



WE MIND THE  
**GAP.**<sup>TM</sup>

# THE **BIG** CONVERSATION

Flintshire - Young People  
Engagement Thematic Review

July 2025



Prifysgol Wrecsam  
Wrexham University



Funded by  
UK Government  
Wedi ei ariannu gan  
Llywodraeth y DU

CYNGOR  
**Sir y Fflint**  
Flintshire  
COUNTY COUNCIL







# Introduction

**In 2023, WeMindTheGap undertook a Big Conversation in Wrexham, talking to 12% of the 18- to 21-year-olds living in Wrexham. The aim was to learn more about life for this hard-to-reach demographic, specifically since the Covid-19 pandemic. The recurring themes from this project included a lack of resilience and motivation, an increase in adverse childhood experiences and anxiety, and unrealistic expectations and uncertainty surrounding employment.**

In January of 2025, WeMindTheGap undertook another Big Conversation with 18-21-year-olds, this time in Flintshire. Over the course of three weeks of dedicated engagement activities, the WeMindTheGap team connected with over 500 people in the local area. This report will detail the aims, methods and findings of this community engagement, and reflect on possible future research and projects.

## Aims

When planning the Big Conversation in Flintshire, the aim was to speak to ask many young people aged 18-21 years as possible, asking about their life in Flintshire. The Big Conversation posed two questions:

‘What is life like in Flintshire?’

‘What could make it better?’

The objective behind these questions was to enable and platform young people as ‘experts of their experience’, demonstrating that their opinions and experiences are valuable and listened to. These questions were presented in-person and through online and handwritten formats.

Through collecting a substantial number of responses to these questions, WeMindTheGap can reflect on potential future projects designed to serve this demographic and tackle the issues they have highlighted.

## Collaboration with Wrexham University

WeMindTheGap have collaborated with Wrexham University’s Civic Mission team to assist on this project, offering advisory input into planning, and creating this engagement report. Wrexham University and the Civic Mission team have assisted in promoting the Big Conversation via their social media accounts and in joining engagement activities during the project. Following the engagement part of the project, Wrexham University has assisted with the collation, processing and interpretation of the data provided from the in-person, online, and written responses.





# Methods of Engagement

**The Big Conversation for Flintshire was formulated to connect with as many 18-to-21-year-olds as possible within the area through using multiple modes of communication. The previous Big Conversation used in-person and online methods to gain insight from young people.**

Due to their success, these methods were utilised for the 2025 project, with in-person interviews planned and an online survey created. Postcards were also used, offering participants the option of writing their responses down and broadening how the desired demographic was reached. The use of the postcards was part of WeMindTheGap's collaboration with Wrexham University on this project, who suggested that the addition of a written method of participation may enable those who feel less comfortable speaking in person. The postcard design was created by Sasha Bilonozhenko, one of WeMindTheGap's Gappies.



The engagement was primarily planned as in-person interactions, led by Laura Columbine and taking place in various parts of Flintshire. The conversations were recorded to collect the opinions and experiences of those who engaged with the project. An extensive timetable of engagement locations was created, with key areas of deprivation considered, and venues carefully selected.

The in-person interaction opportunities were promoted through WeMindTheGap's social media account and supported by Wrexham University's Civic Mission pages.





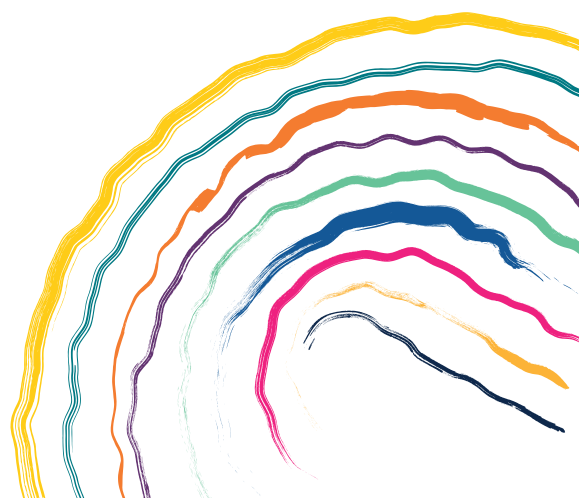
Planning also included preparing appropriate information and suitably detailed consent forms for participants. This ensured that participants understood how their opinions and experiences were going to be stored and used, as well as photos and recordings. The project was delivered by a team of 18, with 9 WeBelong Gappies giving their time in return for vouchers. The Civic Mission offered assistance, with 8 members of the team joining at some venues. WeMindTheGap staff members made themselves visually prominent in their timetabled spaces, using stalls, signage and the use of the Soundavan - a mobile audio recording pod installed within a repurposed, and incredibly eye-catching caravan.

Team members offered potential participants £20 vouchers for their time as an appealing incentive to take part in the conversation. After the first week of the planned activity, the team added a chalkboard to their stalls, highlighting this incentive further, that read, 'Are you 18-21 and live in Flintshire? Want to earn £20 by answering two questions?'



Engagement was conducted in community spaces such as Broughton Shopping Park, Flint High School, and Coleg Cambria. Existing events such as an ice hockey match were used as opportunities to connect with the chosen demographic in venue car parks. The team also conducted on-street engagement in Holywell, Buckley, Mold, Shotton, Saltney, Greenfields, Connah's Quay and Flint. This provided a range of opportunities to engage with the desired age group but with a variety of intersecting economic and educational backgrounds contributing to the conversation.

The project increased engagement possibilities through allowing participants to submit answers through the postcard and an online survey option, both asking the same two big questions. The survey was disseminated through online promotional posts, and a scannable QR code available at each stall. Postcards were offered at stalls and left with local businesses, with the aim of distributing them to as many individuals in the area as possible. A post box was provided for completed postcards that the team collected at the end of the planned activity.



