

A COMPASSIONATE GOVERNMENT

Young people wanted to see a government that values the rights of every person. Key ideas discussed included:

Empathy and connection

Young people wanted to see a greater diversity of people in politics, and felt a greater connection to politicians who brought their own life experience to their roles and were able to empathise with people. They wanted to see more politicians who understand the needs of young people, and consider their thoughts and feelings when decision-making about issues that may affect those they serve. Young people who felt there was not a compassionate government in place were more likely to feel worried and anxious about their future, as they felt that government policies were not set up to support young people to get a good start in life.

Listening to lived experience and expert knowledge

Young people emphasised the importance of having ministers in place who have thorough training in the areas they govern, particularly those working on areas that are most relevant to young people's lives, of listening to expert opinion in these areas, and recognising that expert opinion also includes experts by experience. Many young people felt that governments and local authorities did not value the voices of young people, and that they needed to listen to young people and communities in order to initiate real change.

Contributing to change

Young people recognised that they could contribute to change through voting and activism, but wanted to see more education around politics and government in schools, and more support to reduce potential barriers that might stop young people from being able to vote, e.g., changing home address, transport costs or accessibility of polling stations. It was recognised that when people have little faith in their governments, this can alienate them from engaging in politics. Young people felt it important to empower marginalised and alienated young people to speak up and get involved in creating political and cultural change.



CELEBRATING DIFFERENT PATHS

Young people wanted to see that different paths in life were equally celebrated within society. This encompassed different educational and career paths, as well as other lifestyle choices. They discussed how they wanted to see a change in mindset so that young people could set their own goals in life and be proud of their own achievements, rather than making comparisons to others. Key discussion themes were:

Celebrating strengths and passions

Young people all have their own strengths and passions, and want to see a society that allows them to celebrate these whatever they may be. They were keen to see more opportunities for young people from all backgrounds to try new things to find their strengths, without barriers like cost and location. They spoke positively about the range of different youth-led charities and organisations, and wanted to see more of these opportunities to get involved and celebrate youth voices.

Minimising comparisons

Young people recognised the detrimental impact that making comparisons and setting the same expectations for everyone could have on mental health, particularly if young people failed to meet their own or others' expectations. They wanted to see a society where there was no hierarchy around studying different academic subjects or working in different jobs, and where different experiences, skills and capabilities were recognised and valued equally. This change in mind-set was seen to be particularly important among parents, education staff, those who work with young people, and young people themselves. Social media was also highlighted as playing a role in the way in which young people make comparisons with others and try to validate their own thoughts and feelings.

Exposure to different life paths

To support young people to find their own path in life, all young people should be given the same opportunities and exposure to different life paths. Young people spoke about the idea of having societal role models with a range



of different skills and experiences, including those who may not be “big achievers” but still celebrate where they are in life, or who had overcome different challenges, including mental health problems. Young people suggested having a wider range of speakers coming into schools to normalise a greater range of potential life goals.

EQUITY BETWEEN AFFLUENT AND DEPRIVED AREAS

Young people were very aware of inequalities in mental health, particularly between affluent and deprived areas. While wealth was an important factor, this inequality also encompassed race, education, stigma and opportunities. They felt that current government policy and practice was not doing enough to support those in deprived communities, and wanted to see more equal opportunities for all young people regardless of where they grow up. Key ideas coming out of the discussion were:

Providing equal opportunity

Young people wanted to see everyone have the same opportunities in life, regardless of the area they grow up in. These opportunities included access to education, in flexible formats; provision of youth clubs and safe spaces for young people to spend time at outside the school environment; financial support, such as free bus travel; and access to a range of extracurricular activities including sports and creative activities. A key aspect of the discussions focussed on how to make existing opportunities more visible and ensure that these and any new opportunities were advertised effectively, particularly in deprived areas, to ensure all young people are able to take these opportunities up.

The importance of community

A key theme across discussions was that while different areas may be seen as affluent or deprived, one of the key factors influencing how this impacted on mental health was not wealth but the sense of community young people felt where they lived and the ‘richness in life’ they experienced. They wanted to see communities empowered to make changes themselves, with community leaders such as local councillors, youth group and community organisation leaders, or religious leaders, involved in implementing changes at the local level. Young people felt that by working at the community



level to initiate change this would amplify local voices and ensure that young people could be heard in the decision-making processes. Ideas for creating greater community cohesion include things like creating dedicated ‘hubs’ within every community that would provide a safe place and venue for community activities and events.

