WE MIND THE GAP™

Understanding the lives of young people in Wrexham and how we can support their needs.

WeMindTheGap Insight Report | 2023

Contents

Executive summary 3

Introduction....3
Context....3
Our approach....3
Summary of findings....4
Considerations....7

The scope of the Big Conversation 11

What are the aims and objectives of The Big Conversation?....11
How did we achieve these aims?....13

What were the findings? 14

PHASE 1. Online Survey: 'Hearing what young people have to say.'....14
Results....14
Discussion....22
PHASE 2. Young people's focus group 1 (Coleg Cambria)....23
Results....24
Discussion....27
PHASE 3. Young people's focus group 2 (Maelor sixth form college)....28
Results....28
Discussion....34
PHASE 4. Young people's focus group 3 (young people from more deprived areas of Wrexham)....35
Results....35
Discussion....40
PHASE 5. On-street and in-person conversations....41
Results....41
Discussion....56
PHASE 6. "Digital Entries- Wrexham Voices."....57
Results....57
Discussion....59
PHASE 7. Parent and teacher insight....60
Results....60
Discussion....68

What does it all mean? 69

Personas....69
Common characteristics....73
Behaviour and behaviour change....73
Turning themes into desired outcomes....77
Learnings....83

Considerations 84

Our journey....87

Some reflections 87

The challenges and learnings....88

Executive summary

Introduction

We know that young people matter. They are our future, and for that reason, they need to flourish. Recent events have taken a toll on our young people's wellbeing, and, despite mounting evidence, we still don't know the true impact of the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and growing climate change concerns.

There are warning signs, though. Young people are falling out of education at alarming rates, dropping out of systems that used to offer them security and failing to utilise support services that they so badly need. We know that it's time to show up for them.

This means we have to work towards a common goal and empower young people to drive change. But first, we need to understand motivations, goals and aspirations, fears and worries, through the lens of young people aged 18-21-years. We cannot guess and we must not assume. It's time to start The Big Conversation.

Context

The adolescent phase is notoriously challenging. Between the ages of 18 and 21, young people are making decisions which transition them from childhood to adulthood. They can only do this successfully with the support of families, friends, and the community. While adolescence is a natural time for change, young people have experienced unprecedented disruption to the systems that typically support them through this phase. Their relationships with their families changed when they were locked down with them. Their trust in leaders diminished when they were blamed for spreading an unknown virus in their communities. They are experiencing concerns about their future because they are witnessing their families coping with frightening financial battles.

Our approach

We specialise in human behaviour change, developing campaigns for social good. We work closely with communities to identify behaviours that contribute to desired social outcomes. Our work spans a broad range of social problems from gender-based violence, to child exploitation, to obesity. Regardless of the nature of the problem or the behaviour we are tackling we always do two things. We speak to the people who matter to ensure that everything we do is codesigned.

And we underpin our work with robust, tried and tested theories of human behaviour. We don't guess and we don't assume.

We were commissioned to work alongside WeMindTheGap, we support their ambition to change the lives of 1000 young people in Wrexham in 1000 days. We drew on their expertise to reach as many young people as possible. With young people aged 18-21 in Wrexham, we carried out a large-scale survey, focus groups in colleges and sixth forms, a focus group with young people not in education or employment, on-street and in-person interviews, and online diary entries. We spoke to parents, teachers, and support staff, too. Our methods were not without their challenges- we learned that we needed to meet young people where they are, and they were not always where we expected them to be.

Using our expertise in human behaviour, we took what we heard from young people we spoke to, and we applied a model of behaviour change to support recommendations for supporting a brighter future for young people in Wrexham. We identified behaviours that need to change at an individual, organisational, and systemic level. We recognise that WeMindTheGap might not be able to action these recommendations alone but, given the breadth of the work they have commissioned, we feel they are well positioned to take their findings and appeal for societal change at all levels.

The full report with analyses of individual research phase is available below. This executive summary gives a brief overview of the main findings, learnings from the project, and recommendations.

Summary of findings

The following details combined findings from all phases of the project.

Who did we speak to?

In total, we heard the voices of 419 young people- this is almost 12% of Wrexham's population of 18-21-year-olds. 242 of these came through digital survey channels (quantitative), 129 from on-street engagement, 34 from focus groups and 14 from interviews (qualitative). Around 60% were female, 35% were male and the remainder identified in another way.

Social but struggling

Sadly, almost half of our young people said that, even when they're with people they know, the don't feel they belong. They appeared, on the surface, to be coping socially, but often only really did so in their 'safe spaces.' Sometimes their safe spaces were in the form of trusted circles of friends (73% told us that they spend their free time seeing their friends in person), sometimes in colleges and schools, but rarely in the wider community.

We asked young people which communities they felt they did belong to, and they told us that being Welsh, being part of a religious or spiritual group, being part of a sports team, being neurodivergent and being part of the LGBTQIA+ community were important to them.

Many of the young people who responded to our surveys were in education or employment (56% in school, 13% in university, 13% working full time, and only 10% not working or in education). When we spoke to young people in schools and colleges, they expressed that these establishments offered them a safe haven but were often not suited to their changing needs. They lacked support to move out of education into employment and often felt steered into traditional routes.

Despite their ability to appear socially engaged, almost half (46%) of our young people told us that, since the covid pandemic, they felt more alone. Even more (49%) told us that they feel more anxious. Alongside these figures, in focus groups and interviews they told us that they experienced high levels of social anxiety particularly in unfamiliar situations such as job interviews.

Diverse and disengaged

In our surveys, 34% of young people told us that they had lost interest in education since the pandemic. In focus groups and interviews they expressed a mistrust in establishments and the government. They are driving acceptance of differences (gender difference, neurodiversity, etc.) but do not feel that their views align with those of decision makers in their communities. They might show up to schools, colleges, and their workplaces but they are no longer engaged.

Despite being cynical and savvy in their social media use, they told us that this is where we would find them. They seek out information, support, and guidance through online social channels and often this is how they communicate with friends and family. It seems they moved online during the pandemic and that is where they have stayed. However, support services are not reaching them there. Despite high social media use (86% use Instagram, 79% use YouTube, 77% use Snapchat, and 71% use TikTok), they did not access local authority, education, or support services through these channels. In fact, they did not feel that these services (e.g., the council website) were designed for them.

Resilient and self-reliant

It isn't all doom and gloom. Despite an apparent lack of support to do so, there are young people who are forging their own routes to success, setting up small businesses, running

podcasts, and turning their passions into money-making schemes. Some young people have emerged from the pandemic with new skills and a thirst for life following long periods of lockdown. They adapted to the new way of living online and working remotely. However, they do feel unsupported in their ventures and express that there is a drive towards traditional academic routes at their age. This frustrates their needs and negatively impacts their motivation.

In our surveys 98% prioritised having good health and 93% prioritised having a happy family life. This was supported in qualitative engagement, where young people often expressed that they wanted to feel a sense of fulfilment in their relationships, their education, and their employment.

Their goals and aspirations were often meaningful, but they might not know how to go about achieving them. The majority of respondents (54%) said they wanted access to financial support, and 50% said they wanted access to professional support.

Let down and just living

In our survey 28% told us that they had given up on things they once enjoyed since the pandemic. We did speak to a higher percentage of people in education and employment, but our qualitative engagement ensured we spoke to a more diverse group of young people. For example, we delivered a focus group for young people not in education or employment. We also interviewed many young people in the community who were either not in work or education or were but were dissatisfied and unfulfilled. They often described a sense of hopelessness and being trapped by their circumstances.

Worryingly, around a quarter of the young people surveyed had a mental health diagnosis. While this figure is high, it is also the tip of the iceberg. In conversations, young people told us that anxiety was at an all-time high and they were worried about their own and their peers' mental wellbeing. They spoke about inaccessible support services and long waiting lists.

The COVID cohort

Around 80% of our young people were living with parents or family members. Our conversations with them told us that they often worried about how they would cope when they wanted to live independently. However, more concerning were the conversations we had with young people who described other young people who had never emerged from the pandemic lockdowns. They were described by their peers as always at home, engaging in unhealthy behaviours (e.g., smoking cannabis), and struggling with mental health.

We acknowledge that this was the group we engaged with the least. However, we did speak to their worried parents and their concerned teachers. They described young people who never left the house, whose confidence and self-esteem levels were low, and whose

prospects seemed bleak. One of the highlights of the project was in the discovery that, in order to reach these young people, you have to go through the people they trust.

Considerations

We were faced with several challenges on this journey, and we spoke to many employers, professionals, parents, teachers, and organisations who expressed that they, too, had faced similar challenges in reaching young people. The overarching theme appears to be that young people exist, communicate, learn, struggle, and thrive differently. If we as a community and service providers are to ensure a strong and bright future for the next generation of employers, professionals, parents, teachers, and organisation leaders, we need to meet them where they are. Recognising and acknowledging their perspectives is the first step in achieving this aim.

We believe that by giving young people autonomy to design and deliver services for young people, we can create a culture shift whereby fewer young people fall through the gaps because the gaps become smaller.

What we see in our research findings is a vast divide between us and them. Service providers need to connect with their beneficiaries to ensure that what they provide is fit for purpose.

We put forward the following recommendations to WeMindTheGap:

WMTG to identify opportunities for re-engagement with young people and EXISTING services and share the findings of this report with them in a way that is relevant to them. Here are some of the recommended routes:

- **Local secondary education institutions (educating 11-18-year-olds).** It was identified through the research that these establishments are not providing enough information to support young people out of education. The focus is on supporting them into higher or further education and this is often not what young people want. There should be sufficient provision in place to support young people into work or alternative routes such as apprenticeships or starting their own businesses. Without this, we risk creating a generation of 16-18-year-olds who will become unfulfilled and directionless adults. Similarly, young people do not feel 'heard' in schools and colleges. WMTG are in a strong position to suggest that all educational establishments ensure that their school councils are developed and run by young people for young people, empowering them to identify what matters to them and challenging a system that evidently does not fit their needs.
- **Job centre and Careers Wales.** It was identified by young people that they do not see these services as accessible. They are viewed by young people as outdated and no longer fit the

needs of young people. They are perceived as often having outdated systems which mean that young people have many steps to take before being able to access them and they do not offer the type of support that young people are asking for. WMTG are in a strong position to share the findings from this research to promote a change in the way these services communicate, engage, and work with young people. Without this, such services risk becoming obsolete, or, at best, they will be utilised to fix problems (i.e., claiming benefits), rather than preventing them (i.e., empowering young people to take ownership of their futures).

- **Local authority.** Young people do not view the local authority or the council as 'for them.' At best, they feel that council services are not relevant to them. At worst, they feel that they are unwelcome in the city. They are unlikely to re-engage without huge effort from the local authority. WMTG are well positioned to recommend that the council works to co-design services and support that they offer to young people in Wrexham. For example, co-designing web content so that young people are signposted to services that are important to them. If the local authority wishes to re-engage young people, they need to support them in designing safe spaces (virtual and physical) that they feel pride in being part of. If WMTG pursue the explorer model, they may be able to provide a link for communication between the local authority and young people.

Charitable organisations, including WMTG. Young people do not know that there are charities who provide some of the support that they are looking for. This indicates that there is a breakdown in communication or, more likely, communication methods. We recommend that WMTG increase their social media presence because young people told us that this is where they communicate, socialise, and share ideas. Co-designing the content of websites, intervention design, and other services with young people is also recommended to ensure that they are fit for purpose. It is worth considering employing a young person to manage WMTG social media content and delivery.

Co-design. Co-design is key to ensure that any intervention is shaped by young people themselves. Without this, there is a risk that more unused and unsuitable services or interventions will be designed with little or no impact.

WMTG to partner with other organisations to develop an innovative 'hub' for young people in Wrexham. Whether the hub is a physical location (fixed), a community of people (mobile), or an online provision should be determined by consultation with young people. Something of this scale is likely to need the collaboration of other organisations, but there is a clear need for 'somewhere' that young people can go to access mental health support, physical health advice, career and financial advice, emotional and social support, spend time with their peers without having to spend money and feel welcome.

This needs to be a non-judgemental space where young people feel they are amongst their own. For that reason, co-design is crucial as is empowering young people to lead on such a project (through employment, volunteering, steering groups, co-creation, etc.).

WMTG to partner with other organisations to develop a 'reset intervention' which enables young people to revisit the years of lost experience and learning that they would have had were it not for the COVID pandemic. The research shows that young people feel they have missed out on essential life skills from using a washing machine or booking a doctor's appointment to attending a job interview or applying to university. It is likely that the role-models in their lives who would ordinarily have supported them to do this were equally affected by COVID and may not recognise that there is still a need. WMTG are in a position to provide young people with a safe space where they can learn how to do activities of daily life, as well as guide them through important decisions that they may have missed out on.

WMTG to partner with a marketing or advertising agency specialising in behaviour change to ensure that they are reaching their target audience. Consider a campaign which highlights some of the issues that young people have spoken about in the research to show young people that they are, in fact, being heard. One clear example of this is young people consistently telling us that they feel left behind/abandoned after the COVID pandemic- this needs to be explicitly acknowledged.

WMTG currently offer services for young people to support them into work and education, but they are sometimes under-subscribed and are mainly implemented in the North of England.

We recommend that WMTG 'test' the current model (including communication efforts, social media platforms, website, etc.) they are using with the target audience with a view to make it more acceptable and recognisable to young people, particularly those who we have identified as 'hidden.' Further testing should be carried out in Wrexham with a view to scaling the current interventions to encourage uptake in Wrexham. This might also be the place to test the explorer model or make use of 'trusted referrers' by reaching young people through the channels that they already trust.

An 'explorer' model was trialled during the research with limited success. However, it was likely that the young people we recruited to implement this model were being asked for quite a large commitment with little commitment in return. It is likely that they did not feel motivated to carry out the work.

However, we also learned that it is challenging to reach young people directly, and they often only spoke to us through trusted referrers- family and friends or services that they already trusted. Because of this, we recommend that WMTG continue with the explorer model, but with more permanency. For example, partnering with organisations and parent groups who support young people and offering more permanent of fixed term contracts for young people to work as 'explorers.' This will not only offer them a tangible employment opportunity but will support them in securing future employment.

Adopt a 'do now', 'do next', 'do later' approach with stakeholders to ensure that all parties involved in collaboration recognise the same long- and short-term goals and their roles in fulfilling them. These goals should be designed collaboratively with key partners and stakeholders.

There is potential for testing interventions in early years (for example, building resilience into primary age school curriculum) which might require the collaboration of academic institutions such as Wrexham University in attempted funding bids. It is recommended that WMTG secure an academic partnership, where possible, with a university who is likely to want to support/collaborate.

The scope of the Big Conversation

What are the aims and objectives of The Big Conversation?

Concerning statistics are slowly uncovering the impact of the last decade's events- particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis- on the health and wellbeing of young people aged 18-21.[1]

Children and adolescents were considered low-risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their wellbeing took a backseat while focus was placed on ensuring they posed little threat to more vulnerable members of society. They were labelled 'super-spreaders'[2,3] and health secretary Matt Hancock, broadcast messages through popular Radio 1 Newsbeat which appealed to young people stating: "Don't kill your gran by catching coronavirus and then passing it on."[4] A culture of blame was promoted which drove young people further into isolation that the COVID-19 lockdowns.[5]

Young people felt major disruption to their educations, prolonged periods of social isolation, and economic instability in their families. These experiences increased their risk of poor mental health outcomes and figures suggest that, within eight months of the COVID-19 pandemic starting, prevalence of children experiencing mental health conditions rose from one in nine children to one in six children.[6]

Fear of spreading the virus exacerbated these issues, with young people experiencing isolation, sleep disturbances, and psychological distress. A recent systematic review[7] highlighted that mental health and psychiatric conditions not only increased in prevalence, but there were high rates of relapse in young people who had previously experienced mental health and psychiatric conditions. In addition, mental health inequalities were further exacerbated; those who were already at increased risk of poor mental health outcomes were further impacted by the financial impact of the pandemic, with families losing income and job security at this time.[8]

Health and wellbeing inequalities were also highlighted when young people who experienced unstable family environments

1 https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/generation-covid-19
2 https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/10/study-confirms-kids-as-spreaders-of-covid-19-and-emerging-variants/
3 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-54076937
4 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-54056771
5 https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/we-will-only-learn-covid-lessons-if-blame-culture-inquiries-rooted-out
6 https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017
7 https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00787-021-01856-w
8 https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2021-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey#summary

through abuse and neglect were forced to stay home and their usual infrastructures of support were no longer available to them through school closures and disruptions to services.[9] There is a generation of 'missing' young people, with overwhelming rises in the number of children who are not attending education whether registered or not, not in employment, and not on the streets where they might once have been traditionally found.[10] NHS and Public Health Wales report that the building-blocks for good mental health outcomes were so severely disrupted for young people that they are more susceptible to the negative outcomes of the pandemic than many other groups.[11]

WeMindTheGap [12] (WMTG) provide young people with meaningful opportunities. They empower young people to move from being 'prisoners of circumstance' to 'pilots of their own lives.' Their programmes have proven efficacy and impact. But WMTG acknowledge that there are young people who they cannot find; they are not going to college in expected numbers, they are not applying for entry level jobs, they are not taking up the opportunities available to them. WMTG are not alone in this challenge. Employers are struggling to fill entry level jobs, charities and agencies are struggling to recruit to their programmes, and many are aware of young people who are 'lost to the system.'

WeMindTheGap have endeavoured to speak to as many young people aged 18-21-years in Wrexham to form a true picture of the lives of those young people following the COVID-19 pandemic. WeMindTheGap want to know:

- What life is like for young people aged 18-21 living in Wrexham, post-Covid.
- What support and infrastructures young people in Wrexham want and how this might have changed since the pandemic.
- What behaviours (individual, community, or systems-wide) need to change in order to elicit positive outcomes for young people?

To do this, WMTG initiated The Big Conversation- a big brave conversation that recognises the reality that many of our young people are isolated and disengaged and initiates a social movement for change: a social movement of voices in the community that recognises today's reality and moves towards creating meaningful and relevant opportunity for tomorrow.

With all the lessons and learnings from that, and leveraging the power of our community, we will signpost, support, connect, encourage 1,000 of our young people to the right opportunity for them - whether employment, education, training, volunteering.

9 http://www.vamhn.co.uk/uploads/1/2/2/7/122741688/safe_seen_supported_chevous-fischer-perot-sweeney.pdf

10 https://news.sky.com/story/thousands-of-pupils-missing-and-authorities-dont-know-where-they-are-12910081

11 https://phw.nhs.wales/news/learnings-from-pandemic-can-help-young-people-in-wales-mental-health-and-wellbeing-in-the-future/#:~:text=There%20is%20strong%20evidence%20of,health%20or%20additional%20learning%20needs.

