



WE MIND THE
GAP.TM

THE
BIG
CONVERSATION

Findings and Response

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Prifysgol Wrecsam
Wrexham University



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Wedi ei ariannu gan
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Flintshire Big Conversation with young people and employers on what life is like in Flintshire and what could make it better - Bridging the gap: What it means to grow, work, and belong in Flintshire today.

Welcome

Young people are our future. They're growing up in a world defined by rapid change and rising complexity. Climate change, Brexit, the aftermath of a global pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, social media pressures, and disrupted education all shape the daily lives of today's young people. These aren't individual challenges, they're lived realities, forming the backdrop to their life wellbeing, ambitions, confidence and future prospects.

In early 2025, WeMindTheGap launched our second Big Conversation, a commitment we made in our 5 Year Plan. This Big Conversation took place in Flintshire, with an aim to listen to the lived experiences of 18–21-year-olds and local employers, to find out what life is like for them now, and what could make it better.

This is the same age group we first engaged with in Wrexham in 2023, but now, two years on, this group would have been just 14–16 years old when COVID19 first struck, an age where social development, identity, and education play pivotal roles. WeMindTheGap, worked in partnership with Wrexham University's Civic Mission team.

Through this second Big Conversation, we set out to explore whether the effects and impact of the pandemic continues to shape the outlook of this age group as they transition into adulthood and the world of work.

We engaged with over 500 young people over a month period, and their stories and views were captured in film, audio and digitally. In February, a second conversation took place to engage local employers to understand how they recruit, support, and develop young talent. This report brings both perspectives together to highlight challenges, reveal opportunities, and shape future support for young people across Flintshire. Some reflections affirmed what we already suspected, others challenged assumptions or surfaced hard truths. What's clear is this, the systems and approaches that supported previous generations no longer work in the same way. To support the next generation to thrive, we must adapt, we must make some brave and bold decisions and we must act now.

This report and accompanying film weaves together the voices of young people who have agreed to share their realities, alongside the lived experience and honesty from employers, this report offers not just insight but a roadmap for our future generations.

Methodology

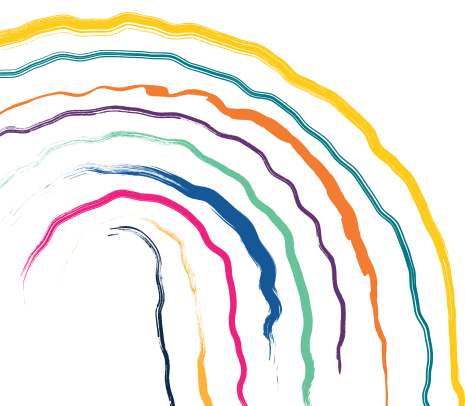
Utilising an Appreciative Inquiry approach, through strength based conversations, the Big Conversation Flintshire was designed as a two-strand community engagement project, connecting with both young people aged 18–21 and local employers across the County. Each strand used tailored approaches to gather meaningful insights and lived experience.

Young people and community engagement

In January 2025, 507 young people aged 18-21yrs were spoken to through a combination of in-person interviews, online surveys, and handwritten postcards were engaged. 507 equates to nearly 12% of the population in that age group. Interactions were conducted in community spaces, schools, and public events across Flintshire, with a focus on reaching individuals from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds, and balanced between rural, urban and LSOI geographies. Members of the WeMindTheGap team, Wrexham University Civic Mission Team and our Gappie Alumni engaged the public, incentives of £20 vouchers were offered to participants, visual tools and a 'Soundavan' mobile podcasting suite, helped participation. A strength-based approach underpinned the two core questions: "What is life like in Flintshire?" and "What could make it better?" Responses were collected with informed consent and later thematically analysed to identify key trends.

Employer community engagement

Between February and April 2025, WeMindTheGap's employability team engaged 207 local businesses through face-to-face meetings, digital platforms, networking events, and telephone conversations. 57 businesses agreed to provide feedback. Employers responded to a 22-question survey, designed to capture both qualitative insights and quantifiable trends related to employing 18–21-year-olds. The survey explored recruitment practices, support for young employees, awareness of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and use of trauma-informed approaches in the workplace.



