget that it's anything to do with having a **natural shape** and instead take on board that by virtue of not looking a certain way they are imperfect or worse, which is having an enormous impact on self esteem and mental health problems, as well as body culture and bullying...

***80% of women and girls are unhappy with the way they look, and 79% of girls opt out of important life activities such as trying out for a sports team or going out to spend time with friends when they do not feel confident about how they look.*** The Dove Beauty and Confidence Report 2016

***Of more than 1,000 eight-18 year old boys polled, 55% would consider changing their diet to look better, and 1 in 4 said they believed there was a 'perfect' male body. The biggest influences to look good came from friends (68%), social media (57%), advertising (53%) and celebrities (49%).*** Advertising Association 'Picture of Health' Report 2016

*"When people think of negative body image they tend to automatically think of fat-shaming and eating disorders, but issues with body image occur across the board... The amount of times I've been asked if I'm anorexic because I'm thin has made me feel like there's something wrong with my body. I'm getting over it now but I still have a problem seeing past my ribs and vertebrae when I look in a mirror. It just seems like*

*if people are slightly overweight they're told that they're too fat and if they're slightly underweight they're told that they're too thin and there's never a comfortable middle ground, so in the end whatever body you have isn't good enough" Ellie, 17 years old*

## **Question 2.**

### **Body image and Young Men**

It is often perceived that women and girls are the primary (or only) victims of intense body image pressures and expectations, and while some focus has been given to young girls and exposing the ridiculousness of the media's current portrayal of women, young boys have suffered enormous anxieties and doubts about their weight, appearance and image based on what the media and society have advertised the 'ideal man' to be. This is what's going on for young boys, in the words of a parent and 19-year-old student, and it calls for schools, youth organizations, counseling services and government to create more support programs for young men;

*"Young men too are increasingly under pressure and judgement about the way they look. Speaking to my 26-year-old son recently, he told how he was painfully aware of being*

*'skinny' at school, which made him feel fragile and inadequate. He wasn't under too much peer pressure directly but felt male PE teachers in particular were macho bullies regularly stooping to humiliate some of the boys less confident, developed or talented. I'd argue that boys and men themselves are victims of the patriarchal society too. My son suffered with melancholy and depression through secondary school but I wasn't aware of the issue. He said he's only just started feeling better about himself physically"*

*"After the age of around 10 I started to have thoughts around how I looked. One of the key things I identified was how I looked smaller, thinner, and particularly, weaker than other boys around me. Up until the age of 16 I was always quite a skinny guy, and this played on my mind quite a lot and over those years I came not only to loathe my body, but think there was something wrong with me, that I wasn't quite as worthy as everyone else. At school I started being bullied for my size and became upset by the normalized comments made around me about my size and being skinny in general. I also became aware of the comments others, particularly girls, made about larger muscular men and decided that was the image I needed to achieve to be accepted. I started going to the gym, intensely so, I became obsessed and addicted to weightlifting and exercise guides online, and began attempting to eat as much food as I can, taking protein shakes to the point where I couldn't stomach another bite. I underwent all of this practically unnoticed by society, my friends, and my family."*

## **Question 6.**

**Do Internet companies, social media platforms or other platforms have a responsibility to tackle trends that entrench poor body image? What are they already doing in this area? What more should they be doing?**

The Internet is a medium for corporations, brands and magazines to publicise their adverts and what 'sells' to an enormous audience, and they are looking to make their marketing the most attention-grabbing and glamorous so that it will entice (or shock) consumers into taking notice of their products, but what isn't considered is how what 'sells' may not be what is best for the mental health of young people, or men and women in general.

In order to stand out, clothing brands and magazines have to find ways to catch people's eye in amongst the millions of Tweets, posts and **300 million photos that are uploaded to Facebook each day**<sup>1</sup>. This is the justification used to warrant thousands of over sexualised, provocative, threatening, aggressive and extreme images being issued all over the Internet -'business is business' - but this is done at the expense of young women and men's self image and esteem. It's done without the consideration that young men and women will look to these adverts as examples of how to be in relationships; aggressive, imposing, submissive, objective, and it's done without considering that young people look for role models to live up to and if you offer a single image of what beauty looks like and this isn't attainable by everyone then we will feel less worthy, imperfect, ugly and abuse ourselves because our bodies will never be 'it', unless we cosmetically change them.