12 https://wemindthegap.org.uk/

How did we achieve these aims?

WeMindTheGap partnered with Hitch Marketing to carry out a series of engagement activities with young people in Wrexham and stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and local decision-makers. Each phase of activity informed the next to enable young people to co-design the activities and final recommendations.

The phases were:

1 An online survey - 'hearing what young people have to say'

2 A qualitative survey **'Wrexham voices'**

3 On-street interviews at various events and in Wrexham town centre

4 In-person focus groups with college & sixth form students

5 On-line focus group with young people from more deprived areas of Wrexham

6 Interviews with teachers and parents of 18–21 year-olds

7 Stakeholder engagement events

At the end of all phases of research, "desired outcomes" were identified that aligned with what young people told us they wanted or needed (their themes).

We then explored existing evidence to identify the behavioural drivers of these outcomes, whether at the level of the individual, community, or systems. Descriptions of these can be found within the 'behaviour and behaviour change' chapter.

What were the findings?

Results

WE MIND THE GAP™

PHASE 1. Online Survey: ‘Hearing what young people have to say.’

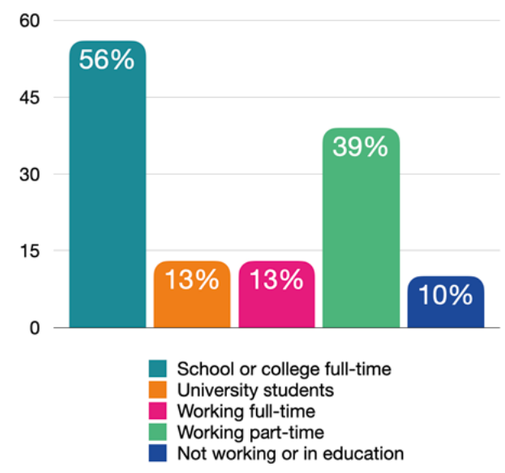
The survey asked young people about their daily lives and routines, how these had been impacted by COVID-19 and what, if anything, they wanted to change about them.

It also asked about their goals and aspirations, experiences of mental wellbeing, and support networks around them.

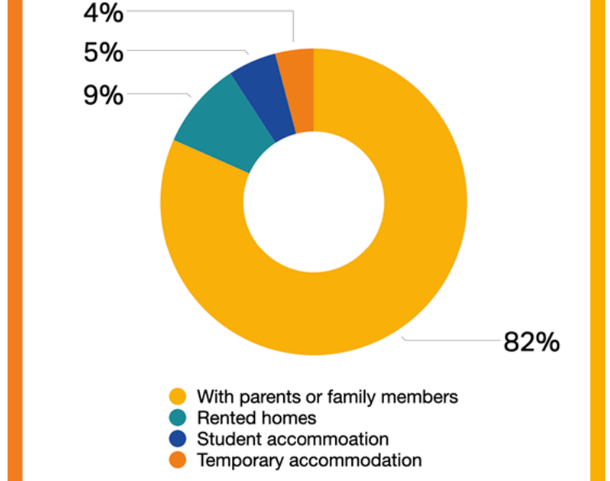
A copy of the survey is available on request.

218

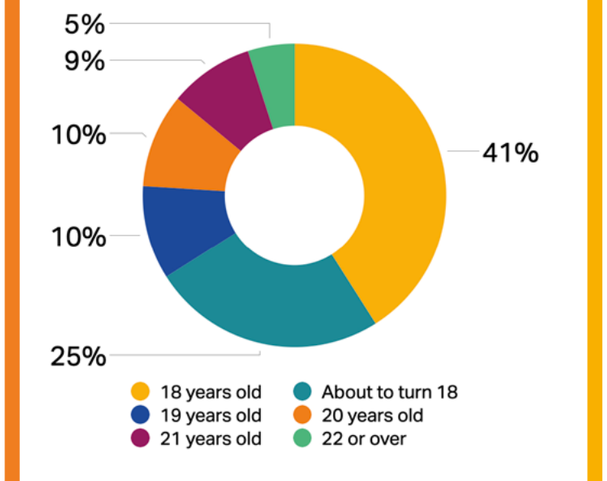
young people completed the survey



Employment and education status

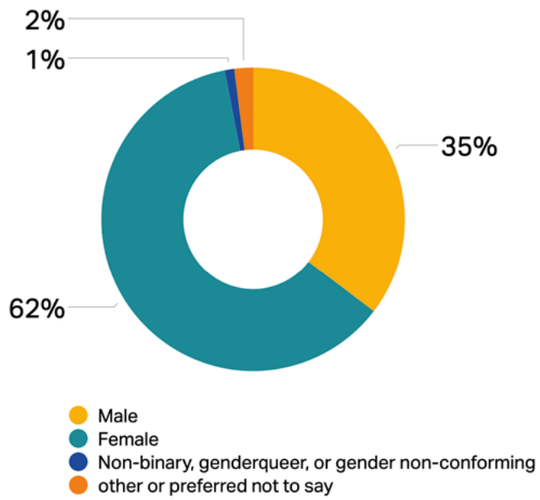


Residential status

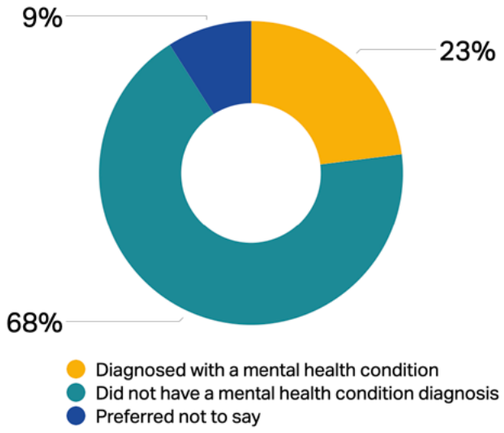


Age

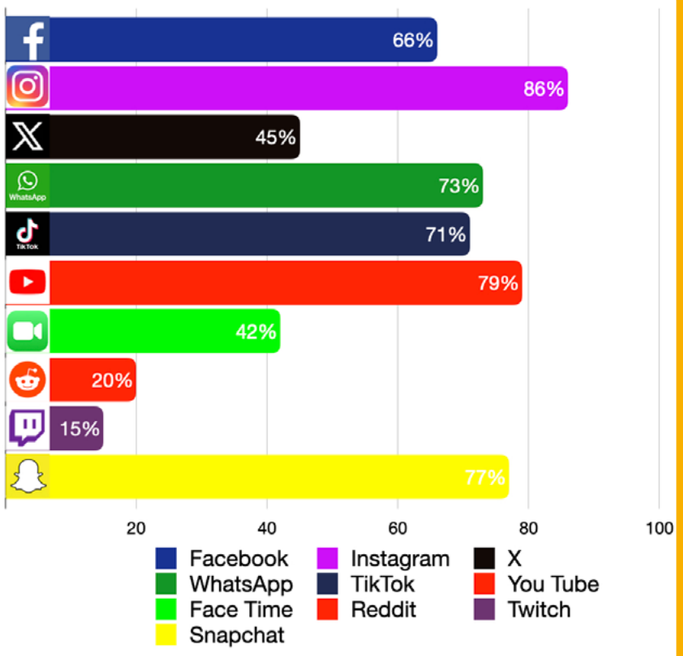
RESULTS



Gender



Mental health



Social media use

Engagement activities in spare time

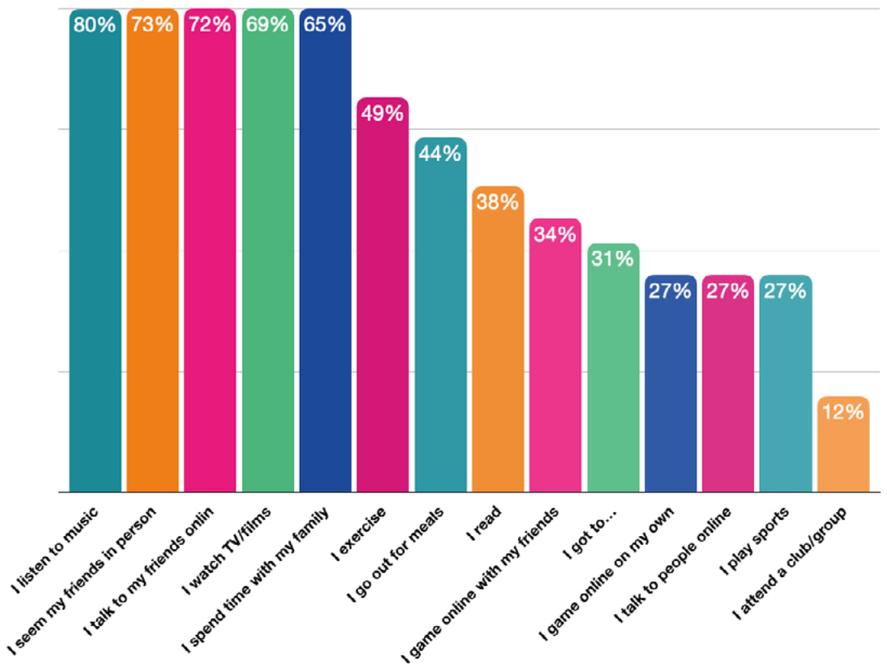


Figure 1. Engagement activities in spare time.

The things that young people spent more than 10 hours per day engaging with were seeing my friends in person and listening to music. They spend 4-6 hours talking to friends online.

They spent 1-3 hours per day watching TV, going out for meals, and exercising. They spent less than one hour per day gaming online with friends or on their own, playing sports, attending a club/group, reading, and going to clubs/bars.

Impact of the pandemic lockdowns

Since the pandemic:

- Almost half (46%) feel more alone.
- Almost half (49%) feel more anxious.
- Almost half (42%) spend more time alone.
- 34% have lost interest in education.
- 34% experienced mental or physical ill health.
- 28% gave up on things they once enjoyed.
- More than half (55%) said that COVID-19 still impacts their life.

When asked to express how COVID-19 was still impacting their lives, free text responses suggested that:

- Education is still being impacted.
- Socialising is difficult.
- Spending time with people face-to-face is more important.

- Years of experience and potential to grow and mature have been 'lost'.
- Anxiety is a by-product of the pandemic lockdowns.

> *"I missed out on key knowledge I could have learned if it was in the normal conditions."*

> *"Just in general, the whole world has changed since then, everyone's definitely more inclined to enjoy their physical time with one another nowadays."*

> *"Feel behind in life."*

> *"Have not got as many friends and struggling in college."*

> *"I've become less social."*

> *"I think it's made me more anxious; I struggle to find motivation to do work."*

> *"I am a lot more anxious now than I was before covid. It impacts me in some normal life activities and hits me when least expected."*

Confidence and empowerment

When asked about their sense of empowerment and confidence, the findings were:

- Half agreed that they felt content with what they were doing, they were happy with who they are as a person, they know what they want in life, and they know how to achieve it. The other half either did not know (average 33%) or disagreed (average 14%).
- 81% were happy with their friends and family.
- Between 45-50% all agreed that they lead purposeful lives, their friendships are rewarding, they are engaged and interested in daily activities, they do things to make others happy, they are good at what matters to them, they are a good person, they are respected, and they respect themselves.

Goals and aspirations

When asked about their goals and aspirations, the findings showed that young people prioritised:

- Having good health (98%).
- Having sufficient wealth to buy what they want (97%).
- Feeling a sense of satisfaction with their accomplishments (95%).
- Having a happy family life (93%).
- Having a job that they enjoy (91%).
- Being educated (91%).
- Having the ability to live wherever they want (87%).
- Being admired by others (67%).
- Being popular (38%).

However, the likelihood of them achieving those goals showed the following:

- While 98% prioritised good health, only 68% felt it was either very likely or likely that they would achieve this.
- While 97% prioritised having sufficient wealth, only 66% felt it was either very likely or likely that they would achieve this.
- While 95% prioritised a sense of satisfaction with their accomplishments, only 73% felt it was either very likely or likely that they would achieve this.
- While 93% prioritised having a happy family life, only 77% felt it was either very likely or likely that they would achieve this.
- While 91% prioritised having a job they enjoy, only 76% felt it was either very likely or likely that they would achieve this.
- While 91% prioritised being educated, 88% felt it was either very likely or likely that they would achieve this.
- While 87% prioritised being able to live wherever they want, only 70% felt it was either very likely or likely that they would achieve this.
- While 67% prioritised being admired by others, 47% felt it was either very likely or likely that they would achieve this.
- While 38% prioritised being popular, 32% felt it was either very likely or likely that they would achieve this.

In free-text responses, respondents were asked to describe their long- or short-term goals. The following themes were identified:

- **Education** - many had goals that centred around university and college.
- **Dream home** - many had goals that centred on having a nice home.
- **Financial stability** - many expressed wanting good finances and a well-paid job.
- **Helping others** - many expressed wanting to do good in their communities.
- **Happiness** - being happy without specific goals was cited frequently.
- **Happy family** - family stability was cited frequently.

> *"To buy my Dream house in the country with a big garden, build my dream pond with fish in it and work in a park ranger job that pays well."*

> *"My short-term goals are to move to Leicester to complete my 3 years of dance university. My long-term goals are to have my own dance studio local in Wrexham to help young kids find their passion and talents."*

> *"I want to go to the university and study for nursing then find a job and start working. And may start my own family."*

> *"I want to be able to spend time with my friends and family. Enjoy days out and good food without money worries."*

> *"I want to make a difference in the veterinary community and encourage BAME people to pursue a career in veterinary science."*

> *"To be happy and live a happy life with my own little family."*

> *"I would like to go to Cambridge University, graduate with a first in Classics and go on to be a fantasy author. (This answer proves my ability to write fantasy, I suppose)."*

> *"My goal is to become a qualified primary teacher, move to a little village in south Wales and someday start a family."*

> *"To be the best version of myself and to improve throughout life"*

Social life, community and belonging

Respondents were asked questions about their sense of belonging. The findings were:

- Almost half (49%) agreed or strongly agreed that, even when they're with people they know, they don't feel that they belong.
- 29% agreed or strongly agreed that they don't feel they can relate to anyone.
- 42% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt connected to society.
- 54% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt part of a community.

Young people were asked which groups they closely identified with. The free-text responses showed the following groups as frequently cited:

- Being Welsh
- Being part of a religion or having spiritual beliefs
- Being part of a sports team or club or a gym community
- Being neurodivergent
- Being part of the LGBTQIA+ community

When asked about the importance of being part of a community, the following themes were identified:

- Shared interests. It was felt that being part of a community or group meant that you were surrounded by likeminded people with similar goals and aspirations.
- Mental wellbeing. It was acknowledged that mental health is positively impacted by having strong social and community connections.
- Being accounted for and supported. Some cited that they felt their communities would check in on them if there was something wrong and that they felt supported because of this.
- A sense of belonging. Being part of a group or community gave young people a strong sense of belonging.

Challenges, communication and finding support

Young people were asked about specific challenges they might face, who they trust to turn to for support and where they are likely to find that support.

When asked who they turn to for life advice or support, the most likely people were friends, with 82% saying that is where they would go. Family followed closely at 79%, followed by teachers and a partner (38 and 32% respectively). Colleagues came in at 20%, online platforms and the NHS were 12-13%. Employers were 10%. Perhaps surprisingly, social media influencers were only 5%. The council and job centre were only 1%.

When asked what they would like support with, the findings showed the following:

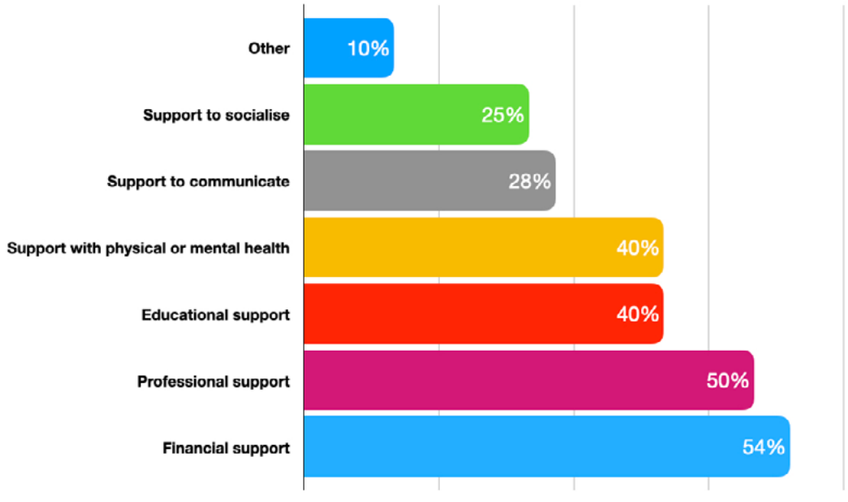


Figure 2. Types of support that young people would like to access.

Respondents were asked in what ways they felt their mental wellbeing had been supported. The following themes were identified:

- Having autonomy. Young people cited that they took care of their wellbeing through their own means. They were adept at identifying activities that are protective of mental health and utilising them. Frequently cited activities were taking part in sports, exercise, being outdoors, and prayer and spirituality.
- Friends and family. Young people cited the support of loved ones such as friends, family, and partners as providing invaluable support. Having a strong support network played a key role in supporting mental well-being.
- Education and workplace support. Many young people cited their colleges, universities, and workplaces as sources of support. There were mentions of college and university mentors, progress coaches, and peer supporters. Some support was specific to the individual needs, such as autism-specific guidance at university.
- No support. Unfortunately, there were several citations of feeling unsupported. Comments suggested that, despite reaching out for support, some young people still felt that it was not forthcoming. There were mentions of long telephone calls, long waiting lists, and poor referral pathways.

Discussion

While many of our survey respondents were college and university students who were living at home with parents, it is worth noting that almost one quarter of respondents carried a mental health diagnosis. This figure is in line with wider Welsh statistics for mental health, where it is evidenced that severe mental health problems were reported in 11.7% of people pre-pandemic and 28.1% of people post-pandemic. [13]

There seems to be a gap in service provision for young people seeking mental health support in Wrexham, with many citing that they had not felt supported in this domain.

A positive finding from the survey was that young people appear socially engaged and cite seeing friends in person as one of the activities they do most. However, it is worth noting that social activities that are likely to involve collaborating with strangers (team sports or joining a club or group) were much lower on the list, at only 27% and 12% respectively.

