



The youth work needs of young people in Fife after the coronavirus pandemic



Foreword

As part of Fife's recovery and renewal, a youth work research proposal was developed that would enable us to explore how the pandemic has impacted young people in Fife and helps us identify what support they are looking for in their local communities.

This report details the background to the research, including the overall objectives, the overarching questions and the methodology used.

The research was underpinned by a participatory action research model with young people taking a lead role in the process as part of the overall planning and as young researchers. This approach has been a key strength to the research and is highlighted within the report. This approach also reflects and supports our commitment to Community Led Services as set out in the Plan for Fife.

The methods used have enabled both qualitative and quantitative information to be collected and this is reflected in the key findings. As well as giving an insight about what life was like in the pandemic, the research questions gave a real opportunity for young people to talk in some detail about their communities and their aspirations for the future.

This report brings together the detailed research findings and these have resulted in a set of key recommendations that we now need to act on; so there is work to be done, including review of other research and data sources.

To move this forward, further exploration of current youth work delivery and the overall youth work offer in Fife with key stakeholders and partners is required with a view to developing a longer-term strategy for youth work in Fife.

Tricia Ryan

Community Development (Support) Team Manager, Fife Council

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Background and Context

The Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic affected life for citizens internationally, forcing governments to impose restrictions on freedom of movement in attempts to halt the spread of the virus among populations.

The UK government and the devolved parliament in Scotland, responding to public health advice, instituted laws creating three major lockdowns that restricted people's right to leave their homes and spend time with people outwith their household in March 2020, November 2020, and January 2021, as well as a range of tiered or levelled and localised interventions designed to limit social contact.

As well as these restrictions, social life has been impacted by the use of social distancing laws and advice that included the wearing of facemasks in public places.

While these interventions were designed to create barriers that would reduce the spread of the various coronavirus strains, they created less welcome barriers to normal social interactions of people.

At various times throughout 2020 and 2021, regulations prohibited or limited the delivery of services among various industries, particularly those that were seen as non-essential. In the UK, this led to closures of businesses and reductions in availability of social services. Schools, nurseries, colleges and universities were closed for lengthy periods, switched to online platforms and extra-curricular, activities, including youth work, were limited. Travel was restricted. Restrictions affecting people's ability to work have created financial difficulties.

Despite these restrictions, there have been over 24 million cases of coronavirus and over 220 000 UK deaths attributed to Covid-19. There have been very real fears for people about the dangers of the disease as well as conflicting concerns about the use of quickly developed vaccinations.

The coronavirus pandemic has affected the lives of all people in the United Kingdom, including young people in Fife. Youth work services continued to operate in a limited way throughout lockdowns and restrictions, creating and keeping contact with young people through a variety of projects. Delivery was clearly limited by the series of lockdown restrictions, reducing young people's contact with youth work services. Fife Council youth work attendances in 2020 were reduced to around a quarter of pre-pandemic levels. This engagement was maintained mainly through developing online activities, employability programmes and schools work initiatives supported through the welcome introduction of the Scottish Government Youth Work Education Recovery Fund.

Attendances began to rise as restrictions were removed though they have not yet reached pre-pandemic levels. Research findings suggest that young people value the renewed freedom to socialise with peers and inputs from youth workers.

A good deal of knowledge of the effects of the pandemic and how they have manifested among young people and their communities undoubtedly exists within the youth work sector in the region, with practitioners having made great efforts to continue to engage young people throughout the pandemic, particularly those most in need of continued support. However, there

has been no systematic gathering of this knowledge Fife-wide and research specific to young people in Fife's experiences, and subsequent needs, has not been performed on this scale.

There has been a recognition for some time that Fife Council's youth work services needed to be reviewed and that a new, long-term strategy should be created. The need to establish an evidence base for the review has been brought into focus by the enforced separation of young people and their communities from youth work services.

Fife Council has chosen to research the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on Fife's young people to develop a clear picture of issues important to young people, with a view to creating recommendations for youth work services. This has been included in Fife's updated Community Learning and Development Plan for 2021-24.

A participatory action research model was proposed, recognising the successes of citizen-stakeholder involvement in the Fairer Fife Commission and recent rounds of action research that have assisted the development of community-led services in Fife.

In Fife there are approximately 40 000 young people aged between ten and nineteen years old. The evidence presented in this report is based on interviews with 198 young people, ten youth workers and recordings of discussions in various stakeholder forums from across Fife between April 2022 and May 2023.

Many of the interviews were conducted by young people who formed a research reference group that was consulted about the research aims and methodology and trained in interview techniques and ethics. At the time of writing, there have been around fifty meetings of reference group members to ensure engagement on young people's terms.

The objectives of the research were:

- To determine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people in Fife
- To assess changes in community life for young people in Fife, building a picture of young people's interests, aspirations and needs
- To make recommendations for development of appropriate community-based youth work services in Fife

The research project was designed around four overarching questions:

- What has been the impact of Covid 19 on young people in Fife?
- What do young people value or find challenging in their lives?
- What are young people's needs and aspirations for their future in Fife?
- In what ways can young people's needs and aspirations be met in Fife, in a long-term youth work strategy?

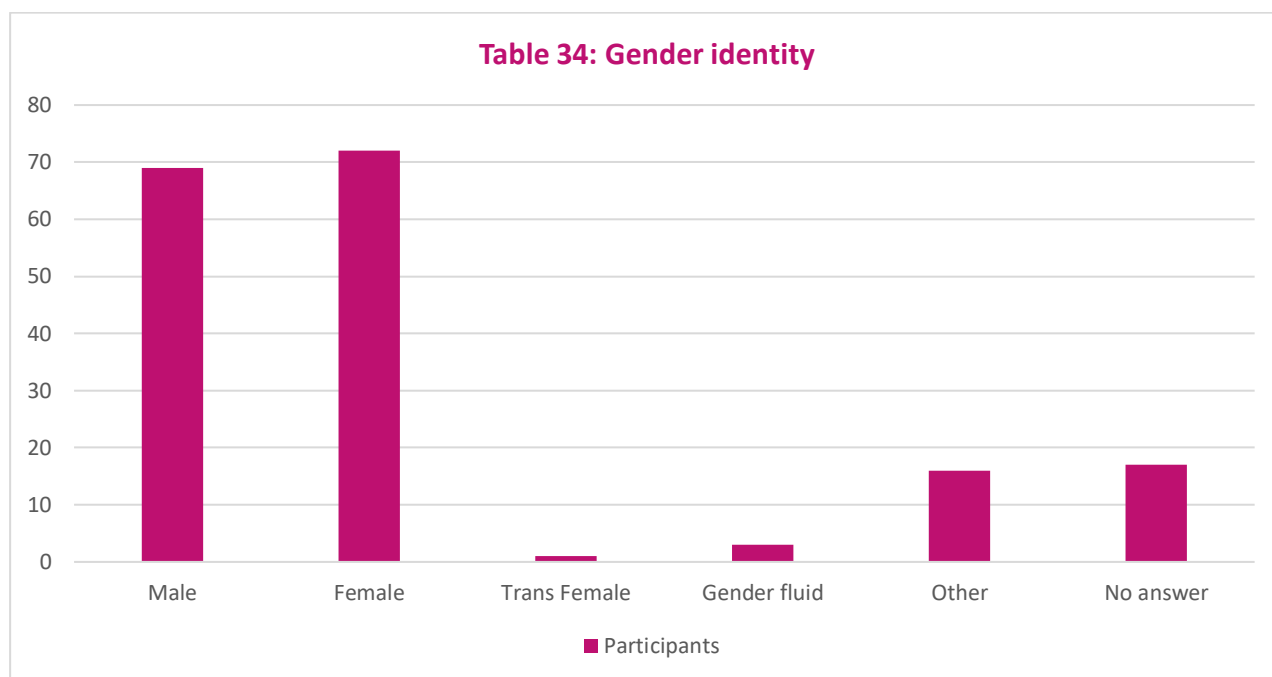
Who was interviewed?

- 10 voice recorded, narrative interviews with Youth Work practitioners to generate research themes.
- 178 semi-structured interviews for 10-19 year olds.
- 20 voice recorded, narrative interviews with 10-19 year olds.
- 5 round-table discussions with young people, 3 with practitioners and youth work managers.

Table 1: Ages of participants in structured interviews

Age	7	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	24
No.	2	2	22	14	23	36	20	19	15	12	4	3	1	2	2	1

Participants self-identified as:



NB: Gender fluid was the option offered but later found that Non-Binary is more up-to-date language.

86% of respondents are in formal education. 12% in college or training. 14% working. 12% working part-time.

Around 80% of young people interviewed attend youth groups. Around 20% attend issue-based youth clubs. 20% of young people attend sports clubs.

Participants come from all areas of Fife, including a mixture of rural and urban dwelling.

Methodology

This project has followed a participatory action research model, using narrative inquiry processes to collect and analyse the data. This allowed for young people to take the lead in the project and to be involved throughout the process. It was important to Fife Council and partners to ensure that young people's voices were heard clearly in development of a youth work strategy that would be relevant and appropriate to young people's needs after the coronavirus pandemic.

Participatory action research positions people as experts in their own circumstances and reality. It is a process that seeks to equalise power relationships between staff and volunteers as well as researcher and interviewee.

It is an approach developed from the understanding that all knowledge is partial and situated. There is no one objective truth that can be created by a detached observer. In short, it is a way of creating new knowledge that involves people in the fullest way possible. Involving communities in policy and service development increases the probability that solutions reached are more likely to meet their needs.

A research team, the research reference group, was formed in March and April 2022, consisting of young people from across Fife who were invited to attend initial sessions about the research project. Once young people had expressed an interest in continuing to be involved in the project, they were given training on research and interview techniques as well as learning about the ethics involved in participatory research. Training sessions centred around what young people wanted to learn from this research and ensuring the wellbeing of all participants.

From formulating and contributing to the questions that would be asked, to agreeing ethical protocols and interviewing other young people about their experiences, young people have been given opportunities to lead the way. Young people in the research team have coded and analysed data and been presented with collated findings to check the validity of reporting.

We believe that young people performing interviews, analysing data gathered and reporting findings allows the best opportunity to break boundaries around expertise that more traditional research models can create. It is important to recognise though, that power imbalances between paid staff, young volunteer researchers and participants still exist; that power cannot be fully democratised and, although the participatory action research approach goes some way to equalising leadership, that should be viewed as an ongoing and incomplete process.

There have been four key modes of data collection throughout this project, each of which informed the approach and actions taken during the following stages.

A narrative inquiry approach was selected as it allows participants to frame the content of discussions and is accessible to researcher and participants.

Narrative interviews with youth workers

Ten youth workers from Fife, with a mixture of experiences and varying lengths of service with Fife Council and voluntary agencies, took part in voice recorded narrative interviews. These were themed on the past, present and future of their youth work practice and young people's needs. This allowed the research team to frame the research with young people based on analysis of

topics that emerged from these discussions. Youth workers were chosen due to their close relationships and direct experience of young people's journeys before and through the coronavirus pandemic.

Semi-structured interviews with young people, by young people

A key tenet of the participatory approach was that interviews conducted by young researchers would reduce barriers to their peers' participation and elicit genuine responses in interviews.

Young people who joined the research team were presented with five key themes, generated by interviews with youth workers. These were; life in the pandemic, community, hopes and aspirations, health and wellbeing and, youth work. A series of questions were developed from these themes that would ascertain young people's requirements from a future youth work strategy as well as building a more rounded picture of life for young people. Once trained, young people would interview peers, one to one, taking verbatim written notes for each answer. Each completed interview schedule would contribute to the quantitative and qualitative data with interviewees answering a mixture of closed and open questions that allowed them to contribute in their own words. In all, one hundred and seventy-eight semi-structured interviews were completed.

Narrative interviews with young people

The research Development Worker interviewed twenty young people, voice recorded, one to one, using a shorter interview schedule following the five themes used in young researchers' interviews. These created more qualitative data and provide the majority of the quotes that can be found in this report. The interview schedule was developed from early data returned from young researchers' completed interviews. Each interview was transcribed and an inductive and emergent process of analysis was followed.

Forums and round table discussions around findings with young people and stakeholders

Part of the participatory process was to present communities and stakeholders with findings from the research in order to develop dialogue about young people's needs and to connect these ideas (and young people) with local and central decision making. Discussions following presentation of key data were held with three independent groups of young people and three local groups of young researchers. A number of conversations were held with professional stakeholder groups, including Fife's CLD Partnership, Fife Youth Work Managers Forum, Fife Council's Communities Senior Management Team, two Community Education Worker forums and some smaller, informal conversations were held. Presentations were also given to YouthLink Scotland's Policy Convention and the Fife and Tayside Alliance's Winter Learning Festival, including video of young researchers produced through the process.

These forums and presentations spread awareness of the research project and therefore wider consideration of young people's needs and aspirations after the coronavirus pandemic.

A fifth, online, method of data collection was devised, with space provided on a Fife Council website that would allow young people to request an interview or submit their covid stories anonymously. There was very little uptake for this and it did not contribute to the final research data set. This does however give increased justification for the decision to use face to face methods of data gathering detailed above.

Commitment of volunteers

The level of demand on young researchers and the complexity of the 'ask' of them was an ongoing concern for the staff involved, particularly at a difficult time for society, communities, families and individuals. It is an interesting dynamic of participatory action research (perhaps common to community development and community capacity building) that progress depends on commitment from individuals who have no obligation or duty to be involved and have pressing concerns in other areas of their lives.

It should be noted that as the project was being developed, there was still very much a feeling that society was tentatively moving out of the pandemic but had not yet returned to pre-pandemic rhythms and the young people who had formed the reference group (as well as the youth work practitioners who recruited and supported them) were still experiencing elements of disruption in their lives while readjusting to something more recognisably normal. It was not yet possible to take this normality for granted.

Given this context, young people's engagement in the project is commendable. The research project provided opportunities to socialise and make new connections. Some good youth work helped to support participation and cohesion but those young people who were involved in the project should be particularly proud of their contributions to a complex and academic process that asked a lot of them.

By the end of the initial training and team building sessions, it was clear that the group consisted of young people who had a range of life experiences, were personable and able to communicate with each other and the staff team supporting the research. They showed an ability to concentrate on the research themes and activities and they were able to contribute positively to the research design and process.

The mixture of life experiences can be considered an asset in terms of the participatory style of research. Among the group there were clearly young people with an empathetic manner who would be well suited to considering the needs of their peers during development of the process and one to one interviews. The group communicated an understanding of young people's needs and were able to relate those, along with their own experiences, to the context of emergence from a global pandemic.

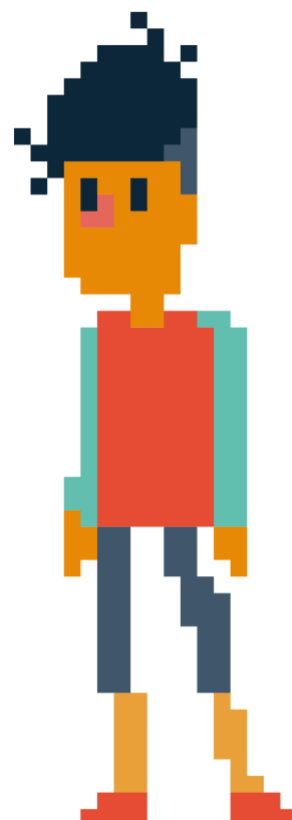
Ethics

Ethical processes and procedures were managed in line with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) 2018 Guidelines. These formed a key part of the training programme and informed the research process throughout.

Responsibilities to researchers, participants and the research community were considered by the research team at all stages. Particular consideration was given to safeguarding young people's wellbeing in relation to experiences of the pandemic being shared and heard. This included ongoing monitoring of researcher wellbeing.

The right to withdraw from the process was stressed for all interviewees and researchers. Consent was sought in all cases and for voice recorded interviews, parental consent.

Anonymity was assured through all processes. Records and recordings will be deleted at the earliest appropriate opportunity after completion of the research and reporting. All recordings are stored securely in encoded systems accessible only to the Research Development Worker and Administrative support.