If this is today's version of 'profiting' and those putting out a product e.g. clothing item, TV show or film are unable to consider the wellbeing of the public alongside making money, then social media platforms and internet companies who provide a MEDIUM for everything to be shared hold the next point of responsibility. They are, technically speaking, not there to sell a product and even though there are background deals determining what trends on the various sites, as a result of having millions or potentially billions of people using their platform they do have a responsibility to monitor what gets put out and published. Social media companies also need to take more responsibility for cyber abuse and moderating what is published on their sites, because there is a vast quantity of hate speech, defamation, sexual harassment and other abuse directed at people because of their weight, physical appearance or look, which sets an example that all young people can see and learn from:

*"The hate celebrities get in the media for gaining weight or showing stretch marks makes me more self conscious as it reminds you that people are judging the way you look and that you're going to be targeted and noticed for things like added weight and no make up"* Alex,  
17 years old

As young people we do rely enormously on social media for information, the news and finding out what's trending, and when the only thing we learn in school is what BMI number is so called 'healthy', almost all of us look online to get some idea of how we should treat the body we have, and particularly for young boys and men who idolise sportspeople who are tough, tall and incredibly muscular they get confused of how to take their own shape and make it look the same. The role models they aspire to be can also be very irresponsible, and today many athletes or gym super stars take supplements or steroids in order to bulk up.

Within all schools there should be mandatory lessons and programs that address the concept of diets, fitness, losing weight, gaining muscle mass and how all body shapes are different, and social media corporations have a responsibility to closely filter the adverts they allow on their sites based on what exactly those adverts are promoting and how this will influence the children and young people who use their sites, as well as all men and women. Abusive campaigns or those which are derogatory, threatening or promote unhealthy body habits e.g. anorexia, steroids, should be removed from social media sites, because they are laying down the physical standards children and young people are actively aspiring to meet.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/>

### Question 10.

**To what extent is dissatisfaction with body image contributing to the increase in mental health problems amongst children and young people?**

While many young people are predisposed to the development of mental health problems because of varying factors, relationships, their upbringing environment and certain events, a lack of confidence and low self worth can be a leading component. Body image can be an area of doubt and little confidence especially for those going through puberty and in the early years after puberty, because things are changing physically all the time and we are still unfamiliar at that stage with our developing features. In addition, as our bodies change our mental priorities change and we become more self-aware, as well as more self-critical. This means that we may compare our bodies to others, however it is very common to see only the positive aspects of somebody else whilst the negative attributes in ourselves and this lowers our self-esteem, which can in turn lead to mental health problems.

As young people many of our decisions are still made by parents, teachers or other adults in our lives and we sometimes feel that we are dictated-to in school, trained to think a certain way and to write certain things. We sometimes fight the fact that our lives are 'out of our control', and while different people respond to this in different ways many young people attempt to control something within their reach that they have full decision over, so if they have felt negatively about their body before this may lead them to eating disorders in an attempt to control their weight. Therefore, especially for young people feeling out of control of other areas of their lives, having negative body image can lead to the development of mental health problems.

Young people suffering with pre-existing mental health conditions such as depression are heavily influenced by people and situations around them; they are sensitive to arguments, problems, lack of purpose or boredom, fights, irritancy, stress and other things that make life heavy and not worthwhile, but all of these things are external issues... What happens when you are INSIDE something you feel is ugly, disgusting, imperfect, fat, gross or wasted? We cannot escape our body, it's something with us 24 hours a day 7 days a week, and many young people resort to self harm and self abusive behaviors to punish themselves for their imperfections. And because as the media makes very clear 'beauty gets attention', when others don't recognize or compliment our features it adds to the apprehension that we are 'not worthy' and our bodies are inadequate.

### Question 11.

**Does the NHS have sufficient resources and expertise to manage mental health issues associated with poor body image? How have changes in education funding impacted the ability of schools to provide in house mental health services?**

If you talk to almost any child going through school they will have experienced another peer calling them fat, ugly, man-looking, gorilla like, stick thin, pale, gross, chubby, round or some other name that makes them feel inadequate about their shape in the last year. Children at the ages of 5 or 6 are dreading leaving their homes for school each morning 'because everybody says I have 'hairy legs' and look 'fat'', and at this age there is no easy way to change your appearance but it's now normal to start searching YouTube for makeup tutorials, dieting programs, asking mum to buy shavers at the supermarket in order to be 'pretty', or for boys to try protein shakes or start doing more exercise and sports to be tougher and taller.