This was reinforced by young people stating that they were still socially impacted by the pandemic lockdowns and that they continued to find it hard to socialise. Sadly, almost half of our respondents said that the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the lockdown periods, had made left them feeling more lonely, more anxious, and more likely to spend time alone. Despite returning to 'normal', their education and socialising were still impacted. Free text analysis suggested that they felt that they had missed an important stage of educational development and maturation and they were now having to 'fill in the gaps' without the right support.

The main findings from the survey are that there is ongoing impact of the pandemic. Young people are still experiencing challenges with their mental health, socialising, and feelings of isolation.

Services that are available to them may no longer be appropriate as they once shifted their lives online and are now expected to seamlessly move to in-person engagement.

13 https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/2534728-share-of-people-in-wales-experiencing-severe-mental-health-issues-more-than-doubled-during-pandemic,-report-finds#:~:text=The%20share%20of%20people%20in,to%20the%20pre%2Dpandemic%20period.

PHASE 2. Young people's focus group 1 (Coleg Cambria)

The first of three focus groups were held with a diverse group of students from Coleg Cambria. Participants volunteered, and their time was reimbursed. The initial aim of the focus groups was to develop an 'explorer model' whereby young people would be recruited to act as co-researchers, engaging other young people in qualitative interviews. However, a lack of engagement prevented this model from being implemented with young people outside of WMTG's existing cohort.

The objectives of the co-design session were threefold:

- To support the design of the survey development (see research plan for more details). The survey was designed by the research team at Hitch, but it was important to gain feedback from young people to ensure that they related to the language, tone of voice, and type of questions that were being asked. We also wanted to ensure that we were asking the right questions.
- To begin conversations with young people. While we acknowledge that young people in education are not necessarily the 'lost voices', conversations with members of the college staff team did that suggest the lives of young people in education had been affected by the Covid pandemic. They have become similarly disengaged, struggle with social connectedness, and face challenges with communicating their wants and needs. Thus, it was determined that we would not 'exclude' certain demographics (e.g., young people in employment or education) from the conversations.
- To recruit to future research and co-research activities. We wanted to gauge the responses of young people when approached to take part in further research. Pervious research had pointed to peer-to-peer activity as being a potential means of communicating with young people.

A member of the Hitch team led and facilitated the sessions with support from a member of WMTG and a student support officer from the college.

A total of 11 participants attended the session, aged between 16-24 years, all residents of Wrexham.

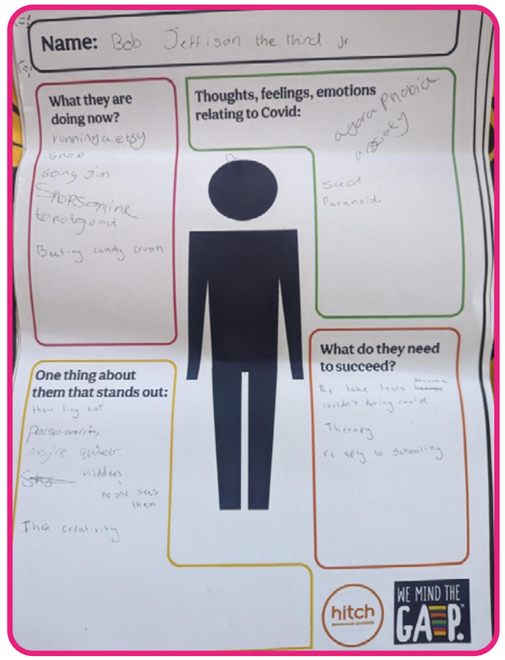
A discussion guide was used to structure the session (available in appendix). The session was not recorded, but notes were made in order to identify common themes.

Results

The following themes were identified in the results of the co-creation session:

A vision of young people in Wrexham.

Persona development during focus groups enabled participants to describe their own lives, but with some detachment from the issue. When asked to develop 'personas' to describe young people and what their lives might be like, the group expressed that there were misconceptions about what young people do with their time.



While some do engage with virtual platforms (social media, gaming, etc.) more and more, others are still 'in attendance' but finding it more difficult to be engaged.

The personas they described were college students who showed poor attendance and struggled with the social aspect of college, young people struggling with mental health concerns and people living with addiction.

The personas were described as quiet and 'unseen' and there were suggestions that physical appearance might be an indicator of inter- or intra-personal problems, such as dying hair or changing usual appearance.

A "new" drug problem.

Participants were asked to discuss things that were more difficult, easier, or just different as a result of the COVID pandemic. There were interesting conversations around an increasing drug problem, even in the college. Some participants shared that young people would come into the college and take ketamine and cocaine.

They are registered students and appear to be functioning within the academic environment, but the reality is quite different. They are struggling with socialising, communicating their wants and needs, and issues with health-damaging behaviours.

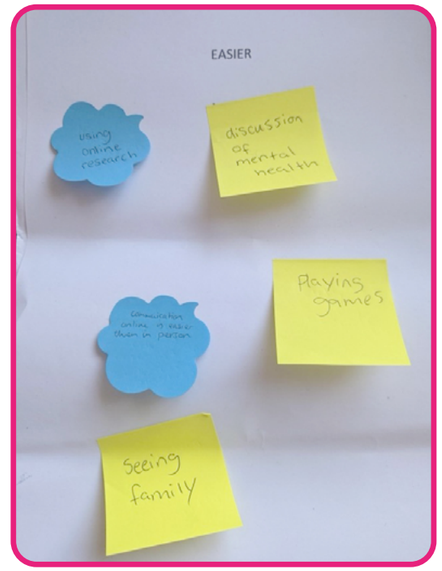
During covid, drugs were harder to get hold of initially, but then creative online means of accessing drugs made it easier than ever. Since the lockdowns have ended, drugs are still available online. Participants expressed that this extends to their social circles, where they felt that there were very few social events (such as parties) where drugs were not readily available.

Drugs were also mentioned as an ongoing cause of poor mental health - young people "got used to just sitting at home smoking weed" and they hadn't emerged since. There were examples of young people who were still at home smoking cannabis and struggling with their mental health. Some participants felt that there was confusion over whether the poor mental health outcomes were a result of smoking cannabis or a result of the lockdowns.

Family dynamics and social connectedness.

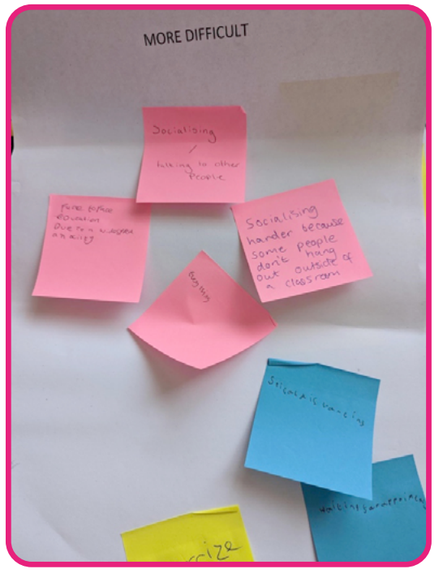
Mental health, isolation, loneliness, and fear were spoken about a great deal. Participants expressed that the lockdowns resulted in young people being scared to socialise. They were familiar with 'agoraphobia' and felt that many of them were experiencing this since the lockdowns had ended. This did not affect just the young participants directly, but they spoke about the ways in which the new sense of isolation had impacted their family relationships. Some older people were still fearful of catching covid or had become 'acclimatised' to a new socially restricted way of living, meaning that some of the young people in the room hadn't seen their older relatives for long periods of time.

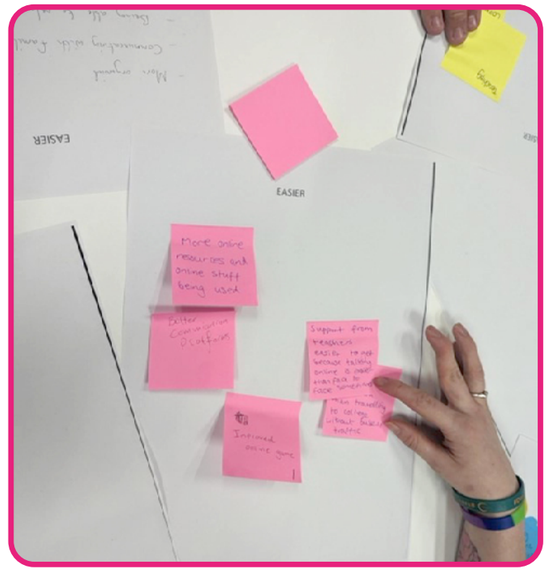
It was interesting to note that some spoke about developing more positive relationships with their immediate families, describing the lockdowns as 'make or break' for many of them. They also expressed the socialising online had become easier and a preferred means of communication.



However, socialising was consistently described as more difficult and there was a sense that

young people no longer knew how to. They had developed different ways of communicating and were often more comfortable doing this via a screen rather than face-to-face.





Changes in service provision and access

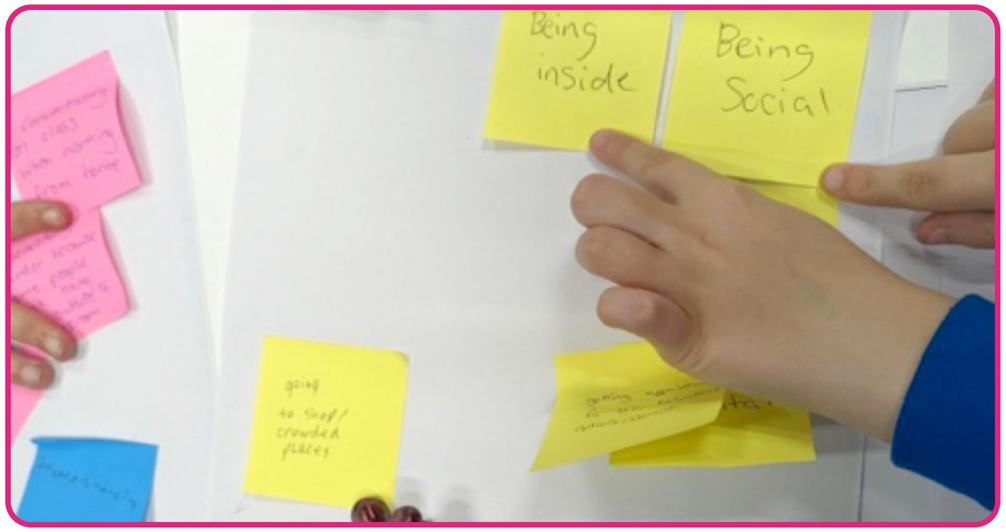
Participants spoke about ongoing difficulties with accessing healthcare services such as mental health support and many felt that the waiting times were just a legacy of the COVID pandemic and were no longer necessary. Waiting times are long and there is no easy way to access services. They also felt that there were barriers to accessing services that were not in place before the COVID lockdowns.

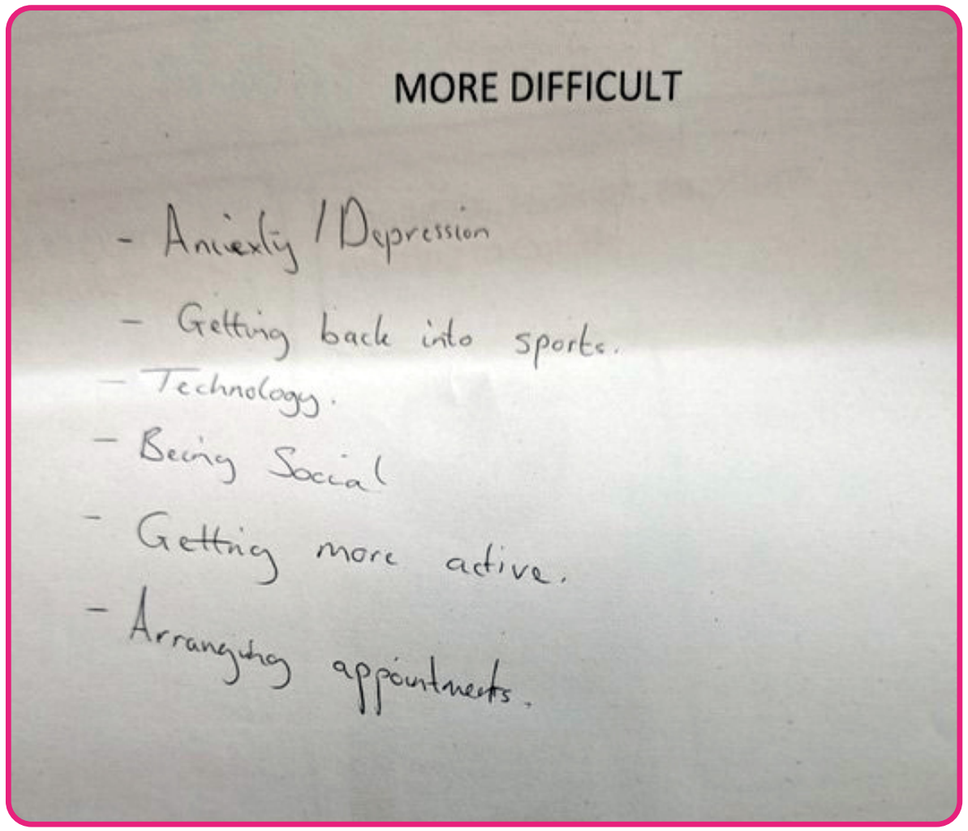
However, it was also felt that mental health was now spoken about more freely and that social media had supported this. Participants felt that young people were more willing to engage in conversations about mental wellbeing now and that the impact of COVID on you people's mental health was well publicised.

> ***"You have to go through the Hunger Games to get an appointment"- participant.***

Changing health behaviours

Many participants described being unable to continue participation in health-related behaviours such as sport and physical activity. They felt that they had become inaccessible during the pandemic and, as a result, were more difficult to engage with now.





At the end of the focus groups, the young people were shown contents of the survey and asked to feed into the design so that the team could determine that we were asking the right questions and addressing topics that are important to young people. Following their feedback, elements of the survey were redesigned before it was made live.

Discussion

The findings from the focus group suggested an over-arching theme of 'indirect impact of the pandemic lockdowns.' Young people expressed that their family dynamics had changed- bonds were formed but some also broken when young people were forced to stay at home. There were new social problems that had been driven by the lockdowns, and services (health, social care, education support, etc.) were less accessible to them now. Young people acknowledged that there were necessary changes as a result of the pandemic, but also felt that excuses were made for poor services despite a return to 'normal.'

PHASE 3. Young people's focus group 2 (Maelor sixth form college)

9 young people (N=3 male and N=6 female) were recruited from Maelor sixth form to take part in a focus group with a member of the Hitch team. The aim of the group was to identify the needs of young people who were in education but might still have required additional support. We also wanted to gain insight about the impact of COVID-19 on young people who had been educated during the lockdown phases.

Results

The following themes were identified from each activity:

What are the big issues in Wrexham?

Participants were tasked with identifying the "big issues" in their lives in Wrexham. The things that were identified were:

Pressure to do well. Particularly in an academic setting, it was felt that there was pressure to succeed. This was particularly salient for participants who were in their A-level exam period.

Social media. It was felt that there was a link between social media use and negative mental health. Participants expressed that mental health and mental illness was romanticised on social media. The negative elements of mental health are not seen through a social media lens. It was described as "treating mental illness as a positive thing."

Social media expectations. Participants expressed that they experienced negative social comparisons on social media. "Looking at other people and thinking I should be doing that, and it makes me feel bad about what I'm doing."

Social media and negative image. It was expressed that social media engagement increased negative self-esteem issues and negative body image issues.

Younger ages groups vaping. The group unanimously agreed that this was a new problem.

Lack of mental health support. Long waiting lists for mental health support and no realistic support within schools were cited by participants.

Attitudes changing since COVID-19. There was a sense that people were more cautious and less willing to take risks since the COVID pandemic. "People are a bit more cautious- it's definitely changed."

Lack of post-18-year support. Participants expressed that they felt that their guidance was heavily focused on doing well in an academic setting but, if they were not academically strong, they felt 'left to one side'.

They had to source their own information about alternative routes into employment or apprenticeships. Careers Wales and other services are hard to access. "They kind of gave up on us because we were in COVID".

Exam motivation. Despite pressure to do well, many participants felt that their motivation for exams was impacted by COVID. Many of them had never experienced exam settings and had felt that they were unprepared for them. They were not formally assessed for their GCSE's and were unsure of their own true abilities. There was a sense that the predicted grades they were awarded during the COVID pandemic might not align with their actual abilities.

Resilience. It was felt that people were less resilient than they had been before the COVID pandemic.

Education about life. Students expressed that they had experienced education about life outside of school (e.g., sex education, how to manage finances, etc.) when they were too young to appreciate it and now they were not given any education outside of their academic curriculum. They felt that they had to seek their own information and they did not receive things such as taster sessions for subjects that they might want to take/focus on.

Focus on university. It was felt that there was a drive towards higher education, but there was limited information about anything else. Participants felt that they had to access their own information online in order to find out what else is available to them. This limits the potential of individuals who are not academically strong but might excel in other fields.

Word association

Participants were given a labelling exercise, to elicit their immediate thoughts and feelings about issues that had been identified in previous research. The table below shows the results of the activity.

Word given to participants	Participant responses
“Happiness”	Stress, summer, music, musicals, family, friends, pizza.
“Stress”	Exams, school, pressure to achieve, where to go next, uni entry requirements, interviews.
“Fulfilment”	Happiness, completion, achieving good grades.
“Wrexham”	Underfunded, Ryan Reynolds, bad hospital, Ty Pawb, events, food market.
“Mental health”	Depression, decline, lack of support, lack of awareness, lack of education
“Courage”	Taking chemistry, overcoming challenges, moving out of family home, decision-making
“COVID-19”	Crazy, lock down, bubble, fear, unknown, trapped, school assessments changed, lack of communication, isolation
“Family”	Busy, supportive, close, complicated, stress
“Difficult”	Exams, school, post-18 decisions, life, time constraints, juggling
“School”	Friends, cold library, free periods
“Social media”	Self-esteem, comparison, control, addictive, time-wasting, time-consuming, doomscrolling, informative, tool, negative, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram
“Physical health”	Sport, food, eating healthily, exercise, sleep
“Future”	Doom, exciting, uncertain, challenging, disappointment

Addressing the big issues

Participants were split into smaller groups and asked to complete an 'intervention design' task where they took on the role of either parents, council members, or their school, universities, or workplace. Their role was to design an intervention that addressed one of the Big Issues that had identified in the first activity.

Wrexham council and the lack of post-18 support

The group that was assigned the role of Wrexham Council chose to cover the issue of poor support for over 18's leaving education.

