



St Albans Youth Council's supplementary report into mental health issues affecting main stream secondary school students in St Albans District.

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&

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This report is supported by Youth Connexions



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We would like to thank Youth Connexions and our Support Worker, Debi Roberts for her support throughout this project.

We would also like to thank all the schools and pupils who took part and who were generous enough to share their experience and thoughts with us. We hope that in doing so, you will make a difference to others.

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Contents

Foreword

Introduction

Findings from the Teacher Survey

Findings from the Student Survey

Where to Find Help

Summary

Recommendations

Foreword



I am delighted to have been asked to write a brief foreword to this excellent piece of supplementary research to the original report produced by St Albans Youth Council in 2010. The original report looked at mental health issues for young people and those who support them, highlighting a number of key challenges around raising awareness of services available and highlighting gaps in provision.

This original work has had a significant impact both within the District of St Albans and more broadly across Hertfordshire and this supplementary research both recognises the progress that has been made, but also again highlights the significant challenges that remain. The work undertaken by the Youth Council has informed and inspired many colleagues and services across the County to investigate how they can address the issues raised by these young people. I hope that this addendum will provide a further valuable resource, adding to the growing body of knowledge that investigates mental health issues in of young people.

Finally I want to commend the tenacity of these young people in continuing to research and investigate an important issue that they feel so passionately about and the Youth Connexions staff who have supported them throughout this work.

Andrew Simmons

Introduction

Following the findings of our first report entitled “A report on the awareness of, and possible need for, extended provision of both mental health and counselling services for secondary school students in Hertfordshire”, we are delighted that we have succeeded in raising the issue of student stress with those that can influence change. However, there is still much to be done.

The first report was drafted in 2010, at the height of austerity measures, when St Albans Youth Council (SAYC) researched;

- What provision was available to students
- If students were aware of that provision
- What issues they would seek advice for
- Who they would go to for signposting to counselling services

The data was alarming, as whilst it showed that there were services in most schools to support pupils; half to three quarters of students were completely unaware of them. We also found that a significant number of students were managing dangerous manifestations of mental health issues such as cutting, without proper support. We discovered that contrary to popular opinion, the vast majority of students would ask their teachers where they could go for help as opposed to any other professional.

These results made it clear we had to do further research and triangulate our data as much as possible by asking teachers what their experience of students asking for signposting was.

We have carried out a second survey, collecting data from a further 853 students from various schools, covering year groups 7 to 13 although mainly focusing on years 8 and 10 and 124 teachers.

This research corroborates the original findings, and provides further evidence that young people in mainstream schools are experiencing tremendous levels of stress.

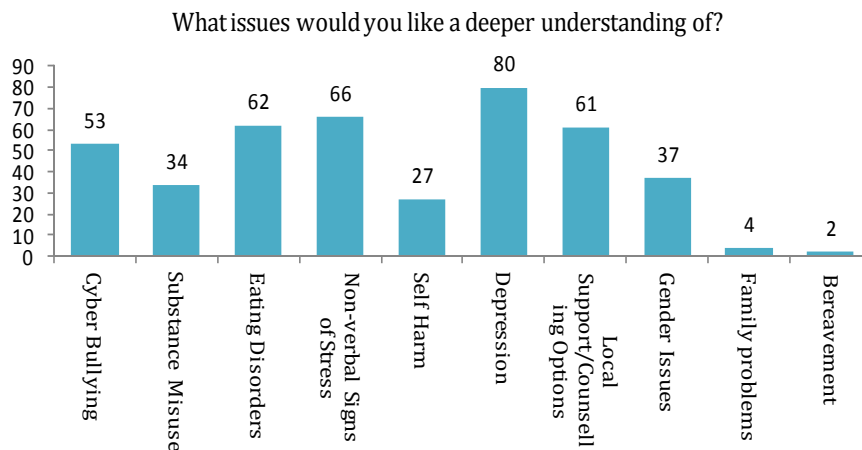


Findings from the teacher survey

Training

90% of the teachers we surveyed said giving advice to students does not cross a professional barrier, although 59% had no training on mental health issues. Of those teachers who did not receive training in mental health issues, 92% said that they felt it would be useful. Of those that had received training, 77% said that they thought it was not adequate and that additional training would be very beneficial.

Figure 1.

