

What challenges have young people who face inequalities experienced during the Covid-19 lockdown?

Experiences of young people from LGBTQ+, Gypsy, Traveller and Roma and young carer communities.

The Young People's Health Partnership

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Introduction

The Young People's Health Partnership represents the interests of young people and young adults aged 10-25. We focus specifically on young people facing inequalities and better understanding the health inequalities they experience. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic this is even more important since the potential for inequalities worsening is clear. We wanted to engage with young people from three different groups to understand their experience of Covid-19, the lockdown, the challenges as well as what supported them and their perspectives on the future. The aim of this work is to inform health policy leads from across the health system including the NHS, Public Health England and the Department of Health and Social Care.

The Young People's Health Partnership is part of the Health and Wellbeing Alliance and we engaged with other partnerships and members of the Alliance to identify three groups to work with. The groups we identified were either prioritised in our work plan for 2020-21 or identified as priority groups in our work with system partners during the pandemic. There are of course many other groups of young people who are at risk of considerable health inequalities but our aim was to highlight the issues raised by these young people and highlight the importance of effective engagement with particular groups of young people.

The Young People's Health Partnership is led by the Association for Young People's Health (AYPH) who led the engagement work.



Methodology

We created a flexible methodology that was used with all three groups. The methodology was designed to support engagement with young people about Covid-19, lockdown and how it has affected them. Currently, there are many research and participation projects focusing on the impacts of the pandemic on young people. Despite this, we have seen less focus on specific groups of young people who may have unique experiences or different inequalities that deserve equal attention. The methodology was designed by AYPH participation staff. While the questions remained consistent throughout the engagement, the methodology was adaptable, so it could be changed according to the different needs of the young people taking part. This allowed the project to reach more young people, as some preferred to work with facilitators from their own support networks or community rather than an external facilitator.

Delivery

We worked with three members of the Health and Wellbeing Alliance: Carers Partnership, Friends Families and Travellers and the LGB&T Partnership. Each member identified local organisations in their networks who would be able to engage with this project. In conversations with a range of local organisations we identified three local partners: [Free2B Alliance](#), a LGBTQ+ youth service, [Richmond Carers Centre](#), supporting young carers and [York Travellers Trust](#), supporting Gypsy, Traveller and Romany families and young people. We also worked with RCPCH & Us who supported the engagement work and the agreement of key messages.

AYPH participation staff met with youth workers from each organisation to discuss the best way of engaging their young people with the methodology. This was to consider confidentiality and consent, as well as what would make the young people feel safe and able to share their opinions openly.

It was agreed that AYPH participation staff would lead two workshops for Richmond Carers Centre, one with their 10 – 12 year old group and one with their 12 – 15 year old group. They would sit in at the Free2B Alliance workshop to clarify questions or feedback, but not lead the workshop. York Travellers Trust would hold one to one interviews with young people and hold one large group workshop. York Travellers Trust followed the methodology but to ensure the young people felt safe, no external facilitators were in the group.

All engagement was carried out between July and August 2020. York Travellers Trust engaged with a group of five young women, aged 15 – 25 years old and carried out seven one to one interviews with young men and women aged 14 – 25 years old.

Richmond Carers Centre ran two engagement groups. One for four girls and three boys aged 10 – 11 and another for two girls and three boys aged 12 – 15.

The Free2B Alliance engagement group included seven young people between 13 – 18 years old.

31 young people were consulted in total, all aged between 10 and 25 years.

What young people said

How have young people been affected by the Covid-19 lock down?

Young people we worked with told us they felt that the sudden withdrawal of clubs, school, after school activities and friends had had a major impact on the health and wellbeing of all young people. They told us being confined to home, where they may not get time to themselves, coupled with the sudden restrictions on day-to-day activities also affected young people's wellbeing negatively.

