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Mind our Future:

YOUNG PEOPLES' PRIORITIES, RESILIENCE
AND VISIONS BEYOND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Young People in the Lead Team



The research team:

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<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/about/our-people/young-people-in-the-lead-wales>

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Introduction

The Young People in the Lead Wales Team (YPITL) are a team of young people appointed by the National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) in Wales to make sure young people's voices are included in the work that they do.

ProMo-Cymru, in partnership with Ministry of Life (MoL), worked with this team to design and deliver a research project over a ten-week period. The research team shared a presentation of the findings with members of the TNLCF team on the 19th November 2020.

Research aims

The research aims decided by TNCLF and YPITL were:

- To help TNLCF understand the priorities of young people across Wales.
- To help TNLCF identify what would make a difference to the resilience of young people in Wales, now and in the future.
- To explore young people's visions for Wales' future beyond Covid-19.
- To uncover voices that are unheard.
- To help young people from communities across Wales join together.
- To have an impact, no matter how small.

The research also focused on what resilience meant to young people.

Research design and the research plan

Our approach was to conduct a series of structured interviews and focus groups and to combine them with digital surveys to targeted groups.

We decided on this reason as the young researchers were in the unique position of being located in various geographical regions and from different backgrounds throughout Wales.

The young researchers facilitated structured interviews with members of their communities which included:

- Rural and urban communities
- Farming communities
- First language Welsh speakers
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Ethnic minority groups
- Faith Groups
- Sports groups
- Universities
- Schools and colleges
- Those not in education, employment or training

The digital survey was disseminated through direct engagement with professionals

The main priorities identified by young people

Mental health

The priority mentioned the most in both the surveys and the structured interviews was mental health. The issues were interlinked with many of the other priorities such as community and green spaces, as well as having access to education and the arts.

"Mental health plays a big part in young people's lives and it has a knock on effect on everything"

In addition, it was widely believed that there was insufficient access to mental health services and many respondents felt that these services were not addressing young people's priorities well enough. Transitions from youth to adult mental health services was also raised as something that needed to be improved and this issue has been raised elsewhere (Welsh Youth Parliament, 2019). Some said that there was a lack of signposting and mental health services were too poorly funded to address the needs of young people in Wales. One young person said:

"The access to mental health services was really slow. There was very little

support to make me better to get me back into education. I made myself more ill by working and there were no services to support me"

The following quotations relate to comments from young people on the positive impact of green spaces on mental health:

"The outdoors - because it provides a place of mindfulness and enjoyment. An escape from any pressures in society"

"Green spaces are very important. It also ties into mental health I suppose. I think it's important for both physical and mental health. Well, it does help, the air we breathe and the ecosystems and nature give a better frame of mind. I do love the green spaces we have."

In addition, many young people reported that the arts had helped them cope with the pandemic.

Employment

The second biggest priority for young people was employment. Employment was regarded as important for young people as a result of the role it plays in their access to opportunities and acquiring independence. One interviewee raised:

"I want to be in a job that allows me to buy a house, raise a family and so on."

Another echoed the role of the importance of employment on their futures:

"It's important to be able to build towards a future."

While another emphasised how this allowed other priorities to be achieved:

"Because obviously given the climate and the uncertainty of unemployment, it sits at the top of the pyramid and having some form of security moving forward."

Many young people felt that they did not have adequate access to employment opportunities and in turn, were unable to save enough money to leave home. While there was the perception that employment support services did exist, the view was held by many that there was not adequate signposting to access these opportunities.



Community and being a part of it

The term 'community' was also raised as a priority by young people. There was a great deal of perceived demand and need for 'safe spaces' and socialising spaces specific to young people.

"Community and being involved. Often young people are put aside as not being involved."

"One of the main priorities I personally have is the ability to socialise in the community in which I live."

Furthermore, this notion of 'community' and being part of 'a wider community' such as through volunteering and having a voice in decisions being made locally or nationally was regarded as important for mental health:

"Without my social part of my life then I feel as if I would be very lonely and not have the fun and memories that I have"

Informal education and life skills

Another key priority for young people was informal education and having the opportunity to develop life skills.