Thematic review of young people's engagement

Question 1: What is life like for young people in Flintshire? - Summary of what young people said:

Young people in Flintshire described a mix of positive and challenging experiences shaped by access to leisure opportunities, education, community, and employment. While some praised the area's parks and sports facilities, many highlighted limited leisure options and poor transport links. Education was generally viewed favourably, though respondents called for more practical and vocational opportunities. Community life felt safe and connected, yet young people wanted greater involvement in planning and decision-making. Employment views were mixed, some saw opportunities, but others faced barriers to entering the workforce, particularly around anxiety, access, affordability and experience.

Question 2: How could life be better for young people in Flintshire? - Summary of what young people said:

Young people in Flintshire identified clear priorities for improving life in their communities. Better access to varied and affordable leisure activities was a recurring theme, often linked to the need for improved public transport, particularly evening and weekend bus services. Education and employment emerged as critical areas, with calls for more vocational training, clearer career pathways, and targeted job opportunities for young people. Young people asked for greater mental health support, more youth-led events and clubs, and stronger inclusion in local planning and decision-making. Across all areas, the emphasis was on creating more accessible, empowering, and responsive systems to support young people's wellbeing and future prospects.

The overarching themes that were identified and enablers and barriers to life in Flintshire can be defined as follows:-

1. Leisure and recreational activities
2. Education and opportunities
3. Community and social life
4. Employment and economic conditions

The barriers identified across the themes were:-

1. Access, availability and affordability of public transport
2. Opportunities, access and variety of leisure activities
3. Perception of opportunities and activities
4. Availability of educational activities, variety and vocational training
5. Social connectivity and youth engagement opportunities
6. Safety and quality of life
7. Work related stress and anxiety
8. Availability of job opportunities for young people



The enablers and opportunities to make life better around the themes were:-

1. Enhanced leisure facilities and activities
2. Improved public transport & accessibility
3. Expanded educational, vocational training & career opportunities
4. Better community support and youth engagement



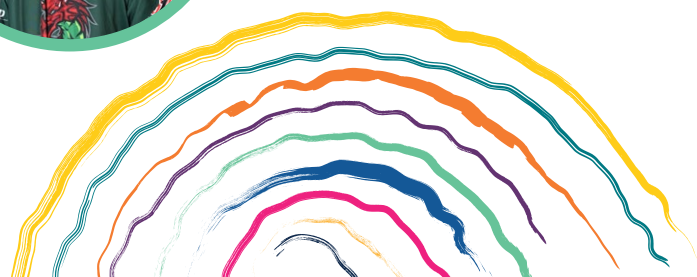
Sentiment analysis was used to gauge the emotional 'feelings' of responses across each theme. While many views were mixed, the average polarity scores reflect whether responses leaned more positive or negative.

There were no outstanding, extreme positive or negative feelings, in fact, it was noted that the responses from young people were realistic and reasonable, all about enhancing and improving their life, providing an overall hopeful view and prospect should their concerns and gaps be addressed.

Analysis by theme was carried out on the differences between online and offline responses.

There was a distinct difference between the online (in person) and offline (digital responses), as well as some similarities.

Those who participated online had a slightly negative sentiment in their answers, suggesting a dissatisfaction with their current lives. Conversely, their suggestions for how life can be better were far more positive than those given offline, implying both a vision and an opportunity for improvement.



Comparisons drawn across National and Flintshire themes:-

Like Wrexham, we believe that the views of young people across Flintshire represent the views of all young people. To reflect this, we have analysed the themes across National research and draw comparisons below.

1. Transport, access and availability

Reliable and affordable transport emerges as a major concern both locally and nationally. In Flintshire, limited bus services, rural geography and high travel costs restrict young people's access to education, employment, and leisure. National research echoes this, showing that young people, particularly in rural areas, experience lower mobility and are disproportionately affected by poor public transport.

2. Leisure and recreation

Young people in Flintshire called for more varied, affordable, and accessible activities. This reflects national patterns, especially in rural areas, where the National Youth Agency has highlighted a lack of youth clubs and safe social spaces, leaving many young people isolated or bored. However, it should be noted that when asked, young people did not know what they specifically wanted in response to this.

3. Education and training

While education in Flintshire received positive views, many young people sought more vocational training and clearer career pathways. Across the UK, the Kings's Trust Youth Index 2022 reported that young people's happiness with their qualifications and training hit a record low, with confidence in this area "lower than ever" after the pandemic.