# Who did we speak to

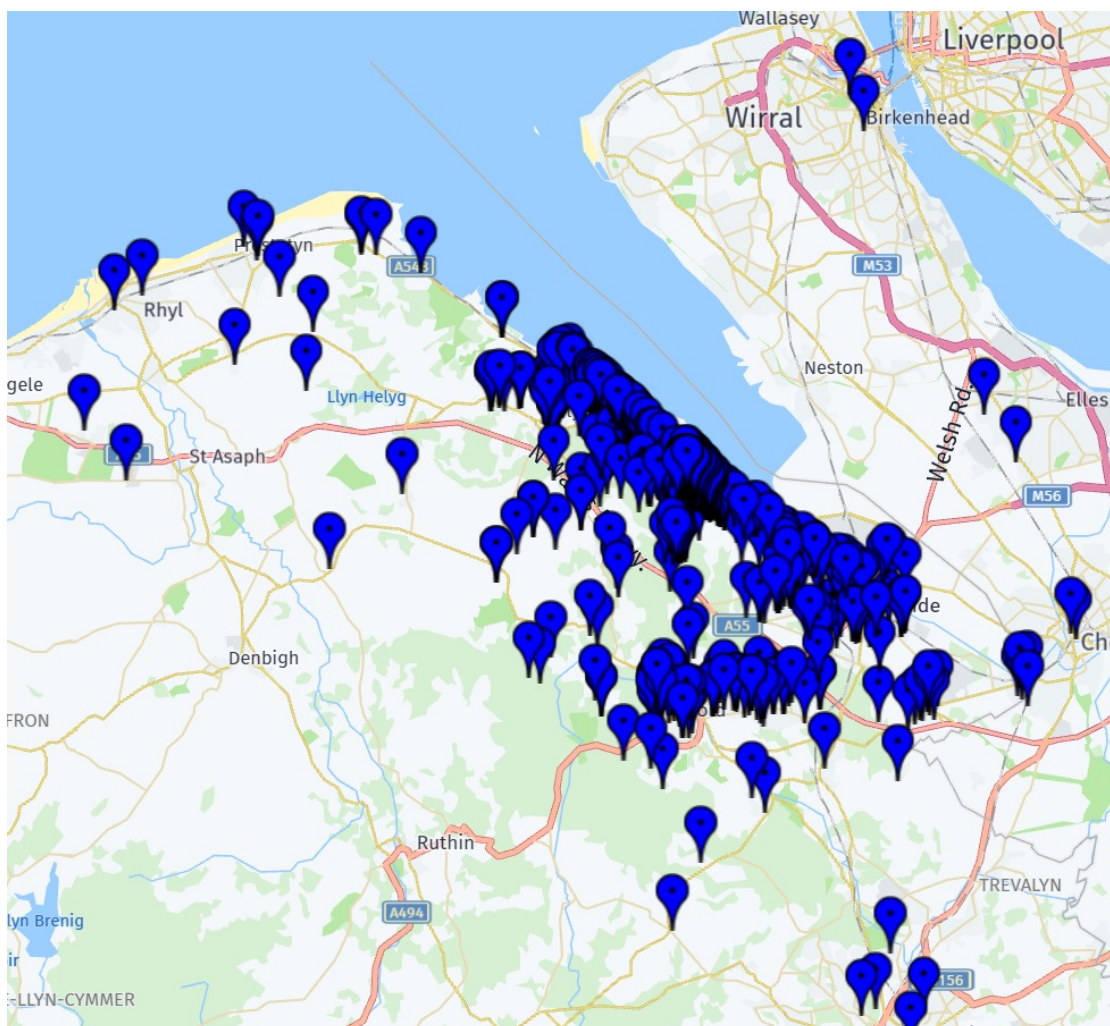
## Age

When processing the data from this project, the ages of participants within the 18-21 demographic were primarily 18 years old, making up 28.7% of participants. 19- and 21-year-olds were similar sizes at 14.4% and 13.4%, with the smaller contributing age group being 20-year-olds at 9.9%. Within the interactions with individuals outside of the desired age bracket (who wanted to engage despite being older or younger than the target group), 17-year-olds made up a third of these interactions.

## Gender

The majority of participants were female with a split of 59.9% female to 38.6% male. A 1.4% percentage of participants identified as non-binary.

## Geographical Spread of Participants



The vast majority of participants were from Flintshire, although as the county has links with Wrexham, Denbighshire and North West England it is not a surprise to see there were some participants from these areas as well. This correlated with areas of deprivation, allowing us to speak to and give a voice to as many young people in the area as we could find.



# Findings

## Question 1: What is life like for young people in Flintshire?

**Life for young people in Flintshire is a mosaic of experiences. It is shaped by leisure activities, education, community interactions, and employment opportunities.**

Leisure and recreational activities, while acknowledged positively by some respondents for the availability of parks and sports facilities, received a notably mixed reception overall. Many young people indicated dissatisfaction, emphasising limited leisure opportunities due to constraints such as insufficient transportation options. Comments frequently depicted Flintshire as a place where boredom could easily set in, with perceptions of inadequate variety and affordability in entertainment and recreation. However, some optimism was also reflected in comments appreciating the existing infrastructure, such as parks and leisure centres, indicating that the issue might be more about enhancing accessibility rather than complete overhaul.

Educational opportunities, conversely, generally drew more positive feedback from Flintshire's youth. Respondents expressed satisfaction with the quality of local education institutions and teachers. Nonetheless, alongside positivity was the recognition of gaps, especially regarding more diverse vocational training and practical career preparation. The importance of expanding education beyond traditional schooling, emphasising that while the quality was commendable, there were areas, particularly in colleges, where improvements could lead to enhanced educational outcomes. Issues raised include accessibility, skills training.

Community and social life was prominently discussed, and often framed in positive terms. Many young people spoke of their community's cohesiveness, appreciating the sense of safety and belonging prevalent in their area. Typical reflections described Flintshire as a "safe and nice area to live," implying strong social ties and familiarity among residents. Still, respondents identified clear room for improvement in actively engaging youth within community planning and participation in the decision-making processes, calling for more significant youth involvement in community-oriented initiatives. The recognition that the community already offered good opportunities but could do more was a common theme.

The theme of employment and economic conditions generated a variety of perspectives. While a portion of the youth acknowledged the existence of adequate job opportunities and expressed relative optimism about local employment prospects, many noted considerable barriers and challenges, particularly for younger individuals entering the workforce. Stress and economic pressures associated with employment were mentioned frequently. The overall sentiment conveyed a cautious optimism, with significant recognition of the employment barriers faced by young people who found entering job markets challenging and occasionally daunting. There was recognition that there were certain advantages to getting on in work in Flintshire, such as geography, opportunity and insider knowledge.



The themes are listed in order of frequency, from which relative importance to young people can be perceived.

