

## **Young people Focus Group Meeting on 16 April 2021**

### **The impact of the pandemic upon young people in Hertfordshire – themes emerging from focus groups with students**

#### **Introduction**

Following a meeting called by the Lord-Lieutenant involving leaders from the community and within Hertfordshire on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2020, to discuss the post pandemic prospects of young people in Hertfordshire, a series of focus groups with young people were set up by the Lieutenancy. The purpose was to hear the voice of young people directly as to the impact of the pandemic on them during the past twelve months and also in terms of their future aspirations.

#### **Scope**

Nineteen groups from eleven establishments participated, seventeen of which comprised Sixth Formers in state secondary schools and colleges across the County. In addition, a group from The Prince's Trust Hertfordshire Team Programme and one made up of Cadets also participated. In schools, groups for Years 12 and 13 were organised separately. The sessions involved five to seven students of mixed gender and ability, selected by each establishment. Groups were led by two members of the Lieutenancy (the same four members were involved in the initiative) with a member of staff in attendance. Sessions took place from 3 February to 19 March 2021. They lasted one hour and took place via Zoom or Microsoft Teams with students joining from their homes during school closures. The last four groups took place following the return to school so students joined from school classrooms.

#### **Questions**

The groups were asked the same six questions:

1. To what extent have you personally, and your studies, been affected by the pandemic?
2. What have been your biggest fears and challenges?
3. What has been the impact on your Mental Health?
4. What are you planning to do after leaving school/college (e.g. university, apprenticeships, work) and how has this been affected by the pandemic? Would you consider some form of volunteering if you are unable to secure employment?
5. How has the pandemic affected your level of trust in the significant adults and decision makers in your lives e.g. government, universities, school staff etc? What do you feel these organisations/individuals could do to improve matters for young people of your age?
6. Where do you see yourself in five year's time?

#### **Responses**

A consolidated list of the views expressed by the young people in all 19 focus groups is attached.

#### **Key Findings**

Without a doubt the last year had been a very challenging time for young people aged 16 to 18. Having to adjust to constant change had been difficult. One student described the past

twelve months as being frustrating, disorientating, isolating – every day had felt the same and self-confidence had been eroded.

Some of the key findings are listed below with some possible questions for discussion at the meeting.

### **Personal**

The most frequently mentioned personal impact was the loss of face-to-face interaction with friends, despite social media and online options. They continue to miss the social interactions with friends and peers even after returning to school due to restrictions.

Question:

- Can more be done by schools to support and reassure students during lockdowns and other periods of restrictions?
- Recognising the trauma of the past year expressed by many students, what can schools do to assist them to process all that they have experienced?

### **Studies**

The uncertainties around exams and assessments had caused, and still is causing, a lot of stress. In particular, lack of consistency and clarity around 'A' levels and BTECs and how these would be assessed had for many resulted in a fear of failure and not being able to achieve their potential. Would their ultimate grading be sufficient to secure a place at university? Would apprenticeships be available and if so how would they secure an apprenticeship without having undertaken work experience and/or practical work?

Questions:

- What can be done by schools/colleges, in collaboration with relevant organisations, to reassure students about the future?

### **University**

For many students with hopes of going to university the application process had been difficult. They found online interviews difficult and didn't feel they provided a good opportunity to demonstrate their potential. The process of finalising choices once they had been made offers was even more difficult. Because of restrictions, most had been unable to visit universities, meet staff and current students, get a feel for the place and get a measure of the surrounding area. There was also a lot of nervousness about going to university. Would they be behind in their learning, would they find themselves 'locked' in their room if there was another lockdown, what restrictions would still be in force?

Questions:

- What can universities do to reassure students who are still in the application/selection process?
- What can universities do to address the concerns of students starting courses in the autumn?
- What can be done to acknowledge the difficulties that current students have had this academic year at university?

## **Employment**

Not surprisingly very few had been able to find part time work due to restrictions and as a result had been unable to save for their further education. Some had made numerous applications for apprenticeships/jobs, most of which had not been acknowledged, and at interview it became clear that some employers had not even read their CVs. Generally, students were pretty pessimistic about opportunities in the immediate and near future. They recognised that there were many people out of work who would be competing for jobs. Will employers see them as “the Corona generation” with a disrupted education and meaningless grades and therefore less employable?

Questions:

- Can anything be done to give young people hope for the future? (none of them, including the staff, seemed to know anything about the HOP)
- What can be done to improve the communication of employment opportunities, including apprenticeships, to young people?

