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WE MIND THE
GAP™

Ambition

Change the lives of 1000
young people in Wrexham
in 1000 days, together as a
community, with love and
real opportunity.

WeMindTheGap findings and response to the Big Conversation

Bridging the gaps: empowering young people across communities, employers,
and education to enable a brighter future



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LEVELLING
— UP —

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Welcome

Young people are our future. Over the last four years the world has become a very different place for them: climate change, Brexit, a global pandemic, a major European war, social media influence, and a cost of living crisis as well as severely interrupted education all make up the 'background noise' to our young people's lives today and every day. We suspected that they have been, and are being, impacted in ways that we experience but can't truly understand. As a result of The Big Conversation in Wrexham we now know that that is true.

In the following pages we have endeavored to capture the highlights, the essence of the important learnings from this fascinating and necessary conversation with our young people, employers and statutory services and our response. We have developed 2 reports containing every fact, statistic and story from our young people and employers, this report brings them together. Full reports are available for you whenever you choose.



Some of these learnings are to be expected, others less so. All demand our attention, and the fact that we must recognise many of our 'old ways' are now irrelevant and our future generations require new focus, new ways of getting things done. This new understanding, shared in this report, is vital to us as a community. By acting on it we can ensure that every opportunity we offer is relevant and attractive, so that our young people can grow and thrive in the future they deserve.

We look forward to working with you to turn these learnings into real actions that impact the lives of the young people of Wrexham in so many positive ways.

With love from,



WeMindTheGap is part funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund in partnership with Wrexham County Borough Council.



Our ambition

Our ambition is to ‘change the lives of 1000 young people in Wrexham in 1000 days, together as a community, with love and real opportunity’.

To reach out to the notoriously hard-to-reach 18–21 year-olds and understand the impact of the pandemic on their lives. Specifically, we aim to connect with those in Wrexham who were 16-18 years old in June 2020 when the pandemic struck, to grasp what truly drove them in a time of unparalleled confusion and chaos. With this understanding, our goal is to create tailored opportunities for them



The Big Conversation was an unprecedented endeavor, a journey deep into the minds and hearts of the young people whose lives and education were abruptly disrupted by Covid-19.

Our questions were not unique. Employers found it challenging to recruit for entry-level positions, while other charities and agencies faced difficulties in enrolling young people in their programmes, and colleges and universities were seeing fewer young people turning up regularly.

The world had changed, and it was evident in the lives of countless young people in severe crisis, including some who were our own children. But what about those young people who remained hidden, disconnected from the world beyond their screens? Young people were being impacted in ways we could experience but never truly understand. The opportunities and choices they were given were designed in a pre-pandemic world, often by well-meaning individuals like us, who may not fully grasp the reality these young people faced.

We realised the urgency of knowing where our young people were, what they were thinking, what they were feeling, and what they needed to thrive. The only way to achieve this was to engage them in a comprehensive conversation as never before attempted.

In parallel, it was equally vital to understand the perspectives of employers and statutory services. By correlating the insights from young people, employers and statutory services, we could then identify opportunities and support to help young people thrive across Wrexham.

Three different phases are required to achieve this:

1. The Big Conversation. An unprecedented endeavour.

This report sets out in broad brushstrokes our methodology, research and findings to date, covering our conversations both with young people and employers in Wrexham.

This has involved:

- being brave, bold and totally committed to the unusual concept of place-based research
- speaking to approx. 12% of young people in Wrexham aged 18-21 years old
- learning how to genuinely engage with our young people in meaningful ways
- understanding our young people's different views of the world: identifying common characteristics and themes in experiences, perspectives, attitudes and behaviours, hopes and aspirations
- developing a number of 'personas' that can help us design behavioral change approaches
- conversations with 52 different local employers across all sectors
- Consideration of traditional practices in recruitment and retention

2. Project 1000

This phase will be focused on developing a collective of employers, educators, charities and our public services - anyone and everyone who works with and for young people in Wrexham. This vital group will work together to examine existing opportunities for young people in the light of new learnings, identify interventions that can answer different needs, and develop new initiatives that are relevant and exciting for all parties, most importantly our young people. We sincerely hope that you will join us.