## Theme 1: Leisure & Recreation

Theme	Subtheme	Details	Example Quotation
Leisure & Recreation	Accessibility & Transportation	Transport availability can limit connectivity, therefore restricting engagement in leisure activities.	<i>"transport is ok but more to do could be needed"</i>
Leisure & Recreation	Perceived Lack of Activities	A significant number of responses described Flintshire as "boring", with limited affordable variety.	<i>"It's quite boring and there's nothing much to do."</i> <i>"more sports / parks to get kids off the street"</i>
Leisure & Recreation	Available leisure options	Others praised the recreational facilities in Flintshire.	<i>"I think that the opportunities for local activities in Flintshire is great as they have football pitches, swimming pools, rock climbing etc."</i>

## Theme 2: Education and Opportunities

Theme	Subtheme	Details	Example Quotation
Education & Opportunities	Positive Educational Experiences	Appreciation for the quality of local education.	<i>"I think it's good in terms of, like, education, I think it just depends on where you live"</i>
Education & Opportunities	Availability of Educational opportunities	Educational opportunities, though there was some call for additional practical training, and lower costs associated with attending college.	<i>"good education"</i> <i>"Not much education after school"</i>



### Theme 3: Community & Social Life

Theme	Subtheme	Details	Example Quotation
Community & Social Life	<b>Social Connectivity</b>	Close-knit nature of communities and social relationships.	<i>"Very community based, everyone knows everyone and togetherness thrives"</i>
Community & Social Life	<b>Safety &amp; Quality of Life</b>	Positive reflection on local safety and community atmosphere	<i>"It's always been sort of like safe to grow up."</i>
Community & Social Life	<b>Youth Opportunities &amp; Engagement</b>	Opportunities for engagement, yet acknowledged some limitations.	<i>"There's some opportunities here, but youth could get more involved."</i>

### Theme 4: Employment and Economic Conditions

Theme	Subtheme	Details	Example Quotation
Employment & Economic Conditions	<b>Work-related Stress &amp; Challenges</b>	Employment stress and economic pressures, relating to inflation and "the cost of living."	<i>"It can be a bit stressful at times like this, because I feel like most of us are either in like college or a levels or school and like work, so it can be a bit stressful with, like, money."</i>
Employment & Economic Conditions	<b>Availability of Job Opportunities</b>	Others positively noted employment opportunities.	<i>"Good, there is plenty of activities and job opportunities for young people"</i>
Employment & Economic Conditions	<b>Employment Difficulties for Youth</b>	Youth employment challenges, such as difficulty entering job markets, were frequently highlighted.	<i>"No jobs in the area for young people."</i>

## Question 2: How could life be better for young people in Flintshire?

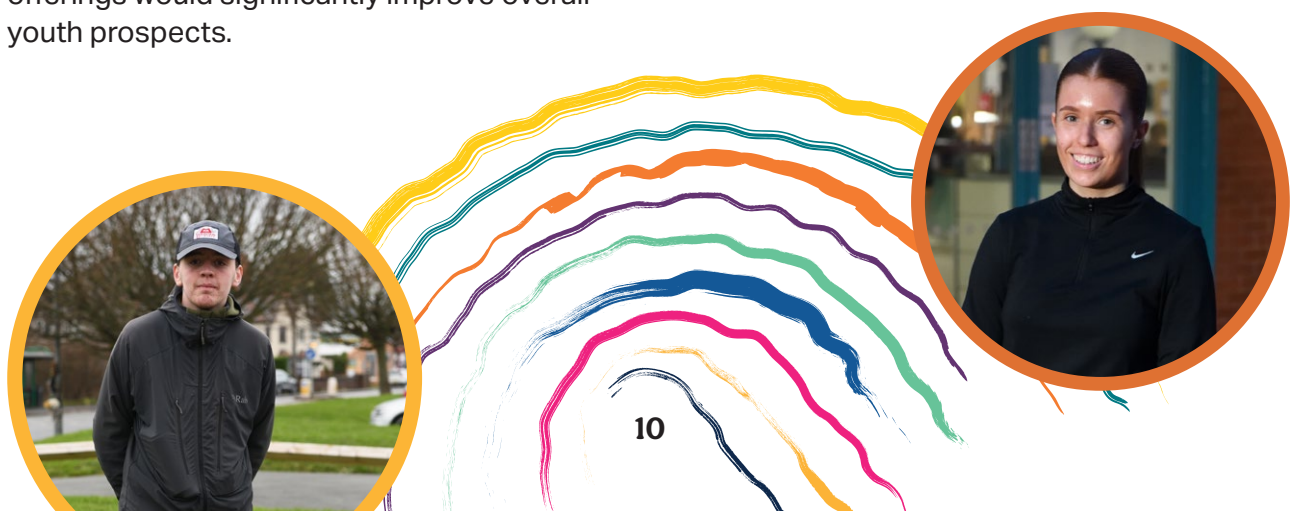
**When asked to identify areas for improvement, respondents provided a set of suggestions categorised around leisure, transportation, education, and community engagement. Enhancing leisure facilities was consistently highlighted, with many young people requesting increased accessibility and greater variety in recreation. Transport emerged as a critical concern in this context, underlining the interdependency between effective transportation infrastructure and leisure accessibility. Improved public transport would also allow for greater economic independence for young people.**

Respondents frequently expressed the need for more reliable, frequent, and comprehensive transport services, particularly bus services. The lack of adequate bus scheduling, notably in evenings and weekends, severely limited young people's ability to engage fully in leisure activities, social interactions, and employment opportunities. The importance, and cost of learning to drive is also a concern.

Educational and career opportunities received substantial attention in the responses. Young people expressed a clear desire for enhanced educational infrastructure and resources, particularly emphasising the need for better vocational training and career-focused support services. This demand included not only improvements in formal educational settings but also better access to local job opportunities explicitly targeted at young entrants into the workforce. Suggestions included expanding the variety of courses offered at local colleges and providing more comprehensive and practical career guidance. The responses suggested a widespread belief that enhancing educational and vocational offerings would significantly improve overall youth prospects.

Community support and youth engagement featured strongly among suggested improvements, receiving notably high positivity from respondents. Young people consistently highlighted the value of robust community support services, particularly emphasising mental health resources and youth-specific community events. Respondents argued that increased youth involvement and leadership in community planning would significantly enhance their sense of agency and connection to their community.

There was also demand for greater youth inclusion in local decision-making processes and community initiatives, reflecting broader aspirations for genuine empowerment and active participation in shaping their communities' future. Specific suggestions included the establishment of additional youth-oriented social clubs and events, emphasising tailored recreational activities for specific age groups, especially older teenagers, who felt somewhat neglected by current offerings, and would help them to avoid common pitfalls such as underage drinking.