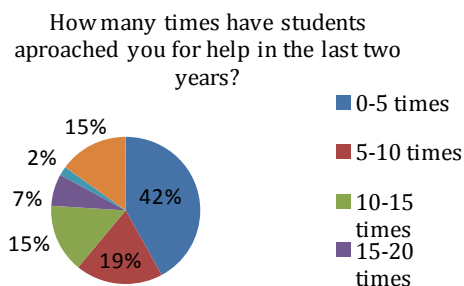


An increase in the problem

52% of teachers had noticed an increase over the last two years in the number of problems students were facing and seeking support for.

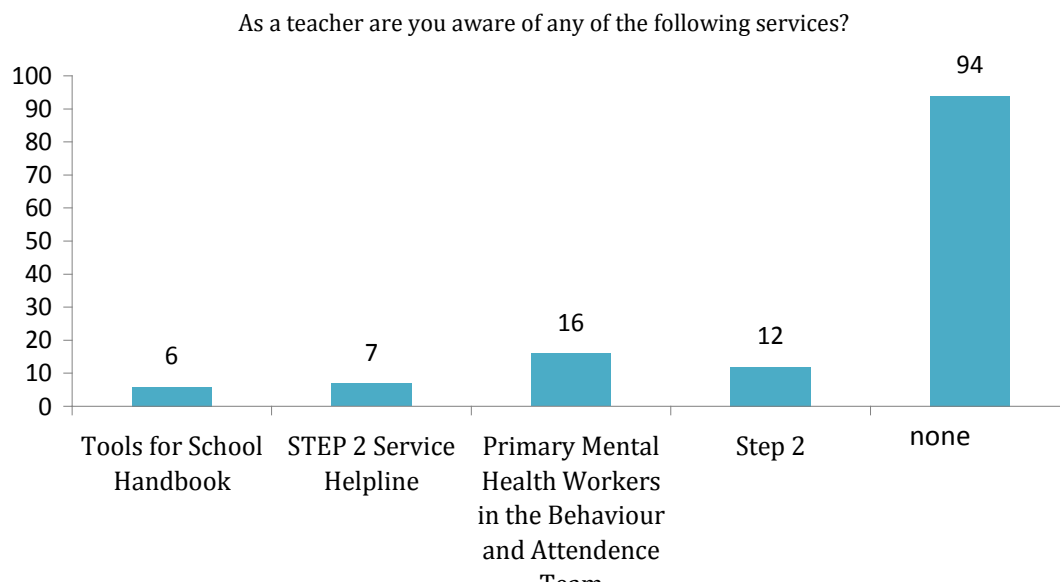
83% had been approached over the last two years by a student seeking advice for a personal problem or issue not directly related to education, and, as shown in fig 1. nearly half the teachers surveyed said they had been approached at least five times, with 15% stating they had been approached over 25 times in the last two years.

Figure 2.



All teachers wanted to have a deeper understanding of at least one issue, with over 50% wanting further information on cyber bullying, eating disorders, non-verbal signs of stress, local support options and depression.

Figure 3.



There are many services and tools available to schools and teachers, however, an overwhelming majority, 94%, of the teachers we surveyed were not aware of any of the services available to them.

Findings from the student survey

Counsellors in Schools

A priority for SAYC was to ascertain whether or not schools were publicising their support and counselling provision so that students would know how to get help if they needed it.

55% of all the students surveyed were aware of counselling provision in their school. This equates to a 35% improvement from the survey conducted just 18 months earlier. However, this still means 45% of students in most school are unaware of the support available to them and this has to improve. It is important that all students are aware of the pastoral support available to them, not least because any single student could be affected directly or indirectly by mental health issues.

The school with the lowest percentage of student awareness was in fact a boy's school. This is worrying as men often endure more issues associated with the stigma of mental illness as well as a reluctance to ask and receive help. We feel it is vitally important therefore that boy's schools in particular are pro active in tackling this issue and ensuring that their pupils are better equipped to face what may come.

