TO LOCKDOWN AND BACK

Research report | November 2020

Young people's lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Acknowledgements

Disclaimer:

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1. Introduction

This report is the first output from the Growing up Under COVID-19 (GUC19) transnational research project. It presents the findings from an initial phase of qualitative research carried out with young people aged 14-18 from seven countries, exploring their lived experiences of life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report draws primarily on semi-structured qualitative interviews carried out with 62 young people (see Appendix One) between July and September 2020 by members of a joint research team from Ecorys and the University of Huddersfield. These provided an opportunity to understand young people's views and experiences of the initial period of the pandemic as well as reflections on their own youth-led inquiries and observations in the first phase of this research. These were supplemented with evidence from group discussions, observation notes and materials shared by young people from research they have designed and conducted themselves. The data was coded and analysed thematically using a topic framework (see Appendix Two).

The report aims to provide a snapshot of a distinct period of the COVID-19 pandemic through the eyes of young people; from the news first breaking globally, through the 'lockdown' period, to the end of the first wave. It is intended for a broad readership, and includes key messages and recommendations for young people, public authorities, NGOs, and academics as well as for the wider public. It is one of a series of outputs, which also includes communication from ongoing youth-led research, collaborative analysis and reporting by young people and adults. Two further reports are scheduled in spring and autumn 2021. The project is due to conclude in September 2021. The lessons learned from the processes associated with setting-up and implementing the online action research with young people for this project are documented separately (Monchuk, et. al. 2020).

In the remainder of the chapter, we set out the aims and the research questions; provide further background to the study; and explain the research methodology upon which the report findings are based.

1.1. Study background and approach

With many countries on lockdown and school closures widespread, young people stand to be affected by the pandemic in quite specific ways. As a comparatively 'safe' population, the immediate risk to health and wellbeing is thought to be lower than for adults. Yet, as a once-in-a-generation global health crisis unfolds, young people's social realities and futures are set to change. There is an urgent imperative to examine the implications for young people, hear their views and concerns, and to understand their role in mitigating against the potential scarring effects for a generation growing-up under COVID-19. It was in this context, and with an awareness of the need to recognise the importance of young people's voices and their agency, that the study was conceived.

1.1.1. Aims and research questions

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the Growing up Under COVID-19 project aims to provide in-depth qualitative insights into the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on young people's lives, and to inform the development of tools and measures to safeguard young people's well-being and their rights during and beyond the pandemic.

The overall aim of the research is:

To understand how young people are experiencing and responding to the COVID-19 crisis, and to make suggestions for how to promote young people's wellbeing and rights during and after the pandemic.

In achieving this aim, the researchers are working with young people as co-researchers to understand:

a. How is the COVID-19 crisis affecting young people's everyday lives and those around them, and how are they responding to the situation?

b. What are young people's perspectives about how the COVID-19 crisis is being managed, how it is talked about in the media, and the measures that are put in place?

c. To what extent are young people's needs and circumstances being taken into account, and what is the actual and potential contribution of young people as active citizens?

d. What do young people think about the attitudes, values, and behaviours of others, and the positive and negative consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for society?

e. What do young people perceive as the priorities for the recovery, for rebuilding society and young people's roles in the recovery process?

f. What messages do young people have for decision makers about managing future crises, and safeguarding young people's rights in the future?

1. 1. 2.   Theoretical influences

Given the exploratory nature of the study, we do not want to presuppose hypotheses, but instead have taken an inductive approach to theory building, guided by young people's inquiries and through ongoing dialogue between adult and youth researchers. The project is framed and informed by three theoretical influences:

- **A whole systems approach** – the project seeks to understand the interactions between the COVID-19 crisis and young people in terms of the contextual influences that play out in their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This includes family, peers, community, socio-structural position, political economy and virtual worlds.

- **Child-centred and rights-based** – the research acknowledges that young people are citizens and rights-bearers rather than subjects of the research. It recognises the 1989 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as the principal vehicle through which child rights are enshrined in international law and through which the impact of the pandemic on young people is understood. We have cross-referenced the Convention and the 54 Articles when developing the preliminary list of themes and topics.

- **Learning in action** – given the unprecedented nature of the crisis, the study will necessarily be emergent. It will involve learning in action as the crisis unfolds, using principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR). This is an ongoing process of individuals researching their own situation, learning from experience, reflecting on the significance of this experiences with others, and using this to articulate their ideas and recommendations for future decision-making and action. It starts with the premise that the young people can participate as experts in their own lives (Thomson, 2008; Abebe, 2009), as well as seeking to embrace the complexity and "messy realities" of doing action research in a real world context (Percy-Smith et. al., 2019).

1.2. Methodology

The methodology involves a longitudinal ethnographic action research design centred around youth-led research conducted over three phases. Over 18 months, adult researchers from Ecorys and the University of Huddersfield are working collaboratively with young people aged 14-18 from diverse backgrounds in seven countries, using Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods through cycles of research, analysis and reporting.

Within this process, young people are supported in observing, documenting and critically reflecting on the impacts of the pandemic as they unfold around themselves, their friends, family and wider society. Additionally, the adult researchers are carrying out semi-structured interviews, group discussions and observations, with 'touch points' to bring together and cross-fertilise ideas and findings between the youth-led and adult-led research.

The project is taking place entirely online, with 70 young people communicating through virtual panels of up to 10 participants through video calls and an online collaboration platform (Yammer), each supported by an adult researcher. Their work involves individual action research inquiry, activities in the virtual groups, and dialogue with a wider network of young people who are affiliated to the project as part of a community of practice.

1. 2. 1.   Selection of countries

The project includes a transnational dimension to reflect on the global nature of the pandemic, and to learn from diverse contexts beyond the UK. It also serves to create a dialogue between young people beyond national cultures of participation. Countries were selected to reflect varying public health responses to the crisis, and different situations with regard to child rights and political representation. The seven countries are:

- England
- Scotland
- Wales
- Northern Ireland
- Italy
- Singapore
- Lebanon

The research does not claim to be an international comparative study per se, nor does it provide a country-representative view of young people's experiences. Rather, the research is concerned with the global nature of the pandemic, and the ways in which individual experience is mediated through varied national political and cultural contexts and diverse local settings and circumstances.

1. 2. 2.   Recruitment of young people

In total, 70 young people were recruited to take part in seven panels, of which four were based in the UK. The decision was taken to mix young people from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to capture similarities and differences in the public response to the COVID-19 crisis and use these to stimulate reflection by young people on responses in each country. The final split by country was therefore as follows: UK (40 young people), Italy (10 young people), Singapore (10 young people) and Lebanon (10 young people).

Young people were recruited through an application process, where they were asked to talk about their motivations, circumstances and experiences. Recruitment was via social media, NGOs, public authorities, and organisations representing specific groups, including BAME young people, LGBTQ+ young people, and young carers. The 14-18 range was guided by a need to ensure commonalities in age and experience, and sufficient maturity and independence to carry out an action research project online. Young people were selected with an emphasis on diversity, and to include representation from those who faced specific forms of adversity during the COVID-19 crisis, whether that related to health issues, family issues, or socio-economic disadvantage. The selection of participants was weighted to ensure representation from the four UK nations within the study.

Further information about the rationale for the ages and characteristics of participants, and the selection of countries is provided in the Research Protocol, which can be viewed at the following link: https://www.guc19.com/pdf/essential-reading/research-protocol.pdf

1.3. Scope of data collection and analysis for this report

This report is based primarily on the evidence from 62 semi-structured qualitative interviews carried out with young people by the adult researchers between July and September 2020. The interviews, conducted by video call in the appropriate language(s), lasted between 70 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed with respondents' consent. Parental consent was obtained for young people under 16 years of age. The research team also supplemented the interview data with a lighter touch review of notes from discussions and observations carried out within the research panels using the online Yammer platform and recorded video calls.

It should be noted that the researchers had each undertaken a preliminary interview with respondents at the start of the project, where factual details were established regarding their living and family circumstances; education; health and wellbeing; and the involvement of other adult professionals. These calls had a safeguarding and welfare purpose, but they also captured information which was used to tailor the one-to-one interviews.

1. 3. 1.   Research design and data collection

Each interview was carried out by the researcher overseeing the panel within which the young person was represented, to build on the trust and rapport established during the first phase of the project. The interviews were carried out using a semi-structured interview topic guide, which was organised around four overarching themes, while being reflexive in response to the specific context for each young person:

a. personal experiences of life during the pandemic so far

b. views on actions taken by adult decision-makers and the public

c. safeguarding young people's rights and wellbeing; and

d. coping and adjustment.

Researchers also made use of two visual aids during the interview: a 'timeline' exercise to facilitate recall of events since the beginning of the pandemic and to locate moments of personal significance; and a wheel summarising different spheres of young people's everyday lives, from which they could select or supplement with additional topics to focus their responses.

1. 3. 2.   Research data analysis and interpretation

The interview data was imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software and coded using a thematic framework (see Appendix Two) drawing on principles of 'template analysis' (King 1998). A preliminary thematic analysis was then undertaken, to make sense of the data both within and between country contexts and to review and adjust the framework to add new codes emerging from the data. The analysis concluded with a realist synthesis (Rycroft-Malone et. al. 2012) to appraise and explain the findings, with attention to the contexts and circumstances within which young people and those around them acted during the COVID-19 crisis, and with what outcome(s).

The research team then tested the findings by recording a set of short video clips with an overview of each chapter, which were shared with the young people. Young people were also engaged in a dialogue to formulate recommendations from the research, and to decide to whom and how these should be targeted.
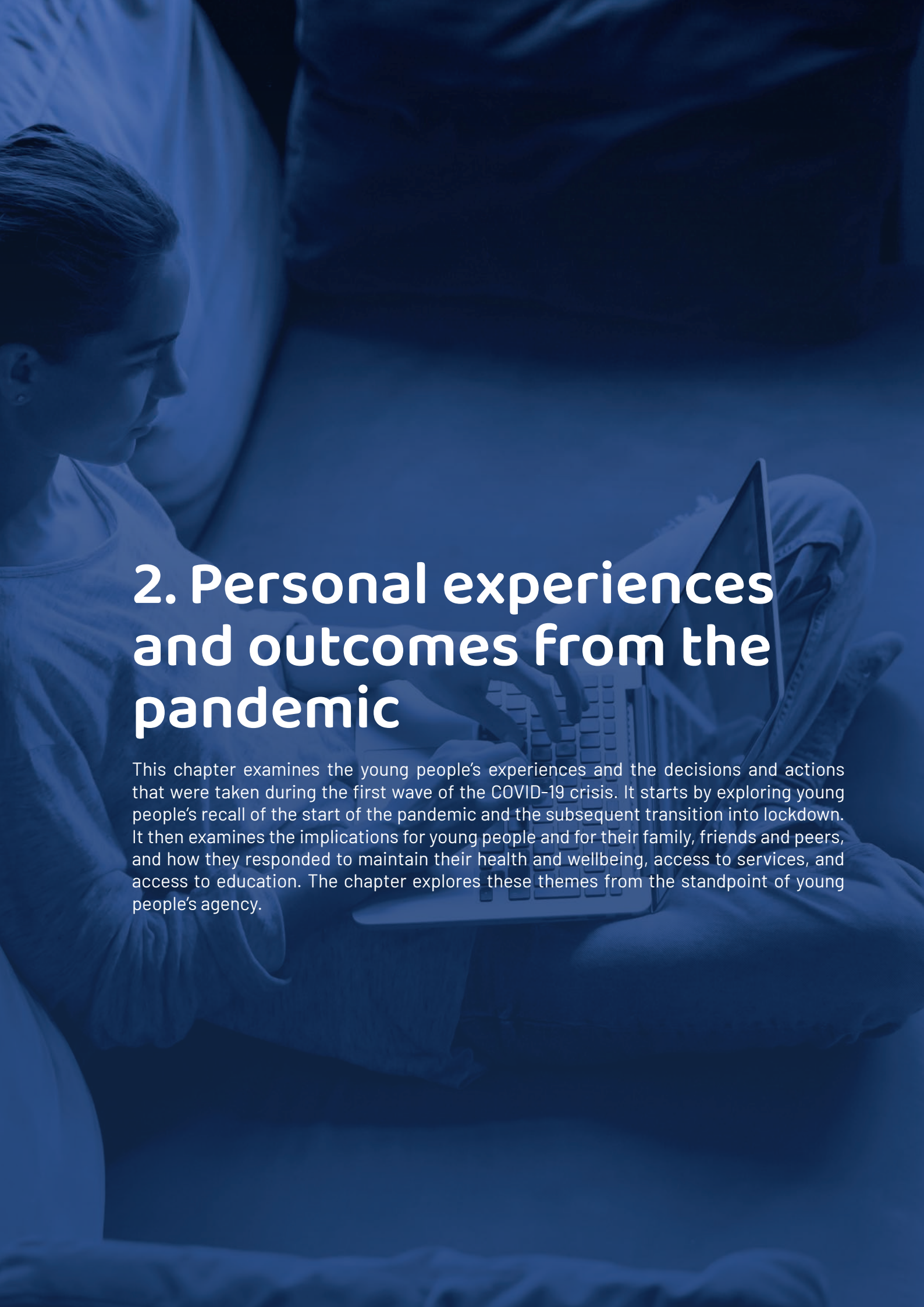
As with any study, data limitations apply, which should be considered when reading this report. In this instance, the sample of young people taking part in the interviews and in the wider study is heavily skewed towards female participants (see Appendix One). Whilst every attempt was made to achieve an equitable representation, the final decision about selection of participants was determined by a desire to ensure young people with a variety of social, personal and contextual characteristics were able to take part. This inevitably affected gender balance. There was also an overall skew towards respondents from England within the sample for the interviews (*n*=20).

The findings reflect a specific phase in the pandemic and young people's insights are limited to the period from the onset of the pandemic up until September 2020. At the stage when the analysis took place, young people were still at a relatively early stage in conducting and reporting on their own research inquiries and the data was not included within the analysis for this report, although young people's experiences of carrying out action research featured within the interviews and were integral to how they reflected on the pandemic during this time.

1.4. Report structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter Two** explores young people's personal experiences and outcomes from the COVID-19 crisis, and their more intimate reflections on their family life, peers, and valued social networks. The chapter considers actions taken at a personal level to adjust and what has been lost or gained as a result.

- **Chapter Three** explores young people's views on public attitudes, values and behaviours during the pandemic; the social issues of greatest importance to them that surfaced during the pandemic; action taken by young people and others to tackle these issues; and perceptions of media coverage during the crisis.

- **Chapter Four** examines young people's perspectives of political decision-making during the crisis, at different scales (global / national / local). It explores the role of formal and non-formal political and social action, and the impact of the crisis on young people's trust in democratic representative structures and views on their own roles and involvement in managing the pandemic.

- **Chapter Five** looks to the future. It covers the things that young people were optimistic about; how or whether the crisis had changed their future plans; steps taken to mitigate against potential risks or harms, and recommendations on how to safeguard young people's rights during and after the crisis; and how to strengthen their voices in the decision-making process.

- **Chapter Six** draws together conclusions on the evidence presented within the report and offers a set of preliminary key messages and recommendations at an interim stage in the project.

- **Appendix One** provides a summary of key characteristics of young people in the sample; **Appendix Two** provides further details of the coding framework used for the analysis; and **Appendix Three** presents a bibliography.

2. Personal experiences and outcomes from the pandemic

This chapter examines the young people's experiences and the decisions and actions that were taken during the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis. It starts by exploring young people's recall of the start of the pandemic and the subsequent transition into lockdown. It then examines the implications for young people and for their family, friends and peers, and how they responded to maintain their health and wellbeing, access to services, and access to education. The chapter explores these themes from the standpoint of young people's agency.

2.1. Recalling the onset of the COVID-19 crisis

Young people generally recalled that the COVID-19 crisis seemed like something distant and unreal when it first appeared on the news. It featured to a varying extent in conversations with family members at home and with peers at school, but the novelty of the situation and the pace at which events unfolded meant that the seriousness was not always immediately apparent. Even when the first cases outside of China and within their respective country hit the news, young people reported having to triangulate between different views and sources to reach their own conclusions about how worried they should be. This included a combination of news, social media, and reactions of parents and carers, schools and their peer group. COVID-19 was intermixed with other domestic and global events, and discussions and information were obscured to some extent by this background 'noise'.

"I think we were starting to hear about it, and we were kind of making jokes about it... We kind of thought that it would stay in China, it wouldn't really spread across the world like some other illnesses we've heard of, like Ebola, and that sort of thing, and I think life was very much normal." **(Female, 16, Wales)**

"Living in a very rural area, things like... I don't know, you can't really say this, but big news headlines, you wouldn't really in a rural area think that it would affect you." **(Female, 16, England)**

Young people's reactions became more polarised as the crisis developed. Some young people recalled feeling a sense of anger and frustration at those who had not taken the situation seriously. They also stated that they had become increasingly concerned about xenophobic comments or actions towards people of Chinese ethnic origin that they had either witnessed or heard about. Others described how they had sought to block out the COVID-19 developments for as long as possible. With a busy academic schedule, stress levels were already high, and the daily news coverage only served to exacerbate this.

Whether or not they had been following developments on the news or social media, young people often spoke about a particular moment when the extent of the seriousness of the situation was realised. This was not always a response to events in the news, such as the official world health organisation (WHO) confirmation that the crisis had become a pandemic, but rather when something happened that affected them directly. Even if this was in a small way, it suddenly made the crisis feel very real.

"I think it was when Italy started, the curve started going up, because it was just a few hours away by plane... I was supposed to go there on an arts trip... Then my dad said, 'No, we can't go to Italy, because it's not that safe,' so that's why I started thinking, oh, so this actually is impacting me directly." **(Female, 15, England)**

"We went through an airport where it was quite high risk and they had the temperature system and it was very like, it was one of those things where we didn't think that that was going to happen in England. It was quite a novelty thing and we were like, 'Oh my God, this is actually serious. This isn't just a news story'." **(Female, 18, Wales)**

The pace with which events escalated stood out in young people's accounts of this period

"March, when it initially hit... the suddenness and the strangeness was definitely the worst". **(Female, 18, Northern Ireland)**

"April or May, around that time. That was when it really kicked in that the coronavirus was a very real thing, and all the [social distancing] measures came in. Life went from 100 to almost 40 or 30 at one time." **(Female 15, Singapore)**

For many, however, **the watershed moment was the announcement of school closures and cancelled exams upon entering lockdown**. This underlined the seriousness of the public health risks posed by COVID-19 and contradicted the reassurances that had been previously given by teachers and other adults. It signalled that the pandemic was something unprecedented and that they were entering a period of uncertainty.