## Theme 1: Enhanced Leisure Facilities & Activities

Theme	Subtheme	Details	Example Quotation
Enhanced Leisure Facilities & Activities	<b>Transport to leisure</b>	Better transportation to leisure activities, as well as more leisure activities to partake in.	<i>"More transport is needed more activities needed"</i>
Employment & Economic Conditions	<b>Youth-Oriented Social Clubs &amp; Events</b>	More youth clubs and social events.	<i>"Community Centers putting on activities and just things for them [teenagers] to do to get them off the streets. Really."</i>
Specific Age-targeted Leisure Needs	<b>Employment Difficulties for Youth</b>	Respondents identified gaps in activities targeted to specific ages.	<i>"making more spaces for older teens or maybe a club"</i>

## Theme 2: Improved Public Transport & Accessibility

Theme	Subtheme	Details	Example Quotation
Improved Public Transport & Accessibility	<b>Accessibility for Activities</b>	Strongly requested transport improvements specifically aimed at better work and activity access.	<i>"I think definitely transport. I think the bus routes really needs to be improved, and the trains, because I think trains are sometimes easier for people, especially going to jobs, and there's just not a lot of routes around here"</i>
Improved Public Transport & Accessibility	<b>Improvement in Transport</b>	Improved transport service quality.	<i>"The only thing that's like a bit of a nag is buses really feel like there's not as many busses, and they're not as reliable as you think you'd expect"</i>
Improved Public Transport & Accessibility	<b>Bus Services Enhancements</b>	Specific improvements to bus services were frequently requested.	<i>"One bus service now past school starting time. Have to walk for 2 miles to get there. 4 buses a day"</i>
Improved Public Transport & Accessibility	<b>Public Transport cost</b>	Reduce the cost of public transport for younger people	<i>"Make public transport more affordable for young people."</i>

## Theme 3: Expanded Educational & Career Opportunities

Theme	Subtheme	Details	Example Quotation
Expanded Educational & Career Opportunities	Youth Employment Opportunities	More accessible job and career opportunities.	<i>"I'd probably, I'd definitely say for 18 to 21 year olds definitely more job opportunities, whether it's an apprenticeship or a part time job or a full time job."</i>  <i>"I think more available activities for more career paths"</i>
Expanded Educational & Career Opportunities	Improving Educational Institutions	Enhanced educational infrastructure and resources, as well as offering other opportunities such as apprenticeships.	<i>"But trying to find work around here is quite difficult. So I think more places to work, more like even apprenticeships, things that are to help people."</i>  <i>"Councils more understanding that school / college isn't for everybody and that there are other options"</i>
Expanded Educational & Career Opportunities	Work Conditions & Career Prospects	Improvements in local work conditions and support for career advancement were suggested.	<i>"Minimum wage rise"</i>





## Theme 4: Better Community Support and Youth Engagement

Theme	Subtheme	Details	Example Quotation
Better Community Support & Youth Engagement	Increased Community Support Services	Enhanced support services and more youth-focused community events.	<i>"However, for me personally I can sometimes have difficult times with my mental health. Specially with my PMDD. Although I'm getting treatment for it and counselling at college. I think not only for me but for many young people should be able to seek help and support in their local area and they should be more help and support groups face-to-face rather than just online."</i>
Better Community Support & Youth Engagement	Youth-specific Activities	Activities that directly engage youth to foster deeper community engagement.	<i>"I think just a lot more kind of opportunities to get involved in the community, and kind of a lot more advertisement out there"</i>
Better Community Support & Youth Engagement	Youth Inclusion & Support	Broader strategies for involving young people actively in the community decision-making.	<i>"I think, if I think Flintshire in terms of the council, I think they could definitely hear us more on what I believe. , I believe, hear the voices of people and people of Wales more."</i>  <i>"Having a mental health system required in local areas for people to get their voices heard"</i>



# Sentiment analysis of themes

Sentiment analysis was computationally performed on each theme, allowing to measure the strength of feeling towards each topic. As might be expected, a good deal of the responses were nuanced, and expressed both the good and bad of life as a young person in Flintshire. These scores reflect the average polarity of all responses mapped to each theme. Positive values indicate overall more positive/optimistic wording within that theme, while values closer to zero suggest mixed or neutral sentiment.

Question 1: “What is life like for young people in Flintshire?”	
Theme	Avg. Sentiment
Leisure & Recreation	0.151
Education & Opportunities	0.224
Community & Social Life	0.171
Employment & Economic Conditions	0.146

Question 2: “How could life be better?”	
Theme	Avg. Sentiment
Enhanced Leisure Facilities & Activities	0.296
Improved Public Transport & Accessibility	0.194
Expanded Educational & Career Opportunities	0.274
Better Community Support & Youth Engagement	0.261

As might be expected, the hopefulness of the second question allowed for greater positivity within the answers provided, and returned higher positive sentiment than the first question. Nonetheless, despite all of the challenges faced by young people today, sentiment was still positive, which suggests a degree of contentment within young people in Flintshire, even if there is still a great deal of room for improvement.



## Online v Offline responses

Analysis by theme was performed on the differences between online and offline responses. There were some notable differences, as well as similarities.

### Question 1: “What is life like for young people in Flintshire?”

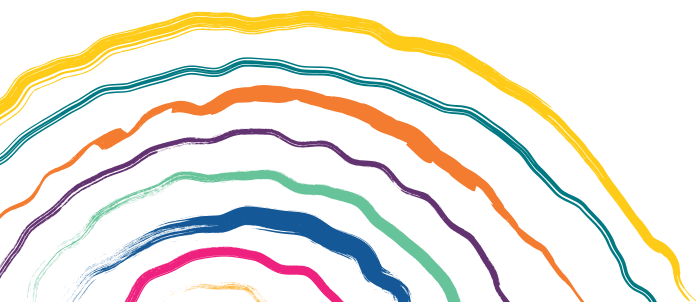
Theme	Similarities	Differences
<b>Leisure &amp; Recreation</b>	Both groups frequently mention a lack of things to do.	<p>Offline respondents often point to existing assets by name (“Deeside Leisure Centre,” “local parks”) and hedge their comments in a more balanced tone (“pretty good... parks and stuff”).</p> <p>Online respondents are more blunt and uniformly negative, describing Flintshire as “uneventful and bleak” and emphasising a total absence of youth-focused venues.</p>
<b>Education &amp; Opportunities</b>	Both sets note limited options for skill-building and progression.	<p>Offline remarks tend to reflect on school provision</p> <p>Online feedback focuses on “jobs” and “work” availability in the county generally, highlighting a gap between education and actual employment prospects.</p>
<b>Community &amp; Social Life</b>	A sense of isolation appears in both.	<p>Offline accounts speak more and frequently and fondly of “community spirit” when it exists, suggesting pockets of strong social life</p> <p>Online voices often describe “no real community spaces” at all, portraying social life as almost nonexistent unless formal events are organised.</p>
<b>Employment &amp; Economic Conditions</b>	Worries about youth unemployment or under-employment.	<p>Offline respondents frame it in personal terms (eg “have to move away for a job”)</p> <p>Online respondents frequently link it to wider economic patterns</p>

## Question 2: “How could life be better for young people in Flintshire?”

Theme	Similarities	Differences
<b>Enhanced Leisure Facilities &amp; Activities</b>	Almost everyone wants more youth-oriented spaces.	Offline suggestions often build on existing infrastructure. Online ideas are more ambitious or novel.
<b>Improved Public Transport &amp; Accessibility</b>	Both groups highlight poor bus/train links as a barrier.	Offline comments focus on very local fixes. Online remarks favour larger network changes.
<b>Expanded Educational &amp; Career Opportunities</b>	More vocational training and career mentorship.	
<b>Better Community Support &amp; Youth Engagement</b>	Need for more youth voice in decision-making.	Online ideas lean toward digital engagement.

