



Hear HER Voice

Young Women and girls on girls in sport, local services and safe spaces

Introduction

The Hear Her Voice research project was created to provide opportunities for young women and girls to have their voices heard on the issues that matter most to them. Too often, their experiences and opinions are overlooked, yet they are the ones most affected by decisions made within their schools, communities, and local services. This project was designed to change that. Through a series of workshops and discussions, our young researchers explored topics that directly impact their daily lives; from safety in public spaces, to opportunities in sport, to creating inclusive and empowering environments where girls feel they truly belong. By sharing their insights, they are not only highlighting the barriers they face but also shaping the solutions that will make a difference.

Our aim is twofold:

- To encourage young women and girls to use their voices confidently and see the value in their lived experiences as a force for positive social change—both locally and beyond.
- To ensure that decision-makers, professionals, and organisations have a clear reference point of girls' views, so their opinions, needs, and aspirations can directly influence policy, practice, and provision.

This report is being shared with schools, professionals, and community organisations as a resource and a reminder: the voices of young women matter. We hope that the findings will not only be heard but also acted upon, helping to create safer, more inclusive, and more empowering spaces where every girl has the opportunity to thrive.



Safe Spaces

In this workshop, young women and girls discussed how safe they feel in different public spaces across Crewe. They highlighted the places they avoid, the situations that cause concern, and the changes that would help them feel safer and more respected in their community.

Areas Young People Avoid

Our researchers reported avoiding a range of locations and types of spaces in Crewe:

Specific hotspots:

- Brookhouse, Macon Way, Edleston Road, Nantwich Road, West Street, Badger Avenue
- Asda car park, Crewe town square, McDonald's in town, Victoria Avenue, Jubilee Gardens, Alberts corner, Near Lyceum Theatre (due to drunk crowds near pubs)
- Outside of and surrounding areas of Tenpin and Odeon
- Joey the swan, Broad Street Park, Valley Park, Pebble Brook Park, Derby docks

Factors That Make an Area Feel Unsafe

Participants identified both environmental design issues and intimidating behaviours that contribute to feeling unsafe:

Environmental factors:

- Poor or no street lighting
- Lack of safe pedestrian crossings (e.g. Flag Lane)
- Dark, cramped, or concealed spaces
- Deserted areas with no one around to help

Social and behavioural factors:

- Large or intimidating groups of people, particularly men
- Staring, shouting, catcalling, and harassment
- Drug and alcohol use in public spaces
- Antisocial behaviour, vandalism, and fights
- Experiences of being followed, touched, or chased
- Presence of "strange" or unpredictable individuals

What Makes Young People Feel Safer

Participants emphasised that both practical safety measures and trusted community spaces help reduce fear and build confidence:

Practical safety measures:

- Better street lighting
- CCTV cameras- in case an incident did occur
- Visible police presence (especially with female officers)
- Pedestrian crossings

Social and emotional reassurance:

- Peace of mind and not feeling on edge
- Seeing families and children around (signal of safety)
- Being with friends or in a group, rather than alone
- Feeling able to walk alone or in evenings without fear

Safe and trusted locations:

- Market Hall, Lyceum Theatre area (linked with regeneration)
- Queens Park, Broad Street Park (when well-maintained)
- Library, wellbeing spaces, gyms, and the Lifestyle Centre
- Retail park and restaurants (e.g. Nando's)
- UA Play (formerly Goodtime Charlie's), Wishing Well, St Mary's Caritas Centre/Church
- Inside Odeon and bowling alleys
- Bus station (when managed securely)

What Makes Young People Feel Respected

Respect was closely tied to both individual behaviour and the role of local authorities:

Respectful behaviour from others:

- Not being whistled at, catcalled, stared at, or harassed
- People making space in crowded areas
- Being left alone when walking alone
- Recognition of differences and treating people fairly
- Having girls' voices heard and not discarded
- Feeling acknowledged and represented by the council
- Seeing visible efforts to improve safety and create spaces where girls can be themselves without harassment

Summary

Young women and girls in Crewe identify significant concerns around safety, particularly in poorly lit areas, deserted areas, and spaces associated with antisocial behaviour or harassment. Environmental design issues (such as lack of lighting and crossings) combine with intimidating behaviours (such as groups of men, drug use, and harassment) to create unsafe environments.

Conversely, safety and respect are reinforced by visible security measures, trusted community venues, and positive social behaviours. Respect is strongly linked to being left alone, treated fairly, and having voices heard by both peers and local authorities.

Girls in Sport

Physical activity and sport play a vital role in improving physical health, mental wellbeing, and social confidence, and is especially valuable in supporting Women's health. However, many girls and young women continue to face significant barriers that prevent them from participating fully. This research was conducted to better understand their experiences, identify challenges, and highlight changes needed to ensure that they are supported to enjoy the benefits of an active lifestyle.