> ***"So, to generally make the post-18 process more accessible and easier for students by having dedicated departments. So, for example charities at committed schools or people who are more sort of educated in that area, more concise web pages and they're able to put appointments more easily with free advisers or company representatives regarding post-18 opportunities."- group spokesperson.***

The group expressed that they did not feel that the local authority website and its contents were relevant to them and this had prevented them from attempting to access or utilise it. When asked if they used council websites when looking for support, all members of the groups said that they did not. The group agreed that the council needed a fresher approach if they were to engage young people their age; ensure they had a strong social media presence, codesign their marketing campaigns with young people, and make their website easy to navigate and accessible to all.

Educational institutions and mental health

The group that was assigned the role of schools, universities, or workplaces chose to focus on mental health in their school. They expressed that there was a lot of focus on doing well academically without consideration for the mental wellbeing of students. They felt that there needed to be a more tailored approach to encouraging students. The group described assemblies where they were given talks by teachers who were encouraging them to focus on their grades and do well in exams.

For some students this was motivational but for others, who lacked confidence in their academic abilities, this felt pressurised and actually negatively impacted motivation.

The group suggested that tailoring this approach to individual students or groups of students might mitigate this issue.

It was expressed that, when they did achieve good grades, there was a push to do even better, and this could also damage motivation:

> ***"I feel like everything's very much like, oh, you've got your first A of the year, like, oh, let's get the A star. They're pushing constantly for the best. And I know why, but just reinforcing that, 'cause I think it means that people sort of give up. They're like, oh, I'm never gonna get there. So, I'm never gonna be successful."- groups spokesperson.***

It was also expressed that young people felt there was sufficient education surrounding mental health but not mental ill health. Young people said that they felt their first points of contact (teachers) for mental health support were unlikely to be able to point them in the right direction or support them appropriately because there was a general lack of understanding of mental ill health.

Importantly, young people felt that it was important that the staff did not assume that they understood the mental wellbeing needs of the students, but that they ensured they consulted with young people to find out what those needs are:

> ***"...asking how students feel or what they want to see as well. Teachers just assume that they know what's best or they think they know what to do, but actually if they spoke to us about how we feel, they'd find out. I think what they think is going to improve things for us, but actually if they'd spoke to us they would realise that that's the opposite of what we want." – group spokesperson.***

They also felt that these needs should be addressed on a more systemic level with open communication between different levels of the system and between staff and pupils.

> ***"And communicating with other teachers and people around the school because everything seems to happen at the same time, so all the deadlines and everything happens. Whereas if they just spoke to each other then maybe spreading things would just lessen the pressure a little bit. Because then they get stressed and then we get stressed."- group spokesperson.***

Parents and educating young people about 'life'

The final group were representing parents and chose the issue of general life skills. They expressed that information often came to them through their parents and that they would like their parents to be able to access more readily available and easy to translate information about life skills.

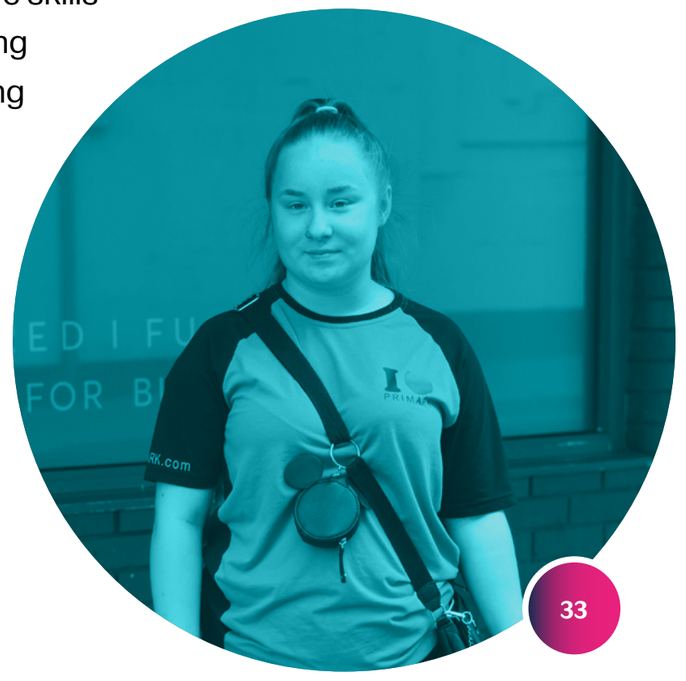
They expressed that they had recently had to complete UCAS applications and, when they had turned to their parents for advice, their parents were often as inexperienced and confused by the process as they were. This was also the case with student finances and securing student accommodation. The group felt that parents needed to be better equipped in order to support young people into independence.

Young people in the group also expressed that they had only succeeded in finding information about non-academic routes when their parents were already educated in such matters. For example, one young person had a parent who had been able to assist them in securing an apprenticeship because he worked in the same field himself. The young person expressed that, without his father, he would not have known where to find the information and would like to have started employment in any job that would take him on.

> ***"A lot of parents do want to help, but they're not quite sure how."***
> *- group spokesperson.*

The group wanted to see better communication between the school and parents so that parents were aware of what their children were being taught, what was on the curriculum, and what decisions they were having to make for their future.

They also wanted their parents to understand that they wished to be taught life skills such as managing money, paying bills, securing credit, and running a home.



Discussion

The young people who took part in this focus group were very engaged in the agenda and offered some simple and feasible solutions to problems that they had identified. This highlights the importance of co-designing policies and practices, particularly in educational settings, with young people.

The group were all preparing for exams and applying to universities, so it is unsurprising that the group expressed high levels of stress and pressure. However, it is worth noting that one of the sources of pressure that was frequently mentioned throughout the session was post-18 decisions. They generally felt steered towards academic routes with little support for those who were less academic. Where pupils were inclined to other career paths, they felt that they were being left to 'fend for themselves.'

The participants were very sympathetic to the pressures that are on teaching staff and parents, but there was a sense that pressure to do well filtered down to them and this sometimes meant that mental well-being was not prioritised. A more tailored approach, particularly when working with school-leavers, might be required to mitigate this.

PHASE 4. Young people's focus group 3 (young people from more deprived areas of Wrexham)

When carrying out our engagement work, we realised that we were having limited success with people living in more deprived areas of Wrexham. We had spoken to many college and university students, but had spoken to fewer people who were not in work or education. Despite visiting areas of deprivation in Wrexham, these were still a group that we were finding it harder to reach. We held an online focus group for young people who came from some of the more deprived areas of Wrexham in order to support their engagement with the research without having to make face-to-face contact.

Results

A total of 6 young people attended the online focus group. The following themes were identified from the data collected:

Trapped

Some of the young people in the group were employed but felt that they had been forced to take jobs that they didn't really want because of a competitive job market. These jobs were retail and hospitality, and the young people expressed frustration at having to work long hours to earn a decent living. Without working additional hours, they would struggle to make ends meet.

When asked what they saw for their future, they expressed that they would like to be able to secure more attractive roles, but that they felt there was some discrimination against them because of their age. Their lack of experience meant that they were often unsuitable for jobs, but not being able to secure they type of role they wanted meant they continued to by inexperienced.

Similarly, having to work long hours and having very little free time meant that they were not in a strong position to improve their employment skills, refine their CVs and apply for different jobs. Some participants had second part-time jobs in addition to their main full-time employment.

> ***"And I felt like my only option was to just find a job in retail and keep that for whenever, for as long as possible. And even now, I don't see myself ever getting out of it."***

"I do work in a pub in Wrexham as well so I do that because obviously the cost of living and things like that I can't just survive off one wage."

"I'm having to do two jobs and I just had to apply for another job."

"I think there are a lot of workplaces that are quite discriminative of age. They think that you can't do the job because you don't have the amount of experience, but I don't think they realise we can't get the experience if they won't give us a job."

"I would just like to not have to work for so many hours for no money basically."

"I was working like 70 hours a week for minimum wages- £6."

"So, I used to do the weekend shifts all the time, and it takes a massive toll on your mental health, constantly being shouted at by customers."

"And I think the main problem is when you're first getting a job, when you're coming out of school, college, whatever, you're first getting a job, hospitality is normally the only ones that take people in."

Non-academic support

As has been stressed by many participants throughout this insight work, this group of young people stated that they had not been offered support for career goals that were non-academic or traditional roles. They felt that, from school, they had been steered towards higher education and there was no diversity in the support they could access. According to one participant, a useful service that she had found in Wrexham to support with setting up a business was closing down and would no longer be available.

"I feel like we've been so bubbled and shadowed in Wrexham to think that you need to have that nine to five job, you need to do this, you need to do that."

"But if you asked in school that you want to set up your own business, they'd look at your daft."

Social anxiety

This group strongly felt that social anxiety was problematic for them following COVID-19. It was cited as a reason for not attempting to reach their goals of securing better jobs because they were worried about having to attend face-to-face interviews. When probed further, some participants said that they had been used to doing everything online during lockdown and now they were unable to push themselves out of their ever-decreasing comfort zones. Some said that this was the reason they had taken the jobs they were in- they had been able to walk into bars and restaurants and secure employment almost immediately without having to go through lengthy interview processes.

> *"I used to be fine with talking to people over the phone or I used to be quite confident before COVID. I'd speak to anybody. But then as soon as COVID hit and then lockdown and everything else it was just me with my family. Now if I apply for a job or they say that they'll phone me or something I like crumble and I'm just like no! The terror of phone calls. And then it's like I think 'why am I letting just a little phone call stop me having a job or me having an interview?' or something like that. But I think COVID has impacted that a lot."*

> *"I had an interview today and my anxiety was through the roof. Because of COVID, I missed out on pretty much nearly, like, two years of life."*

> *"No I definitely say that um having your cameras turned off and maybe interviewing like a group of people you know like we're doing now rather than just targeting one person."*

Autonomy

When asked what they felt they would benefit from in the local area, the participants unanimously agreed that they should be supported to design a "hub" that they run themselves which enables young people to come and seek mental health support, learn about life skills, find out information about employment

opportunities, and socialise without the pressure of alcohol and drugs. They felt that they had little ownership over service provision in the local area and no decision-making powers. The group expressed that, on low or no income, there was very little for them to do in the local area. Given the opportunity, they would like to support young people to come together to socialise without it costing them.

> *"Well everything consists of money and obviously if you're only part-time or if you don't work then you obviously haven't got that money."*

> *"I just think that there's literally nothing for us to do unless it involves money. You go to Starbucks and you have to spend six pounds on a drink to sit there and have a chat with your friends."*

> *"And in our generation of like 18- to 21-year-olds, drinking and drugs is a massive thing and like for me personally I don't really like being involved in that so on a Saturday that's pretty much the only thing I can do."*

> *"Sometimes I just need someone to just sit there and listen to me and know what's going on in my head."*

> *"So yeah, if there was like a specific, you know, place that I could go and ask a question and get an accurate answer, then I think that would help me a lot."*

> *"They need to be kind of put into one place so that you can maybe walk into a hub or something like that and they can say, this is where you need to be going for this information."*

> *"I think a youth club for like our age would help a lot of people with their confidence as well. Because it would be especially for the ones who were in Covid, who didn't have the social life or anything like that. I'd say, obviously it'd be someone older running it. They should have like a little, like, council type thing of people our age."*

> *"That's what I think would be amazing if we had a youth group and it'd be like every Saturday we have gymnastics, every Tuesday we have a different activity and stuff like that- Just like have a council of people our age, have them all just say like what they would like to have and see in it and plan like activities and stuff around that."*

The dangers of social media

Despite citing themselves as frequent social media users (Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok), the group were well-versed on the negative side of social media, from the impact on self-esteem to the potential threat of being victimised or exploited online. However, they also expressed that they went online when they were looking for trusted sources of information.

> *"...especially with girls, boys do it as well, but they compare themselves to what other girls look like and you know on the adverts it's always like a really pretty model or something when you're scrolling past and it's like why do I not look like that? It puts your own confidence down just because you're looking at somebody else who may be prettier or is wearing better clothes."*

> *"I completely agree with the fact that it's dangerous. The fact they don't ask for any proof of that you could literally be 10 years old and you can get Facebook and then you could be talking to an older man."*

> *"Well, obviously, comparing yourself in a negative way to someone else that perhaps looks better or whatever, then there is a bad thing."*

> *"I think it can sometimes be a positive thing, depending on what kind of content you consume on social media."*

> *"I always go on Google and just Google my symptoms."*

Discussion

The young people who took part in this focus group highlighted the pressure that people of their age are under when looking for employment. They are inexperienced but find it difficult to secure positions that will give them the experience they need to progress. In order to earn a living, they accept jobs that they are unhappy in and often have to secure second jobs to ensure that they have sufficient income to live. This then leaves them feeling trapped in roles that they thought were temporary.
It was interesting to note that, similar to other focus groups, the solutions that participants provided to the problems they identified were are practical and likely to be feasible.

When looking for information and support, participants tended not to use local provisions and services. Rather, they sought help online and trusted their own judgement about what constituted credible and reliable sources. When looking for support with decisions about their future, they felt that there was very little help in the local area.

This group also highlighted the residual mental health concerns that COVID-19 had left behind, with almost everyone in the group expressing some form of social anxiety which limited their abilities to carry out activities that might help them to progress.

PHASE 5. On-street and in-person conversations

A period of insight work was carried out on-street and in various locations with young people. Members of the Hitch and WMTG teams were accompanied by a youth support worker and photographer at events where there were expected to be a high number of young people in attendance (Wrexham town, Wrexham Lager festival, Networld, MoneyPenny, and Explorer activity). In addition, young people who had engaged with the insight work were recruited as 'explorers' and they, too, carried out several interviews with their peers.

While there was a drive to engage people and find them 'where they are', one of the greatest challenges with this piece of work was in reaching these young people. Often, we found that this specific age group did not frequent the locations where they are traditionally expected to be.

There were also challenges with engaging explorers in interviewing their peers as many of the young people who signed up changed their minds or become reluctant to start conversations with their peers. However, a total of N=143 interviews were conducted across on-street and explorer activities.

Results

The following themes were identified from the large volume of qualitative data that was collected:

Always home

When asked about the impact of Covid-19, a large number of participants cited that they had been forced to stay at home for most of it. While this was difficult already, some expressed challenges with returning to the social engagement because they had 'unlearned' the necessary social skills and were experiencing new levels of social anxiety.

Being at home and having limited contact during the pandemic lockdowns had exacerbated existing mental health concerns and brought about new ones. Despite a strong desire to 'return to normal', this proved equally difficult. Some young people cited spending long periods of time at home, in bed, or scrolling social media.

Conversely, some young people expressed that they were 'making up for lost time' by spending as much time outside of their family homes socialising. They had felt confined for a long period of time and were continuing to enjoy a sense of freedom. Some expressed battling through social anxiety to ensure that they were getting out:

> *"The usual week consists of mostly studying in the weekdays and then meeting up with friends at the weekends, trying to get out as much as I can really instead of being stuck inside."*

> *"I'd feel a bit anxious because when I get up in the morning sometimes I feel like I don't want to go out the house but then I've got my friends and loads of people to support me to come out the house so like I love doing that. I just go shopping and play pool."*

> *"I couldn't even go out when other people were so I was just in bed all day every day."*

> *"I remember before Covid, we didn't hear the word 'lockdown' and it makes me feel a bit trapped."*

> *"I still feel alone at times, even filled in a room with people I'd feel completely isolated."*

Anxiety, mental health and neurodiversity (ND)

In almost all interactions with young people, there was an overarching theme relating to mental health, anxiety, and a high prevalence of ND. Young people cited the impact on their mental health as severe and ongoing. Many were still struggling with mental health concerns and there was a general consensus that support for mental health was not readily available. Many young people felt they had to access their own support and that traditional services were no longer accessible.

Many young people cited difficulties with concentration and focus as a concern and there were several mentions of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which is a neurodevelopmental disorder which is growing in young adults.

Young people cited social media as both detrimental to mental health and supportive of mental health. Some felt that mental health was glamorised or romanticised on social media and that social comparison led to poor self-esteem and body image.

Others felt that social media was the only place that they could obtain mental health support and connect with people who were experiencing the same challenges.

> *"My disabilities, which all my family and people who know me know I have, but getting a diagnosis is another thing. I am bipolar and autistic, for definite- I hyper-fixate on certain things, I have meltdowns..."*

> *"Yeah, because like [COVID] had an impact on my life because I couldn't get [out of] that house, I couldn't see family or friends and it just I struggled with my ADHD and my anxiety but not being around everyone. And when I had contact with people it just felt like so weird it felt like I'm not seeing them in like 20 years."*

> *"I think for people in general, but for younger people especially like a lot younger than me I think there could be some social anxiety and stuff like that because there was a whole two years where barely anyone interacted with each other. I think personally next year might be more difficult."*

> *"It links quite strongly to the mental health side of things... there's almost like a lack of negativity surrounding mental health. What I see is a lot of people treating mental illness in an almost positive way, almost embracing it. It's romanticised a little bit."*

> *"...being more educated on mental health because I think there's a lot of awareness on mental health but not on like different mental health and mental illness. Cause I think a lot of the time they say, 'you can do all these things for your mental health' but if somebody's actually got a mental illness, they're not aware how to handle that."*

"I would like to start waking up a little later and meditating because I have a lot of anxiety that tends to start hurting here in the heart and in the stomach and tends to cause problems down the line."

"I sometimes feel a little bit scared in Wrexham because there's all these groups of people and I have a lot of new social anxiety which scares me of just generally people."

"Well, I do have some learning difficulties I do have ADHD, so I have trouble with just you know attention deficit."

"Okay I feel like I need to focus a bit more and use some learning methods that I've been taught how to use in class."

"In high school I felt like they said there was help but I didn't get the right amount of help and they just neglected me".

Aspirations- but how?

Many young people had clear goals and aspirations for their future. These were often related to education and employment but, equally, young people were citing 'just being happy' as an aspiration. Many young people cited good grades and getting into university, which is likely a result of the high number of college students that were spoken to.

It was interesting to note that many young people felt that they did not know how to fulfil their aspirations. They received little support about how to develop life skills such as handling finances and they felt that support was too focused on traditional routes such as higher education.

Young people also felt that they did not have access to the same support that had been available before them, and they found it difficult to engage with existing services such as Careers Wales.

There are residual issues with face-to-face engagement with services, despite lockdowns having ended, and young people often felt that this is now an excuse.

Where there was a focus on financial success as an aspiration, many young people were keen to start their own businesses (see the next theme) and were not content with traditional employment routes. Many who were in employment already expressed dissatisfaction with their current employment and that they did not see themselves being there in years to come.