Online v Offline Sentiment		
	What is life like? Sentiment	How could life be better? Sentiment
Offline	0.151	0.226
Online	-0.010	0.262

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.



# Comparative Analysis to national trends and other research on youth issues

## Leisure and Recreation

Young people in Flintshire described their community as generally positive yet lacking in leisure opportunities. Several Flintshire respondents noted there are “not many things for young people” to do locally and called for “more activities” and youth clubs to have fun and socialize. This mirrors wider trends in rural parts of the UK.

The National Youth Agency’s Overlooked report (2021) highlighted vast gaps in youth provision in many rural areas, leaving youth with few safe places to spend time outside school. The National Youth Agency estimates that 85% of a young person’s waking hours are spent outside of school, yet in rural communities there is often “little or no youth provision” – no youth clubs or organized activities – which leaves young people “vulnerable to isolation, loneliness and poor mental health”. Flintshire youth testimonies align with this, as they praised a strong community spirit but felt “bored” or underserved in terms of recreation.

The lack of local entertainment venues or youth spaces means young people rely on parks or must travel elsewhere for leisure – a challenge if transport or money is limited. Nationally, youth organizations have called for investment in rural youth services to “build and bolster local youth services” and provide more activities outside school. Flintshire’s young people echo this need for better leisure infrastructure, suggesting that limited recreation opportunities are a common issue both locally and across the UK.

## Education and Training

Flintshire’s young people also voiced concerns related to education and future training. Some expressed personal ambitions – for example, aspiring to become a flight attendant or to work with children – but indicated uncertainty about local opportunities to pursue these paths. This reflects a broader context in which the COVID-19 pandemic and economic pressures have eroded youth confidence in education and skills. The Prince’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. Disruptions to schooling, cancelled exams, and lost instructional time in 2020–21 left many feeling their education was sub-par, which in turn affected their training and job readiness. By 2024, new challenges emerged: the cost of living crisis forced some youth to deprioritize education. Nearly one in five young people (18%) planned to finish education early to start earning, and a quarter said they cannot afford to get the qualifications needed for their desired career.

This financial barrier was even more acute for disadvantaged youth (over a third of those from poorer backgrounds). Welsh Government data underscores that many youths remain outside education or training – about 12.5% of 16–24-year-olds in the UK were not in education, employment or training as of early 2024. Respondents in the Big Conversation implied difficulty in accessing training or careers without leaving the area. Flintshire’s youth emphasised the geographic barrier, feeling that to achieve their educational or training goals they might have to go outside their home area. Overall, both Flintshire and national evidence point to significant challenges in education and training for today’s youth, such as catching up on lost learning to affording college or apprenticeships, which can dampen young people’s optimism about their future.



## Employment and Economic Prospects

Flintshire's young people appear acutely aware of the economic challenges ahead. Some mentioned that people their age were moving away for better jobs, suggesting limited local employment options in Flintshire. This sense of uncertainty and concern about future prospects is strongly reflected in national research. The Prince's Trust found that by 2024, over half of 16–25 year-olds in the UK felt the ongoing cost-of-living crisis had impacted them even worse than the pandemic. Economic anxiety among young people is high: in the Youth Index 2024, 53% were worried they will never be financially secure, and nearly half feared they will "never earn enough to support a family" or buy a home. Indeed, 60% of young people said they worry they may never be able to own a home in the future. These findings show a generation anxious that stable jobs, decent pay, and milestones like homeownership may be out of reach. Participants expressed similar anxieties in personal terms, such as referencing peers leaving for opportunities and a need for better jobs locally, which aligns with the national picture of economic uncertainty for young people.

Compounding these worries is a lack of confidence in finding quality work, especially close to home. A UK-wide Youth Voice Census (2022) reported only 14% of young people felt confident they could find a good job where they live. This indicates that a large majority see their local economies as lacking in opportunity, a sentiment seemingly echoed in Flintshire by the comments about having to leave. Geographic disparities play a role: 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. For example, in early 2025 the youth unemployment rate stood around 14% in the UK (625,000 young people unemployed), but this average masks higher joblessness in certain areas. Flintshire's youth, like many across the UK, are navigating a tough labour market: even when jobs are available, entry requirements and competition are stiff.

According to the Prince's Trust, almost half of young people worry they don't have the right skills or experience to secure a job in future. Several Flintshire respondents voiced personal goals but did not clearly see the pathway to achieve them locally. This highlights a convergence between Flintshire and national trends: young adults feel pressure to attain skills and work, yet face economic headwinds and limited local openings, which together dampen their outlook.

However, one positive note is resilience. The Prince's Trust observed that despite the bleak landscape, "the overwhelming majority of young people... remain determined to achieve their goals", provided they get practical support. Flintshire's youths similarly still expressed aspirations. The challenge will be ensuring opportunities (jobs, training schemes, career guidance) are accessible in places like Flintshire so that these ambitions can be realized without young people feeling forced to move away.



**'Participants expressed similar anxieties in personal terms, such as referencing peers leaving for opportunities and a need for better jobs locally, ...'**

## Community Engagement and Social Inclusion

Flintshire youth perspectives suggest a mixed picture on community and inclusion. On one hand, a few respondents highlighted a “big sense of community” in Flintshire – a close-knit feeling where “everyone knows each other.” This indicates strong social cohesion at the local level, which can be a protective factor for young people. On the other hand, several Flintshire comments raised concerns about social issues, particularly around mental health support and awareness. Some young people felt there is “no help for mental health” and that better understanding of mental health is needed in the community. This resonates with national findings that young people are struggling with isolation and well-being. The Prince’s Trust 2022 survey revealed that 39% of UK youth often or always feel lonely, a striking figure that underscores widespread social isolation. Moreover, over a quarter (26%) said they will never recover from the pandemic’s emotional impact – a sign of deep scars to mental health and resilience. While Flintshire’s strong community ties might mitigate loneliness for some, it is clear that mental health challenges and social inclusion go hand-in-hand: without adequate support services or open conversations, young people can feel very alone even in a close community.