3. Project Future

The culmination of our efforts will yield insight, showcasing our methodology, results, and impact evaluation. We will share these insights widely to position Wrexham as a beacon of thought leadership in social mobility, youth empowerment, youth employment and mental well-being.





The Big Conversation... with our young people

The main thrust of our Big Conversation to date has been a journey deep into the hearts and minds of young people in one specific place. Our aim was to understand what makes them truly 'tick' in an era of once-in-a-generation confusion, chaos and noise, with a thoroughness that has never previously been attempted. Specifically, we aimed to connect with those in Wrexham who were 16-18 years old in June 2020 when the pandemic struck, who are 18-21 years old today.

Finding our young people to speak to them was incredibly hard, but perseverance has paid off: over recent months we have spoken to 12% of the young people aged 18-21 in Wrexham. We can be proud and confident that our findings as reported here really do represent this important cohort.

This piece of research with our young people was undertaken by change behaviour consultants Hitch with the support of our WeMindTheGap team on the ground. Hitch have produced a full and extensive research report that is available separately. Major findings and highlights are presented here.

This research received crucial support from Wrexham County Borough Council and was conducted in collaboration with Wrexham University and Coleg Cambria. We thank them for their commitment and help, and look forward to working with them to ensure that all of the lessons and learnings within these pages make a positive difference to this wonderful city of Wrexham and its young people.

Methodology:

Quantitative and qualitative information was collected from the 419 young people and 105 employers, this provides us with a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and perspectives. The quantitative data gathered offers statistical summaries and trends, while the qualitative data provides depth and context to their responses, and helps us gain a more holistic view of their opinions and experiences.

Data was gathered in a variety of ways:

- An online survey to capture young people's experiences, goals, and aspirations.
- Qualitative surveys and in-person focus groups with college and sixth form students.
- An online focus group with young people from deprived areas.
- Interviews with teachers, parents, and stakeholders.
- On-street interviews in Wrexham.
- Stakeholder engagement events.
- Workshops with employers to develop a survey, face to face conversations to understand the gaps in employability of young people and the gaps in employers' skills and opportunities




So what happened next?

1. Developed personas

Following the insight work with Hitch Social Marketing and Behaviour Change experts, we identified ‘personas’. Personas help us to visualise the people we are talking about and see how might live their lives, make decisions, and choose how to behave. This also helps us to identify specific behaviours that might need to change in order to promote more positive outcomes.

<p>Social, but struggling</p> 	<p>These individuals, comprising a significant portion of respondents, have faced increased loneliness, anxiety, and challenges in socialising due to the pandemic.</p> <p>Almost half of our young people told us that even when they’re with people they know, they don’t feel that they belong. Almost half said that, since the COVID pandemic, they feel more alone.</p> <p><i>“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 and all that and I just go shopping and play pool.”</i></p>
<p>Diverse and disengaged</p> 	<p>Many young people in Wrexham feel disconnected from society and struggle to relate to others, contributing to a sense of not belonging.</p> <p>1/3 of our young people said they have lost interest in education since the COVID pandemic. They feel let down and blamed by society and mistrust older generations.</p> <p><i>“We need 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?”</i></p>
<p>Resilient and self-reliant (the side hustler)</p> 	<p>Some young people exhibit resilience and a strong sense of purpose, often relying on their support networks and self-motivation to navigate challenges.</p> <p>Young people need help to get where they’re going. More than half wanted financial or professional guidance and support. Almost all our young people (93-98%) said good health and happy family were their priorities.</p> <p><i>“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.”</i></p>
<p>Let down and just living</p> 	<p>A portion of respondents expressed feelings of being let down, struggling in college or work, and experiencing financial instability.</p> <p>Many young people can’t see their full potential: 28% of our young people had given up on the things they once enjoyed since the pandemic. They feel like they’ll never find work and they’ve given up trying. The cost-of-living crisis hit them hard.</p> <p><i>“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.”</i></p>

<p>The COVID cohort</p> 	<p>The pandemic has left a lasting impact on this group, affecting their mental health and social lives. To be honest, we struggled to find this cohort but so many young people told us of their friends and family who they believe to be part of this cohort that we feel they must be included.</p> <p>Around 80% of our young people were living with parents or family members. Many parents told us that their children were facing challenges with returning to life as it was pre-covid</p> <p><i>“You’re really lucky to speak to her today, she very rarely goes out. She’s always at home with me.”</i></p>
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Insight and themes