Reading this report

This report contains a large volume of information recorded and transcribed verbatim from young people's interviews. It was important to the research team to include as much of this information as possible, as the idea of the importance of young people's voice underpins the research approach.

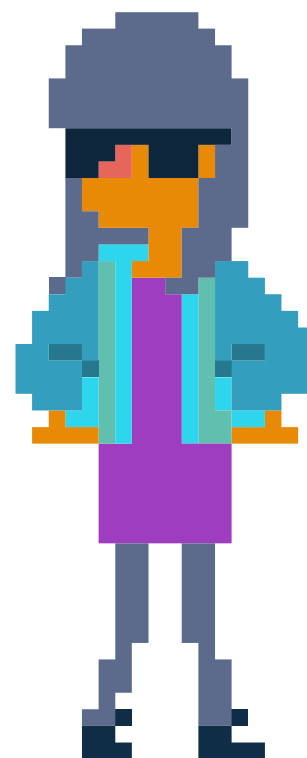
Many of the themes in the report are interrelated and young people were able to speak freely around all of these and more. Many of the quotes included could have been used under different themes, demonstrating the complexity of the report.

The five themes for sets of questions are:

- Life in the pandemic
- Community
- Aspirations
- Health and wellbeing and
- Life in the pandemic

Semi-structured interviews provide the quantitative information in the report as well as contributing a number of quotes. Readers may note that few of the tables shown here will provide numbers that add to 100% as only statistically significant (high or low) responses are included in the majority of instances.

For quick reference, there are sections of key findings, and recommendations preceded by a discussion of the recommendations.



Key Findings

This report presents many concerning findings. Some of the statistics and stories will feel worrying to youth work practitioners, young people and communities. The findings chime with other national studies that show that there is no one universal experience of the pandemic. They also show that young people have been positive, caring, adaptable, and resilient. This has been shown throughout the pandemic period and is evidenced, in young people's own words, in this report.

It should be noted that young people's concerns, interests and needs should not be viewed solely through the lens of the effects and impacts of the pandemic. Throughout the interview process, it has been clear that teenage years continue to be dynamic as young people develop their identities and life courses in personal, social and economic terms. For many young people, the pandemic has proven to be a secondary concern in the greater narratives of their lives.

As of May 2023, the World Health Organization has determined that the Covid-19 pandemic is no longer considered a public health emergency of international concern. Despite a recent variant that has manifested, the illness itself is less prevalent and, generally, less serious in its consequences. Some of the social effects continue to impact young people though and are likely to do so for some time.

Some of the lessons that were learned and considerations that emerged from the pandemic should not be forgotten as the pandemic recedes.

Health and wellbeing

The extent of the impact that the pandemic has had on young people's health and wellbeing should not be underestimated. 38% of young people told us that during the pandemic they felt unwell with a further 12% telling us that they were not fully well, that their mental health was affected or that they were experiencing anxiety. At the point of interview, 35% described their mental health as 'negative' or 'other'.

For some young people, their lifestyle during the pandemic negatively affected their physical health. Sports provisions being impacted, diet and decreased levels of physical activity played a part. The stress that the pandemic placed on society, restrictions introduced to manage spread of the virus and the difficulties associated with reintegrating after lockdowns and restrictions have affected young people's mental wellbeing.

However, some young people we interviewed were positive about how the pandemic afforded them opportunities to develop personally, in ways that pre-pandemic life seemed not to. They discussed improved self-esteem, confidence and social networks, fulfilling interests and taking advantage of the hours that were allocated to exercise.

The shape of contemporary life meant that some young people also appreciated the respite that they gained from 'normal' life during the pandemic. For some, the instruction to stay at home was considered a blessing.

The value of community

The majority of young people were positive about where they live. There was a range of factors that influenced their responses, from knowing their local area well, to the convenience of getting to the places that they wanted to go. This, in some way, may reflect the size of Fife's towns and villages. Other positives were heard around free bus travel and new developments, such as redeveloped play parks.

There is a clear sense from the research data though, that what young people value in their towns and villages is community. What matters to them most is time with friends and family. The increasing opportunities to get together with other people as pandemic restrictions eased and services began to re-establish themselves were welcomed.

Young people's need to be with their peers shines through every theme of this research project, informing their answers to questions about life in the pandemic, aspirations and youth work. When young people describe their futures, they do so with a vision of the people around them.

Conventional aspirations

It is interesting that, during a time of change and uncertainty, a clear majority of young people that were interviewed have identified what may be considered quite traditional and conventional aspirations.

Money and employment are key aims for young people. Interviews suggest that for most, they see these aims as a means to achieving a stable family life.

Large proportions of young people we interviewed have set career goals, often with particular vocations and professions in mind. They attach value to these, showing that their career aspiration goes beyond the financial.

Relationships

Relationships are the key to young people's lives as they have described them during our research. They are essential to living healthy, happy and fulfilling lives. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of maintaining positive relationships, and the stresses that can appear when they are interrupted. Reconnecting with friends and family is what has repaired damage caused during the pandemic.

For young people who want to build stable family lives and contribute to communities, developing healthy attitudes and habits around relationships is vital. Likewise, if young people are to maintain the substantial careers they seek, they must learn to establish and navigate relationships built on cooperation and understanding.

Social media

Social media plays a huge part in young people's lives. This was apparent in both narrative and structured interviews. It was invaluable to young people as a means of keeping in touch with friends and loved ones, schools and youth clubs during the pandemic. It is used for news and information about the world. It is difficult to imagine how the pandemic would have unfolded for young people without it. Young people told us about these advantages but also some of the dangers and risks that they are aware of when using social media. Issues with twenty-four hour

culture, weakening of ties with geographical communities, addiction and impacts on mental health were discussed among the topics raised.

Many young people appear to have well developed awareness of the double-sided nature of social media's pervasiveness.

Youth Work

Around eighty percent of the young people who took part in this research participate in youth groups. The evidence shows that they value youth work services for a variety of reasons; the opportunity to spend time and socialise with peers, their positive relationships with trusted adults, the range of activities and experiences on offer and informal learning approaches.

Safety

A fifth of young people (20.2%) interviewed identified safety as an issue in their communities. This evidence is reinforced by narrative interviews and forum discussions. Participants told us about the difficulties some had emerging from lockdowns and reintegrating into school and social life. Focus groups linked this to the desire for young people to learn about responsibility.

There is some evidence of bullying, extreme behaviours, substance misuse and violence. Practitioners spoke of some groups' difficulties in communicating and working together post-lockdown as well as a dip in resilience. Young people attributed some of these behaviours to exposure to negative influences online and erosion of community and family influence.

This research did not aim to fully investigate this theme and it may be an area for further study with partners in education, police and health.

Life in pandemic

We set out to find out whether young people felt that they and their peers had been affected or changed by the pandemic and, if so, in what ways. We wanted to know what impact restrictions in movement and the enforced time at home had had on their relationships with family, friends and others. We were interested in what these effects were during the pandemic restrictions, at the time of interview and if there were any patterns that might suggest lasting effects.

Narrative interviews were structured in a way that encouraged interviewees to discuss the impacts of the pandemic on young people more generally, before focusing on their own experiences. We felt that this would allow participants to comment more freely than they might in response to more direct questions about themselves and their relationships. Inevitably though, some young people talked about their own experiences as well as others'.

This has been interesting in that responses to the question, 'Has the pandemic changed young people?' tended to be more negative than when young people focused on how the pandemic directly affected them. Young people perhaps refusing to feel sorry for themselves while recognising that the pandemic was difficult for others.

This research has found that young people's experiences of the pandemic and the effects it has had on them and their peers has differed for a wide variety of reasons. Group discussions that helped to review the questions we asked suggested that young people had definitely been changed by the pandemic, lockdowns and other restrictions. The data collected suggests that they have but provides a complex picture of how different people experienced life in the pandemic and beyond.

Has the pandemic changed young people?

YES

Yeah, a lot.

Irreversibly and immeasurably.

I have definitely changed a lot, I don't know if I have just grown up a bit. I've definitely changed a lot.

MAYBE

A little bit. Mentally, yeah.

Some of my friends, well not really my friends but people I know got really affected by it. Me not so much, it was just a bit annoying, but I think it has really affected them.

NO

I would say no, because I just feel the same.

For me? Not really, it's not really changed me.

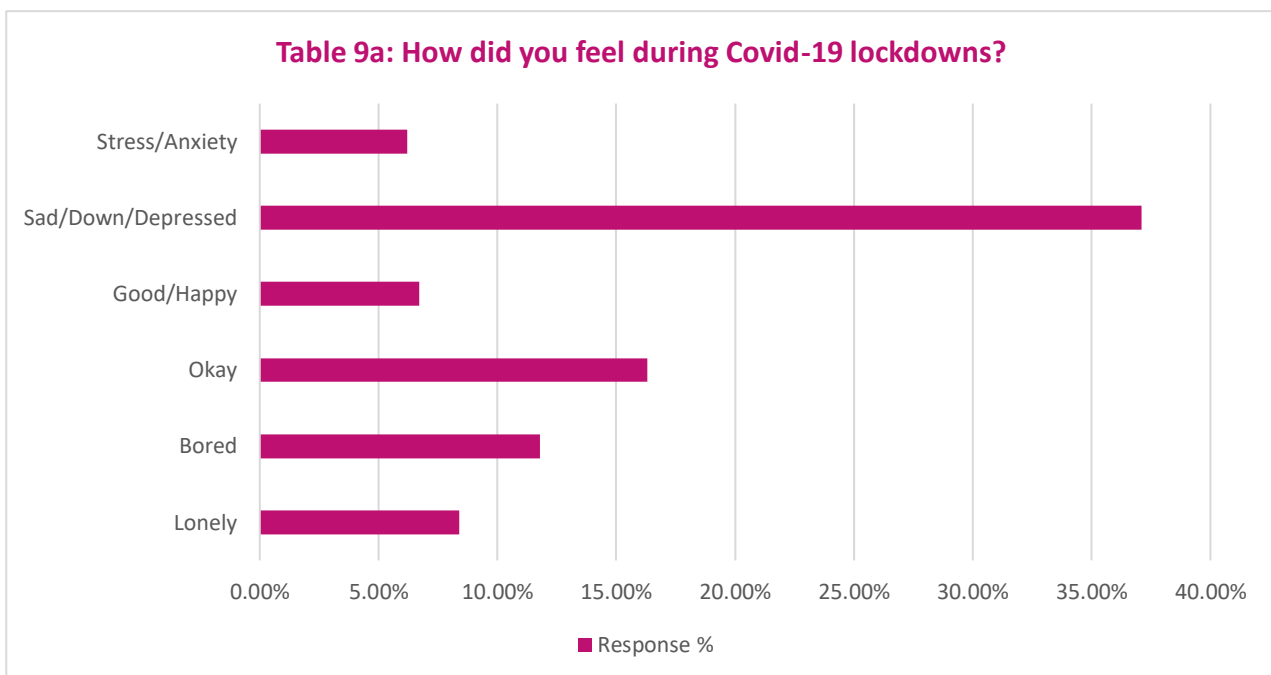
Nah, wasn't really bothered...- I took my jags and that but since then never bothered. If I got covid I got covid.

(W)hen I was younger there was nothing I couldn't do. When the pandemic happened, I totally changed and I am not wanting to talk to other people like normal.

I think if you look at everything and the problems young people are already experiencing growing up, I think covid made them bigger and made them faster. If you look at people my age, they pretty much have an addiction to social media – they are on it constantly, that worsened during covid. It was the only way of contacting people; it was their only connection to the outside world. Apart from TV and stuff but that's not as personal.

I think everyone changed so much. I think it made everyone grow up a lot faster, make everyone want to act a lot more like adults a lot faster maybe, while still not being fully prepared to go into that. I saw a lot more adult behaviour from people when they came out. Everyone was wanting to go out drinking more, and there was more people starting smoking. I don't know if it's because we just hit an age during lockdown where that just happens or, it was directly because of the lockdown, what people had seen and been exposed to. I don't know.

Since the pandemic and isolation, they've just not got the social skills anymore to talk to anyone. It's changed them a lot.



This table shows us that 63% of young people's first response was that they felt negative during lockdown periods. Over a third of young people (35.4%) told us that they could not remember life before the pandemic, suggesting the type of impact that the isolation and worry of the period had on their thinking and perhaps the scale of that period in their life histories.

Being locked up for two years in my house. It was so weird I had to go on a zoom call to see my friends instead of going up to chap the doors. That was something that affected me, saying you can't see your friends or your family. School work as well, if you're trapped in your own house the last thing you're

going to want to do is schoolwork, sitting right beside the window... you wanted to go out there but, no, you have to finish this task to get out there.

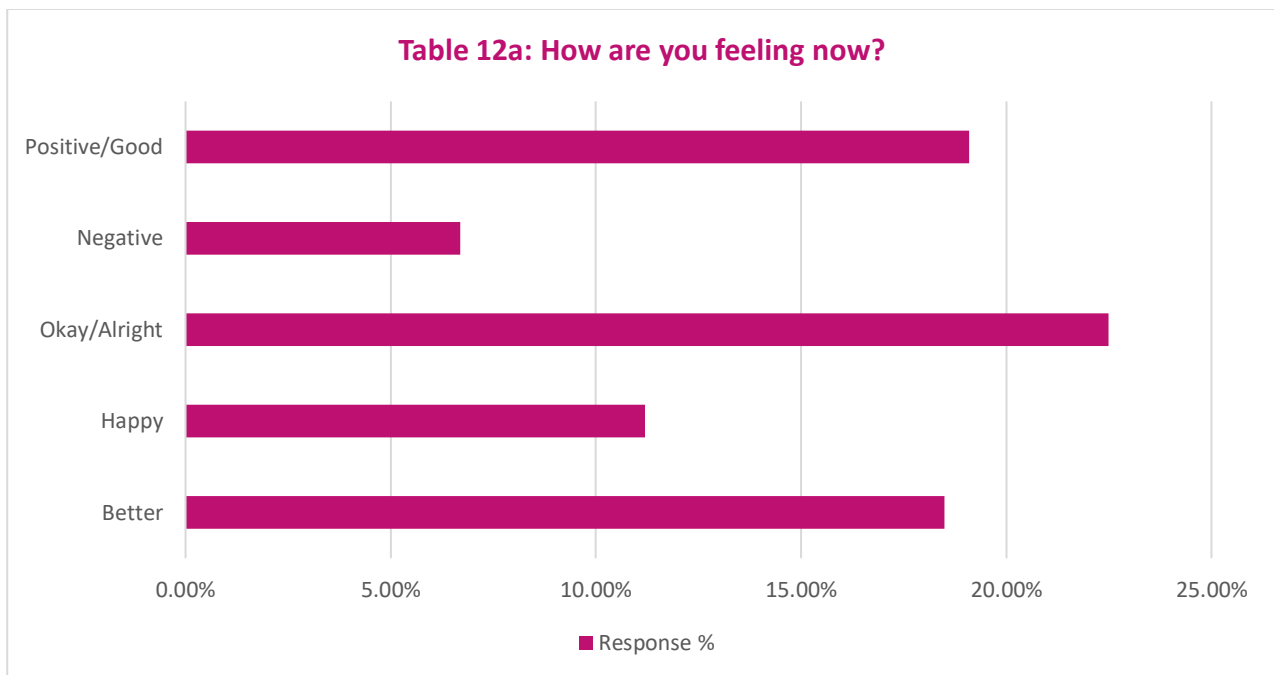
I think having all that time by ourselves made us grow up a little bit faster than we should have.

Didn't see family members, didn't see friends. Had to do schoolwork all day, never went out that much. Just all rubbish...

Some young people discussed the fears they had about the illness that Covid-19 could cause them. There were concerns about contracting the virus and transmitting it to vulnerable relatives. Others discussed cooking and caring for household family members who were ill with Covid.

Young people who felt that they never had particularly close or understanding relationships with their families spoke about feeling very isolated. Some young people worried during lockdown periods that life would not return to normal. For those that did feel particularly isolated, they experienced confusion around where they could find support.