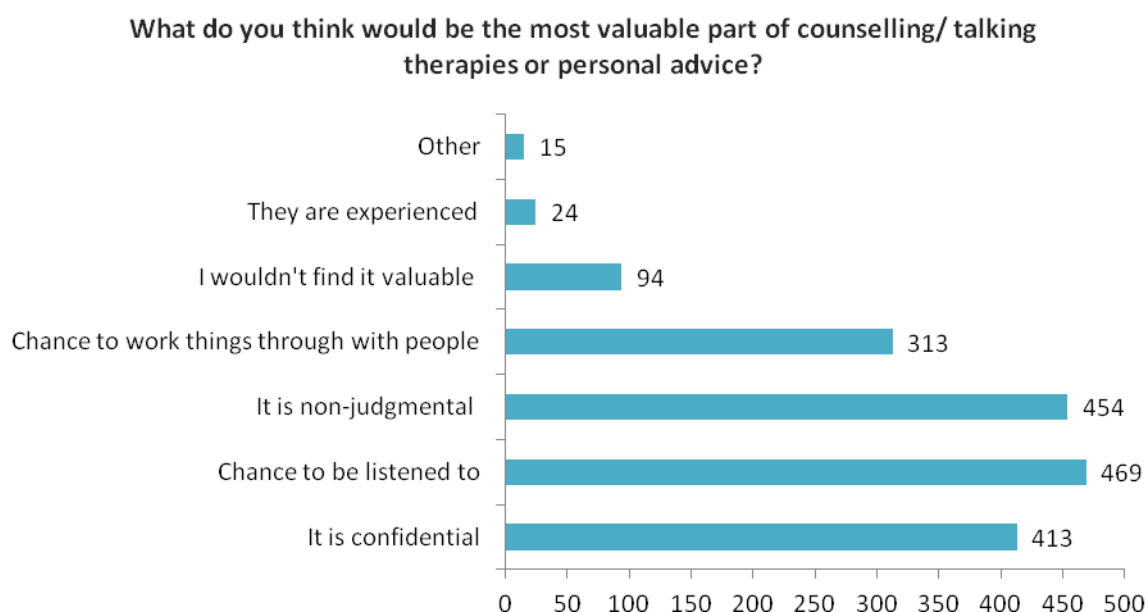
It would seem there is still more for schools to do to ensure their students know how they can access help through school and who can help them.

Making a whole school aware of its counselling provision does not just benefit those who may be experiencing mental health issues directly. It can also help build up a stronger support network for those who are supporting their friends but feel unsure of how to manage the situation they find themselves in.

Three quarter of students suggested they were keen to have a counselling provision or support in school with 70% of students who knew they had a counsellor in their school believing that it was useful.

Furthermore, 75% of students who stated that they were unaware of counselling provision in their school stated they believed it would be beneficial.

