**Executive Summary:**

Over 200 young people across the South East have come together to discuss their social mobility, and assess the issues they believe are barriers to their progression.

They took part in workshops across in Hampshire, Kent and Oxfordshire, and attended a dedicated listening event, to discuss their lived experiences of social mobility, and identify potential problems and solutions in order to increase opportunities for young people in the UK.

This report has been created from their voices, and stands as a genuine representation of their views and recommendations. They ask you to consider their experiences, and use their suggestions to start a serious conversation to bring about change.

The top recommendations coming out of this report are:

1. For schools to implement life skills lessons and improve their careers advice services
2. For landlords to be given incentives to offer rent relief to young people
3. Collaboration between local government and the private sector to create affordable spaces for young people to socialise.
4. For jobs and opportunities to be better advertised across the social platforms used by young people.

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***Introduction***

We have no control over where we are born; so much about who we are and the circumstances of our upbringing is determined for us, and ultimately it is how we use these formative experiences to build a fulfilling life for ourselves that is important.

Social mobility is about breaking the link between parental background and reaching full potential despite social class or upbringing. It is a topic the government is concerning itself with more and more over recent years, setting up the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility in 2011 to ‘discuss and promote the cause of social mobility; to raise issues of concern and help inform policy makers and opinion formers[[1]](#footnote-1).’

The APPG stated in their 2017 annual report that social mobility ‘is about better opportunities for each generation and making access to these opportunities fairer, regardless of background[[2]](#footnote-2).’ However, while the existence of the APPG suggests the government is taking steps to try and improve opportunities for young people from all walks of life, the young people themselves are less optimistic about their chances of transcending their social backgrounds.

The government’s Social Mobility Commission publish an annual barometer assessing the attitudes of 5000 members of the public on the issue, and the 2018 report paints a picture of pessimism on behalf of younger people. It summarised ‘it is typically younger generations who feel more acutely that background determines where you end up, with almost half (48%) of 25-49 year olds agreeing with this statement compared with 38% of those aged 65 and over[[3]](#footnote-3).’ It goes on to say only a fifth of 18-24 year olds believe they have a better level of job security compared to their parents and just 22% of those aged 25-49 think their housing situation is better than their parents’ compared to 60% of those aged 65[[4]](#footnote-4).

Perhaps the most concerning statistic emerging from the report is that 18-24 year olds are the age group least likely to understand what the term social mobility means, and therefore a discussion about young people’s views towards their own social progression seems highly appropriate.

This report aims to give young people a voice in shaping the future for others, compiling the views and opinions of over 200 young people from the South East, recorded across nine regional workshops and a dedicated listening event in Winchester. It will cover influencing factors and barriers, including relationships with peers, family, connectivity, work opportunities and income, the use of social media, as well as interaction with services, and the availability of information on opportunities for social progression. Their views will be considered alongside relevant statistics and research.

***Methods***

A team of trained ‘Young Person Coordinators’ travelled across the South East holding workshops with young people, many of whom came from disadvantaged backgrounds. The aim of these workshops was to find out more about the barriers young people.

In total, nine workshops were conducted with a total of 190 young people aged between 16 and 25. A large number of the young people involved came from deprived backgrounds, some had been excluded, others were unemployed, and many had suffered with their mental health.

To begin with the young people were asked to consider what opportunities they would take up if they were available to them. They discussed what support they would like to see given to young people in the future and debated the quality of help currently on offer.

The conversations were divided into four sections:

Education and Training

Home

Access / Connectivity / Employment

Services / Provisions

During each section, the young people were invited to speak about their experiences and suggest solutions to the problems they faced. At the end of the workshops, individuals were also invited to complete a short survey.

Participants of the workshops, along with other young people in the South East, were later invited to attend a ‘listening event’, held at the Discovery Centre in Winchester. Morning discussions took a similar format to the workshops, with young people debating the barriers they experience to getting on in life and solutions they believe could make a difference.

An afternoon question time saw the top problems and solutions presented to an invited audience of policy makers and stakeholders.

Key themes and findings from the workshops and listening event were analysed and written into this voice-led report. A small focus group, made up from young people who had taken part in both the workshops and listening event, have helped refine the recommendations.

Names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals.

**Education:**

Education is a constant, inescapable part of the existence of young people in the UK, with children required to remain in school or training until the age of eighteen.[[5]](#footnote-5) While schooling itself is compulsory, the way in which the curriculum is administered is different depending on the institution a pupil attends, which made for some varying reports on the quality of education in the UK from the young people who took part in our workshops.

There was a general consensus that life at school is not a true reflection of life outside it. Cited reasons included an unfair focus on academic performance over more creative and expressive subjects, alienating those pupils wanting to pursue careers outside of English, Maths and Science and leaving them unenthusiastic about their education as a result. This focus on academia was thought by the pupils to come at the expense of practical knowledge and experience, with many frustrated that a grasp of Pythagoras was held in higher regard than an understanding of taxes and VAT, which would become an important part of their adult lives.

The students felt this could be combatted by the implementation of a dedicated ‘life-skills’ lesson, focusing on practical knowledge outside of the curriculum. They also argued schools offering more creative subject options would help them to find a passion and career path that would inspire them to engage with their education.

When it came to careers advice, many agreed it was an afterthought at their schools. The young people expressed a desire to learn more about CV’s, personal statements and interview techniques that would improve their prospects alongside their qualifications. They felt if schools made more of an effort to promote work experience options it would help them feel comfortable entering employment, and could aid students in deciding on what career to pursue.

***Outdated Curriculum***

A sentiment repeated in all regions across all workshops was a sense that education failed in its purpose of preparing young people for life beyond the confines of a classroom.

