



Change Now

A call for change led by the
voices of children

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Charity number: 222041
www.children-ne.org.uk



Helping babies, children and young people grow up to be happy and healthy since 1891



Acknowledgements

Our heartfelt thanks goes to all the children and young people who shared their experiences, hopes, ideas and passion through the individual activities reviewed in this research report.

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Additional thanks to Liz Todd, Gwen Dalziel and Janet Cairns.

A huge thank you to the funders, partners, schools, youth organisations, youth groups and community organisations that have made this report possible.

For a full list of acknowledgments visit: children-ne.org/changenowthanks

To quote this publication: Guy, M. (2024) Change Now. A call for change led by the voices of children. February 2024. Newcastle upon Tyne Children North East

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About Children North East

Children North East is a large North East regional children's charity, with some of our work extending across England, Wales and Scotland. Children North East exists because growing up can be hard. We want all babies, children and young people to be happy and healthy and to grow up feeling:

- Safe and loved
- Resilient to the challenges they may face
- Valued and confident

We have a strong children's rights ethos and believe that real social change is achieved when those who are, or have, experienced issues lead the change.

Children North East deliver services, support and initiatives that provide a platform for children, young people and families to work through issues, take action and provide them with the tools to reach their full potential. This includes; therapeutic services, mental health support, youth work, domestic abuse support, family support, community-based initiatives, participation and consultation activities and our UK wide Poverty Proofing© initiative. We campaign on issues affecting babies, children and young people, we challenge those in positions of influence at all levels who make decisions affecting the lives of babies, children and young people and we influence social policy and system change to address obstacles preventing babies, children and young people growing up happy and healthy.

Children North East are proud of our ethical approach to consultation and research, and we value the input of all that we consult with. We have a core commitment to ensure that all consultation projects mean something and that they are impact focused.



“I have the right to be listened to and taken seriously”

Why Change Now?

Children and young people want to be listened to effectively – this means fully listened to, their opinions and thoughts taken seriously and suggestions acted upon- only then will this reflect fully Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 - The right to be heard.

It is clear that there needs to be the investment of time, money and policy change to support these recommendations and build consistency across schools, health services and local authorities in the North East.

The overwhelming factor underpinning all the recommendations laid out in this report is that children and young people do not feel listened to and valued. There needs to be significant changes at all levels in approaches to and engaging with children and young people on the things which impact them.

Context

Children North East has extensive experience of listening to the voice of children and young people across a wide variety of programmes and initiatives. We have recognised the value of the information we collated and identified an opportunity to share learning from consultative work more widely with the aim of disseminating key messages and recommendations from the voice of young people.

This report consolidates learning from consultations with children and young people carried out since 2020. It brings together the voices of over 35,000 children and young people into a single report with a number of key recommendations for the North East of England. Its purpose is to analyse and assimilate previous work to highlight key thematic areas of learning and make recommendations. It puts the voice of children and young people at the centre, exploring what is important to them and how services can be informed by the voice of their lived experience.



Ethical considerations

Children North East have sought consent from external partners who commissioned research and consultation projects over the previous three years, to allow us to use findings and information from these projects.

Consent was sought from all participants in keeping with Children North East's ethical

guidance and the needs of the consultation. To ensure anonymity of the participants, no identifiable information was recorded.

Children North East's safeguarding policy was adhered to, and any safeguarding concerns followed appropriate protocols.

Range of projects

For the purposes of this report, all projects, research or consultations will be referred to as consultations. Each consultation will be referred to in an abbreviated way, full names of consultations can be found in the appendix table.

The projects considered for this report can be broken down into two main categories:

- Poverty Proofing© the School Day audits
- Research and consultation projects

Consultations were completed for a range of purposes and funded by a variety of organisations, including the NHS England, North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Service, the Economic and Social Research Council, local authorities and Northumbria Police and Crime Commission. A full list of funders can be found in the appendices.

Some consultations were carried out with partner organisations, for example Children North East partnered with Newcastle University to deliver the Voices Consultation and North East Solidarity and Teaching (NEST) were partners for the BACP consultation.

Consultations varied in length and scale. The Voices project was carried out over two years and involved several researchers speaking to 1,780 children and young people. The BACP consultation was carried out over three months with an individual researcher building trust with 30 children and young people.

Interpreting the recommendations

In considering the voice of children and young people throughout this report, it is important to consider what has been described as the 'wants' of children and young people. In order to do this, their recommendations have been interpreted to give clear and concise proposals for organisations, local authorities and policy makers.