The responses allude to a perception issue, that for many young people there is a disconnect between their idea of what a strong community, wellbeing and social support is, and what in their experience they actually receive as community or support. This gap is an important observation, recognising that wellbeing depends on the perceptions of others’ benevolence, support or kindness, as well as their actual acts of support. The World Happiness Report 2025 noted that young people, particularly those living lives online, underestimate the kindness of others, but their wellbeing can be improved by simply receiving information about the reality of kindness, support or benevolence. We need to address the perception gap and ensure young people hear about the reality of community support and services.

The findings suggest that the 5th persona identified in the Wrexham Big Conversation as the ‘Covid persona’ is still elusive but real – the young person living online, a heartbeat not a data point, on no one’s register and living on the bank of mum and dad, not engaging with services. We haven’t found them yet, but they are telling us they are more hopeful about the future than we had anticipated, and far more creative in their outlook than their circumstances would have us believe. Their ambitions for a more positive future are not insurmountable; they do not expect or want huge innovation, but do need everyone in the system, and the system itself, to do better.

Another aspect of social inclusion is whether young people feel heard and empowered in society. National reports indicate room for improvement. For instance, surveys by youth organizations show many young people do not feel represented in decision-making and are frustrated by negative stereotypes. The pandemic and economic woes also exacerbated feelings of disconnection. One Flintshire respondent called for initiatives like an “anti-drug scheme” and more youth engagement – suggesting they want to improve their community and be part of solutions, but need support to do so. In Wales and the broader UK, numerous third-sector projects, like Youth Cymru’s youth-led programmes, the British Youth Council, and local youth forums have aimed to boost youth voice and inclusion.

**‘The responses allude to a perception issue, that for many young people there is a disconnect between their idea of what a strong community, wellbeing and social support is, and what in their experience they actually receive as community or support.’**

The extent of participation varies, but major issues like mental health, discrimination, and safety often dominate youth consultations. Notably, a recent 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. Only a small number of respondents in the Big Conversation noted a worry over crime in their areas. Overall, both Flintshire and national data underline that social inclusion is about feeling safe, supported, and connected. Flintshire youths appreciate their community but want more proactive support to ensure no one is left behind. This aligns with calls in national research for better youth services and inclusive support networks. For example, the NYA Overlooked report specifically recommended investing in rural community transport and digital connectivity to reduce isolation, and deploying more youth workers in villages to combat loneliness and exclusion. Addressing these social inclusion gaps can help Flintshire's young people, and their peers UK-wide, to engage positively in their communities, rather than feeling marginalised.

## Transport and Access

Access to reliable transport is a crucial enabler for youth, affecting their ability to reach education, jobs, and leisure, and it emerged as a significant theme in national studies, and was commonly mentioned in the Big Conversation.

Research by Sustrans and the University of the West of England (2023) found that young people (16–24) have far lower mobility than older adults, partly because they rely more on public transport. Only about 40% of young people in the UK hold a driving licence (versus 74% of older adults), and just 28% are primary drivers of a car (compared to 57% of over-25s). Young people thus depend on buses, trains, walking and cycling – yet public transport services have been cut back in recent years, especially in rural and semi-rural areas. This has created a “transport accessibility gap” for youth: for example, the Transport to Thrive report noted 16–24-year-olds made 21% fewer trips in 2019 than older working-age adults, a gap that has widened over two decades. Importantly, lack of transport disproportionately affects disadvantaged youth.

Those not in employment (or in education) are nearly 3 times more likely to have very low mobility (under 10 trips per week) than their employed peers. Likewise, young people from the lowest-income households are 1.4 times more likely to travel very little, and those with no household car are over twice as likely to have low mobility compared to youth with car access.

Difficulty getting around can severely limit youth access to colleges, jobs, and social activities. National evidence bears this out: one survey found 5% of young people had missed school or work in the past year because they couldn't afford transport fare, with the rate nearly doubling for those from poorer backgrounds.

There are also cases of youth turning down job offers due to unaffordable travel or relocation costs. In Flintshire, which has both urban and rural areas, transport plays a similar role and correspondents noted similar challenges in getting to work, educational centres or to leisure facilities. Wales has recognised this issue at policy level, for instance, the Welsh Government's discounted travel schemes for young people, although there could be a lack of awareness of such schemes within Flintshire.

**‘The responses allude to a perception issue, that for many young people there is a disconnect between their idea of what a strong community, wellbeing and social support is, and what in their experience they actually receive as community or support.’**



# Case studies

## Sarah

Sarah points out that there is a shortage of everyday social spaces and recreational outlets in Flintshire. She observes that “the shops are not even open that much anymore,” showing that cafés and shops play as much a role in young people’s leisure as formal facilities, and their decline leaves many feeling isolated. At the same time, Sarah reports frequent drug dealing around Hollywell and Connah’s Quay: “people are selling drugs constantly”, which makes public areas feel unsafe and discourages youth from gathering. She suggests enhanced rehabilitation services and stronger policing may help solve these issues, as well as highlighting the need for targeted community support to restore both the quality of life and confidence in public spaces.

### “more things for young people to do,”

On economic and educational fronts, Sarah notes a lack of job openings: “there’s not enough openings to support with jobs”, and understaffed local businesses offer limited, uninspiring roles. She also urges “more things for young people to do,” such as additional colleges and training programs. These points reinforce the demand for local vocational pathways and apprenticeships, as well as career guidance that connects young people to meaningful work. Her experiences demonstrate the value of mobile youth hubs, improved transport links, expanded training options and stronger community-based services to meet the real-world needs of Flintshire’s youth.

Sarah’s reflections exemplify many of the themes and subthemes identified. Firstly, her observations about the scarcity of open shops and community amenities underscore our Leisure & Recreation theme, particularly the subtheme of Perceived Lack of Activities. Sarah noted that “the shops are not even open that much anymore,” indicating that beyond formal recreational facilities, everyday social spaces such as shops and cafés form part of young people’s leisure ecosystem, and their decline contributes to a sense of boredom and isolation.

## Elliot

Elliot, who moved to Flintshire from India, was initially concerned about discrimination but found “a welcoming environment” at Hawarden High School. She recalls that “the teachers are very, very friendly” and offered extra support because “you’re from a different country”. Outside the classroom, Elliot has engaged with local cultural events like Diwali in Broughton. She also balances school with a part-time role as an assistant carer: “I like working with lovely people and residents,” highlighting the value of meaningful youth employment opportunities. Looking ahead, Elliot appreciates the value of arts and social clubs: “I love our drawing ... any kind of socially programs, like Arts Club ... everyone can get together and talk and see different peoples.”