*‘We need to be learning more life skills, to ensure we are better prepared for our future.’ –* Sam

*‘You aren’t taught anything useful to prepare you. We aren’t taught about taxes, and we have no business etiquette*.’ – Thomas

‘*You are not taught in school how to do real life adult things like paying bills, getting a mortgage, how to budget, or look after money*.’ – Jasmine

This is not a viewpoint held exclusively by the students we spoke to; a 2015 survey[[6]](#footnote-6) of 1000 pupils conducted by the Career Colleges Trust revealed 76% of participants felt their school only taught them the information relevant to their exams, as oppose to educating them about topics integral to their lives as adults.

In fact, further research has shown these desired life skills are regarded as universally important by those within the education sector. In 2017, 1,361 practising teachers, 1,133 employers and 2,612 young people were surveyed separately to compile the ‘Life Lessons’ report for the Sutton Trust’s APPG for Social Mobility[[7]](#footnote-7), which summarised: ‘There is a wide recognition of the importance of life skills, with 88% of young people, 94% of employers and 97% of teachers saying they are as or more important than academic qualifications.’[[8]](#footnote-8) The report also found more than half of teachers believe life skills are more important than academic qualifications to young people's success and 72% believe their school should increase their focus on teaching life skills.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In spite of this, only half of the schools involved in the research had an implemented policy relating to the provision of such skills[[10]](#footnote-10). The fact the issue was repeatedly broached by the groups we spoke to suggests the lack of tutelage outside the curriculum is indeed a problem for a lot of young people.

*‘The curriculum needs to be updated and life skills should be included, or we could start a lunchtime club so the people who want to learn more have the option.’* – Jason

The pupils all felt a simple solution to the academically-weighted curriculum would be to implement a lesson to help them learn these important life skills. They agreed this would help them feel less nervous when the time came to live independently of their parents.

***Support Individuals***

A side effect of the focus on academic performance in compulsory GCSE subjects is other topics can be left by the wayside. There was a feeling schools didn’t encourage or celebrate the individuality of students, and the academic route to success was the only one that mattered.

*‘You have to do traditional subjects and follow the route through GCSEs, A levels and University. If you don’t want to go to University it’s seen as a big issue. There’s only one way. That may be the conventional way but I think people should be encouraged to do their own thing.’ –* Jack

‘*I want to own my subject options. Teachers are picking them for us*.’ – Femi

Discussions also touched upon the fact that whatever the subject, the approach to teaching was always the same and teachers did not have the capacity to accommodate different learning styles.

‘At *school you are a robot, and if you do not operate in a certain way then you fail.’* – Omar

‘*Teachers think they have to teach everyone the same way and everyone will get it but that’s not the case.’*– Rebecca

‘*I do not understand how you can test everyone the same way when we are all different. We should be taught at a young age about our learning style.’ –* Jessica

*‘My teacher taught me how to sing my times tables, that is the only way I learnt them.’ –* Omari

The pupils wanted schools to recognise them as individuals, in order to better adapt their teaching style and realise not everyone benefitted from traditional methods of tuition. They suggested teachers should be taught about different learning styles, so pupils could progress by processing the same information in a different way.

Some students who went to specialist schools and subsequently had more flexibility in their lessons and timetabling said it made a positive difference to their performance and mind-set.

‘*Our college only has 80 people. We can change our timetables to suit us. They treat us more like individuals*. *There should be less of a gap between the support at mainstream and specialist schools.’* – Daniel

***Pressure***

The biggest issue revealed by their discontentment with such a rigid curriculum was the immense pressure they were put under as a consequence; when a whole educational system correlates a specific grade with future success, the everyday struggles associated with chasing that grade can be demoralising.

‘*You’re stressed because you’re told you need these specific grades or you won’t get into college*.’- Aidan

Alongside these expectations, many felt they were constantly compared to their peers, particularly academically, and were not recognised or celebrated for their individual talent.

*‘At school you are compared. I feel schools exploits people who are better than you against you.’ –* James

Another common conception was students were pushed to get high grades to make the school look good, and therefore the grade system was not for the benefit of those striving to achieve them.

‘*There’s a lot of pressure, and schools want you to get good grades to make them look good, it’s not for you*.’ – Kate

Many felt that simply by acknowledging the individuality and specific talents of students independently of their peers, and offering guidance on different, they would feel less pressured and more comfortable at school.

***Careers Advice***

A vital part of preparing young people for life after school is providing effective careers advice; something which many felt their respective schools failed to do. Students admitted to feeling lost with their career path, and over half of the young people who completed our survey felt they would have achieved more if they had better careers advice.

*‘There’s no one I can speak to about what I want to do.’* – Imogen

*‘I don’t know what my dream job is.’ –* Charlie

‘*I have no idea how to write a personal statement*.’ – Freya

*‘It would be good to have someone to talk to about how I can get into it and what subjects I need to do well in*.’ – Dan

*‘Lessons are too general, and aren’t focused on your chosen career.’ –* Lisa

Students suggested the provision of a dedicated careers advisor at their school would be the easiest solution to the problem. It would help give them someone to talk to about how their interests could be reflected in a fulfilling career, and also let them know what steps to take to get to where they want to be.

*‘I think a careers advisor would be helpful to help us get into college or to help us find an apprenticeship.’* – Sarah

While it is clear students find the exam process stressful, the young people also expressed anxiety about what would happen to them after their exams were over and they had completed their time at school. They were not hopeful about the possibility of transitional support post-16 and 18, and the young people we spoke to at this stage described feeling abandoned by the system.

‘*You turn 18 and it’s ‘well you are old enough to do this on your own now, off you go’, but you are not, you don’t know how to*.’ – Jasmine.

*‘When you do know what you want to do, you don’t always know what you need to do to get the relevant experience to be accepted.’ –* Will

‘*We need help after school: When you finish your exams that’s it. We do not know what to do. What if you don’t want to go to sixth form, college or do an apprenticeship? We had people come in and talk at assemblies but it was not enough*.’ – Matthew

*‘Offering more work experience would be beneficial going forward.’* – Brook

While many were uncertain about what career they wanted to pursue, the young people believe work experience would be a step towards a solution, as it would allow them to begin to envisage life in a working environment, and come into contact with career options they may not have previously known about or considered.