Common characteristics emerged:

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

<p>Mental Health</p> <p>A significant number of young people reported experiencing mental health challenges, with nearly 25% having a diagnosed condition.</p>	<p>Pandemic Impact</p> <p>Covid lockdowns have led to increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and social isolation among young people.</p>	<p>Aspirations vs. Reality</p> <p>While many prioritise good health, wealth, and happiness, they often doubt their ability to achieve these goals.</p>	<p>Belonging & Community</p> <p>A significant portion feel disconnected from their communities, highlighting the importance of belonging and strong social networks.</p>
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Key Learnings

The most important pieces of insights gained from the young people’s research are also the most valuable. They are essential information that need to be considered or applied when making any decision or change.



Important learnings from this research include:

<p>Engaging with young people often requires a referral process, involving outreach through parents, colleges, schools, friends, and family, as they may not directly seek assistance. A trusted referrer is needed: parent, teacher, friend.</p>	<p>Young people are easily disengaged by the wrong type of language or agendas that don’t appeal to them or feel exclusive. Their attention must be caught quickly, or it never will be...</p>	<p>The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and lasting impact on young peoples lives, making it unrealistic to expect them to return to pre-pandemic norms easily.</p>	<p>Conventional methods of reaching people for research purposes did not work e.g. social media questionnaire, printed questionnaire.</p>
<p>Happiness is closely tied to having a sense of purpose and meaning, which many young people lost during the pandemic and struggle to regain.</p>	<p>Social engagement plays a protective role in young people's mental well-being, but remote work trends have reduced their interaction with peers and colleagues.</p>	<p>Habits formed during COVID-19 lockdowns, such as increased online time, solitude, and residual social anxiety, continue to affect young people.</p>	<p>Young people's communication and worldview have shifted significantly, necessitating a re-evaluation of pre-pandemic expectations.</p>
<p>Many young people feel demotivated and unsupported in their learning and development, having missed crucial milestones during the pandemic.</p>	<p>Building self-efficacy requires facing optimal challenges, but young people may lack confidence in their abilities due to the absence of assessments and examinations during the pandemic.</p>	<p>Despite challenges, there are inspiring young individuals with unique aspirations, and it's essential to accommodate and support them, even if their paths don't conform to traditional expectations.</p>	<p>Young people do not feel that they are asked, that they have agency. Many commented ‘This is the first time I have been asked for my opinion’</p>



2. Identify Behaviour Change Frameworks to support our young people, using the five personas where appropriate

Now that we know who our young people 'are', we can explore their desired outcomes and possible ways to make them happen. These are often things that an individual, or us as a charity, cannot do alone but require the collaboration of the local authorities, local organisations and the wider community.

The COM-B model – encompassing Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation and changing Behaviour - is a recognised behaviour change framework that helps us to address the themes identified in our young people, to identify gaps and design interventions.



Below please find an example of how this framework works.

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.	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

The COM-B has been applied to various themes affecting young people in Wrexham, categorising both individual and systemic issues which are included in the table below.

Loneliness	Anxiety	Disinterest in education	Loss of enjoyable activities	Emerging drug issues
Changes in family dynamics	Shifts in service provision and access	Pressure to excel	Challenges related to social media	Lack of mental health support, insufficient post-18 support
Feelings of being trapped, lack of autonomy	Uncertainty in pursuing aspirations	Difficulty transitioning after lockdowns	The rise of young entrepreneurs	Alterations in health behaviour



Considerations about how to move forward:

A comprehensive set of considerations is provided to 'bridge the gap' between young peoples' and employers' needs and available services. However, the top 6 are applicable to all aspects of young people lives, not just education or employment.