### “I like working with lovely people and residents,”

## Chris

Chris, 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"

Chris 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.

**"there's not a lot of activities..."**

## Ben

Ben, a 20-year-old engineering student from Portugal, reports a largely positive experience in Flintshire's education and community settings. "I came from Portugal, so growing up here, it's actually been good. I got good opportunities since I came here. Not really much I can complain about," he says. He adds that "there's lots of leisure things to do and clubs... around the summer. I think there's more things to do also because of the weather," showing how seasonal events and outdoor activities enrich young people's social lives. On community, he observes, "Most people get on well, there's not much problems with other people."

Looking ahead, Ben is "hoping to move on to an apprenticeship after college," highlighting the value of accessible vocational routes. When asked about improvements, he admits, "I'm not sure if anything can be improved, really," though he notes that peers who aren't involved in existing activities might benefit from more targeted outreach.

**"hoping to move on to an apprenticeship after college,"**

Names have been changed for anonymity.

## James

James, an 18-year-old from Hawarden, describes Flintshire as “quite relaxing... there’s not really much stress going on”. He appreciates the proximity of educational and career options: “school and education, find work experience around the local area, so not having to travel too far.” For leisure, he swims with a club, rock climbs occasionally and uses the gym, illustrating how local sports facilities support active lifestyles and social connection.

James suggests that public transport generally meets his needs. He’s considering apprenticeships at Airbus in Broughton, as it is “not too far from Hawarden”, showing the importance of nearby career pathways. To boost youth community engagement, he suggests “promoting different activities... promote sports clubs in schools more, and try and encourage kids to get into it”

**“promoting different activities... promote sports clubs in schools more, and try and encourage kids to get into it”**

## Sam

Suggestions for improvement came from Sam, who hints at the need for further trauma informed practice being adopted across the county, especially when it comes to mental health support. “However, for me personally I can sometimes have difficult times with my mental health. Specially with my PMDD. Although I’m getting treatment for it and counselling at college. I think not only for me but for many young people should be able to seek help and support in their local area and they should be more help and support groups face-to-face rather than just online. I’m currently studying at the Yale site of College Cambria and sometimes feel lonely and isolated. There are many groups during lunchtime but not enough in Take and not many for adults and appeal more to the younger students.”

She also felt there was a lack of social places for young people, as so many others did: “And finally, I feel like Buckley is real lacking in places for young people to socialise which is causing a lot of... I think councilors and the community should get together and discuss ideas and funding which can make the town better. For example, a restaurant, cinema etc. And finally in general, I think supermarkets like ASDA should have shopping hours for people with learning disabilities (Autism, ADHD, Sensory Issues) with less bright lights, no loud background music etc. Same with groups/clubs too.”

**“And finally, I feel like Buckley is real lacking in places for young people to socialise...”**

Names have been changed for anonymity.



# Reflections

**Following the completion of the engagement activities, Laura Columbine reflected on the project and what the team experienced. This reflection may lead to the development of future projects, as well as an on-going development of engagement approaches and techniques for WeMindTheGap.**

When reflecting on the project, the WeMindTheGap team found that the best approach for Flintshire was to ask, 'are you 18-21?' rather than asking 'do you have a few minutes?' This initial conversation starter was vitally important in establishing and maintaining engagement. The length of the project gave the team time to find the most effective initial interaction. While the latter question implied that the team may be trying to ask them for money or to sign up for a membership of some kind, the former connected with the participants regarding part of their identity. The team preferred the use of stalls, stands or an existing venue as a location, rather than on-street conversations. A male staff member stated that he felt more comfortable in a stall or venue as he was conscious of the potential anxieties young women may feel if a grown man approaches them and asks their age in the street. An established stall or familiar venue arguably lent legitimacy to the team, while the aesthetic of the Soundavan may have implied approachability and a more casual, youthful tone. The team reported that the Soundavan seemingly created a substantial amount of interest. The team found that people were generally happy to speak to them, but the monetary incentive proved to be incredibly appealing - 'Easiest money I've ever made!'. Advertising this further on a chalkboard also increased engagement after the first week.

The team often found it difficult to estimate people's ages and that community members who approached them were much older than the desired demographic. However, these individuals were keen to know more about the project, despite not knowing any 18–21-year-olds in Flintshire or having an arguably negative attitude to that age groups – 'they're all in bed!'. This less positive attitude towards the targeted demographic was reportedly most apparent in Holywell.

Initially, engagement at existing venues could be slow to start but, after a few initial recorded conversations, individuals and groups were encouraged to participate. This was further encouraged by support from staff at the venues. When approaching groups of potential participants there was a great deal of hesitation and anxiety from them, with a noticeable number of individuals needing reassurance and encouragement to engage. Team members described some of the targeted demographic as seemingly nervous or stressed at the possibility of being asked the question – 'I wouldn't have anything to say'.

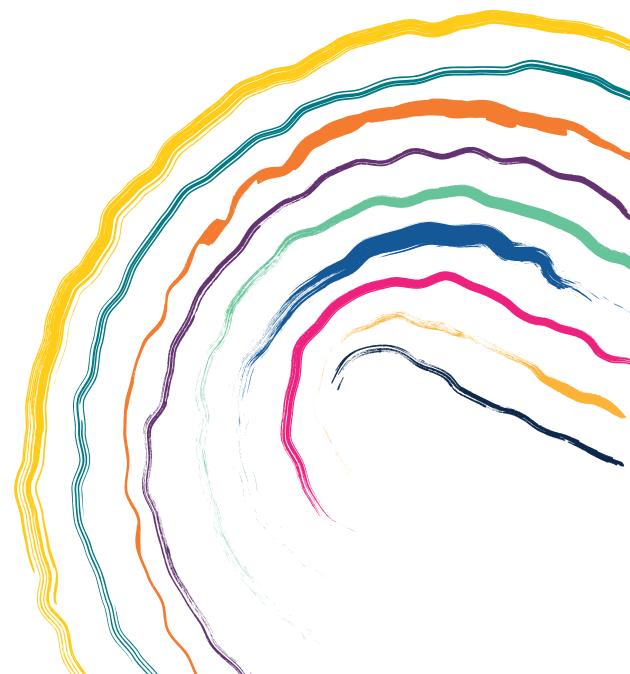
The team felt that a substantial number of participants expressed a vague need for opportunities and 'stuff to do' in the local area but struggled to offer any specific examples of what these opportunities could be. The team also expressed their observation that participants seemed 'liked they'd never been asked' these questions before, further evidencing the need to promote young people as the 'experts of their experience' and offer a platform for their opinions.