They also told us that young people like them were likely to feel the impact of the withdrawal of support networks even more acutely. Many of the youth clubs they attend have been set up to meet specific needs within their communities. These clubs come with expertise in supporting young people and an awareness of the challenges they face. The Free2B LGBTQ+ young people's group considered their youth club not only as a place to see their friends, but where they could seek advice on LGBTQ+ issues and a space that was safe and free from discrimination. Many of them had stories of living with homophobic or transphobic families and spoke of increased verbal or physical domestic violence toward them. Young carers we spoke to were not only managing the sudden withdrawal of their own support, but an increase in their responsibilities when caring for family members. One young carer commented, ***"My brother is normally in a residential school and when he is home we have carers in the holidays. We have not had any carers so it has been a lot harder than normal"***.
Young Person from Young Carers 10 – 12 year old group, Carers Richmond.

Young people from The York Travellers Trust echoed the difficulties they felt in lockdown due to the sudden removal of support networks, and also told us they were experiencing financial stress, as many of the young men in the communities are self-employed and had lost work. Many did not feel they could access Universal Credit and that culturally receiving financial support was frowned upon or considered shameful.

Work of the charity *Friends, Families and Travellers* has highlighted that financial stress may worsen severe health inequalities faced by Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities – in particular, young men. In the All Ireland Traveller Health Survey, researchers found suicide to be the cause of 11% of all deaths in the Irish Traveller community¹. Further to this, research conducted by Walker in 2008 found that over 65% of Traveller suicides occur among those under 30².

¹ https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/AITHS_SUMMARY.pdf

² <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/nosp/research/suicidetravellercommunity.pdf>

What has young people's experience accessing healthcare provisions been like during Covid-19?

The York Travellers Trust young people told us they struggled to manage current healthcare conditions during lock down. Digital GP appointments and emailed prescriptions can be challenging with low literacy levels. A young woman in the group workshop said, ***"When people don't know how to read or write it's hard. I don't know how to get an email prescription"*** - Young person from York Travellers. This practical boundary to healthcare can become more challenging when facing stigma and discrimination, ***"I've been followed round, talked to like scum"*** - Young person from York Travellers.

LGBTQ+ young people have also experienced digital exclusion. Although they might have access to devices such as tablets, phones and laptops, when living in transphobic or homophobic households, they are unable to find a space to use devices to access the support or healthcare they need. LGBTQ+ young people also told us that they felt reduced staff had led to delays and disruption to the treatment of Transgender young people due to issues such as stockpiling transition medication. Many young people from the LGBTQ+ community also reported that they mistrusted healthcare professionals and confidentiality. They had experiences of professionals breaking confidentiality when they had shared something in confidence. One young person shared an experience of a professional raising safeguarding procedures when he disclosed he was in a same sex relationship with someone in his class of the same age.

Young Carers felt the information for people 'shielding' during the lock down was inadequate, particularly when compared to the regular broadcasted updates. ***"It did not tell you what you can do and what special measures you would need. The media showed the beaches and news flashes of no social distancing and makes you worry about when this is going to end"*** – Young Person from Young Carers 10 – 12 year old group, Carers Richmond.

What support has been missing or unhelpful?

All the young people we spoke to felt that the lack of clarity around the lockdown presented challenges, not just for young people from their communities but also for young people generally. The rules about social distancing felt overwhelming and difficult to remember and this led some young people to feel anxious when going outside.

Inconsistent communication and information from schools created a huge amount of stress and anxiety. This is true of all year groups and not just young people who were due to sit exams. Even schools that provided regular contact concerning young people's academic life did not provide the social element that comes with attending school and young people missed this. For example, they wanted ***"more meetings with teachers doing fun activities, to be able to see friends"*** – Young Person from Young Carers 12 – 15 year old group, Carers Richmond. In addition, several young people suggested that advice about what to do if you had a health concern, about benefits and food banks was not reaching young people.

Shielding young people from the York Travellers Trust told us there was no support for them when trying to stay in isolation when they were also being moved on from where they were staying, forcing them to break social distancing rules.

What do you feel young people have done in order to support themselves?

Some young people acknowledged that being around family more than usual could be difficult and in some cases damaging to mental health or even dangerous in the cases of homophobic or transphobic family members. Despite this, a majority recognised that proactively connecting with family and friends, through games, social media or going for walks could be a very positive way of coping. The young people who went to schools that were more proactive in staying in contact with students about non-academic things, after school clubs etc. reported that they found this useful. Many young people were taking advantage of Zoom groups or extracurricular activities and online youth groups when given the opportunity.