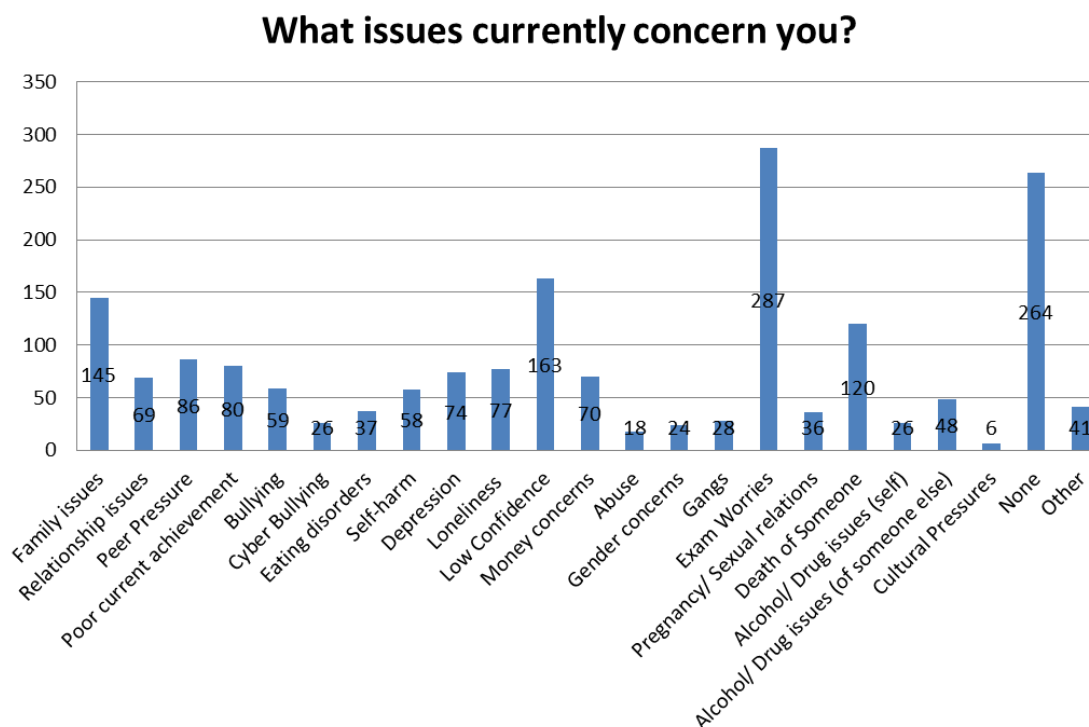
Figure.4



Students Concerns

We asked students about their current concerns. All the issues we chose to include in the survey are ones we felt could have an effect on someone's mental health and well being.

Figure 5. Students' Concerns



This graph represents the views of over 1800 students. Although at first it seems encouraging to see so many students state they have 'no current issues', the reality is this is only one in seven. Only one in seven of our peers are not suffering with some kind of anxiety. We do not think this is acceptable. This could mean in a typical class of 30 students around 4 pupils will be dealing with quite stressful situations and for the vast majority, that stress will be connected to exams and the consequences of poor attainment.

We also found some interesting correlations within this data. For instance, 12% of students suffering exam stress also consider themselves to be depressed and many also stated they have low confidence. We also saw a connection between those who cited low confidence as an issue with those who considered themselves to be suffering from depression.

It is alarming to consider the numbers of young people going through problems that are likely to affect their mental health and we believe more research is needed to fully investigate the correlation we have seen.

Is exam stress the leading cause of depression and low confidence in mainstream students? Or, are students who are prone to depression and stress more likely to endure extreme levels of stress and depression during exam periods? If that were found to be the case, does the high level of reported stress during exam periods suggest that young people are generally more stressed and therefore more susceptible to suffering from depression? And what are the long term economic and health consequences for a generation predisposed to stress?

Our data shows that for 1 in 15 respondents, 'self harm' is a current issue. 1 in 25 respondents also suffer with eating disorders. It is upsetting to see how many young people are facing these serious problems. Unfortunately, 46% of those with eating disorders also said that self-harm was an issue. 7% of respondents said they had issues with bullying and a further 3% said cyber bullying was an issue.

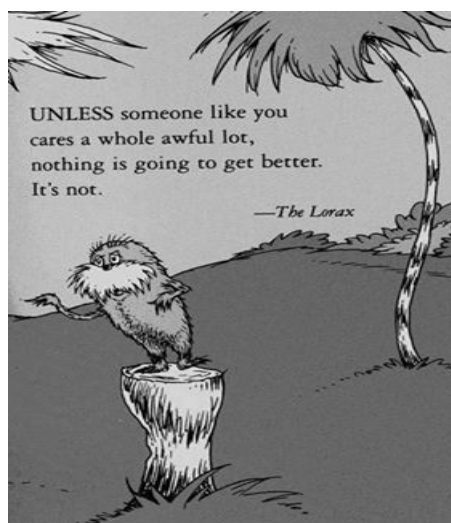
17% of students cited family issues as a concern. This could cover a wide range of things from separated parents, to small family disagreements. This can have an effect on things such as achievement. For example, only 9% of respondents said that 'poor current achievement' was an issue for them; however, of those who said they had family issues, 22% said that 'poor current achievement' was a problem for them. Obviously 'poor achievement' is relative to every individual; it may be that a student will feel that their achievement is poor because of pressure from family members and this could also be considered to be a 'family issue'. Family issues could also link to current achievement by preventing a student from being able to study comfortably at home.

The students who ticked 'other' had problems with a range of issues such as; dyslexia, feeling left out, being unable to speak English, worry, homework, body issues, friend issues, missing their family, not understanding themselves, lack of confidence, suicidal thoughts, medical issues, mourning, not knowing what to do in the future, lack of trustworthy friends, anxiety attacks, speech and the future (generally).

Where to find help

We repeated a question from our first report that asked students who they would go to for support with a personal problem. Once again, 'friends and family' came out on top and teachers are still the first professional a student would go to for signposting. However, the internet has increased in popularity enormously and is now accessed more often and has become more popular as a source of information than a student's teacher.

This reinforces our resolve to ensure school websites link to other sites and repeat our suggestion that a link to ChannelMOGO would provide all the necessary information and links to bona-fide organisations without the concern of vetting them, as Youth Connexions would have already done this.