## **Mental Health**

Most of the students with previous mental health issues spoke of how this had deteriorated during the pandemic. They also spoke of peers, who had not had mental health issues previously, being affected at this time. There had been limited access to professional services as these had been overwhelmed. Not having a support network of friends and face-to face counsellors had been hard. Even trying to make contact was difficult with everyone at home. Even those without previous mental health problems spoke about increased anxiety, isolation, difficulty with motivation, lack of separation between study and home life, and a sense of not being able to cope with the world having been “flipped” upside down. One student spoke of knowing three young people who had tried to commit suicide.

Question:

- What can be done to improve the provision of and access to mental health services available to young people?

## **Voice of Young People**

Although the students recognised how difficult it had been for the government they spoke of a loss of trust in government due to inconsistent messages about restrictions, exams/assessments, timeliness of announcements, indecision and the appearance of not being in control. They felt let down after so many hopes were raised then dashed. They also noted that on a number of occasions the government action was at odds with their scientific advisors. In general the young people would have taken tougher decisions sooner. They felt young people had been blamed unfairly for the spread of the pandemic in some instances.

They felt very strongly that the voice of young people had not been sought or heard.  
*(Although one group did briefly mention being involved in some form of consultation earlier this year.)*

To their knowledge no-one e.g. MPs, had approached young people to listen their views.

Question:

- What can be done to improve the opportunities in Hertfordshire for young people to have their voice heard?

**Hertfordshire Lieutenancy**

**April 2021**

## Focus Group Questions and themes

Six questions were asked as follows, together with a note of the most frequent responses:

### 1. To what extent have you personally, and your studies, been affected by the pandemic?

#### Personal impact

- **Lack of interactions** - contact with friends despite social media/online options, team extra-curricular activities, loss of social interaction generally, lost opportunities to 'make memories' with friends, loss of community
- **Loss of opportunity to experience/celebrate life events** - driving lessons, 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays, school proms, missing the Sixth Form experience
- **Feelings of** - frustration, disorientation, isolation – every day had felt the same and self-confidence had been eroded
- **Health** – many had family and/or friends who had suffered from Covid-19. Some had been carers for their parents/family members or had struggled with the physical separation from family members at this time. Others found their eyesight had been affected by too much screen time

#### Studies

- **Personal discipline** - lack of motivation due to lack of routine and structure – it's been tempting to join lessons whilst still in bed or just go back to sleep. It has been especially difficult for students who have changed schools at Sixth Form
- **Environment and 'tools'** – challenges with technology, access to equipment, limitations of appropriate study space, recognition of the 'poverty gap.'
- **Academic Courses** – cancelled field trips, lack of access to equipment/facilities for practical elements
- **Online learning** - far less positive an experience than face-to-face due to lack of interactions, especially for those who learn best interactively. The switch from online to school and back has been hard
- **Leadership responsibilities** – limited opportunities as everything has been cancelled
- **Observation** – more of those we spoke to from college and other settings seemed to have had their studies severely affected than those in full time school – Prince's Trust had provided hope

**But** there had been an opportunity for growth in maturity, resilience, independence and recognition that good things had been happening in local communities with people supporting each other. Some had made the most of things and enjoyed the time with family. Others had used the time to study further, research their subjects and complete additional courses online

### 2. What have been your biggest fears and challenges?

- **Lack of consistency and clarity around A Levels and how students will be assessed** – resulting in a fear of failure and not being able to achieve their potential.
- **Lack of preparation for major exams** - for those who had not taken GCSE's
- **Loved ones becoming ill** – concerns about bringing back the virus to the family home or to vulnerable members of their 'bubble' as a result of parents who are key workers and the return to school

- **Will I be offered a place at University?** – how will predictive grades be viewed? Online interviews and auditions had been very difficult and provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities/potential. How will I cope if I am away from family?
- **Adjusting back into the normal studying environment** – some felt their learning had fallen behind, especially those studying courses with practical elements. Time was also needed to come to terms with all that had
- **Future employment** - Will employers see them as “the Corona generation” who have had a disrupted education and therefore their grades at A Level will be meaningless? Might they be seen as lazy or having had ‘an easy ride?’
- **Fear of going out again** - Catching the bus, going to the supermarket, meeting groups again once that is permitted, returning to school
- **Will life ever return to ‘normal’?**
- **Long term impact** - the lack of socialisation, possible increase in anti- social behaviour in local communities, parents losing jobs

### 3. What has been the impact on your Mental Health?

- **Lack of motivation** - focus, structure, increased personal responsibility leading to increased, disrupted sleep
- **Lack of separation between study/work and social life**
- **Increased anxiety about the future** – difficult to process all that has happened
- **Existing Mental Health issues becoming more acute** - exacerbated by limited access to professional services and not having a support network of friends and professionals eg. counsellors face-to-face. Some spoke of friends who had contemplated suicide. Those normally not affected had also struggled with their Mental Health
- **Loneliness** – especially for those who are the only ‘child’ in the family  
**Non-personal communications** - it is difficult to read people’s expressions and can lead to misunderstandings and anxiety
- **School as a protective factor** - for some students

### 4. What are you planning to do after leaving school/college (eg university, apprenticeships, work) and how has this been affected by the pandemic? Would you consider some form of volunteering if you are unable to secure employment?