Many young people who felt that being at home during lockdown may be unhealthy or even dangerous because of abusive family members chose to stay with friends instead. While most reported this as safer for them, it has also put a strain on relationships and this has led to poor mental and psychosocial health in some young people.

Young people told us that having their own space to be alone was very important. They reported doing different things in their time alone, such as using a punching bag or watching YouTube videos, but all agreed it was an essential part of being able to cope.

Some young people we spoke to also acknowledged that they had been coping in ways that may not be considered sustainable or healthy. Some found that alcohol or drugs have helped them when feeling particularly bad. Interestingly the young people identified that this may be linked to pre-existing mental health issues, exacerbated by the lock down. Other young people reported that they had developed complicated relationships with food and body image, either comfort eating or worrying about changes in their bodies due to lack of movement.

A small proportion of the young people we engaged in these particular groups struggled to identify anything supportive or positive. Typically, these were young people who were facing financial difficulties or felt particularly isolated from health services or other forms of support such as universal credit.

The NHS is looking at how it makes healthcare more linked up for young people - how could it work best for you?

Young people we spoke to felt that healthcare professionals needed to prioritise speaking to them first or at the same time as they spoke to parents or guardians about their health, one young man explained, ***“if they explained something to you about care you might need; it might make you less nervous”*** – young person from Richmond Carers. Young people also felt that more referrals and sign posting to other professionals, either other health provisions or youth charities would benefit them in managing their health.

Many young people we spoke to wanted to know pathways to health services that did not rely on their parents or family members to make appointments, set up online consultations or take them to clinics. This may be particularly important for those with whom services find it harder to connect. Better health literacy around how GP practices work, such as how to speak to reception staff and



book appointments, as well as knowledge about their rights and confidentiality. A lot of young people said they would value being able to speak to healthcare professionals and mental health experts in a non-clinical setting, over Zoom or in school.

Where young people understood confidentiality, general mistrust in professionals meant young people wanted healthcare professionals to take time to view them as a whole person, rather than just their health issue. This is of course the case for all young people, but is especially important for groups of young people who may be managing health conditions, helping them to engage with care plans. This meant healthcare professionals understanding the circumstances of young people who face inequalities and the unique challenges they face, as well as the impact of managing health conditions on young people's mental health.

Key messages from young people

- **Accessing health services:** Young people want to understand pathways to health services so they can take agency of their own health. However, they do not automatically know what support they are entitled to. Developmentally appropriate health messages for young people that explain their rights to healthcare with or without family members, clear and meaningful information about confidentiality and opportunities to engage with healthcare in a variety of settings all supported young people to manage their health during lockdown and while social distancing. This is particularly important for young people facing a wide range of social and economic challenges.
- **A range of ways to engage:** Digital engagement is a good way of reaching young people in lockdown, however, not all young people have access to computers, email, social media or a safe environment to access the support. Services should bear this in mind and ensure they have the option for communicating via telephone, posters/flyers and post.
- **Clear communication particularly for young people affected by shielding:** Young people shielding, or living and caring for loved ones who are shielding will have a heightened anxiety to Covid-19 and value regular and clear advice and updates, alongside updates for the general population who may not be shielding or managing complex health conditions.
- **Importance of social support:** Online social support such as youth groups and school clubs were incredibly helpful for young people for maintaining mental health, providing a source of information about Covid-19 and gave them a healthy distraction from the stress of lockdown. This can be very useful for young people who may otherwise distract themselves in less healthy ways, such as substance use or develop food related disorders.
- **Understanding how broader social determinants and stigma affect young people:** The effects of Covid-19 on some young people who face inequalities go beyond physical health concerns. Additional challenges are likely to be economic and work, housing and safety at home and social wellbeing and mental health. On top of this, stigma toward different communities of young people plays a big part in young people's ability to proactively engage in support. Young people are less likely to seek healthcare if they feel the services are judging them, will break confidentiality or do not understand their culture or lifestyle. This was particularly true of the LGBTQ+ and Gypsy, Traveller and Romany young people.
- **Being at home has a very different impact depending on your circumstances:** Young people spending more time at home and with family can be a protective factor for them or can be extremely challenging. They can face extra responsibilities when caring for a sibling or parent/guardian, or they may face discrimination and abusive behaviour.