> *"When the school came out and were like, we can't stay open – you're off. That's when it really hit me."*
> *(Female, 16, Northern Ireland)*

> *"I'd talked to my teachers and they were like, 'No, exams won't be cancelled or anything' and I watched it, and then it got cancelled, and I was like, oh, my God. I was like, what is happening?"* *(Female, 17, Scotland)*

Retrospectively, young people expressed frustration at the lack of preparedness among schools and public authorities. In the UK, especially, there was some disbelief at how poorly the situation had been judged and the false assurances that had been given. The same was not necessarily the case in Singapore, where adjustments were made at an earlier stage in the pandemic and a programme of individual tuition was in place when school closures became a reality. Some young people had family members who had lived through severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and prepared them earlier for how the situation might develop within the region.

Having taken on board the health implications of the pandemic, young people's thoughts often turned towards vulnerable family members or friends, and the actions they could take to keep them safe. Older relatives or those with underlying health conditions were a particular cause for concern, especially where geographical distance was an issue, and young people were not on hand to offer practical help. Some reassurance was taken from public health advice, which stated that individuals must take measures to protect themselves. Nonetheless, young people sometimes felt anxious where family members were key workers – such as medical staff or social workers – and exposure to those with the virus was unavoidable.

Young people also recalled the **uncertainty about what would happen next regarding their education** and spoke about their cancelled plans, lost opportunities and experiences. Many had intended to travel or undertake volunteering over the summer, while for school leavers the pandemic prevented them from marking this milestone:

> *"I think that I was really worried about missing all of the stuff that would have been happening, so like leavers, the last day, all of the important things."* *(Female, 16, Scotland)*

> *"I don't know, just kind of everything, like I had plans to go on holiday to Bulgaria. I was really unsure about exams, like going to university, just the whole summer, this was supposed to be my last summer home."* *(Female, 17, Scotland)*

> *"I do quite a lot of stuff, and almost - in March - everything that I'd known that I do from school to extracurricular activities had gone. I don't think it quite clicked in my mind what big of an impact it was."* *(Female, 14, Scotland)*

Despite these impacts, lockdown was met with relief by those who had been struggling academically and for whom the prospect of cancelled exams was a welcome one. One young person reflected that they had been significantly underprepared for their A-levels, and an unexpected positive outcome from the pandemic was that they had been more honest with themselves about the time they needed to invest in studying.

At this point, young people were still often planning on the basis of short-term disruption. While there was a realisation that they might not see friends or family members for a period of time, they had envisaged that this would be for a month or two at most. It was only with the benefit of hindsight that young people could reflect on their decisions in the knowledge that six months of disruption to all aspects of their lives were to follow.

2.2. Coping mechanisms and adjustment

Following the first lockdown, **young people described a range of ways in which they adjusted their lives** to deal with the circumstances presented by the crisis. One of the most important changes in this respect was psychological. Accepting that the COVID-19 crisis might be long-term was an important step towards making practical lifestyle adjustments. This step helped to prevent inertia and gave legitimacy to a range of social and leisure interests:

> *"I was like, yes, okay, it's happening, I just need to accept it."* *(Female, 16, Northern Ireland)*

> *"I think April was a realisation that this is going to go on for a while. I think I tried to do a bit of a routine: I made a bit of a list, like I'm going to do all these great things in lockdown!"* *(Female, 14, England)*

Young people quite often made a conscious choice to use the time afforded to them by lockdown as productively as possible. This was partly because keeping busy helped give back some sense of control, but also due to the recognition that this was a unique opportunity to utilise the time that would otherwise be filled by their studies. Aside from pursuing new leisure interests, young people engaged in activities that best matched their personal stance on the crisis. Some chose to ramp-up their civic responsibilities, "... by throwing myself into youth work", or "kicking my student voice back into gear again", while others turned to creative expression such as visual arts, music or writing. These were important ways to process their thoughts and feelings about the crisis. It was also a record of the period and allowed young people to reassure themselves about their ability to cope.

> *"I started writing more poems during this period. I think that was one way that managed to cope with my down-ness, I guess, because I feel that writing poetry, it allows me to express myself. It tells a story that I would not be able to tell anybody face-to-face."* *(Male, 17, Singapore)*

> *"I have written an entry about how I have felt every single day... I've been able to rewind time and look at this is what happened this day; look, this has been a worse day than today...I think for me that's special, because it proves I have come through 107 days and they've all been different."* *(Male, 14, Scotland)*

Faith was also a central part of how some young people coped during this phase. As well as providing a sense of community, for some their religious beliefs gave a deeper meaning to the pandemic and actions to take:

> *"For me, as a Muslim, I believe in predestination. That means that our lives are already ruled... you're not in control of it and it's already been planned. I sort of focused more the prayer aspect of things... If I do have another life, this is going to be something quite small... I kept telling myself that, and that helped me cope through it and realise that it's not that much of a bigger deal?"* *(Female, 17, England)*

Others had rediscovered their faith, and they saw this as an unexpected positive outcome from the challenges that they had been presented with during the pandemic.

> *"I've always been a spiritual person. I've always had a connection with the higher power, but I never felt close. When I was younger, a child, I was very close but after, when I grew older, into my teenage years, everything went back... It's when COVID, when there was a lockdown and when I felt like I should start getting close to my spiritual beliefs. I felt that it really helped me as I started to research online, and I started to see my religious beliefs."* *(Female, 18, England)*

Perhaps what stood out most, however, was the extent to which young people used the lockdown as a time to invest in their wellbeing. There was often a realisation that they had neglected to maintain their physical and mental health and relationships, and the events surrounding the pandemic gave young people a change of perspective. Rather than simply keeping busy per se, they took this **opportunity to focus more on what mattered to them and discover, or develop, interests they previously did not have time to dedicate to**, such as drawing, reading, or baking. For some, these steps were incremental and came from having a routine

and becoming more self-aware. This was often realised with support and encouragement from parents and carers, or from peers. Young people spoke of feeling that they had become better at caring for themselves, and had adopted beneficial routines, thought patterns and behaviours that could be applied long-term, beyond coping with the pandemic.

> *"I think if there is one good thing to come out of COVID-19, it's more of how not to distract myself, but how to self-care... even before the pandemic, it's something that a lot of my peers and I struggled with... I just honestly decided to pay more attention to the smaller things... I stopped feeling so hopeless."*
> ***(Female, 15, Singapore)***

> *"At first, I didn't know how to cope with this whole virus thing, and quarantine... Once you get the hang of it, you're fine. I got the hang of keeping my life together, and once I'd got the hang of that, everything was fine. I knew how to organise my life and make it seem really neat, and really organised again."*
> ***(Female, 15, England)***

For others, lockdown brought a more critical appraisal of life goals. A common theme in this respect was to **reassess the importance of academic achievement relative to other aspects of their lives,** such as family, leisure interests and personal development. They spoke about the need for respite from grade competition with peers and from the anxiety induced by exams and results. Despite this, the young people also acknowledged that these traits motivated them in their school life and that academic success remained important to them.

Actions taken by young people were, to some extent, specific to the stage of the crisis and the corresponding restrictions. They were influenced by the official public health guidance and acceptable levels of personal risk. Some of the young people were classed as vulnerable due to underlying health conditions or because they lived with family members for whom this was the case. Others described how their willingness to take controlled risks had increased over time as they acclimatised and felt better able to make informed decisions about how to protect their health. The easing of social distancing measures after the first lockdown signalled an important psychological step for most: "from there it was like... this won't be too bad; we'll be all right"; "it was a lot better for me. that was what I needed", but the prospect of a return to lockdown was not imminent when the interviews took place.

2.3. Impacts on self and others

The interviews, diaries kept by young people and online discussions provided insights to how the pandemic affected different aspects of young people's lives and people around them, and how they responded. This section explores these themes in further depth, examining themes of family, friendships and peer groups, health and wellbeing and education, respectively.

2.3.1. Family

One of the immediate impacts of the crisis was on time spent with family members, whether this was reduced contact as a consequence of social distancing restrictions or more time spent together while in close proximity during lockdown while home-working and home-schooling.

A **sense of missed time with relatives** came across in many of the interviews, where the lockdown restrictions meant that access to older relatives or those in a higher risk category was not possible. Young people commonly expressed concerns about grandparents, and they recalled anxious times where it was feared that periods of illness might be COVID-related. This posed a dilemma when deciding what level of access was safe and appropriate, while recognising the importance of relatives' wellbeing. Young people recalled how encounters could be frustrating or upsetting.

> *"So we started doing my gran's shopping and then we'd sit in the garden and have a cup of tea, right at the back of the garden. I think mum made the executive decision at that point that there was no way that it was good for my gran not to see anybody. So despite rules... we were going to go and take own cups, take our own flask, not touch anything of my gran's and just go and sit and have tea with her once*

a week." **(Male, 16, Scotland)**

"I didn't go [to the care home] because I hate the masks and all the stuff, I couldn't do it, I was like, I kind of want to see her, but at the same time… I don't want to sit there on my own and then [what if] something happens? Because when Dad left, she lunged up to grab him, and I don't want her doing that to me." **(17, Non-binary, England)**

Missed family events or crises particularly stood out. Examples included where young people were unable to attend funerals as a result of social distancing, and where they missed out on the birth of new family members.

Where families occupied multiple households, the COVID-19 restrictions presented difficult decisions about living arrangements, with a knock-on effect on family relationships. This was guided by factors such as schooling and parental working hours. One young person recalled that their cousin had moved in with them due to "a bad family situation at home". In another case, the young person recalled the process of deciding which parent to live with during lockdown. This determined the levels of contact that they had over the following months:

"I didn't want to go to my dad's. It wasn't because it was my dad, it was just, if I am going to be stuck in a room, I don't want to then be stuck in a room that's only got half my stuff in … [So] I stopped seeing him as much and that was purely, nothing on him, it was just because, it just what happened because of lockdown." **(Female, 17, England)**

School closures and homeworking also meant that many of the young people were spending much longer periods of time with family members within the home. While there was an awareness that this could be a cause of tension, it rarely resulted in conflict with family members among the young people who were interviewed across countries. Indeed, the greater amount of time spent together against the backdrop of the crisis quite often resulted in a spirit of compromise and mutual support. Young people saw a side to family members or siblings that they may not have had an opportunity to observe before, where routines pre-COVID had limited the amount of time spent together. While not always the case, young people commonly felt that the experience of lockdown had resulted in a greater level of emotional closeness, as well as valuing time spent with family members.

"With my immediate family, my brother, my mum and my dad, it's just been us four, and normally, we don't really spend this much time together, especially me, my mum and my brother. It's really helped us to strengthen our bonds… I think we've grown a lot closer to each other than six months before." **(Female, 16, England)**

"I didn't factor in how important it is to spend time with your family or your younger siblings. I feel like they're not going to stay young forever, this is like the crucial time when you need to establish a good relationship with them. I find telling myself more to calm down and not make things such a big deal." **(Female, 17, England)**

Valuing time with family was reflected in small adjustments to routines that allowed for more time together:
"I remember my mum saying that she didn't see much of me and I felt a bit bad about that, but then I thought oh, okay, well I'll work towards my exams and then we'll have the whole summer. Then when lockdown happened that studying has gone, so all of the little hobbies and things I'd been picking up, I could bring them downstairs… to the living room or somewhere that everyone would be."
(Female, 17, Northern Ireland)

"The new Michael Jordan documentary came out and we made it a point, without breaking it, every Monday night, we'd come together and watch it religiously. That was one of the ways that we just kept ourselves together… It's one of the things that we associate most with that time. I think we really tried to make sure that there were positives to balance out the negatives in our environment."
(Female, 15, Singapore)

There were exceptions where continued work and study commitments meant that cohabitation did not translate into greater amounts of time spent together. This included where multiple family members were homeworking and home schooling in separate areas of the house, and / or where one parent's reduced hours or redundancy resulted in the need for other adult family members to extend their hours to compensate for lost income. Economic hurdles resulting from the crisis, in Lebanon in particular, negatively affected family life in some cases. The **lockdown period also exposed similarities and differences in values and beliefs within the family.** Young people sometimes found that they appreciated parents or siblings to a greater extent following lockdown, and they had gained a newfound respect: "My mum, she has started to grow on me… her way of thinking". Elsewhere, there were inevitable personality clashes. Young people were not averse to challenging adult family members where these views came into conflict. The response to the pandemic quite often highlighted political differences:

> *"I spent some time with my dad, he has a lot of very far-right beliefs, and I do not share any of those, so I think I've become more opinionated and vocal on those, and standing up to him."* **(Female, 17, Scotland)**

> *"I got to know my dad better, especially in terms of his political views, which turned out to be different than what I thought. I heard him comment on the news sometimes, and I would stare at him thinking "What are you saying?" and this would trigger a discussion. I tried to explain my views, but he would just repeat what he had heard on the news – and it's not like the media give much insight on TV, they don't delve deep."* **(Female, 17, Italy)**

For some, family relationships had been a source of greater tension. One young person who identified as being transgender had struggled in a situation where they were locked down with family members who had not accepted their status and who had insisted on calling them by their birth name throughout. The social distancing measures had made them feel cut-off from their support networks and unable to talk about sensitive issues while at home: "not having a safe space to speak with other LGBTQ young people has been disastrous". Another young person had been supporting a gay friend who had been "outed by her mum", having overheard a conversation and demanding to see the messages on her telephone. Other young people were acutely aware of the potential difficulties posed for their peers who may be locked down with family members in situations where there was a risk of abuse, in unsuitable living conditions, or where they might be living in poverty. More often than not, however, these concerns were speculative and arose from young people talking in a more generalised way about young people as a group rather than from direct experience. They had encountered these scenarios through news, social media, volunteering, or during their action research.

2. 3. 2. Friendships and peers

For many of the young people, lockdown and social distancing was a time to re-evaluate their friendship groups and networks. With schools closed and reduced opportunities to meet in person, communication inevitably shifted online. Young people generally had hopes and expectations that friends would provide a supportive role during the pandemic, while understanding that everyone's circumstances were different. Those who abstained from social contact or who did not engage or connect much with their peers during this time were generally frowned upon.

> *"A lot of us have thought that that's quite important, that everyone should still maybe try and make an effort to speak to each other. Like, obviously, everyone has a lot going on… but I guess it's good to try and update people even if you say, 'Look, I'm having a break from social media'… just to check-in."* **(Female, 17, England)**

> *"I had two friends that haven't texted me throughout quarantine, haven't been like, 'Yes, how are you?' and then all of a sudden, they just ask me for the homework on the home learning, so then it's like, what was that about? You couldn't have texted me to say, 'How are you doing?' but you can ask for my*

homework." *(Male, 15, England)*

Changing patterns of contact also saw a realignment of friendships. Young people often distinguished between close friends and school friends, developing stronger bonds with the former during lockdown. For some, this was a welcome opportunity to distance themselves from affiliations that had become stale or tiresome. One young person spoke of the relief at having a break from the day-to-day friendship disputes within her year group: "I was a little bit relieved because break and lunches just got really tedious". For others, there was a realisation that they had not invested enough time in meaningful friendships and that this needed to take a greater priority.

Conversely, many young people from Italy reported having relied on the support of their classmates during this period, to study, prepare exams together and sustain each other's motivation. This closeness might be due to the fact that in Italy, young people in primary and secondary school are assigned to fixed classes of about 30 students, which in situations like this, became each other's support groups.

> *"You have no idea how much it helped me, making me feel so relieved because we would take study breaks and have some fun".* *(Male, 15, Italy)*

In either scenario, focussing on the people who really mattered was often part of a wider appraisal of their self and lifestyle that took place during the pandemic.

Social media and online platforms assumed a new significance during lockdown; particularly during the earlier stages of the pandemic when restrictions were being observed more strictly. For some, online platforms provided a way to maintain and consolidate friendships and were "a really positive part of lockdown". Whether through gaming, social media or Zoom quizzes, these tools were key to maintaining their support system and helped to bring friends together. One Italian young person organised some reading sessions with her friends, through video calls, in which they selected a passage from a book or a playbook (for example, they read Shakespeare), with each of them playing different characters. Then, as restrictions were lifted after the first COVID-19 wave, young people supplemented online contact with meeting friends outdoors in parks and gardens again.

> *"Friends and peers, yes, I think from one point of view, we've gotten closer to each other because we've learnt more about each other, like stuff that can't be said face-to-face. We've been sharing articles, sharing movies, stuff like that. It's been a lot more dynamic."* *(Female, 16, Singapore)*

> *"My real friends, we started to talk a lot, we started to take care of each other's mental health actually, like we need someone to talk to and we're not meeting near the schools nor public places. WhatsApp, it's something good to us. Yes, whether it's awareness campaigns with people... we're sharing stuff."* *(Female, 16, Lebanon)*

For others, time and the space afforded by lockdown was **an opportunity to reinvent their friendship groups.** Here, young people spoke about the excitement of being off school and actively engaging on social media:

> *"When lockdown happened, that was when the whole Zoom frenzy began... I found that I was suddenly making new friends... of these people I'd only met once or twice. Suddenly I was quite familiar with them, and it was nice talking to them and just playing that game and just meeting new people."* *(Female, 17, Northern Ireland)*

> *"During the lockdown, I became really - I have a completely different friendship group, like a completely different set of friends, because we FaceTimed every single night for about a solid two months... then, first time I went down to [City] and we all met up, that was one of the best moments so far."* *(Female, 17, Scotland)*

For one young person who was a wheelchair user, the online shift had some unexpected benefits. Whereas previously they felt like they were treated differently by some of their peers, the group chats and social media had a certain levelling effect. This made it easier to participate without dealing with others' inhibitions.

Not all young people viewed mainly online engagement with their peers in a positive light, however. Texting and video calls were sometimes felt to be a poor substitute for face-to-face contact, and there was a varying degree of comfort with relying on these formats, despite young people understanding the necessity during a pandemic. Comments included: "I'm not really much of a texting, internet type of person", and "there's something about a physical presence ... it just feels more natural... intimate". Those from Singapore in particular reported missing the interaction with their classmates. One young person felt that the conversations at home were "limited and shallow", compared with the personal connection they usually feel with classmates with whom they share and can talk about similar experiences.