Post school/College

- Some staying with original plans, others changing course or Universities, some choosing to take a gap year or enter the world of work but were concerned as to how easy this would be given the economy. Some were finding it difficult to make decisions about their future due to all that had happened and the risk of further uncertainty
- Many wanted to reassess priorities and spend time travelling/enjoying increased freedom before settling into further study or work
- Some on practical courses or in specific spheres such as Performing Arts felt less certain about opportunities so may take longer to achieve their goals
- It had been very difficult for students to make informed choices regarding Universities/courses/accommodation/location with virtually no visits possible despite ‘Virtual tours’, sample lectures etc. Also there was concern as to whether

next academic year would be a better experience for University students and whether it would represent value for money. No work experience and references to show Universities was a concern

- Apprenticeships or courses with an overseas element had become very competitive with few places as funding/scholarships had been cut

**But** some students had used this time to be proactive – undertaking research/additional online courses in their field of interest. For some the pandemic had made them think about what they could give back to society in due course through career choices

#### Volunteering

- Some stated they would consider volunteering or were already volunteering and would continue. Others stated they would do so if it would provide them with work experience.

### **5. How has the pandemic affected your level of trust in the significant adults and decision makers in your lives eg government, Universities, school staff etc? What do you feel these organisations/individuals could do to improve matters for people of your age?**

#### Government

- **Loss of trust due to:** inconsistent messages about restrictions, exams/assessments, timeliness of announcements, indecision, ‘U turns’ and the appearance of not being in control. Some poor decisions were blamed for causing the second lockdown. Will the ‘roadmap’ be effective? The Government has not always listened to or acted on the advice of their scientific advisers
- **Criticism of the Government’s priorities** - especially Education and Mental Health. Focus has been on A Levels and not BTECs or access courses for Higher Education
- **Young people feel blamed unfairly** for the spread of the pandemic and they were seen as ‘all the same’. Many felt they had been responsible adults
- **The voice of young people has not been sought or heard**, despite this age group being directly affected

**But** some recognised how difficult it had been for the Government - none of us have experienced a pandemic before. The vaccine programme has been handled well.

#### Universities

- **Concern Universities won’t take into account the difficulties students have faced** – lack of work experience and online interviews are seen as a real disadvantage
- **Some Universities are offering less places this year**
- **University experience for students this year has not been good** – students locked in accommodation and not well supported, fees not reduced

#### Schools/Colleges

- **Most felt well-supported** by their schools/colleges and recognised that teachers could not tell them what they did not know themselves

#### Others

- **Social media and news reporting was generally cited as unhelpful** – adding to anxiety, including around the vaccines. Also the focus on exercise has put unhelpful pressure on those who have poor self-image, particularly girls
- **Some cited poor communication regarding apprenticeships**

## **6. Where do you see yourself in five years' time?**

In addition to specific personal plans, the following were expressed:

- Some felt hopeful for the future whilst others were still unsure making them indecisive as they felt they could not plan at the current time
- Some saw themselves still in full time education – Masters, PhD's
- Several wanted to experience more of life, enjoying opportunities – travel, different cultures, freedoms
- Some stated they wanted employment where they could contribute to society – partly influenced by the pandemic
- General comments - Successful, secure employment, stable accommodation, financially independent, driving, happy, no pandemic, no masks, "freedom to meet with as many people as I like", 'normality'

### **Observations from members of staff**

- Feedback from all establishments was that the focus groups had been very worthwhile. Students had enjoyed the sessions and found them helpful. Several stated they had never heard students speak so openly so would do further work around the students' concerns and fears and to help them realise their aspirations
- Students don't always appreciate how difficult it has been for schools and can have a simplistic view of how things could change. Staff have also really struggled. More reassurance from Government about vocational courses would be helpful. Some students have felt bombarded by Universities so schools have tried to filter information for them. Others have left applications later than normal due to the uncertainties
- There is a sense students been more disadvantaged socially than academically
- There is a danger that this age group will feel they are on a 'train track' to one outcome for their future. Normally schools would offer a programme to broaden their horizons with external speakers etc but this has not been possible
- Students have probably gained new skills during this time that they don't yet recognise

### **Conclusions**

The focus groups had been very enjoyable and informative in the responses elicited. For those leading discussions it has been a humbling and inspiring experience to hear young people speak so openly about their feelings, hopes and fears.