I was at school during the pandemic, going back to school it felt like a loss of a lot of close relationships with staff at the school. Which was a big loss for me, I had a lot of trusting relationships within the school but friendships as well.



For around a third of young people (37.1%), there was quite a positive progression between lockdowns and the time of interview, where interviewees told us that they felt positive, were enjoying a return to freedoms and a sense of normality.

In narrative interviews there was also strong evidence to show that young people felt that life had at least begun to improve. For many, the return to more normal patterns, freedom to spend time with friends, at social activities and reconnect with their physical communities made them feel better about life. Joy and elation were expressed by some interviewees about the chance to spend time with their friends after restrictions. Some young people felt that they had grown different to friends over the time that they were separated during the pandemic but also that once freed from restrictions and allowed to begin to socialise with each other again, most were quick to readjust.

You might have fallen out with certain folk because you have become different people. But I don't think it had a direct effect on the relationships because I worried about that during the pandemic – when I meet up with my pals in person straight away are we going to have forgot how to socialise with each other? It was a wee bit awkward for five minutes but then it was okay again.

...when the restrictions ended, they got a lot better because...I felt I could finally do my own thing again and especially this year, that I've forgot covid existed because all the rules, not really seen anything about it anymore. It's been really good, but it's been weird going back at first because I felt like I was doing something wrong but no it's been good...it was weird seeing my friends for the first time in like 6 months.

...when it was still kind of around and people were getting sick and that; we had to wear masks in school. When that stopped, I was so relieved.

I think things have gotten a lot better. People are recovering from the pandemic; things are going back to more normal. You still need to get your covid jags to make sure if it does come back it won't affect you as badly. So that's a need, a must have, you need to have that.

I guess its positive impact is that people are being more grateful that they can get out and see folk, because they know how easily it can be taken away. Or how difficult it can make it, or more aware of people who don't have these connections and maybe more isolated.

By the time of interviews, almost three-quarters of young people (71.3%) gave a response that told us they felt better, positive or, at least 'okay/alright'. This shows a huge improvement over the feelings expressed about lockdown periods. Interviewees attributed their improved feelings to positive experiences (15.2%), time with friends (12.4%), the pandemic receding into the background of life (6.2%) and positive feelings about the future (9.6%).

For young people who said they did not feel particularly troubled by the pandemic and lockdowns, returns to pre-Covid norms had a similar lack of effect, beyond happiness about reestablishing relationships.

Yeah, just feels the same as in 2019, I just felt the same.

Some people in the upper age ranges of our sample recognise persisting negative effects of the pandemic. Over one in six (15.6%) young people told us that they felt negative, anxious, tired or bored. A feeling that the people and places around them had been affected in a way that made them different to the period before Covid. Examples cited were around the closure of businesses and facilities.

Some were concerned about a lack of respect for authority that they felt had developed and led to irresponsible behaviours. This links to a more substantial theme expressed in structured interviews where around a tenth of respondents thought that what young people needed to learn was responsibility.

The sources of a perceived lack of respect are explained by several arguments made by interviewees, reference group members and in forum discussions. That young people were stressed and took time to readjust to life, with everyone's emotional recovery happening at a

different pace. That young people saw a lack of responsibility of those in power that made them question rules. That people had been controlled more than pre-pandemic and they felt the need to rebel. Or that social media had a negative influence on behaviour.

I see a lot of young folk, maybe even younger than me kicking about the high street drinking. That might have been part of covid, ya know.

I always had the thought that things were going to get really good, and they were going to get better. Now I kind of always look on the bad side which I don't remember doing before the pandemic. I guess it was just a depressing period and I kinda think that everyone that came out of it is a little more mucked up or a little more upset about things.

Some young people told us that they found it difficult to discern whether the increase in risk-taking behaviours they saw and heard about were reactions to the pandemic or whether they were part of the natural process of growing up that they had just become more aware of.

For some young people, there was a feeling that they needed to wring the most out of opportunities to socialise and have fun in the here and now, due to the uncertainty that the pandemic had raised about the future.

I'm no sure how to put it. It's changed our way of living because during it we were all so careful and, I dae ken, not being able to go see our friends so we were all a bit down at that point. Now I feel like we are trying to get the most out of going to go see our friends just in case it happens again. I've definitely been out more and in a way I have felt like a bit more sadder because I didn't get to see my friends and when I first got to see my friends it made me more happy.

when I got out the pandemic, I was desperate to see people in real life again.

maybe we were looking for more people to speak to because you were more isolated you wanted ...new people because obviously, you're speaking to the same family members every single day. That maybe pushed me to speak to new people.

There was a continuing theme of appreciation for close family as people were forced together in their 'bubbles' but were also afforded the chance to spend time they would not otherwise have had with parents and siblings. These arrangements depended on the careers of parents and, although computers were made available to all children through schools, to an extent this would also depend on resources and family makeup. Some young people did recognise and discuss the pressure that was placed on families by being trapped in new home-office arrangements as the divisions between school, work and home life began to blur but there was undoubtedly opportunity for some to form closer relationships with family members.

I think we were driving each other insane bit by bit but in the end, we were alright...

I would say improved it slightly because my dad works long hours. He is barely in the house and when covid hit and lockdown came we were staying with him most of the time. So, I got to see him a lot more and obviously there was a lot

of falling out and things but ultimately, I think it had a positive effect on my relationship with him.

I felt more, not connected, but I experienced a lot more with my mum and my sister because we sat at the table and we normally all did our work there. A lot of my friends didn't do the work, my mum and dad was quite strict about it, I had to do it all. I think that be quite [further] forward than I would have been because after lockdown I felt like I was a lot smarter if that makes sense, I did do a lot more.

My mum just cooks lunch for me at the house which is alright because I get a chicken korma pot noodle sometimes. I quite like them.

My mum had to get everyone set up on Teams and it was really hard for her to do it all at once. Sometimes she would just have a break and then we would just have to do our work when we were in lockdown because we weren't at school.

The opportunity to work at their own pace and in their own environment was appreciated by some who attributed the home learning style to improved academic performance.

I quite enjoy my schoolwork in the house as well because it's like you can do it at your own pace. It's not like you have a certain amount of time to do this and you can't do it later.

...in primary school I got distracted a lot, maybe got off task but like when I was in my house just sitting on my iPad in the Livingroom – somewhere I was more comfortable sitting, I kind of put my mind more to it. And having the whole day to finish my work made my learning a bit more easier

Changes in the way that people used the internet and social media to cope with what would otherwise have been absolute isolation meant that some young people developed new friendship groups and connections as well as maintaining existing networks. Some young people spoke about the resilience of their relationships with their closest friends, generally suggesting that the peer relationships they were most eager to maintain survived the pandemic. And young peoples' natural urge to make new friends and keep in touch with a wider social network were aided by social media, home schooling arrangements and, for some, online youth work activities.

I did enjoy going on a call with my friends every night cause we usually wouldn't do that at all because we had just seen each other for 12...6 hours. There was some things that were exciting and some things that weren't. The second lockdown was just boring, and it was sad. I felt I was fed up at that point but in the first time, it was something new and exciting.

I wasn't really bothered; well, I was more affected by the fact I couldn't get out and see my girlfriend and be with my mates. But at the end of the day, I knew we could always face time them and play Xbox with them and that.

I had different friends at the start of the pandemic to the end, so I was getting to know new people.

All my friends and that are still my friends. From S1, the pals that I had before S1. I have made new pals.

After the pandemic when we all went back to school, I did get more friendly with people in my classes. Started going out more, people I never imagined I'd be friends' with...

I talked to [the new friends I made during lockdown] before but me and my friend, because there wasn't really anything to do, we all went on our Xbox and PlayStation, Switches. We all played Minecraft at the time, me and my pals made this one world, and we played it all the time- the entirety of lockdown up until the summer of P7. Think because we played it all the time people would ask us about it and there was these people, [we said] you can join if you want. So, it was one of the main reasons [we made new friends].

Online gaming clearly serves as a community activity, particularly for boys. The relative benefits of the networks built before and during the pandemic are worth recognising as, for some, they undoubtedly provided an escape from loneliness and a substitute for face-to-face meeting. One young person suggested that boys and girls were affected differently by the pandemic as they have different social needs and styles – where he was happy to keep in touch through gaming and social media, his sister suffered more from the physical separation from her friends.

I think boys and girls are different. I think boys find it easier, they don't complain, I think girls- this is just my opinion likes- I think girls want more attention than boys. Need it, you know. So, that's, what I think, what's wrong with [my sister]. I don't think she had her pals to chat to all the time. But with me, I didn't really need my pals. I had my phone. Or if I did have my pals; bangin!

Although social media, including online gaming, allowed something of a progression of positive social forums for young people, a feeling was communicated that the connections that it provided felt synthetic and eventually unsatisfying.

The advantages of social media do not always translate as well to family relationships. Some suggested that their relationships were galvanised by the crisis while others felt they were tested and some felt connections to family and peers damaged by the convergence of issues that they were faced with in the pandemic.

It's affected things with my dad I'd say because we used to be really close. I used to go see him every weekend but now that's changed, I barely see him, barely hear from him.

I used to be really close with my nan and grandad, used to go visit them every Sunday- come and eat and obviously nan and grandad wait on people hand and foot, there was a bit of that. I don't know if it was for the full year or just a couple of months but all that time away from them, I think it put a wedge between us. When I saw them again it was like meeting a stranger.

A really good one for me was me and my brother fought all the time, just like sibling stuff. It was still constant. Over lockdown he would wake me up at the same time every day at like 8am, we would make breakfast together listening

to...music then we would go through and watch a movie...We would do that every morning and if we weren't watching a movie we were watching a show.

The idea that young people have been forced to grow up too quickly has been repeated through many of the interviews, including with Youth Workers.

I saw a lot more adult behaviour from people when they came out. Everyone was wanting to go out drinking more, and there was more people starting smoking. I don't know if it's because we just hit an age during lockdown where that just happens or, it was directly because of the lockdown, what people had seen and been exposed to. I don't know.

personally- I was really, really stupid before the pandemic and I think all that time alone made me more- is it self-aware? Of everything, whether that is positive or not, whether it has made me incredibly insecure, I have no idea. Well, no, I do know- it probably has made me extremely insecure.

This theme points to a variety of concerns. Increasing use of the internet and social media inevitably mean increased likelihood of accessing inappropriate or adult material.

Also, as much as adults, young people have been interested in how the pandemic would affect them, their friends, families and wider society, so were forced to consider life in a way that they would not have before the pandemic.

There is something in the nature of the enforced isolation and break from normal routines that seems to have affected some young people's development, particularly at key times of transition.

We never got an introduction [to high school]; never got stuff you're meant to do to find out your working level in the classes.

I think the transition from primary school to high school is maybe made a wee bit more difficult because my sister is that year where they kind of didn't get induction days and stuff. I think maybe they've found the jump up a wee bit more difficult and adapting to work with high school, because you have induction days and days you maybe go up and do sport – they missed out on that. So, adapting to the two different levels has become a bit more challenging.

they were just normal people I was friends with and afterwards, they maybe hadn't figured out how to do schoolwork online, they maybe never got anything to do - schoolwork - which put them behind. It's just unfortunate because there is a lot of people, I know that are really far behind and people had lost their jobs so, it was maybe a little bit harder for them at home as well.

This last quote also highlights the young person's concern around the financial impacts of the pandemic and, beyond, the financial crisis that the UK is currently experiencing. This 'cost of living crisis' is unevenly felt and negatively impacts lower income families most. The young person here recognises that financial insecurity has wider effects on lives.

At the time of writing, with life beginning to return to normal, it can be easy to forget the stress caused by fear that the rapid spread of an unknown illness caused. Here we can see young

people's concerns for themselves and others and the level of anxiety that was felt during the pandemic.

I would say it affected me a lot. Like I said before; everybody was scared to catch covid... It's always going to be a big thing now a days.

I'm a young carer for my dad. I was worried about getting covid and giving it to my dad.

Just like, covid affected me because people died cause of it then we got it, my dad got it then my whole household got it... I was the last one to get it, so I was dishing out dinner to everyone when they were all in their beds.

There was suddenly more things to worry about, I mean we are talking about new viruses – that stress-r [Strep A] or something like that, that killed 6 kids. That really scared me, stuff like that- it's terrifying. What's going to happen, is that going to be another?

There was considerable national debate early in the pandemic about a lost generation of children and young people, whose life course might be severely affected by lockdowns, loss of schooling and the financial implications of the pandemic. This study shows that for young people in this age group, there is a much more complex picture of the pandemic's effects but, generally, young people do not see themselves as broken or lost.

...personally, I didn't get that affected by it. I was one of those lucky ones. During the pandemic I was out with family, we were doing a lot of exploring at that point...I was lucky throughout the pandemic. But, that wasn't the same for everyone but in the pandemic, I was able to focus on a diet, I was able to lose weight, I was able to focus on stuff I wouldn't usually focus on...

It's no really affected me much. This one time, everyone in my household- my mum and dad, brother and sister- all got covid. I didn't and when they all got out of covid, I got covid, so I got like 2 weeks off school... Honestly, I felt good because I got off school.

...but I enjoy my kid life. I would like to stay a kid.

Some of the effects of the pandemic have already passed but others appear to have longer term implications. Some of the findings in the report suggest that people view the world differently after the pandemic, having lived through a period of danger and great uncertainty. Various societal factors serve to compound this. Cultures around the sharing of entrenched ideological positions can make social life feel risky and difficult to navigate. Young people have grown through transition periods with less of the normal supports they could have expected had there been no pandemic. If they managed not to fall behind in their education, they will have witnessed friends and other peers doing so. The financial climate in the UK is a concern for families and those young people hoping to emerge into the labour force. All while the world appears to be increasingly politically volatile.

Within the answers to the questions asked by researchers though, young people's resilience, adaptability and positive responses to a very challenging time can be seen.

Some young people did not feel that they were affected by the pandemic and lockdowns. Some felt positive effects. Growth, development, improved and new friendships. Sense of adventure. For some, being at home just suited them. Some emerged with increased feelings of confidence and improved sense of self.

I didn't have that many people skills to begin with so coming out of the pandemic, some people were like oh I forgot how to communicate- I was like I didn't know in the first place so... I didn't hate the pandemic. I didn't like it but I didn't hate it.

I hated going out the house and everything before lockdown but after it I felt a little more confident in a way because I felt like I got smarter.

Respite from normal routines appeared to allow some young people to take stock of their lives and form more feelings of control over their immediate situations, using the time to reshape their choices.

At the start, yeah- felt calm, I enjoyed that.

Having the opportunity to be in their own setting, organise themselves and work and socialise at their own pace rather than having it structured in by school or work was appreciated. While for some, it was therapeutic to avoid difficult social situations or people that made them unhappy.

For some who were always indoor people that was fine for them.

I had a really hard time going to school, like I hated going to school...going into lockdown made me feel more comfortable, just the fact of being home made me feel more confident.

I would go on a walk like every day. I wouldn't go anywhere; just go for a walk. I really branched out my music taste because I would always have headphones in. Little things that I did, just expanding stuff.

I have really bad social anxiety and I'm a massive introvert so, not going outside wasn't that big of an issue for me. In terms of changing a lot I think definitely gotten my confidence, up a bit, weirdly because I didn't have to see a lot of the people that caused a lot of problems in my life.

Some found other positives. There was something of a pattern, more often among males, where the absence of school and chance to spend more time gaming was particularly appreciated, although they generally recognised that this was not a healthy long-term lifestyle.

I think most boys enjoyed it because you got to sit in front of a screen all day and all night. Don't have to worry about school at all. Teachers being a prick eh? Aye, just play games all day with your pals.

Young people have demonstrated their resilience and adaptability. For all the disruption, fear and anxiety that the beginning of the pandemic ushered in, they have told us there were elements of adventure and excitement as they were forced to look at life differently. Waves of infections and rounds of restrictions over a period of two years though, meant that the pandemic became a

draining long-haul. It was a challenging time for mental health though some flourished and it strained some relationships while bolstering others. Habits changed for better and worse.