Young people also recognised the limited resources and funding that many community organisations have to work

with, and wanted to see a greater recognition from politicians and within funding structures of the benefits of community-level investments. Young people felt a stronger case could be made to governments and local authorities around the long-term benefits of community investment not just for individuals, by improving emotional and mental wellbeing, but also by reducing the burden on the services that people rely upon when they are in crisis. Another key point was around bridging relationships between communities, so that different communities, and particularly deprived communities are not isolated and are better understood by others.

Enabling young people to thrive, not just survive

Young people recognised that many recent events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis had exacerbated the inequality between affluent and deprived communities. They wanted to see a society where young people were able to thrive and pursue their ambitions, rather than just trying to survive the day-to-day. The impact of everyday stress around money and access to adequate housing and food on mental health was seen as a major issue for some young people. Young people wanted to see a focus on ensuring all young people have access to nutritional food and affordable housing, and saw changes to the benefits system as a way to do this. They also pointed out the detrimental impact that the stigma associated with being on benefits or being from a deprived community had on mental health and people’s willingness to access the support that is already available.

INCLUSIVE ACCESS TO SERVICES

Young people wanted to see inclusive access to a range of different services that support mental health, including education, community groups and youth services, transitional services, social services, disability services and creative services, alongside health services. They highlighted the importance of decision-makers working alongside young people to design and implement policy and practice changes in this area. Key discussion themes included:

Reaching the unreachable

Young people felt that some communities or young people were seen as being 'unreachable' and therefore missed out on access to support services. This included those outside formal education or training, who may not have access to the support networks embedded within these institutions. Young people wanted to see more mental health and trauma-informed training and practice across a range of organisations including police, social services and first responders, to ensure young people in marginalised communities are able to get the support they need when they need it most.

Reducing inequality in access

Young people were aware of a range of good services that provide support for young people. However, they were concerned about the inequality in access to these. Key access barriers included economic, social, cultural and geographic barriers. To reduce some of these barriers, young people suggested providing funding to support travel or access to services. Young people also wanted to see more mental health support services provided through the settings they already had access to, such as having more counsellors

in schools, better psychiatry training for GPs, and repurposing Covid-19 resources. They recognised that online services offered a good way to provide most people with access to support, but wanted to see young people able to access a range of options to best suit their needs, including online, telephone and in person support. Young people also recognised that often there are support services available, but that it is the awareness of them that is lacking.



More signposting through a range of different settings and greater visibility of support services may go some way to reducing inequalities in access and ensuring all young people have access to the same range of services and treatment options.

Simplifying the referral processes

The referral process for services was seen as a barrier by many young people. Some young people were unsure of the referral process for formal support services, while others described how some services that were only accessible after receiving a formal diagnosis. Young people were also concerned that some referral processes felt like a 'check-box' process, rather than being seen in person and discussing their individual needs. They wanted to see a 'no wrong door' approach, making access and referral to services easier without having to negotiate who is the most appropriate person to turn to first.

Support for those on waiting lists

Young people felt that waiting lists for specialised services such as children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and gender identity development services (GIDS) were unacceptably long, with many young people reaching crisis point before being seen. They wanted to see services that were able to help a greater number of young people with reduced waiting times, and more regular check-ins for those on waiting lists. To increase workforce capacity, young people suggested making it easier to access training and qualifications to work in these services. They also suggested providing informal services for those on waiting lists, such as peer support networks or informal counselling provided within their community.

Connecting silos of services

Young people felt there were 'silos of services' in the current system, and wanted to see more collaboration across services to allow young people to access more holistic care rather than seeing multiple providers for different things. They wanted to see more communication and sharing of information between different services, including child and adult services and physical and mental health services. Young people liked examples of multidisciplinary teams reviewing individual cases to identify appropriate individualised care pathways.

Importance of individualised care

Young people discussed the importance of having needs-based services, and staff adapting therapies and support plans to meet

the needs of individuals. They wanted to be involved in their own care, and help personalise their treatment. The importance of cultural sensitivity and adapting services to meet different cultural needs was raised. The intersectionality of different aspects of young people experiences and characteristics was also discussed as being a key consideration when planning an individual's care. Another key issue was the poor transition between children and adult services, and that, for some, greater support was needed to negotiate this transition and ensure that they do not lose the support they need when they need it.