Summary

Young people want to be informed about developments in Covid-19 and how to protect themselves and their loved ones. This is particularly true of young people shielding or living with a family member who is shielding. However, information often doesn't reach young people and this can cause additional worry and impact their ability to take agency over their care. Digital support can be incredibly useful for young people in all sorts of ways, from sharing the latest information to making them feel more connected to their support networks. When young people can access this support they find it very helpful, but when young people cannot access digital support, this can make them feel even more isolated.

For young people who face a range of social and economic inequalities, the effects of Covid-19 go beyond just physical health concerns. Unstable housing, employment, mental health issues and unsafe home lives are hugely significant for their health and wellbeing. Healthcare professionals and services that demonstrate an understanding of this can help to remove stigma for different groups and communities and help young people feel more comfortable reaching out for help.

Understanding how to get help in a multitude of ways, digitally, by phone and through non-clinical settings such as schools can help young people from these groups access healthcare professionals and better manage their health.

Young people value being connected to a network of friends and professionals as well as being fully informed about how services can work for them, from referrals to confidentiality.

The **Young People's Health Partnership** represents the interests of young people and young adults aged 10 – 25. We focus specifically on young people facing health inequalities. We are a partnership of six organisations with VCSE networks across the UK from the youth and young people's health sectors.

<https://www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk/YPHP>

The **Association for Young People's Health** is the leading independent voice for young people's health in the UK, bridging the worlds of policy, practice and evidence to promote better understanding of young people's health needs and to advocate for youth friendly health services.

For more information about our work please visit the AYPH website
www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk or email info@youngpeopleshealth.org.uk

Free2B Alliance is a London based community organisation, supporting LGBTQ+ young people and their parents. They provide 1:1 and group services in schools and in the community including trans groups, with all of their provisions co-developed with their members. They challenge homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and provide LGBTQ+ awareness training to schools and organisations to promote inclusivity. They seek to provide safe spaces and champion empowerment, acceptance and a place where you are Free2B!

free2b-alliance.org.uk or email info@free2b-alliance.org.uk

Richmond Carers Centre (RCC) is established to give practical help, service, support, advocacy and information to those people caring for others who are dependent upon them because of physical disability, learning difficulty, mental health problems, age or illness within the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames, and who themselves are in need. RCC works with unpaid carers of all ages, enabling them to continue their caring roles, help to improve their health and wellbeing, prevent deterioration and breakdown of caring relationship/s, and reduce stress. Services include telephone support line, one to one informal support, support groups, social mornings and evenings, free counselling and complementary therapy service, young carers support and mentoring service, emotional advice and support, bespoke projects and events, breaks and activities programme for young carers. Importantly they give carers the time and space they need to relax and have a break from their often demanding and challenging roles.

www.richmondcarers.org or email info@richmondcarers.org

York Travellers Trust is a community led organisation that works with Gypsy and Traveller communities in York and the surrounding areas. From their community centre in York – as well as outreach on sites, road side and houses - they offer advocacy support, advice and guidance and run social clubs and activities to promote positive wellbeing. They work with the settled community as well as Gypsies and Travellers to promote community cohesion and run Safe Space Conversations for organisations wanting to learn more about Gypsy and Traveller culture in order to improve their practice. <https://ytt.org.uk/> or email y-t-t@outlook.com

RCPCH &Us is the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health's (RCPCH) network of children, young people and families who work collaboratively with RCPCH and the NHS to improve child health policy and practice. Over 2000 children, young people and families contribute each year to a range of programmes including workforce development, health policy, paediatric exams, youth social action and more. RCPCH &Us supported the engagement of organisations working with AYPH in this initiative. You can find out more about RCPCH &Us at www.rcpch.ac.uk/and_us