Differences in parental mediation also meant that not all young people had the same freedoms for online social contact. This contributed towards young people feeling left behind by their peers and struggling to put in the time that was needed to participate in gaming or conversations that ran into the early hours of the morning when they were no longer online.

Anxieties around perceived exclusion from friendship groups and peer pressure took on a new dimension when social restrictions started lifting. There were instances where young people's views about responsibility clashed with their peers, and did so at a time when they felt a need to be visible to friends who were meeting up for the first time in months: "it's like this pressure to go out, even if I don't necessarily want to." Disagreements could feel even more isolating at a time when friendship groups were such a lifeline and being excluded from reunions was hard to accept: "I've been punched in the stomach [figuratively]... one of the worst days of my life."

Some young people were concerned that the loss of in-person contact made it harder for their peers to ask for help when this was needed. Where meetings were in-person, there was a reliance on body language and eye contact as cues, allowing difficult conversations to come about more naturally. One young person recounted how difficult it had been to find the right time to tell friends that they were struggling with an eating disorder when WhatsApp chats had become the norm. This meant that telephoning them unexpectedly had seemed inappropriate:

> *"[The friend] was quite close, but not close enough to randomly message them and go, 'By the way, I'm struggling with this, can I talk to you about it?' It is harder to do that online because it is like you've just messaged them for that sole purpose. At least if you're having a chat... [It's] a bit more natural."*
> *(Female, 17, England)*

Moreover, **privacy was not always assured during lockdown with other family members in close proximity.** Young people were often sensitive to what this might mean for more vulnerable friends at a time when the risk posed from their home situation was greater than under normal circumstances. One young person described this:

> *"I think, especially when it comes to safeguarding for more at-risk friends that I have, they aren't able to say the things that they would normally say. They are not able to talk about the things that they need to talk about because they know they are in earshot of family members... Even if they're not actively at risk from those family members, they still want to maintain some degree of separation and privacy."*
> *(Female, 18, England)*

2. 3. 3. Health and wellbeing

The mental health and wellbeing dimensions of the crisis featured prominently in the interviews with young people and were a common theme in young people's action research. As one young person stated: "there were good and bad effects of COVID-19 and most of them just played out through mental health".

Despite the anxiety caused by events surrounding the pandemic, however, the wellbeing implications were complex. Traumatic events, both reported in the news and affecting young people directly, were offset by positives relating to family time and reduced academic pressures. Young people's coping strategies also differed considerably. Nevertheless, there was a heightened **awareness of mental health issues coming**

to the fore among their peers, which was also underlined by consultation with others undertaken by young people through their action research as part of the project, and through other school or youth council activities that they were involved with. As with other social implications of the pandemic, young people expressed particular concern about those whom they considered more vulnerable or at risk.

Young people participating in the project reported periods of generalised anxiety, which was often associated with times when COVID-19 infection rates and deaths were rising, or moments when the accumulated stresses of the situation had caught up with them. This anxiety also related to a sense of the unknown and a loss of control over events: "It is out my hands, and I can't do anything about it"; "It just felt really sad and almost hopeless because there wasn't an end in sight". In some cases, young people reflected that they had underestimated the toll that the crisis was taking on them psychologically during the initial stages and had learned to speak with friends or family members about their concerns. This was sometimes helped by the changing context for family relationships during the crisis which made it easier to seek emotional support, depending on their personal circumstances.

There were examples where young people reflected on their **growing resilience to news and events** relating to the pandemic – this was described by some as an acquired toughness or ability to block out news headlines about COVID-19 deaths to protect their emotional wellbeing, or a view that the pandemic was eclipsed by other forms of hardship in their lives. For example, the COVID-19 'shock' factor was somewhat muted among the Singapore group. Many Singaporean young people had family members who had directly experienced the SARS outbreak, while young people from the group in Lebanon pointed towards other recent political and social crises in relation to which the COVID-19 pandemic was just one more source of adversity. In this context, the main impacts were principally material rather than psychological.

> *"My mental health, it has not [been] affected. This kind of things we always deal with here in Lebanon. From the beginning of my age we have these things. If not the disease, it's war, it's a problem with the government like some people, so we are sent to be lockdown because the place near us have problem with the government and things like that. People here are used to these problems, they are prepared."* **(Male, 17, Lebanon)**

In contrast, others had felt the **emotional strain from the first period of lockdown** and expressed concern and even a sense of fear that they lacked the psychological resources to cope with future periods of lockdown in the event that the pandemic continued long term.

> *"I barely scraped through this lockdown. What about the next one? If we have another one how would we all cope? Especially with the impact of mental health on how we will cope."* **(Male, 14, Scotland)**

> *"My girlfriend was like, 'It will be great, the first day we can see each other will be great,' and I was like, 'I honestly don't think I'm going to make it until then'. I didn't know what was happening, and if I didn't know what was happening, to me there was not much point in being here."* **(Female, 17, Scotland)**

It was particularly apparent that social distancing measures and school closures were problematic for young people who were already experiencing mental health problems. Months away from school and extracurricular activities provided contemplative space, and while this was a positive experience for some, it amplified problem thoughts and behaviours for others. As one young person reflected: "for someone that already has anxiety… it has doubled". Young people commonly knew members of their peer group or had directly experienced heightened anxieties relating to body image during lockdown, and they had seen the (re)emergence of eating disorders among their peers while at home. One young person with a history of self-harming described how the lockdown saw a return to behaviours that they had previously brought under control, while another young person who was suffering from PTSD recalled how the crisis had brought suppressed trauma to the surface.

In quite stark contrast, other young people reflected on the pandemic as a period when they had flourished emotionally. The paradox of these unexpected benefits at a time of crisis was not lost on the young people, many of whom spoke of the deep contradictions of the pandemic, and they were well aware of the degree to which experiences of lockdown varied among their peers. Specifically, young people spoke of the **psychological boost provided by the removal of exam pressures, and the rebalancing of their time and**

energies. For some, school closures also provided an opportunity to restore healthy sleep patterns. And indeed, the flexibility to plan academic studies around other aspects of their self-care was welcomed as an unexpected benefit of school closures, despite the challenges of online learning (see below).

"I feel like, even though the pandemic was such a horrible thing to happen to the world, I felt like it was kind of a break from stress and I remember even though the boy that I am talking about, is my competition academically, he is also one of my friends and he also told me that he needed a break from the whole, who is going to come out on top, who got the highest grades." **(Female, 14, Lebanon)**

"I think that when we began lockdown, I like, I felt so much better, I needed desperately, desperately needed a rest... I feel better than I have for a very long time, because I am rested, and I am fitter, and I've eaten better... It came at the right time, but now I am ready to go again." **(Male, 16, Scotland)**

During the lockdown period, young people also adopted new routines incorporating some form of exercise. Again, this was often assisted by stepping aside from packed academic and personal schedules.

SPOTLIGHT 1:

Narratives of personal change

A central theme from the interviews was that young people often felt they were no longer the same person as before the COVID-19 crisis. The nature of these changes was expressed in different ways, but young people were aware that they had lived through an event of global and generational significance, and that they had both lost and gained from the experience in ways that could not be reversed.

The profound nature of the crisis and its impact on society meant that young people spoke of having become more mature and self-aware. While at the same time, the loss of key milestones such as exams, school-leaving and travel was a form of arrested development. Young people felt like they had missed out on life experiences in ways that had held them back with their social life, education and experiencing the world.

It was necessary to find ways to reconcile these mixed emotions.

"I've changed a lot, both for the best and the worst on different aspects. I have become more mature, I have changed my opinion on many things, because I had more time to reflect about them and discuss with other. This pandemic has changed my identity and beliefs very much." **(Male, 14, Italy)**

"I feel like if it [COVID-19] didn't happen, we'd be more mature in a way, because this year I was going to travel with some of my friends to go abroad.... we were going to grow up a bit... We've finished our exams and we're older and we're going to be moving into sixth form... But [nonetheless] I feel like we have changed over quarantine... everybody's changed... their identities changed." **(Female, 16, England)**

2. 3. 4. Access to services

Access to medical care was a widely reported challenge during the initial period of the COVID-19 crisis. Young people spoke of cancelled non-urgent medical appointments for a range of conditions; reduced contact with clinicians or therapists who they had been seeing on a regular basis before the pandemic, and a shift from face-to-face to online delivery of consultations for ongoing medical care. **Young people sometimes felt that their needs had been deprioritised** and that clinicians were less accountable than was previously the case. One young person described how their mother had intervened after their therapist had cancelled a series of appointments and become unresponsive during lockdown, at a time when their mental health had taken a turn for the worse.

Satisfaction with replacement telephone or video consultations varied; from ambivalence, to scepticism about the effectiveness of remote diagnosis and treatment, to more serious concerns about miscommunication. The latter was the case where young people were accessing therapeutic services, and in accessing medication:

> *"I've been with [CAMHS] for like four years, nearly. When the pandemic struck, everything got moved online, which was a huge change, and I really hated it... I think they can't really see how you're doing. I could just sit there and say, 'I'm fine', and they wouldn't know any different..."* **(Female, 17, Scotland)**

> *"Well, all my appointments were cancelled. I got a call saying, 'No, you can't come into the hospital." That is when it actually really changed... I was anxious because maybe I wasn't getting the right prescription, and no one could check... I couldn't go into hospital."* **(Female, 16, Scotland)**

Young people's needs and preferences varied, however, and some preferred the online format on the basis that they were more comfortable raising issues about their mental health this way and were more likely to go through with an online appointment than making a visit to a clinic. One young person particularly valued their schools' online counselling system, which had remained open following school closures, offering a telephone and texting service. They found this to be very responsive and reported making better use of the service during lockdown than previously, due to being less constrained in their availability to see a counsellor around the school day.

> *"I like that they've continued that, I get texts from my school counsellor and calls which have been really good... I could text her and say I've had a bad day, can we have a catch-up, which has been really positive. I started accessing that in probably April, which was when it started to get off the ground a lot."*
> *(Female, 16, Wales)*

Others had taken to self-help via internet-based sources, for routine management of medical conditions as a holding measure: "I've been doing YouTube things, and stuff like that". These arrangements had generally shifted with the lifting of social distancing restrictions, however, and young people reported that in person contact was re-established with medical and non-medical professionals. One young person recalled how being able to meet in person with their social worker in a café felt like a key milestone in the transition from the first lockdown. Even so, reduced public transport timetables and fears about the safety of accessing medical treatment due to COVID-19 risks had continued to present a challenge for some young people during this period.

2. 3. 5. Education

Access to education was a key theme that ran through young people's experiences of the COVID-19 crisis. Technology was one dimension of this. Young people described varying access to IT equipment at home, which were brought into focus by home-schooling. Some were sharing laptops, iPads and other devices with siblings or with adults in the household who were homeworking. New routines had to be negotiated, and education and work were prioritised over leisure and other online interests: "it's mostly work... it's just a struggle".

Schools differed considerably in their response. Within the UK, schools had taken steps that ranged from organising for books to be posted home and using government funding to supply laptops for lower income families, to relatively little concrete action at all from the perspective of young people. In Italy, most schools resorted to online schooling to ensure continuity of teaching and learning. However, **young people faced challenges in terms of teachers' training in digital technologies, and students' access to devices and Internet connection.** These challenges were magnified in Lebanon, where poor Wi-Fi quality was a recurrent issue during the lockdown period. There was often a sense of injustice, which was framed by the exam marking crisis and its compounding impacts on educational inequality for young people in the UK. Young people were troubled that not all of their peers had access to a quality education during this period, or even to a formal education at all.

> *"I was able to still maintain a good level of education, but...students under the poverty line basically had to cut-off education. A lot of schools had to do WhatsApp group calls as education and they couldn't open videos. You know the connection in Lebanon is so terrible."* **(Female, 14, Lebanon)**

> *"I feel like the injustice in - my friend, she goes to a private school, and... they've had learning this whole time... It's such a big difference just from how much money you have which is so wrong in 2020. It really should be more equal than this."* **(Female, 16, England)**

Beyond differences relating to socio-economic status, young people in the UK also expressed concerns about the **variation in what was offered by individual schools.** There was a perception that, in addition to their education being determined by decisions at a national level regarding school closures and exam marking, schools and local authorities had responded to the crisis in ways that had a direct impact on their education during lockdown. These decisions were felt to have lacked transparency, with young people feeling side-lined.

> *"I think people have sort of left the young people to the schools and it's been up to the school on how to deal with that."* **(Female, 14, England)**

> *"So I think that was something to do with the local councils and boroughs... Like when Year 12s were allowed back in, one of my friends had to go to school on Mondays and Tuesdays... whereas, my school, in the London Borough of [X], wasn't having anyone in at all."* **(Female, 17, England)**

Young people generally had strong views about the quality of education that they had received and how well their school and teachers had adapted. They often had friends or relatives who attended other schools, and the differences in the education that was provided during lockdown were quite stark. In Italy, for example, school responses varied depending on the level of resources available and approaches adopted by different headteachers, and according to the attitudes and preparation of teachers and class coordinators. In Lebanon, many young people reported dissatisfaction with how the situation was managed: a few schools and teachers resorted to Zoom and WhatsApp to deliver classes, but in most cases teaching and learning was discontinued. One young person in Lebanon reported having "only one session in the whole month or two", and several complained about not being able to finish the curriculum for that year. Again, young people valued fairness and accountability but did not always feel that this reflected the local situation.

> *"At my school, everyone had the option of having an iPad to use at school and take home... but obviously, there's a school a couple of towns over that I know for a fact will have none of that ...it's like being told to run a race, but everyone's at different starting points...for various different reasons, be that having technology or their family situation or even where they live."* **(Female, 14, England)**

Young people reported different experiences of how their school had managed the initial closure and the shift to home learning. In most cases, there was a transitionary period, while schools mobilised their technology and prepared materials. Some schools were overly ambitious in the amount of work that was set, and they scaled-back their timetable after a trial period. In Italy, young people oscillated between being "overwhelmed with homework" and getting bored because they had "had much less to do". In the latter case, several young people were worried about losing their studying habits and feeling unprepared for the next academic year.

In the main, however, young people recognised that **schools were responding to a crisis and that trial-and-error was to be expected. Indeed, it was schools' willingness to take feedback on board and to make adjustments that gained young people's respect.**

"At the start, their system for giving us work and lessons wasn't great, but that's fair because they've never had this before, so they were just sending out a lesson's worth of work at the time."
(Female, 14, England)

"Right at the very beginning, teachers were just sending out the PowerPoints and that was it... but I think after a while, they got different hacks with it. Like geography have done an audio of one of the teachers talking through the lesson, which was a lot more effective." ***(Female, 14, Scotland)***

One young person recalled how their teacher had initially challenged the class about attitudes towards homework, before they were aware of the access difficulties young people had been experiencing. They sent a follow-up email to explain the misunderstanding. This was appreciated by the group and made them feel like they had been heard.

"I remember there was a time when our chemistry teacher was saying like, 'Some people are not marking their work as done and if this continues, we're going to have to email your parents'... Then he followed it up saying, 'Sorry, some people have emailed me saying they were sick... please do ensure that you catch up', or 'Let me know if there are any circumstances preventing that'. That was nice that they were able to understand that everyone has their own reasons." ***(Female, 17, England)***

The availability of individual teachers was also important to young people during the lockdown. Many had a good relationship with particular teachers to whom they would usually go for help or advice if they were in school. Having ongoing contact was important when there were so many other uncertainties, whether this was by email or telephone calls. One young person had particularly valued their teacher's efforts to maintain a positive environment when switching to video lessons: "we're all very jokey with [the teacher] anyway, and we managed to still get that... like a class environment, but we're at home instead". Another young person expressed their admiration for one of their teachers, whom they felt had gone the extra mile to support students during home-schooling.

"What a gem my physics teacher had been throughout the whole thing. He set up a YouTube channel and did little tutorials. It was just him and a piece of paper and he would write on it and he would explain it but he did it so well that we actually got through the first two topics of A2 physics, and they were complicated topics... I understood them almost completely. Now, in September [it] might be a bit different." ***(Female, 17, Northern Ireland)***

In contrast, some young people had found their schools wanting for communication during the crisis. They spoke of situations where teachers had started with regular emails and telephone calls, but the contact had tapered-off, or it was unclear how and under what circumstances students could reach teaching staff. Some young people just felt ignored. These experiences had undermined trust and credibility and gave some young people the perception that their teachers had absolved themselves of responsibility under the cover of the lockdown.

There was a similar pattern with regard to the work that was set during this period. While some schools had been overly zealous with maintaining their academic timetable, others referred to a **drop-off in the quality of education provided following the lockdown.** Work was set with deadlines that expired without feedback or consequences. Here, young people described a deficit of leadership and accountability and were unimpressed by the lack of challenging or engaging context.

"Yes, we can message our teachers... just asking and sending work, but there wasn't really that much communication in the school." ***(Male, 14, England)***

"We did get sent it but a lot of the time it was just filler work, that even if it did, it wouldn't be useful and it was like, I am not going to do this. Then I ended up not doing it." **(Female, 17, England)**

"I think it was a lot of just churning out work without explaining much, which I don't think is a very good model, especially for Year 8s who are still learning how they understand things almost."
(Female, 17, Northern Ireland)

In the main, young people were more positive where schools had braved online teaching from an earlier stage and had got past any technological problems. The interactivity was particularly welcomed, even though not all students found live online classes to be a positive experience. This mode of delivery seemed to have been better established even prior to lockdown among the schools in Singapore, while being comparatively rarer among the UK schools in the study.

"I think their decision to move everything online and to have online lessons was really beneficial, because I know other schools... just send them work, so I thought the decision to maintain contact with us virtually was a good idea. I think it really helped me in terms of keeping to my studying schedule."
(Female, 16, England)

"I am grateful that I am in a school that set up online schooling and had their resources to do... Even though, no matter what you do, online schooling is never going to be the same as real actual schooling and everything like that. I was still able to maintain a good level of education and the basic education."
(Male, 17, Singapore)

For some young people, the pandemic was felt to have been a real missed opportunity for schools to embrace digital modes of working. While they understood that schools were under pressure during the pandemic, it was the lack of imagination that frustrated them. A few Italian young people described teachers' **attempts to replicate or mirror traditional classroom practices in the virtual realm ineffective, and unimaginative.** The COVID-19 crisis had sometimes also exposed a lack of I digital skills among teachers. This was seen as a wake-up call.

