

Report Summary

Young people's perceptions of provision and opportunities in Suffolk

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report reflects the voices and perspectives of seventy-seven young people from the ages of 11-18 years old across communities living in both urban and rural areas of Suffolk. Young people volunteered to participate in focus group discussions, with creative mapping activities, across Ipswich, Claydon, Leiston, Lowestoft, Felixstowe and Haverhill. Young people are frequently excluded from decision making, even in matters that impact directly on their lives¹. Subsequently, emphasis has been rightly placed upon ensuring that young people have an active participatory voice in shaping programme development and service provision.

Recent research², which sought to identify young people's perceptions of engagement and opportunities in Ipswich, revealed that young people have a vast array of concerns about their local communities. In particular, the influx of gang violence within their local areas, having negative implications for their sense of safety and wellbeing, in addition to provision of mental health support and employment opportunities. Prior to engaging in countywide responses to community issues, it was considered important to identify what young people's perceptions were of their local community across different geographic locations in Suffolk, to develop an evidence base and inform future youth provision.

¹ Lansdown (2011) Every Child's Right to be Heard: A resource guide on the UN Committee on the rights of the child general comment No.12: https://www.unicef.org/french/adolescence/files/Every_Childs_Right_to_be_Heard.pdf

² Tyrrell, K (2018) Youth Engagement: Exploring methods of engagement and feedback on the Ipswich Opportunity Area delivery plan with young people. Ipswich: University of Suffolk.

Table 1: Summary of the qualitative findings

	Theme	Description
1	'There isn't anything for us here'	Young people were frustrated with the lack of things to do within their local communities. Particularly young people living in rural communities, in which travel to alternative destinations was crucial. <i>'There isn't even nothing good about Ips man, its dead' (Preston, aged 17, Ipswich)</i>
2	Prospects and perceived opportunities	The perceived lack of things to do within communities was compounded by the view that this was also a barrier in gaining work experience and employment opportunities. <i>'I guess it's also job opportunities as well, people our age are all trying to get jobs, so we can get money to go places, like if there were job opportunities in our area...'</i> (Latisha, aged 15, Haverhill) <i>'There might be things, but they don't spread the word enough, they keep it quiet'</i> (Aaron, aged 15, Lowestoft)
3	Community safety	The fear of crime, violence and gang activity within local communities is negatively influencing young people's movements and perceptions of space. Discussion of gang activity was more likely in areas outside of Ipswich. <i>'Christchurch park is ok, but any other park is a no go, like chantry park I only went there when I was young and even then I saw a lot of drug use and gangs, I wouldn't go there now'</i> (Ollie, aged 13, Claydon)
4	Disconnect and social exclusion	Young people described feelings of disconnect and social exclusion, with regards to a lack of accessible transport, the cost implications of engaging in activities as well as perceived inaction when voicing their concerns and opinions on matters which directly affect their everyday lives. <i>'I wanted to go to sixth form; it's going to cost me £900 a year for transport wherever I go'</i> (Amelia, aged 16, Leiston) <i>'Anything we do say, it's not going to matter to them, this has happened so many times, it won't change'</i> (Kieran, aged 17, Ipswich)
5	Supportive, safe and social spaces	Most consistently, young people described the need for safe indoor social spaces to belong, spend time with friends and seek additional support if needed. <i>'A place to just sit down, hang about and talk, like a living room.'</i> (Lottie, aged 13, Leiston) <i>'Somewhere that feels safe, like it's yours'</i> (Amy, aged 11, Lowestoft)

Overall, young people describe a complexity of different challenges and issues they face within their local communities and across wider Suffolk. In particular, they expressed a feeling of overall exclusion and a lack of social and employment opportunities. Furthermore, limited accessibility to public transport routes, but also the cost of travel and activities was a key issue for young people, particularly within rural areas of Suffolk. The most consistent message was a lack of access to safe social spaces, in which young people have a sense of ownership and can relax amongst friends. Moreover, it appears that there is a lack of coherent, targeted messages toward young people themselves to raise awareness of opportunities. As a result of this, a number of recommendations and actions are suggested:

1. Development of safe, supportive social spaces

The most consistent overarching theme was that young people suggested that they need safe social spaces, to be with friends, socialise and engage in activities. Young people described the idea of a café or an indoor space, much like a youth centre, which has games and resources available to them. A sustainable, accessible place to belong, with the ownership placed upon young people themselves. Many also suggested that they would like the opportunity to receive additional support, in the form of youth workers, mental health advice, places to obtain information regarding careers and employment. It would be useful to consider models of youth provision already in place, to develop similar services within local communities, which could facilitate community cohesion, break down the likelihood of desistance and provide opportunities for young people to access provision and supportive role models. For example, young people within Ipswich suggested that instead of focusing primarily upon town centres, areas in which young people can reside within their local community would be of benefit. Not only will this provide safe spaces for young people to belong, but it will also offer them services and support which aid in developing protective factors³ and fulfilling basic needs.

³ Working with young people at risk – what works from young people’s perspectives: Safeguarding Children and Young People at Risk of County Lines: <http://www.suffolkscb.org.uk/assets/Safeguarding-Topics/Gangs/County-Lines-and-Gangs-Resource-Pack-2018.pdf>

2. Coherent and consistent marketing of opportunities

Whilst there are multiple positive opportunities and activities for young people across Suffolk provided by both voluntary and public sector organisations, young people feel as if they are unaware of what is on offer to them, and these messages are not conjoined in a helpful interconnected way. This lack of awareness highlights the need for an overarching cohesive response with coherent and consistent marketing of opportunities in Suffolk. There are a multitude of ways in which this could be done to encourage engagement with young people and there is no one-size fits all approach⁴. However, it would initially be of use to map the current provision for young people across the county. Using a variety of different mediums would be useful to ensure there is maximum reach, including social media advertising, website directory of activities by area, school visits, community group visits, letters home (as suggested by one young person), creation of a geo-location application as a central source of activities and events for young people. Whatever multitude of approaches are utilised, the critical factor is that marketing is consistent and developed alongside young people, with the purpose of effective use of current resources to meet the needs of young people across the county.

3. Addressing social exclusion: Travel and finances

Feelings of social exclusion and disconnect was frequently referred to by young people, with regards to accessibility issues. These predominantly took the form of reduced travel opportunities to access activities and further education, in addition to financial restraints in using public transport, but also deploying current provision. Organisations may benefit from working together and toward more affordable activities, which reduce the exclusionary divide. In addition, local travel companies within Suffolk should be consulted regarding the cost of travel for young people to see if this can be altered, specifically within rural areas (for example, Leiston, Claydon, Haverhill, in which access to youth provision, further education and facilities are limited), for those facing economic inequality⁵.

⁴ Tyrrell, K (2018) Youth Engagement: Exploring methods of engagement and feedback on the Ipswich Opportunity Area delivery plan with young people. Ipswich: University of Suffolk.

⁵ Sinha, S., Dogaru, C., Auty, H., Smith, N., & Mavrommatis. (2017) Young people and progression in rural Suffolk: A report for the Seckford Foundation. University of Suffolk.

4. A focus on youth voice

Provision should be developed and delivered alongside young people, as well as ensuring that actions taken as a result of their participation are reported back to the young people themselves. Further engagement with young people to decide how to develop community social spaces, youth provision and activities, to determine their key attributes would be useful. In addition, further consultation with other youth groups and young people within various organisations across other areas of the county (e.g. Bury or Sudbury, areas which has also been influenced by county lines), including those that are NEET, to ensure additional perspectives are heard, would be beneficial. Young people are part of the solution to community issues; we must ensure we are doing our utmost to include them in the development, design and delivery of youth provision across the county.

5. Knife crime and youth gangs: Changing the narrative

Current local narrative regarding county lines in the county reported by the media, for example, may be considered unhelpful, further glamourizing gang membership and generating fear in an already established 'risk society'. These narratives are influencing the free movement of young people within and between different localities in their county and generating fear, which impacts upon their views of their local community. Voluntary and public sector organisations may benefit from working positively and collaboratively alongside media outlets to ensure that the most effective messages are disseminated, including the support available for those who are gang-involved, or gang-affected, and positive actions taken to improve the lives of all young people in Suffolk.