There was strong evidence of improvement in how young people felt after restrictions though clearly some way to go.

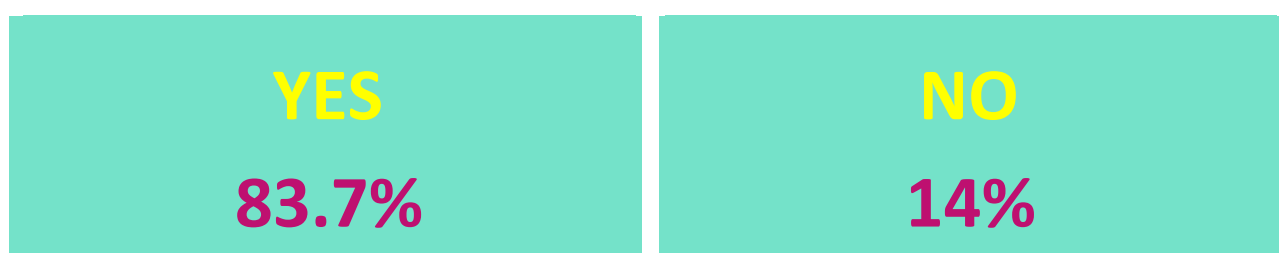
The main point to take may be that the experience has been different for everyone and recovery is uneven. The pandemic has an ongoing legacy of uncertainty and for this generation of young people, it is not clear how long that will continue.

Community

Under this theme, we wanted to know how young people feel about where they live, what there is to do for young people in their area and what are the difficulties, if any, of living where they live and at this time.

This knowledge is essential in developing understanding of what is appropriate for community-based youth work services post-pandemic, the focus of this research. A picture of what young people have at their disposal locally and what they would like to be able to do with their time and within easy reach of their homes can help inform decisions about service provision.

Do you like where you live?



Generally, young people are happy with where they live. This is qualified and fleshed out in narrative interviews but is an overwhelmingly positive figure.

There was a wide range of reasons given, with over a quarter stating that the proximity of friends, family and sense of community (27.5%) was the most popular explanation. A variety of descriptions relating to the type of town, ('small and quiet' / 'big and busy') were coded under 'good place' with almost one in five young people (18.5%) answering in this way. One in ten (9.6%) pointed out that their town or village has a nice physical environment and a similar proportion (11.2%) feel that the area has good facilities. The most likely reason for young people to say that they dislike where they live was that it is boring but only 2.8% gave this answer.

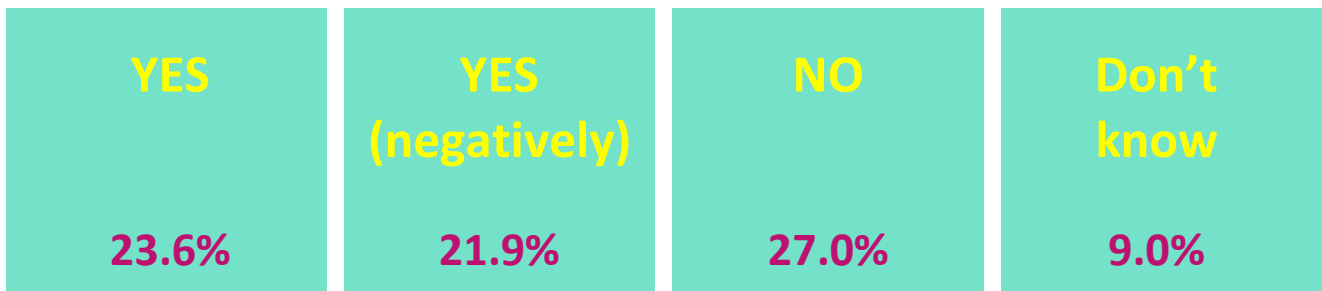
This shows us that young people feel strong connection to their towns, valuing the people around them that make up local communities, that they appreciate the physical aspect of the town and their ability to move around, and travel from, it.

It's quite a safe place to be in and since I've got such a big friend group here, I've always got somewhere to go if say my mums not in or someone's not in, there is always some place to go, and I know I will be safe with them.

Don't know. I like that I know the area and that all my friends are here but my family lives quite far away.

I would say over all I like the place but that's just because I was born there and it's familiar. It's obviously not an overly well-off place, but it's not that bad, it could be worse.

Has the pandemic changed the town you live in?



There was considerable opinion that the pandemic has changed the towns research participants live in. Almost half (45.5%) said that their town has changed with just over a fifth (21.9%) being specific about that change being negative for the place that they live.

When asked what there is to do in their town, young people were most likely to look to the local environment (23%), sports (18%) and visiting shops (13.5%) with just over one in ten (10.7%) telling us there was nothing to do. Those who gave us more than one answer again identified spending time in the local environment and sports as things for them to do.

This confirms a number of things: young people want to spend time outside their homes being active and social and, community is important to them - things that were removed from life during lockdown restrictions. We asked young people what they would like to be able to do in their town or village. Almost a quarter told us that they don't know (22.5%) while the next most popular responses were from young people seeking to visit sports facilities (18%) and general facilities i.e. places to go (16.3%).

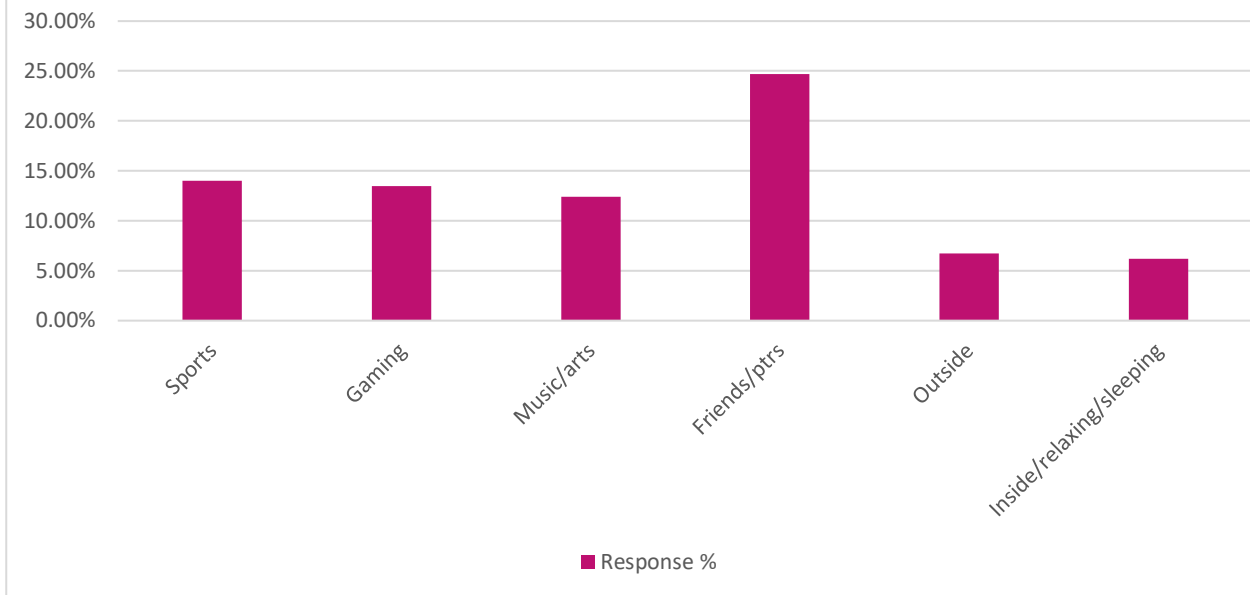
Really good...You get to go a lot of places...You get to go to all the parks and all that, the shops...Sometimes my mum takes me for the food shopping for the house, but we also usually go to the clothes and look at the shoe section.

I think for me it has been quite good because I have been in [youth clubs] since I was like 11 maybe, so I have always had something to do but I guess for a lot of people maybe there isn't something do.

Pretty normal, I don't know. I'm just myself yeah, it feels normal to be young [here], I feel.

Interestingly, given that 83% of young people told us they like where they live, one in five (20.2%) told us that improved safety would make their town the best place to live. Other interests were expressed around having more to do (15.2%) and more or improved parks (9.6%).

Table Q3a: What is your favourite way of spending your time?



Narrative interviews support the statistical evidence in as far as young people's value placed on their home towns tends to be related to having friend groups close by. The company of good people and benefits of community such as support beyond the family network, connection and familiarity and a sense of comfort were clearly important to young people we interviewed.

It's more interesting [than before I lived in Fife] and I have more friends that I can go walk to. None of my friends live [here] but ... I just have to walk like 15 minutes, and I get to go see all my friends. That's another plus and it's in walking distance of pretty much everywhere.

There is a lot of wonderful people there. There is a lot of people you can go and say come out and play and you can be friends. I have a tight group in my class and there is the park that is getting done up.

When asked what young people want to be able to do in their home towns, four ideas dominated responses: friends and fun, safety and boredom.

I think have fun with their friends, I guess, that's what most folk want to do at this age.

Hang about with their pals in different places that are fun and that.

Want to be able to go out to a park or something and just hang about there for a few hours. Just chill out, have fun, play games on their phones or whatever.

When they come out of school they will go home and probably go play with their friends. Somewhere to meet up with your friends or if you can't meet up with them there then your phone, Xbox whatever. In my opinion maybe some other clubs you can go to.

Just feel safe and go about with your pals.

I think just have fun; I think that's the big thing for me. I think for a lot of other people is have things to do because boredom- it sucks. It is no fun for anyone. Just being able to go out and do something is really fun. So, yeah just things to do and have fun.

Just something fun to keep their mind occupied and that so they dinnae be bored. Trust me I know a lot of people who just sit in their house and play Fortnite or whatever. Like I have pals who [live in other parts of Scotland], they smoke now and get into trouble because they have nothing to keep them occupied. So they are just getting in trouble.

Young people, in the main, accepted and embraced their home towns and villages, despite the flaws that some identified.

For some though, community can act as an exclusive function that makes them feel separated and, particularly as teenagers, an outsider. When asked if there is anything that makes it difficult to be young at this point in time, the majority of responses fell into two categories, around a feeling of being bullied, othered or made to feel on the outside, or around the pressures of expectations to attain and achieve.

Just like bullying makes it difficult for being young and all that. What you wear, what your hair colour is, If you're short or tall.

Really just in school, people put you down and that.

I guess a lot from 4th year, like exams and there is a lot of pressure around that – you need to pass these, you need to do that otherwise you're not going to get anywhere. Which isn't true but it's a lot of pressure to succeed academically.

Probably having to live up to people's expectations for you. If someone wants you to be good in life, like be good in school; maybe you can't, maybe you get distracted by people in general. Maybe you just can't get good grades, so just stuff like that.

People in their later teens tended to think beyond their local communities, considering culture and society more widely. The effects of the internet, again, make an appearance where young people were encouraged to consider difficulties they face:

I think there is a lot of pressure online now – you should be doing this now, you're this age, this is what you should do. Like this is what's expected of you.

Internet – main one. Less community stuff, like the local area.

If you look at cultures and things around sex, it's awful now.

Whether it be a lot of pressure of “when I was younger, I did this, this and this by your age”, or if it's just general world issues cause things are already completely messed up at the moment and it's like – right ok, there you go, off you go, on your way, have fun.

One young person who did not feel they had been particularly affected by the pandemic was able to offer a more light hearted take:

Int: Is there anything that makes it difficult to be young these days?

YP: Not really.

Int: Nut?

YP: Well yeah, having no Wi-Fi!

There was something of a feeling that presented where young people felt they were seen as a threat, especially when with groups of friends. Others felt that they themselves were under threat. Young people, especially those who feel excluded tended to feel that their peers provide the most likely threat, physical or emotional, painting a complex picture of sense of belonging.

... people tend to think I am a bit of a hooligan just because, once again, the way I dress and I hang out in a big group of friends.

Surprisingly it's other people that are young, but I also think that's just a product of the adults. They teach their kids this and that then they come to school, and they shove someone into a wall because they are the opposite of this or that.

...a lot of folk who automatically assume that [you] have done something wrong, if you're in a big group you're going to cause trouble. I hang about with a big group and we're not causing trouble, we might be wee fannies at times but we're no causing trouble in the community.

I think the more we beat each other up, the more we call each other names, the less we care about each other. Which I think we need to do more of- care for each other.

Mirroring quantitative findings, narrative interviews showed that some young people in the bigger towns in Fife had concerns about safety.

Because there is a lot of junkies, alcies and that and sometimes [the town] isn't that safe.

...some youth feel like they don't feel safe at night because of adults and that but on the other hand the youth kind of run about outdoors at the same time.

A general pattern, particularly in more rural areas, was that young people felt that the towns and villages they were from were for children and older adults - that teenagers are somehow caught in the middle ground with a lack of provision deliberately designed for their needs and interests. This lack of provision may be linked to an absence of young people's voice and visibility within local decision making, planning and investment.

I'll be honest- boring. But there's a lot of people my age but not a lot happens there, it's quite a quiet town, mostly for old people. Not much fun about it but we do have some giggles sometimes.

Yeah, it's really good. I live close to a lot of my friends but there's not as much to do because I am a little bit older.

Free bus travel for young people was discussed by a few young people as a positive aspect of current life, allowing them to connect more easily to friendship groups and facilities that interest them. There is an implication within many of the interviews that life could be more fulfilling, enjoyable and generally easier for those with the resources to engage in a range of activities.

One of the biggest positives about being a young person is the free bus travel. Like me, myself, I am able to explore the whole of Scotland without paying anything towards it. Up to the age of 24 I believe.

I mean I've got lots I like to do, I like coming here, I go to the football but with the football, obviously that costs money to do. You've got to think about that as well, a lot of people can't afford to do things.

Not everyone was positive about their community. There was some consideration from young people in the older teenage years of how community and society can be changed and the extent of and limits to young people's agency within that.

You're kind of not finding your own way to do things, you're only doing things the way adults have done it before, so you are kind of trapped in a box. They want you to repeat a cycle that is different for different people.

I think some people just genuinely don't care, just accepting it – we can't really do anything but then there is also quite a large group of people trying to change it. I think that's good, I'm one of those people that wants to be able to change it.

For some, the desire to change their communities gave way to a natural stage of growing up. The drive to gain independence can equate to the urge to move away from where they have grown up and begin to make their own choices.

It's ok. I think I kinda hate everyone [here] and I'd like to leave as soon as possible, but it's where I live, it's not amazing.

...me and my pals were talking about it the other day- it just seems like such a miserable town.

When asked what young people wanted to be able to do in their communities, these participants suggested the potential benefits of finding hobbies that aligned with their interests, as well as suggesting the level of bravery required to try new things with new people.

Maybe express themselves in the way they feel best represents them – sport, art, cooking, baking because everyone wants to do something that interests them, have a passion for. So, probably doing things they want to do.

I think anyone who does a hobby, do something that they enjoy- I think it's quite important, I think it's quite cool that people can go and do that. And they enjoy it and it doesn't have to be for something, it can just be for fun but still there is things I want to do but I tell myself- you can't do that because people will laugh at you, you can't do that cause people just find you annoying. You can't do this, you can't do that because you wouldn't be good enough.