The previously mentioned Career Colleges Trust survey revealed more than 80% of students surveyed believed the education system should be more career focused, but less than a third had been encouraged to undertake work experience, and 32% were still unsure what they wanted to do when they left school.[[11]](#footnote-11)

But a lack of (or ineffective) careers advice is not the only issue young people face when thinking about their futures. Partly as a result of the academic focus of the school system, some students felt even when they knew what they wanted to do, they were steered away from pursuing that career by unsupportive school staff.

‘*It’s discouraging when you say what you want to do and you are told ‘You can’t do that!’* – Sam

***Class Discipline***

Large class sizes can make it hard for individual needs to be met. It also makes discipline an important part of school life. In a bid to continue with lessons, teachers will often dismiss disruptive pupils from class and give no time to getting to the root of the problem.

*‘Class sizes are a problem; there are so many students and not enough teachers or support. The teachers don’t listen to us and I just get ignored.’ –* James

‘*There is only one person in my school who will help you if there is a problem. Teachers need to be more willing to help children and be more open to children’s suggestions*.’ – Noah

*‘Teachers don’t know what to do with some children and just send them out. All this does is get rid of them for a bit and slow their education down*.’ – Emily

‘*Punishment isn’t very useful; it’s said that they match the punishment to what you’ve done but I don’t agree. Sometimes they put you in isolation – what’s that going to do?’ –* Olivia

‘*You get asked if there’s anyone causing you a problem and you tell them the names but there’s no action even if you have complained about people*.’ – Lisa

In general, the experiences of the young people suggest a lot of teachers get overwhelmed by class sizes, and are not equipped to deal with issues in the classroom, with many pupils feeling unsupported as a result.

***Bullying***

Another issue raised by the young people was bullying, which seemed to be prevalent in all schools. They felt not enough was done to raise awareness of the issue, and the perpetrators did not realise the effect their actions had on the victims.

*‘Bullying has stopped me before; it’s made me feel like I wasn’t good enough and my confidence was really low. There needs to be more awareness and teachers need to report it if they know it’s going on because sometimes people don’t listen.’ –* Kiera

*‘Bullying is the most important issue. Schools need to show the impact and affects bullying can have on someone’s future to prevent it from happening.’ –* Thomas

While there are no statistics relating to the prevalence of bullying in UK schools, a 2018 report by the Education Policy Institute[[12]](#footnote-12) found research indicated ‘more than half of young people have experienced some form of peer victimisation in their lives, with approximately two in five reporting some type of bullying, including cyber-bullying, in the previous year.’

In general, it was felt where bullying was a problem, it was not dealt with appropriately by the school, and many did not have confidence to speak out about such behaviour as a result.

‘*Teachers let bullying happen*.’ – Alex

*‘Some schools ignore bullies in the school but I think they should exclude them and get their parents in because that’s when they start to take it seriously.’ –* Jake

In most cases, the young people agreed that suspensions and exclusions would dissuade an individual from repeating bullying behaviour, but others felt punishment was only a short term solution, and educating people about the detrimental effects of bullying would be ultimately more effective.

*‘Bullying is a big problem. We should have lessons on bullying so we can all understand the side effects of banter. Social mixing should be encouraged to understand people’s personalities.’ –* Rose

*‘Schools should run a support group to help people who have struggled at the hands of bullies and this might help put a stop to it, they should also have support groups for bullies to see what’s making them behave in that way.’ –* Ellie

It is clear disruptive behaviour and bullying from peers is a common barrier to a child’s success at school, and the lack of confidence associated with it can have long lasting effects on an individual’s education. The solution is to educate children from a young age about the consequences of bullying.

***At What Cost?***

School may be compulsory, with no need to pay tuition in state schools, but one thing that was clear from the workshops was education is not without its costs. Each subject comes with its own set of textbooks, with some subjects like English literature requiring students to read novels and poetry anthologies they are encouraged to purchase themselves. In particular, most students said they were told to buy specific revision textbooks as part of their GCSE’s.

*‘Revision books are £40, and depending on your subjects you could end up paying £100. Macbeth and other books are expensive as well.’ –* Daniel

The emergence of technology in the classroom has added to this cost, with many pupils saying the use of iPadsin lessonswas becoming increasingly common, and teachers generally assumed students had access to laptops and computers outside of school, when this was not the case for everyone.

*‘You have to pay £40 for your iPad but you don’t get it back even if you don’t break it.’ –* Toby

However, the biggest everyday expense for pupils at school is the price of food at lunch time. The majority of young people thought food prices were too high for what was provided, and those supported by Free School Meals argued the allotted daily allowance was not enough to purchase a satisfying meal.

*‘I get £2.30 towards mine. It’s a free school meal but it’s pricey and doesn’t go far.’ –* Charlotte

*‘When it comes to school lunches everyone should get a free lunch and it should be a proper meal.’* – Sofia

A 2010 report by the Department for Children, Schools and Families[[13]](#footnote-13) suggested children from less privileged backgrounds were more at risk of being alienated by their richer peers: ‘They experience all the difficulties associated with their comparative poverty and they find themselves in a significant minority, having to live in the midst of a community and school population who are more affluent, perhaps considerably more affluent, than they are. They represent a ‘pocket of poverty’ within their community and school.’

The young people we spoke to want schools to help less privileged students so they were less of a target for goading behaviour.

How young people interact with their peers, and adjust to social, economic and educational comparisons are all defining factors in how well they engage with their education, and consequently, how well they can utilise their education to move beyond their social position. The attitudes of the children we spoke to details the impact negative peer relationships can have on their education, whether this be through disruption, bullying, or unavoidable comparisons.

**Recommendations:**

1. For schools to implement a ‘life skills’ lesson to teach children about tax, VAT, and other essential parts of adult life.
2. For pupils to be given more comprehensive careers advice, so they can engage with relevant education and training and ultimately pursue a career that interests them.
3. For schools to educate pupils about bullying and for teachers to take the issue seriously.