- Pupil voice to be given priority in reviewing school policy and systems and reviews to be carried out regularly.
 - All school staff to receive training on mental health and wellbeing, inclusion and poverty – develop opportunities for staff to reflect and build consistency throughout schools.
 - A regional review of how bullying and racism is dealt with involving children and young people to build consistency across the North East.
 - Recognition that secondary schools are challenging environments for neuro diverse children and young people and a plan to address this.
 - Emotional wellbeing to be prioritised and budgeted for.
 - Equality of access to digital technology and provision of alternatives by educational establishments where there is no access to digitalised work.
- Acknowledgement that educational establishments are under used outside of school hours and should be made available for communities to provide activities and services for all.
 - Awareness raising with transport providers on the importance of making children and young people feel safe and supported when they travel alone.



Recommendations

Children and young people across the North East have consistently shown that they are able to clearly and concisely vocalise how they felt both positive and negative experiences impact their feelings and consequentially, their lives.



School and education recommendations

Children and young people want:

- To be taken seriously in school, they feel their opinions are sought in a tokenistic way and not valued. It is clear that 'school councils' are not always representative of all children and young people.
- More opportunities to ask questions, have discussions and debate on a number of subjects.
- All school staff to be comfortable and confident and knowledgeable on the subjects which matter to them.
- Training for staff to help them understand the issues they're facing, including, mental health, LGBTQ+ inclusion, gender and poverty.
- Consistency in the way they are treated and how racism and bullying is addressed.
- Equality across the school day including accessing food, uniform, extra-curricular activities and trips.
- To not face stigma, shame, or additional obstacles to learning because they are living in poverty.
- To be involved in decision making as 'experts by experience'.

Learning disabilities and SEND recommendations

For many children and young people, school is a safe environment. However, in mainstream schools, neurodiverse children and young people are not always supported according to their needs and would greatly benefit from improvement in how they are listened to. The same is true of healthcare settings.

Neurodiverse children and young people want:

- Communication to be direct, age appropriate and regular with normal language– they don't want to be talked down to and want to be kept informed about what is happening.
- All adults who they come into contact with, to be respectful.
- Their neurodiversity to be talked about in a positive way.
- The Keyworker service to be expanded and more awareness of the role among professionals and families and autistic young people.
- More consideration given to the environment and expectations, particularly in secondary schools – they feel strongly that they should not be judged by neuro typical standards.

Health and Wellbeing recommendations

Children and young people are struggling more than they ever have before with their emotional wellbeing. They want:

- Help to build resilience and deal with the challenges they face.
- To be believed the first time they ask for help and get help quickly.
- For creativity to be acknowledged as vital in developing good emotional wellbeing and be given higher priority in schools.

Digital recommendations

It is clear that technology and digitalisation is a significant part of children and young people's lives, particularly since the pandemic, however children and young people want:

- A digital curriculum to be built, based on what they enjoy.
- The digital divide to be addressed.
- Not to be punished when they are unable to access digitalised work.

Services and activities recommendations

The availability of activities and services to children and young people outside of school is dependent on affordability and their family circumstances to access them. Children and young people want:

- Investment in activities and children's communities to provide services that are accessible to all.
- Fair access to transport.

Findings and discussion

The themes of consultations and projects were many and varied. They were commissioned for a variety of purposes and all asked questions of children and young people in different contexts, but all had children and young people and their futures at the centre.

Poverty Proofing the School Day audits formed the largest number of participants focused on socio-economic status and its impact on the school day, while the Voices project was the next largest number of participants, it concentrated on the impact of Covid-19. The Now and Next consultation had over one thousand voices and was dedicated to finding out about Culture and Creativity in Newcastle and Gateshead, while other consultations were smaller and focused on specific areas, including accessing health settings and safety.

While some consultations are given greater weight due to the numbers of children and young people involved, it is important to remember that other consultations, despite being smaller, give valuable insight and visibility into a broader picture.

Despite the variety and differences among consultations, common themes were easily identified and can be split into the following main categories:

- **School and Education**
- **Learning Disabilities and SEND**
- **Relationships and Communication**
- **Health and Wellbeing (including acceptance and inclusion) (substance misuse)**
- **Protected Characteristics**
- **Digital Lives**
- **Culture**
- **Covid-19**
- **Services and activities outside of school (including transport)**

While these are the main themes, it should be noted that there is much interconnection and cross-over between them. Representation of opinions in thematic areas aides communication of the main points of importance from diverse sources. It is hoped this clarity will facilitate acting upon the voice of children and young people.

School and education

This section is represented by Poverty Proofing the School Day, the Voices consultation and The Inclusion Audit as the majority of children and young people involved were consulted in schools and many of the topics covered involved school life and education.

The Voices report (2022) identified that:

“Children and young people view school as more than just place to do school work. They valued the emotional support they found there...”

Most children and young people consulted in school were part of the Poverty Proofing the School Day audits and thus the themes are strongly connected to the Poverty Proofing© themes.