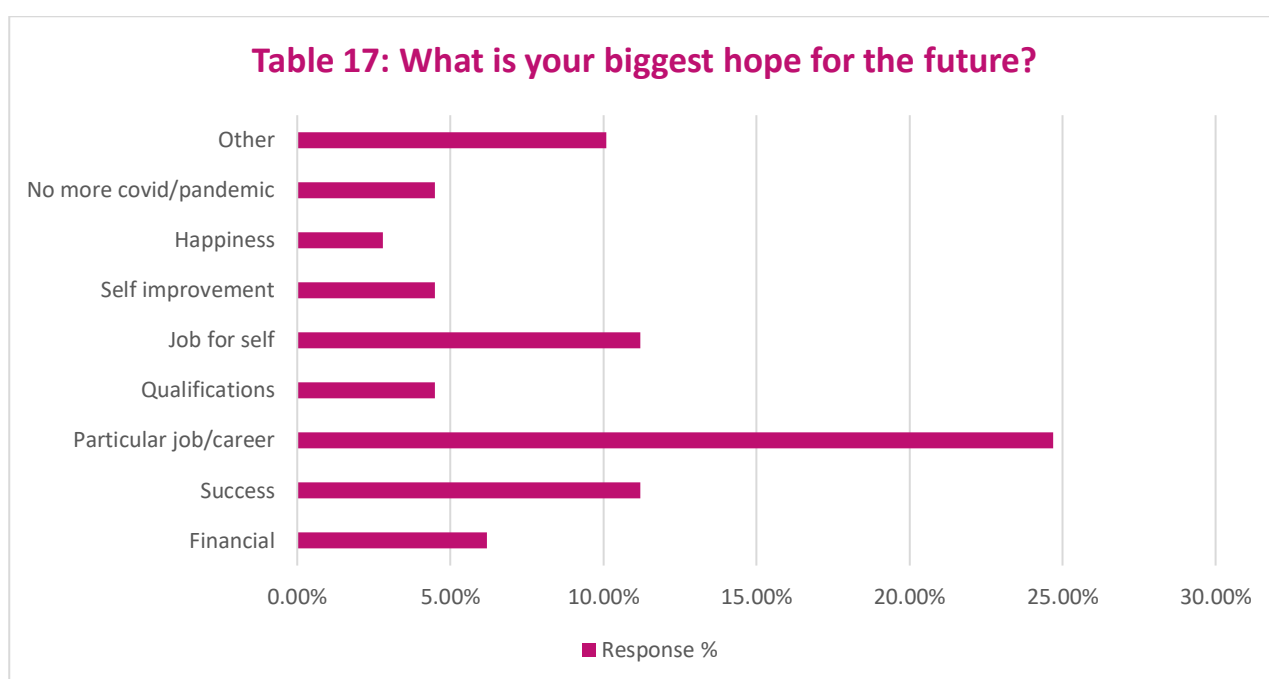
Communities have been somewhat traumatised by events over the last three years and people's ability to engage with people locally has been impacted. The concept of community has changed as online life has developed too. These factors, among others, could contribute to an erosion of communities of place and some young people we interviewed have suggested that this is a process that is in effect.

Fife's young people are though, perhaps surprisingly, positive about where they live. They are, generally, made happy by the people that are close to them and although they do not present their towns as perfect, they can accept the imperfections along with the elements that make life fulfilling and enjoyable for them. They demonstrate a clear urge to continue to maintain existing, and forge new, connections in the places they live.

Aspirations

Questions around the theme of aspirations related to what young people wanted life to be like and what they needed to get there. Young people were also asked what parents and other responsible adults wanted for them, to allow consideration of similarities and differences of hopes for young people between generations. Questions posed encouraged responses that ranged from consideration of the personal to societal interests and concerns.

What may be striking about the responses showing young people's hopes for their future is just how conventional or traditional these aspirations are. There is a strong sense of practicality and pragmatism in young people's responses.



Structured interviews found that young people's main hopes for the future were related to career. A quarter (24.7%) of young people interviewed identified a particular career interest as their key hope for the future with another eleven percent hoping for a job without specifying in which field. The answers of a further 11% were categorised as 'success', meaning that almost half (47%) had career success as their top hope for their future. Well over half of young people (58.4%) said that their aspirations had not been changed by or during the pandemic.

Narrative interviews clearly followed a similar trend, expanding on this theme to suggest that young people believe career would bring enough money to support family and stability and provide independence and comfort.

Where we asked young people what they want from life, 'money' was a very common answer before interviewees expanded on this to discuss what money would mean to them.

Money, their own money.

I would jokingly say money but a lot of them do want money. I would say a lot of them would rely heavily on I would say, two things which would be success and having a family and a home so they can just relax and they will get that happiness from all that stuff.

Money, everyone wants money aye. Maybe not actually money- not having to worry about bills, food and that, probably just chilling.

Have a good job and have a good family.

I think the majority of people aspire to grow up, have a house, get married and have kids.

It is worth noting that during the period that interviews took place that financial issues and the 'cost of living crisis' were among the most popular news items and this may have coloured responses. The number of responses and strength of the evidence in this respect though, as well as a majority of young people having told us that their ambitions had not changed through the pandemic suggests that young people that were interviewed have been consistently focused about the direction they want their lives to take.

Financial and career aspirations come tied to a level of stress for interviewees. They discuss the weight of expectation that society places on succeeding in school studies and progressing to longer term aspirations. Young people put some of that pressure on themselves but it also comes from social media, parents and school. Add to this that the pandemic has made schooling more difficult, particularly for those who were not fully supported to participate in online classes and for young people who developed anxiety around returning to busy social environments.

A lot of my friends at the moment are very geared towards where they are going after school. College, uni, apprenticeships. That's quite daunting, 'specially if you don't know what you want to do, it's quite a stressful time. I think a lot of that has been taking a lot of time recently.

I would say the majority aren't 100% sure. I think it's a big decision at 16, 17, 18 what you're going to do forever, well not forever but I think the majority worry about it. They don't know, they haven't come to a position they are happy with.

No, I think there is high expectations. I think I get decent grades but not as well as I'd like. Well, not as well as my dad would like.

One focus group of youth work practitioners reported that vulnerable young people in post-school transition have found it more difficult to prepare themselves for independent adult life and the world of employment due to the exacerbation of emotional and mental health issues caused by the disturbances of the pandemic, and need more time than they traditionally might have.

Although not evidenced clearly in the research findings, youth work practitioners provided anecdotal evidence to suggest that many young people reacted negatively to the pandemic, displaying more extreme or disruptive behaviours on return to school and community activity. One focus group meeting suggested that because of the pandemic, some young people have not developed the skills to de-escalate normal conflicts and find it harder to work together, leading to a situation where the behaviour of some groups is 'totally off the scale' and shows a lack of risk-awareness. This is supported somewhat by young people's responses to questions around youth

work and the pandemic and may relate to young people's interests in responsibility (see Youth Work: Table 20a), having seen the behaviour of some peers become more extreme.

It's effected our learning so like it's really hard in school. Sometimes when we first got back to school after the pandemic, and it's maybe changed our mind set a little bit.

There also appears to be a level of anxiety around being 'left behind' if successful transitions and career aspirations are not met.

Finding a job instantly is hard in youth, for some people- they have no qualifications, they jump the gun and go yeah, I want to do that.

...because 3rd year is a big thing, we need to choose our subjects and think about what you want to do. Jobs that interest you. It's always been a thing of mine, scared of not getting a good job.

Apart from financial success, young people clearly believe that, in order to be happy and successful, they require strong, supportive friend groups, families and communities around them.

I think a strong support system. Whatever that is through family, friends, through the youth club. Sports clubs, whatever. To succeed you would probably have to be happy with where you are, because if you're just in a negative mind space you're not going to produce great work. So, having an outlet to express yourself or letting out your emotions is probably quite vital to success.

Just someone who listens to them and someone who's there for them because if they don't have that then who are they going to go to?

Definitely friends you can, even when you're older, it is important to have friends then. And have money to run a place like a house or something. Enough money left over for food and that.

I think having a strong family around you - a strong stable family which is a massive issue around here if you look at the breakdown of what a family is. You need friends, good group of friends around you and just a good general community, I think...now everyone keeps themselves to themselves, it's atomised I guess in that way. I think family, community and you need to educate people as well. Good education that will get people into well-paying jobs to have a good future.

A nice community. The people around them being nice to them as well, supportive, helpful and that. For successful, just continue with what you want to do.

Successful careers appear to be seen as a way to allow young people to maintain these strong social bonds while contributing themselves. The high numbers of young people identifying interests in particular career areas suggests ways in which they feel they can live a life of value, as well as achieving financial stability.

I'm wanting to work on a construction site or something like that. If I manage to get that job, it'd pretty much be my dream job, so I'd feel like I did right in my life... some people would treat their family and actually pay them back and that.

In structured interviews, we asked young people what represented freedom to them. The most common answers were no restrictions, independence (13.5%), going outside and, most popular, was personal rights (16.3%).

Some answers in narrative interviews linked to the ideas of independence and personal rights. Young people talked about the desire to be respected as adults and treated with a level of parity.

Right now, from what I know, what they need to be happy and successful is just really good friends, especially at my age because you stop doing as much things as you would do with your parents. So, I feel a lot of them, especially moving onto high school they need those good friends that they need to talk to a little bit more.

I guess, not just me, I know a lot of them want to be treated like adults... it's like they spend their entire life up to that point then thinking I want to go be by myself. I want to live; I want to work.

Respected. I certainly want to be respected and again I guess that's like being treated like a person. A lot of people at my school, I know they want to be their own person and express themselves in different ways. And also be on the same level as an adult.

...A good stage would be not still living at your mum's house when you're older... try move out and stuff – get your own house, live your own life and all that.

I guess just to be listened to, to be talked to with a level of understanding because I even have conversations with my parents or teachers- I will explain something, I've dumbed it down to what I think they will understand and they're like- 'oh that's nice'. And after the conversation you just think like they didn't understand that. They didn't understand what I was talking about.

Although their language is at times infused with their urge to establish their own independence, young people generally recognise that the responsible adults in their lives hopes for them are similar to those they have for themselves.

They would want you to be happy, what you choose, what you want your life to be like. They want you to be happy how you pick.

To have a good time, to have a good education, to make the most of life... And just be confident and do the stuff you want to do. Be respectful to people and stuff like that.

Probably just for them to be happy, have some success in life, do well. I think the biggest one though is, be happy and live a fulfilling life. I know at least that's what my parents want for me.

They just want the best for you, even though they sound like knobheads trying to annoy you.

One young person questioned the amount of influence that parents have on young people's lives. This idea was not repeated elsewhere but raises a recognisable and interesting issue that relates to various themes in the research.

I think parents want their children to be happy and successful. I think there is an issue with parents not having as much control over that as much as they used to because of outside influences. And I think parents are less involved in children's lives than they were before... there is a lot more parents separated now than there ever was and when people are in their house- am the worst for this – sit in my room, sit on my phone or do my homework as opposed to going out and actually speaking to my parents... There is a bunch of kids who are estranged from their parents which didn't used to exist as much.

If you could change three things in the world, what would you change?

We have described what young people aspire to in their personal lives and there are clear patterns around career, financial stability and supportive, fulfilling social arrangements. We also wanted to know what kind of world young people would like to live in and, perhaps, create. We asked, 'If you could change three things in the world, what would you change?'

1 pollution in the water, make sure people don't do that.

2 People suffering because they don't have enough money to buy enough food and that so starvation and all that.

3 And then probably the war in Ukraine

Mirroring young people's personal aspirations, many identified poverty and the cost of living as something they would like to see change. They showed real concern around others' ability to manage, thrive and survive in the current economic climate.

The prices and stuff and homelessness because it's quite sad when you go in the street and you see a guy on the street, freezing cold. And how hard it is to get a good job, good money. It's quite hard to get good money and people struggle to pay rent and everything.

I think money is stupid...It's hard to explain because the more you try to explain the less it makes sense... I just want everyone to have a roof over their head and clean water and food.

People suffering because they don't have enough money to buy enough food and that so starvation and all that.

We don't put the heating on in my house yet because I think it is too warm and everybody doesn't want to put it on because of the energy bills. I quite like the blankets, we've got a lot of blankets in the house.

Probably make it not cost £7 a day for your heating because that is a joke. I'm no enjoying my whole heating aspect.

Billionaires, get rid of them...this is getting too political!

Everything's going up and I think I would change that definitely.

...free school meals over the whole of the U.K.

Again, reflecting the news of the time, some young people focused on their concerns around the invasion of Ukraine and war in general, telling interviewers that they wanted to see a more peaceful, stable and compassionate world.

No wars in the world because that's a really big thing, the war with Russia and Ukraine.

...then probably the war in Ukraine

There were more personal takes on these pleas for kindness and hopes for peace closer to home.

...less discrimination obviously, racism, homophobia, transphobia stuff like that- bad. Ableism – awful.

No bullying because a lot of people at school do get bullied.

...just for everyone to be more nice to each other.

... more of a sense of community, everyone being a bit more empathetic to each other.

The environment featured, although less prominently.

Climate change, the pandemic and I forgot what my last one was. It was the prices as well... Cause it's quite sad, people can't afford stuff they want to do.

Pollution in the water, make sure people don't do that.

Some people, touchingly, discussed personal hopes for change:

Make it easier for me to make more pals. I'm no the best at making pals.

I would like to get more friends, I hope that changes.

There were also a number of personal interests and bugbears voiced as young people looked for answers to the question that were less generic. Within these answers though, as well as humorous idiosyncrasy, was the suggestion that the problems of the world, and what needs to change in it, should be quite apparent, so alternative perspectives should be offered.

I would let everybody have a free pet and have all the food paid for, all its' vet bills paid for, and you'd get a free pet as a form of relaxation in life and if you had a full-time job, it would be paid for – the dog walker, cat sitter or whatever.

You know what- blue bottle flies, hate them get rid of them.

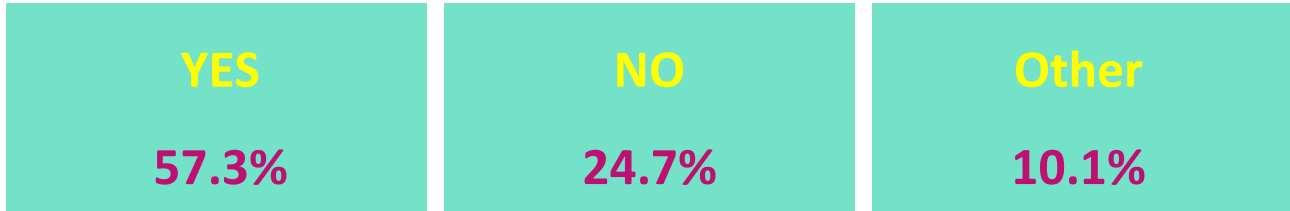
It will be interesting to the reader that few young people displayed a drive to be involved in the solutions to the problems that they see and this raises questions about belief in their own ability to be active citizens.

However, many of the responses show that some of young people's motivations for positive career ambitions come from a desire to create stable futures. This desire for settled, relaxed lives is unsurprising, particularly in the context of the recent disruptions that young people have experienced.

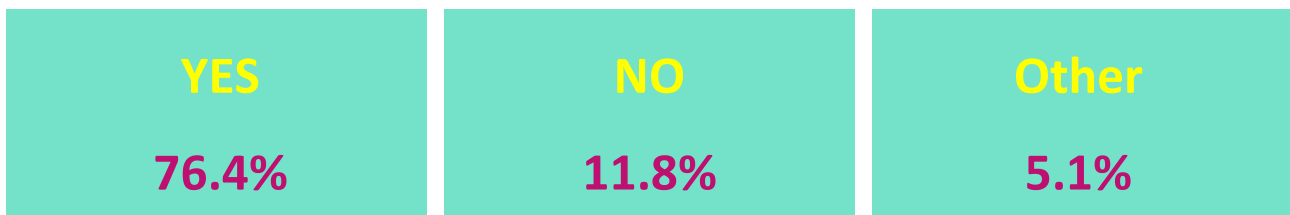
Overall, findings create a picture of hopes and ambitions largely unchanged by the pandemic, with young people aspiring to stability in financial and social senses. They show that they are caring, kind and want to live in a just world. Questions still remain about their belief in agency and change and whether they feel that their voices matter.