"We had no online classes or video classes or anything like that... it just didn't feel like it was making the most of the technology and the possibilities out there." **(Female, 16, England)**

"They haven't actually fully utilised this, the iPads, the technology that we have... there's not really an increase in solutions, just the teachers finally realising that there are other ways to do things."
(Female, 16, Singapore)

Although in exceptional cases, schools were reported to have excelled in this regard:

"My teachers also found new methods of teaching us, like through Kahoot!, Nearpod and those other educational resources such as YouTube also. They tried to stream YouTube in order to engage us better during the COVID-19, during the circuit breaker." **(Male, 17, Singapore)**

Non-formal educational contexts such as youth work and forums also featured heavily in young people's accounts of lockdown, in the UK especially. This included educational activities such as the one described below.
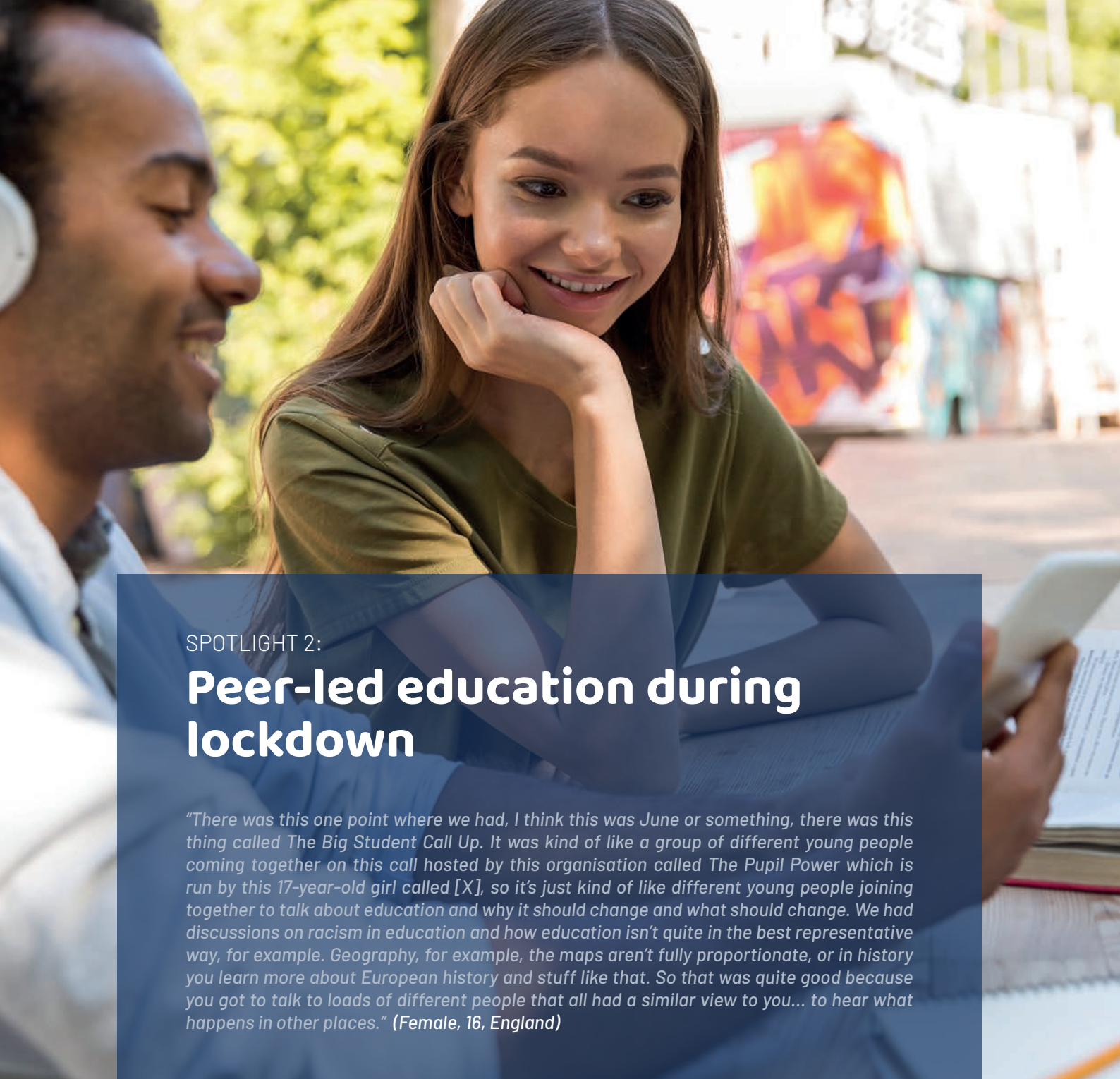
Peer-led education during lockdown

"There was this one point where we had, I think this was June or something, there was this thing called The Big Student Call Up. It was kind of like a group of different young people coming together on this call hosted by this organisation called The Pupil Power which is run by this 17-year-old girl called [X], so it's just kind of like different young people joining together to talk about education and why it should change and what should change. We had discussions on racism in education and how education isn't quite in the best representative way, for example. Geography, for example, the maps aren't fully proportionate, or in history you learn more about European history and stuff like that. So that was quite good because you got to talk to loads of different people that all had a similar view to you... to hear what happens in other places." **(Female, 16, England)**

Young people reported both **advantages and drawbacks from home schooling, and it seemed to suit some individuals better than others.** On the positive side, some young people had liked the flexibility to set their own timetable; to vary the pace between subjects that they found more or less difficult; to study at times when they were the most productive, and to wrap their learning around other family tasks and routines. This allowed the young people to introduce elements of personalisation into their learning.

"We were teaching ourselves, but I never felt that I was going to fall behind or that it would impact me that greatly as long as I just kept going... it was nice to be able to have my own regime and wake up when I needed to, so I actually managed to get more sleep." **(Female, 16, England)**

"The one thing I liked about the lockdown was that, yes, I was doing schoolwork, but then I also had flexibility... with the way I would take my notes for example, the amount of time I'd spend on the lesson if I wasn't understanding it, all those things. That allowed me to become much more independent in my schoolwork." **(Female, 17, England)**

Similarly, some online platforms had the advantage of providing instant results, so that young people could check their progress and understanding straightaway. Some looked to their peers for support and set-up study groups on Microsoft Teams to work together, having become familiar with the platform from their online lessons.

On the downside, young people invariably found that content took longer to cover at home than in a traditional classroom environment. While there were advantages to working at their own pace, the need to pause and review video content was time consuming without being able to seek instant clarification from a teacher. Young people and teachers had to make allowances for this in their planning. Some teachers had also tried to make the resources more intuitive over time, such as by pre-recording a FAQ segment.

> *"Usually we expect a one-hour lesson to take one hour... for myself I am taking two hours to complete a one-hour lecture because of the [video recording] that I can stop and understand."* **(Male, 17, Singapore)**

Live online teaching also divided opinion, with some young people noting the advantage of allowing for real time questions, while others missed the interaction with teachers and the opportunities to ask questions that would occur in a classroom setting. In addition, online teaching demanded higher levels of concentration than traditional classroom teaching, and without teacher's supervision it was easier to get distracted. Much was also down to the quality of the delivery and this was very new for many teachers: "I think it can be good if done well, but I think quite often... teachers don't get it". For these reasons, schools often combined online teaching with activities that were designed for students to complete in their own time, with reference to pre-recorded content or PowerPoints.

Motivation was also a challenge. Young people found that having their mobile telephones accessible to them at all times could be distracting and were aware that it was too easy to lose focus during Microsoft Teams calls with cameras switched-off. They often missed the wider context of school life and the everyday social situations and extracurricular activities that they were used to: "stuff that spiced up our normal school days came to a halt". Then there was the backdrop of COVID-19 and the anxiety surrounding this, and the distraction of being at home.

> *"Even students like me, maybe you wouldn't expect me to lose motivation, because normally I'm really academic, I'm really motivated. Once in quarantine, I was just suddenly demotivated, but schools don't take that into account... They wouldn't expect you to have those problems."* **(Female, 15, England)**

The implications of missed time in education differed according to the stage young people had reached in their schooling. Those in their final year of secondary school were anticipating taking exams. When those exams were cancelled, it left them with time originally earmarked for revision. While the focus turned to how their grades would be awarded, there was often little communication or clarification being provided by schools. In the UK, lockdown was particularly ill-timed for year 10s (14 to 15-year olds), who faced the resumption of their GCSEs in the autumn. They expressed greater concerns about the longer-term impacts of missed education, and some had planned for personal academic tutoring to bridge the gap.

3. Young people's views about public attitudes, behaviours, social issues and the media during the pandemic

This chapter includes young people's reflections on how the public responded to the pandemic, their views on media coverage and on other social issues that have emerged as being important to them in this period. The chapter considers the challenges experienced in accessing reliable information and views about how young people have been portrayed in the media.

3.1. Views on public attitudes and behaviours

In general, young people felt that the public had been supportive of the government measures put in place in response to COVID-19. Young people thought that - at least in the initial stages of the lockdown - the public had realised that the issue was important, and that everyone needed to come together and adapt their lives accordingly:

> *"Most people, they saw it and they were like, all right, we have got to do a lot of that, so they did it, and they followed it."* *(Non-binary, 17, England)*

> *"When you see people sanitising their hands, it's nice because it kind of highlights the unity and highlights everyone understanding that yes, this is a pandemic, and you need to take it as seriously as possible. It hopefully won't last that long. While it does, you have to be as vigilant as possible."* *(Female, 17, England)*

Young people noted how, by adapting their behaviour, the public made compromises in their own lives to follow the guidelines, and importantly, to protect others. Young people gave examples of smaller everyday decisions, as well as being aware of larger sacrifices which had negatively affected people's lives and their wellbeing. Seeing the extent of people's efforts, young people described how 'proud' they were, both of their country – which they felt was unusually united on this issue – and of people they knew:

> *"I was quite proud of the fact, because it was such a big, the first time for 30 years [Liverpool Football Club winning the Premier League] and obviously football is such a big thing here, because we are Liverpool and Everton, it's such a big thing. I know how hard it must have been for people not to go out and I know a lot of people didn't, and that made me quite proud... while all we hear about is people who aren't following the rules, a lot of people are and I am quite proud of that."* *(Female, 17, England)*
> *"But if we managed to bring daily cases down to 200 in May, we must have definitely done something right. And we have also been very patient, not only because we stayed at home; economically, workwise, every single family on its own, emotionally."* *(Female, 17, Italy)*

As well as individual decisions, the **young people highlighted acts of kindness and generosity** as part of the public's response. Young people liked how this good-natured spirit developed a sense of the community facing the crises together. The young people were also aware of groups on social media platforms that had been set up to coordinate larger scale operations of support in the community, including delivering food or running errands for others, making cloth masks, distributing IT equipment, or writing to care homes to reach other vulnerable people. Young people valued these acts of community benevolence as they thought it showed the positive side of human nature, providing a sense of solidarity and mutual support needed during the difficult time:

> *"I would say the fact that people really came together and were more supportive of each other. So you'd have people checking up on you like, 'Are you okay? Is your family okay?'"* *(Female, 16, England)*

> *"This family down my road set up tables outside their house where people could drop things off for anyone who needed them. They had first just DVDs, dry food like pasta, rice, then they got books, clothes, and people were leaving things on the table for other people in the community. I was like, that is a really nice thing to do, just to make sure everyone's happy."* *(Female, 16, England)*

In the UK interviews, young people gave the weekly 'clap for carers' as an example of how neighbours would regularly come together in a safe way to show recognition of the NHS and keyworkers working on their behalf during the pandemic. Similarly, Italian young people spoke about people coming out on to their balconies to share music and bring people together, in a weekly ritual that young people thought filled the neighbourhood with warmth. In these examples, young people described how these acts reminded them how their country was coming together and why their actions and following the guidance were important, providing young people with a feeling of community and identity that may have otherwise been missing for them.

"I think there's been a lot of sense of an increase in community as a whole, seeing how everyone, like the whole clapping thing I think was really good for the NHS, the posters and stuff. It acts as like, signs to say that we're all in this together and stuff like that. I think that's helped a lot of people to boost their morale." **(Female, 16, England)**

"There were all these positive and encouraging messages to stay strong and united as a country, to make a collective effort for everyone's interest." **(Female, 18, Italy)**

Overall young people thought that these positive examples of attitudes and behaviours represented the main response from the public to the pandemic. Young people hoped that some of the spirit in these acts of solidarity or generosity would continue beyond the lockdown with a stronger sense of community and mutual support.

Although young people largely felt that the public had been supportive of government measures, they were aware of public attitudes and behaviours that challenged the pandemic responses. Specifically, young people gave examples of people blatantly breaching the guidance of the pandemic – ranging from smaller breaches, of wearing masks inappropriately, ignoring signs in shops, and not social distancing, to the ill-considered crowding on beaches, illegal raves, and large parties. In Northern Ireland, young people mentioned large funerals going ahead, which they thought was unhelpful in the context of measures to reduce the impact of the pandemic.

"I would see people in my year so close, and I'm like, you're killing people, you don't realise. They don't care until someone dies that they know, and then they care, but their friends still don't care until it happens to them, and that's how everyone dies. That bothered me." **(Female, 15, Scotland)**

"It's just quite disheartening to see that some countries, they prefer to go enjoy, go to the beach, [rather] than to be safe, to make sure they don't die, but they want to have fun. That's just quite disgusting, in my opinion." **(Male, 15, Singapore)**

Overall, **young people thought that many of these breaches reflected poor choices** – either a lack of restraint, selfishness, or sense of entitlement on the part of the individual. They thought that it was a reasonable ask for the public to put their needs aside and people only needed to make sacrifices in the short-term:

"With all the holidays, you know there's been a lot of people going abroad and... things, that's really frustrating to watch on the news, when there's a family there going, 'We need this holiday. We've been keyworkers. We've been waiting for this'... it does annoy me because I'm like, I know people work hard, people save up, but it will come again. Everyone, for now, needs to just chill and do their bit, and then we can all go out." **(Female, 16, England)**

Despite their feelings about the transgressions, young people balanced their views and considered reasons why they might have occurred. They acknowledged that the rules were restrictive, and it was perhaps inevitable that breaches would occur, especially if people's lives or livelihoods were directly affected by the lockdown. They also reflected awareness was associated with adherence, and where there was confusion about the rules and mixed messaging from the government, breaches would occur:

"I think to some extent, you can blame the individual for going out and breaking the rules, but also, like we mentioned before, there's been quite a few mixed messages. I think it would be unfair to say I think people have been doing really badly and it's their fault. I think maybe some people have been and that's fair because some people choose to go out and break the rules, but I think maybe a few people have been misled." **(Female, 14, England)**

Young people also thought that some of the disquiet was part of a wider culture of complaining and the human tendency to blame others. In the context of the pandemic, young people reflected that migrants,

religious groups, tourists and to an extent young people themselves, had been blamed as contributing to the spread of the virus – possibly unduly. In terms of groups directly challenging the restrictions or promoting conspiracy theories, young people generally thought these views were held in the minority rather than mainstream views on the public.

3.1.1. Views on young people's behaviour

Like the whole public response, young people thought that, overall, others their age had tended to adhere to the government guidance. In their view it was important to respect the law, whether they agreed with it or not. However, young people felt this view was not shared by adults, who believed that young people had been irresponsible and chiefly involved in breaking the guidelines.

Providing many different examples, young people made the point that people their age had followed the guidance and behaved sensibly. While they had heard the narrative that young people were behaving recklessly because they were less at risk than older generations, in their experience young people were following the rules:

"I know lots of people like to paint teenagers as these reckless people who only like to go to dance parties, or whatever the hell, and they're always so reckless and everything, I feel like they really weren't… Even TikTok, to be honest, most people just kind of obeyed them." *(Female, 14, Lebanon)*

"I think there's been a lot of this about, oh young people feel like they're invincible so they're not socially distancing. Which has been quite unfair because I know a lot of young people who have been socially distancing because they live with their grandparents and I think it's quite a generalisation from unfair stereotypes about young people." *(Female, 16, Wales)*

Confronting negative portrayals of young people

Negative portrayal in the media frustrated young people because they thought it undervalued the positive role many young people had played in volunteering and supporting older generations during the crises, including running errands and providing food deliveries. This resulted in young people feeling dismissed and devalued rather than being recognised for their positive action.

"People my age have been going into care homes and have been volunteering in their communities, going to homeless shelters. The vast majority of the people that I know within my town have done some kind of volunteering over lockdown."
(Female, 18, England)

"People who haven't been able to go shopping have been relying on young people that they don't even know, that's people taking time out of their day to do that and I think that deserves recognition."
(Male, 18, Northern Ireland)

While young people knew of parties or beach gatherings taking place, they thought it was rare and was unfair to say it involved only – or even mainly – young people. Rather than being normalised to break the rules, young people gave examples where they had challenged friends about the specifics of the guidance or on the seriousness of the issue to encourage them to follow the rules as well:

"The conversations I've had with friends when they go posting pictures of themselves hugging each other on Instagram, they go, 'Oh, the guidance says this', and I go, 'Yes, actually, the guidance says this', and then I have to send them a screen shot of a table which specifies all the different scenarios, and the support bubble stuff is quite complex." (Male, 15, England)

Adding to their frustrations, young people gave examples where they had seen older generations being relaxed about following the rules, which they thought irresponsible given they were at a greater risk of a serious disease. This felt a bit hypocritical given how adults have talked about young people in the pandemic:

"Most of the older people on the bus would wear it under their nose or wear it under their chin, so it's completely useless. It just makes me a bit like they're judging us when they're being worse than us."
(Female, 16, Northern Ireland)

While the views of adults were frustrating, young people recognised there was little value in the generations being in conflict with each other. Instead, they thought that it was important to be united in fighting the virus.

