Self-harm is a serious issue among young people today. So what is the simplest, most direct and effective way to offer them support in tackling the issue? In Leicestershire, school nurses teamed up with young people to come up with an ingenious solution – a helpline called ChatHealth which relies on smartphones and SMS texting.

ChatHealth is secure, protects confidentiality and anonymity and is monitored by a small team of trained nurses. No message ever goes unanswered, with automated texts signposting alternative sources of help out of hours. The system, indeed, has been so successful that a single nurse can now handle all of the in-hour messaging enquiries from across the county.

It is estimated around 13% of young people may try to hurt themselves at some point between the ages of 11-16, with some experts arguing that the rate of selfharming may have doubled over the last decade.

What is clear is that, with only 1,200 school nurses for 200,000 schools, students cannot always get the help they need. If every NHS Trust adopted a similar model to ChatHealth – although the system was designed specially by a team of software developers after nothing appropriate was found on the market – as few as 30 school nurses could handle all the messaging from young people in the UK, freeing up hundreds of hours of nurse time for other care duties.

Key patient benefits
- Improved choice for young people on when and how to access confidential, nonpersonal help and advice.
- Overcomes stigma – half of all contacts begin anonymously.
- Breaks down social barriers – double the uptake of the service amongst male users compared to face-to-face clinics.

Value for money
- Early contact, due to low barriers to access, prevents escalation to more costly interventions.
- Efficiency gains from triaging messages only a third require any form of face to face intervention.
- Improved inter agency working and reduced duplication.

Next steps
- More than 50 NHS Trusts have expressed an interest.
- Potential to develop a dedicated ChatHealth instant messaging app.
- Scope for virtual clinics and self-help discussion forums via secure video-chat.

A YouTube video explaining ChatHealth can be found [here](https://www.england.nhs.uk/challengeprizes/about/winners/winners-1415/chathealth/).