Summary

The majority of teachers have not been trained to recognise non-verbal signs of distress and yet, by the age of 14, half of all people who will develop a long-term mental illness will have displayed early signs of their future mental health issues. With this in mind, it seems odd that many counselling providers don't offer a provision for children under this age.

Teachers have seen an increase in the number of students coming to them for support or signposting with regards a personal issue. However, many students do not feel comfortable approaching a trained pastoral worker, as they feel disconnected, and it is easier for them to connect to the teachers that they interact with on a day-to-day basis.

Having now surveyed over 2000 students and over 100 teachers in and around St Albans District, we have found:

- The awareness of mental health and counselling services has increased, however young people are often unwilling or unable to access professionals help.
- Many young people seek help and guidance from friends and family, teachers, or the Internet.
- Although students may not always feel comfortable engaging with counselling provisions, they do like to speak to their teachers and contrary to what many people assume, our research shows that the first professional most students go to when seeking guidance either with a problem or in getting help for a problem is still their teacher and not their doctor. This is perhaps not surprising as the most accessible adults for most students are their teachers whereas the most inaccessible professional, if you are a student, is often your doctor.
- Teachers do not feel qualified to deal with these issues, and as a result, want more training to be able to help students better.
- Exam Stress, family issues and low self-confidence are the issues that cause the most concern for students.
- Despite sharing comprehensive data and recommendations in our earlier report, nearly half of all students across the district (45%) were unaware of counselling provision in their school.
- Local providers are overwhelmed. For example, Youth Talk, a local counselling service in St Albans who were not able to secure funding from the National Lottery this year, will struggle with the consequences of this financial blow. Ultimately a reduction in funding means young people will have to wait longer for the support they need as the number of sessions Youth Talk can provide next year will reduce. At the same time, the demand for Youth Talk's services is increasing and at different points during the year they have had to close their books to new patients to ensure that they can continue to provide the best possible care to existing clients.

Recommendations

We want schools and anyone connected to education to understand the unique pressures that young people endure. At age 16, students now face being forced to leave their school if they do not obtain the relevant A-B grade in core subjects. They fear being removed from their friends and everything they know. In addition, their post 16 educational choices can become limited or required to take a new route as schools close their gates to them.

Obviously for many students college is the perfect setting and we know how fortunate we are to have Oaklands College here in our city but our point is that college used to be a choice, for many students now college is the only option if they wish to continue their education. As a result, extreme stress related to exams is no longer only to be found in the 6th form block. The stress that all year 11 students face is extraordinary as the consequences of GCSE grades now has an immediate impact.

The findings in this supplementary report support, enhance the original findings and the recommendations made in our first report.

- We need to develop awareness that teachers are a preferred choice for pupils seeking advice on personal guidance and counselling. In doing so we hope teachers will be better supported so that they can help students or signpost them to someone else who can. In addition to knowing who the local providers are for a wide range of issues, teachers need specific training that will help them recognise verbal and non-verbal signs of stress and we would like to see this become mandatory within teacher training.
- Use publicly funded resources such as school and GP premises to create venues for contact with providers such as counselling services, Youth Connexions advisors and anyone who can support maintain mental wellbeing.
- School websites must be better utilised so that parents and pupils can find support more easily. This could be as simple as creating a link on every school website to the ChannelMOGO website.
- GP's confirm that keeping up to date with all the services provided can be time consuming and like teachers, they don't always know what services are available. This is particularly true when a client has been referred to CAMHS but now has a 4-6 month wait for any active intervention to begin. GP's have very few options to support clients during this limbo period. One solution is to find funding for IT info points to be placed in GP surgeries that link reputable sites such as MindEd, ChannelMOGO, Young Minds etc so that patients can be active in supporting themselves or their family member through this difficult time.
- Join up service providers with schools to develop and disseminate best practice.
- Set up a programme to support young people who have friends that are disclosing mental health problems to them, and let all students know what to do if they are concerned about someone they know.