Current Participation

When asked whether they currently participate in sport or physical activity:

- 57% reported that they do not participate.
- 7% said they used to but no longer do.
- 7% reported that they participate only infrequently.
- 29% reported active participation.

Activities that young women currently or previously took part in include football, dance, gym sessions, walking, workouts, gymnastics, and P.E. in school.

The main reasons for participating include feeling comfortable in the activity, experiencing mental health benefits, and being in a supportive environment.

The main reasons for not participating include repetitive or boring P.E. activities, feeling uncomfortable or judged, disliking being shouted at, lack of enjoyment, large group sizes, not knowing how to access opportunities, and low motivation.

Barriers to Participation

Participants identified a wide range of barriers that prevent them from engaging in sport. These include:

- Personal barriers: insecurity, nerves and anxiety, lack of confidence, and judgement from others.
- Practical barriers: cost, lack of knowledge about local clubs, lack of equipment or training, limited access to women-only spaces, restrictive age/ability groups, and lack of accessibility (including for low mobility).
- Environmental barriers: uncomfortable or unhygienic changing rooms, male presence in sensitive spaces, crowded or competitive environments, and limited choice of activities.
- Cultural and social barriers: sexism, favouritism from coaches or teachers, body standards, being compared to male athletes, and fear of how women are looked at in male-dominated spaces.
- Biological barriers: periods, hygiene concerns, and lack of access to period products.

What Would Help Remove Barriers?

Girls and young women suggested a number of positive changes that would help them feel more confident, comfortable, and included:

- Relaxed uniform rules.
- Clean, private changing spaces.
- More relaxed and friendly atmospheres.
- Accessible and affordable opportunities, including low-cost or free sessions.
- Women-only spaces and clubs.
- Quiet hours and sensory-friendly environments.
- Access to free period products without embarrassment.
- Opportunities to try a variety of activities.
- Equality in sports provision, moving away from gender stereotypes.
- Confidence-building approaches and sensitivity from teachers, coaches, and facilitators.
- Adapted routines for low mobility.
- Education on the wider benefits of sport, including health and social wellbeing.

Schools and P.E. Lessons

As P.E. is often the first introduction to physical activity, participants were clear about what schools could do differently to encourage more positive experiences:

- Do not separate sports into "girls" and "boys" activities, this reinforces negative gender stereotypes, such as; boys can't dance, girls can't play rugby
- Ensure changing rooms are clean, private, spacious, and allow time for showers.
- Provide more choice and variety of sports.
- Ensure male staff are not present in changing rooms.
- Allow opt-outs and confidence-building alternatives.
- Take girls' concerns seriously, particularly around mental health and body confidence.
- Avoid use of "spare kit boxes," which increase insecurity.
- Create a fun, inclusive environment with understanding teachers, ideally women staff where possible.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research makes it clear that young women and girls face multiple barriers to sport participation, but also that there are practical, achievable steps that schools, local organisations, and community clubs can take to make sport more accessible and enjoyable.

To support girls and young women in leading active lives, it is essential to:

- Create safe, clean, private, and inclusive environments.
- Provide affordable and accessible opportunities.
- Offer variety, choice, and women-only sessions.
- Educate on the benefits of sport for health and wellbeing.
- Ensure teachers, coaches, and facilitators are understanding, supportive, and sensitive to the needs of girls and young women.

By addressing these barriers and implementing the changes suggested, schools and organisations can ensure that young women are given equal opportunities to thrive through sport, improving not only their health but also their confidence, resilience, and social wellbeing.