4. Employment and economic prospects

Flintshire respondents expressed concern over limited local job opportunities and the need to leave the area for work. Nationally, Youth Futures Foundation notes a young person's region heavily influences their prospects, with those in disadvantaged or rural areas (including parts of Wales) facing "range of barriers to employment" such as fewer jobs and fragmented support services.

5. Community engagement and social inclusion

Young people in Flintshire valued their close-knit community but asked for more mental health support and stronger youth involvement in local decision-making and inclusion. This aligns with national concerns around loneliness, poor well-being, and a sense of being unheard. The Youth Endowment Fund survey of 7,500 teens found that fear of violence and crime is another barrier to inclusion for some, causing young people to avoid certain places or activities.





Thematic review of employers engagement provided the following themes:

1. Recruitment methods, roles and responsibilities
2. Changes to recruitment since COVID19
3. Strengths of recruiting 18–21 year olds
4. Challenges in employing 18–21 year olds
5. Retention and progression of young people
6. Work experience
7. Supporting young people
8. Transport links
9. Awareness of ACEs and Trauma-Informed Practice

1. Recruitment methods, roles and responsibilities

Employers primarily recruited 18–21-year-olds through online job portals and their own websites, with word of mouth also playing a key role. Social media was less commonly used for advertising vacancies. Most entry-level roles were part-time or permanent, though limited hours often led to underemployment. Seasonal roles were common in retail and hospitality, and only 18% of businesses offered apprenticeships. Entry level positions typically involved operational or customer-facing duties. Notably, 77% of roles required no qualifications beyond age 16, creating low-entry barriers but potentially limiting long-term progression and earning potential.

2. Changes to recruitment Since COVID-19

Recruitment processes have shifted noticeably. Many employers now use online interviews and streamlined application systems, though approaches vary. Open days and group interviews have become more common. Employers noted that young applicants often lack communication skills and work readiness, highlighting a need for greater mentorship and support early in the hiring journey.

3. Strengths of 18–21 year olds

Employers overwhelmingly valued young employees for their enthusiasm, creativity, and adaptability. Many cited the fresh perspectives they bring, particularly in customer-facing roles or digital environments. Some businesses noted success in hiring young people into apprenticeships and nurturing them into long-term roles, recognising their potential as future talent.

4. Challenges in employing 18–21 year olds

Employers reported recurring concerns around maturity, confidence, and work ethic among young people, with 63% highlighting gaps in readiness for the workplace. Some cited issues like poor attendance, limited commitment, or overreliance on parental support during recruitment. While these reflect broader generational and mental health challenges such as anxiety and low self-belief, others felt some young employees lacked motivation or flexibility. Perspectives varied, with some employers seeing overconfidence and others observing a lack of assertiveness.

5. Retention and progression of young people

Despite concerns, young people tended to stay in roles for at least six months, and if they stayed that long, many remaining over two years, even in high-turnover sectors like hospitality and retail. The most common reason for leaving was progression, pursuing full-time roles or continuing education, suggesting entry-level jobs are seen as stepping stones. Employers acknowledged that perceived gaps rarely led to dismissal and could be overcome with support, indicating that young people are invested in their growth when given the opportunity.

6. Work experience

Employers held mixed views on the value of prior work experience. Some preferred inexperienced recruits to avoid “bad habits,” while others, especially in sectors affected by rising wages, preferred candidates with proven initiative and understanding of workplace expectations. Although 42% of organisations offered work placements, many who noted that young people lacked readiness for work were not currently open to providing experience opportunities, highlighting a missed link between awareness and action.

7. Supporting young people

Employers recognised the importance of development, with many offering social activities, mentoring, and soft skills training to build team culture and workplace confidence. Social connection at work was seen as vital for wellbeing and retention, particularly for younger staff with limited personal networks.

8. Transport links

Transport accessibility varied by location. Coastal areas had better connectivity, while rural employers reported significant gaps, especially in early mornings, evenings, and on Sundays. Some businesses offered taxi contributions or sought to hire only those with personal transport.