Many young people also felt that their aspirations were cut short during the pandemic. They were unable to sit exams and their grades were based on predictions. Many young people recognised that this was unrealistic and that, despite not engaging with the learning process, they emerged with qualifications (some worse, some better, than expected). Despite this gap in their education, they were under pressure to achieve academically now, and this appeared to be taking its toll.

> *"I don't currently have any specific long-term goals just to be happy and content in my life really."*

> *"Short-term goals is just to be happy and stay healthy and long term is to progress my career as far as I can."*

> *"Get out of McDonald's. Yeah, just chill out. chill out, have a good job."*

> *"I know I want to be happy when I grow up because my parents aren't exactly happy, and I want to have a job that doesn't make me hate myself essentially."*

> *"Main worry is just not knowing what I'm doing and not knowing where to access the information... like in the future if I'm trying to start a business or open something myself, I wouldn't really know where to go."*

> *"It's very draining and it can really give a negative outlook on the future, and it really worries me of whether or not I'm actually going to be able to get to where I want to be...I don't really have a good plan anymore because before COVID I had a good idea of where I wanted to go."*

"It was during my first year of A Levels and I think at the time I was doing alright, and I think I was set for like all B's and then I got my results second year because second year was impacted as well and it was all, it was D, D, C, C..."

"See around about when COVID hit originally I was actually into mechanics and I applied for an apprenticeship with Mercedes and I did the interview process and I got through it all and they said "Yeah, we've given you the apprenticeship, the start of the day will be in August" but when it came around to the time, two weeks before I just emailed them saying "Look, what's happening, COVID is happening" and they said "Oh sorry, we've decided to disband the whole apprenticeship programme, left me high and dry""

"...there's not much support towards the future and thinking about it."

"Post-18 guidance, we've had a bit of work on uni's things but job seeking in general, apprenticeships, there's not a lot of information out there."

"So then when we have been big assemblies and they tell you 'you have to do well', it's like piling on the pressure even more."

"Like, trying, like being a young person now, thinking about trying to get housing and trying to think about what job would best be able to sustain that comfortable living is becoming a lot more difficult."

"I think my age group, we kind of just got pushed forward, just moved, do it quickly and just get it going... and now you're expected to work almost, yeah, leap that whole stage of your life."

"I want to have a family one day and marry the girl of my dreams".

"I want to live a peaceful life and visit South Korea and the States".

"To have a job where I can work with animals. To have friends. To be able to cope with my anxiety better...To feel better about myself."

Side Hustlers

Many young people expressed a desire to develop creative money-making methods or were already doing so. Many wanted to go into self-employment and be their own bosses. This is perhaps different to previous generations, where there has been a focus on traditional means of employment or job role.

Young people spoke about running Etsy shops, owning restaurants, working in the film, television, and music industry, and starting clothing brands. It was also noted that there is little financial investment in non-traditional career avenues.

"I want to open a café for people with disabilities...I'm thinking about calling it the Sunflower Project."

"I want to be a tattoo artist."

"I want to start my own business as well."

"My long-term goal is to run a business."

"Yeah, well I'm a rapper..."

"Potentially just start off with maybe a travel agency, get my name known in the events world and then work up from there."

"I want to be a personal trainer so I'm going into that at the minute".

"Yeah, is to have my own business in electrical installation, ideally domestically."

"I'd like to go into acting, maybe for film, but that's like the big aspiration."

> *"I work like as a freelance I can just work whenever I want to work so that's nice. And this is how I've got this really good niche job, because I'm finding more interest in the stuff that's not about education anymore."*

Online and social media

Social media and online engagement are woven into the lives of young people. Not only were they raised using technology, but they were locked down for two years of their lives with social media as the only means of communicating with the outside world.

When asked about their social media use, many young people expressed that they were frequent users. They used social media for seeking out support and information, to find trusted and reliable sources, and to communicate with friends and family. Almost all people who were asked how they communicate with people who support them cited some kind of online method, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, etc.

Some of the positive aspects of online engagement included being able to stay in contact with people, using it as a source of information, and being able to stay informed about current affairs. Some of the negative aspects were the impact on mental well-being (particularly body image and self-esteem), inability to control what you see, and being forced online during covid (particularly in relation to education and family communication).

> *"Yeah, so I was actually in uni at the start of Covid, and then because it all went online, and I actually dropped out because of that, because it was literally just logging on, and I didn't retain any information, so I dropped out of uni during Covid."*

> *"Yeah, like, like the expectations and like seeing other people and thinking we have to be like-- - Yeah, it's like comparison."*

> *"I think social media is also a very good place to look because pretty much every young person has Tiktok."*

> *"We had social media as well, body image, self-esteem, link to mental health..."*

> *"Comparison, community, control, quite addictive, time wasting, time consuming. Scrolling, doomscrolling, but informative...." (words associated with the words "social media")*

> *"You get what you get depending on who you decide to follow. Yeah, kind of algorithms that know what you're interested in or what you're. . . what you engage with. But sometimes you get rubbish stuff anyway."*

> *"I think it's like If you know you don't want to see that stuff like you don't really have much control as to whether it comes up Especially on Tiktok or YouTube even like YouTube shorts. You don't get much choice what you see."*

> Interviewer: *"How would they find you?"*
> Young person: *"Literally look on the internet."*

Socialising and life in Wrexham

Despite some of the issues raised around social anxiety and re-emerging into 'normal' social interactions, many young people cited going out and socialising as something they did frequently. Many also spoke about their friends and family as their support networks. It was noted by many young people that there are few locations in the areas for them to safely congregate.

There is either a misconception that they are there to cause trouble, or they do not feel safe themselves.

One group of young people, in particular, expressed socialising in their cars because they felt that they were being penalised by the local authority for the anti-social behaviour of other young people. Anti-social behaviour was cited as a problem in Wrexham by many. However, because of this ongoing issue, many areas that young people had previously frequented were closed off to them and they no longer had anywhere to go.

There was a sense of boredom. Interestingly, though, when asked exactly what they needed in their local area, many did not know what they wanted. There seemed to be a sub-set of young people who cited 'the gym' as somewhere they regularly went.

> *"I go to college, and I work two or three times a week and if I'm not doing that I hang out with my friends and go to the gym."*

"Definitely like supportive friends and family who I feel like I can actually talk to."

"Yeah, talking to my mates and stuff and meeting up with them and stuff like that Going out."

"And then on the weekend, it's just a lot of social time."

"Yeah, at home or just out with their mates really."

"We'll go out and like, we'll go out at night and then come back in the morning."

"Sometimes I don't really like in the evening sometimes the anti-social behaviour can get a bit out of hand, but on the other hand, sometimes there are groups and like people coming together where it makes it feel safe and like clubs and stuff that Wrexham has- it feels really fun to go to those and it can sometimes drown out the fear of anti-social behaviour because you do feel like you're in a safe environment."

"The council need to sort themselves out... Because they just ban kids from everywhere. It doesn't work. You're just making them worse."

"My parents are like a great supporting system for me and like all my family's always been like very supportive I think if I didn't have them it'd be a lot harder to just do basic stuff."

> *"Yeah, I've got my family and then I've got a trainer in the gym which I go to, he supports me quite well."*

> *"I think talking to my friends, because they went through the same thing as me, really helped me at the time."*

What the right support looks like

Young people not only want non-judgmental emotional support, but they want practical support, too. They recognise that they have missed a large and important part of their lives and they feel that they are being left to figure things out for themselves. Some have built strong networks of their own, identifying with specific groups where they feel safe, valued, and understood.

Some have forged their own paths, making the most of their education or employment but still lack the skills required to lead a fulfilling life.

Some are trying to find their way with little help or support, and they feel that they are both let down and blamed for recent events.

When asked what 'support' meant to them, responses ranged from having someone to listen to them to having practical guidance about how to step into adulthood. Mostly, young people have a desire to be listened to so that decision-makers are not making assumptions about their wants and needs.

It was also mentioned that some of the benefits of the recent activity around Wrexham relating to the football should be fed down into the community.

> *"Someone who can listen and understand. Not necessarily trying to fix, but to just sort of understand and just be there to not judge you about what you say to them have that extra sort of bond that you have to someone for their fee to be comfortable around them."*

> *"Just somewhere we can have more places to take the kids because at the end of the day it's...it's just full of crime...it's disgusting."*

"There's been a bit of funding for Ryan Reynolds, which is kind of boosted the town. It's put us on the map. And it's like, hopefully it'll give us opportunities in the future. So we're going to have celebrities. We've had big, multimillionaire celebrities come in here, put us on the map. You know, it's going to do some good for us. Hopefully there's great things, not stupid things, you know what I mean. And hopefully they can put the money where the mouth is."

"...like post 18 support, like social media expectations, exam motivation and resilience, mental health and education on life. We used to have PG days but then they stop when you get into sixth form- stuff like finances that weren't really relevant when you were in year seven, but you sort of want to know now."

"Young entrepreneurial support, for those people wanting to set up their own business."

"There's not much support towards the future and thinking about it."

"For support I'd say just having the right people around me you know and just having the right support off of those people to get my goals because if that support's not there then it feels, you know, like you're doing it for nothing."

"I think a lot of people in my age just need a lot more emotional support, to be honest."

"If the council just had a bunch of links to apprenticeships, internships, like degrees, degree apprenticeships, just something a bit more organised rather than having to spend hours looking for something."

"Support means to me a place that is safe and I feel content and I can go to when I feel pain mentally or physically."

"Just have that open space where they're free to walk in and walk anytime. Have that like, you know, that open book or any sort of communication that they can go to that's on their terms and they are fully in control of how they talk and what resources they can get."

"Leadership people that actually listen to the people because what is a city, what is a town, what is a village, where you are in charge of people when you don't actually listen to them? What's the point of having the responsibility of taking care of people when you do not actually look at what the people need."

Safety in small numbers.

Many of the young people we spoke to told us that they did not feel safe in Wrexham. They cited issues with anti-social behaviour in young people, homelessness, drugs, and challenges with not feeling welcome in certain locations. Many felt that there was not enough police presence in the town centre and that the area would benefit from more street-lighting and better CCTV. While some said that they felt safe in Wrexham during daylight hours, they did not feel the same after dark. The problem appeared to be peer-to-peer, with many expressing that the anti-social behaviour challenges were within their own age group. While discouraging young people from occupying certain areas of town (for example, young people are no longer allowed to go to the ten-pin bowling without spending money), this does not appear to prevent anti-social behaviour.

Self-efficacy in education

Many of the young people we spoke to felt that not only did they lose valuable learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they lacked self-efficacy in their educational abilities because the grades they were given were based on predictions.

There were disruptions to their classes, they often did not turn up for online sessions, and occasionally their teachers were not turning up to scheduled classes.

"I don't think if it was an actual exam, I would have got that."

"We're re-sitting this year, but they've put in all the content that we didn't learn last year, so it's overwhelming this year."

"They should have still had reduced content this year...and also I think, because so many are resitting this year, they could have spread exams out a bit more."

"It was stressful because we've not really done it before- no external exams, we've never even been taught how to revise properly."

Life in bed

When asked what they would like to change about their routines, many of the young people said that they wanted to make better use of their time by getting up early in the morning and being more productive.

When probed further almost all of the young people said that they stayed up late scrolling on their phones and then would often wake up and lie in bed on their phones before beginning their day. Despite showing self-awareness around this problematic behaviour, young people often felt that this was out of their control and showed poor abilities to self-regulate this behaviour.

Some felt that this was a by-product of the COVID-19 pandemic; they had developed these habits during lockdowns, or existing habits had become more ingrained, and now they were faced with challenges to change them:

"I get up late in the morning...have a late lunch."

"I'd like to get up earlier and do all the stuff I want to do...be more productive...I'm just not a morning person."

"I need to be more disciplined...get up in the morning..."

"I either work, or stay in bed, to be honest."

"I couldn't go out so I was just in bed all day, every day."

Nothing to do

When asked about how they spent their free time in Wrexham many young people expressed that there was "nothing to do" for them. However, when probed further about what exactly they would like to see in the area, many respondents did not know what they wanted. There was just a general sense of dissatisfaction:

> *"If there was more stuff to do for young people...if it was there, I would know what it was"*

> *"To be honest, there isn't anything to do in Wrexham."*

> *"I work long hours for not much money and there's really nothing to do."*

> *"There's really nothing to do round here, like, everything's closed down."*

Mental health support for all

While many participants cited that they would like support with mental health, some seemed to have more trouble accessing services than others. For example, those with additional physical disabilities, young parents, and people who worked long hours said that they either did not have the time, resources, or knowledge of services to access mental health support:

> *"We need more accessible, readily available mental health support, like counselling because it is really expensive."*

> *"As someone with disabilities and mental health, I know how hard it can be to get a job."*

> *"I went to a mental health support service in town and it was not what I needed at all."*

Discussion

It is evident from the conversations that we had with young people in Wrexham that there are common concerns amongst this group. These are concerns about mental well-being and where to find help, lack of motivation and direction for their future, lack of support and guidance for non-academic goals, and challenges with community engagement.

Many young people feel ostracised in their communities and that there is little to accommodate their needs. However, a strong pride in Wrexham still exists, fuelled by recent media support through the football club's success.

Conversely, many of the young people we spoke to did have clear goals, but they did not align with the types of services and support that are available to them. When they wanted information about setting up their own business or working from home, they felt that they were steered towards more traditional routes.

Current employment and education services are not equipped to deal with the ways that this cohort has become accustomed to working. They were forced to stay at home and work online and, now that the rest of the world has returned to normal, they are still comfortable working from home and behind a screen. Rather than seeing this as an unwanted by-product of the COVID pandemic and increasing online use, it is probably beneficial to view this as a paradigm shift in the way young people want to be educated, employed, and engaged.

PHASE 6. “Digital Entries- Wrexham Voices.”

To enable young people to share their stories qualitatively but without having to engage in face-to-face or online focus groups, we delivered “Wrexham voices”, a digital entry platform where young people were able to have their say. Young people had told us that they were happy to engage digitally but that they did not have the time to join focus groups- this gave them an anonymous platform.

Results

A total of N=25 young people completed “Wrexham Voices.” Of the 25, 5 were in full time employment, 8 in part time employment, 4 in school or college full-time, 2 in school or college part time, 4 in university. One was in work but looking for work, while one was in work but not looking for work. Nine respondents were aged 18, three were aged 19, five were aged 20, and six were aged 21.

The following are themes that emerged from the data:

Uncertainty.

Respondents expressed uncertainty in many different domains, from what they wanted to do after leaving school, to how they would cope if one of their parents fell ill. Some respondents identified money worries as the many causes of uncertainty- they did not know if they would be able to make ends meet, they did not know if they should take a job they might not enjoy just because it pays well, and they did not know if they would be able to strike the right balance between family and work. The respondents often expressed concerns over managing money during a cost-of-living crisis.

> *“I panic when something changes. My worries for said goal is that if it were to suddenly change then I wouldn’t be able to cope with change.”*

> *“It’s really tough down here, lack of funds and supports is really draining me.”*

> *“...long-term goals would probably be to not be insecure in my abilities and work to improve them, also getting a permanent job that pays, so I can finally stop sponging off my parents.”*

> *“...is there any point in doing something that I don’t enjoy, even if it pays well.”*

> *"I worry that I won't be able to afford the cost of living with the wage that I am on."*

> *"My worry is money whilst studying."*

Caring responsibilities.

A surprising number of respondents expressed caring responsibilities. These ranged from caring for people living with dementia, caring for siblings, and caring for their own children. For young people, the burden of caring for others was often coupled with financial worries, challenging living arrangements, and uncertainty about their future.

> *"Also, what happens if my parents get ill, will I be able to look after them?"*

> *"I'm a stay at home mom so my day to day life is cooking, cleaning and looking after my daughter and playing with her."*

> *"My standard day consists of caring for my siblings and working."*

> *"A standard day in my life is taking my son to nursery and attending university where I study social work."*

Lack of motivation

Many of the young people expressed a lack of motivation and autonomy. Often cited goals were vague with little evidence of clear direction. Many felt controlled and constrained by their environments, lack of support, and few opportunities.

> *"I have no worries with my goal except motivation."*

> *"I don't really have a career goal."*

> *"I'm not sure if I have any goals at the moment."*

> *"I've never been able to find out what I would like to do."*

Discussion

Young people are burdened with worries that are preventing them from moving forward with their futures. They are concerned about their direction, their work lives, and their finances. This is in keeping with research elsewhere that has shown that 39% of young people consider money to be a major cause of stress[14], that young people are the most stressed demographic in the workplace[15], and that young people have concerns about achieving their hopes and dreams.[16]

The entries into Wrexham Voices indicate that young people are still feeling the burden of the cost-of-living crisis and COVID-19 and they are worried about what the future holds for them and their families.

14 https://www.forbes.com/sites/tracybrower/2023/01/15/gen-z-is-struggling-5-things-they-need-for-a-bright-future/?sh=4bd072283410
15 https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20230215-are-gen-z-the-most-stressed-generation-in-the-workplace
16 https://mccrindle.com.au/article/topic/generation-z/gen-zs-top-hopes-and-fears/

PHASE 7. Parent and teacher insight

As part of the insight work carried out by WeMindTheGap and Hitch, research was undertaken with parents, teachers, and support staff who engaged with young people aged 18-21 in Wrexham. The objective of this strand of research was to gain the perspectives of those who live and work with young people, to see how closely their views align with the views of young people, and to develop relationships to support further engagement with young people.

Hitch researchers spoke to N= 8 staff at a local Wrexham college and N= 3 parents of 18–21-year-olds. Interviews were semi-structured and were delivered either by telephone or Teams call. Where available, recordings were transcribed and analysed. Where calls were not recorded (e.g., on the phone), notes were made.

Results

The following themes were identified:

Accountability

A theme emerged across many of the interviews whereby staff, in particular, expressed a concern that young people lacked accountability. This was attributed partly to the COVID-19 pandemic, where young people had missed opportunities to develop skills such as time management and meeting deadlines.

They had not been constrained by typical daily routines and structure. This appears to have led to a perception that these aspects of school and work life are no longer a priority, with teachers stating that 'young people don't care about deadlines anymore,' and that they do not see the consequences to missing deadlines or not meeting other similar expectations. Interestingly, this poor accountability was also attributed to a wider societal shift. Interviewees expressed a fear of offending and fear of being seen as exclusive, thus limiting their ability to hold young people accountable in ways they might have previously.

Many expressed challenges with instilling discipline in young people, meaning that there were often no consequences for disruptive behaviour, missed deadlines, poor work ethics, and other factors. There was a sense of 'compassion fatigue' within the narratives of the interviews; many felt they no longer knew how to do their jobs effectively. This seemed to affect parents as well as teaching staff.