3. 1. 2. Public attitudes and behaviours changing over time

Young people from Italy and the UK often drew comparison between the public's views at the start of lockdown, where there was panic and fear, and at the point of the interview, where some of the restrictions had eased and people were feeling more relaxed. Young people gave examples that included themselves where they no longer followed the rules that strictly:

> *"I think at the start everyone was very like, 'Yes, let's keep our two metres', but I think now it's hard even for me when I go and see people, because people just kind of forget now." (Female, 17, England)*

However, young people also pointed out that people had become more used to the rules which, to some extent, had become more normalised and embedded in everyday life with time.

> *"Everyone's sanitising their hands everywhere which is great." (Female, 18, England)*

> *"The only thing that has stuck around is hand sanitiser, that's everywhere." (Male, 17, England)*

In noticing change in behaviours, young people commented that elements of normal life were returning, although there were mixed views about this. Some young people felt that it indicated that measures were working, as a result of guidance to stay home and reducing social contact.

> *"As they saw the COVID cases dropping now, I think they have become more open to what they (government) are doing, and they finally realised that mask wearing is important."*
> *(Female, 14, Singapore)*

Other young people, especially from Italy and the UK, were concerned, and in some cases, disappointed, that old behaviours were returning. Where people were relaxing the rules too much, young people thought this was sign of people being selfish. The young people reflected that some of the unity on the issue that they had seen at the start of the pandemic had disappeared.

Overall, young people were anxious that some of the relaxing was happening too quickly while the risk of the virus was still present. They also wanted some of the positive changes they had seen during the crises to be continued and the early signs suggested that this was not happening.

3.2. Perceptions of media coverage during the crisis

Young people engaged with all types of media to understand the virus – ranging from traditional forms of news broadcasting, on TV, radio and news apps (rather than newspapers), to curating their social media platforms, to include a range of political viewpoints and news updates. It was also common for young people to access information from multiple places, as they aimed to triangulate sources, and develop a reliable understanding of different issues.

Social media was also key in how young people received news information. While young people were aware of the shortcomings of these platforms, they thought there were **benefits in being part of the open, unedited discourse about political developments.** They also thought that these platforms broadened the spectrum of content and provided them with an opportunity to make up their own mind on issues, whereas on traditional news outlets, young people complained that articles were biased but presented as fact, often sensationalised, and sometimes contradictory.

3. 2. 1. The role of traditional broadcasters

Young people watched, read, and listened to the news from a range of sources, including mainstream, traditional broadcasters and the tabloid press. Young people thought having access to information from different sources was important during a time of change and uncertainty. They also liked how you could access details quickly from specific organisations and government to gain the facts, and specifically the number of cases:

"The benefit of having a global pandemic 2020, is that all the statistics and everything is at our fingertips which that in itself is excellent. The fact that I can go on at two o'clock every day and work out how many more cases there are, is perfect. I think that accessibility for young people is reassuring in a time of uncertainty, yes, and that's fairly important." (Male, 16, Scotland)

Yet, at times, young people reflected the volume of information from news sources meant that the coverage about the pandemic was confusing or contradictory. The main complaints were the tendencies of news outlets to sensationalise issues and to overly focus on the negative, rather than portray a fair and balanced view on the issues. Some of these shortcomings were true of the media in general, but young people highlighted that during the pandemic it was dangerous because amplifying the negative had the potential to scare people:

"They constantly wanted to focus on people dying all the time, which is like, yes, that's a very serious issue, granted, but it's like, literally that's all you'd hear about, is people dying of it. Which I think scared people more because the only bits that were broadcasted were people getting it really badly and dying." (Non-binary, 17, England)

Young people also found the contradictions in the media to be frustrating because it reduced the clarity of the messages. This made it hard to understand the changes in the guidelines as well as what was happening locally:

"The news was so contradicting, so you never really got a clear message... We were listening to Boris [Johnson] and then we were having to find out what's actually happening in Northern Ireland, and then we're having to find out what's actually happening in Belfast instead of Newcastle. It's just been really stressful." (Female, 16, Northern Ireland)

Young people thought that because of these issues, sometimes the reality of a situation may be different to what was written in an article – pointing to the stories about young people breaking lockdown as an example of an exaggerated truth. Young people also gave examples of specific races and ethnic and marginalised groups that had been negatively portrayed in the media, which supported unhelpful false beliefs about the pandemic. The examples here illustrate how young people thought the media negatively portrayed the Chinese, migrants and Muslims in the coverage:

"I was quite upset when I watched videos or read comments about the COVID-19 being a Chinese virus and being racist to Chinese people. I think it's really unfair because it's not really their fault." (Female, 14, Singapore)

"Migrants are always discussed in the worst, most negative tone – right now they're saying migrants will most likely be responsible for spreading the virus and causing a second wave." (Female, 17, Italy)

"The media was just like, oh, all these Muslims who are going and breaking lockdown, when in reality they weren't. I saw pictures where they had changed the angle to make it look like people weren't social distancing when they were. Then in the same day there's huge masses of people on a beach." (Female, 17, Scotland)

3. 2. 2.　The role of social media

While social media platforms (including Twitter, Instagram, Reddit and Facebook) were not used primarily to access news updates, young people were using these platforms to stay up to date and informed. There were only a few examples where young people avoided social media as a source of media coverage on the pandemic.

On social media platforms, young people accessed both published news articles and the individual viewpoints of politicians and their peers. By 'following' specific organisations or people, they included media coverage of the pandemic as part of their content. Specifically, young people liked that news organisations published bulletins that synthesised information on key developments, which helped them to stay up to date and in a language that was accessible for them:

> *"There's an Instagram account called Simple Politics and they've got really, really big over lockdown because a lot of young people have started following them. They were doing, every day, they were summarising all the briefings. They'd do it within an hour of the briefing." (Female, 14, England)*

> *"They would just put it in smaller, easier-to-understand videos instead of all the contradicting messages you're hearing and then going, okay, what one? They just put it in a video and are direct about it, so it's easier to understand." (Female, 16, Northern Ireland)*

In some ways, young people thought that there were advantages of social media over more traditional broadcasting in helping them to engage with a wider discourse on the pandemic. Specifically, they liked being able to read people's opinions and make up their own mind on an issue, rather than having to remember specific biases of certain publications; they liked young people being able to present their views directly, rather than it being reported on their behalf by adults; and they liked learning about positive events that were happening, rather than overly focusing on the negative.

Young people were mindful that the information on social media platforms had its limitations. They noted that it was important to fact check information, how easily misinformation could spread without any formal editorship, and how common it was for small issues to escalate and for people to become outraged. On balance though, young people thought that there were more positives from being involved in social media than negatives. They thought that by understanding the limitations of the platforms, it was possible to engage quickly and easily with information in a meaningful way.

3. 2. 3.　Reliability of information

Young people were aware of the issue of reliability in the information they were accessing about the pandemic. Their main solution was to triangulate information from different places and to fact check details from highly credible sources – including websites of national governments or global organisations (e.g. World Health Organization), science journals and academic research. Even when reading coverage from a source they considered reliable, like the BBC, young people would triangulate with other sources to understand an issue:

> *"I would always look around, so I'd read a BBC News article, and if they were saying something about a specific group, that would maybe make me question it, I'd look at another article." (Female, 17, Scotland)*

Social media also had a role in facilitating young people's access to multiple sources of information. Young people described how they followed a range of viewpoints which helped them to think critically about ideas outside of the mainstream discourse. With this, though, young people reflected that it was essential to corroborate the details where possible with credible websites and fact check information before sharing again. Overall, young people thought that the breadth of information on social media offered clarity on the issue of the pandemic as a whole:

"I feel like having social media on my phone right now, being able to open Instagram and see what's happening, pandemic wise, and everything like that. I feel like it just made the situation way clearer." **(Female, 14, Lebanon)**

Misinformation or fake news was also problematic. Young people reflected how this issue was amplified during the pandemic with there being a lot of new information and everyone keen to learn about the issue at the same time. Although young people thought that a positive side of the lockdown was the fact of having time to become informed on new topics, they also thought there was a risk of assimilating misinformation as fact without realising. In highlighting the risks of spreading fake news, young people included themselves, as they found it hard to ascertain quickly which stories were real:

"I knew about fake news before COVID, but they never had such an impact on me as they did lately. I even spread some of this fake news sharing them to my friends." **(Female, 18, Italy)**

"I saw this one headline saying that Donald Trump had contracted COVID and was dying, that was fake news, so that was really appalling to me that such a big media company would let such fake news appear on their website." **(Male, 15, Singapore)**

Overall, young people were alert to the reliability issue of information and acted with caution before sharing information they had read. However, the evidence that young people were vulnerable to spreading fake news on social media shows the challenges in navigating information in an unedited online environment. One of the biggest causes of concern was the way the media represented, and often misrepresented, the younger generation.

3. 2. 4. Media portrayals of young people

There were two main views on how young people had been portrayed in the crisis: either young people had been completely ignored, as a group to report on overall; or they thought the coverage had been very narrow, focusing on specific issues – specifically education or stories about young people behaving recklessly and not adhering to government guidance. Young people also highlighted general shortcomings about how young people were reported on by media coverage.

Young people balanced their views about the coverage of young people by conceding the media often took elements of the truth and amplified it for a good story. They also reflected that there were stories that blamed the public in general for the spread of the virus, they disproportionately targeted young people or other marginalised groups: "it just put everyone at fault… It's just portraying everyone as bad, which isn't fair."

Excluded from the narrative

Some young people believed that it was correct to leave young people out of the narrative. They thought that the media had focused on how the virus was affecting people in general. Where age was relevant, it was in the context of those at risk of a serious illness or facing unemployment, which disproportionately affected adults:

"In an ideal world there would've been more stuff and more attention brought to issues facing young people, but I understand why there hasn't been as much emphasis on young people, because a lot of the problems young people face are a lot smaller than older generations." **(Male, 15, England)**

Others also thought it was a good thing that young people were not being targeted by the media, as it meant that young people avoided being blamed for the crisis:

"I think we've been fairly absent, which I suppose for us, isn't necessarily a bad thing, given the negative press that we tend to get." **(Male, 16, Scotland)**

In Italy, though, participants thought that excluding young people was a negative reflection of the Italian media. They reflected that the young people's experience had been missed from the narrative because there was a wider issue of undervaluing young people's views and voice in the news.

> *"The media have not attacked young people, rather we were ignored completely. It's not about portraying young people negatively, because they simply ignored us. They talked about everything else, but not about young people because we don't matter."* (Male, 14, Italy)

Limited coverage on specific issues

Those who thought young people had been included in only limited coverage of the pandemic recalled stories either about education and schools reopening; or young people behaving selfishly - not adhering to the government guidance by refusing to wear masks, ignoring social distancing, and gathering in large crowds. Young people thought this was a narrow reflection of their experiences during the pandemic, specifically because it missed some of the positive ways that young people had been part of the pandemic response.

Participants found the stories about young people involved in breaches particularly annoying. They complained that there was an assumption in the media that it was only young people doing this, when, in their view, it was happening across all ages, and that should have been reflected as well:

> *"Not to tar all adults with the same brush, but it's like, there's a lot of adults doing it, too, not just us [teenagers]."* (Non-binary, 17, England)

Young people also thought that the negative portrayal of young people was an inaccurate representation. As well as missing the ways young people had followed the guidelines, young people felt the coverage lacked details on how the lockdowns had affected young people with caring responsibilities, young people's mental health, as well as the positive ways young people had contributed to the pandemic response:

> *"I suppose it's hard to ignore the big, you know, the illegal raves and things like that and that will reach the media but there are cases of young carers going and helping the community and people volunteering, delivering food and things like that."* (Female, 18, England)

Inaccurate or generalised portrayals of young people

Beyond the extent of coverage, young people described some of the weaknesses in journalism about young people's issues, which compounded the lack of representation for their age group in the current crises. These shortcomings meant the media oversimplified issues and stories fell short of portraying young people effectively in the pandemic. Participants commented on the limited authenticity of the young person's voice in the coverage - it was rare for an article to be written by a young person, and it was always an adult reporting on their perspective:

> *"I haven't really felt represented. It was more an adult voice portraying young people like they always did."* (Female, 18, Italy)

Young people also thought that the media over generalised young people's experiences, rather than differentiating between primary and secondary school children, or teenagers and young adults:

> *"They say kids need to go back to school. That may be true for children, like in primary education. But not for me! Not for high school students! I'm perfectly fine with home-based learning, part-time or full-time!"* (Male, 15, Italy)

Even with the limitations of how young people were portrayed, young people reflected that there were elements of truth in media portrayals: "I feel like they are true, but very exaggerated." Their argument often proposed to improve the balance in how young people were portrayed, rather than suggesting that young people had behaved perfectly as a group. Addressing some of the weaknesses in the journalism would support this.

3.3. The significance of wider social issues and young people's social activism

Young people reflected that one positive of the government lockdowns was the additional time they had to engage and learn about social issues. They highlighted several issues they felt were important that were evident during the pandemic, some because of events that happen to coincide with the timing of the first wave of the virus, and others directly related to the pandemic and lockdowns. This section describes young people's views on these social issues and the extent to which young people participated in social activism in this period.

3.3.1. Social action during the pandemic

Young people highlighted two main high priority issues that coincided with the timing of the first wave of the virus: the first was systemic racial inequality; the second was climate emergency. Young people perceived both as issues separate to COVID-19, but also issues that continually emerged as being important, requiring social action and government attention alongside the pandemic response. Overall, young people felt well-informed on these social issues; but, notably, the circumstances of the pandemic allowed them to think about wider issues, and read about them, more than they would have done had they been at school. Although both important, young people thought that events during the crisis had raised the profile of racial inequality and had increased support from the public, whereas initiatives relating to the climate emergency had been deprioritised by the government.

Black Lives Matter (systemic racial inequality)

Overall, young people thought that the public awareness and support for this issue had increased during the time of the pandemic. The attention on systemic racial inequality was largely due to public outcry in response to police brutality and the death of George Floyd in the USA. Protests by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement followed George Floyd's death, taking place in many cities across the world, as well as prompting extensive responses from governments and businesses concerning their stance on racial inequality and inclusion, as well as a high level of activity on social media.

Although the BLM movement was a separate event, young people argued that COVID-19 had directly brought attention to the issue due to underlying systemic inequalities in many societies, as evidence had shown that those from Black and Minority Ethnic communities were significantly more likely to have severe symptoms or die from the virus. Young people reflected that the timing of BLM movement, exploded during the government lockdowns, may have helped to give it support. They suggested that this might be due in part to coverage of the controversial protests during lockdown, which meant people paid attention to the issue, as they debated whether they should have taken place. Young people also thought that with the order to stay at home, people, particularly young people, may have had the time to join protests in person or use their influence on social media to raise awareness:

> *"I guess, as well, everyone was indoors and on social media and stuff, so people were able to make quite an impact, as well, with big figures and stuff like that, because no one had an excuse to really not get involved."* (Female, 17, England)

More generally, young people reflected again that because they were at home, they had extra time to learn more about this issue, read up on the different perspectives, and give some thought in their opinions, more so than if they had been at school:

> *"It gave them more time to think about it, because in school we're just piled with exams and books, reading textbook. We're never really given a chance to be human and think about stuff for ourselves, so I think it definitely helped to encourage the movement."* (Female, 16, Northern Ireland)

Young people tended to agree that the BLM protests were justified, although some were concerned about the risks of mass gatherings during a pandemic. Most **young people in the UK believed that addressing racial inequality was a priority, even with the restrictions on people gathering in a pandemic.** They also indicated that, for the most part, protests had taken place safely and peacefully. Young people drew comparisons with the protests against the pandemic restrictions, where people were gathering and not social distancing or wearing masks, and how BLM protests were set up differently and therefore less likely to spread the virus through their actions. Young people were proud of those taking part in the BLM protests:

"I'm not going to tell them not to protest, because it is [BLM] a very big issue that needs to be solved, even in a global pandemic." **(Female, 16, England)**

"It's kind of like, this is more important than the coronavirus... I was quite proud to see that even though something had happened in another country, everyone still rallied up here. It was wholesome and they made sure everyone was spread out, and they made sure everyone was safe..." **(Female, 15, Scotland)**

Even with their support of the issue, young people acknowledged that there was a risk involved in large groups of people coming together during a pandemic. In this context, some young people – who tended to be from countries were youth social action was less of a norm - questioned the justification for protesting this issue and the position it put people in who thought the issue was important:

"Think it's affected the young people a lot, because now they are not able to - they are not allowed to go - it's unsafe for them to go out and protest. If they go and protest, it will be also very unsound, because they might get infected with COVID-19, so it's like either way they still lose. I think that's the part that has been very affected, yes." **(Male, 17, Singapore)**

"Unfortunately, this was not the right time to take it to the streets. We have a very difficult situation that involved the entirety of the world, and I don't believe it is wise to risk even more infections. Human rights, which should be a given, are really important, but health is more important in my opinion. If people die, who are you fighting for?" **(Male, 18, Italy)**

Despite the challenges in protesting about an issue during the pandemic, young people thought the response to BLM showed the positive impact the public can have during a pandemic to force the attention of governments to respond to an issue. They also thought it was an example of how young people can positively contribute to social change and use their influence on social media and in person to raise awareness and challenge the status quo.

Climate emergency

In contrast to the increasing awareness of BLM, young people from Italy and the UK thought the pandemic had moved the government attention away from the climate emergency in the immediate and short-term. In the interviews, young people highlighted how they were aware of – or had been involved in – relevant initiatives that had now lost their funding or been postponed. Young people raised concerns about deprioritising this issue when timing was still so critical:

"Before lockdown I was speaking to other people about sustainability and stuff like that... Then I think because of Corona - it just kind of got cancelled." **(Female, 17, England)**

"I find that the environment has almost been forgotten, because they were trying to focus on economic issues... I think was a bit weird, and I feel they should've had an equal outlook on every aspect of how COVID is going to affect it." **(Female, 18, England)**

Although young people recognised there were reasons why the climate emergency had been deprioritised, they expressed frustrations at a missed opportunity to implement wide scale changes, especially given the evidence in lockdowns of the reductions in pollution, focus on alternative modes of transport, and opportunities for nature to grow. Young people were also worried that the environment may be affected by the increasing amounts of plastic and waste because of the disposable personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as local measures using disposable items to reduce the spread of the virus:

> *"[Coffee shops are] all giving out the non-reusable ones [cups], because they're like, 'We don't want to spread the germs', and things like that, and with food places they're all giving the takeaway stuff. So that's been a lot more plastic as well."* *(Female, 17, England)*

Young people pointed out that people felt that, rather than deprioritising the issue, the government should apply the same urgency to initiatives related to the climate emergency as had been shown possible in responses to the pandemic and should not prioritise one issue over another. Instead, they underlined how this issue should be seen as similarly pressing by the government and the public.

