Young People's Engagement

"New Normal? It's anything but"

Outreach & Online Key Messages
September to November 2020

Covid-19 ‘National Lockdown’ Measures were relaxed in July 2020 and over the Summer, we visited Kirklees Parks and Open Spaces to gather the thoughts and feelings of the young people we met…

As promised, we returned to the places where we had found the youngest people to see what, if anything had changed and how they had found ‘venturing out’ and returning to their school, college or employment.

Here is an update summary of our learning.

This is a snapshot of some of our young people’s thoughts and lived experience. It should be viewed in this context and is not claiming to be representative of all young people.

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Where did we re-visit and what did we do?

The main purpose of the outreach sessions was to speak with any children* and young people we met about their thoughts and feelings around covid-19, the current restrictions and listen to anything they thought was important.

Conversations were organic, they focussed on 'checking in' and were 'young person led.'

We saw 145 young people this time, visiting across the locality between 7th September and 01st October 2020. 80 young people actively engaged in conversations.

To capture some voices of young people who were not out and about. We have used an online engagement quick link. We have included the responses to date.

In Huddersfield Central, we visited:

The Town Centre
Greenhead Park
Lindley
Joint sessions were undertaken with the Detached Youth Work Team at Rawthorpe, Ravensknowle Park, Dalton and the Brackenhall area.

In the Colne Valley, we visited:
Slaithwaite
Linthwaite
Marsden Skate Park
Cowlersley

In the Holme Valley we visited:
The Sand's Playing Fields
Honley
New Mill

We have also collected the voices of young people who haven't been out and about, by using an anonymous online question.

We've shared this on our Socials and Colleagues to circulate with the young people they work with or know.

In North Kirklees, we visited:
Cleckheaton
Mirfield
Robertown
Heckmondwike

In Denby Dale & Kirkburton, we visited:
Lepton, Grange Moor & Shepley

We saw young people in Marsden who we had met in Lindley whilst undertaking this engagement.
This mirrored our experiences in the Summer, that some young people travel long distances, independently to reach their friends.

*We've defined children as aged 11 and below. Those aged 12 and over are referred to as 'young people'

Children & Young People's Views on 'Covid-19'

Children and young people naturally discussed the pandemic, as part of our conversations.

Whereas in the Summer months, there had been a sense of optimism and young people seemed accepting of the necessity of change, the sessions undertaken since September did not reflect this. Most young people spoke about the challenges they are now facing, mood appeared lower and unless prompted, many struggled to find positive aspects to the current situation.

Here are the key themes that emerged…

"Two have caught it in my year group, the first week back, I won't be sent home though as I've not been with them" (young person 15)

Very few young people had experienced Covid-19 directly, when we had last spoke to them. Now young people are reporting they are aware of friends and peers who have caught it.

"It's time to just get on and live with it now. I'm at the point where I'm just going to carry on like I did before" (young person 17)

Being back in town and with friends had marked a transition for some young people.

"What's the worst that can happen? I catch it, am unwell and I get better. People like my age, we seem to be ok" (Young person15)

Some young people didn't show an awareness that although they may be able to recover quickly, should they catch the virus, that they may pass it on to others, who may be vulnerable.

"We've all had it. My Mum works in the NHS" (young person 16)

Some young people felt if they'd already tested positive and recovered, they would be ok if they met people who were contagious.

"I sit all day in a classroom with these two (points at friends) How can it be that I can do that but then aren't really meant to sit here, in the park. If I was going to catch it here, why wouldn't I catch it there…" (young person 15)

Young people struggled with the idea that school or college was safer than being outside in the fresh air with their friends. When we discussed 'covid safe' measures like mask wearing and distancing being in place in school, young people suggested that at break and on school transport, these measures weren't possible or maintained. They struggled to see a rationale for the restrictions preventing them from meeting other households, outdoors.

What do these key messages tell us?