> ***"But now, instead of thrashing that out with us or going to another tutor, they go straight into our student services and complain about us. With little thought of the consequences on our wellbeing, I have to say."***

"Yeah discipline is much harder because you could be you know it could look like prejudice or it could look you know you need to be framed correctly."

"You know it's not clever to use the F word every other word in a sentence. I mean I hear them going past and it you know can be literally two or three times in one sentence and it's like, yeah, accountability isn't it? Your behaviour reflects on you and maybe there's no accountability. Yeah, I mean going into deeper issues because I was talking to my daughter over the weekend about this and I mean just to take two prime examples that are in the press at the moment and I'm not being political but there's Boris Johnson and the Donald Trump and both of them have been under huge investigations."

"We've actually questioned ourselves as well as to our standard to have the expectations that the students come in for three days, they arrive on time, they stay, they don't tell us to f off, they're not abusive, aggressive or we just have to accept all these behaviours now, we're not even allowed to prevent someone from hitting another member of staff."

Anxiety, mental health and neurodiversity (ND)

In keeping with research that has been carried out directly with young people, interviewees expressed a rise in anxiety levels, particularly social anxiety. There was a sense that young people are being challenged with social interactions in a way that has never been seen before, specifically as a result of the pandemic.

Every-day interactions, such as careers appointments, are being seen as 'pushing young people out of their comfort zones', and interviewees felt that, despite seeming to cope socially, young people are often uncomfortable outside of their trusted circles.

It was also stressed that, while there appears to be a rise in neurodivergent students and young people, often these differences are being missed.

Young people are entering education aged 18 and over with evidence of additional learning needs and neurodiversity having not received a diagnosis or the support they might need.

"They may, they would, I would say this year, high percentage of them have social anxiety. And then neurodiverse. So there's a lot of autism and ADHD this year"

"A lot of them have got heightened anxiety."

"And a lot of the times we're getting-- I would say the one thing that's obvious is we're getting children through, learners coming to us now. And we screen everybody. And we are picking up additional learning needs, dyslexia, autism."

"Yeah, I've noticed a difference in anxiety. You know, part of my role is that I contact students, not only students now but new students as well. And one thing of note is just anxiety's through the roof. So many students disclosing anxiety and just lacking the social skills just to make conversation. Yeah, that's something I have noticed."

Aspirations?

There was a clear disconnect between the research findings with young people and the current findings in that young people often expressed that they did aspire to goals, but they were less traditional.

By contrast, the interviewees in this phase of research voiced their concerns that young people had lost their drive and their aspirations. They appeared to interviewees to have no clear direction. This disconnect might be explained by the more traditional views of the people who took part in this phase of research; their expectations of what young people should aspire to might not match the reality of the goals of young people. Equally, this might be an area of concern for young people.

In agreement with many of the young people who have taken part in this research, participants also felt that young people lacked the skills and life experience required to live independently (bill paying, budgeting, applying for work, mortgages, etc.).

> *"I think some of them don't have such aspirations. I think there is that tendency of, you know, like, well, the economy is going down the creek and sort of what's the point. But then there are some that have that that ethic that, you know ,it's going to carry them forward. I mean I'm thinking about my own daughter. She's really struggling to know which direction to go in. You know I think she'll get there."*

> *"We are dealing with more young people who are, their sense of entitlement is outstanding. They expect everything to come to them and there is no, and we've discussed it with other people in the area, we discussed it with people in other facilities. They have very little aspiration, which is always a challenge in an area of socioeconomic deprivation, because you've got a lack of community aspiration, haven't you?"*

Online and social media

It is probably not surprising that the interviewees in this phase of research were in agreement with many of the themes identified by young people themselves. Social media was seen as potentially damaging to self-esteem, with participants expressing concerns over social comparison, hidden online bullying, and 'doom scrolling'.

However, it was acknowledged that young people might find comfort, communities and sources of information via social media. While it social media was generally considered to be over-used, it was also felt that there was a positive outcome; society was generally more accepting of individual differences because of the nature of social media. Mobile phone use was cited as problematic by many participants, with one stating that mobile phones were a 'comfort blanket.'

> *"They live in a world where they just look at the image of someone on the beach and they think oh my god they're taking that as face value, they've got a brilliant life, they've got all this, they've got all that and I think that plays a massive part in mental health."*

> *"Yeah they don't communicate. Unless it's Snapchat."*

Socialising and support in Wrexham

It was interesting to note that some of the descriptive used by the current groups of participants fit with the personas that have been identified so far. For example, it was highlighted that even socially adept young people might struggle with social anxiety outside of their safe and trusted circles. Some participants felt that young people no longer want to participate socially; they had been offered activities and extra-curricular opportunities, but they were often turned down. Where there were provisions for young people to access (wellbeing hubs, wellness coaches, etc.) these were often underutilised.

Many respondents attributed this to challenges with face-to-face interactions. It was also evidenced as a systemic problem. Referral systems mean that young people are often referred to support by someone they trust (e.g., their progress coach), but are passed through several different people until they are eventually referred to someone who they may not have a trusting relationship with. This leads to drop-offs within services and non-attendance to appointments.

> *"But yeah, I think socially they, you know, teenagers and stuff, they go around in packs, don't they? And they kind of come across sometimes as being super confident. But I actually think that they're not confident at all. I mean that's not the same as it's ever been but they give this you know, why their lives are so upside down, and, you know, they couldn't have their usual, it was a tough time for them. I feel like they were almost forgotten that that happened."*

Incentivising education

It was highlighted that either attendance or attention was an issue for many students. Because of the nature of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), it was felt that young people were being financially incentivised to turn up to college and show their attendance. However, this was not conducive to good attention, concentration, or engagement.

These students were often seen to be disruptive and displaying behavioural issues. It was interesting to note that many of the interviewees who worked with individuals with additional support needs felt that these particular students were often grateful for a return to routine and structure (following COVID lockdown

restrictions) and were now thriving in an academic setting. By contrast, young people who were not in receipt of additional support but had become accustomed to an unstructured way of life, were more likely to display emotional and behavioural regulation issues.

The result of financially incentivising young people into education appears to work in favour of the academic institutions because attendance rates look positive, but not in the favour of young people who might be better engaged with something that they feel motivated towards. It has been cited consistently by young people that there is not sufficient support (readily) available to them to help them into non-traditional routes of employment/ apprenticeship/ entrepreneurial roles etc. This is consistent with the narrative of the current research phase results and highlights a flaw in the system.

On one end of the spectrum are young people in attendance despite lack of motivation. On the other end of the spectrum there are a cohort of students who are entering college-age education without any formal education experience since primary school age. Some participants expressed that there are worryingly high numbers of young people who are not officially home-schooled but have never been in a formal education setting. Education in the UK is supposedly mandatory, but this cohort of students highlights that this is not always the case.

> ***"So, for example, there's a young person coming to us in September who hasn't been in education from say year eight to year 11. He's just done year 11 in a pupil referral unit. So they haven't lived, and it fascinates me on a personal level because if you were a parent and you didn't send your child to school because education is mandatory, you would be fined. But what happens is once they're out of the system, there seems to be a hole somewhere."***

> ***"I think the ALN (additional learning needs) learners were glad to be back in class, glad to have support again, glad to have stuff. I think maybe the more able learners had grown resentful and they've grown disengaged from education because they've got better independent skills."***

> ***"You know, I've heard you to say, I don't know why this person is here, because they're clearly not interested. you know, but they come in every day, maybe because their mum and dad have said, or they get EMA or whatever. But actually, you know, they'd be better off doing something different."***

"They're coming, the attendance gets them their EMA, but they're not actually engaging in any way."

"And a lot of them will be getting EMA if they qualify for EMA, which means my attendance figures are marvellous. You know, I get praise for attendance but it is quite a big link because it's a financial aspect."

"Statistically we could pull those out, we could pull a report I guess from somewhere I say well what higher percentage would I mean I think of it my group's got great attendance and I know that they do lose the EMA they will be kept quiet because it's not just them it's their parents as well yeah and we have got I'm sure we've got situations where parents are very but actually motivated to ensure good attendance and I won't dwell on that too watch but that's definitely automated."

"EMA is not a huge amount of money but it makes a difference ultimately to you know the finances at home."

Under-investment in physical health, over-subscription to mental health services.

Several of the participants highlighted that the need for recreational activities such as sport and exercise is paramount for improving the mental wellbeing outcomes of young people. While it was felt that there was heavy investment in the mental health needs, the physical health needs no longer took priority.

It is important that physical health is still at the forefront in intervention development because of the correlation between good physical health and good mental health.

While some participant had expressed that it was challenging to encourage young people to engage with service provisions, others felt that these services were over-utilised. The resilience courses offered by colleges are over-subscribed, and it is difficult to encourage young people to leave safe spaces such as Coleg Cambria's wellbeing hub.

Young people take to these safe havens and refuse to leave them to participate in lessons, social activities, and other aspects of college life.

"I feel like there's an under investment in terms of the physical side of health physical health side things for example like catering or the investment into more healthy physical lifestyles. So, food wise I think we don't provide enough in terms of healthy or higher quality options. Active Cambria I feel is under invested because we only have three of them across five different sites which they do deliver massive sessions but I feel like if there was more of them then maybe we could have smaller tailored sessions for the students who do look in but don't engage because it's intimidating to go into a big sports hall filled with people. From the physical side of things, yeah, I just think that we are looking like we've put a heavy investment into like mental health and trauma like we've got the trauma informed project going on at the moment but I do feel like we need to invest in physical health as well."

"However now we're facing the problem where students are struggling to leave the well-being and inclusion zone and get involved with other students outside of there. So, they'll go to their class and then they'll go straight to the well-being hub and sort of just hide in one of the egg chairs. And they'll put their headphones in, zone out, and switch off from the world. And some students just spend all day in there which isn't really ideal and we're trying to look at how do we sort of wean students off this sort of transition and like reintegrate them back into the mainstream college."

What the right support looks like

When participants were asked what they thought was missing for young people, several themes were identified:

- **Enrichment-** Young people need more than traditional education to feel fulfilled. It was suggested that team sport, team building activities, and resilience building events should be part of the curriculum. The importance of these things is not currently recognised.

- **A renewed focus on physical health-** There are links between physical and mental health, exercise and mental wellbeing, but these are not being capitalised on. Physical health has taken a back-seat in light of the trends in increased mental ill health, but improving physical health has the potential to mitigate some of the mental health concerns that young people are experiencing.

- **Accountability-** A system whereby teachers and parents are able to teach young people about expectations and accountability while protecting both parties. Currently, there is no clear guidance, particularly for teachers and there is a sense that their hands are tied.

- **Accept or respect-** Teach young people that they do not need to accept the views of others but that they do need to be respectful. Behavioural challenges amongst students have led staff to feel that there is a general lack of respect amongst their learners (e.g., using explicit language unnecessarily while in the presence of teaching staff).

> ***"No, I think you should respect. You have to be respectful, but I'm not saying you should agree with everything. You're not going to agree with everything, but I think if you don't agree with it, let them get on with it."***

Discussion

This qualitative insight from the perspectives of parents, teachers, and support staff further highlights the disconnect between young people and those who support them. It also supports the worrying trend of young people who are being 'lost' from the system and are not accessing education, with figures in Wales suggesting a crisis in absences from schools.[17] This was expressed by participants in this phase of the research, along with concerns about the mental well-being of young people who are in attendance.

It was highlighted that the role of parents is crucial in ensuring young people attend their schools, colleges, and workplaces yet it is evident that the mental health of parents has been impacted by the pandemic, increasing the depth of this challenge.

Schools and colleges need to maintain strong relationships with families to support their young people in attending and engaging. While there is evidence that the EMA scheme encourages young people to attend, it does not appear to impact engagement, with many teachers feeling that it simply encourages young people to show up and disrupt classes. As suggested by participants in this phase of insight work, young people might be motivated to engage with resilience building, social skills training, and other extracurricular activities in the form of sports, clubs, and other interventions.

17 https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/shocking-number-pupils-still-missing-27045824

What does it all mean?

Personas

After speaking to so many young people in Wrexham, we started to see that there were specific groups with similar characteristics that we could identify. Developing 'Personas' from qualitative research enables us to speak about the people we are communicating with, describe them well, and help other people to visualise them. We found four main Personas in our qualitative insight work, but we believe there is a fifth. While we spoke to all five, the final persona is the one we found the hardest to reach.

Social, but struggling.

This group appears to engage socially but struggles with mental health such as social anxiety and depression making it a daily challenge for them. The pandemic has left them feeling lost and daunted by their own futures. They worry a lot about the direction of their lives, their physical and mental well-being, and money. They don't feel supported, and they feel that they have been left to fend for themselves since the pandemic. The pandemic has left them with health anxieties and the cost-of-living crisis with financial worries.

This group don't know what they want to do with their future and are not sure what their options are. Their past accomplishments were based on 'predictions' that they don't feel they had autonomy over. They made blind decisions about their education and employment without any form of support and now they have emerged into an unfamiliar world with no direction. They are expected to navigate it the same way their older siblings and parents did, but they don't know what that is meant to look like.

They are often unemployed but, where they have gained employment, they are dissatisfied. This is a group of young people who are used to being told that they are 'not fulfilling their potential.' They are in jobs that barely pay enough to get by and that leave them feeling dissatisfied with life in general. Their motivation for meeting their aspirations has waned and they feel stuck.

This group spend their free time with their friends, but when they are away from their friends, they spend long periods of time at home in bed 'doomscrolling'. They feel isolated, lonely and misunderstood by the older adults around them.

> ***"I'd feel a bit anxious because when I get up in the morning sometimes, I feel like I don't want to go out the house but then I've got my friends and my loads of people to support me to come out the house so like I love doing that. I just go shopping and play pool."***

Diverse and disengaged

This group identify with very specific groups, identifying as neurodiverse and gender fluid for example. They display an acceptance of others that has not been seen in generations that have gone before them. They feel let down by society, blamed and responsible for social issues (the pandemic, climate change) and feel that they now have to 'find their own way'. They describe themselves as 'abandoned' and 'let down' and they have developed an ingrained mistrust of older generations. They feel safe and accepted in their own circles but wary and anxious when they are out of them.

This group are both regular and cynical users of social media. They socialise on social media platforms but are aware of the potential negative health consequences. They also feel the pressure to conform to certain norms displayed on social media but are ill-equipped to lessen their engagement because it is often the main source of contact with friends and family. They developed online social engagement habits during the pandemic that have simply become the norm.

This group are driving awareness of mental health issues and demanding their acceptance. They are finding alternative ways to take care of their own well-being outside of traditional medical routes, of which they are mistrustful. They engage with influencers on TikTok who speak openly about mental health and promote self-help. This group don't only want acceptance of learning and developmental differences, they want them to be embraced and celebrated.

The diverse and disengaged feel that they missed out on opportunities for learning life skills and have been left to fend for themselves. They feel pushed towards traditional routes, particularly academic routes. Despite unwillingness to conform to these traditions, they feel unsupported in alternative routes. The information is not readily available through the channels they usually seek information from, and it isn't being given to them by those who supervise these choices (teachers, parents, etc.)

These young people are drawn towards careers in the public sector where they can feel they can make a difference, but they often don't know how to get there.

> ***"Leadership people that actually listen to the people because what is a city, what is a town, what is a village, where you are in charge of people when you don't actually listen to them? What's the point of having the responsibility of taking care of people when you do not actually look at what the people need."***

Resilient and self-reliant (the side hustler)

Similar to the diverse and disengaged, but this group have emerged from the pandemic more resilient and ready to take on new challenges. They are not ready to conform to old norms and ways of doing things- they have lived through uncertainty for a large percentage of the life they can remember. They are unlikely to take standard jobs but are already developing 'side-hustles' and creative ways of making money. They have an entrepreneurial spirit, and they are resourceful.

This group engage with social media for their own ends. They produce podcasts and YouTube channels that tackle important social issues. They are politically savvy and aware of current affairs. They engage with brands, platforms, and media that celebrate diversity and are sceptical about what they read, hear and see. Like the diverse and disengaged, they want to be able to control what they see online but this does not mean that they engage any less with social platforms.

Like the diverse and disengaged, they are driving acceptance of human differences, not conforming to traditional beauty and gender norms. They experience mental health concerns but have learned to cope in their own ways. Unlike the diverse and disengaged, this group are more likely to engage openly with people outside of their trusted circles, but cautiously.

> *"I work, like, as a freelancer. I can just work whenever I want to work so that's nice. And this is how I've got this really good niche job, because I'm finding more interest in the stuff that's not about education anymore."*

Let down and just living

This group are often unemployed and are barely making ends meet. Some lost their jobs during the pandemic while others have not had the opportunity to work at all. They feel that they might never get into the workplace and have given up trying. The cost-of-living crisis has hit them hard, and they struggle to pay bills.

They are occasionally young parents themselves and they worry for the future of their children- the future looks bleak. For those that aren't, a worry for them might be how they can provide for and support their family, especially their parents. They witnessed their parent's financial struggles and now they are going through their own. This group, though risk averse, are more likely to turn to illegal means of making additional money to support themselves. They will often engage in behaviours that put their health and wellbeing at risk such as smoking, drinking and taking drugs. They don't feel

motivated to change these behaviours and often see them as the only enjoyment they have in life. They feel generally unfulfilled but don't know what needs to change.

This group feel let down by and mistrustful of the government. They believe governments make decisions to fit their own agendas and they see them as corrupt. They can envisage simple solutions to some of the issues they face (such as affordable childcare) but they don't see these solutions being implemented so they feel that they are on their own with their problems. This group struggle with mental ill health and loneliness.

> *"We just need somewhere we can have more places to take the kids because at the end of the day it's ...it's just full of crime... it's disgusting."*

The COVID cohort

This group of young people were often described to us by their peers. They spend long periods of time at home and don't socialise much in person. Their social development was stunted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and they are struggling with residual mental health issues that came from the pandemic and heightened social anxieties.

This group of young people mainly socialize online. They are often not registered to attend school or college and they do not work. When they are registered at schools and colleges, they are rarely in attendance. If they attend, they feel under threat and need to retreat to the safety of their homes. They are often in the care of their parents and their parents are often feeling the aftermath of the pandemic and the new challenges of the cost-of-living crisis, too. Their futures feel bleak.

This group of young people do not seek help. Many of the traditional routes to support do not seem accessible to them- attending a GP practice, making a telephone appointment- these things are often insurmountable hurdles. There is an ongoing cycle of the impact of poor socializing and social anxiety, meaning these young people don't go out, their mental health suffers, and this drives them further indoors.