The top issues in school were identified using the Poverty Proofing© tool of translating responses from children and young people into percentages. These were verified with Children North East staff who carried out the consultations.

They included (but not exclusively):

- Food
- Additional opportunities
- Celebrations
- Arts and Technology
- Uniform
- Rewards/behaviour and attendance
- Homework/home learning

Other areas talked about were, bullying, charity, curriculum and ability groups, leadership and governance, pupil support, resources and support to families. These should not be forgotten, however for the purpose of consolidation and this report, they will not be discussed at length.

Food

Access to food throughout the school day was important to children and young people, particularly those in receipt of free school meals (FSM) pupils in secondary education, who are frequently unable to access funds at breakfast and break times.

“I’m often hungry at school – I’m hungry right now.”

“Get £4 a day if I buy breakfast I can’t get lunch.”

It was important that there was no segregation of pupils on dinners and those on packed lunch.

“All my friends went on packed lunch so I did. I don’t like school dinners because I can’t sit next to my friend.”

Many children and young people were able to distinguish those from poorer backgrounds or those in receipt of FSM as they were always ‘on dinners’ or had a ‘brown paper bag’ handed to them for their lunch on trips.

“You can tell who has a school packed lunch, they are in those bags”.

“It’s shocking how you can’t buy what everyone else gets, I walk round with my Barrs drink as can’t get proper coke it just says hello I’m on free meals.”

Children and young people in receipt of FSM talked about how the money was barely enough to get a meal, or how the money could not be rolled over on days they were ill or did not want to eat as much as they might on another day. This, taken alongside the wider notion that there are thousands of pounds of unspent money going missing, is causing concern among many.

Additional opportunities

Children and young talked about the opportunities they have in school to try new activities at break, lunchtimes and after school and how important this is to them to learn about themselves and find out what they are good at outside of the academic curriculum. It was important that there was no cost to these activities.

“There’s so many clubs – it’s great.”

“I always get to go to clubs”

“We’ve been to every club.”

“There is Health and Wellbeing, yoga and mind.”

“We have the Football team [what do you wear for that] boots, socks and shin pads, school have spares of everything.”

“There was a career day in the learning centre, there was a Nurse, Electrician, Dentist, someone from a marketing place.”

“We have learned about different jobs, we had a sheet of paper and had to base it in different skills we had.”



Being able to go on school trips and have visitors to the school to share skills and experiences was reported as an important part of learning. Pupils were very aware that not all children and young people went on trips with financial barriers.

“...The schools out clubs are first come first serve but rely on immediate payment online.”

“Often, money is requested to be paid the same day or with a few days’ notice...”

“The school trip this term was to the aquarium- asking for £14.50 is a lot for some parents to pay within the weeks deadline.”

“School trips and events can be expensive.”

Swimming and cycling opportunities are inconsistent and it often depends on individual schools, there can also be a cost implication for families which can limit uptake.

“Some of us did it, you had to sign up, people didn’t do it if they didn’t have a bike they had spare helmets but not spare bikes.”

“£5 is too much” (for swimming).”

Celebrations

These are an important part of children and young people's lives, but sometimes children and young people feel pressure from peers and teaching staff to discuss or write about holidays and gifts. Young people experiencing economic disadvantage frequently felt discomfort when being asked to discuss in front of peers activities during the holidays or gifts received such as birthday or Christmas presents.

"She goes round the class on each table, you do get a choice if you want to talk."

"Yes, we write down what we did in the holiday in our morning books."

"I keep quiet when they ask about what we did in the summer, like I didn't leave the estate"

"If you're brave enough the teacher might ask what you got for your birthday at the front."

Some children and young people found their ability to join in some celebratory activities in school was limited by financial resources.

"We bring in sweets for our birthday, but I never get to do that."

"They might feel sad if they can't bring some in."

Children and young people felt it was important to give thanks to people and celebrate achievements together.

Physical Education

Children and young people felt there was disparity between girls and boys PE content.

"The girls do less active stuff, and that's not fair on them."

"We're not allowed to play rugby and football..."

Children and young people also talked about PE uniform and how it can be awkward to change at school. It is noted that some schools allow pupils to come into school in PE kit on days they have PE and this is welcomed by children and young people.

However, what children and young people appear to value most about school, particularly 'post Covid-19' is:

"Contact with their friends, the support of the teachers and the structure of the school day."



Uniform

Children and young people were vocal on the topic of school uniform, they were able to identify people from poorer backgrounds due to logoed uniform, uniform that was dirty, 'scruffy with holes in it' or if uniform was grey or discoloured.

“You can tell who doesn't have much money – they have bad clothes on or they might wear the wrong uniform.”

“They might not have the right shoes, they wear the wrong shoes.”

