Youth-Led Visions for Change

Guidance for policy informed by young people's experiences of the pandemic

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Who we are

Leaders Unlocked enables young people and underrepresented groups to have a stronger voice on the issues that affect their lives. In education, policing, health, justice and elsewhere, we help organisations to involve the people who matter and shape decision-making for the better. Leaders Unlocked has been working in the health sector since 2016. Our work enables young people to play a leadership role influencing strategic decisions, provision, and research in relation to young people's health and wellbeing.

In Spring and Summer 2020, Leaders Unlocked partnered with a team of anthropologists based at the London School of Economics (LSE). The Covid and Care Research Group is a collective of researchers using ethnography and participatory research to study the social effects of the pandemic. The group explores issues related to gender, ethnicity, race, class and regional inequality. Its members have worked with other disciplines, policy makers, community leaders and organisations to generate policy solutions bolstering local infrastructures of care and social support.

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Our Research

Motivation

The motivation for this collaboration arose from the circumstances of the pandemic. In fieldwork and surveys conducted in Winter 2020 – Spring 2021, the Covid and Care group found that young people were facing significant disruptions of their lifecourse due to suspended schooling and social contact. Young people were also experiencing the loss of independence, increased caring responsibilities, and anxieties about the employment prospects.

The Covid and Care researchers recognized that young people's embeddedness in social infrastructures – including school, home, and community organisations – lent them special insight on the changes brought by COVID-19 and lockdown. Involving young people as co-investigators opened new opportunities for creativity and collaboration in the research process. The partnership with Leaders Unlocked gave shape to the researcher's vision of truly participatory ethnography.

Since 2016, Leaders Unlocked has engaged young people across the UK in peer research and advocacy; they have set wheels of change in motion by contributing to local and national-level policymaking projects, including the Future Health Inquiry and the Mental Health Foundation's youth partnerships. Leaders Unlocked provided the guidance and space for young people to draw on their own motivations – their hopes and plans for the future – to start meaningful conversations in their communities and inspire potential solutions.

Method

In April 2020, Leaders Unlocked recruited a diverse cohort of **14 young researchers** from **Leicester, Derbyshire,** and **London** to conduct research on the impacts of the pandemic on their peers and communities. Over the following months, we ran **two workshops online** with the partners and young researchers, **exploring, sharing and understanding** the changes they noticed in their local areas. The young people **received skills training** and support designing their own **peer research tools**, identifying the questions they wanted to ask, and the activities to gather responses.

The young researchers spoke to **65 people in total**. They facilitated three workshops with their peers (online and face-to-face). They conducted interviews with 45 young people, adults, and professionals. Those interviewed included students, young carers, young people experiencing mental health difficulties, LGBTQ+ young people, those facing unemployment, primary and secondary school teachers, pastoral care teams, Special Education Needs Coordinators, parents, and care home staff.

The young researchers came together to **analyse the data** they had collected and worked collectively to identify the important **themes and quotes.** They presented their key findings virtually to an audience of researchers, community organisers, and local officials in September 2021. We will present here the **key findings**, the **visions for change** and what young people want from the post-COVID recovery.

Young researcher, London: *'The workshops that we did with Leaders Unlocked and students from the other cities taught me more than just the pandemic itself. **I felt like my options mattered, so I felt I was able to explain my thoughts comfortably**. Not only did I gain a broader perspective but my public speaking practice in the workshops enabled me to feel comfortable enough to prepare our own workshops in schools and to do interviews. I also loved that we met out to have lunch with everybody and discussed our future plans and university*

*courses. **I'd recommend this type of activity to anybody.***'

An Overview of the Pandemic's Impact on Young People

Our research was carried out against the backdrop of Winter 2021 national lockdown. This period of lockdown presented particular challenges to young people, whose schooling and social lives continued to be disrupted. According to a survey conducted by Young Minds, 75% of respondents had **more difficulty coping with this lockdown** than previous ones and 67% felt that the pandemic would have **long-term effects on their mental health**[1].

Several other reports have provided evidence that the pandemic has negatively impacted young people's mental health and wellbeing[2]. This impact varied across regions and according to age, region, socioeconomic factors, ethnicity, and educational level[3]. Alongside these health effects, young people were experiencing changes in their relationships and in their feelings about the future. They took on the burden of an uncertain economic future in which their career prospects were increasingly unclear[4]. On top of it all, climate change weighed heavy on their minds[5].

The young researchers were seeing these issues unfold in their daily lives: at school, at home, and online. They were perfectly placed to start conversations with friends, family, classmates, teachers, carers, and health professionals about the losses and gains of the pandemic. In sharing what they had learned with the other young leaders, visions for the future took shape. Together, these visions provide a framework for policymaking that takes the experiences and futures of young people as inspiration for wider societal change.