> *"You're really lucky to speak to her today, she very rarely goes out. She's always at home with me."*

Common characteristics

Throughout the research, common characteristics were identified:

- **Skip-the-ads generation-** they don't want to be manipulated; they can choose what they want to see and understand how algorithms work.
- **Sound-bite generation-** they have a short attention span and a preference for engaging with snappy materials that don't take up too much of their time.
- **No accountability generation-** They are anti-institution and are ready to forge their own paths outside of traditional routes.
- **Digital nomad generation-** They are used to being educated online and know that they don't have to be tied to one location to work.

Behaviour and behaviour change

Many of society's issues stem from human behaviour, including non-communicable diseases[18], mental health prevalence1920, and environmental issues[21].

Applying behavioural science to drive changes in human behaviour can mitigate some of these challenges. For example, behavioural science has been applied to improve mental health help-seeking behaviour[22], decrease sedentary behaviour[23], and increase academic engagement.[24]

The application of behaviour change frameworks allows us to systematically understand behaviour and then design and develop interventions and campaigns that support changes in those behaviours. Evidence suggests that the application of theoretically informed behaviour change frameworks leads to greater efficacy in such interventions.

The COM-B model offers an over-arching framework which helps to explain, predict and change behaviour. The model posits that

18 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/17437199.2020.1719184?casa_token=B5axRpvWGz0AAAAA:o1Vz8feoZujRAZTV2Rcy-jeF5XSOqkaVqZVKQejlH2RyPf6ZZn5J1qWXBmxDszgHYYfgG4Ijnagi2-Ig

19 https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Hannah-Dale-2/publication/263725589_The_impact_of_healthy_lifestyle_interventions_on_mental_health_and_wellbeing_A_systematic_review/links/5763cf6d08ae1658e2ea1b00/The-impact-of-healthy-lifestyle-interventions-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing-A-systematic-review.pdf

20 https://ijbnpa.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12966-016-0432-4

21 https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-021-01109-5

22 https://assets.cureus.com/uploads/original_article/pdf/155326/20230616-22931-1pjtp5d.pdf

23 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1836955317300474

24 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563221002326

behaviour is driven by three constructs. These are Capability (in the form of physical and psychological capability), Opportunity (in the form of social and physical opportunity), and Motivation (in the form of reflective and automatic opportunity). An individual or group of individuals must have Capability, Opportunity and Motivation for a behaviour to be enacted.

We have used the COM-B model to categorise the themes identified in this insight work to highlight where elements of COM might be missing at an individual and systemic level. Table 1 shows these categories.

COM-B component		Examples
CAPABILITY An individual's psychological and physical ability to engage in a given behaviour.	**Psychological** Knowledge and information, phsychological strength, skills or stamina.	Knowledge
		Skills
		Memory, Attention and Decision Processes
		Behavioural Regulation
	Physical Physical strength, skill or stamina.	Skills
OPPORTUNITY External factors that make the execution of a behaviour possible.	**Social** Opportunities as a result of social factors, such as cultural norms and social cues.	Social Influences
	Physical Opportunities provided by the wider environement, such as location or resources.	Environmental Context and Resources
MOTIVATION Internal processes that influence our decision making and behaviours	**Reflective** Reflective processes, such as making plans and intentions, evaluating the past/past experiences, evaluating options available to you.	Social/Professional Role & Identity
		Beliefs about Capabilities
		Optimism
		Beliefs about Consequences
		Intentions
		Goals
	Motivation Automatic processes, such as our desires, emotions inhibitions, habit.	Social/Professional Role & Identity
		Optimism
		Reinforcement
		Emotion

CPhy= capability (physical); Cpsy= capability (psychological); Os= Opportunity (social);
Op = Opportunity (physical); Ma= Motivation (automatic); Mr = Motivation (reflective).

Theme	Cphy	Cpsy	Os	Op	Ma	Mr	Individual or systemic?
Feeling more alone (survey)	•		•				Individual and systemic. Many young people feel their social opportunities were taken away during COVID- now they lack confidence to rebuild them.
Feeling more anxious (survey)		•	•		•		Individual. Anxieties such as social and health anxiety are heightened following the pandemic. Young people felt they did not have access to appropriate support/services to address this.
Losing interest in education (survey)					•	•	Individual. Many young people lack motivation to achieve their goals- they often don't know what their goals are.
Giving up on things they once enjoyed (survey)					•	•	Individual. Reflective motivation (e.g., intention) has been impacted by COVID, but so has automatic motivation (e.g., habits changing).
A "new" drug problem			•				Individual and systemic. New 'norms' around drug use are driving this issue. Young people can now easily access drugs online.
Family dynamics and social connectedness			•		•		Individual and systemic. Individuals are less motivated by in-person social connection. COVID changed family dynamics, and the ways in which peers communicated and connected.
Changes in service provision and access			•	•			Systemic. Young people feel that COVID is an excuse for poor service provision and inaccessible support.
Changing health behaviour					•	•	Individual. Habitually poor health behaviours have prevailed after COVID and motivation for health behaviours has waned. Social anxieties contribute to this.
Pressure to do well			•			•	Systemic. Young people feel pressured to do well, rather than supported. This thwarts their motivation.
Social media			•		•		Individual. Young people are aware of the negative consequences of over-consumption of social media but are habitually over-consuming.

Theme	Cphy	Cpsy	Os	Op	Ma	Mr	Individual or systemic?
Lack of mental health support			•	•			Systemic. Either the provisions for mental health support are not in place, not accessible, or not appropriate.
Lack of post-18 support			•	•			Systemic. Young people feel there are no opportunities for support in non-academic fields or in 'activities of daily living'.
Trapped			•	•		•	Systemic and individual. Young people said they felt trapped by circumstances (low paid jobs, long working hours), but also that they lacked motivation and direction to change.
Autonomy			•	•		•	Systemic and individual. Young people lack autonomy and control over their own lives. They do not have decision-making powers and feel that their views are not valued by those who do. This impacts motivation for their own aspirations.
Always home			•		•	•	Individual. Young people were trapped at home through COVID and are now struggling to get 'back to normal'
Aspirations- but how?		•	•	•		•	Individual and systemic. Young people often don't know what they want to do with their future but, when they do, they don't feel supported. They lack confidence and motivation to follow their own dreams.
Side hustlers			•	•			Systemic. Despite showing strong motivation for developing their own businesses, young people lack the opportunities in their community and support networks to do follow through.
Socialising and life in Wrexham			•	•		•	Systemic and Individual. Young people feel there is "nothing to do" in Wrexham for their age group. They often cannot afford the cost of socialising and sometimes do not feel safe.
Life in bed						•	Individual. Young people expressed that they lacked motivation for 'life' and spent long periods of time at home in bed, despite wanting to change this.

Many of the themes identified from the insight suggest that young people mostly lack three of the six constructs that are needed to drive behaviour. These are: social opportunity- young people do not feel that they are supported by the various systems that they are engaged with (schools, colleges, employment, healthcare, family etc.).

They express feeling left behind since the COVID pandemic and, while their lives have changed as a result of the COVID pandemic, service provision has not changed to accommodate their changing needs; physical opportunity- young people often felt that the services and support that they needed just were not available.

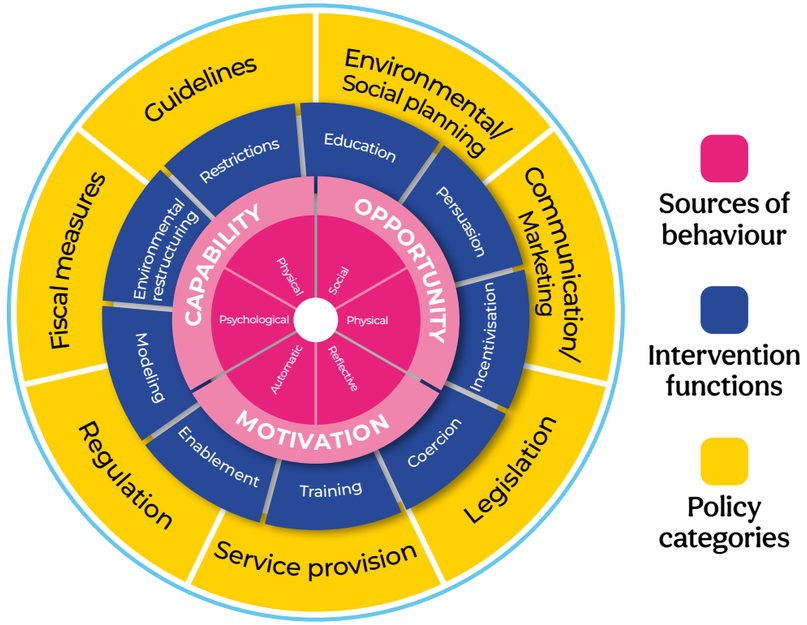
They felt that there was little for them to do recreationally, and this led to issues such as anti-social behaviour or social isolation: reflective motivation- motivation for behaviours that support well-being (exercise, socialising in person, being outdoors) have been damaged by the COVID pandemic and remain low.

Similarly, habitual negative behaviours (driven by automatic motivation) have increased- young people spend more time alone and more time online, despite knowing that these can be potentially problematic behaviours.

Turning themes into desired outcomes

For each of the themes, a "desired outcome" was identified. Using existing literature relating to that outcome and insight gained from the research, we have identified potential behaviours (individual, community, and systems level) that might lead to these desired outcomes.

The COM-B model sits at the centre of the Behaviour Change Wheel, which is an overarching framework enabling intervention developers to identify policy categories at their disposal and appropriate intervention functions that target specific needs relating



Employing the behaviour change wheel and its tools allows us to identify what is 'missing' currently and preventing the behaviour from happening. We can then select appropriate intervention functions (see intervention functions table, below)

Model of Behaviour sources	Education	Persuasion	Incentivisation	Coercion	Training	Restriction	Environmental Restructuring	Modelling	Enablement
Physical Capability					■				■
Psychological Capability	■				■				■
Physical Opportunity					■	■	■		■
Social Opportunity						■	■	■	■
Automatic Motivation		■	■	■	■		■	■	■
Reflective Motivation	■	■	■	■					

Table 3 (below) shows the themes mapped onto desired outcomes, potential behavioural drivers, the COM-B construct identified from the research, and appropriate intervention functions (including examples).

Theme	Desired outcome	Potential behaviour example	COM construct (driver or barrier to the behaviour)	An appropriate intervention function and example
Feeling more alone (survey)	Young people feeling connected with others	Coping behaviours such as help-seeking and seeking social support have been identified to mitigate loneliness.1	Social opportunity (they feel disconnected from those around them) Psychological capability (they lack self-efficacy in their ability to socialise).	Enablement- develop peer-to-peer interventions to build small communities of like-minded young people. Training- develop social skills training programme to be delivered in schools.
Feeling more anxious (survey)	Young people experiencing positive mental wellbeing outcomes	Help-seeking behaviours and disclosing mental health have been shown to support mental wellbeing.	Psychological capability (they lack the knowledge of how/where to seek help) Social opportunity (they don't feel existing services are the right fit for them) Automatic motivation (they lack the emotion regulation to reduce social anxiety)	Training- teach educators to spot the signs of anxiety and how to effectively communicate with young people in order to encourage them to seek help when needed. Modelling- develop a communications campaign which normalises help-seeking by using role models/influencers. Training- peer support which gives young people the skills to regulate their emotional responses to social situations they perceive as threatening.
Losing interest in education (survey)	Young people engaged with education- not just registered but motivated to learn.	School/college/ university attendance and engagement.	Reflective motivation (some young people have disconnected with education because it no longer fits their needs) Automatic motivation (some young people have developed online learning habits that they are finding difficult to break)	Enablement-autonomy is one of the strongest drivers of motivation, so give students the opportunity to co-design their curriculums so that they can learn what they love. Environmental restructuring- where students will engage online but not in-person, support them to do so.

1 https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-93878/v2

Theme	Desired outcome	Potential behaviour example	COM construct (driver or barrier to the behaviour)	An appropriate intervention function and example
Giving up on things they once enjoyed (survey)	Young people reengaged with recreational activities	Re-engagement with recreational activities such as sport, social clubs, etc.	Reflective motivation (some young people have disconnected with things they once enjoyed because of the COVID lockdowns causing a break in services) Automatic motivation (young people lost good habits that they had before the COVID lockdowns)	Enablement-give young people of Wrexham the opportunity to co-design and deliver a service/ hub/social for young people Persuasion- a strong social media campaign promoting engagement with the above intervention.
A "new" drug problem	A reduction in anti-social behaviour	A reduction in drug or other substance abuse	Social opportunity- norms around accessing illicit drugs are driving the issue.	Modelling- a marketing campaign that normalises saying no to drug use using role models or influencers
Family dynamics and social connectedness	Young people feeling connected with others	Engagement and participation in face-to-face interventions to support community connectedness	Social opportunity- young people no longer feel a sense of connectedness in their communities	Enablement- a co-designed hub where young people can gather and develop a sense of community
Changes in service provision and access	Young people feeling able to access services in a way that suits them when they need to	Help-seeking when needed, for example, for mental health.	Social opportunity- while young people acknowledged that there were services available, they often felt they were inaccessible to them	Enablement- options to book appointments online and to carry out virtual consultations, where appropriate
Changing health behaviour	Young people experiencing positive physical wellbeing outcomes	Engagement with physical activity	Reflective motivation- young people described waning motivation as a reason for not engaging with health behaviours	Education- a campaign which uses messaging to support young people to understand the benefits of physical health behaviours on mental wellbeing.
Pressure to do well	Young people feeling motivated by their own goals, not pressured by pre-determined life courses out of their control	Use of controlling language in education- behaviour of educators	Reflective motivation- young people expressed that feeling pressured actually reduced their drive to do well and promoted a fear of failure.	Education- an intervention which supports educators to adopt non-controlling language in their interactions with students and encourages them to direct students from a strengths-based perspective.

Theme	Desired outcome	Potential behaviour example	COM construct (driver or barrier to the behaviour)	An appropriate intervention function and example
Social media	Young people using social media in a way that is healthy and does no harm	Reduction in scrolling behaviours	Automatic motivation- young people expressed that they are habitually driven to engage with social media	Modelling- an anti-scrolling campaign that uses role models to show changing social media use
Lack of mental health support	Young people feeling empowered to seek support when and how they need to	Help-seeking when needed, for example, for mental health.	Social opportunity- while young people acknowledged that there were services available, they often felt they were inaccessible to them	Enablement- options to book appointments online and to carry out virtual consultations, where appropriate
Lack of post-18 support	Young people having a full and clear picture about how to transition into adulthood	Engagement with services	Social opportunity- young people feel that there is not enough support for them to transition to adulthood and services may need to change to accommodate this need.	Education- ensure that the curriculum empowers young people with the skills they need to transition into adulthood.
Trapped	Young people feeling there are opportunities in their local area	Meaningful engagement	Social opportunity- young people expressed that they felt pushed out of their community which worsened the risks of anti-social behaviour	Restructuring the environment- a safe space for young people to gather where they can engage in meaningful activities.
Autonomy	Young people feeling in control of their futures	School/college/ university attendance and engagement.	Reflective motivation (some young people have disconnected with education because it no longer fits their needs) Automatic motivation (some young people have developed online learning habits that they are finding difficult to break)	Enablement-autonomy is one of the strongest drivers of motivation, so give students the opportunity to co-design their curriculums so that they can learn what they love. Environmental restructuring- where students will engage online but not in-person, support them to do so.
Always home	Young people being able to transition 'back to normal' following the lockdowns of COVID	Engagement with services to support this transition	Social opportunity- young people feel it is unreasonable for them to 'catch-up' so quickly after they had to miss so many important steps	Enablement- an intervention within schools to support young people to 'catch-up' on missed years, supporting their future resilience and ability to transition.

Theme	Desired outcome	Potential behaviour example	COM construct (driver or barrier to the behaviour)	An appropriate intervention function and example
Aspirations- but how?	Young people having the knowledge and skills to turn their ideas into actions	Business start-up	Social opportunity- young people feel that their aspirations are often unsupported, and they are driven down traditional routes.	Enablement and education- an intervention that gives the skills and knowledge to young people who are looking to start a business
Side hustlers	As above	Business start-up	Social opportunity- young people feel that their aspirations are often unsupported, and they are driven down traditional routes.	Enablement and education- an intervention that gives the skills and knowledge to young people who are looking to start a business
Socialising and life in Wrexham	Young people feeling fulfilled, having pride in their area, and a strong sense of community	Meaningful engagement	Social opportunity- young people expressed that they felt pushed out of their community which worsened the risks of anti-social behaviour	Restructuring the environment- a safe space for young people to gather where they can engage in meaningful activities.
Life in bed	Young people feeling motivated to participate	Reduction in scrolling behaviours	Automatic motivation- young people expressed that they are habitually driven to engage with social media	Modelling- an anti-scrolling campaign that uses role models to show changing social media use

Learnings

- In order to engage with these young people, there is a need for a referral process. They did not come directly to us- rather, we had to seek them out through parents, colleges, schools, friends, and family.
- Young people are easily disengaged by the wrong type of language or agendas that don't appeal to them or feel exclusive.
- Young people's lives were greatly impacted by COVID-19 and, for many of them, it is a large percentage of the life they remember. Expecting them to 'return to normal' is not reasonable.
- There is a sub-population of this age group that we feel we did not reach successfully, despite trying various different methods. They may not want to be reached or perhaps we have not found an appropriate medium through which to reach them.
- Happiness is correlated with purpose and meaning. Many of the young people we spoke to lost their sense of purpose and meaning during COVID and have never been able to get it back.
- Social engagement is protective of mental well-being. New 'work from home' culture means that young people are less and less engaged with their peers and colleagues.
- Many habits that were formed during COVID-19 lockdowns are difficult for young people to break- they spend more time online, more time alone, and they have residual social anxiety.
- There has been a paradigm shift in the way young people communicate with and view the world. They are not likely to fit into pre-defined expectations that were set before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Motivation is at an all-time low for many young people. They feel that they have lost an important part of their learning and development and they are not being supported to make allowances for this. They feel that they are expected to just 'slot back in', but this is challenging for them. They missed some very important developmental milestones.
- In order to build self-efficacy in one's abilities, there must be optimal challenge. Young people often feel that they did not 'earn' their predicted grades, they were not assessed or examined, and therefore they do not feel confident in their abilities and they do not 'own' their achievements. This is translating into lack of confidence in the work-place, lack of motivation for their past aspirations, and lack of self-efficacy in their abilities.
- There were many positives that came from the insight work- we spoke to some inspiring young people with bright ideas for their future. We need to accommodate these young people and support them in their aspirations, even if they (or because) they do not fit traditional expectations.