“They might wear clothes that are too small for them.”

Many children and young people talked about being punished for not having the correct uniform through detentions, demerits or other sanctions. Children and young people felt this was unfair and often indicative of a lack of understanding of their circumstances.

“I got told off this morning, even though the teacher knows the situation. I live with my dad he's a single parent and my shoes broke – we haven't had time to go and get new ones.”

Children and young people talked about gender stereotyping in school uniform and how the school response would depend on the level of understanding of individual staff members around gender issues if for example a boy came in wearing a skirt.

There were discussions around changes in uniform at different times of year and how uniform was strict because anything outside the prescribed uniform was considered to be a distraction.

“Apparently, it distracts from learning: that's what I heard.”

“We have to ask to take our jumpers off.”

This is compounded by schools not appearing to understand the wider effects of enforcing uniform policies so stringently or inflexibility as children and young people's financial resources are outside of their control, further compounding the stigma around poverty.

Rewards, behaviour and attendance

Children and young people talked about the unfairness of rewards for attendance. Behaviour was rewarded or punished inconsistently across different schools and often in a subjective way, depending on the teaching staff.

“Some people get a warning, some go straight on the chair, it depends what they did. It was a green chair in Year 2, then in Year 3 its orange, you can get sent to the Year 1 green chair and it's really embarrassing.”

Children and young people felt they were more likely to be punished if there wasn't an understanding about what had happened. These discrepancies were highlighted particularly when children and young people had additional needs.

“I feel very ashamed.”

“People say to you like 'ah are you on the wall again'.”

Special Educational Needs and Neurodiversity



Two consultations, SEND Health and The Learning Disability and Autism Programme, spoke with children and young people with SEND exclusively. Other consultations included children and young people with SEND or additional needs, such as Poverty Proofing© the School Day and The Inclusion Audit and their voice was particularly thought provoking around the development of information around SEND.

Children and young people talked about how they access services and are supported in Health and Education settings with particular reference to communication and how they are listened to. Many children and young people with additional needs felt that this required improvement.

“They don’t listen. I have tubes and this one they were going to put the tube up my nose and I said no because it was scary and I wasn’t ready but they pinned me down and did it anyway and I cried.”

“Sometimes they listen to my parents more than me.”

The environment is particularly important to children and young people with additional needs and this is apparent in school, in health settings and the wider community. Many find loud, busy and sometimes dirty environments a cause for discomfort and anxiety.

“I had to stay in the hospital...I couldn’t sleep. I hated it...I just wanted to go home”
“Its really loud, I sit in the corner with my mam. There’s lots of people. I feel very shy and I feel overcrowded.”



**“Sometimes they
listen to my parents
more than me”**

A significant number of neuro diverse children and young people expressed a need to 'move around' and have something to interact with to help them to feel calm in stressful situations. Helpful tools included fidget toys or stimming tools, being allowed to use a game or watch something on their electronic device.

Children and young people talked about how important it was to have someone in their educational setting who they connected with, trusted or could talk to, especially someone who understood how their needs impacted their ability to engage in a learning environment.

"At my old school I didn't get the help I needed I'm autistic. I can't help doing things sometimes. My old school when I was naughty I had to go and sit in the dining hall by myself and people could see me through the window. When I got into trouble, it was for no reason, they didn't try to help me. We went to visit other schools... now I come here it's better because in this one I've got Miss X, I've got help."

While many identified a single person who fit this description, they also recognised that it would be more beneficial to have greater understanding of neurodiversity from class teachers. They articulated that it would be beneficial to have **"quiet space to do work"** and **"more breaks"**.

Those children and young people who were taking part in the Government pilot programme of keyworkers to support young people with the most complex needs to be fully involved in their care, felt that it was an essential part of the process in feeling safe, informed and supported in their lives.

The Keyworkers gave them time and listened to them, involving them in their plans, care and support which helped in reducing stress and anxiety.

"He isn't biased and gets in touch when he says and answers my calls as soon as possible..."

**"She is my rock.
She's always there,
offering advice.
She's been
absolutely fantastic
through all of it,
lending an ear."**

Keyworkers acted as advocates, liaising with professionals and other services and were able to support on a practical and emotional level. The children and young people found them to be invaluable across education, health and other services.

Relationships and communication

Across all consultations, children and young people have identified effective communication as paramount to their voice being heard effectively. All children and young people were happy to be involved in consultations and felt that they were being listened to. This theme is represented by quotes from The Inclusion Audit, The SEND Health Consultation and The BACP Consultation, but it is important to acknowledge that relationships and communication are underpinning in Poverty Proofing the School Day audits and The Voices Report.

Having a voice in an education setting was important for children and young people but many feel that their voice is not valued as the perception that change is not implemented in accordance with their input.