<p>1. Foster community and belonging</p> <p>Encourage community engagement and belonging through shared interests and support networks.</p>	<p>2. Enhance social opportunities</p> <p>Create more social engagement opportunities, especially for collaborative activities involving strangers, to combat feelings of isolation.</p>	<p>3. Empower young people</p> <p>Promote autonomy and self-reliance among young people while ensuring they have access to resources and guidance.</p>
<p>4. Address economic challenges</p> <p>Implement opportunities to address the cost-of-living crisis, budgeting, access to cash ensuring young people have the means to achieve their aspirations</p>	<p>5. Acknowledge mental health support</p> <p>Address the gap in mental health support for young people and provide timely and accessible opportunities to promote positive mental health and wellbeing.</p>	<p>6. Bridge maturation and skills gaps</p> <p>Develop initiatives to help young people mind the gaps on missed education, and skills development and maturation stages.</p>





The Big Conversation... with our employers

It has been widely reported that employers are finding it challenging to recruit and retain entry-level staff, charities and agencies are facing difficulties in engaging with young people, and colleges and universities are seeing fewer students turning up regularly.

An obvious next stage for The Big Conversation is to expand it to include every employer, trainer, educator in the city, to understand their experiences, needs and wants. This process has already begun – we have spoken to 105 Wrexham employers already – and the summary findings of those conversations are included below in this report.

Methodology

- Initially a focus group of employers from different sectors was held - housing association (including elderly care, homeless provision and supported accommodation), manufacturing, IT, retail.
- Using feedback from this group a questionnaire was designed with Wrexham University that enquired about practices and experiences around recruitment, retention, resilience, job availability, job security.
- 105 local employers were invited to complete the questionnaire, which was available via email link or QR code. 52 questionnaires were completed. 31 of those employers also participated in a one-to-one conversation with the WeMindTheGap team to gather more insight.
- This provides us with a comprehensive understanding of experiences and perspectives of employers across Wrexham.

Insight and themes

Certain themes appeared time and again, highlighting the impact that recent life events have had on young people's engagement with employment and employers.

Resilience	Some young people lacked essential social skills, including resilience, motivation, and initiative, making it challenging for them to integrate into the workplace.
Meaningful work experience	There was a consensus that young people were missing out on the valuable skills gained through work experience, leaving them unfamiliar with the dynamics of a workplace.
Wellbeing	Employers recognised the critical importance of wellbeing for young people in the workplace, as many faced significant social, emotional, and financial burdens that affected their work performance.
Adverse Childhood Experiences	ACEs and heightened post-Covid anxiety were evident in young people's behaviour, impacting their social interactions and performance at work. The research revealed that over half of the respondents had never heard of ACEs, indicating a need for education and training on this subject.
In-Work Support	Motivation was often low among some young people, with a reluctance to perform routine tasks. Resilience was also a challenge for some, leading to frequent absences. However, appropriate support from employers could lead to better retention.
Employability Skills	Many young people lacked basic employability skills, such as punctuality, mental and physical readiness for work, and basic social skills.
Role Modeling	A lack of exposure to employment and role models contributed to unrealistic expectations and uncertainty about workplace behaviour.

In conclusion, the research uncovered several significant gaps in young people's readiness for work and the potential support employers could offer to help them.



So what next?

Building on these insights, the following practical considerations can be made to address the disconnect between our young people and employers:

Employability Skills Training

Commitment to provide employability skills training encompassing communication skills, confidence building, and team dynamics.

Programme Adaptation

Adapt existing programmes and provision for young people to make them more relevant, engaging e.g. support services available in the evenings. Ensure any new initiatives answer our young people's needs directly and do not rely on previously tried and tested ways of working. The COM-B model allows us to interrogate each aspect of a programme or provision to ensure it is relevant.



ACEs Education

Prioritise education and training across the community on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the 'Trauma-Informed' approach, aligning with the Welsh Government's vision for a trauma-informed nation.

Meaningful Work Placements

Sustain efforts to deliver programmes and collaborate with local employers to offer more meaningful work placement opportunities. This will nurture resilience, motivation, and a deeper understanding of work.

Mental Health Support

Collaborate with local mental health organisations and initiatives to develop strategies for effective mental health support within the workplace. Establish clear policies and procedures for addressing mental health challenges among employees.

Employee Engagement Initiatives

Implement employee engagement initiatives tailored to the unique needs and preferences of younger employees. Foster a workplace culture that values inclusivity, diversity, and open communication.

Professional Development Opportunities

Offer professional development opportunities and mentorship programmes to help young employees grow within the organisation, addressing concerns about retention and motivation.