9. Awareness of ACEs and Trauma-Informed Practice

Only 31.6% of businesses had heard of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and a similar proportion were aware of trauma-informed practice, despite Welsh Government efforts to raise awareness. The lack of understanding poses a barrier to creating inclusive, supportive workplaces. Encouragingly, over 70% of businesses had an Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) strategy, offering a potential route to embed trauma-informed approaches in the future.

Case Study

With over 300 face to face interviews captured on camera, it has been hard to choose one case study to represent the findings of this report. However, we believe that Ethan's story reflects many of the challenges young people shared:-

Ethan, a 21-year-old from Flintshire, describes his home town thus: "there's not a lot of activities... besides, like, going to a pub maybe," and "there's nothing like, to go and hang out." Outside the sports centre or college campus, young adults lack affordable places to meet their friends. In order to solve this issue, he envisioned a low-cost "package that maybe you pay an extra fiver, and you can get the gym, get the pool... but the extra fiver gives you 24/7 access to a nice hall that isn't just a hall. You've got computers, comfy chairs... a nice place to sit, have a chat with your mates, maybe do some study"

Ethan shared that a medical condition left him with few options: "And my mom was very protective. No buses, basically. So now I've got my licence now, though, so I will be going to college... but before that I was housebound".

This illustrates the need for improved public transport to support education and social life. On campus, he finds structure, but "there's not a lot of structure outside of the schools and stuff," highlighting gaps in community-based educational settings. He also notes understaffed local businesses - "places like KFC, there's not enough workers" - pointing to limited youth employment opportunities. He ended his interview with a wish for "a place... a chill space... free Wi-Fi, access to computers, a quiet, relaxing environment that isn't the library". These all point towards the need for more broader change across Flintshire.

Observations

Engagement challenges:

Engaging employers proved difficult, with many citing GDPR concerns or requiring Head Office approval. In some cases, this may have masked discomfort or lack of authority to speak on recruitment practices. Participation was much higher among existing partner organisations, highlighting the importance of trust and clear communication. A reminder that engagement, like employment, begins with explaining the “why.”

Trusted Referrer model:

WeMindTheGap’s Trusted Referrer approach proved valuable, with those familiar with the charity more willing to provide detailed, honest feedback. These relationships underscore the power of shared values in driving meaningful participation.

Aligning youth and employer perspectives:

Young people called for more opportunities, social spaces, and generational understanding. Meanwhile, employers cited low confidence and independence as key challenges. These gaps may reflect systemic issues. Transport, mental health, and social isolation, all contributing to the barriers young people face in the workplace.

Generational disconnect in communities:

Some employers and community members shared negative stereotypes about young people, while others recognised their creativity, adaptability, and digital skills. Bridging this generational divide will require reframing perceptions and valuing the unique contributions of today’s youth.

Awareness of ACEs and Trauma-Informed Practice:

Nearly 70% of employers lacked awareness of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma-informed approaches. This knowledge gap risks misinterpreting behaviours shaped by adversity, highlighting the urgent need for wider education and cultural change across workplaces.



Recommendations and next steps

Based on the rich insights gathered through the Big Conversation Flintshire, from both young people and employers, there is a set of clear, actionable recommendations and next steps that can drive positive change and strengthen youth employment outcomes across the county:

1. Strengthen employer support through training and awareness

- Deliver ACEs and Trauma-Informed Practice training to employers to build understanding around youth behaviours, barriers, and potential.
- Incorporate this training into ESG strategies already active in over 70% of local businesses.

2. Bridge the skills, experience and confidence gap for young people into employment

- Expand WeBridge and WeGrow employability programmes to offer flexible, holistic and evidence based development opportunities, including cv and interview preparation, meaningful work experience, and in work mentoring.
- Introduce employer and young people mentoring partnerships, focusing on building confidence and readiness for young people with limited or no work experience.

3. Create opportunities for inclusive and local recruitment

- Support employers to simplify and take a trauma informed approaches to their recruitment processes, especially for entry-level roles, with clearer communication and fewer barriers.
- Promote work experience placements and apprenticeships, particularly among SMEs.

4. Improve public transport for access and equity into employment

- Continue advocacy for affordable and reliable transport, with a specific focus for evening and weekend service enhancements.
- Raise awareness of existing Welsh Government travel schemes, and explore subsidy partnerships with employers and local authorities.