Our visions for change rest on the pillars of (1) community, (2) education, and (3) health and wellbeing.

[1] https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/esifqn3z/youngminds-coronavirus-report-jan-2021.pdf
[2] https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHF%20Scotland%20Impacts%20of%20Lockdown.pdf
https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/charts-and-infographics/fairer-foundations
https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n614
[3] https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/10/how-is-climate-change-affecting-the-mental-health-of-young-people/
[4] https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/news/young-people-say-their-prospects-are-dwindling-and-wellbeing
[5] https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/10/how-is-climate-change-affecting-the-mental-health-of-young-people/

A Youth-led Plan for Recovery

Illustration by Maggie Li

1.1 Community

⇒ **Improve community infrastructure to support young people in their communities.**
- o **Youth services and centres** should be designed by and with young people. Local councils should create **voluntary opportunities** for peer support so young people can gain experience helping one another.
- o **Community centres and central government grants for Community Hubs** should be reopened in areas disadvantaged by the Covid-19 pandemic (areas of enduring
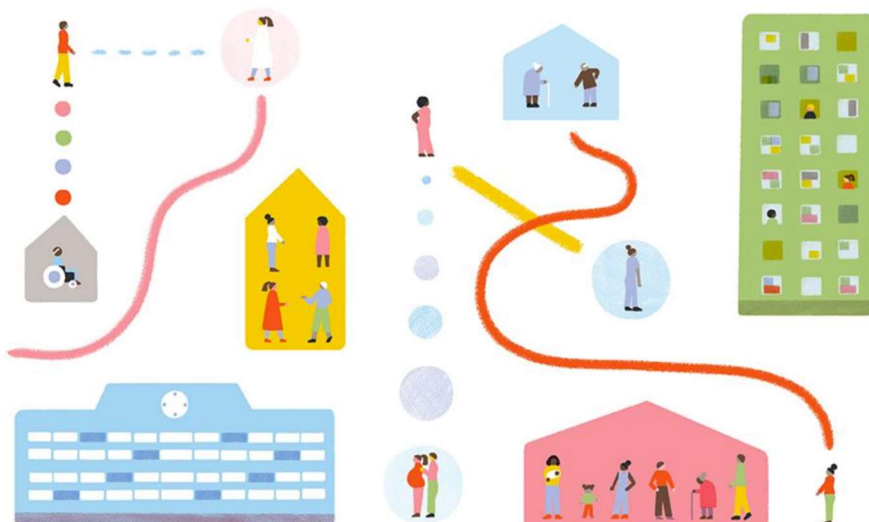
transmission and/or local interventions).
- o These spaces should be protected as an important **'middle ground'** between school and home, where young people might face pressures or even abuse.

⇒ **Provide for better transport and connectivity to ensure everyone can access the support they need.**
- o People living in rural areas feel particularly neglected in the recovery, where access

      to services is already limited. We need to see equality and consistency when investing across the country.

⇒ **Utilise disused buildings and turn them into community hubs and arts spaces.**
- o Empty spaces in local high streets should be repurposed as community centres to allow residents to socialise and connect.
- o Unused buildings could also be repurposed as accommodation to tackle homelessness.

⇒ **Invest more money into youth services and training youth workers**.
- o We need to actively encourage more adults to enter the youth work profession. Invest in trained volunteers and paid youth workers to create a support network for young people coming out of the pandemic.
- o National level funding should be targeted to local voluntary and third sector organisations providing skills-building opportunities for young people, especially those run by minority and disadvantaged groups.

⇒ **Conduct systematic youth-led mapping of formal and informal services supporting young people.**
- o Young people should be given a platform to record which services are already accessible to them locally. This will help identify gaps in provision and target investments to serve disadvantaged groups.

1.2 Education

⇒ **Elevate student voice and involve young people in decision making.**
- o Young people feel they weren't listened to during the pandemic and now students are calling for their **voices to be heard** and taken seriously. Young people want to be **involved in shaping their future.**
- o **Community Champions** programmes serving and involving young people must be funded to support integrated local recovery plans.

⇒ **Increase the number of youth workers in schools and ensure there is one youth worker in every school.**
- o This would **relieve the pressure on teachers,** who are already under a huge amount of stress, as well as **school counsellors**, who are only able to see a limited number of students.

⇒ **Revisit the curriculum and address the lack of representation.**
- o **Black and minority ethnic people,** both past and present, need to be celebrated and taught to students within the curriculum.
- o The **hidden work** carried out by the voluntary and community sector during the pandemic should be recognised through **awards and honours** presented in educational spaces.