“they get us to do student voice stuff, so they listen to us, but they don’t do anything with it.”

“I think they just look at like 5 then put the rest to the side or in the bin.”

“we tell them stuff and they don’t do anything about it.”

“sometimes it might not get dealt with until it escalates.”

Children and young people recognise good communication and know this contributes to a positive experience, they identified things like **“bringing their chairs closer to you”**, **“eye contact”**, **“being polite”** and **“friendly”** as well as having a curiosity about individual interests. They understand that this makes them feel valued, **“relaxed”**, **“grown up and mature”**.

It was particularly important to children and young people with SEND that they were spoken to appropriately as many had

negative experiences both in school and out in the community.

“Sometimes it feels like they’re talking to you like you’re a child- condescending.”

“When they are impatient and just mean and not patient or understand.”

Neurodiverse children and young people want to be able to give their feedback about services, but felt there is a lack of information on how to do so. They would like better and/or more advertised ways to give feedback.

Neuro diverse children and young people who had a Keyworker felt listened to and supported and this made a significant impact on their health and wellbeing.

Children and young people from asylum seeking backgrounds in the BACP consultation, were being asked specifically about accessing counselling and they talked about feeling anxious about sharing their feelings with an interpreter. In some cases this was due to the interpreter forming part of their community or having connections in their community.

“I usually keep my feelings to myself so would be nervous to share with someone I don’t know”

“For me I wouldn’t like it because I wouldn’t want to share with extra people. Because it happened to me before when an interpreter said something private when my Dad was there”

All children and young people who had used an interpreter could recall a negative experience, from practical issues like **“the wrong language”** to trust being broken due to divulging their experiences.

Health and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing is not a strong individual theme in Poverty Proofing the School Day, however, it should be noted that it impacts behaviour and attendance significantly and is also underlying in The Voices report as Covid-19 significantly impacted health and wellbeing. The direct links to health and wellbeing, for the purposes of this theme have come from The BACP consultation, the SEND Health consultation, the Inclusion audit and the Now and Next consultation.

Most young people associate mental health with physical health, although the level of understanding is varied and most associate it in the negative way.

“If you don’t take care of your body, you can faint and become dehydrated.”

Although children and young people from asylum seeking backgrounds point out that mental health and wellbeing is more of a western concept.

“Where I come from we don’t have this issue (good/bad mental health). When people come here they realise things like domestic violence and consent – we don’t have consent in our country.”

In health services children and young people want consistency.

“Someone who I’m familiar with, I’ve been going to the same doctors for ages and that’s better, change is not good for me.”

Children and young people talked about their frustration when they have to spend a long time waiting in Health settings. They felt it could be improved by having things to occupy them and help them to relax if they were feeling anxious.

“...sometimes you go and you’re there for ages and it’s really boring...”

“Fidget toys in the waiting room, if they get stressed.”

“Give information on how long the wait will be.”

In school children and young people talked about the importance of having someone to talk to with mental health and wellbeing issues.

“There are some staff who are very supportive, and serious issues get dealt with well.”

“We have Mental Health First Aiders, and they aren’t normally teachers, so they are about to talk to more often.”

“There are dedicated members of staff to go to when experiencing any issues.”

Children and young people talked about how their mental health and emotional wellbeing is linked to their futures. They see wellbeing as an important part of their future and acknowledge that creativity is important to their self-esteem. These aspirations are insightful in providing information about how children and young people want to be treated (Now and Next Consultation).

Protected characteristics



This was a significant theme mainly due to the Inclusion Audit, however, it has been identified in other consultations by many children and young people as something which is important to them. In Poverty Proofing the School Day, this was through 'celebrations', 'reward and behaviour' and 'uniform'. In the Safer Streets Consultation through how they feel outside of school in wider society.

Gender: It was important to children and young people that they were given the opportunity to ask questions and have discussions and debate around acceptance, inclusion and anti-oppressive practice in school.

Some children and young people talked about it feeling less safe to travel around in public spaces if you were female.

"If you don't take care of your body, you can faint and become dehydrated."

"Being female you are 100% more vulnerable, men are terrifying."

Children and young people feel like they are mostly supported with using the correct names and pronouns in school, although this can be dependent on the school. Generally, children and young people feel that other students need more education, information and real-life examples.

LGBTQ+: Children and young people feel that acceptance and attitudes are not addressed adequately in school.

“I really think our school needs that (PSCHE lessons) to learn more about these topics and have the chance to discuss it more and ask more questions”

“... the topics are not properly discussed ...”

“...it’s just like ticking boxes.”

Children and young people feel like they had unanswered questions when talking about sensitive issues and want more information about LGBTQ+ topics and concerns. They experience inconsistency in the way they are treated, dependent on knowledge, experience and confidence around LGBTQ+ issues within their education setting.