**Home**

The Social Mobility Commission describes an individual’s access to affordable housing as ‘a crucial part of anyone’s wellbeing[[14]](#footnote-14).’ A home provides a person with a comfortable base from which to organise all aspects of their lives, but for young people, it seems finding affordable accommodation can be difficult.

The Social Mobility Commission’s *Time for Change* report found that between 1997 and 2017, home ownership had declined sharply amongst young people. It stated: ‘As a proportion of household income, housing costs have risen fastest for the poorest. The poorest fifth now spend more than 31 per cent of their household incomes on housing costs. In contrast, the richest fifth spend 8 per cent[[15]](#footnote-15).’

This prohibitive cost of housing means young people have less disposable income to use on other services and leisure activities, and this financial strain was something felt by the young people we spoke to.

‘*House prices are really high. I am self-employed and this area is a really expensive place to live.’ –* Tim

*‘I can’t afford houses round here.’* – Sienna

‘*The house I’m living in in Winchester is £500 a month.’ –* James

Even housing allocated for students, such as halls of residence provided through universities, are seen as far too expensive for young people, when considered alongside other forms of housing.

*‘Student housing rent is ridiculous. Four people living in one house and the landlords get £2500 a month: they’re making a lot of money from us.*’- Kiera

‘*I live in halls of residence and it costs £104 a week. My Aunt told me it costs her £50 a month to pay off her mortgage.’ –* Hayley

For many, the costs associated with living independently lead to a reluctance or inability to move out of their family homes.

*‘I pay my parents £75 a week for rent. To live in supported living it’s £50 a week but I don’t get the help there so my parent’s home is better because I get support. I can’t afford to go anywhere else*.’ – Eva

In 2017, the government published *Fixing our Broken Housing Market*, a review of the state of housing and accommodation in the UK, in which it promised to pledge £7.1 billion through an expanded and more flexible Affordable Homes Programme, and to ‘provide clarity over future rent levels.[[16]](#footnote-16)’ In its list of proposals, the paper promised to ‘make rent fairer for tenants’, as well as to ‘encourage the development of housing that meets the needs of future generations[[17]](#footnote-17).’

These proposals, if implemented appropriately, will help younger people access cheaper housing, and therefore expend less of their income on day-to-day living. This would allow them to save more, and put aside money for other essential services.

***Benefits***

Whatever physical barriers exist in relation to social mobility, the young people we spoke to suggested there was a lot of stigma around services designed to help with their financial needs, such as benefits and supported housing schemes.

‘*I think landlords discriminate against people on benefits*.’ – Jack

‘*You are brought up to judge people on benefits.’* - Jenni

The charity Turn2Us published a report called *Benefits Stigma in Britain* which analysed how far the welfare state was stigmatised, both personally and institutionally. Based on data from surveys, it found people did not as often stigmatise themselves for accessing benefits, but institutional stigma from the media was ‘widespread’, revealing ‘the content of press stories is indeed skewed towards negative representations[[18]](#footnote-18).’

Welfare services like housing and employment benefits are intended to help those who cannot afford to access basic necessities, and should be readily available to those who need them. However, the negative portrayals of benefits claimants in the media may be having the effect of making people reluctant to access them. The groups felt more education and support should be given on the benefits system so people would not feel embarrassed about accessing financial help.

*‘There still needs to be support for those people. They do not want to be on benefits but people judge them because of it*.’ – Sophie

***Family Support***

Discussions on the topic of home frequently turned to family, with the young people identifying the importance of a stable home life.

‘*You can give support to young people but if their home life is bad then it is pointless. You need to access the parents to teach them. You can put a lot of hard work in to a young person but they go home and it is all undone.’* – Robert

*‘Family is home.’* – Ella

Some showed frustration at the fact they were instantly considered or judged by the circumstance of their parents; something which they had no control over.

‘*People assume everyone in the family is the same but that is not the case.*’ - Leanne

The 2018 Social Mobility Barometer found that, in general, younger people were less likely to think they had a better quality of life or chance of economic progression in comparison to their parents, stating ‘those aged 65 or over are about three times more positive about their position in society and almost four times more positive about their overall living standards than those aged 18-24.[[19]](#footnote-19)

While their own situation was initially linked to the situations of their parents, the ability to move beyond them is largely influenced by life at home. Many felt ultimately it was their families who supported them the most.

‘*Without family, there would be no one to care about your future*.’ – Grace

**Recommendations:**

1. For the government to incentivise landlords to offer rent relief to young people.
2. More education on the benefits system, so people are not deterred from accessing financial services that could help them.

**Services And Provisions**

We asked the young people about how they filled their spare time; their opportunities to live healthy and active lives; their experiences accessing health care and questioned the support they receive from services such as the police and social services.

Many felt their local authorities did not provide enough spaces for young people to visit outside of school hours to pursue hobbies and socialise with others. There were stories of young people having to give up a youth group because the service was shut down due to a lack of funding, and others not being able to attend sports clubs due to the crippling cost of equipment required. They believe a provision of public spaces, free to access, would enable young people to engage with new activities and reduce antisocial activity.

Discussions also touched upon the high price of public transport prohibiting them from accessing services not on their doorstep. They called for transport companies and service providers to make bus travel cheaper for children through subsidies and concessions, with some saying they should scrap fares for people under a certain age altogether.

***Opportunities***

For most young people in this country, school takes up the majority of their time during the week, giving them the opportunity to socialise with friends and peers as well as gain a formal education. What a child does outside of school hours during evenings and weekends is largely up to them, allowing them the chance to pursue hobbies and attend sports clubs and youth groups, where available.  
  
When we asked the young people what there was to do in their local areas, the workshop groups all told a very similar story, indicating an all-round lack of affordable services and activities for young people to take advantage of.

‘*I would walk until my legs hurt because that’s all I could do. I didn’t have the money or the friends. If there was more in place I would have been so much happier.’* – Millie

*‘There’s not enough to do. Not enough youth clubs or other activities.’ –* Jack

‘*Outside of college there aren’t a lot of places to socialise and make friends*.’ – Megan

Most felt the absence of these services more acutely because they had previously been part of youth groups and clubs that had since been shut down, recognising the provision of services in their local areas was on the decline.