“Access to training - especially how to get a job, write CVs etc. Important life things they don't teach you in school.”

Another echoed these views and described how this was linked to greater equality in society such as through social mobility:

“(It's) how social mobility comes about, it's how you can transform what someone can do for the rest of their life.”

Education was also raised in terms of being a tool for addressing inequalities and other social issues:

“The best we can do is educate people on LGBTQ, racial and poverty matters.”

The topic of life skills has come up in youth consultations previously, for example by the Welsh Youth Parliament (2019) and the UK Youth Parliament (2018).

Pressures regarding the environment, sustainability and responsibility

There was a lot of anxiety about how young people will be the ones to deal with the consequences of a changing climate and plastic waste:

“The environment - the climate crisis is the biggest crisis facing this planet and if we don't prioritise the environment there will be no future to look forward to.”

The following quotation highlights one young person's view regarding valuing local, in addition to global environmental issues:

“The Environment - as well as environmental issues that need to be tackled on a global scale, there are always things closer to home that can be tackled; loss of wildlife, lots of people cannot name lots of birds and trees and therefore may be more disconnected from environmental damage.”

Housing

One interviewee held the view that housing in rural Wales was hard to purchase because of the high proportion of second home ownership in that region:

"It's important to be able to live somewhere and have independence and not live with my parents."

This was reiterated by another interviewee:

"(I would like to be) able to buy a house in my area where I grew up"

Housing was also raised in relation to the lack of employment opportunities available:

"It's almost impossible to leave home and even harder to not be renting for the rest of your life"

The lack of opportunity to gain finance left young people in the difficult position of not feeling able to afford a house and get independence.

Funding the arts

The arts have been an escape and a source of refuge for young people during Covid-19.

"Accessible arts activities. Through the arts I've learned a lot of important life lessons. "

The rising costs of access to these services was also raised:

"Funding into arts programmes specifically into music in counties - on a school wide and countywide level."

"Since I was in year five to leaving school I've gone from everything being free to having to pay for lessons and instruments"

Summarising young people's priorities

There were many issues that were seen as important for young people from our consultation. There are also many issues that have not been raised that are also important in their own ways and as this section has clearly illustrated they are all interwoven factors which contribute to the overall wellbeing and life chances of young people aiming to get on in adult life.

Many young people said that services weren't addressing their priorities and again effective signposting was raised as an issue alongside funding to address the priorities of young people in Wales. The following diagram illustrates the Research Team's interpretation of the interwoven nature of different themes highlighted in the research.