3. 3. 2.   Social issues related to the pandemic

This section describes young people's views on how government lockdowns directly affected the extent of social issues in their country. In most examples, young people thought the pandemic had worsened situations and potentially increased social inequalities in their country. However, there were examples where the pandemic highlighted such issues and forced the government to act.

The main social consequences of the lockdown, as identified by study participants, included poor mental health, challenges in accessing health services, rising incidence of domestic abuse, and increasing levels of unemployment. **Young people highlighted how these social issues had exacerbated, and made increasingly more visible, the extent of social inequality.** They also reflected that these factors had serious repercussions for their future and for them, particularly related to job prospects, highlighting generational inequality and the disproportionate impact on the younger generation. Moreover, young people raised the concern that, due to the crisis, governments were unable to prioritise further support and therefore social issues were at risk of spiralling:

> *"I've heard there's been a lot of domestic abuse and stuff like that that's been happening and the government hasn't really been helping with that… all sorts to do with mental health and stuff like that, I think they haven't really paid attention to."* *(Female, 16, England)*

One social issue that has come to light during the pandemic and which has prompted action by the Government, concerns the living conditions of migrant workers in Singapore.

Social injustice highlighted by the pandemic

For a long time, there had been an issue of overcrowding and squalid conditions in the dormitories of migrant workers in Singapore. However, the issue had received little attention from the public or Government to improve the situation. When the dormitories became hotspots for the virus, at a time when the rest of Singapore was returning to normal, the poor living conditions in the dormitories was brought to everyone's attention. To control the clusters of the virus, the Government imposed a strict lockdown on the dormitories. This meant many of the migrant workers were then unable to work or send money home to their families. They were also forced to remain in quarters where it was very difficult to keep apart from other people. Several cases of suicide made the news in Singapore further highlighting the extent of the issues in the dormitories.

Reflecting on the events, the young people thought that the pandemic had potentially been a positive in this context, as it had provided a catalyst for change. The media coverage had effectively forced action the public to realise the extent of the issue and prompted the Government to think of ways to improve the situation.

"I think the migrant workers' dormitory issue was a blessing in disguise… COVID-19 opened the eyes of the people to what was happening there. It also motivated government to give a response. They actually acted with the dormitories and there's better living conditions… I was quite impressed."
(Female, 14, Singapore)

"I really wouldn't have believed that we were exploiting them, which I think I have come to realise we are… almost horror-like stories began to emerge of how they didn't have money to go back and they had to send, they gave up on life and passed on because of suicide." (Female, 15, Singapore)

4. Managing the crisis – young people's views on political and public health responses

This chapter captures young people's perspectives on how responses to the pandemic have been managed initially at a local, national, and global level. It also explores the extent to which young people feel their issues and concerns have been taken into consideration and their accounts of the active roles they took in influencing the development of measures and strategies in response to the pandemic. The chapter concludes by considering whether young people's interest in politics and civic

4.1. Young people's views on the global response

In general, young people felt that **the global response was too slow and lacked international coordination.** They described the response as a 'disaster' with concerns that the pandemic was declared too late, that individual countries responded in very different ways, and a suggestion that a global, rather than phased approach to lockdown, should have been implemented:

"Globally, the response has been a disaster because every country had their own positions; the UK with herd immunity, the US was closing borders, European countries were mocking each other. Not even the EU managed to get a hold of themselves and agree on common objectives. France had the Smurfs gathering up against COVID, Germany completely ignored the issue. The world has not responded well." *(Male, 14, Italy)*

"I think everyone should have gone into lockdown at a similar time, so it shouldn't have been one country would go into lockdown, another country would go into lockdown, it should have been a whole world thing." *(Female, 16, England)*

During the interviews, young people discussed the importance of responding quicker to try to prevent the spread of the virus by closing borders and restricting travel:

"I think a lot of governments were too slow... I don't think it was fast enough... you could see the warning signs and everything. I think as soon as it started to outbreak there should have been more – they definitely should have closed the airports... because that was really how it spread, people travelling." *(Female, 15, Northern Ireland)*

There was also a feeling that not enough was done globally to learn the lessons from the SARS experience:

"What I thought that the world could have done better was to have an earlier response to COVID-19 because people didn't really see it as a big thing last time. I think in Asia, we experienced SARS before, we were quick to take measures, but other parts of the world, they were caught off-guard. I think they could have listened to the warnings from the other countries and worked together." *(Female, 14, Singapore)*

Whilst some young people objectively noted possibilities for responding earlier, others highlighted the difficulties of responding to the new and uncertain situation the pandemic presented.

"You've seen cases rising very, very quickly. What you can do is very limited because of the fact that it's new and not something that occurs regularly, so you don't have a lot of evidence. You're not sure, like you don't have... stuff ready to go, it's not like that... it's hard to be a leader in something you have no experience over." *(Female, 17, England)*

One young person (UK) suggested this was due to powerful nations influencing the early response to the pandemic through leveraging their funding to relevant international organisations, such as the WHO. Another respondent (Italy) suggested that due to prior relationships between China and WHO, there may have been influence on the way WHO managed the spread of the pandemic.

"Scientists are now saying the virus had been around since summer 2019... We know China is a regime that lacks transparency, but rumour has it that the WHO DG cooperated to keep it a secret. They praised China for its commendable work! If that's commendable, I wonder what poor work would have looked like! The WHO could have done far better, they shouldn't have waited for China to speak up, because the WHO acts like a global inspector and it should be on the frontline to check that nothing happens." [1] *(Female, 17, Italy)*

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1   The evidence for these assertions has not been substantiated by the research team.

The role of powerful nations influencing the global response was noted regarding, for example, wearing of masks, where inconsistency existed between WHO and individual countries.

"It's only been June and July that we've been told to wear masks now, and I think that should have been implemented much sooner, because that could have helped, because there was so much confusion over Boris Johnson saying, 'No, we don't need masks', and in America, Donald Trump saying, 'We don't need masks', and the WHO saying, 'Wear masks'." [2] *(Male, 14, Scotland)*

Despite suggestions the global response could have been quicker, many young people acknowledged the important role of global organisations such as WHO in doing "a lot of heavy lifting during this pandemic."
"I think globally those organisations have done a good job, like making sure that every country and most people are aware of what's going on. I think that they have been giving the right advice and things, but then it's more like the countries' leaders either sticking with their guidelines or not."
(Female, 17, Scotland)

For many of the young people who were following the situation internationally, views about the global response was significantly influenced by the responses of individual countries with a sense that ***"not all political leaders around the world handled it responsibly but a good chunk of them did." (Female, 14, Lebanon)***

Young people consistently highlighted specific countries who responded well and those they felt had not.
USA, Brazil and UK were repeatedly identified as examples of countries responding poorly to the pandemic.

"Well, especially the US, they didn't really try to control it, compared to countries like Taiwan and New Zealand, who have zero new cases every day, like US is still having 200,000 cases every day. You can see the difference between countries, how they have handled the outbreak. Especially US, who is supposed to be the most technologically and medically advanced country in the world, and they didn't manage to contain the virus properly." (Male, 15, Singapore)

"It astonishes me every day that Donald Trump is the President of the United States throughout this. I was gobsmacked to read that he had suggested to medical professionals about studying if they could inject disinfectant into people's bodies to kill coronavirus... He has said... that he was being sarcastic... I've watched the video... and there is zero hint of sarcasm. How is this man president?"
(Male, 14, Scotland)

"I have some very controversial thoughts about certain presidents such as Brazil, Philippines, and United States!... they are very outspoken people... and they may not necessarily give the best advice. For example, Philippines, President Duerte, he would give suggestions to the people of the Philippines to clean their face masks with petroleum, and that is I think very unsafe!... Then Brazil's President Bolsonaro... said that everybody's going to get COVID, so might as well catch it earlier so that you can recover and get back into the workforce. I find that quite ridiculous." (Male, 17, Singapore)

Conversely, New Zealand's approach to managing the pandemic was commended in preventing the spread of the disease and Canada's approach to assisting citizens with welfare was highlighted:

"The country I know has done the best is New Zealand, I cannot sing their praises enough! It's always all over the news... We're all texting each other, like, 'Oh, they do this. Why don't we do that?' I love it... how they just shut down, and they've had, what, two cases? If we all took a page out of that book, it would be gone by now." (Female, 16, Northern Ireland)

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2   As above, the evidence for these assertions has not been substantiated by the research team. The view expressed in this quote does differ with other sources e.g. https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/30/world/coronavirus-who-masks-recommendation-trnd/index.html

"Canada, for example, they're doing great, they provided monthly payments for their citizens, they rejected the electricity bills and stuff like this, they helped their citizens." (Male, Lebanon)

For young people, the significance of national leaders was not just about making good decisions but also about being positive role models.

"Spain did not respond too well from the beginning, and they still aren't. I saw a video where the Princess of Spain was telling her father, the Prince, to wear a face mask in public. I mean, the Prince is a public authority, he should be a model." (Female, 17, Italy)

"Yes, I guess some countries such as the US, Brazil… the leaders themselves sometimes do not portray the best example for their citizens to follow and thus it has resulted in a lot of tensions, especially with the Black Lives Matter movement. I guess there is a lot more issues to be dealt with in… more liberal countries." (Male, 17, Singapore)

In reflecting on the role of leadership in managing the pandemic, some questioned whether the role of female leaders was significant in providing good leadership, referring simultaneously to Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand and Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland, who was also seen to be providing better leadership than Westminster.

"What I find interesting was that the majority of countries have done well… had women leaders… I saw an explanation… online, where it was like genetically, women are more caring than men… that makes sense." (Male, 14, England)

Other countries who were noted as managing the crisis better included Taiwan and South Korea, arguably because of more centralised regimes. Reference here was made to the quick and successful implementation of a track and trace system.

"Cuba, Vietnam, Taiwan, are all positive examples of dealing with it, even South Korea. Just showing it can be done when you properly develop a track and trace system and don't abandon it prior to the peak of the virus… Their handling has been more than excellent and… shows the benefit, to an extent, of centralised government. It makes sense that if you've got a strong government handling on public service and people's lives, I suppose then, you're going to be able to deal with the pandemic more easily than if you haven't." (Male, 16, Scotland)

"In terms of response I thought Singapore is one of the top fairing ones… I think Korea really flattened the curve really fast. I thought they handled it really well, because there was an outburst in cases, they just handled everything… The tracing system we have in Singapore, so I think that's like more of a top-down approach where the government implements measures. In US… it's more of a bottom-up system, which might not be working very well for them. I feel like the current US administration is actually a bit wishy-washy on their policies and measures… because Americans are very into personal liberty and stuff like that." (Female, 16, Singapore)

Indeed, in observing global patterns, young people noted that some of the countries that had experienced rapid rates of infection were those where populations were more ready to assert liberal values of freedom and individual rights, such as the USA and Sweden.

"I was reading on social media that they really found wearing masks to be really annoying and they didn't want to do it even though it was for the sake of public health… I think the US administration is also very keen on preserving everyone's liberty and freedom. So they didn't exactly make it compulsory, I think that was the difference between the two governments." (Female, 16, Singapore)

"I think Sweden didn't shut down at all really… and they just told old people to stay home but let everyone else live their life. They didn't have that much economic impact, but I think they've done quite badly as well." (Female, 14, England)

Through their research, young people raised questions and explored explanations for the patterns they were observing, with some suggesting the wealth of the country might be significant and others trying to find links with the size of the country. Young people noted how countries who took early, and authoritative action had very low case numbers. In turn, where countries had 'opened up' too quickly, often driven by economic or political motives, this gave rise to a resurgence of cases. Despite Singapore being a wealthy country and acting swiftly in response to the pandemic, young people observed the folly of basing decisions in managing the pandemic on economic criteria only.

> *"While Hong Kong was dishing out masks... Singapore had the concern that if they were to give out these masks so readily. People would continue demanding for more masks and then eventually there was this fear that the whole healthcare sector might break down because of a lack of masks... but Hong Kong managed the outbreak quite well. While Singapore has... it has fallen from handling it well to not handling it very well." (Male, 17, Singapore)*

> *"Japan is a little on the unsafe side right now, because they started reopening too quickly. I think Japan is a good case study to talk about actually, because Japan knows that the people want their entertainment, so they open up theme parks, the night life, the night-life streets, and that could be more detrimental... in a country with a high proportion of elderly population... I think they could slow down on the reopening of their markets and... all that entertainment stuff, so their infection rates don't explode." (Male, 17, Singapore)*

The EU joint response to COVID-19 was praised by one young person from Italy, who hoped the crisis might represent an opportunity for future, stronger collaboration, and a rosier picture for Italy as well.

> *"When I heard about the agreement on the Recovery Fund: 209 billion euros, for Italy that's so much! And also the fact that for once, the EU cast aside individual interests and prioritised community policies, as it was supposed to do since its inception. It made me think that maybe the future holds something better, that France and Germany will no longer be the only ones leading the EU". (Female, 17, Italy)*

However, not all young people had followed the global situation or what was happening in other countries. They were instead more concerned about what was going on in their own country. This was especially the case in Lebanon, where significant wider social and political events had been occurring.

4.2. Young people's views on national and local responses

The previous section, discussing young people's views on how the pandemic has been managed globally, included reference to countries that young people felt had managed responses to the pandemic well, and those that had managed it badly. In this section, we examine young people's perspectives on how the pandemic has been managed nationally and locally in the case study countries: Italy, Lebanon, Singapore, and the UK home nations.

Young people generally felt that **prioritising the public health response and locking down more quickly was an effective strategy to deal with the crisis,** albeit worried about the economic implications of this decision. In general, many young people recognised the difficulty of managing the country during the global pandemic, and it highlighted the difficult trade-off that governments have had to face during this period.

> *"Even though Italy was chaotic, we were one of the countries that best reacted to the emergency. I think that's what saved our country, how rapidly we responded and imposed the lockdown. We tried, failing, to keep up the economy, people... lost their jobs, but overall, this is better than losing everything like in other countries."*

(Male, 18, Italy)

"I think that politicians in Singapore… have handled it well in terms of minimising the damage that was caused to people's lives in the medical sense. Wherever there was a COVID-19 spread, they successfully just wiped that cluster out and helped to bring down the numbers quite fast." (Male, 15, Singapore)

Whilst Italian participants celebrated the 'dignified' way in which their country responded, in Singapore, young people highlighted the value of an authoritarian regime in providing the strong leadership needed to enforce effective lockdown measures.

"I think in terms of desperate situations; I think a more authoritative style of Leadership in countries needs to be assumed… I would say that it's better to have - in times of desperation we need to be more authoritative and give up a certain - give up some of our rights in order to stay safe and secure."
(Male, 17, Singapore)

In Lebanon, the response appeared to be largely the work of the (relatively new) Minister for Health, an apparent exception to a Government otherwise seen as Beirut-centric.

"The minister of health here in Lebanon was new. From the people's perspective, he has done everything he can because the old government was corrupt." (Male, 17, Lebanon)

In contrast, young people felt that the UK dithered in its response, waiting to see what other countries did before acting and as a result delaying too long before measures were implemented.

"I don't think the Government knows what they're doing at all. They just seem to be copying what other countries are doing… so I feel like they don't have a specific plan, they're just going with the flow."
(Female, 16, England)

"I feel like they were just really slow compared to other countries, even though we'd seen in China and then Italy… I don't know why the Government wasn't trying to see all the mistakes that happened there or what they did really well and implementing it in Britain. It was a really delayed reaction… I think… like they're valuing the economy way more than human life. That made me really frustrated."
(Female, 16, England)

Across the UK, condemnation of the way the Government has handled its response echoed throughout young people's perspectives. They cited a **catalogue of errors** including failure to enforce mask wearing, allowing events to go ahead (e.g. football matches), not banning travel, providing mixed messages, having long delays in equipping the NHS with PPE, being slow in getting testing and track and tracing systems in place, and generally not thinking through decisions.

"The way that they handled things was really late… and disorganised… The lack of PPE, the lack of organisation within hospitals, even until now… it's really hard to understand what the Government's advising you to do, and when it does issue this guidance, it's really late for them to try and do anything. […] There's been a lack of public involvement. They literally just throw guidelines and rules at us without asking us… I don't know where they're getting their scientific advice from. We don't even know who those people are… if we can trust them, we don't know if they're credible." (Female, 16, England)

These perceived failings have done little to inspire confidence in young people and were exacerbated by what young people saw as hypocrisy. For example, the Cummings affair[3] was noted as being a turning point in public cooperation with lockdown measures, and the failure to receive an apology and hold Cummings to account was disheartening.

"One thing that I find very interesting is, public support has just faded so much as it's gone on. At the start, everyone was behind the Government, supporting the lockdown and everything, and then especially after the whole Dominic Cummings thing, it's just gone down so much, and no one really trusts them

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3   This concerned the UK Prime Minister's advisor having been widely perceived as breaking the rules.

anymore." *(Male, 15, England)*

Young people from the UK also criticised the Government in relation to religious celebrations that were prohibited even though pubs and national celebrations could go ahead, leading to accusations of **cultural inconsistencies.**

"For VE Day[4], there was loads of people having street parties and stuff, but then for certain Muslim holidays people were getting angry at people for going around to see their families. I think it was Eid on the last day of July, and the Government made it so in some parts of northern England you can't go to your friend's house, or family's house, the day before Eid, so they completely ruined all the celebrations, even though people were allowed to go to the pubs." *(Male, 15, England)*

Generational injustice: Young people feeling overlooked

Young people across all countries felt a sense of generational injustice and inconsistency in feeling that their needs and circumstances were overlooked and their voices underrepresented, which led to a failure to consider the differential impact of the crisis on young people as a whole and for different groups.