Health and wellbeing

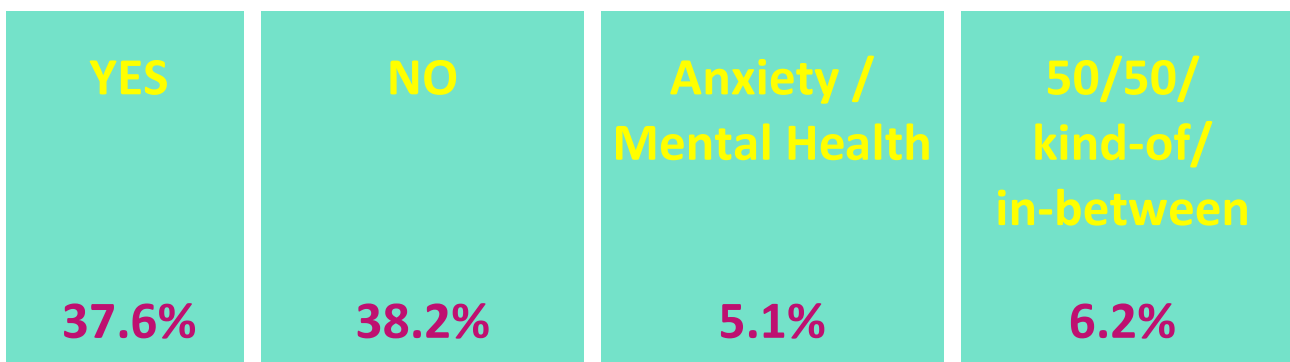
Would you say your mental health is good?



Would you say your physical health is good?



Did you feel healthy/well during the pandemic?



Early findings from semi-structured interviews returned quite clear data about young people's health. When designing the interview process for narrative interviews, it was not felt necessary to include questions relating directly to health as it was expected that discussions around life in the pandemic would cover how young people felt, both physically and mentally. This was borne out by the evidence and there are quotes throughout the report that cover the state of young people's wellbeing, both implicitly and explicitly.

Findings around health and wellbeing tended to fall into three categories and these have been separated out in this section. Young people's feelings about their own wellbeing and, in particular, mental health, the relationship of social media and internet use to health and concerns about safety that impact young people's wellbeing are all detailed below.

In the house with family, family only. I can't chat to people I really get on with or people who build me up...

Maybe because people might be affected by mental health. I'm not like but some people might be, some of my friends maybe but I'm not sure. ... I don't know, maybe it's just getting older, they are just acting older, I don't know. ... Most of my friends are fine, sometimes they're sad because their pet has died or something or they can't go to something, or they have covid.

Young people's mental health has been a frequently discussed topic in recent years, with young people more easily able to identify feelings of stress, anxiety and mental-ill-health, often with less stigma than previous generations may have. This also finds adults, including youth work practitioners, attempting to respond to the issues presented, as well as attempting to make sense of this openness to discuss mental wellbeing.

The pandemic has amplified concerns around mental health and wellbeing as people adjusted to enforced changes of lifestyle and were separated (at least physically) from support networks.

When interviewed, 35% of young people stated that they had negative or 'other' mental health. Only 57% stated that they have positive mental health.

Over half the young people interviewed for this research felt sad, depressed (37%), lonely (9%) or bored (12%) during the pandemic. Only 16% said that they felt 'okay' during that time.

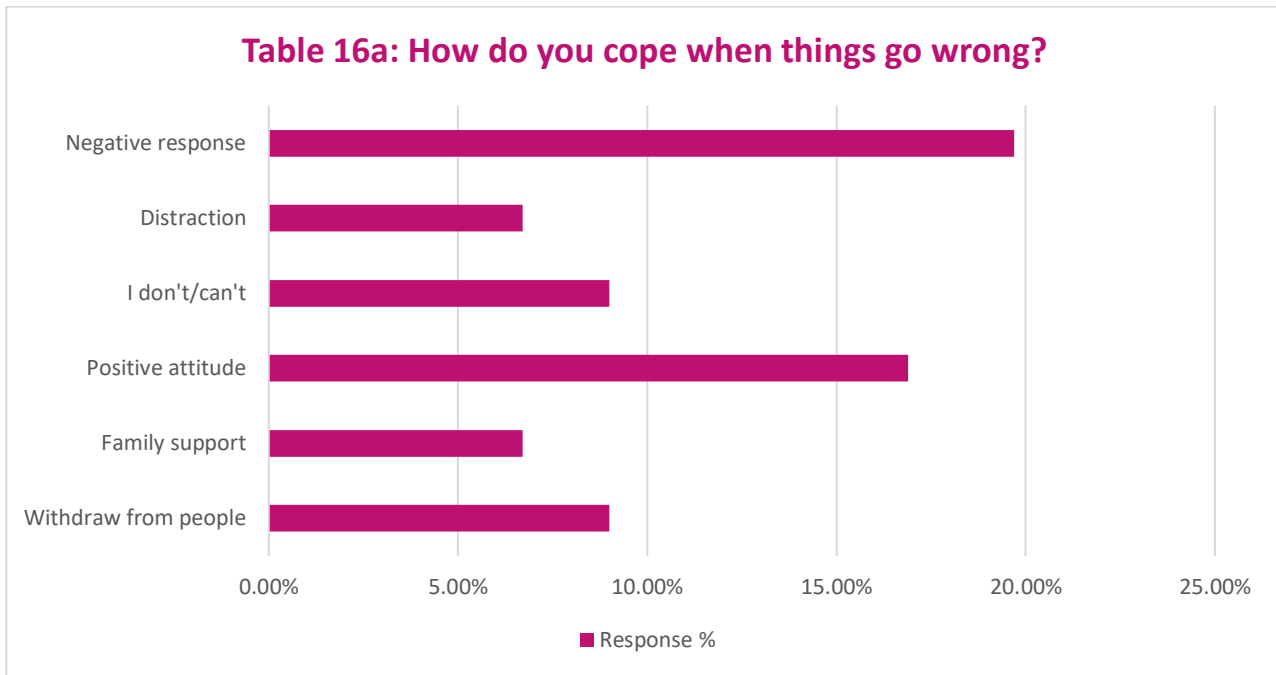
This research has highlighted some of the ways in which the pandemic has increased stress for young people and their families as well as showing that, although stressors are not limited to pandemic experiences, the pandemic further negatively impacted those.

I don't know if it was the pandemic directly, but my mum died during the pandemic, so obviously it's overshadowed by that massively, not by covid but a lot of it. I am grateful for the beginning of it because, I was obviously home the whole time, that was time I wouldn't have got. So, I am quite glad for that but then the end of it was really kind of isolated for a while because obviously you can't see your friends. You can't return to normal life, when that shifted it but then also everything around you shifted as well, so there's no going back to normal. Obviously [youth work] was a big support. All my friends were a big support. But not so easy to access during that time, so it was quite confusing.

Over a third of respondents (35%) said that they could not remember life before the pandemic.

Nearly 40% of respondents showed a generally negative response to coping with difficulties, ranging from withdrawing from people to getting angry with loved ones and damaging things.

Table 16a: How do you cope when things go wrong?



Though mentioned less often than mental health, for some, physical health also became a concern during pandemic restrictions as people were forced, at times, to lead more sedentary lifestyles.

Most my pals, we kept contact. Only thing is most of my friends didn't want to go on facetime because they- I know I did, I gained so much weight. That's what happened, I think most people did... Aye, they started telling me- oh aye, I don't want to go on facetime, I have a bit of a belly and that.

Other respondents in structured interviews said that they remember eating more during the pandemic although the data does not show a reason for this – perhaps as a coping mechanism, boredom or because, without the structure of school, the opportunity arose.

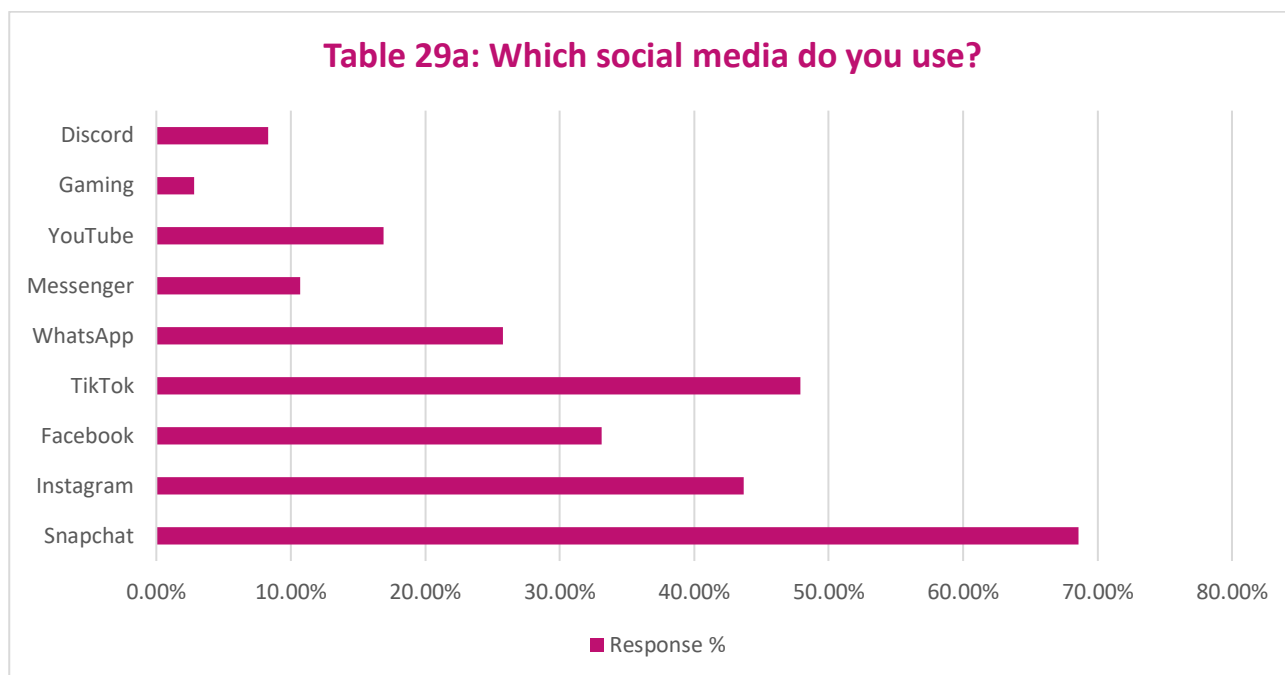
Some young people told us that their sleep patterns were impacted by life in the pandemic and that they would turn day into night, particularly gamers we spoke to. Positively though, there was no evidence to suggest that this was a pattern that survived the pandemic.

There is also positive evidence to suggest that many young people became quite active where restrictions allowed, enjoying the freedom to go for walks or play sports as well as expanding their range of interests, all of which benefit wellbeing.

Life online

It may be argued that young people in the 10-19 age range in Scotland, unlike any previous generation, are true digital natives. The internet and social media clearly form an integral part of their lives. In this research, interviewers did not ask whether young people used social media – instead assuming they did and asking which platforms they used. This was not an unfair assumption to make. Of the nearly two hundred young people that have been interviewed, almost all young people identified at least one app or service they used.

Table 29a: Which social media do you use?



When young people told us about life in the pandemic, they talked about social media addiction, exposure to adult and unhealthy influences on the internet and the blurring of the school/life boundary. Some young people were left behind by online schooling. They also, though, told us about the opportunity it gave them to keep in touch and maintaining and developing relationships. Some boys (in particular) felt that they were living the dream when they were told to stay indoors and all they had to do was play their console, even if they realised this wasn't a healthy long-term lifestyle. They also showed that, although barely mentioned in responses about social media use, community exists on gaming platforms and this applies to social media too.

[Our pals] always want to stay inside and play on the Xbox, talk to us then, not go out.

Given their prevalence, social media and internet use can not be separated from consideration of young people's health and wellbeing, their learning and aspirations or their experience of community. Our findings highlight that community and social media have a complex interrelationship for young people. On one hand, community can be found regardless of location, while on the other, extended use of the internet can separate young people from face to face social bonds such as friends, local networks and even family within the home.

One young person suggested their ratio of social media use to in-person socialising:

Socialising; percentage wise, probably at least 85% [online]. The rest of the 15% is outside.

This did not seem to be an unusual or surprising figure to various groups of young people that have been presented with the research findings. The figure can not be treated as fact as it came 'off the top of the head' and describes one person's experience. The comment also appeared to come from a point that did not consider the social aspects of school, work and family life.

However, the comment and subsequent reactions of focus groups and young people in the research team highlight the extent to which social media and the internet are integral to young people's lives. It is also not an isolated statement. Most young people talked about their and others' internet use and how that increased during the pandemic during narrative interviews:

I think because we were online so much, we are used to socialise different ways now. I'm not sure.

In the pandemic no one was really meeting each other and you were mostly just online. That's like the main thing now; just always online.

Interestingly, less than 4% of young people told us that their favourite thing to do was to spend time on their phone or social media which raises various questions about how common an activity it is and how active a choice it is to use time in that way.

There was a fairly even split between young people who think social media is good for you (29%) and those who feel it is not (27%). Young people who said that it is good for you pointed to the ability to keep in touch while some respondents thought it was bad for mental health. A further 19% said either it is both good and bad or that it is *sometimes* good for you.

Without forgetting the positive influences social media can have on young people's lives, and the ability that it gave young people to interact with others during periods of physical isolation, the negative potential and the actual harms it can produce must be considered.

We grew up with the internet, well we were getting into the good stage. There was a lot of access built into a lot, there is so much stuff on it, people see stuff. Stuff they probably [shouldn't]... especially when they are younger.

I feel like – this might sound weird – I feel like people know too much nowadays.

The quotes above connect to the theme expressed elsewhere in the report that young people have felt that they have been forced to grow up too quickly. They also suggest that the volume of information that young people are exposed to, the amount of time that they spend online and the mature themes they have had to consider during the pandemic have had an effect that can be negative.

...sitting on the internet all the time probably wasn't great either because you're building more insecurities.

There are clearly various sources of these insecurities.

There is more information in the report relating to the idea of the contested nature of reality, the danger of sharing opinions online and also the '24/7' element of bullying that young people now need to learn to negotiate. More than one interviewee mentioned bullying but its links to internet use is neatly summed up here:

The heat that everybody gets. I would change that.

Young people have talked positively about their ability to keep connected to friends and family, engage with school work and learn about the world during a time when they would otherwise have been closed off from these. But the potential dangers to their wellbeing and the established patterns of use are highlighted in this research.

Social media has been an essential tool that has helped young people to cope with the pandemic, allowing them to stay connected to friends and the world beyond their homes but ultimately, is something else that they need to cope with.

...consuming more stuff doesn't mean you will become smarter. It is like if you eat a ridiculous amount of food, you won't have it all just as energy, you will get fat.

What that diet consists of is also of interest in relation to the health of young people. Various conversations in focus groups related the internet to the theme of safety. Online life takes place primarily on platforms that are coded to reward the most outlandish and emotionally driven views and behaviours in order to boost engagement, which can be dangerous for young people (and old) influenced by what they see. It can also have the effect of leaving people in more and more polarised 'camps' of opinion, leading to conflict between different people and groups.

Safety

Safety was a concern for young people considering their communities and local areas. During interviews, young people appeared to regulate their responses around their own and peers' risk taking behaviour.

This is not an area that the research set out to investigate but it is perhaps surprising that it did not feature more prominently.

Focus groups and anecdotal testimony during the study would support that some young people's behaviour has been negatively affected by the pandemic. Youth workers spoke about some groups of young people finding it more difficult to communicate and cooperate. Young people in forum discussions spoke about how unsafe they feel as a result of increases in violence involving peers. There have been several instances of violent behaviour that have been highlighted in the press since pandemic restrictions were lifted.

It's everyone around me, my peers are all idiots, and they all threaten to jump each other. Just the other week, someone got beat up in a classroom, and teachers and adults just seem to tower over us- I dunno.

At my school there is a lot of people who get into bother with people and there is a lot of fights. Normally when fights break out with people, they just aren't good people – they are rude to people, they scare people for no reason, and you can't do anything about it because they are usually quite strong people. They know they will just hit you; they have no remorse. They do, even at my age, a lot of people do drugs, and they smoke and stuff like that - I've seen it happen, even people younger than me. Stuff like that. They don't focus in class either, blurt out and make things difficult.

Some young people suggested that they are less influenced by parents and because of pandemic restrictions they have been less connected to institutions and organisations that support them.