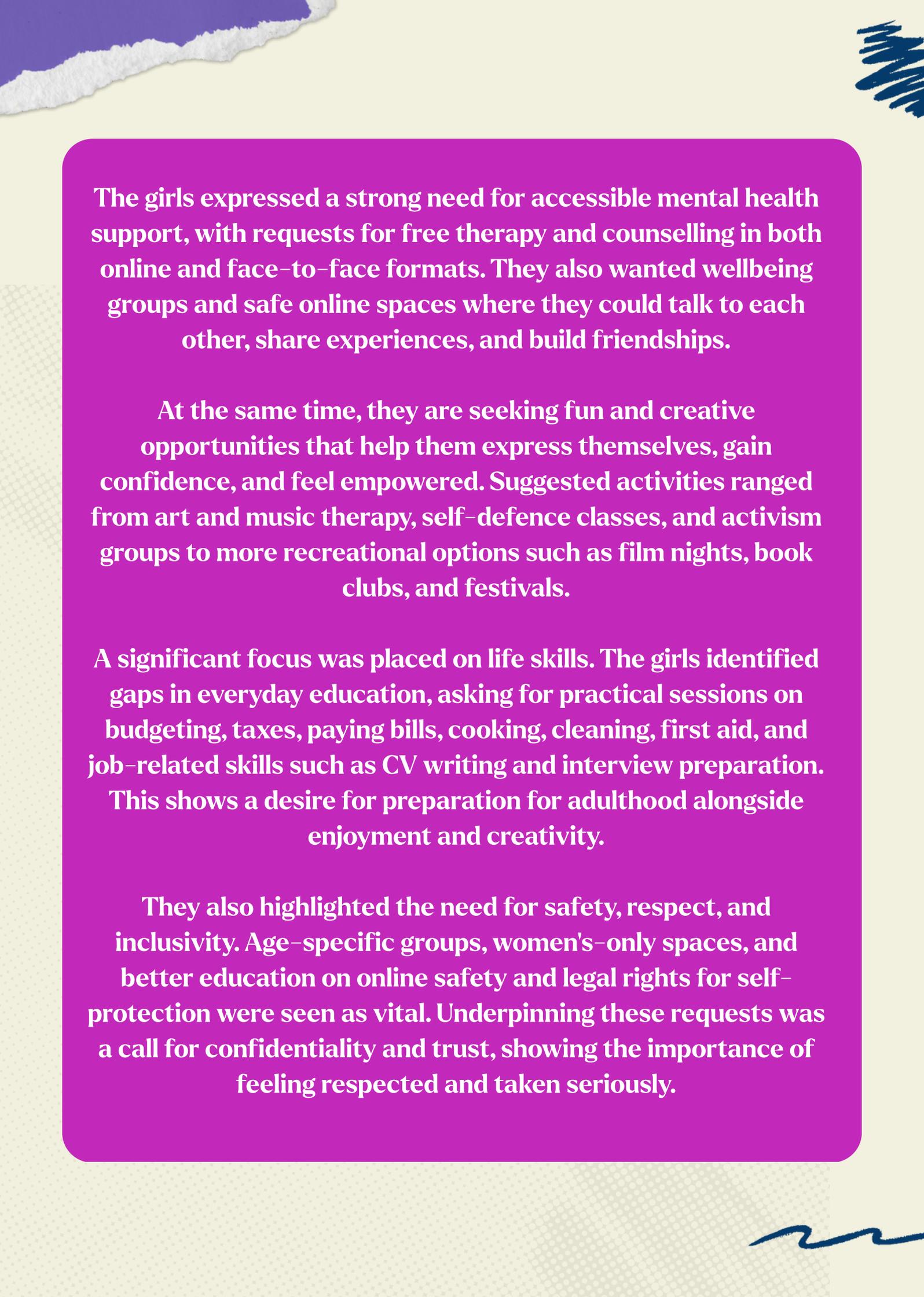
Creating Her-Place

This research was carried out to better understand the experiences, needs, and priorities of girls and young women in our community. Too often, the voices of young people are overlooked when services and activities are designed for them, resulting in support that does not fully reflect their lived realities. By asking girls directly what they want, need, and value, this project aims to provide clear evidence for schools, professionals, and local organisations, ensuring that provision is both relevant and effective.

By centring the voices of girls themselves, this research offers valuable insights that can guide the development of youth services, school provision, and community initiatives. It underlines the importance of creating opportunities that are not only supportive and inclusive, but also engaging, enjoyable, and empowering for young women.

Services and support girls would like to see

- **Mental health support, free therapy and counselling (online & face-to-face)**
- **Wellbeing groups and confidential peer support (including online spaces such as Reddit, Discord, Twitter)**
- **Opportunities for fun, creativity, and empowerment (music & art therapy, women's-only gym sessions, self-defence, activism, festivals and concerts)**
- **Life skills development (cooking, budgeting, taxes, paying bills, CV writing, interview skills, first aid, cleaning, basic hygiene)**
- **Educational provision (sex and women's health education for both genders, PHSCE with activism, online safety, SEND awareness)**
- **Safe, respectful and age-appropriate spaces (13-16, 16-18, 18-25)**
- **Social and recreational groups (book club, film nights, art group, music activities, group work, team-building)**
- **A strong emphasis on confidentiality, trust, and respect**



The girls expressed a strong need for accessible mental health support, with requests for free therapy and counselling in both online and face-to-face formats. They also wanted wellbeing groups and safe online spaces where they could talk to each other, share experiences, and build friendships.

At the same time, they are seeking fun and creative opportunities that help them express themselves, gain confidence, and feel empowered. Suggested activities ranged from art and music therapy, self-defence classes, and activism groups to more recreational options such as film nights, book clubs, and festivals.

A significant focus was placed on life skills. The girls identified gaps in everyday education, asking for practical sessions on budgeting, taxes, paying bills, cooking, cleaning, first aid, and job-related skills such as CV writing and interview preparation. This shows a desire for preparation for adulthood alongside enjoyment and creativity.