- Young people are starting to experience covid, within their friendship and peer circles. This was less common when we had engaged with groups outdoors, over the summer months.
- Despite us managing to see 180 young people over the month, it was observed that our parks and open spaces were less busy. Some young people were walking from the shops or home, they were not all congregating or socialising. The reasoning for this would need more exploration, but it could be due to the colder weather, darker evenings, young people being tired or busy after their return to school; or it could indicate more were following localised restrictions.
- Some areas were quieter than others. The area's we've visited in North Kirklees had less young people out and about, than in the South.
- Mask wearing was observed and discussed. As most young people wanted to enter shops or may have required them for school, they had a mask with them.
- Groups tended to be small, in less than 6. Even at busier areas like skate parks, young people stood in small groups, social distancing wasn't always evident within the small groups.
- A common theme in the young people's conversations, was that they felt 'less at risk' of negative outcomes from the virus. This seemed to be rationalised by the knowledge that some of their peers had tested positive but been asymptomatic or that those who had showed symptoms, were only mild.
- Not all young people appeared to understand that although they may be 'less vulnerable', they could pass the virus onto people who may be at higher risk. Grandparents were often identified as 'vulnerable'.

Young Peoples reflections on their return to school or college:

What do these the key messages tell us?

Primary and middle school aged children

- We saw very few primary young people this time around. The evenings were darker, and this may explain the lack of children 11 or under on the streets and in our parks and open spaces.
- We did see some children on earlier sessions, playing football. They explained that their return had been 'alright'. The biggest changes they spoke of had been the frequent handwashing and changes to start and break times. Some seemed concerned/anxious that they may be asked to, at some point, wear masks.

Secondary age young people

- There was a resounding "we aren't coping" from KS4 young people, across Kirklees. This was particularly about 'keeping up' with work expectations, since they had returned in September. KS4 students showed the most difficulty in managing the current expectations, the worries of catching up on missed studies and the implications of possible ongoing periods of being sent home, due to 'collapsed bubbles'.
- Some young people had assumed that part of the reason they were being excessively assessed, was to ensure there was enough 'data' to issue them an exam grade. They seemed unclear in the reasoning for the volume of assessments and pace at which they had received them.
- The idea that work was 'all encompassing' appeared prevalent. Many young people spoke about getting up and going to school, staying on for additional teaching afterwards and then returning home to online learning and assessments. They struggled to see anything 'outside' of education. The perceived pressure to 'study' even remained at weekends, as there was a lack of recreational or social activities outside of the home to offer distraction, relief and create distance. Young people spoke of being 'stuck' in the space of their academic work, IT equipment and home learning.

Post 16 young people

- Face to face teaching arrangements varied from one provision to another and some young people had experienced more time on campus than others. Those who discussed a 'week in, week at home' approach felt their transition to College had worked well, enabling them to meet their new peer group and familiarise themselves with their new college. Some young people had not been on campus or had minimal face to face contact with staff and peers. This saw them speak with uncertainty, loss and they appeared unsettled about the transition into further education.
- Similar feelings were apparent for the post 16 young people we met, as those of the KS4 age young people, that academic work had become an all-encompassing; the prevailing current focus of their lives.
- Some young people questioned if the pressure to catch up/get a head was a way of ensuring further 'lockdowns' didn't see them getting further behind.

"We've only been back a week and I've 9 assignments They keep saying 'you need to catch up'. Catch up how [holds palms up] it's not like I've been on holiday. We've missed 6 months of work" (young person 15)

Young people discussed the academic expectations to be relentless. The felt online learning meant they had no real separation between school and home.

"I tried to keep up with home learning through lockdown, but it was all power-points and computer stuff. If you could learn like that, why would you need a teacher?" (young person, 14)

"If I have to use Google classroom again, I will go nuts" (young person 12)

Online methods appear to have been the understandable choice for teaching and learning from March to July, however these didn't appear to be preferred by some young people.

"You wear your mask in the corridor, you sit in bubbles in class, but then you eat without masks in the hall and there are no bubbles on the school bus" (young person 14)

Young people didn't see the 'Covid Safe' measures as being consistent in managing risk.

"2 people in my year tested positive today. They've started sending people home. What's the point, I'm going to be back home again in the next two weeks" (young person 15)

The uncertainty of 'constant change' and the possibility of being sent home to isolate, appeared to weigh heavy on the minds of some young people.