A SOCIETY THAT DOES NOT FOCUS ON WORK AND PRODUCTIVITY

When discussing how a society that does not focus on productivity and work would positively influence young people's mental health the following key themes emerged:

The importance of rest

Young people recognised that having time to rest as well as work was critical to avoiding burnout, and to being more productive and maintaining quality when they were at work. Initiatives such as mandatory rest days, wellbeing days and the implementation of a four-day working week were viewed favourably as potential ways to support young people's wellbeing in relation to their work. They suggested that having more education around the importance and benefits of rest, and of normalising work-life balance would help young people to take time out to care for themselves and protect their mental health.

Separating your own worth and success from your work

Young people identified that many people felt that their worth was tied to their work, and that there was a need to see themselves as more than their job role. For young people for whom their experiences or outcomes at work did not live up to expectations this could lead to feelings of disappointment and discouragement, impacting on their mental health. They discussed a need to focus more on fulfilment in life, whether this was through work or other activities. There is a need to move beyond defining success solely in terms of work to encompass a broader range of activities. A positive step towards this would be teaching young people about

different pathways and attitudes to success, where this is less linked to work outcomes and wealth.

Valuing all activities and experiences

Young people were keen to see a society that put less value on work and academic performance, and placed more value on other aspects of their lives, such as experiences gained through involvement in youth groups, sports clubs and volunteering. These activities were seen as often being more fulfilling for young people and supporting their mental health, while also teaching them skills and helping them develop relationships and confidence. Young people wanted to see more funding to support all young

people to take part in different types of extracurricular activities, and for employers and universities to give value to skills that could be developed through these activities rather than just work experience or academic achievement. Within education settings, young people felt exams were not the most suitable assessment method for everyone, and that other assessment methods that took into account a range of different non-academic skills and experiences would benefit many young people.

Valuing all career paths

Young people felt that society should celebrate all career paths and job types, and reduce the stigma around having a lower paid job or "working class" job. They felt that there was too much emphasis on career pathways through higher education and pushing young people to go to university, leaving those who do not choose this route feeling devalued and less respected in their careers. This could be facilitated by more holistic education on different career path and supporting young people to find a purpose. In this way, all young people would feel equally valued, and they will feel positive in their work whatever role they choose.

The importance of relationships

Young people highly valued a relationship focussed approach to work, rather than a sole focus on productivity. They recognised how having good relationships with colleagues reduced stress and made



work demands easier to cope with, and that people usually work much better when they are in a comfortable environment where they feel that their employer cares about them and not just profit. Building relationships was also seen as an important skill for young people to develop, through both their work and other activities they took part in outside of work. Young people also spoke about the importance of having colleagues as role models, demonstrating positive behaviours in relation to setting a good work-life balance and not judging others solely on their productivity.

Issues with low pay and job insecurity

Young people's mental health was affected by having low paid jobs and job insecurity. They were frustrated by the categorisation of minimum wage by age, inaccessible job opportunities due to a reliance on having previous work experience, and being expected to do unpaid work to gain experience in order to access jobs. They felt that benefits payments were far too low and come nowhere near accounting for the reality of the cost of living. They were keen to see a trial of Universal Basic Income, and thought that young people should be given more education around their employment rights. Young people did speak positively about opportunities for flexible working and working from home, and were keen to see this type of job role continue in the future.



A CALL TO ACTION

Through this workshop young people identified a range of different aspects of society that influence their mental health. The priorities young people highlighted largely fell outside the traditional areas of focus for research and practice that aims to support mental health, with more of a focus on societal factors and less on individual experiences. This is a significant shift from the traditional view of mental health and support or treatment for mental health problems being at an individual level, and instead young people recognised the bigger structural, political and cultural changes that would create a society that promotes better mental health for all.

In order to implement change within these areas, many different members of our society will need to come together and play a part including government, local authorities, healthcare providers, education staff, employers, third sector and community organisations, other service providers and young people themselves.

Throughout the workshop young people emphasised the need for youth voices to be heard and how critical this was to embedding change that could effectively create a mentally healthy society for young people. Young people wanted to talk about the bigger picture, but felt that their voices were not being heard by those that matter. Therefore, our call to action is to:

- Recognise the societal changes that young people prioritise as being most important to their mental health and look for opportunities to implement these changes in different settings, including through further research or changes in policy and practice.
- Involve young people in the decision-making process and design of new services or initiatives to address these priorities, valuing the lived experience and opinions they bring when tackling these challenges.
- Support young people to feel confident and empowered to involve themselves in local decision-making processes around governments and local authorities – and in parallel, ensure that governments and local authorities are committed to listening to and acting on the views of young people.
- Ensure that research on young peoples' mental health is impactful and that there are appropriate pathways to rapidly translate new research findings into real-world action.