*‘There used to be a youth group but it’s gone.’ -* Chloe

‘*When I was younger there used to be youth clubs but they disappeared*.’ – Rebecca

Research by the YMCA suggests this decline in youth services is a loss felt by children all over the UK, as local authorities face increasing budget cuts resulting in vital services being closed or forced to operate less frequently.

Their 2018 ‘Youth Consequences’ report found in the period between 2011 and 2017, local authority spending on youth services had decreased by £737 million, representing a total decline of 62%. Subsequently, youth services accounted for just 5% of local spend on children and young people in 2017[[20]](#footnote-20).

Further research by Unison in 2016 found funding cuts to local authority budgets had a devastating effect on the provision of youth services, with 600 youth centres being forced to close since 2012, resulting in the loss of nearly 4000 jobs[[21]](#footnote-21).

In the introduction to Unison’s research, they state ‘youth services do a vital job in our communities, helping young people to lead positive lives as members of society.’ This was echoed by those we spoke to who had accessed youth services in their local areas and believed they had helped foster practical skills and use their energy in constructive ways.

*‘Where I went gave me opportunities that I never knew about, like helping me get official ID.*’ – Noah

*‘This building (Youth of Bicester) is the best thing that has happened to us.*’ – Jasmine

*‘A music project changed me. Once a week we went there and we became close friends, wrote songs together. It was a good alternative. There were no barriers – anyone could come.’ –* Jack

Research has shown a lack of these services can have negative effects on the lives and futures of young people.

Unison’s *A Future at Risk* report surveyed service providers from 180 local authorities to see how they thought the decrease in youth groups had affected the children in their communities. Eighty per cent said the young people felt less empowered, with 65% saying they believed those affected found it harder to get jobs. But, more worryingly, many believed the space left by the absence of these services drove young people to fill their time with criminal activity; 70% spoke of a rise in increased alcohol and substance abuse, and 83% reported increased crime and anti-social behaviour in their communities[[22]](#footnote-22).

This concern was mirrored in our discussions, with a selection of those taking part suggesting such behaviour was prevalent in their area, or reporting they had become involved in criminal activity themselves.

*‘If you try to find your own stuff, you get into trouble with the police. It’s mostly down to boredom*.’ – Robert.

‘*There is a skate park, which is dodgy. There are drugs there.*’ – Kate

The responses in our workshops indicate young people are frustrated at the lack of services, and recognise youth groups can have a positive impact on their social skills and development. However, the absence of them leaves young people with little inspiration and few positive outlets for their energy, in extreme cases leading to anti-social behaviour that could impede their ability to progress beyond their social situation.

***Alternative Opportunities***

In lieu of subsidised youth spaces, many children look for commercial forms of entertainment, whether this be going bowling, to the cinema, or shopping with their friends. The downside of these activities is they can be expensive, especially to young people with little money, or those from lower income backgrounds.

*‘We need a space that young people can go to and not spend money.’* – Hugh

*‘There is nowhere to be. It is £5 for a kids’ ticket to go to the cinema.’ –* Jack

‘*There is a leisure centre, bowling and swimming, but everything is expensive.’ –* Fatima

*‘Key services are being cut – there is nothing that doesn’t cost anything.’ -* Lisa

The young people had several suggested solutions to the cuts in services. While they recognise the budgetary constraints placed on local councils, there was a sense other sectors could step in to plug the gap.

They recommended schools open up their communal spaces after hours for youth clubs, and local communities get behind young people by helping to fund activities. The young people also suggested private sector collaboration, with financial incentives being offered to encourage businesses to support local groups.

In an ideal world the young people would have free access to spaces and activities, however the people we spoke to were realistic about this. They believed many of their peers would be happy to pay a small amount to enter as long as activities were free once inside.

Many we spoke to mentioned their enjoyment of videogames, and stated somewhere they could meet and play together would be a good way to socialise for free.

**Health**

An individual’s health can directly impact on their chances for social mobility, with both physical and mental ailments becoming potential barriers to a person’s ability to access opportunities and employment in their local areas.

Research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Council stated that ‘although overall health has improved dramatically since the NHS was founded, the health gap between the richest and poorest people has widened. The poor enjoy less high quality health services, relative to their needs, than the richest and middle income groups. In other words, those in the greatest need receive the worst service. Policy should prioritise improving services for those with the poorest health outcomes[[23]](#footnote-23).’

The young people we spoke to felt health services, both at school and within their local communities, were largely inadequate, due to long waiting times and a lack of funding. Mental Health services were a particular focus of our conversations, with many saying accessing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) was a difficult process. They added schools did little to make mental health a priority, and suggested informative assemblies for the pupils along with more training for teachers on mental illness

In terms of health services outside school, those with experience said support felt limited after you turned 18, and efforts could be made to ensure those outgrowing children’s provisions are referred to equivocal adult services to avoid becoming lost in the system.

When it came to physical conditions, they called for GPs and doctors to be slower in prescribing treatments and instead offer a more holistic approach.

***Mental Health***

The Mental Health of Children and Young People Survey conducted by the NHS in 2017 found one in eight (12.8%) 5 to 19 year olds had at least one mental disorder when assessed in 2017, and  
one in twenty (5%) met the criteria for two or more individual mental disorders[[24]](#footnote-24). Referral data indicates increased demand for specialist mental health interventions over the past decade, suggesting young people are increasingly affected by mental health issues.

Despite this prevalence of these conditions in young people, our conversations revealed a general lack of awareness surrounding the issue.