Considerations

- WMTG to identify opportunities for re-engagement with young people and EXISTING services and share the findings of this report with them in a way that is relevant to them. Here are some of the recommended routes:

  – **Local secondary education institutions** (educating 11-18-year-olds). It was identified through the research that these establishments are not providing enough information to support young people out of education. The focus is on supporting them into higher or further education and this is often not what young people want. **There should be sufficient provision in place to support young people into work or alternative routes such as apprenticeships or starting their own businesses.** Without this, we risk creating a generation of 16-18-year-olds who will become unfulfilled and directionless adults. Similarly, young people do not feel 'heard' in schools and colleges. **WMTG are in a strong position to suggest that all educational establishments set up a school council which is run by young people for young people, empowering them to identify what matters to them and challenging a system that evidently does not fit their needs.**

  – **Job centre and Careers Wales.** It was identified by young people that they do not see these services as accessible. They are viewed by young people as outdated and no longer fit the needs of young people. They are perceived as often having outdated systems which mean that young people have many steps to take before being able to access them and they do not offer the type of support that young people are asking for. **WMTG are in a strong position to share the findings from this research to promote a change in the way these services communicate, engage, and work with young people. Without this, such services risk becoming obsolete, or, at best, they will be utilised to fix problems** (i.e., claiming benefits), rather than preventing them (i.e., empowering young people to take ownership of their futures).

  – **Local authority.** Young people do not view the local authority or the council as 'for them.' At best, they feel that council services are not relevant to them. At worst, they feel that they are unwelcome in the city. They are unlikely to re-engage without huge effort from the local authority. WMTG are well positioned to recommend that the council works to co-design services and support that they offer to young people in Wrexham. For example, co-designing web content so that young people are signposted to services that are important to them. If the local authority wishes to re-engage young people, they need to support them in designing safe spaces (virtual and physical) that they feel pride in being part of.

- **Charitable organisations**, including WMTG. Young people do not know that there are charities who provide some of the support that they are looking for. This indicates that there is a breakdown in communication or, more likely, communication methods. We recommend that WMTG increase their social media presence because young people told us that this is where they communicate, socialise, and share ideas. Co-designing the content of websites, intervention design, and other services with young people is also recommended to ensure that they are fit for purpose. It is worth considering employing a young person to manage WMTG social media content and delivery.

- **Co-design.** Co-design is key to ensure that any intervention is shaped by young people themselves. Without this, there is a risk that more unused and unsuitable services or interventions will be designed with little or no impact.

- **WMTG to partner with other organisations to develop an innovative 'hub'** for young people in Wrexham. Whether the hub is a physical location (fixed), a community of people (mobile), or an online provision should be determined by consultation with young people. Something of this scale is likely to need the collaboration of other organisations, but there is a clear need for 'somewhere' that young people can go to access mental health support, physical health advice, career and financial advice, emotional and social support, spend time with their peers without having to spend money and feel welcome. This needs to be a non-judgemental space where young people feel they are amongst their own. For that reason, co-design is crucial as is empowering young people to lead on such a project (through employment, volunteering, steering groups, co-creation, etc.).

- **WMTG to partner with other organisations to develop a 'reset intervention'** which enables young people to revisit the years of lost experience and learning that they would have had were it not for the COVID pandemic. The research shows that young people feel they have missed out on essential life skills from using a washing machine or booking a doctor's appointment to attending a job interview or applying to university. It is likely that the role-models in their lives who would ordinarily have supported them to do this were equally affected by COVID and may not recognise that there is still a need. WMTG are in a position to provide young people with a safe space where they can learn how to do activities of daily life, as well as guide them through important decisions that they may have missed out on.

- **WMTG to partner with a marketing or advertising agency specialising in behaviour change** to ensure that they are reaching their target audience. Consider a campaign which highlights some of the issues that young people have spoken

about in the research to show young people that they are, in fact, being heard. One clear example of this is young people consistently telling us that they feel left behind/abandoned after the COVID pandemic- this needs to be explicitly acknowledged.

- **WMTG currently offer services for young people to support them into work and education, but they are under-subscribed and are mainly implemented in the North of England.** We recommend that WMTG 'test' the current model (including communication efforts, social media platforms, website, etc.) they are using with the target audience with a view to make it more acceptable and recognisable to young people, particularly those who we have identified as 'hidden.' Further testing should be carried out in Wrexham with a view to scaling the current interventions to encourage uptake in Wrexham.

- **An 'explorer' model was trialled during the research with limited success.** However, it was likely that the young people we recruited to implement this model were being asked for quite a large commitment with little commitment in return. It is likely that they did not feel motivated to carry out the work. However, we also learned that it is challenging to reach young people directly, and they often only spoke to us through trusted referrers- family and friends or services that they already trusted. Because of this, we recommend that WMTG continue with the explorer model, but with more permanency. For example, partnering with organisations and parent groups who support young people and offering more permanent of fixed term contracts for young people to work as 'explorers.' This will not only offer them a tangible employment opportunity but will support them in securing future employment.

- **Adopt a 'do now', 'do next', 'do later' approach with stakeholders** to ensure that all parties involved in collaboration recognise the same long- and short-term goals and their roles in fulfilling them. These goals should be designed collaboratively with key partners and stakeholders.

- **There is potential for testing interventions in early years** (for example, building resilience into primary age school curriculum) which might require the collaboration of academic institutions such as Wrexham Glyndwr in attempted funding bids. It is recommended that WMTG secure an academic partnership, where possible, with a university who is likely to want to support/collaborate.

Some reflections

Our journey

We want to start by telling you why Hitch aspired to work, and is proud to have worked, with WeMindTheGap on this project, why we took the approach we did, and what we learned from the young people we spoke to, as well as the challenges we faced along the way. We then want to highlight to you, some of the main insights, conclusions, and recommendations that we have worked with WeMindTheGap to develop as this project, which aimed to speak to as many, and try to understand the lives of young people of Wrexham, has progressed.

As an agency, we use behaviour change and social marketing techniques and theories to help us understand people. We work closely with communities to identify behaviours that contribute to desired social outcomes. Regardless of the nature of the problem or the behaviour we are tackling we always do two things. We speak to the people who matter to ensure that everything we do is codesigned. And we underpin our work with robust, tried and tested theories of human behaviour. We don't guess and we don't assume.

It is important to base our understanding in theories and frameworks so that we don't just present stories that aren't grounded in science. For this project we used the COM-B model as a framework for understanding behaviours and potential intervention ideas, and to give the work this grounding in behavioural science – we explain this more in the main report but in short, it frames behaviour as being an interaction between Capacity, Opportunity, and Motivation – allowing understanding of where and how to help.

We started out on this journey, knowing from other projects, about the impacts of the pandemic on a whole raft of life issues. We've also worked with young people specifically, looking to understand and measure the impacts of the pandemic on education, and mental health, and social connectedness. So, our goal was to capture the voices of as many young people in Wrexham as we could. We wanted to understand what it is like to be a young person in Wrexham in 2023. What difficulties or worries do young people face in terms of moving forward with their lives? What are their needs to help them move forward? Are these needs met, and if not, how can we meet them? What must, or could, happen to help them fulfil their full potential?

We knew different research methods would need to be used to ensure we captured a diverse range of voices. We tried hard to leave no stone unturned: carrying out a large-scale survey to provide anonymity and digital access for those that needed, focus groups in colleges and sixth forms which we knew were places young people generally felt more comfortable, a focus group with young people not in education or employment, on-street and in-person interviews in the town centre, at a festival and other relevant Wrexham-based events and locations, and followed up with online diary entries. We

spoke to parents, teachers, and support staff, too. Our methods were not without their challenges! In total however, we heard the voices of 419 young people! 242 of these came through digital survey channels (quantitative), 129 from on-street engagement, 34 from focus groups and 14 from interviews (qualitative). Around 60% were female, 35% were male and the remainder identified in another way. Around 80% of our cohort lived with their parents, and most of them were students, but we found this did not mean they were engaging with the world around them.

Before we share the results with you, however, let us start with the many challenges and learnings that we found along the way. What these serve to do is highlight the importance of continued engagement with these young people in Wrexham.

It also shows how important it is for all of us who can make a difference to think about how that difference needs to be made. What needs to happen for those in authority, or in the system or as part of the process to help design services that suit how young people operate in the world.

We hope you enjoy reading about the journey we undertook with WeMindTheGap and Wrexham's young people – they deserve to have their voices heard and for those listening to work out how we can help.

The full report contains all the data of the quantitative and qualitative work we did, and I hope that this executive summary helps to get a flavour of why we wanted to be part of this project, and why making some of these changes, and thinking about some of these changes, matters. From a personal perspective, I hope it isn't the last time we get to work with these young people and others like them.

The challenges and learnings

From our experience, we knew, from the very beginning, that we would face challenges engaging with young people. We would also face challenges untangling how our society and services, and the personal impacts of the pandemic, have impacted the lives of those young people. They aren't a homogenous mass.

They're absent:

Young people were never where we expected them to be. We set up a stall in the University and were faced with an almost empty campus. People who were milling around were generally mature students and staff. It was term time, but it proved impossible to speak to anyone in the target age bracket. We know that many universities are struggling to get their students back to face-to-face learning, but we saw it first-hand.

We really struggled to recruit young people who were not in education and employment, and we utilised an external recruitment agency who had contacts in the local area who could help. When we held an online focus group with these young people, 6 out of the 10 recruited made it (even though they were incentivised), and not one of them turned their camera on, but they were all keen to participate and speak about their experiences.

We hit the streets of Wrexham when there were local events happening, but we often found ourselves approaching people who were either too old or too young to complete an interview: 18-21-year-olds were, by far, the hardest to find on the streets of Wrexham.

When we did manage to speak to them, we started to see that we were struggling to reach them because they often stayed in their 'safe spaces'- within specific groups that they identified with, in the safety of mental wellbeing hubs at college, in their homes. In our survey, almost half (46%) of our young people told us that, since the covid pandemic, they felt more alone. Even more (49%) told us that they feel more anxious.

When catching them on the streets of Wrexham, they were often out with a purpose- visiting the sunbeds, salons, or walking to college. They felt unsafe and ostracised because they had 'nowhere to go,' and we realised that we had to meet them where they were.

NEETs aren't just NEETs:

NEETs are defined as a young person who is no longer in the education system, is not working or being trained for work. By definition, these young people are expected to be those that aren't getting the help they need through choice or through how the system happens to be.

What we found though, is that even those that are in education or are employed or on work placements aren't necessarily getting the help they need to progress with lives. In the survey again, 34% of young people told us that they had lost interest in education since the pandemic. In focus groups and interviews they expressed a mistrust in establishments and the government. Does this mean that those people that are in education or work or just seen as 'getting on with life'. We found out that may not be the case.

We're 'wrong' about them:

The 'lost generation' aren't necessarily lost. There was a misconception when we first set out on this journey that young people were hiding away in their bedrooms, and they weren't being heard because they didn't want to be heard. We got that very wrong. Young people do want to be heard. They are creating their own communities and their own systems and that's what we're missing. Of course, some of them are hidden away in their bedrooms and they

are not having their voices heard, but there are equal numbers who are shouting from the rooftops.

They are pleading for systems changes. They want to know how to run businesses, how to manage money, how to develop meaningful relationships, and how to be happy and fulfilled. Their goals and aspirations were often meaningful, but they might not know how to go about achieving them.

In our surveys 98% prioritised having good health and 93% prioritised having a happy family life. This was supported in qualitative engagement, where young people often expressed that they wanted to feel a sense of fulfilment in their relationships, their education, and their employment routes through education, employment, and life in general are not necessarily going to work for them- all that was shut down for them when they were still very impressionable, and they have learned new ways of existing in these spaces. We have to meet them in the middle, and that doesn't mean allowing them to remain unaccountable, it means empowering them to take ownership of their futures- in a way that is meaningful to them.

When we visited Maelor sixth form we were told that the focus group we held was the first time that those young people had really felt listened to. We asked them about what they needed to come back from their missed COVID years, what they needed to feel supported, and what they felt the gaps were. They, and other young people we spoke to, said they knew there were support services available to them for various things (mental health, financial, employment, etc.) but these services were often not accessible to them in a way that they want to access them. One young person, when asked where we needed to look for them, told us, "literally look on the internet," and expressed that decision makers did not listen to young people when making decisions about those same young people.

They feel betrayed and are distrustful:

The COVID-19 pandemics had devastating impacts on every single one of us, on our systems, our habits, and our sense of normality. Young people were at the forefront of that. Our target audience were, at the time, going through one of the most important times of their lives, a time of responsibilitation, of decision making and of character building. They feel not only that this experience (end of year exams, choosing a university or college, finding apprenticeships) were not only robbed from them, but that no one around them acknowledged this.

Young people often shared that they felt their wellbeing and needs was completely ignored during the pandemic, and they also felt responsible and scapegoated for a situation that was beyond anyone's control. Once the world reopened, they were expected to get back to normal, without being asked how they felt, or the opportunities and development they missed out on recognised in any way, or that normal had actually changed. Even more concerning

were the conversations we had with young people who described other young people who had never emerged from the pandemic lockdowns. They were described by their peers as always at home, engaging in unhealthy behaviours (e.g., smoking cannabis), and struggling with mental health – their new normal.

This left them feeling betrayed. Betrayed by the institutions around them, by older generations and sometimes by the very people they thought they could turn to for help. With betrayal comes mistrust, and a proportion of the young people we spoke to made it very clear they did not trust older generations to be able to ask them for support, because they felt those people did not care to listen, let alone help them fix and find solutions to the challenges they had been facing.

For those that did, a common theme in the qualitative data was that support services were inaccessible, with for example, increasingly long waiting-lists, when around a quarter of the young people surveyed shared they had a mental health diagnosis, or that anxiety generally had been at an all-time high mainly as a result of the pandemic, cost of living crisis and growing climate change concerns amongst other issues.

They don't fit into boxes:

So, we designed the 'Wrexham voices' survey which contained just four open-ended questions. Although we didn't get many responses, we did get heart-felt ones. Young people were much more inclined to share their personal thoughts and feelings when it was anonymous and when they were able to write freely. Perhaps pre-set questions with pre-determined answers wasn't the right way to encourage young people to voice their opinions.

When young people engaged with qualitative research, they spoke very freely and openly about their feelings and experiences- they were much more able to express themselves and be open with us than we might have initially expected. They told us that being Welsh, being part of a religious or spiritual group, being part of a sports team, being neurodivergent and being part of the LGBTQIA+ community were important to them, that happiness, fulfilment and good health (mental and physical) were a priority to them and that they worried about how they would cope when wanting to live independently or make big life decisions (applying for university, for jobs etc).

Young people have shorter attention spans:

One of the main things that we noted throughout the whole process was that we had to take our learnings from each stage into the next to ensure we were more successful each time. For example, we

learned from the survey that young people were easily disengaged when they had to pay attention to something lengthy and 'arduous', this being the case even after we shortened the survey to take less than 10 minutes. We had as many partial responses to the survey as we did full responses because they were dropping off half-way through- sometimes sooner than that.

They're non-committal:

When we tried to recruit for the 'explorer' model- an intervention where we hoped to train young people to conduct their own casual interviews with their peers, young people, particularly at the college, were very keen to be involved. We had quite a few signing-up to come the following day for explorer training. We were giving them lunch and incentivising them to be there. **The next day, nobody came.** One sent a message to say they weren't coming, but the rest just didn't turn up. This happened time and again- young people would agree to come and participate in something we were doing (focus groups, interviews, face-to-face events), but on the day they wouldn't show, or they'd change their mind just before.

This aligned with what teachers and parents told us when we spoke to them. Teachers were at a loss with how to re-engage young people. They described challenges with attendance and engagement that they had never seen before. They felt that young people had not learned how to be accountable, so they were frequently absent or unmotivated.

We didn't see this lack of commitment in the same way because, on numerous occasions, young people told us that social anxiety was the reason they stopped showing up for things.

They're bright and adventurous:

One of the biggest eye-openers for us was that young people were often very aware of the systems in which they exist and their shortcomings. They have lost faith in institutions, and they are forging their own ways forward.

They often spoke about their desires to do well both academically but also outside of traditional routes- they record podcasts, they shoot films, they paint, they play and share their music, they find ways to turn their passions into projects and their hobbies into long-term plans for the future.

A majority of survey respondents (54%) said they wanted access to financial support, and 50% said they wanted access to professional support. They are admirable risk-takers. But they don't trust that there is support out there for them when they need it- at least not the type they need. For example, when discussing social media use, despite uncovering high numbers (86% use Instagram, 79% use YouTube, 77% use Snapchat, and 71% use TikTok), young people still explained they did not access local authority, education, or support services through these channels. In fact, they did not feel that these services (e.g., the council website) were designed for them. If

employers, local authorities, educators, and other institutions refuse to learn to speak the same language as young people, to make changes to their systems and their processes, they will lose them. There are bright young people who are still expressing that age old problem of, "they want us to have experience, but won't give us work so that we can gain that experience." There is an obvious discord between the voices of young people and the systems around them.

Young people are not gullible

Warm language, positive messages and smiles are not enough. Just like we thought we had them figured out and didn't, we also underestimated how much they understand us. Young people want to see change and have a lot of feedback on what and how they'd like to see their lives, and the things in place around to support them evolve. They see a lot of the discourse around them as fake promises and are not fooled by content that stops at just being inspirational or reassuring. They want to see that the things that they care about are being talked about, and that the people talking about are knowledgeable about those issues.

As mentioned above, they also can tell when they aren't actually being listened to, or when assumptions are being made about who they are and what they need. When they sense that, they instantly disengage. They want to see language that is accessible, supportive, and fresh yes, but one trap to avoid falling into is babying them. They are young, but they are still adults with opinions, ideas, and aspirations that they not only want to, but also feel like they've never had an opportunity to truly share. Making assumptions, putting words in their mouths, or communicating with them without making them feel in control, or with agency, will leave them completely disengaged and feeling more distrustful of the world around them.

Social media is their life, but they are aware of its negative impacts - Social media impacts on everything. It's the main communication channel. It's one of the main sources of information – although there is a healthy scepticism towards influencers – impacts of virtually every aspect of their lives, positively and negatively. How do we reclaim it?

We took the evidence and data and created some personas for the young people of Wales. In the hope that in using this, we can really see how society and support services need to help. Even those in education, go to college and thinking of university, still need help and still feel, 'different 'to pre-Covid times.