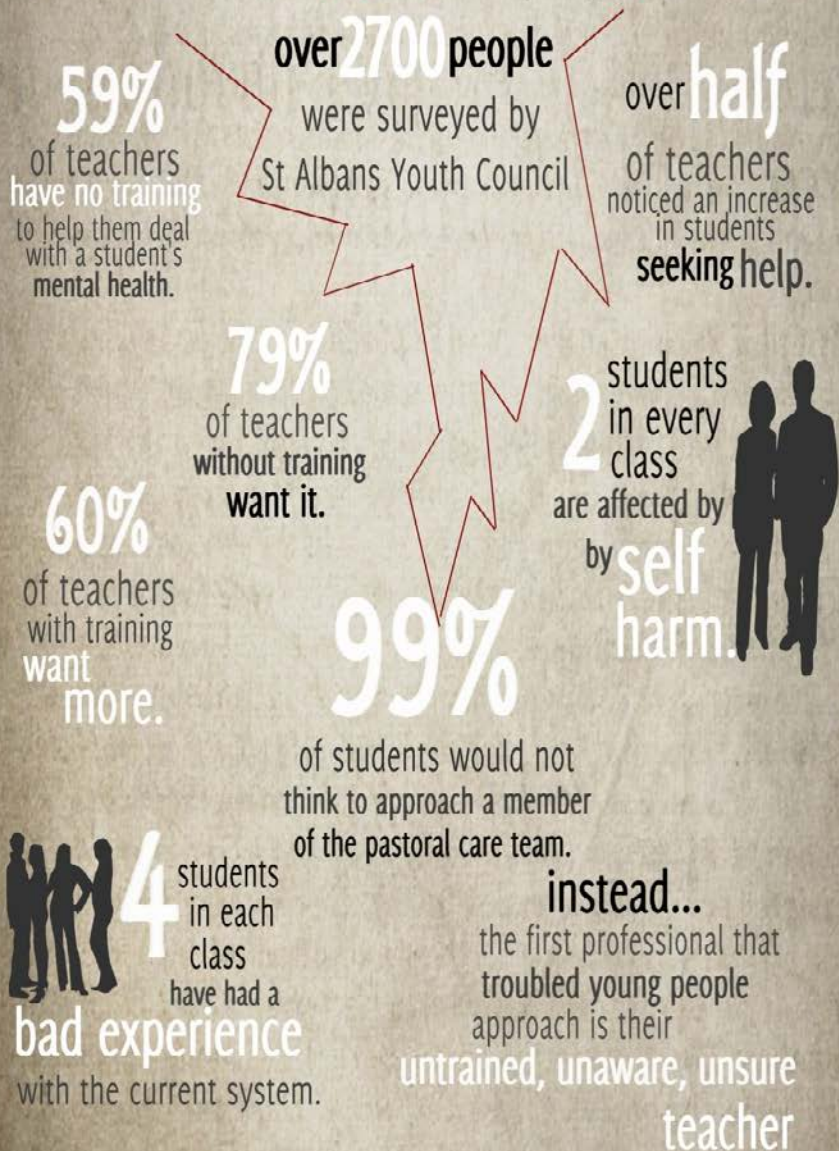
- Develop a mentoring programme in which sixth form students spend time with year 11 students to help with the transition into sixth form by giving year 11's a better understanding of what sixth form is like. Sixth formers could also give peer support by helping GCSE students with their studied. This would bring more students together and help to break down the barriers between separate year groups.
- Keep in Touch (KIT) days for year 11-13 immediately after exams, just before results and after results where students have a designated appointment to meet with a member of staff to de brief / check in. The appointments before results can be manned by Youth Connexion Personal Advisors or other support workers.
- We have seen time and time again that just being able to talk and speak with others who are going through the same thing can make all the difference to someone so we would like to develop a project similar to a youth project, for teenagers who may be feeling a little stressed, where they can simply hang out, spend a little time with friends who may be in the same boat and where there are Youth Connexions staff on hand to support and talk to if needed.
- To develop the stress workshop commissioned by SAYC and produced by Youth Connexions, so that it develops with the need of the local youth population and can be accessed by more students, parents and professionals.
- To ensure that the Herts1125 manifesto 2014/15 that explores this issue as a county wide concern is widely circulated and is used to help inform policy.

If you would like to know more about this work or about St Albans Youth Council, please contact their support worker, Debi Roberts debi.roberts@hertfordshire.gov.uk



THE SYSTEM IS BROKEN

Students and teachers are struggling to cope with the challenge of mental health



WE MUST CHANGE The solution is not difficult, or expensive.

1. Training teachers
2. Online resources
3. Signposting

Visit our stand to find out more about the research and recommendations.