...a lot of the ways people choose to have fun the now aren't great because they might not be able to afford to do things; or they might've grown up around things that are quite disruptive to what would be sensible behaviour. They might imitate what they have seen on the internet as opposed to good fun which is going out and doing an activity with your pals or something.

There is evidence in health studies that young people are misusing substances more frequently and at younger ages and some findings here support that.

They are drinking down the bus station, drinking down the prom, which isn't really safe or ideal. You ask yourself why and it is because there is nothing for them to do.

After they left primary that cuts contact and I just found out recently and I know it for a fact, they are getting access to drugs and smoking weed, they are taking MDMA and stuff like that.

This research has not created enough data on the subject to draw firm conclusions around whether these situations have deteriorated as a result of the pandemic or what the wider effects are on young people and society. This may be an area that requires further study.

Before covid Poundstretchers didnae get set on fire. Obviously, we are after covid now but if the pandemic never happened then these fires on Leven High Street wouldnae have happened. ... they might still have but it's got a part to play in it because it changes everybody- the way they think, the way they see stuff now.

Where young people are either victims or perpetrators, there is emotional fallout, relationships and wellbeing are affected and supports will be required. Early intervention can support young people to consider their risk-taking behaviours and make healthier choices.

people nowadays they don't really know how to be able to talk to somebody, especially a young person... times are a lot different now so talking to someone about it is a lot worse, a lot heavier. They can bully them when they are home, when they are out with their friends because you can have cyber bullying, normal bullying- can have both at the same time. The heat that everybody gets, I would change that.

Youth work

This research project has provided ample evidence that young people value community-based youth work services and approaches. This endorsement should give youth work practitioners confidence about their delivery, particularly after the enforced separation from communities during the pandemic could have created a crisis of confidence.

Narrative interviews sought to find out what young people know about youth work; how they understand it and what they think youth workers can do for them as well as, if they participated, how they experienced youth work during the pandemic.

I'm glad this place is here; it's been a joy for me.

I've had a few youth workers, so I see what they have done, how they help people... It's a great alternative for people who don't know what they are doing after school, it gives them guidance because there is multiple layers to it.

They already do it: make it enjoyable. Make you feel safe to come here, release your mind, so you do fun stuff here if you can't do it outside...It feels safe in here because you know there is people to talk to.

I do love this place, just so much...I just like the people here – the workers, the friends. I know everybody here, we go to the same school. I just like this place the best because we do fun activities...

I think it lets me kinda explore other sides- I can be as creative as I want or I kind of use it to socialise with people. Even if we get no work done in our project it's just nice to talk to people.

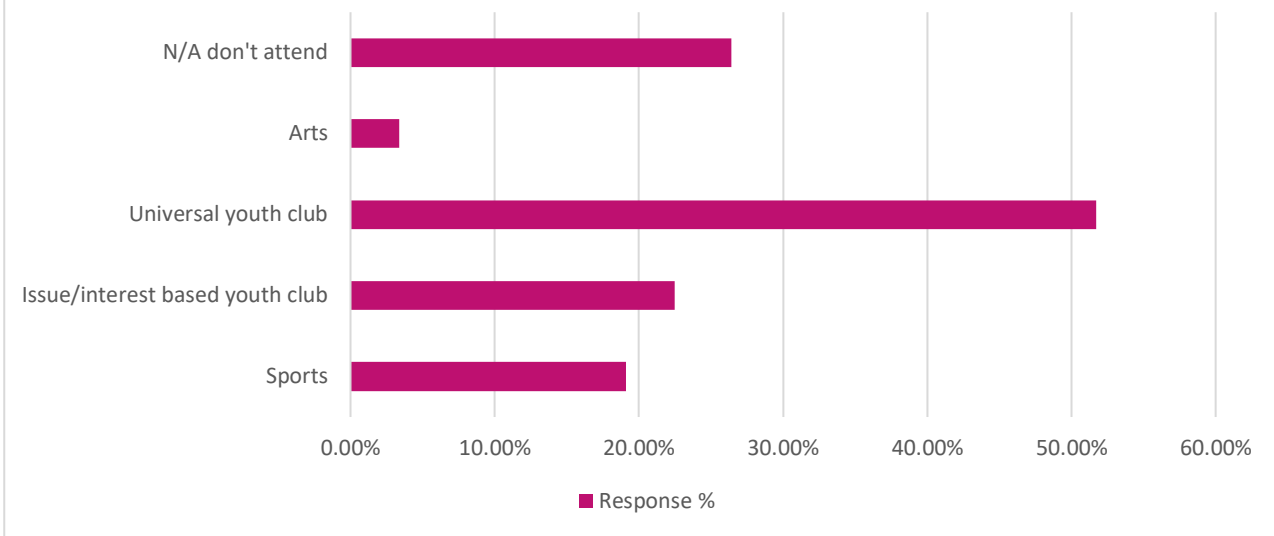
Yeah, just keep doing what they are doing cause they are doing awesome anyway. I wouldn't say change anything about them because they are doing great.

Well for me what made me happy and successful was youth work. That was one of my go-to places, school wasn't a positive place for me - I wouldn't really fit in, I wasn't really academical. I used to attend [youth work projects] through the day - I would do music projects, youth clubs, stuff like that, it would build my confidence up.

Attendances at Fife Council and voluntary sector groups have increased positively as restrictions and concerns about spread of the virus have receded with young people returning to spend time socialising and gaining further support from youth workers.

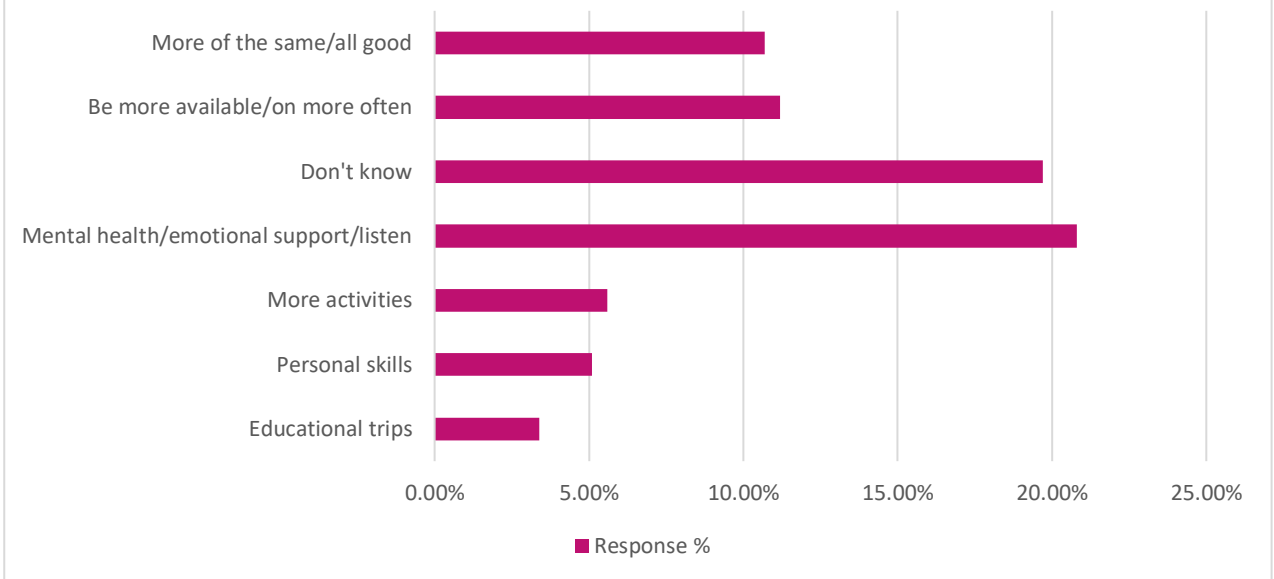
It should be recognised that 131 (73.6%) of the 178 young people that took part in structured interviews attend youth groups of some kind and that findings will have been coloured by that. There is, though, a good evidence base for the impacts that youth work can make on young people's lives and there are well informed suggestions about the youth work offer.

Table 23: Types of youth group attended
%



Responses to this question show that just over 30% of interviewees attend more than one youth group. The most likely reasons given for not participating in youth groups were due to time limitations (3.9%) and having no interest in attending (10.7%). Again, we would expect these responses to be higher in the wider population of Fife’s young people.

Table 25a: What could youth workers do?



This table (25a) shows that a majority of young people who took part in the research see youth work as a place that should support mental and emotional wellbeing. It will be no surprise to youth workers that they are required to show leadership in terms of programming as a significant percentage of interviewees said that they do not know what youth workers could offer. Given the proportion of young people that take part who do not attend youth groups, it is possible that some of the young people who do not attend do not know what youth work involves or has to offer.

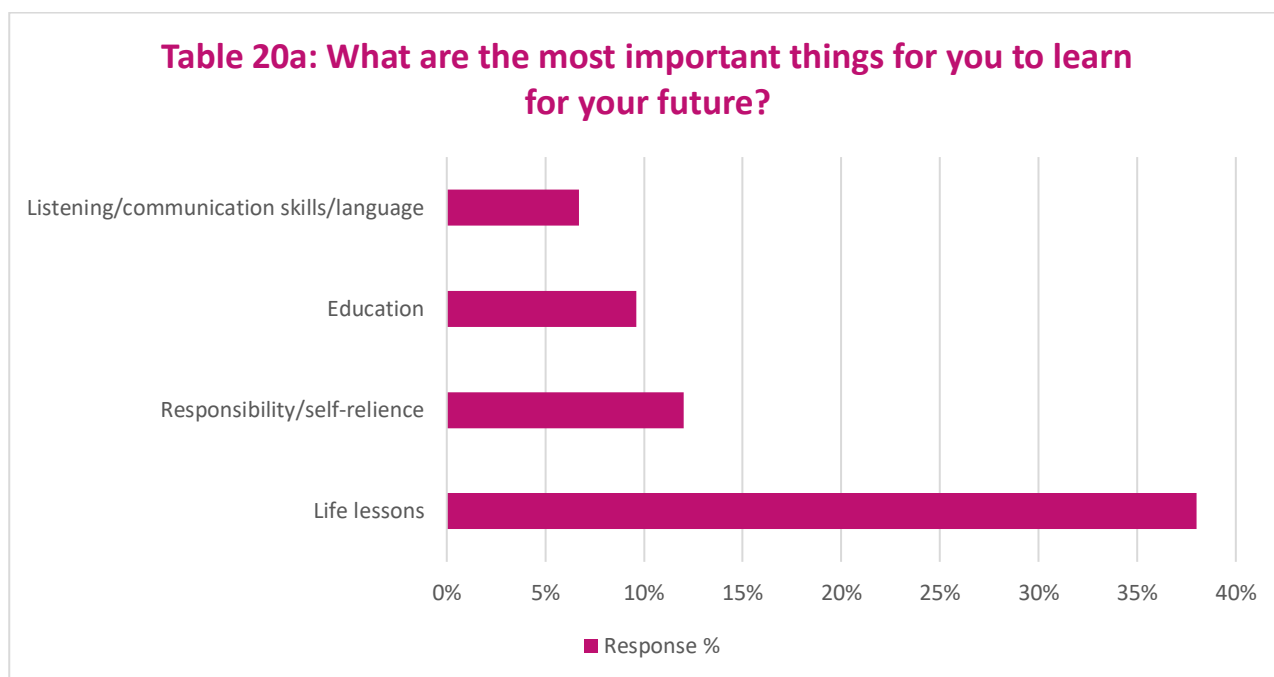
A significant percentage (11.2%) also suggested that they would like to attend more youth work sessions or that it could be more available to them.

Narrative interviews both supported the call for mental health and emotional support as well as providing evidence that youth work responds to young people’s mental health and wellbeing.

Just listen, talk to us...it provides mental health support...they will tell us where we should go...I think it’s nice to have just support.

Provide help and just be there for them, that’s really only the important thing and if they are struggling then give them advice. Trust me, that will make a difference then they can just come to you if they have a problem or issue or that and like just make them much better. But here it is already like that so if we all just keep doing that it will actually help.

I think support workers should go to young people's houses and take them out for a coffee and see how they are getting on and that.



Young people who gave second answers to this question also thought that life lessons (10.1%) and responsibility (10.1%) were important things to learn.

The responses below show that youth work can create conditions for young people to develop and mature, taking responsibility for themselves while relying on direction from supportive adults.

I wanted to leave [school] but I didn’t want to just sit in the house and that is when I got offered to come to here which totally helped... [16+ makes it] easier to get out the house, helps you learn life skills and helps prepare you for the world. Shows you what you need to become to be a proper adult.

I have been sent different resources and they have actually really helped. They are really good on that front, they are good for just someone to talk to and have a laugh with some of them and they are just generally really positive people.

I think one of the big things is information. I am lucky that youth clubs and youth services have been able to help me, guide me, get me my own flat, looking into routes, knowing how to do that.

...provide opportunities. Point out things are on... job advertisements and that... I think youth workers can really help with that and try to sort of steer young people on the right path to achieving fulfilment and living a good life... I think it should be a youth workers responsibility to provide opportunities and guide them... it is important for youth work to play a lot more parental role to teach children how to think in situations and to conduct themselves in a certain way.

Young people's understanding that it is important for them to learn life lessons implies the need for time to socialise and build relationships. Life lessons can only be gained through interactions with others and reflection upon those. In this way, youth workers operate as 'critical friends', creating and facilitating social situations and supporting the learning that can be gained from them.

I met [new friends] through youth club. We became really close through that - seeing each other every week out with school so I am closer to them.

We don't really need a lot of stuff. We have a pool table, and they do different stuff every week. So, not really much...This is basically it cause what else do we need? Nothing, we've got basically everything that we need and it's also really fun. Friends get to come here and hangout here outside of school time, so you don't just see them in school you get to see them in clubs.

Of course, these opportunities to socialise normally were limited, if not removed completely during the coronavirus pandemic. Young people discussed how youth work continued to support them during the pandemic as well as how it has helped them get together with friends and peers since. For some, there were even advantages to online work in the pandemic.

[Online youth work] was strange at the time, but it has made quite a big positive impact.

I would say during the pandemic for people with anxiety it was easier for them because it wasn't the worry of coming in, they could just be behind the computer, they didn't have to have their face on. Just sit there, do our stuff, log on, log off. It was easy for time. For me it was okay, I was kind of there.

I like youth work more now because you're more involved but even youth work during the pandemic was pretty fun. There was a lot of jokes carried over that have become legend, at least in our group.

[Young volunteer]: Some of the kids would be too scared to go back to school after covid, but I would talk to them and tell them it will be alright. I am the same as them, I am scared to go back to school and that.

That youth work could hold young people's attentions during the pandemic shows, not only the supportive relationship that is fostered but also how it can relate to young peoples' needs and interests and how youth workers are creative in developing programmes from them.

Young people told us that their favourite ways to spend their time are with friends, gaming, sports and music, which are all covered in the huge range of activities offered in youth work. Narrative interviews hint at the range of activities offered, with a variety of arts, cooking, STEM, educational excursions, outdoor learning and other sports and games all mentioned and part of the regular repertoire.

These activities are not the purpose of the work but, instead, in specific programmes and universal provision, are the vehicles that allow for young people's personal development and formation of relationships. They provide opportunities for participants to explore risk and build resilience, to gauge the world and test themselves beyond their comfort zones.

I don't think an activity needs to be complex or intricate and creative. I think the important bit is if you are doing something, people are more likely to talk if they are doing something. If we are making brownies tonight – you're making brownies and – oh how have you been? Your more distracted making them. You might be more willing to share than what you would if you were just sitting round the table, doing nothing to occupy your mind. Or colouring in a picture; it doesn't need to be anything fancy. Just something to do so it's not so formal. I mean it'd be great if they could take us on big fancy holidays and stuff, but I don't think it's the most vital thing!