*"The scariest thing now is that primary aged children are much more body aware than they were. Instances of bullying are increasing and so too is acute embarrassment about being too fat, not having the right clothes or look, and talk about dieting and wanting to wear makeup"* Kate, Youth & Community Worker, Somerset

**"81% of 10 year olds are afraid of being fat"** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, PBS, National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

*"When I was younger I used to cry for hours because I was bigger than all the other girls and I didn't know that it was just a growing thing. And even last year I went through a super self-conscious phase and I think that was because we're not only surrounded by the media's photo-shopped pictures of models but also by real life people who look different from us. That shouldn't make us self-conscious because there are like 3.5 billion women (and the same for men) and each one of them is going to look different. But I think that's something that's hard to remember so we're constantly comparing ourselves to those around us who might be "prettier" by our standards"* Maya, 17 years old

There should be more dedicated space during the pivotal time where children are under schools' guidance to support them with their self-esteem and confidence, and education bodies should be saying much more than just, 'bullying isn't tolerated here' because there is no substance or role modelling in this discipline. Preventing bullying is one thing, but exposing the ridiculousness of judging others for their appearance and **offering another way** to treat one another AND view your own/your peers' appearance is the step that will support children and young people for years after they stop formal schooling.

Somewhere in the thousands of hours we spend in compulsory education, young people need to be offered an alternative to all the contradicting, confusing and imposing ideals about what 'healthy' and 'beauty' mean from the Internet and in society. Often teachers feel more comfortable having experts or youth workers come in and present on these topics, to offer children a different and authoritative angle. However, education cuts have dramatically reduced the funding for youth work, making thousands of workers across the country redundant and unable to provide these important services, such as the example in Somerset;

*"Approximately 5 years ago before service cuts there was a total of 171 youth workers and admin staff in Somerset. I assume this would also include part time, unqualified workers in the clubs as well as full time qualified workers and senior workers (managers). We delivered in youth clubs, youth projects, schools, ran full year citizenship and PSHE sessions in colleges and more. We worked with young people on the streets as part of detached programs and outreach. We had annual events and a range of programs, which addressed gender work, equality, diversity, and self esteem among other things. We addressed anything that would block young people's potential, need for access and created and delivered workshops and activities designed to develop and empower young people. We had a £3.1 million budget, and now we are down to £380, 000. There are now 2 full-time qualified youth and community officers (managers) who don't deliver face to face with young people...and there is me. A full time qualified community worker."* Kate, Youth & Community Worker, Somerset

Also, there is a lack of counsellors, school nurses and mental health experts actually **available** and easily accessible to young people. As a result many who suffer with low self-esteem, anxiety about their appearance, depression and other mental health conditions feel isolated and alone in dealing with their problem, some not even realising that the way they think shouldn't be normal in the first place.

*"The way women are perceived in the media and in school has effected me massively, particularly in my last few years. I started feeling fat and unattractive which people told me was normal to think, as a result of how women are shown to look perfect and have naturally ideal body shapes that they achieve effortlessly. It's also shown that mostly women that look a certain way are successful and famous. But then it developed into anxiousness around people; based on the pressures I'd put on myself, and the ones other people put on me to be perfect. A few months in I had completely isolated myself and was feeling anxious in almost every situation. I went to a counselor and they told me that my problems weren't bad enough to go to a real counselor but I could talk to a Safe-guarding Expert, who judged if I was depressed or not, by if I came in to her office smiling or frowning. Because of the way she dismissed me, I felt like everyone else would do that too, because I thought and was told my problems weren't bad enough. This is the kind of help I have experienced that is medically advised for young people with mental health issues & I know it needs to improve!"* 14 years old

#### **Question 12.**

**What supports young people with their self-image or body anxieties, and what more can be done by health professionals (or education services)?**

Young people are looking for support but currently very little is available at schools or colleges, GP practices and health centres. Having drop in clinics, school nurse sessions and counsellors easily accessible would make an enormous difference to how young people feel about their mental health and body, creating a space where they can express what's really going on inside and ask questions. The current assumption that feelings like these need to be buried and bottled up needs to be diminished.

*"Sometimes it feels like it's all in your head and you're the only one that feels a certain way, or who worries about what you look like and thinks everyone else is more beautiful or attractive... but actually realising that other people think similar makes you feel more comfortable in yourself"* Rina, 16 years old

*"It's so important to talk about issues like body image, mental health and general worries because it hurts so much when you feel like you can't tell anyone and you feel so isolated, whereas you can get so much relief from having a community to confide in"* Sadie, 17 years old

***"I feel like for me an actual understanding of how body's work would be useful, like lessons on sex education and how that works, because we don't understand how hormones work and how genes effect body type"*** Alex, 17 years old