5. Invest in rural youth infrastructure for social and community activities

- Co-create with young people leisure and social activity provision, including youth-led clubs and age-targeted recreational spaces, especially in under-served rural villages.
- Incorporate young people into local planning and funding decisions, using formats like youth forums or advisory panels.

6. Bridge the generational gap across communities

- Facilitate intergenerational volunteering and social groups to tackle negative stereotypes and perceptions and build strong relationships to create a sense of belonging in communities.
- Share youth voices widely, including via the Big Conversation film, to shift narratives around work ethic, ambition, perceptions, and how each person can play their part supporting young people to build their social capital.

Next Steps

1. Share and present our findings

- Disseminate this report to local councils, schools, employers, and third-sector partners.
- Host a community roundtable leaders summit to discuss the findings and response to them.

2. Expand the 'Village' model of WeMindThe Gap and our WeGrow and WeBridge programmes

- Seek new employers partnerships willing to think and act differently about employing young people.
- Launch new work experience placements and skills-building interventions based on young people's expressed interests and barriers.
- Track outcomes and adjust the model based on impact and feedback.

3. Develop an employer toolkit

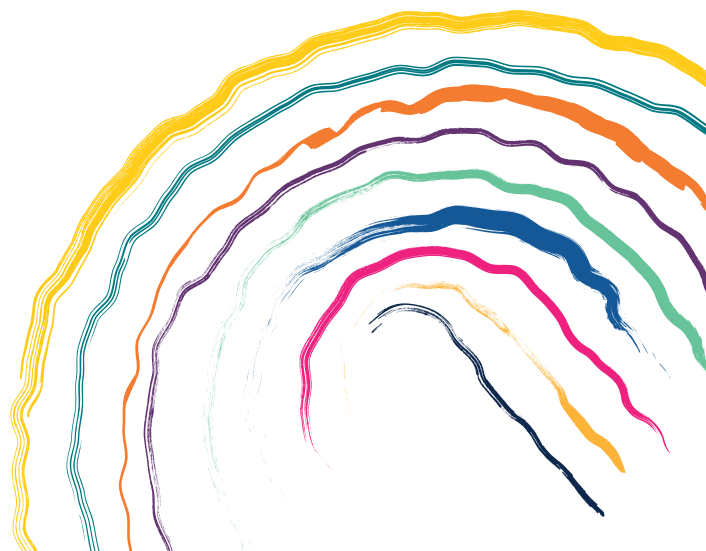
- Create resources with practical tips for recruiting and supporting young people, including templates for job adverts, interview processes, onboarding plans, in-work support programmes and trauma-informed practices.

4. Build a Youth Voice network

- Form a Flintshire Youth Voice network to co-design future engagement work, represent young people's perspectives, explore new opportunities, carry out youth research and monitor impact over time.
- Develop a behaviour change campaign through the voice of young people to change the perceptions of communities, employers and young people utilising the COM-B model.

5. Monitor progress and celebrate success

- Publish regular updates to demonstrate accountability and inspire continued engagement.
- Share success stories both from employers and young people to highlight what's working, and what continues to be the barriers, perceived or real.



On Tuesday 1st July the findings and response to the Flintshire Big Conversation were launched at a round table meeting. The following people were in attendance and pledged their support for the report and its recommendations:-

In attendance were:	
Andy Dunbobbin	Police and Crime Commissioner
Liam Evans-Ford	CEO Theatr Clwyd
Becky Gittins MP	MP Clwyd East
Ed Hughes	ClwydAlyn Housing Association - Employer Partner of WeMindTheGap
Tom Kinsman	Employer and Partnership Manager DWP
Amie Field	Head of Services for Young People, Careers Wales
Nina Ruddle	Wrexham University Civic Mission
Craig Macleod	Chief Officer Flintshire Social Services
Matt Hayes	Flintshire Youth Service
Laura Columbine	Flintshire Community Maker - WeMindTheGap
WeMindTheGap Alumni	Ben Clarke, Sasha Bilonozhenko, Rob Contento
Ali Wheeler	CEO – WeMindTheGap
Members of the WeMindTheGap Team	Diane Aplin – Chief Impact Officer, Edward Greening – Analyst, Aaron Jones – WeGrow Programme Lead, Jason Evans – WeGrow Programme Lead, Kim Harasym-Moss – WeDiscover Programme Lead, Craig McKee – WeGrow Welfare Officer

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