*‘Schools try to cover everything but they are not brilliant on mental health, drugs, and homelessness. They are not equipped to deal with it all. There should be more about youth mental health and more help available.’ –* Nicola

*‘We had a mental health assembly but I still don’t really understand it.’ – Ben*

*‘I think that mental health is a problem in schools, some of my friends have depression and it’s hard to know how to help them.’ –* Jessica

*‘Schools do a half hour lesson on mental health and they think that’s enough.*’ – Ryan

They suggested schools make mental health education a priority, and dedicate more time to raising awareness of non-physical conditions. This, they hoped, would help people recognise potential mental health issues early, and seek appropriate help. Part of this pathway would require educating teachers; so they could help their pupils understand the associated challenges and signpost them to support networks.

*‘Run a course for teachers to go on to spot the signs of mental health, to make sure people do not hit breaking point before they get help.’ -* Demi

This is an opinion shared by Emma Thomas, CEO of mental health charity Young Minds. Commenting on the government’s autumn budget plans to pledge more money to mental health services in 2018, she said: ‘The plans to roll out Mental Health Support Teams in schools across the country are very welcome, and could help thousands of children with emerging issues to get early support. But we also need to see a more fundamental rebalancing of the education system, so that wellbeing is as much of a priority for schools as exam results[[25]](#footnote-25).’

The young people agreed a re-focusing of the education system should be a priority and suggested lessons on healthy living, how to spot the early signs of mental health problems and practical advice on when to see your GP.

*‘If we want longer GP appointments we need to find a way to free up their time. We are so quick to go to the doctor, I think people need to be taught when to see a GP.’* – Layla

***Advertise Services***

Knowing who to turn to and what support is available was a significant focus of our discussions. On top of not fully understanding the nuances of mental health, some young people felt it wasn’t clear where they could go to seek help. The groups suggested raising awareness of mental health services outside of their schools would be an effective solution, and allowing these organisations to have a presence in schools would also be a benefit.

*‘At school we had mental health organisations come in and talk to us. That massively helped. We need more agencies who will come into schools rather than leaving it to teachers.’ –* Michael

*‘There are people to help with things like mental health and that makes a difference.’ –* Emma

*‘Businesses should offer free advertising to support agencies so their message is where we are, like in bus stops.’* – Ade

*‘What about having radio messages or supermarket and train station announcements advertising where people can get help?’* – Sarah

***Difficulties Accessing Healthcare***

In terms of funding and governmental attention, mental health services are still trailing behind their physical counterparts. A 2018 report by the King’s Trust revealed NHS budgets were channelling less money into mental health services than those providing specialist care, despite the government calling for a ‘parity of esteem’ between mental and physical providers in 2013[[26]](#footnote-26); resulting in services that are understaffed and ‘stretched to the limit’.

When talking about their experiences of accessing external mental health support, the young people largely agreed it was a difficult process, due to long waiting-times caused by a lack of funding to an overstretched service.

*‘There is an 18-month waiting list to get in to the adult mental health team; even a crisis appointment is a 6-8 week wait*.’ – Rhiannon

‘*There are not enough free therapists in Bicester. Sometimes if people need one they have to wait for a long time.’ –* Andrew

‘*It’s not easy to access healthcare.’* – Ava

A 2018 report by Young Minds found a third of young people waited so long to be seen by mental health services their conditions had deteriorated by the time of their eventual appointment[[27]](#footnote-27).

However, the government announced a new 10-year NHS plan at the end of 2018 in an attempt to ‘close the gap between physical and mental health treatments’. The plan includes a promise of £2.3bn to pay for talking therapies for an additional 350,000 young people, and an around-the-clock helpline for those struggling with mental issues[[28]](#footnote-28).

These measures aim to help reduce waiting times, and with more effective support young people will stand a better chance of moving beyond their own social position without being hampered by untreated mental health conditions. More awareness of such issues would also help young people approach their doctors with confidence and create a proactive care plan.

‘*A young teenager will just be given medication rather than dealing with the cause. They need to look at different forms of dealing with the problem*.’ – Chris

***Child vs Adult Services***

While a number of those we spoke to had positive experiences in getting help despite the waiting times, it was generally agreed accessing support was a lot harder when they became adults. Currently, CAMHS work with young people up to the age of either 16 or 18, depending on the individual service[[29]](#footnote-29), and many spoke of feeling abandoned after outgrowing their support networks.

*‘There needs to be a transition between CAMHS and Adult services. I fell through the cracks.’ –* Robert.

*‘Mental Health services are absolute rubbish. I went through CAMHS, my doctor was nice, but there was a gap between 17 and 18 years: services just stopped. I felt I got lost in the system.’ –* Emily

*‘If they don’t think you require adult services when you turn 18, you are on your own. You are screwed.’ –* Mark

They felt applying for adult services after CAMHS was a daunting experience, and while CAMHS encourage young people to fill out Transitional Care Plans as they approach 18, many said services should do more to prepare them for the transition so they do not feel abandoned, and like they were starting all over again with a new network of support workers.

Thankfully, part of the aforementioned NHS mental health plan involves a promise that ‘young people will no longer be forced to restart their treatment with adult services when they turn 18[[30]](#footnote-30).’ Removing the need for patients to reapply as adults will help them feel secure in their care, and make the most of opportunities given to them.

***Opportunities To Live A Healthy Life***

Discussions revealed the young people were aware of the importance of keeping fit and healthy, but admitted it wasn’t always easy, in part because of the cost of gyms and leisure centres.

*‘Gyms are really expensive, like £38 a month. Key services are being cut and there is nothing that doesn’t cost anything.’ –* Omar

*‘We have one gym on the island owned by the council.’* – Chloe

*‘I was a member at a gym but you could only go in between 4:30 and 5:30 and I ended up cancelling.’ –* Danielle

Workshop participants felt the price of health facilities could be made cheaper for younger people through concessions and student discounts.

‘*Student discounts should be larger for gyms and stuff, it’s only 10%*’ – Zoe

However, gyms are not the only way to stay fit, and one solution suggested by the young people involved schools making more of an effort to educate children about maintaining a healthy life style in affordable ways.

*‘You should learn as part of your curriculum how to exercise, have a good diet and cook healthy food*.’ – Maria

They also said schools could make nutritious food cheaper in school canteens, which pupils said was more expensive than unhealthy options.