"With young people… they rushed, and just said, 'Oh, yes, we'll just do predicted grades for GCSEs, and I don't really think there's been that much policy directed specifically for young people. Apart from the free school meals, which they didn't even want to give." *(Male, 15, England)*

"All decisions in this country are focused on adults. Young people in this country are always ghosts, and that's really a shame. During this crisis, young people could have been instrumental in so many ways. Now the Government is proudly saying the education sector has received €9 million euros. Sure, but that's after six years of cuts worth €50 billion." *(Male, 18, Italy)*

For example, young people from the UK criticised the Government for only focusing on primary children as the 'lost generation'. The older age group, attending the final year of secondary education, was at a critical juncture in their education and was faced with an exam grading debacle weighing heavy in determining their post school transitions and future life decisions. This gave young people – especially those coming from more disadvantaged areas - the sense that they do not matter.

"Everybody was calling primary school children the lost generation… I absolutely disagree… it is high school children… that will be sitting GCSEs and A levels next year, that will be going on to… college and start apprenticeships and start university. That's the lost generation… that is going to be graduating into a recession… those are the people that are going to be suffering." *(Female, 18, England)*

4. 2. 1.   Regional variability

In spite of all UK home nations being subject to decisions taken at Westminster[5], the responses of the devolved administrations often differed from that of the UK government. Young people believed that **key differences between the way Scotland and England managed the crisis** included the clarity of messages, strong and informed choices, daily briefings, and positive engagement with young people. In addition, whilst England rushed to release lockdown measures, young people felt that easing lockdown in Scotland happened more cautiously.

> *"I think the way he's (UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson) dealt with this has been more about saving the economy than saving lives... from a Scottish perspective we've got a leader that actually is competent. ... I think that the communication of our leader, where we have a daily briefing every day - Boris Johnson stopped doing them weeks ago because of ratings - and talks to not only adults, but she addresses young people directly in her briefings, and talks about it in a way that we will all understand every single day."* **(Male, 14, Scotland)**

> *"I think Nicola Sturgeon has... done it right: we stayed in lockdown for longer, we are very gradually building stuff back up. The Government's guidelines on schools are really good... and everyone is sticking to it. Boris on the other hand, I feel very bad for you lot. He was trying to get schools back... July, June?"* **(Female, 15, Scotland)**

The response in Northern Ireland (NI) was seen to follow behind the Westminster Government but was shaped through what initially was seen as close partnership working between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein. This however, changed when the Sinn Fein leader was seen attending a funeral without wearing a mask, subsequently initiating a fracture in political relations in NI. Political parties were thought to be using the pandemic for their own political agenda rather than for the good of the country.

> *"I don't think Northern Ireland's very much on top of it, because we have two conflicting messages, one from the DUP and then one from Sinn Fein... the two are blaming each other, so it's not very uniting! ... Instead of working together, they're forcing each other's arms, which is not working well for the wellbeing of the country. ... they're using this as an opportunity to better themselves rather than better the country."* **(Female, 16, Northern Ireland)**

4. 2. 2. Perspectives on specific measures and the easing of lockdown

Although Nicola Sturgeon was generally applauded for her handling of the pandemic, there was also criticism, for example, in terms of not restricting travel or imposing quarantine.

> *"There wasn't any temperature checks or anything like that when you flew out, or when you got to the airport in another country... and the police never came to check they were isolating for two weeks. In places like Australia and New Zealand, they were doing that, which is why their cases were lower. It feels like a really simple thing that they could've done to reduce the number of cases, which ... is quite frustrating".* **(Female, 18, England)**

The general feeling from young people about the importance of closing borders was also reiterated in Lebanon.

> *"The good decision is that they decided to close everything, but then they left the airport open."* **(Female, 16, Lebanon)**

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4   Victory in Europe Day is the day celebrating the formal acceptance by the Allies of World War II. The day is celebrated annually across European nations with public holidays and national observances.
5   The UK Parliament, located in England, has the power to pass law in all policy areas for the whole UK. Since devolution, however, it normally legislates in devolved areas (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) only with the agreement of the devolved institutions. https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/devolution-at-20/westminster-and-whitehall

"When they first opened the borders for people outside of Lebanon to come back to Lebanon, like students and everything… it was a controversial topic in Lebanon. They did… open it back up and they tried their best there to keep it coronavirus friendly. I am personally against the whole thing and now it's done irresponsibly." *(Female, 14, Lebanon)*

The general impression from young people was that lockdown was eased too quickly, often for economic motives, and without sufficient consideration of the health implications.

"I don't think it's very fair. We switched from being fully closed down to re-opening everything up, with much less control measures in place." *(Female, 17, Italy)*

"I think by having 'Eat out to Help out'[6], people assume everything is back to normal, but the normal that they're used to isn't the new normal at all and there's no definition of the new normal. I think that's really confused people a lot and misled people." *(Female, 16, England)*

Using the pandemic for political ends was also noted by young people in Singapore, despite overall approval of how the pandemic was managed.

"Almost less than a month after the first phase rolled out, they were ready to start electing our officials. I just felt like this was a really weird attempt to garner people's sympathy, to get them a strong mandate, and I didn't like it at all. I just felt like it was a wrong move, especially when they still didn't have the thing under control." *(Female, 15, Singapore)*

However, many young people acknowledged the difficulties in getting a balance between keeping people safe and trying to prevent the economy slumping. Young people generally praised the economic support measures that had been put in place, except for Lebanon and Italy, where young people felt more economic support and a timelier furlough scheme were needed for families and workers. In Lebanon, this meant that many people did not have the means to live so were forced out to work.

"Debates focused on furlough schemes, because money injections were disbursed too late … But we must realise that Italy had its economic issues, with billions from the EU Recovery Fund. However, it's also true that many families were really confused." *(Female, 17, Italy)*

In Singapore, while acknowledging the value of payments made for all families, some young people felt that many disadvantaged families were not helped sufficiently.

"Thankfully, the government had given… funds to the public to help recover during this pandemic, like there was I think $5,000… given to each household during the COVID period to make sure that we can survive." *(Female, 16, Singapore)*

"A lot of families are falling into poverty because their parents are losing their jobs, their kids are losing control of their studies… I think that in that sense, currently, the government might not have paid enough attention to those people." *(Female, 15, Singapore)*

A number of young people from Singapore highlighted the lack of support for migrant workers specifically as an example of how certain sections of society have been marginalised in the management of the crisis. Similarly, young people noted that Syrians in Lebanon did not receive support. More broadly, young people who are disadvantaged were seen to have lost out:

"I'm not sure about the UK Government, but the Scottish Government anyway, I don't think they've been as serious as they should've been in terms of poverty. They didn't put anything in place for those on free school meals, anything really. It was kind of left to local councils… I think that should've been a national policy or something that they should've done." *(Female, 15, Scotland)*

4. 2. 3. Perspectives on local responses

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6   Incentivising the UK public to eat out with Government-funded half price meals.

The efficacy of government strategies is most acutely seen in the way measures are implemented and experienced locally, through frontline services such as schools, universities, and hospitals. Young people's views about local responses to the pandemic were mixed, suggesting variability in responses for managing the pandemic locally. In the UK, there was a suggestion that some councils were responding well – for example, talking to stakeholders about opening schools (although it was recognised this was not necessarily the case for all councils); and providing communication via a newsletter to local residents to reinforce measures.

"Some places have done it so well, they've really been good, put in lockdown in areas and they're really good at tracking it and stuff. So yes, I think it's just different places." (Female, 16, England)

"There hasn't been any local restrictions put in place... perhaps more should have been done in recent weeks... like closure of pubs or bars... largely the council haven't really had a role in this and haven't given any guidance and if you ask people what have the council done... you'd struggle to get any answers." (Male, 18, Northern Ireland)

Some local responses were praised in Italy and Lebanon, but in general, national measures were more strongly felt in these countries. Mask-wearing and effective track and trace arrangements were seen as being important, although people had concerns about measures not being enforced sufficiently well locally.

"I know lots of people haven't been sticking to social distancing measures, and our council hasn't really been dealing with that very well... you see lots of people not within two metres distance, even touching... really close to each other... that's not been handled very well." (Female, 16, England)

Running through young people's experiences of local measures was a feeling that **communication could have been better,** for example, with respect to local Members of Parliament (MPs) being more prominent throughout the pandemic. Whilst lockdown was seen positively overall, young people questioned whether it may have been better to manage lockdown measures more locally where there were areas that peaked, in particular to prevent spreading between areas. For many young people, effective national leadership in managing the crisis involves the adoption of a partnership approach with local municipal authorities.

"The Scottish Government I think have worked better with local authorities (than UK) instead of just throwing power at them... the Scottish Government were like, 'Okay, we're going to do this', and then they set out guidance, gave it to local authority and said, 'You can adapt this to your schools and things like that. We trust you on that.' Whereas, from what I've seen in England it's, 'Here it is, go and do it.' (Male, 14, Scotland)

"In Aberdeen in Scotland they just did a localised lockdown because there's like an extra amount of cases there, and I think that was a good decision because... it spreads to other cities... and... could start a new second wave, so the localised lockdowns that have happened... I would agree with those decisions." (Male, 15, England)

Most significantly, young people were concerned with the impact of governments' decisions on their immediate everyday realities such as education, travel, and social wellbeing. Schools on the whole were seen to be managing well, putting appropriate measures in place to protect and support young people, including social distancing and school counselling services. In turn, many young people recognised that governments could have done more to support schools.

"Schools are doing their best, but other than that, I don't think much more can be done. Because they don't have that much power... the most important thing is to make sure the virus doesn't spread, and that's our top priority... schools couldn't have done more, but government could've done a little bit more to help." (Male, 15, Singapore)

Whilst young people did expect public bodies to take necessary action, at the same time they highlighted the

importance of local community action through people volunteering and providing mutual support.

> *"We have all been banding together and going and supporting all of our small businesses, which is... important. Starting to see a lot more of the volunteering stuff come back... because... community volunteering and helping with young people is a really big thing, a really big community effort to all chip in. I can't think of any specific policy that has affected anything, but just the way that we're all coming back together is quite nice."* *(Female, 17, Scotland)*

> *"At the beginning of lockdown, there was a mutual aid group set up in Devon... by two girls in Year 13... It got really big interest from adults and children. There was a lot of young people in the group as well."* *(Female, 14, England)*

The importance of local community action and young people's role in influencing decisions on how to manage the pandemic is explored further in the following section.

4.3. Young people's representation, voice, and influence in responding to the crisis

As mentioned above, in Italy, Lebanon and the UK **young people felt that their views, situations, and concerns had not been sufficiently considered** in responding to the pandemic, despite feeling their generation was likely to be the most affected. This reflected a sense of marginalisation as a generational group.

> *"I don't really think, in relation to COVID, I don't think young people have really been involved in any of the major decisions. I'm sure there've been a few panels run by the government to gauge how young people are feeling, but I don't think... COVID policy, has been impacted by young people... I don't really think that the government has thought that much about young people at all, to be honest."* *(Male, 15, England)*

> *"I don't think young people have been involved... In relation to education and schools, they should have asked our opinion. There may have been some minor attempts, I heard of 'student's associations'... in Rome, close to the Ministry... the rest of Italy is not heard at all."* *(Male, 17, Italy)*

> *"No, maybe for the Lebanese people, but for Syrians surely no. Our school and government didn't think about us because we are Syrians. The schools and government care more about Lebanese young people. They didn't care much or listen to the needs of Syrians. They didn't give us anything and I am so sad for this because our economic situation is so bad, and we can't buy anything."* *(Female, 14, Lebanon)*

In Singapore, young people were more forgiving of their Government because of the difficult situation the pandemic created.

> *"I don't think that they are able to be heard by the government because of such trying times... we are not as much involved with the community as we would like to be. I think it more lies in the government's hands... I don't think there is much we can do... right now... I think governments all over the world are currently unavailable to listen to the young people... I understand... it may be... quite frustrating sometimes, but... we just have to... trust that the government knows what they're doing."* *(Male, 17, Singapore)*

Young people understood that the situation was critical and challenging and necessarily involved a degree of urgency in decision making. However, they also articulated a feeling that young people did not seem to matter in government decision making and many of the decisions made had not been thought through. Young people believed that more consultations with different groups would have been needed to better understand their needs and reflect those in decision-making.

> *"I think decisions were just made there and then, rather than going... how is the best way to go about*

this? Which is good because it's getting stuff done, but you can't always rush into things if it's going to be the wrong thing; you'd rather wait and do what everyone thinks is best." (Female, 17, Scotland)

"I think when Government were going to stop free school meals over the summer holidays, it made me feel like the government wasn't focussing that much on young people. I still don't think that they're focussing on young people. They haven't even had a proper consultation with young people or adults, even." (Female, 16, England)

In Italy, some young people reported on having to move to Rome to start paid internships, which were cancelled due to COVID-19, so they had no source of income and still were expected to pay rent:

"These are all things the government did not care about until July, but at that point these people had already resorted to loans or asked their families to support them, possibly putting them in a difficult spot." (Male, 18, Italy)

Where there was an attempt to respond to young people's perceived needs, this tended to involve providing some information and guidance for young people. In the UK, for example, this was done by directing young people to mental health helplines. However, many young people believed that the information provided was unhelpful.

"I think there was a lot more certainty in everything else, but young people weren't really told, 'Hey, this is what's happening to you. Expect this to happen with you, this might happen'. We were shoved to the side and we didn't get asked." (Female, 15, Scotland)

"We've just been told [about going back to school], ... they've posted a few things about online counselling... but... there hasn't been any question about whether we feel okay coming back... they just said, 'Oh, we're putting signs up around the school', but there wasn't any questioning... or making sure that people are listened to and asked." (Female, 15, Northern Ireland)

4. 3. 1.   Adult attitudes and opportunities for young people's participation in decision-making

One of the reasons why young people felt they were not given sufficient attention in decisions was because of adult assumptions about young people's limited ability to understand and input into complex decision-making.

"I think that they don't really take us seriously... because they feel... we are too young to know anything... that teenagers are opinionated, rude, arguing. They tend to stereotype us a lot and then don't take our accounts into perspective." (Female, 14, Singapore)

"My biggest concern with the Lebanese Government, that they're all just old people... that completely disregard younger people... dismiss young people's views... just look down on teenagers as if they have half a brain. I have political views but if I say them out loud, people are like, 'You're 14, what do you know?' (Female, 14, Lebanon)

This feeling of being denied involvement in decisions about responses to the pandemic was widespread across all countries. In seeking to speak out about their experiences and needs, some young people felt there were limited opportunities to do so, whilst even those who had been typically more active through youth fora have found their voices increasingly marginalised:

"It's been harder sometimes to get our voice across... I'm part of the COVID-19 pupil forum for my school. I feel like we've been listened to less and less and less, because obviously it's adult decisions, it's adult this, it's adult that. It's kind of ignored from the pupil perspective." (Male, 14, Scotland)
"We've tried a lot of things; it doesn't seem to have worked... There's Youth Parliament, isn't there, but

I've never heard of them doing very much. I know they exist, and they've elected people... they must be doing something, surely." *(Non-binary, 17, Scotland)*

"Schools... asked us about how we feel about doing online lessons, whether it's been effective or not, so they've had some sort of input from us, which is nice. Whereas, the government, nothing. Local authorities, nothing." *(Female, 16, England)*

Alignment to youth wings of political parties offered an opportunity to get involved for some, yet key to facilitating young people's engagement have been the opportunities presented by youth participation organisations driven by a commitment to young people's rights, rather than formalised structures.

"A lot more people have been creating or joining non-profits and starting forums where they talk about stuff like this... saying, these are the ways that young people can make decisions. This is how we take charge of what's happening around us and we decide to make a change in our surroundings." *(Female, 15, Singapore)*

This was also significant across the UK, with some of the most impactful youth engagement happening through the plethora of third sector youth participation organisations that exist.

In response to not feeling heard, young people have capitalised on the use of social media as a platform for youth activism and having an influence, for example through Instagram and TikTok.

"We managed to scare Donald Trump into a bunker. That makes me proud of my generation! We ruined one of his rallies – that made me proud – to the point where he went to ban the app. He's so scared of us. That made me proud of my generation. TikTok and stuff has definitely given us a voice, because where it's worldwide we can all share our views and opinions... That brought me so much joy in our generation, knowing that we would be the generation to bring about further change." *(Female, 16, England)*

The increasing politicisation of young people globally is reflected in young people noticing how the 'fun content' on social media platforms, such as "Quel momento" (That moment), have given rise to serious content about mobilising support for young people in relation to COVID-19. Young people have recognised that social media is particularly useful for mobilising support for protests and movements. However, many also recognised that online activism needs to translate into practice on the ground.

4. 3. 2. Seeking influence on priority issues for young people

Many of the issues young people wanted to talk to politicians about important issues that impacted them directly, including their education and exam grades, as well as schools reopening.

"I've heard a lot of people my age say that they feel like they don't have a lot of control over the situation with exams and grades... I mean, it's tricky doing it without exams... but I don't think there was enough consultation, and I'm worried there's not going to be enough consultation for the changes to my GCSEs." *(Male, 15, England)*

In the face of an unpopular and misguided policy, with potentially detrimental impacts for young people's future, the policy U-turn about exams in the UK occurred as a result of young people protesting and taking action themselves, given a lack of formal channels of influence.

This lack of concern for young people's situations was also reflected in Italy, in young people's attempts to discuss difficulties they were experiencing. For example, concerning meeting assignment deadlines in the current context, online learning, and scheduling classes. Whilst some teachers did respond positively – for example, with one professor who was convinced to switch from pre-recorded to live video lessons that the class found more useful – this was not always the case.

In spite of not feeling fully involved in decision making about returning to education, unlike in the UK, young

people in Singapore did feel that decisions were made with their interests at heart.

> *"I do think we were represented quite well, in a sense because they took into consideration our final exams and they still took away topics from the overall amount... we had to study, so I do think we were put into consideration.* *(Female, 16, Singapore)*

> *I guess as a whole, most of the measures taken have... tried to satisfy whatever complications they might face while having this home-based studying... we can request to go back to school if our home learning environment isn't as conducive."* *(Male, 17, Singapore)*

Young people in Lebanon similarly had a positive experience with the Ministry of Education taking young people's perspectives into account by organising a public Zoom meeting with young people to discuss online learning. This was well-received by young people. However, this seemed to be an isolated incident within a wider culture of adult dominated decision-making.