"It's been a really hard thing, moving from school to college now. I've been there nearly 2 weeks and I've not met a single friend yet" (young person 16)

The year 13 students appeared to manage settling back in due to their already established connections with their college and friends. The year 12 students were facing the unknown.

"It's not so bad now I'm getting used to it. We know we have to wear our masks, wash our hands and it's just normal now" (young person15).

Conversations with some young people, by October had started to show that acceptance of the new routines and changes had occurred.

Mental Health and Wellbeing:

"If I was to rate where I am right now? Probably a 4 out of 10" (young person 17)

The inability to socialise with friends, regain a structure and do regular activities all were things that made this young person's mood low.

"It's not seeing my family. I'm really struggling now with not being able to see my family" (young person 13)

Although young people understand how to maintain relationships using indirect methods, the lack of contact with their extended families, especially Grandparents was a strong and re-occurring theme.

"Having safe places to go, outside, where everyone gets on, like this skate park, that's what has kept me going" (Child 10)

Social experiences which can be shared with friends are important! Helping young people navigate returning to activities, safely, is important to them.

"If we could have some exercise in parks, that would be good, we don't do any PE in school at the moment" (young person 15)

Sport and recreation was known as a stress buster to the young people. Some young people were confident enough to organise their own tournaments and matches (observed on MUGA'S, Skate Parks and Football Fields). However, some young people didn't know how to do this alone. They needed 'coaching' through the rules and skills needed to play a game.

"I suppose if I think hard It gave me the time to learn a new instrument, watching YouTube". (Young Person 15)

Some young people who had the privilege of 'resource' could find some positives in the situation.

"I'd been referred for counselling before lockdown, when my appointment finally came, it was on the phone. That's not really worked for me" (young person 16)

Although services have had to operate remotely, the impact of the changes on some young people was evident.

"It's like, we know that we shouldn't be here, it's not the rules and it's a risk coming out. But something's got to give, and I don't want it to be my mental health" (young person 16)

Young people seem to be employing decisional balance when making choices. They are aware of the risks and 'rules' and consider these when deciding to socialise.

What do these key messages tell us?

- The initial 'buoyancy' of young people, which was observed in the Summer months, no longer seemed apparent. The young people we met didn't tend to naturally offer positive experiences, associated with the current situation. Some could 'find' positives when prompted, but this usually took effort.
- Some young people had seen grandparents and extended family when the lockdown had been relaxed in July. However, the localised restrictions and return to school/college had again meant that direct contact with their families had ceased. This was a common theme and appeared to 'weigh heavy' on the minds of the young people we spoke with.
- Physical exercise and fresh air were identified by the young people as ways to stay well.
- Whereas large groups of young men were witnessed to mobilise their own games of football or basketball, girls were not generally observed to do this. The girls we spoke to, told us that PE lessons at school had been the only exercise they had undertaken, prior to lockdown. Now they were not undertaking PE lessons in school, they were not doing any regular exercise. When we asked if they would feel able to go to a park and run/play, they stated not. However, they did say if organised coaching was happening in local parks and recs, they'd attend.
- Young people said "they just wanted somewhere to go" when we discussed them being out and about. They were aware of the risks associated with being out, but also seemed to have insight regarding their emotional wellbeing. They spoke of the need to see friends, who they spent most of their days with in school and struggled to see how being sat outdoors was any different.
- There was a repetition that recs and outdoor spaces had continued to provide 'safe places' for young people to exercise or take a break.
- Young people's discussions generally were fixed around the anxiety of change, loss and uncertainty. Identifying knowledge and skills around resilience, adaptation, coping and optimism remained a challenge for many of the young people we spoke with. They spoke of the current focus being about the risks they posed and the impact of the pandemic on their learning. A holistic approach to 'staying well' didn't emerge in conversations.
- Experiences of attending physical and mental health appointments were discussed as part of conversations. Some services had been dramatically reduced, in the views of the young people and there had been disruption to routine.