‘*It’s so expensive to get healthy good food.’ –* Sam

However, it was agreed children can only be as healthy as they choose to be, and that schools and governments cannot make children access services.

‘*We’re encouraged to get out and be active but it’s down to you if you do or not*.’ – Jack

Whatever the case, by lowering the prices of public health services and educating children about the best ways to keep active, young people will be more encouraged to choose a healthy lifestyle.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. For local governments, schools and the private sector to provide affordable spaces for young people to go and socialise.
2. Schools to provide a more comprehensive education on mental health conditions, so young people have an understanding of them and can seek treatment early to avoid them becoming mobility barriers.
3. Better advertising of support services in places and on platforms used by young people.
4. More co-operation between CAMHS and adult services, so patients remain supported and do not feel abandoned by the system.

**Access, Connectivity and Employment**

***Public Transport***

The ability to move freely in their community is an important consideration for the young people we spoke to, and for many it underpins their ability to be attend college, go to work or access support. The high price, and at times limited availability, of public transport was a common problem discussed in all the workshops.

‘*Buses and trains are too expensive*.’ – Sarah

‘*Buses are expensive so once you have paid to get to work there is not much of your wage left. The prices have gone up recently but my wage hasn’t.*’ – Cameron

‘*Flights to Europe are cheaper than trains - how*?’ – Harry

*‘Buses here (on the Isle of Wight) are really expensive; a return to the town is £7.’ –* Chloe

‘*My mum has to pay for the bus for my 3 sisters and me and it costs £40 each just for us to go to school and back per term*.’ – Charlotte

Research by the Department of Transport shows in the year ending March 2018 alone, bus journeys across England fell by 85 million[[31]](#footnote-31); the decrease in journeys coinciding with an average 55% price hike in bus fares over the course of the last decade[[32]](#footnote-32). When considered alongside data from the Campaign for Better Transport showing a £104 million drop in bus service funding between 2011 and 2017[[33]](#footnote-33), and the consistent increase in train prices[[34]](#footnote-34), it is accurate to say people are not encouraged to take public transport.

However, the young people did propose their own solutions to make public transport more accessible and enticing. Some suggested making buses free for everyone under a certain age, while others felt subsidising travel and introducing concessional discounts for young people would make accessing services easier and more affordable.

‘*I think it would be an idea to make the bus free for under-16s*.’ – Barney

‘*There needs to be an allowance for young people who are in support lodgings because of us being on a low income*.’ – Ellie

‘*If you sign up to a youth club you should get a free bus pass to be able to get there.’* – Tom

As part of these concessions, the groups argued student cards should be made more widely available, as these provide young people with access to a range of discounts, from travel to retail. The National Union of Students offers a TOTUM discount card for an annual fee, and some universities give out NUS affiliated cards which save money on transport, but not all young people are able to make use of them. Making these cards more accessible and affordable could help encourage young people to use transport.

‘*All colleges should offer student cards*.’ – Philippa

‘*At our college you can’t get student cards because we don’t have student email addresses*.’ – Kieran

It was not just the cost making transport inaccessible to young people. Where buses are provided, they are not always reliable and can run on inconvenient schedules, especially in rural areas.

‘*Buses can be so restrictive - there’s like one an hour*.’ – Sam

‘*The bus near me used to be every half hour, but now a larger one comes every two hours*.’ – Jack

‘*If it’s a small place it’s like it doesn’t matter to them*.’ – Nicola

Those with disabilities also stated public transport is not considerate of their needs.

*‘Being in a wheelchair, if I want to go on the train I have to book it 24 hours in advance. On the buses there is always the issue of buggies in the way.’ –* Sarah

By recognising the importance of public transport to those too young or too financially unstable to drive and taking steps to make it more affordable, whether this be through student cards, fare reductions or concessions, policy makers could give young people the tools to move beyond their geographical restrictions and access vital services that could improve their future prospects.

***Employment***

In many ways, young people are restricted by the income of their parents, but one way in which they can gain some financial independence is through part-time or full-time work. However, finding work is not always an easy task.

*‘You try and get a job and you are told you need experience, but you can’t get any because you can’t get a job without it. Employers make you feel worse about yourself.*’ – Stephen

‘*All companies judge you on your CV and grades, not your personality.’ –* Kim

‘*I can’t think of any skilled jobs in my area. There is a huge lack of opportunities here for young people to gain a skill or improve.’ –* Luke

In general, the young people agreed it is hard to secure work without previous experience. One suggestion was for employers to put more of an emphasis on providing training and qualifications for young workers with little or no experience while on the job, to help improve their future prospects and earn higher salaries.

‘*Employers should upskill us when we are at work so we are motivated*.’ – Ben

‘*There needs to be better paid jobs. No one wants to go to work if they are not paid enough*.’ – Matthew

***Connectivity***

On top of the lack of jobs, the young people said finding work and accessing services often came down to how visible the opportunities were online. This was a problem for those who did not have consistent access to home internet, relying on public Wi-Fi to surf the web.

‘*There are Wi-Fi hotspots about, but they’re always BT and O2 and you can’t always access those. You have to pay*.’ – Daniel.

‘*It’s inconsistent across providers*.’ – Chloe

‘*I don’t like everything being online. I hate how much we rely on the internet. I use it but I hate doing it.*’ – Kiera

They felt free, unencumbered access to the internet would help them locate and make use of important services, and discover job opportunities more easily using public hotspots.

Young people suggested employers and service providers make more of an effort to publicise opportunities through social media, so those looking for work and youth activities would have a greater knowledge of the potential for progression in their local area.

‘*It is all word of mouth, there needs to be a bigger social media presence as that’s where the young people get their information from*.’ – Hannah

*‘There are lots of things going on but they are not advertised and there is nothing of relevance to young people. A youth café opened recently but it is hardly open and they haven’t publicised it or approached us to give us more information.’ –* Luke

If more was done to publicise opportunities through platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram, young people would be more likely to engage with them than they would be if they were promoted through traditional channels and job boards that many would not think to check.