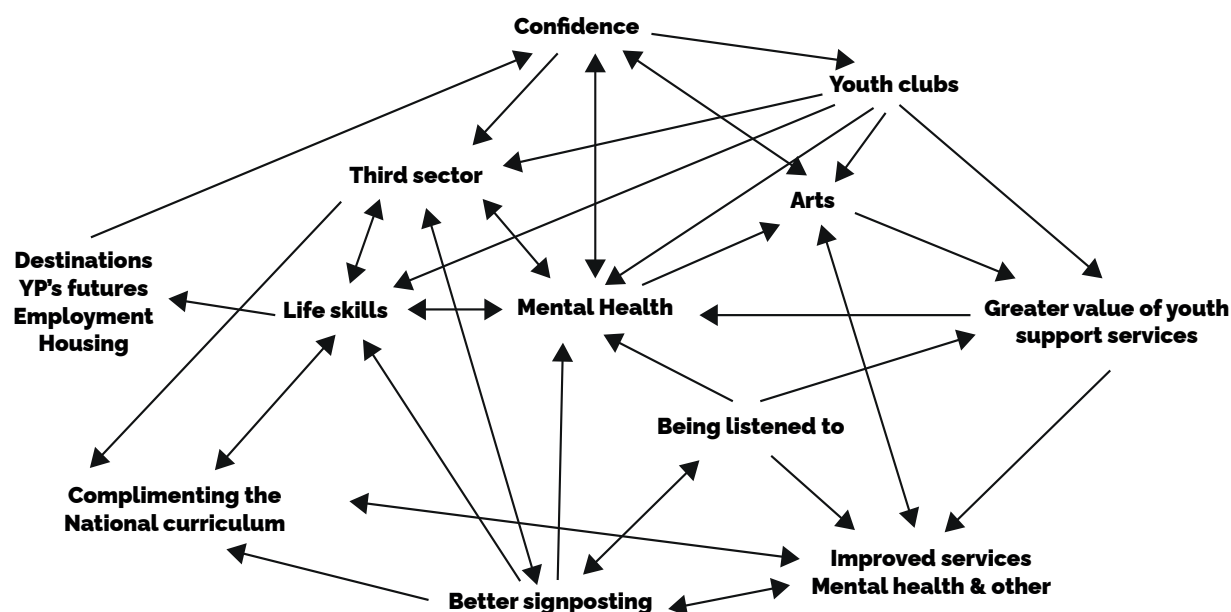


Figure 1. A draft conceptual model of key themes raised by young

Young people's resilience

When asked "What do you think could improve young people's resilience?" signposting, improved services, nurturing self-confidence, improved representation and simply having someone to talk to were the key suggestions made.

The following quotations illustrate respondents' views when asked about improving their resilience. One young person expressed the need for greater support to build people's capacity and perspective:

"Personal capacity - not dwelling, being equipped with the tools to take a step back. Getting a new perspective on things"

Another raised the importance of having support and knowing that there is support available:

"I get a lot of support, and I know there are people there for me, and knowing they're there is what helps me bounce back."

This was echoed by another, in regards to facilitating and empowering others:

"Support on how to help people help themselves. Prevention is better than a cure."

Support was also raised in relation to encouragement:

"Encouragement to take up other hobbies and passions would have been helpful"

And indeed the nature in which people offered support was raised:

"Neutral and non judgemental that I could open up to and talk to"

One young person said that confidence was a key factor in improving their resilience:

"I feel that I need to build my confidence and that would help me improve my resilience."

In relation to improving resilience, one young person spoke of the importance of improving access to services through signposting:

"(Make) wellbeing activities more accessible - I shouldn't have to have loads of money or be at crisis point to get help."

Another spoke of the challenges that they have faced contributing to their resilience:

"I've dealt with many challenges over the years and I've learnt how to bounce back from heartbreak, disappointment and failure because there's always tomorrow and how I feel is only temporary."

Visions of Wales beyond Covid-19

Respondents were asked “How positive do you feel about your future beyond Covid-19?”

The data showed that the majority of respondents were positive about their futures beyond Covid-19.

50%

POSITIVE

34%

UNSURE

15%

NEGATIVE

Over 50% showed a level of positivity regarding their futures beyond Covid-19, while over a third (34%) were unsure. Less than 15% were either somewhat negative or very negative about their futures. The results show remarkable positivity and optimism despite the pandemic. It is interesting to compare this research to what we have seen in the media.

When asked to give further detail about supporting young people's priorities, responses could be grouped into three themes:

‘Bearing the brunt’: Wellbeing and mental health

One young person spoke of the uncertainty that they faced during the pandemic and the impact of this on their wellbeing:

“The world feels so uncertain right now it's hard to look ahead with positivity”

Throughout the responses, the word ‘uncertain’ appeared frequently and Covid-19 had clearly heavily influenced the nature of people's answers. Young people spoke of the impact of not only Covid-19 but many other events impacting their lives. This perhaps suggests that many young people

had internalised the view that their generation had repeatedly borne the brunt of challenging times:

"Our generation have had so many crises piled onto us"

On a more positive note, some young people did appear to feel better equipped than other generations in relation to issues such as wellbeing and mental health. Many held the view that there was a need to talk about mental health issues with their

peers, families and others. They also recognised that mental health was helped by keeping a balanced lifestyle:

"Physical health goes hand in hand with mental health."