**'The team found that people were generally happy to speak to them, but the monetary incentive proved to be incredibly appealing..'**

# Our Recommendations

**At WeMindTheGap, we are committed to transforming the lives of young people in Flintshire by removing barriers to work, education, and community participation. Drawing on the insights from local youth and national research, we propose the following strategic actions:**

1. We will continue to offer support to the young people of Flintshire across our 5 programmes, WeGrow, WeBridge, WeDiscover, WeBelong and WeInspire, in order to mind the gaps in their lives.
2. Challenge 10,000. We intend to surround every young person with 10,000 supporters in every community, in order to give them the support they need to
3. Train Staff in Trauma-Informed and Inclusive Practice  
  
We will invest in comprehensive training for all staff and volunteers, equipping them with trauma-informed techniques and engagement strategies. This ensures that every interaction with our programmes fosters safety, respect, and belonging. We will offer this training to our Employer Partners too.
4. Continuous Evaluation and Youth Feedback  
  
Our monitoring and evaluation framework will track key metrics, allowing us to publish annual impact reports that transparently share our successes and areas for growth.
5. Forge Strategic Partnerships Across Sectors  
  
To maximise our impact, we will continue to collaborate with local councils, schools, colleges, health services, and third-sector organisations. By pooling resources, aligning strategies, and co-delivering initiatives, we can create seamless pathways from education to employment and reinforce a community-wide support network for young people in Flintshire.
6. Push for Youth-Focused Transport policy change.  
  
We will use our influence in the community to push for improvements in public transport, making it more affordable, accessible and available to young people
7. Improved Leisure provision  
  
Encourage investment in the community, so young people have more options to play sports, engage in arts and simply hang out in safe spaces
8. Build a bridge between young people and employers  
  
By utilising our professional relationships with local businesses, we can improve work outcomes and experiences for our young people.
9. Foster Community  
  
We are firm believers in the power of community at WeMindTheGap, and we will continue to champion the power of belonging.



# What's next

The project created an impressive amount of meaningful and informative engagement, offered 18-to-21-year-olds an opportunity to share their opinions, and demonstrated that their voices are valued. The project showed:

- **Who engaged**
- **Key themes and subthemes**
- **Sentiment analysis of the themes and subthemes**
- **Case studies**
- **Recommendations**

As well as useful and important findings, this project has also offered further insight into the most effective methods of engagement, with strategies that could be developed further in the future. For example, an increase in digital engagement and making this option more prominent was an approach the project team suggested.

In early discussions about the project with the Civic Mission, it became clear that WeMindTheGap's ambitious aspirations for young people in North Wales lend themselves to further engagement work, including long-term research projects. During the Big Conversation in Wrexham, the data implied specific 'personas' within this demographic such as 'Social, but struggling' and 'Diverse and disengaged', summarising consistent issues such as anxiety, loneliness, and financial instability. Continued research could investigate these personas further, applying them to the Flintshire area. An in-depth research project, including ethical approval, would further investigate the findings from this project and examine aspects such as how socio-economic deprivation intersects with the responses from young people. The key subgroups and discussion points highlighted through this engagement work could be explored and analysed intensively through research, with the findings informing the creation of future engagement methods and impact programmes.





# Digital engagement

The digital responses enabled WeMindTheGap to engage with young people who may struggle to be in public spaces or choose not to. The online option enabled more accessibility and flexibility in how participants could contribute such as voice typing. This removed obstacles such as spelling difficulties or hesitation to write answers down/talk to a person. It also allowed individuals to engage with the project on their own terms as those who didn't have time to stop and have a conversation could scan the QR code for the online survey and complete it when possible.

## Postcards

The postcards were successful in attracting participants due to the eye-catching design. It also streamlined the process, as consent forms were not required for this form of engagement. These postcards were also distributed by local businesses, which increased the visibility of the project, but it is difficult to measure how much this increased engagement. The use of the post boxes that were left at businesses proved to be broadly unsuccessful and team members reported that communication between business staff was seemingly the barrier to these being used effectively.



# Appendices

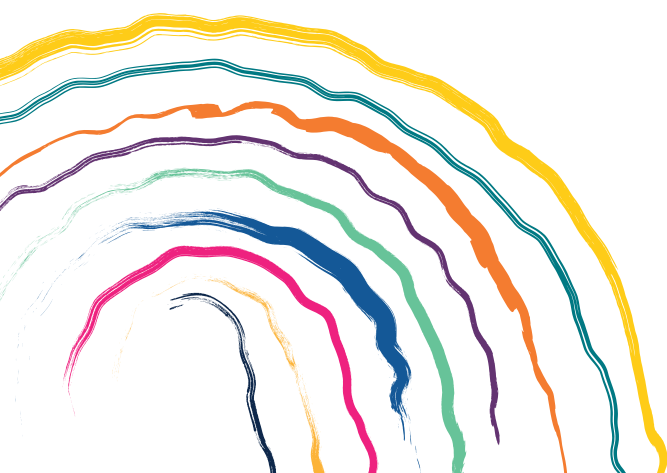
## Appendix A

### Reference List

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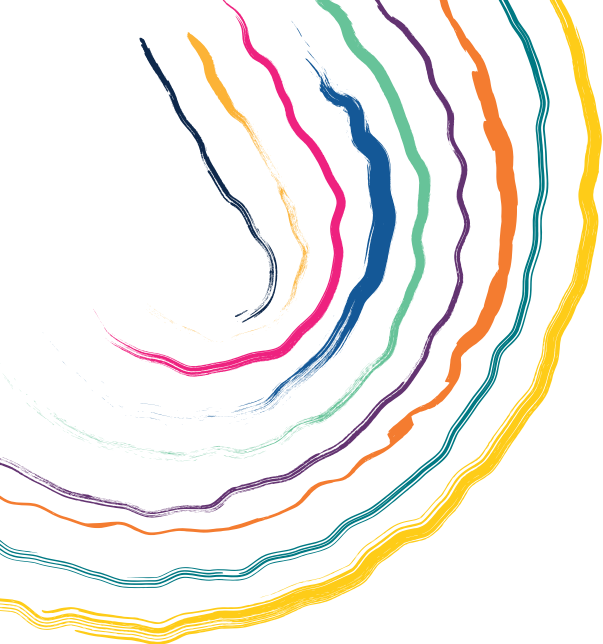
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## Appendix B

Sentiment Score	Example from the dataset
+1	I love the community spirit here, and there are so many clubs and events to get involved in.
+0.5	The youth clubs and support services here are really welcoming, and I've had good experiences—but adding a few more weekend workshops or peer-mentoring sessions would make a big difference.
0	There are local youth groups, sports facilities, and study sessions available throughout the week.
-0.5	I think it lacks opportunity to socialize.
-1	Very boring.



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