“I don’t think it’s the best for acceptance. It’s the students and then how the teachers respond. Sometimes students will say things that are offensive, and they don’t get told off.”

Many children and young people rely on their friends or social media for information and thus misinformation is an issue for many.

Race: Many ethnic minority children and young people do not feel supported in school and there is much inconsistency across different schools and with different staff.

“I know someone who was accused of racism and he just got isolation for the day.”

“One student used the N- word, but because he got really upset, he didn’t get punished – which was unfair. Then I used the word Mackem and got a worse punishment.”

“Teachers pretend they don’t hear racism.”



Culture

In consultations, some children and young people talked about culture in terms of their individuality, and this led to some links under this heading with the Inclusion Audit and a general link with Poverty Proofing the School Day through 'celebrations' and 'additional opportunities'.

Children and young people have a wide range of views on culture and creativity and the meaning of these words.

Creativity was seen as an important part of life for children and young people and its definition expanded across art based activities, sport and digital creativity. All children and young people have their own definition and experience of creativity which is supported and facilitated by adults around them.

"Creativity means where you can set your mind to what you want to and draw or create anything you want."

"Personally, I believe creativity is a gateway to freedom, a place of which you can escape from your problems, and are free to do as you wish."

"Trying new things and drawing my feelings on a piece of paper."

Children and young people from Now and Next Report

Some younger children are unclear about what culture is, but many children and young people identify their culture as a part of their individual identity.

"Peoples background and link to identity."

"It makes my identity as a person."

For many children and young people, their identity was related to religion and ethnicity.

"Different races and types of people, places, religions."

Young person from Now and Next Report

Many children and young people, particularly those who were White British, did not necessarily see culture as something they were connected with and not part of their identity.

"Nothing only going abroad gives you culture."

Although some did link culture to things that may be considered quintessentially British like 'fish and chips' and 'tea'.

However, children and young people recognise the strong correlation between creativity, culture and wellbeing and how different activities can generate a sense of belonging and support their wellbeing.

“Your culture helps you fit in and makes you feel comfortable.”

“When I go to St. James’ Park everyone’s nice and if something happened everyone would help.”

Children and young people are socially conscious with views and opinions reflecting opinions about social justice. They talk about homelessness, climate change, poverty and racism. They want equality and acceptance.

Children and young people talked about culture in terms of their individuality and how they feel school does not support you to be an individual – making it more likely to be bullied if you do demonstrate your individuality.

“we can’t be ourselves, it’s not smart, or what they want us to be, the school is quite controlling in how we act.”

“Teachers tell you off for being yourself.”

There was a distinction between Primary and Secondary in terms of how individuality was interpreted.

“My Primary school was more supportive – you could be anyone you wanted to be until Year 7.”



Covid-19

This was the primary theme and reason for The Voices report. Covid-19 is also mentioned in The Now and Next consultation. Covid-19 has had a huge impact on children and young people, changing lives demonstrably.

Missing friends and family was an overwhelming factor for many.

"I felt lonely and depressed because I couldn't see my friends..."

"It's been a year of instability without seeing people. I worry I forgot how to talk to them."

The social deprivation that was apparent during the pandemic has had a long lasting effect on children and young people. They talk about how their futures were compromised.

"...feeling as though my future is very undetermined. I want to be a doctor but is it worth going to uni?"

"Losing confidence and feeling scared all the time. I don't know how to feel or how to deal with it."

Children and young people talked about the impact of Covid-19 and how it has limited their opportunities in accessing creative and cultural activities. (Now and Next Report).

There was a great sense of loss and negativity for many children and young people.

"...worried about grandma's sister in India and has nobody to care for her."

"...My parents split up over it."

However, some children and young people found the benefit of spending more quality time with their immediate family .

"I got (a) better understanding of those around me – my mam and dad – we were forced to communicate – the family flows better now."

Many children and young people talked about taking up new activities during lockdown, including art and crafts, cooking, walking, reading, DIY, gardening and making videos and for some their immediate communities were instrumental in this.

Children and young people are much more aware of the wider world since the pandemic.

"I need to know what's going on now there's a pandemic. Before It never really occurred to me to watch the news."

They have become more interested in politics and the world around them and many felt they were being unfairly blamed for the spread of the pandemic. Some children and young people had strong views on the actions authorities should be taking.

"the government haven't learned from the first lockdown, and things are just going in circles."

Digital lives

This was a key theme of The Voices report, it also features significantly in Poverty Proofing the School Day as 'homework', 'additional opportunities' and 'art and technology' and is referred to in the Now and Next consultation as a way of being creative.