Another spoke of the need for better mental health services:

"Mental health support, counselling services, CAMHS, programmes to train teachers on how to deal with mental health issues, the rest will follow."

Representation of voice, being 'heard' and misinformation

The way in which young people's voices are heard was another key theme which arose in the data. Young people spoke about the need to be listened to, as one respondent said:

"Being listened to and being heard are two different things"

In addition to whether young people were meaningfully listened to or not, how their voices were represented was also raised. In support of the previous examples one young person spoke of the ways in which their views were taken on board only when it suited others:

"Listen to young people. Young people aren't actually invited into conversations that concern them but if they are, it's at a later date..."

This young person went on to suggest that young people unfairly received blame for many issues:

"... Also, young people feel that they are viewed as a scapegoat when it comes to things."

One young person spoke about how they felt they were represented following incidents during the pandemic:

"The press interviewed the loudest, most party animal people and put them on the news."

Young people were clearly frustrated with how their voices are represented in the wider world and the previous two quotations both speak of feeling unfairly scapegoated. There was also an acknowledgement of the impact of social media on young people's views. Mis-information in social media was seen as a source of unwanted polarisation in society:

"People are becoming so left wing OR so right wing - People feel like they have to commit themselves to one side. Rise in radicalism."

Young people often felt that they were being bombarded with information and were finding it hard to filter in an age of social media.

As such there was the belief that something should be done about the level of misinformation and the impact of social media on them.

Resources and avoiding the tokenistic involvement of young people in funding decision making

Respondents also spoke about how they felt funding should be used. These responses had a striking resemblance with the previous section in relation to young people feeling as though their input was listened to inconsistently. When asked 'How should funding be used to support young peoples' priorities?' one young person spoke about the importance of funding going towards those it was intended to reach:

"Funding could be used more wisely. There are a lot of places that get funding but the money doesn't go toward what they said it would go towards."

It was also suggested that young people should be given more control in deciding where funding is allocated:

"Young people should have more control, they should say where it goes and who decides where it goes."

There were also views that funding and resources could be directed towards representing young people's voices more effectively:

"I think funding should be used towards funding young people's voices to be heard. Also young people would be more likely of giving their opinions towards other young people and therefore I believe that a young people's lead would be a priority with the funding."

Young people are clearly frustrated with the levels in which their views are being listened to and acted upon. Their points relate not only to funding, but also decision making and discussions on a more general basis.

Conclusion

Drawing on a range of research methods the project sought to learn about the views of a broad range of young people across Wales. As a result of the YPITL team being geographically located across different regions of Wales and being members of various groups (young farmers, sports groups, asylum seeker/refugees) the project had the particular benefit of the peer researchers having unique access to these groups.

When focusing on visions of Wales beyond Covid-19 the majority of respondents were positive about their futures. When asked to give further detail about supporting young people's priorities, responses could be grouped into three key themes. The first related to well being and mental health demonstrating the prominence of this theme throughout the overall research. Representation of voice was also a key theme and young people often felt that their views were listened to inconsistently. There was also the acknowledgement of the impact of social media on young people's views. Finally, in relation to the use of funding, young people's views suggest that they should be given more control in deciding where funding should be allocated.

This research report was largely exploratory in nature drawing on qualitative research methods that have uncovered some remarkable findings. However, there are many things that this peer-led research report cannot claim to be. It is important to stress that these views cannot be taken to represent all young people's views across Wales. Furthermore, there are many themes and issues that exist in the lives of young people that may not have been identified within this research. However, it has highlighted the interwoven nature of many issues within young people's lives in Wales. Perhaps the open and transparent way in which this research project has been set up provides a positive way in which power holders can involve the views of young people in being at the forefront of decision making, paving a brighter future for improving young people's resilience in Wales. This report also includes some practical steps that could be taken to improve young people's resilience through better signposting, earlier mental health intervention and joined-up services.