Personalised Stories:

"I was excluded from school in March. I didn't hear anything about what next, who would be taking me on or where I should go. I thought I would get my predicted grades, but I've got I've nothing. No one's called. I don't know what I'm going to do..." **(young person 16)**

"It's been a really tough few years, I've had to move home, give up many aspects of my life and now, well my whole life is on hold. My practical course at college has limited teaching and I'm unsure how we will complete it without the assessments. I pay private for my hormone treatment and even the clinic has suspended that...
But, I'm strong. I've never given up. Why? Because I always look long term" **(young person who is transitioning-17)**

"I go to a group for young people (with SEND). Its once a week and I love seeing the workers and my friends. It's not been able to run since March ad it's great they are reopening this week, but because of the rules they've made it shorter now. Because, I live out here (8 miles from town), It's too long travelling to get there, just for an hour and a half, then come back" **(young person 15)**

"Me, I'm not doing so great. I was due in court, in April. That's been put off and it depends what happens in that one to how another thing I'm up for, goes. Until the first one is sorted, I've no answers for the other. I just don't really know what will happen. I just want to keep out of trouble and get it over with" **(young person 17)**

Although children and young people are generally understanding and complimentary about our town, our services and the staff, who they know work hard to support them, there have been some stories that cause worry and show the very real impact of this pandemic, for some of our most vulnerable young people.

Here are some first-hand accounts of those who are really struggling through, very complex situations, with varying levels of support.

We appreciate that we've been unable to 'explore fully' these situations and speak with the staff or provisions which these young people attend. However, this is their understanding or interpretation of the situation. It is their voice and our role to share it.

These young people have been signposted, as part of our conversations to services who can support.

"My Dad just hasn't coped on furlough. He's Not managing well at all. It's been hard. There have been 7 of us (5 teens 2 adults) all stuck in a 3-bed house" **(young person 15)**

"I got a call during lockdown to say my counselling and therapy will stop, because I'd need to go to adult services, how am I too old for children's services? I'm still 16!?!" **(young person 16)**

Next Steps…

We are not claiming this engagement is representative of all children and young people in Kirklees. It's the views and opinions of those who volunteered their time to speak with us 'out and about' and who filled in an anonymous online form.

However, it offers some insight into the 'world' and lives of some local young people as we move into the phase of 'living with Covid'.

To stay safe and manage the 'risks' of Covid-19

Many of the young people we spoke with, feel their age and general health are protective factors against Covid-19. They didn't seem to truly understand the 'risks' associated with spreading the virus to more vulnerable people.

Definitions of vulnerability varied. Although many young people saw their grandparents as vulnerable, there wasn't much understanding demonstrated outside of this (eg parents, siblings, other children and adults).

Some young people are very aware of the risks of meeting people from outside their 'household bubble,' outdoors. However, they will choose to continue to do this. Reinforcing 'hands, face, space' and other ways to reduce risk would be beneficial.

Returning to Education

Could there be consideration for 'assessment or homework free' periods, where mental health and wellbeing is instead a focus? For example, asking children and young people to complete safe activities or exercise they enjoy? Some young people appeared to need 'permission' to step away from learning for self-care.

Skills around managing time, adapting to change and activities that promote resilience may also help young people reach balance.

There still seems to have been little discussion around alternate learning and career paths, but instead a desire to return to the known structures.

Online/independent learning isn't for all. As bubbles collapse how can the needs of those who struggle to use online methods, be met?

Maintaining Well-Being

Can face to face approaches occur safely in your service? If so-please do it! Phone calls and online appointments don't seem so bad when they are combined with some direct work.

Consider again how we communicate with young people. Young people are showing confusion and a lack of understanding about what is happening and why. This seems to be confounded by the different messages and approaches across different settings. Ensure explanations are honest, clear and consistent.

Physical exercise in local areas has been suggested, repeatedly, by young people as a way to stay well, distract from worries and prevent ongoing isolation. Can small 'booked' coaching, supported exercise sessions or activities happen in parks and open spaces?

From October to December 2020, we will be continuing conversations with young people, with a focus on reaching those, who we haven't been able to speak with in parks and open spaces. Those who we haven't seen 'out and about'. We will return to some of the places we have visited and go to some of the places we have not.

We will listen to the young people's stories of whatever is important to them and communicate what they tell us, to our decision makers and partners. An addendum report will be produced by Mid-December 2020 to share these key messages.

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The Our Voice webpage is here: https://www.kirkleessafeguardingchildren.co.uk/young-peoples-voice/
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