***Media***

Social media usage is an intrinsic part of life for the majority of people in the UK, with young adults being the most prevalent users of social platforms. Data collected as part of Black Dog Media’s Digital in 2018 report revealed there were 44 million active social media users in the UK in January 2018. The average daily usage time was one hour and 54 minutes. Of these users, 9.4 million people aged 18-34 had Facebook accounts; the most popular social platform[[35]](#footnote-35).

Today’s young people have grown up around social media, and therefore these figures are not surprising, with online interaction being a key method of socialising for children and teenagers.

‘*My social media is private but I have 1,300 followers…I don’t know half of them.’ –* Chloe

‘*Social media is a good thing to help new people meet and connect.’* – Indie

The young people agreed the connectivity of social media can be a good thing for social progression, as it allows people to easily share and access new opportunities remotely. As previously stated, the groups felt they engaged more with services and work opportunities advertised on social platforms as opposed to through more traditional methods of searching through specific websites and job boards.

*‘Social media can be good for making connections, but you have to seek them out*.’ – Robert

In terms of accessing work opportunities, they believed their social media usage had an impact on their chances of being hired, both positively and negatively, with the majority understanding the importance of building a network.

*‘I feel pressure to get as many likes and followers as possible online to help me get a job. I think being popular makes you more employable.’ –* Jessica

*‘Your career can be ruined if you have done something bad online in the past. Everyone has to be very careful about what they post*.’ – Matthew

However, a study conducted by the Good Things Foundation suggested people from lower income backgrounds were less likely to connect with social media. It identified over 13 million UK citizens who were limited or non-users of the internet, concluding ‘the majority came from lower income households’[[36]](#footnote-36).

***Unrealistic Competition***

The young people we spoke to focused on the more negative aspects of existing online, despite their continued usage of online platforms and at times saw it as a barrier to social progression.

One common point made in discussions was about social media being a breeding ground for competition amongst young people in terms of financial situation and popularity.

*‘It can take over your life and it makes you feel competitive with people instead of feeling happy for them.’ –* Becky

They also spoke about social media portraying an unrealistic picture of life as many only post positive updates.

‘*There are unreal expectations of how people are living on Facebook. At Christmas young families compete to see who has the most presents under the tree. It’s about validation – they are not happy about themselves.’ –* Gina

‘*Social media makes young people more isolated*.’ – Faith

*‘What happens on social media is not what happens in real life.’ –* Josh

Part of the issue for young people is the close connectivity with celebrity profiles on sites like Twitter and Instagram, which expose them to constant updates about unobtainable levels of wealth and opportunity, which can have an effect on self-esteem.

*‘I think the TV and media gives people unrealistic goals to meet and everyone on TV is trying to be someone very fake.’ –* Charlotte

*‘Everything’s always happy on social media but it’s not real. I think it holds a lot of people back. It knocks your self-esteem*.’ - Alex

The BBC’s education correspondent Sean Coughlan published an article entitled ‘Can social mobility work in a selfie culture’, in which he explores the issue of social media and self-esteem, saying: ‘Social mobility was the idea that everyone deserved a fair chance. How does that sit with celebrity culture and relentless self-promotion, where people are admired for excess and stockpiling wealth?[[37]](#footnote-37)’ It seems similar sentiments are shared by the young people we spoke to.

This competitive environment can have other unintended consequences, with some saying social media usage was detrimental to their mental health, as it has the potential to expose them to triggering content.

‘*With my mental health social media has put me back a lot. On Instagram there is an eating disorder recovery site and it has put me back. You see someone eating less than you and it puts your brain back. It’s toxic and I don’t regard social media as a good thing.’ -* Lucy

*‘If you have an eating disorder you can look on social media and there are diets to follow, websites to follow. It’s not healthy.*’ – Danielle

These anecdotes are supported by the Office for National Statistics, which found a “clear association” between longer time spent on social media and mental health problems[[38]](#footnote-38), and those who did not suffer from detrimental mental health effects said the culture of comparison often lead to bullying online.

To combat the detrimental effects of social media, the young people said more should be done to educate children about staying safe online, so they are less likely to be subjected to unhealthy content and virtual bullying. The responsibility for this should fall upon schools and parents. They also suggested better safety measures and parental controls be introduced by the content creators.

*‘There should be better controls for younger kids.’ –* Barney

*‘There needs to be stricter security, we think facial recognition would help keep people safe online.’ –* Shannon.

A report by the Education Policy Institute on social media and mental health agrees, stating: ‘Restricting a young person’s access to the internet could inhibit the development of the skills needed to handle online risk. The focus of public policy should therefore be on how to develop resilience in young people to potential risks associated with social media use. The role of government should be to work with the industry, schools and families to help improve young people’s emotional wellbeing and resilience and to ensure children are taught and supported to learn digital skills as they start to navigate social media for the first time[[39]](#footnote-39).’

**Recommendations**:

1. To increase subsidies and concessions to reduce the cost of transport.
2. For opportunities to be better advertised on social media, so young people can engage with them remotely.
3. For social media platforms to enforce stricter parental controls so young people are not met with harmful or triggering content.
4. For the government and schools to provide social media education to help young people stay safe and use it effectively.

**Conclusion**

Young people have opened up and told us about the barriers they believe are preventing them for getting on in life.

They have spoken about the need for schools to shake up their curriculum to include lessons on life skills which will give them a solid footing when starting out after leaving mainstream education. Their frustrations at not being given adequate careers advice when in school, seem easily rectified by the appointment of a dedicated careers service in every school.

A collaboration between local governments and the private sector could radically transform not only the housing sector young people struggle to rent in, but the transport prohibiting them from freely moving around their communities.

And finally, an acceptance and understanding of the way young people consume their information on social media by the professionals advertising services, support and jobs, could open up opportunities and help to hundreds of individuals currently left in the dark.

We ask you to listen to what these young people have said and to consider their recommendations for change.

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