Children and young people have digital technology in every aspect of their lives and felt their use had increased significantly since the start of the pandemic. They use it for both 'work' in school and recreation outside of school, from mobile phones to computer gaming, their lives are intrinsically involved in digitalisation.



Children and young people have mixed feelings about their digital lives. They recognise that the amount of time they spend on digital devices for leisure has increased, with it being used not only for gaming, but socially to connect with friends and family and academically in school.

There has been a notable increase in the use of digital devices since the pandemic for schoolwork and some children and young people recognise the skills benefit to them and are aware of online safety messages. Much of their homework and schoolwork in general uses computers, tablets and interactive digital devices. However, they prefer face to face lessons than online ones.

"It's easier now we can see each other, and you can have a one-to-one conversation. It's hard when all you can see is a face on a screen."

Some children and young people talked about a lack of understanding from adults about what digital activities mean for young people.

"Adults don't understand how much we rely on it (Wi-fi/internet). They don't understand why we need it so much, but we do."

Some children and young people are very aware of the differences between themselves and others who do not have the same access they do to digital resources. The digital divide is gaping and access is particularly dependent on individual schools.

"My Mum's a teacher and had to give our computer to a pupil. At school we didn't receive computers. The government should have carried through."



“Before lockdown I had interests, but they’ve all been cancelled so I spend a lot of time not doing anything.”

Services and activities

While school plays a crucial part in children and young people lives, it is balanced with their time outside of school.

The importance of activities outside school to children and young people was evident in Poverty Proofing the School Day, the Voices report, Safer Streets and the Now and Next consultation. It was also a part of the SEND Health consultation, which focused on health services.

It was apparent that there has been a change in how children and young people access services in recent years as well as the availability and breadth of services.

The pandemic had a significant impact on how children and young people access activities outside of school, from organised sports to soft play and going to the park and these impacted opportunities for socialising.

“Before lockdown I had interests, but they’ve all been cancelled so I spend a lot of time not doing anything.”

Many children and young people spend time in local parks and generally outdoors, outside of school. They do not always feel safe in these places and often see risky behaviour like drinking alcohol and drug taking. They identified that parks were not well lit which contributed to them feeling unsafe, particularly in the winter months.

“I saw a bunch of teenagers in a skate park drinking and smashing bottles.”

Some children and young people talked about feeling safer outside of school when they were with family or friends or people they knew.

Alcohol and substance misuse was a factor to feeling unsafe as children and young people felt these affected the behaviours of others, **“swearing, drinking cans and throwing things around”**.

Children and young people also felt unsafe in towns or city centres where large groups of people congregate and many avoid particular streets or places in the areas they live.

“If there’s a large group of people, it’s going to turn into a fight.”

Many children and young people use public transport outside of school and pre-pandemic found travelling on public transport a source of enjoyment.

“...the bus was (the) best part of the day... chat to others...”

But during the pandemic they found travelling on public transport stressful and challenging.

“I don’t like buses anymore. Loads of people on...I didn’t feel safe.”

By 2022, according to the Safer Streets Report, young people often found travelling on buses unsafe, particularly at weekends and late in the afternoon. They talked about bus drivers being unapproachable, particularly when they experience risky behaviour.

“The bus driver didn’t intervene while they were giving her grief...”

“I would definitely not tell the bus driver, they’re useless.”

Methodology

Poverty Proofing© the School Day audits take place within the school day and consist of all children in that setting taking part in small focus groups where they are asked about aspects of school life that can be affected by socio economic disadvantage. In primary settings focus groups are conducted by staff. In secondary settings peer researchers are trained to work alongside staff in facilitating focus groups.

Consultations are commissioned for a wide range of purposes. Each consultation has a bespoke methodology designed specific to the needs of the commissioner, the needs of the participants and negate any barriers to participation. Examples of methodologies include drawings activities which featured in both the Voices project and the SEND Health Consultation. Focus groups in different forms are used frequently and can utilise discussion and word showers. One-to-one conversations are employed in many consultations such as SEND Health, Keyworker and Now and Next.

Methods are based on extensive experience and participatory research practices. Time was taken at the beginning of each consultation to ensure individual needs were considered and participants supported appropriately. Every effort was taken, as far as is possible, to ensure children and young people felt comfortable in places consultations took place, including school, community centres and sometimes with parents/carers present for support. On occasion peer researchers were used to take every effort to support the participants to feel comfortable to share their thoughts and opinions openly and honestly.

Poverty Proofing the School Day audits formed a large part of the consultations to be included and analysed. Relevant information and reports were shared, and CNE utilised extensive knowledge and experience from the Poverty Proofing the School Day Team. The recommendations frequently made to schools were discussed and the Poverty Proofing the School Day Team shared some personal anecdotes and quotes from children and young people.