⇒ **Increase extra-curricular activities, sports clubs, and revision sessions.**
- o This will provide young people with vital **time to socialise.** Young people feel they would benefit from the extra support in education and improving skills and relationships.

⇒ **Invest in holistic and creative forms of therapy.**
- o Creative arts help people express their feelings and encourage them to open up in a less intimidating way. A space to **talk through their feelings** and discuss important topics such as mental health should be provided for staff, as well as students.

⇒ **Support young people to gain skills and experience to find employment.**
- o Young people have been stuck at home for so a long time, missing out on work experience and tangible opportunities to help them **gain skills for employment.**
- o Young people should be supported and funded to engage in **local and self-designed research**, as they did with Leaders Unlocked.

Candice, Derby City Council*: 'It really has surprised me how well the **young people really understand the complexities that we face**. It was nice, and sad, to hear that we are underworked and overstaffed, because as much as we don't want them to feel like that, it's the truth… [Their presentation] was **very useful for points that I can take forward**.'*

1.3 Health and Wellbeing

⇒ **Improve mental health provisions in the community, services, and schools.**
- o It is critical that CAMHS is supported in **reducing waiting times**. Pressure on CAMHS can be relieved by **signposting people to specific local support** services, especially in rural areas.
- o Where these local services do not yet exist, pressure on CAMHS could be relieved by founding and funding community-based well-being cafes and peer support groups.

⇒ **Educate young people on building and maintaining healthy relationships.**
- o By focussing on family, friendships and romantic relationships, young people will be able to identify what healthy relationships look like and support each other.

⇒ **Invest into healthcare, key workers and lead by example.**

- o Increased spending on health workforce and services is necessary to address chronic underfunding and to provide all young people with the care they need.
- o Funding for community organisations providing **local mental health, childcare and eldercare** services should be prioritised.

Fatima, Policy Officer for Mental Health Europe: *'It was really great and refreshing to hear the research findings… The **importance of youth-led research** – hearing directly from young people on the things that impact them are things – is something I will definitely take away. This is going to be something that **informs our policy work, at national level as well as the European level**.'*

Location-specific insights

2.1 Derbyshire

- o Derbyshire represents many of the UK's rural communities in that it suffers from a **lack of adequate public transport.**

- o Events for **outreach across local communities and towns** would facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences. This is important for people living in relatively homogenous rural communities.

- o Local councils should support **arts and cultural opportunities** for young people outside of urban centres.

o   Community groups and local health services should be funded in creating **robust youth-support infrastructures**, including food distribution through community centres and schools.

Photo by Karl, Flickr: https://www.flickr.com/photos/72718192@N00/28522926245/

2.2 Leicester and Leicestershire

o   Leicester would benefit from more **youth clubs and youth workers** providing safe spaces (with food and heating provided) for young people to socialise and be themselves.
   - These can serve as a middle ground between the family (private sphere) and the school (public sphere) where young people might be subjected to intense pressures, even harm.

o   **Libraries** offer quiet places for young people to revise and socialise in constructive, academic settings. They are places where young people can check in with one another and manage their workloads free from external pressures.
   - They are equalising spaces that welcome and bring together people from all backgrounds and housing/family situations.

- o Increased funding is necessary to support **children and family services**, which are chronically understaffed and over-stretched.

- o Young people would like to see increased support and funding for **environmental protection and air quality** initiatives, like using green vehicles for public transport, policing, and delivery services.

- o Homelessness and drug use have been exacerbated by the pandemic. More **affordable and sustainable housing** are critical in improving this situation.

2.3 London

- o The urban environment of the big city presents distinct challenges to young people, especially in relation to public safety and transport.

- o Local councils should support ommunity-based campaigns addressing the **underlying causes of knife crime**, which has made many young people feel unsafe.

- o The Mayor of London and local councils should prioritise the maintenance and expansion of **green spaces**. This priority should be balanced against the construction of housing and the demands of urban developers.

- o There is a need for **improvements to urban public transportation** systems, especially to compensate for deceased reliance on cars and ride-shares under the ULEZ expansion. The pandemic has underscored the importance of public transport, which is critical to many young people's freedom of movement and ability to renew in-persorn social connections.

Conclusion

These are more than recommendations; they are urgent calls-to-action for local and national policymakers from the next generation of their constituents. Young people have been dramatically impacted by the uncertainties and disruptions of the pandemic. Far from being silenced by these new challenges, our young researchers started conversations that placed the big issues of the pandemic in local context.

We urge local policymakers, officials, community workers, and healthcare representatives to carry these actions forward. We are always eager to present our findings and run workshops for those interested in engaging with us. Please contact us at rose@leaders-unlocked.org.

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