They also highlighted the need for safety, respect, and inclusivity. Age-specific groups, women's-only spaces, and better education on online safety and legal rights for self-protection were seen as vital. Underpinning these requests was a call for confidentiality and trust, showing the importance of feeling respected and taken seriously.

What's Missing

in the Community, Schools, and at Home

- Lack of diagnosis and understanding of mental health
- Girls not being listened to, dismissed as "attention seeking" rather than unwell
- Long waiting lists and poor access to services
- Lack of confidentiality and trust with adults
- Adults/ parents comparing today's young people to the past ("I was your age once")
- Pressure from parents and schools (e.g. to revise rather than relax)
- Teachers lacking awareness of SEND and disabilities in women
- Mental health not being taken seriously in education and health systems
- Cultural pressure to people please and lack of breaks
- Being compared to other girls or expected to meet unfair standards



The girls were clear about the barriers they face in their daily lives. They identified a lack of understanding and support around mental health, with many feeling dismissed, judged, or labelled as attention seeking when they were genuinely unwell. This was compounded by long waiting lists and poor access to timely services, leaving them without the help they needed.

They also highlighted issues of confidentiality and trust. Many felt adults; including teachers, doctors, and parents, did not take their concerns seriously or showed little sensitivity around upsetting topics. Comparisons to previous generations (“I was your age once”) were viewed as dismissive, failing to recognise that young people face different challenges today.

Academic and parental pressure was another key theme. The girls reported not having enough time to relax or practise self-care due to constant expectations to revise, perform, or please others. They also noted that teachers lack specific knowledge of SEND and female experiences of disability, meaning their needs are not fully understood or supported in schools.

Overall, these responses suggest that girls want to be listened to, trusted, and taken seriously. They need environments that value their wellbeing as much as their academic or social performance, and services that are responsive, sensitive, and accessible.



What Girls Look for in Activities

When asked what makes activities appealing, the girls highlighted both the atmosphere or “vibe” of the sessions and the specific activities or features that would encourage them to take part.

1. Atmosphere and Feelings

The girls consistently emphasised the importance of a welcoming and supportive environment. They want activities to feel safe, friendly, relaxed, and inclusive, with opportunities for fun, creativity, and self-expression. Words such as laid-back, cosy, calm, supportive, fun, belonging, and comfortable reflect their desire for a space that is not pressured or competitive, but instead fosters confidence, friendships, and shared goals. They also value activities that are energising, motivating, and inspiring, while still being practical and structured enough to feel purposeful.

2. Specific Activities and Features

Alongside the desired atmosphere, the girls identified specific activities that capture their interest. These included creative and hands-on options such as art, baking, cake decorating, crafting, nail art, music, and gardening, as well as more relaxed, social activities like movie nights, book club, pamper sessions, LGBTQ+ groups, and gaming. Comfort-based features such as snacks, hot chocolate, beanbags, blankets, and calm lighting were also highlighted as important in creating an enjoyable and appealing experience. In addition, they mentioned activities that build life skills, teamwork, confidence, and achievement, as well as opportunities to get out of the house, connect with peers of a similar age, and make new friends.

Summary

Overall, the girls are looking for activities that balance enjoyment and relaxation with creativity, skill-building, and social connection. The appeal lies not only in what the activity is, but also in how it is delivered; in a warm, inclusive, and supportive environment where they can feel comfortable, confident, and connected to others.

Final Summary

The Hear Her Voice project has demonstrated the value of giving young women and girls the space to share their experiences and shape the conversation about their own lives. Across the themes of Safe Spaces, Girls in Sport, and Creating Her-Place, participants highlighted both the barriers they face and the solutions they believe will create safer, more inclusive, and more empowering environments.

Their voices are clear: young women want to be listened to, taken seriously, and included in shaping the services, policies, and opportunities that affect them. They have shown that they are experts in their own experiences, and that their insights are crucial for making meaningful, lasting change.

For schools, professionals, and organisations, this research should serve as more than just a record of young people's opinions. It is a call to action. The findings provide a reference point to guide decision-making, ensuring that choices about community spaces, education, sport, and wellbeing genuinely reflect the needs and aspirations of girls and young women. Implementing these insights is not only about addressing barriers—it is about creating a culture where young women feel safe, valued, and empowered. When their voices are respected and acted upon, we build communities that are fairer, healthier, and more inclusive for everyone.

We hope this report inspires you to reflect on your role in shaping the future of our community, and to commit to embedding girls' perspectives in the decisions you make. By working together, we can ensure that every young woman has the opportunity to thrive, and that their voices continue to influence positive social change, both locally and beyond.



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We're deeply grateful to all the young people, schools, and partners who took part in Hear Her Voice.

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