Youth work does provide opportunities beyond the walls of the youth club, particularly but not exclusively, during holiday periods. Youth workers often describe educational excursions, residential experiences and outdoor learning that form part of the youth work programme as the most rewarding and impactful pieces of work that they do. This can be because young people have longer to spend away from their normal surroundings and longer to build relationships with other participants and staff. The challenges and learning that are part of these opportunities are also beneficial.

We could take people out and that, basically like what [our youth workers] do. Just take people out and do different things.

Not too long ago, this wee group of people made this movie thing and that was really fun. We could do stuff like that.

...we got to do Fordell Firs, that was quite good...There was people on that trip I didn't know but you're falling off of high objects and totally out of your comfort zone and you just kind of get to know people better through that.

As well as catering for young people's immediate interests, they believe that time spent in youth clubs can be an investment in their future. Projects that are specific to career progression, achievement and attainment are at the heart of youth work provision while all youth work allows young people to contribute to community life, develop understanding of the world and people around them. These 'soft skills' are essential to what young told us about their wider ambitions and the successful transition to adulthood.

We look for jobs, we learn about what's the best way to go about life. What's the best way to get a job, we learn about what to do, how to be in an interview, stuff like that. Aye, I enjoyed college, but I didn't feel ready for college, so I left and came here.

You get to learn culinary skills in the kitchen, you get to expand and work better as a group. The most important part is the youth achievement awards...

...if they are going down the path of they hate school, they don't want to go, they want to leave school...this is a great place for them to try branch away from that, actually get their qualification...phoenix rising up from the ashes effectively. They give you a second chance. When you smash everything it's like yeah, I'm ready. I'm ready to go.

Young people told us that they are motivated by the approach of youth work, valuing the focus on them and their progression.

Learn life skills and help get ready for the world of older life...Yeah and to build confidence to do interviews and that.

They do a lot of things to be fair. They do a lot of things to keep us happy. I don't think [youth workers need to change]. In my opinion we do a lot of work- sometimes too much work - but at the end we get the biggest reward.

Some interviewees discussed the need for youth work to be promoted and publicised for the benefit of more young people. There were suggestions that some young people miss out on the opportunities that youth work can offer and that communities could better understand the value that it can provide.

I think there needs to be a lot more advertisement on how youth work does change lives. No even necessarily the personal stories but folk need to know, there needs to be a lot more public knowledge about how youth work is crucial in communities. When young folk are getting involved in anti-social behaviour and doing things they shouldn't be, taking drugs, stuff like that- it's youth services that can provide that support.

These quotes point to the diversionary benefits of youth work as well as implying the importance of attractive spaces and places in communities that young people can safely assume ownership of.

Not even necessarily a youth club, just somewhere for young folk to go. It'd be significant [where I live]; I don't know what you would call it- even if it was a drop in hub or somewhere for young folk to go sit and that doesn't close at the back of 6 at night. That's not very useful to the teenagers who go out to do all sorts at night.

Narrative responses confirmed that it has been difficult for some young people to adjust to gathering again after the pandemic. Young people questioned the behaviour of some peers in youth work sessions. However, the relative safety of youth work settings and the benefits of socialising have been described at length in this report – youth work offers young people places to go that they can express themselves and find support where required.

...when I first came here it was more calm and that but whereas now like on Fridays – oh my God it's chaotic... its most of the older ones like the S1s or P7s that are kicking off and there is younger ones – they behave much better than them.

One young person described a whole family approach that they thought would be beneficial in understanding young people's lives.

I think youth services need to partner up with families, with schools, things like that instead of focusing all on the young person. It benefits that young person more when actually they know what's going on at home.

This is an approach that is a feature in some types of youth work provision but not common in all.

What young people have described is, that youth work offers them a range of supports around relationships and their wellbeing. Connection to their communities. Places to socialise and get advice. Chances to prepare for the adulthood that they aspire to. Opportunities to learn new skills and take part in activities they may not otherwise be able to access. Guidance that helps them negotiate life's difficulties, like the Covid crisis, and gives them the tools to move on.

One young person provided a valuable reminder:

Just fun. Make whatever we are talking about fun. If we are doing stuff, talking about important issues and that – make it in a fun way, so we're no sitting around being bored.

The reason that many young people choose to participate in youth work activities is that they feel it provides them value in their lives. It provides a place for them to be seen and heard.

I've said things at [my youth club] I have never said at school or do at school. I like the fact they will talk to me like a person.

...it's providing a space for people to be young people and do what they do to express themselves in different ways and take part in activities.

Youth work is when people really understand that young people are also people.

Recommendations - discussion

The recommendations that follow are developed from a synthesis of the research findings illustrated in this report and discussions with the research reference group, stakeholder forums and youth work practitioners as well as elements of the professional expertise of those supporting the research.

Some of these recommendations are directed towards decision makers and youth work managers for consideration in the formation of a strategic direction for youth work in Fife. Some are more practical and pertain to young people's needs. They are not intended provide a how-to for youth workers. There is evidence in this report that suggests that good quality youth work is already being delivered in Fife. What is currently lacked though is a clear sense of purpose and direction for youth work in the area and this research should provide the foundations for the discussions that will build that direction.

This research has been essential in creating a formal engagement with young people in Fife after the coronavirus pandemic and coincides with work to develop a new national youth work strategy for Scotland.

All young people's lives have been affected by the pandemic but these effects are uneven and experienced unequally.

Issues the pandemic has raised

What young people have told us about their experiences of life during the pandemic is that mental health is a growing issue, that social media is more of a factor in young people's lives than ever before and that although they identify closely with their communities, for various reasons, connections to them have been stretched. They have concerns about inequality, highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic, and life can still feel uncertain, precarious and, at times, threatening.

What young people in Fife aspire to is stability, connection and a comfortable life, free from worry.

A persistent theme throughout interviews with young people and youth workers suggests that life during the pandemic has forced young people to grow up quicker than may be healthy and more quickly than they feel ready for. This sentiment implies that life for this generation is less innocent and more individualised than may have been true for previous generations.

Relationships

What may be a constant is that young people's key reference point is time with friends. Indeed, to address the issues that this research has identified, relationships are key; to health and wellbeing, to aspirations, to safety. Real world relationships are where young people can learn the life lessons they believe are important to them.

Close connections increase happiness and support mental wellbeing. Welcoming communities that value their constituents are safer and encourage greater responsibility. Opportunities to spend more social time with people who are accountable to their actions and behaviours reduce the

likelihood of negative and unhealthy influences. Stable and successful careers are built as much on positive relationships as expertise in a chosen field of work.

Social media has a role in supporting greater connection but over-reliance on it can also negatively impact connections between people. Young people have a well developed understanding of the dilemma that social media presents so are likely to be open to discussions around a large area of their lives. Youth work is well placed in the lives of participants to address issues that arise in constructive ways. Services need to consider their role in understanding what young people see and how it affects them as well as whether there is a further role in terms of creating social media content that can engage and inform young people. Content creation, in particular, would have resource implications for youth work services. However, it can also work to promote youth work services, approaches and opportunities.

Not all young people will feel that youth work is relevant to them. Voluntary participation is an essential component of the approach. However, young people we interviewed felt that opportunities were being missed by peers who could benefit from youth work due to a lack of understanding or awareness of it.

A backdrop of poverty and inequality is likely to form the context for youth for some time in the UK. The Scottish Government, Fife Council and voluntary sector organisations all face growing financial pressures. This means that youth work will operate in an environment of increasing financial pressure on more young people and their families. This will require services to plan and operate together if the best possible outcomes for young people are to be achieved.

Youth work can play a role in alleviating financial pressures on families with low cost programmes and opportunities. In supporting young people's development and positive transitions, it can also help young people to build successful futures for themselves. But it can not hope to achieve the best outcomes for young people in isolation.

Youth work – spaces and places

Young people are no different to any other group in society in that they need time and space to socialise. They deserve a chance to get together and *be* together, particularly after a time like the pandemic that has made it difficult to socialise. Youth work provides the chance for young people to be young. To express themselves and grow in a natural way that connects them to people with similar interests and concerns and ties them to their local communities. It allows them to be together.

Positive youth work requires places that young people feel welcome and comfortable that they want to spend their time in. Communities should recognise young people's needs and support and encourage the gathering of young people in places that are safe and appropriate.

If young people are to live in the kind of world they want to live in, they have to be supported to create it. They should have ownership of decisions that are made for services that affect their lives. Young people's voices need to be heard if services are to respond to their needs. Many of the young people involved in this research were pleased but somewhat surprised to be asked for their opinions on matters that are important to them.

Spaces for dialogue and discussion should be designed in to service planning and delivery, both in youth work and in the wider network of the Fife partnership. Consultation and engagement should take account of the fact that it is important to incorporate the voices of young people who want to engage in the short term as much as those who are happy to be involved over longer periods. A flexible approach to the formal consultation of youth voice is most likely to have a positive impact.

Youth work - design and marketing

Youth work in Fife is well placed to give voice to young people but it is currently less clear in its own voice. Youth work services have to be clear about what they can offer to young people and ensure that the benefits to young people are clearly communicated with communities. A new youth work strategy for Fife would help to give practitioners direction and leadership while a marketing strategy that is built from the skills that exist within the sector would help to communicate that direction.

From the evidence presented in this research, it is clear that universal youth work – youth clubs and other services available to all young people during their social time – and focussed project work that seeks to respond to important issues, are beneficial in the personal and social development of young people in Fife. Both of these areas need to be invested in to give young people the best chances of successful transitions at key times and into adulthood. Well resourced, proactive, welcoming and attractive services that take into account what young people have expressed in this research provide good routes for young people to achieve their ambitions as well as proven social return on investments made.

We should take care not to contribute to the narrowing of young people's ambitions. Youth work is a process that has value to young people's wellbeing, to their relationships, their learning, their communities and their voice. An approach that has immediate benefits and that helps young people, as valued citizens, not only to get to where they want to be in the future but allows them to express themselves right now.

Recommendations

Mental health and wellbeing

35% of participants said that their mental health was 'negative' or 'other'. 57% of young people said they had positive mental health. 76% said that their physical health is good.

Youth work in Fife should aim to promote positive wellbeing. Particular attention should be given to exploring the services' capacity to further support the positive mental health of young people we work with. A baseline of youth work practitioner's understanding and confidence in spotting, supporting and signposting would help to identify training requirements. Training programmes appropriate to any skills gap should be created. Youth work in Fife is, and should remain, a universal and inclusive service, based on social engagement rather than clinical or medical approaches and associated language. However, the extent of issues young people have identified around their wellbeing requires action and perhaps improved understanding and sensitivity. A strategic approach to partnerships that can support referrals would be an advantage.

Our findings show that young people are supported in their wellbeing through current youth work arrangements and this recommendation should not focus programmes specific to mental health. It should, instead, incorporate improved capacity to support mental wellbeing within existing arrangements.

Social media

Almost all young people interviewed use social media. Most using a wide range of apps. 29% say using social media is good for you and 27% say it is not. Time spent on social media, the volume of information consumed and access to inappropriate content were all concerns voiced.

Social media forms such an integral part of young people's lives, it should also form part of the youth work 'curriculum'. Young people have told us that it is both a positive and negative force in their lives and these two sides should be explored regularly in youth work. Digital media can be used as a lens through which to develop critical consciousness with young people and a range of useful skills for life.

Youth work services should consider developing their digital offer in a way that is relevant and attractive to young people.

Aspirations – relationships are key

47% of young people's biggest hope for the future was related to career or success. Narrative interviews showed that these were seen as vehicles to achieve financial stability and support family and social life.

Fife's youth work delivery should focus on supporting young people to develop the skills to maintain healthy relationships. The ability to nurture and negotiate healthy relationships is essential to young people achieving goals they have told us about related to career, family and

friends. It is key to self-expression and personal happiness. It is key to contributing to community life.

Community safety

20% of young people in Fife have concerns about safety in their communities. Further concerns were raised about bullying cultures, extremes of behaviour and polarisation of debate.

Youth work services in Fife should work with partners, committing to an effort to support young people who are disengaged, ensuring that their recovery post-pandemic is healthy, successful and that they can build positive relationships in and with their communities.

Poverty and inequality

Poverty and inequality are significant concerns for Fife's young people.

Fife Council has worked on alleviating inequality for some time, with particular focus on poverty in recent years. Youth work provides low-cost activities, often has food as a central element of programmes and provides opportunities that young people would not normally have access to. Some projects can access funding from anti-poverty budgets. Youth work practitioners are often well placed to understand poverty in communities. Around 60% of participants in youth work in Fife live in SIMD datazones that fall in the bottom 20% of areas of multiple deprivation in Scotland. Youth work also offers young people employability skills and helps them build positive relationships. This can reduce pressure on family budgets during term and holiday times but youth work can not provide a solution alone.

Planning work that incorporates the needs and voice of young people as part of a whole family approach must be done between services to provide prevention and the best routes out of poverty in Fife.

Youth voice spaces

Young people were all able to discuss what they would like to see change in the world. Key themes were poverty and inequality, environment, violence and kindness, politics. Very few discussed their own ability to contribute to social change.

A commitment to listening to and amplifying the voice of Fife's young people should not end with this research report. Fife Council and delivery partners should continue to find ways for young people to engage with decision making processes and structures, in youth work and beyond. Young people should feel confident that they can *and should* be heard. Significant experience of facilitating youth voice, such as this research project, Scottish Youth Parliament and Fife Youth Forum may be analysed in order to plot a way forward that provides continued space for young people to express their needs. Creative and flexible approaches should allow young people to engage both over short and longer terms.

Youth work service marketing

Young people and youth workers alluded to the weakness or absence of marketing and promotion of youth work.

Youth work in Fife should be well marketed, publicised and promoted. Capacity should be improved to recognise the contributions and achievements of young people, to celebrate successes in projects and to promote new initiatives. Youth work in Fife should reach out to young people, the wider community and the youth work field, building relationships, reputation and trust.

Youth work service review and development

Fife Council and key partners including the local voluntary youth work sector and national organisations should develop a new, long-term youth work strategy that aims to be sector leading in its approach and impact. This strategy must recognise the varied social, economic and political landscape in Fife and provide youth work in the region with a well-defined identity that meets the needs of this generation of children and young people. The service should be ambitious in its vision for young people and appropriately resourced to meet these ambitions. This research provides strong evidence to suggest that much of the current youth work offer has a positive impact in many areas of young people's lives. There is not, though, a current and clear picture of the youth work that Fife Council delivers. Work that has begun on mapping that offer may help establish a route to a new youth work strategy.

Universal and focused service

100% of young people have been affected by the pandemic. Young people have expressed that the break in normality has been difficult and that the opportunity youth work provides to socialise with friends in a safe environment has had a positive impact on recovery.

A forward thinking, well-resourced youth work offer that delivers both a universal service and more focused projects should be accessible to all young people in Fife, low-cost or free of charge.

It should encourage understanding and acceptance of young people, allowing them to feel valued as contributors to the life of their communities and society.

Acknowledgements

Huge thanks for supporting this research go to:

Youth 1st – Judith Allison, Gayle Brown and Rachel Collins. All Fife Council Community Development Teams and managers. Community Education Workers Leanne Bower, Barry Clark and Shirley Crawley. Lisa Hunter, Enhanced Detached Youth Worker. Gemma Frail, Cupar Youth Café Coordinator. Youth Worker Nathan Bushnell and the Youth Café Team. Clued Up - Amy Scott, Youth Participation and Volunteer Development Worker. YouthSpace Fife Project Workers Clare Penman, Ben Douglas, Otto Cox and, in particular, Nick Venture who has provided creativity from the outset. Development Workers George Murray and Lesley Pringle. Kingdom Off Road Motorcycle Club. Fife CLD Partnership. Claire Maxwell and Gregor Wilson at Fife Council Communications Team. Billie Dunleviewood, Community Education Worker. Robyn Kinnaird who did all the hard work. Ross Martin, now CLD Standards Council. Tricia Ryan and Professor Karen McArdle. Thanks all for your support and patience!

Most importantly, all the young people who contributed, made this happen, gave their time, energy and their wisdom. I hope this does you justice. You should be proud. Thank you.

Gordon Forbes
Research Lead and Report Author