A literary review of previous consultations was undertaken, to identify the main themes and recommendations from each report.

Participants/Engagement

The diverse nature of the projects gives us findings from a broad demographic of children and young people from across the region. In all North East Local Authority areas children and young people aged between 5 and 25 years old were represented.

Participants came from a cross section of society and included diverse groups, those from ethnically marginalised communities, those with a disability or neurodivergent as well as those with other protected characteristics.

To facilitate engagement of a wide range of participants their individual and diverse needs were considered. Practitioners were aware of combatting any barriers to participation by use of accessible methods, appropriate communication, and a variety of formats to engage including online in some cases.

Face to Face consultations took place in different venues, including schools, youth and community centres and in the home. Participation in all consultations was optional and children and young people had the option to opt out at any time before or during the consultation if they wished.

Barriers/Challenges

The purpose of this piece of work is to bring together the findings of a diverse set of data from a number of different consultations, this understandably presented some barriers and challenges:

- Consent from stakeholders to use reports
- Number of voices to be represented
- Synthesising the information from different styles of report
- Analysis of a large volume of data

These barriers were overcome with the support of colleagues from the Poverty Proofing the School Day Team, with advice from Professor Liz Todd of Newcastle University and by employing a thematic approach to data presentation.

Consent from stakeholders to use reports: Most stakeholders responded in a timely manner, but some took longer to secure, which meant the work had to be re-visited and re-evaluated during the tight timescales. Consent was not agreed for some consultations and these have not been used.

Synthesising the information: Each consultation report had a different style in keeping with the purpose of the report which meant that collating information was not straightforward. There had to be some interpretation of data to enable it to be included in the findings in a cohesive way. Liz Todd, Professor of Educational Inclusion from Newcastle University was able to support and advise with this.

List of reports

The Voices Report

Purpose: To talk to children and people about the impact of Covid-19

Demographic: 5 to 18 year-olds living in poverty

Funders/Partners: Economic and Social Research Council (Funder) Newcastle University (Partner)

Theme: Covid-19

Area: North East wide

No. participants: 1,780

Duration: 2 years

Completion date: October 2022

SEND Health Consultation Report

Purpose: To talk to young people with additional needs about Health Services

Demographic: 10 to 21 year-olds with additional needs

Funders/Partners: NHS England (Funder)

Theme: SEND Health Services

Area: North East wide

No. participants: 70

Duration: 3 months

Completion date: January 2023

Now and Next Report

Purpose: To talk to young people about culture and creativity

Demographic: 2 to 18 year-olds

Funders/Partners: City of Dreams (Funder)

Theme: Culture and creativity

Area: Newcastle and Gateshead

No. participants: 1,198

Duration: 3 months

Completion date: November 2022

Key Worker Pilot Report

Purpose: To talk to young people who have a key worker about the pilot scheme

Demographic: 2 to 18 year-olds

Funders/Partners: North East and North Cumbria SEND Forum (Funder)

Theme: Access

Area: Newcastle, Stockton

No. participants: 11

Duration: 4 months

Completion date: June 2023

Safer Streets Consultation Report

Purpose: A result of Voices project, for the for Commission to gather more information

Demographic: 11 to 23 year-olds

Funders/Partners: Northumbria Police and Crime Commission (Funder)

Theme: Safety

Area: Ashington, Newcastle, Sunderland

No. participants: 42

Duration: 3 months

Completion date: June 2023

Barriers Children and Young People from Asylum Seeking Backgrounds Face to Accessing Counselling

Purpose: Identify and describe barriers to counselling services for children and young people from asylum seeking background

Demographic: 8 to 25 year-olds from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds

Funders/Partners: British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (Funder), North East Solidarity and Teaching (Partner)

Theme: Asylum seekers/Communication

Area: Newcastle

No. participants: 30

Duration: 6 months

Completion date: October 2022

Acceptance and Inclusion Audit

Purpose: Discuss experience of children and young people who identify as LGBTQ+

Demographic: 11 to 17 year-olds

Funders/Partners: Burnside College (Funder/Partner))

Theme: Protected characteristics

Area: North Tyneside

No. participants: 200

Duration: 1 week

Completion date: July 2022

Poverty Proofing the School Day Audits

Purpose: To talk to YP about the impact of poverty on the school day

Demographic: 3 to 26 year-old students

Funders/Partners: Kavli Trust (Funder) North of Tyne Combined Authority (Funder), Newcastle and Durham Diocese (Funder), North Tyneside Council (Funder), Child Poverty Action Group (Partner), Newcastle University (Funder)

Theme: School/Poverty

Area: North East wide

No. participants: 32,000

Duration: Up to 10 days per school

Completion date: 2020 to 2023

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