Alternative Employment Hub

Develop with young people a safe space and place to nurture employability and employment opportunities to bridge the gap between young people and employers who want to co-create employment opportunities together.

Many employers felt alone in the challenges that they are facing in recruiting and retaining young people in entry level jobs, while also supporting their existing teams to deal with post-Covid, cost-of-living and mental health challenges. There seems to be the will and the need to work in partnership across the city to help everyone thrive.



Why now?

The urgency of addressing the needs and aspirations of young people is underscored by several compelling reasons, making it imperative to take action now:

Demographic Shifts

The global workforce is experiencing a significant demographic shift, with a potentially growing proportion of young people entering the job market without basic qualifications and employability skills. This shift demands a proactive response to ensure their successful integration and retention within the workforce.

Rapid Technological Changes

The pace of technological advancement is accelerating, impacting job roles and required skills. Young people, often early adopters of technology, must be equipped with the skills needed to thrive in evolving work environments.

Talent Retention

Organisations that invest in the development and well-being of their young employees are more likely to retain top talent, reducing turnover costs and maintaining institutional knowledge.

Economic Recovery

Many economies are in the process of recovering from the economic impacts of global events, such as the pandemic. Prioritising the needs of young workers can expedite economic recovery and our prosperous community by ensuring they have access to meaningful employment opportunities.

Innovation and Adaptation

Young people bring fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and adaptability to the workplace. By harnessing their creativity and energy, organisations can enhance their competitive edge and ability to navigate an ever-changing business landscape.

Mental Health and Well-being

The well-being of young employees is a growing concern. Addressing their mental health needs and work-life balance is essential to create a healthier and more productive workforce.

Social Responsibility

Organisations are increasingly expected to demonstrate social responsibility. Prioritising young people, who represent the future workforce, aligns with societal expectations and ethical considerations.

Strategic Advantage

Organisations that proactively embrace the needs and aspirations of young people gain a strategic advantage by harnessing the talents and potential of this diverse and dynamic demographic.

Global Challenges

Young people are entering the workforce at a time when the world faces complex challenges, such as climate change, social inequality, and global health crises. Engaging them in addressing these challenges is crucial for building a more sustainable future.





Next Steps For WeMindTheGap

The findings of The Big Conversation have given us cause to pause and review our own practices, and our thoughts are gathered under three different headings. We are going to make changes to our programmes, as well as our employment offer to make them even more impactful for the young people that we work with. This will include such things as:



WeExplore: Deepening our understanding of the needs and desires of young people to bridge the gaps between their aspirations, the community and available services.

- Develop a group of 'Community Explorers' comprising young people who represent our five personas and who bring a diversity of experience and expectation and give them the skills and support necessary so that they act as a sounding board for our ideas on how to change and develop
- Establish regular communication channels for young people and employers to share their experiences, needs, and expectations
- Encourage open and transparent discussions where parties can express their concerns and provide platforms for young individuals to voice their opinions and ideas.
- Encourage young employees to participate in decision-making processes, ensuring their perspectives are considered.



WeNurture: Challenge the format of our current practices and programmes, and trial new and different elements that focus on both young people's employability gaps and the gaps identified by employers looking to recruit, retain, and develop young talent.

- Offer training programmes that address the specific skill gaps identified by both young people and employers.
- Foster a learning culture that promotes continuous development for all
- Establish mentorship programmes where experienced employees can guide and support young talent.
- Encourage the sharing of success stories and career journeys to inspire young individuals.
- Tailor recruitment strategies to align with the preferences and expectations of young
- Collaborate with local organisations, schools, and community groups to bridge the gap between education and employment.
- Create pathways for young people to access internships, apprenticeships, and work experience opportunities.



WeShare: Commit to sharing our findings as widely as possible and carry out robust impact and evaluation.

- Create a WeShare portal to disseminate findings and insights, fostering collaboration across services and employers, and providing a framework for other communities to adopt this innovative approach.
- Regularly assess the impact of these initiatives by tracking key metrics such as employee satisfaction, retention rates, and skill development
- Adjust strategies based on the evolving needs and feedback of both young people and employers.

If you can see how any of the above ideas could help your organisation or your young people please get in touch. By working in partnership, as a community, the impact any one partner will have will be amplified.