> *"The only time I can think of that young people's voices were actually heard, was when it comes to official exams, the Ministry of Education really wanted official exams... It caused an uproar, because... private schools were able to maintain a decent kind of level of online classes. [But] not a lot of people are in private schools... like we protested on Instagram... the ministry actually heard us and... exams were cancelled. That was the only time... they listened to people younger than 50."* *(Female, 14, Lebanon)*

This example highlights the power young people can have in influencing decisions through platforms such as online social media, which appears to enable young people to engage in the democratic process uninhibited by adult controlled governance structures.

4. 3. 3. Positive examples of young people engaged in decision making

Where attempts have been made to engage with young people, these have been positively received and have tended to involve simple processes of consultation with young people. Whilst these are important, young people valued opportunities for dialogue and joint working.

> *"I would say, in Scotland I think yes, probably, there's been a lot of... I know that there's been a lot of consultation that has fed back into the way that the Scottish government has handled things. I know that Young Scot, and the Children's Parliament, and the Youth Parliament have all done different things that have fed back."*
> *(Female, 17, Scotland)*

> *"Youth Parliament Devon got the chance to speak to the Children's Commissioner of England, which was an amazing experience. She was doing a bit of almost an interview with us and... we had the opportunity to share our views and concerns and worries over the pandemic and what we thought wasn't being done for young people... just even talking to her felt like we were making a difference... it was really positive."*
> *(Female, 14, England)*

> *"We got that opportunity through the assembly... speaking to all the head teachers in my county... about things that we should do, like should we open the water fountains? Buses?... and I've been speaking about how... young people would find it, giving feedback from other young people who've gone back to school."*
> *(Female, 16, Wales)*

These experiences signal positive ways of engaging with young people. However, many flagged the risk of only engaging young people who are already active in youth participation organisations with seemingly less opportunity for the broader population of young people, especially those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

4. 3. 4. Young people and direct action

Faced with what was perceived to be limited options for meaningful engagement, many young people tried to voice their concerns and influence decision-makers through their own self-initiated action. They did this in a range of ways, including through writing open letters to the government. These letters highlighted concerns about, for example, ensuring free school meals are not stopped; exam grades not reflecting what young people deserved; the way the government was managing the pandemic; and young people's concerns not being listened to by authorities. However, in spite of young people taking the initiative, they often did not receive any replies. Other approaches young people have adopted have involved undertaking consultations with young people of different age groups to hear their concerns on education, and then writing a letter to the authorities on this basis. But again, young people often failed to get a response.

"We've done a podcast on Spotify and iCloud and stuff regularly throughout COVID-19, and that's been our way of getting our voices out, and sent it off to the Children's Commissioner, and things like that, but it's quite hard to directly impact, and our way of influencing stuff is - sometimes I feel what's more effective is local projects. Like we run the training for our local professionals in children services and stuff, and that often feels like it makes more of a difference than national campaigning."
(Male, 15, England)

This seems to reinforce young people's observations that they are not a priority, that their views and contributions are not valued, but also that the extent to which the workings of central and local government are not set up to accommodate effective public engagement.

"There's a lot of disconnect between our youth council and the council itself. In order for us to do anything, the process is so slow that you get nothing done. So we tried to have this litter-picking event during lockdown... it took forever to do it and at the end we had to cancel it because they were taking so long." *(Female, 16, England)*

As a result, many young people in the UK have resorted to protest to have their voice heard, whereas in countries like Italy, such a culture of participation is less developed.

"I think the only thing they've really done is protest, but I feel like that's the only thing they could do".
(Female, 18, England)

"No, young people are always very passive, and we have continued to be so during this pandemic... Young people did not organise any form of protests. Adults did because businesses were going bankrupted. We just stayed at home... But in terms of collective action by young people... I don't think there have been any".
(Male, 14, England)

In perceiving the shortfalls in politics, young people have become acutely aware of the extent of their own sense of agency and empowerment in the democratic process.

"I think lockdown has made also the younger generation realise how powerful we can be... it's quite cool to see the power that suddenly young people have [reference to TikTok]. I think it's given me quite a lot of faith in the fact that things are hopefully going to change in the future because I don't realise how... many around me are actually willing make to a difference and I think it is our younger generation are much more likely to do that." *(Female, 17, England)*

4.4. Young people's interest in politics and civic participation

Through observing and researching the impacts of the pandemic on their lives, young people have invariably become more interested in political decision-making that affects them. Whilst some were already politically active, others discovered a newfound interest and concern with the changes around them.

> *"It's given me more interest in politics seeing the way that the UK Government has run it."*
> *(Male, 14, Scotland)*

> *"I always hated politics, but during... lockdown I started following it very actively because I was worried about the situation. I started researching and reading the news online more, as well as on TV. It's a big change, going from someone who does not engage with the news... to someone who follows the news all the time. I'm quite happy about this change, not about politics, I still want to stay away from it."*
> *(Female, 18, Italy)*

To a large extent this is due to being able to use time more flexibly as well as spending more time online and on social media to explore further the issues young people are experiencing, when they might otherwise be in school.

> *"We have more time to learn about it (activism) and it's on social media... so we're learning more... about it which has been really beneficial... my Instagram is all educational and like activists."*
> *(Female, 16, Wales)*

> *"I've got involved with so many other different organisations that I never would have got involved with otherwise... I've just joined a climate activist group, which I never would have known about... I have the time to engage and find contacts... It's just brought around a lot of good opportunities."*
> *(Female, 14, Scotland)*

> *"I really feel like this pandemic has opened my eyes and made me more involved in the community... I find myself reading up more and doing more to help... I'm signing up for this science mentorship programme it piqued my interest in this kind of stuff."* *(Female, 14, Singapore)*

Young people have expressed concern about disruption to their education through the pandemic, but they have also become **more aware of the world around them, by learning from everyday life 'beyond the classroom'.**

> *"I was able to form more opinions... on things that the school doesn't educate you in... about the world around you... If the pandemic didn't happen, I wouldn't know about racism... because of Black Lives Matter. If the pandemic didn't happen, I wouldn't have taken the time to educate myself on what's going on and the oppression that people of colour had to go through."* *(Female, 14, Lebanon)*

> *"I think it's increased because the stuff that usually, that will be on during school that I wouldn't see, I am now seeing. So, for example, council meetings, they're all going online and being broadcast... So... the ability to see more politics live."* *(Female, 16, England)*

As importantly, policy decisions about exams and education had an immediate impact on young people's lives, further increasing their interest in politics:

> *"All the decisions they're making... right now you can literally see how it's having an impact on you... my friend and I are having increased chat about politics in general. I'm way more active on social media and... seeing everybody's views and stuff."* *(Female, 16, England)*

Beyond taking immediate action, some young people described how, through being more aware, they had started to ask broader questions about their country, leadership, and what was happening around them:

"It made me question the things in Singapore... I went to the Freedom House to check Singapore's freedom score and it barely just passed. So I was wondering, why are we not a free country? I learnt... things that we learn in history might not always be true. ... because I have more time... I have realised this." *(Female, 14, Singapore)*

"I had quite a lot of time to try to... catch up with the news and I guess it kind of strengthens my worldview and helps me to understand... what is happening around the world, maybe we should be concerned about it... it has kind of brought to my attention... around the world... how we are handling this sort of pandemic and also... our different political systems and... benefits and consequences." *(Male, 17, Singapore)*

Whilst concerns with how the pandemic has been managed have rallied the interests of many of the young people, a minority has been dissuaded from developing a more active interest in politics.

"Politics drives me insane, just seeing it! We only really see the bad stuff about it; we never see, oh, they've done this right... I think I've swayed more away from it". *(Female, 16, Northern Ireland)*

"No, it [interest in politics] hasn't, I feel like the topic is far from me, I am not really involved, and I don't know much about politics" *(Female, 16, England)*

In young people's responses, the extent to which they were **driven by a moral stance and commitment to justice and fairness** was striking, particularly where some groups were seen to be marginalised in government action:

"I'm more interested in politics and all the democracy and justice and stuff like that, because I feel like a lot of people have been left out from the government or the government hasn't really been paying them much attention." *(Female, 16, England)*

"I feel like this pandemic... it made me realise that... your view on politics... it's a reflection of your morals... So I had more time to... reflect on that and now I am much more aware of everything going on." *(Female, 14, Lebanon)*

Young people's civic participation

Whilst some young people felt distanced from the formal political realms, they were enthusiastic to get involved informally in their communities, and some were driven by a sense of hope for something better. Through a heightened sense of interest and realisation of their own ability to do good, young people shared examples of local community action that they had initiated or observed, and they valued supportive social action. This tended to involve volunteering or supporting online campaigns.

"I participated to relief efforts in Beirut after the explosion and helped the people who had their homes destroyed... I noticed that a lot of children in our community were showing signs of depression and needed a way to take their minds off the situation. So... we created puppets and wore them while going around with a truck... where we live, playing children songs... and they participated from the windows." (Female, 16, Lebanon)

"I... wanted to get involved in more things and feel I'm helping in some way. I didn't want to just be sitting around when I know that there are some things I can do. I was volunteering in the village, calling up elderly people whose families are quite far away to check in on them weekly, and just got involved in lots of other projects." (Female, 18, England)

"My class started a community project to help girls like us get through these times. We would post funny videos on our website, to make everybody happy and optimistic... [We]... raised funds for patients who may not have enough money to pay for their healthcare fees... There's this thing called Masks Sewn with Love and a lot of youths have been signing up for it... do some masks for the migrant workers." (Female, 14, Singapore)

While some young people became more involved in terms of civic participation, others were less active, because of preoccupation with studies or because young people were told they were too young to be active citizens, for insurance reasons. In other cases, volunteering initiatives young people were involved in had stopped altogether as a result of the pandemic.

"It looked like everything we were doing, I was too young, they'd have to get all these consents and insurance and things. It was like, I can sit and help behind the scenes, but there weren't too many opportunities to go out. Our local food bank kept asking for volunteers, but you had to be 18, so... I fell away because it got a bit boring for me, because there was [Sic.] people all planning to go out and doing these things to help, they're like, 'Yes, but you can't come.' I was like, oh, okay." (Female, 17, Scotland)

What these examples demonstrate, is that when young people are confronted with the reality of the world around them, how it is governed and how decisions affect their lives, they become very interested in politics. In many cases, this results in them getting engaged in civic action and local initiatives. Indeed, in acknowledging that they do not learn important things about life in school, they observe how having real life opportunities for participation better enables them to be active and involved.

5. Future proofing – hopes, concerns, and aspirations

This chapter examines the reasons for hope and concern voiced by young people after the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, and what they believe will be the long-lasting impacts of the crisis. The chapter also presents young people's recommendations to address their concerns and strengthen their voice in the current and future crisis, as well as during the recovery phase. Across topics, the chapter explores different issues that have emerged as important to young people, as well as the importance of incorporating young people's voices in decisions that matter to them. These areas and the related recommendations strongly align with the content presented in the rest of the report.

5.1. Looking forward – hopes and causes for optimism

While young people continued to worry about the ongoing impact of COVID-19, many were optimistic about the possibility of returning to the way things were before the pandemic. They had often been following the news closely and were hopeful that a vaccine would be developed soon, which they hoped would allow a return to greater normality.

"Looking forward I have a feeling that they have some cure or some vaccine for the virus, so things are getting fast, like six months or 12 months from the pandemic thing." **(Male, 17, Lebanon).**

"When I heard they were already at work to create a vaccine, I was confident this would happen very soon, and I still am. Having heard now that scientists have moved onto the next phase of trials, I'm more convinced that we will have a vaccine by next year." **(Male, 18, Italy).**

The main opportunity that young people across the different groups were most optimistic and excited about was the return to school, despite social distancing and other restrictions. Young people were particularly looking forward to seeing their friends again. Whilst young people stated that they were looking forward to the social aspect of returning to school, they also described that they were excited about returning to their studies and being able to progress academically. **Young people reflected on the importance of this stage in their lives and were eager to finish their education** in order to progress to university and then into employment.

"I wish there will be classes, schools will reopen again, because our education is something necessary for us, and you can't take this from us. You do your decisions, do a lockdown, and prevent from escalating cases, so we can reopen our classes and study. I wish I'd finished this year and just go through university and seek jobs and stuff like this to finish this level and to jump, if you want, to another level in life." **(Female, Lebanon).**

As well as looking forward to socialising in school, young people were looking forward to fuller social lives more generally. Many of the young people interviewed had enjoyed very full active social lives before the onset of the pandemic and were excited about being socially active and able to see friends and family again and regain a sense of community and belonging:

"I think people getting out and about again. Yes, it's bad, but there's still life, people need to keep moving. If we all stay in our houses and don't go anywhere, it's going to be like more of a ghost world than anything. You need those interactions, you need to see people, you need to have fun as well, you can't always be restricted, we can't do this, we can't do that. We need that socially; we need to be social." **(Female, 16, England)**

Despite university life posing a cause of concern which will be discussed in later sections, young people who were planning to take this route were excited about progressing into this next stage of their lives and gaining a sense of independence. There was a sense that going to university represents growth and personal development, and young people were eager to progress with their lives:

"I'm really looking forward to going to uni. [Sic], and making new friends, and starting a course that I'm hopefully going to be really in love with. I think things are going to be really different in terms of the way that the pandemic's changed, but at the same time my life is going to be completely different anyway". **(Female, 17, Scotland)**

While young people were disappointed that social distancing guidelines would mean their university experience would be different from that of previous cohorts, they were particularly excited by the prospect of meeting new people and starting to prepare for their professional careers. A young person in Northern Ireland said:

"Going to university at Belfast, moving out of the house and living there in the student accommodation, just meeting new people. Whatever way the guidelines are, I think we'll be able to meet new people and hopefully start my medical course. It's something that I've wanted to do for as far as I remember. It has kept me going just the thought of starting that, and how exciting that will be." *(Male, 18, Northern Ireland)*

Many young people expressed how they were looking forward to the return of their extracurricular activities, having led busy lives full of different activities before the introduction of lockdown. For many young people, their extracurricular activities represent an important part of their identity and sense of self-worth, and they were excited to pursue their personal passions once more. A young person in Scotland was looking forward to getting back involved in politics again, having been particularly disappointed by the cancellation of a significant conference:

"Well, through UKYP we have this thing called the Annual Conference – no, not the Annual Conference, the Big Debate which we have in parliament, the only people besides MPs that are allowed to sit in the parliament on the green chairs. We were originally meant to have it in November this year, but obviously, it got cancelled, so we're having our Annual Conference which is the one we have to decide what our main points for Young People are." *(Male, 16, Scotland)*

The young people in the group who were from relatively affluent backgrounds were frustrated that they were not allowed to travel over the summer and were looking forward to the possibility of being able to travel again. Younger people viewed travelling with friends as almost a rite of passage, and were excited by the possibility of future travel, with few fearful of the risks involved in travelling. A young woman in Italy was particularly looking forward to being able to take a trip with friends next year, which is an annual tradition they had to forgo this year.

While some young people were optimistic about a return to normal life, others felt that there would be no return to the previous way of life, and instead were hopeful about a "new normal" to replace the status quo. Many young people were concerned by the deep societal inequalities that the pandemic had exposed and were hopeful that the pandemic would lead to a fairer society. In addition, many young people had become more interested in politics and volunteering in their local communities during the lockdown, and were hopeful that the pandemic would lead to other young people being more politically active and socially engaged:

"I think I would like to see more young people witnessing these changes and doing something about it because as we know, we have a lot of avenues to make a difference through our Instagram or through social media, through our schools and the communities we are around. I honestly think that more people... have become more aware, of what's going on around us. It's something that... I definitely hope won't go out of trend or won't become something that... people just forget about gradually." *(Female, 15, Singapore)*

5.2. Ongoing causes of worry or concern about the pandemic

In this section, we document what young people have identified as ongoing causes of worry or concern, in light of their experiences during the first wave of the pandemic, the efficacy of the measures put in place and the consequent effects on the different aspects of their lives.

5.2.1. Social life

Young people of all ages across the different groups expressed concern about the impact of social distancing measures on their social life. Many young people worried that their friendships would suffer without being able to meet in person, and worried that if they did not go out as much that their friends would forget about them.

"Particularly thinking about friends, I think a huge problem is worrying about losing friends through this, worrying about the fragility of the impact of COVID-19." (Male, 14, Scotland)

"Recently, people seem to not be following the rules any more, and it's like, well if I don't go out, then I feel like, because I haven't seen my mates in ages it's like they've forgotten about me." (Female, 17, England)

Young people worried that the quality of their family relationships would also deteriorate if the need for social distancing continued. Many young people had been separated from older and more vulnerable family members for a long time and worried about relatives' wellbeing, and the relationship weakening without close contact.

5. 2. 2. Returning to school

Whilst for some young people, returning to school was something to look forward to, for others, returning to school following the long period of absence was a source of worry. However, while young people in Italy and Lebanon expressed concern that returning to school would increase their exposure to the virus, many young people in the UK and Singapore reported concerns about readjusting to an academic environment and making up for lost time.

One young person in Lebanon, who came from a Syrian refugee background, was particularly concerned about the risk of getting infected in school, and reported that:

"I think that I am not happy at all because I don't know what will happen to my family at all and I don't know how my education will go. I am really scared about my education and about being back at school and getting infected. I think that my family should emigrate to another country – like Canada – because Lebanon is very difficult, especially for Syrians." (Female, 14, Lebanon)

Younger members of the groups in the UK were also concerned about the increased risk of infection in school and how social distancing measures would be implemented in schools:

"I think just the increase in cases is definitely making me worry. It's starting to have outbreaks in schools. They've, basically, said that will happen, so that is what worries me." (Female, 15, Northern Ireland)

"I think probably the only maybe worry or thing that I have is that I don't actually know how the school are going to do social distancing or what their plan is for that, but I mean, obviously, I'll find out, but you know, at the moment." (Female, 14, England)

Young people in both the UK and Singapore described the return to school as a difficult adjustment and expressed concern that their academic performance will suffer after so much time away. Young people were very concerned that their ability to learn and produce good quality work had deteriorated over the lockdown period and that they have not progressed as far as they should have done at this stage. Young people described an acute sense of pressure to perform well and felt that the pandemic had thrown them off course.

"Going back and doing A levels from six months off – I've heard the jump from GCSE to A level full-time is hard enough, never mind just having that break in between. I'm a bit worried about the workload and how everything's going to - like if they're going to ease us into it or just throw us in!"
(Female, 16, Northern Ireland)

"Starting sixth form feels like... I don't think I'm old enough. It's like I've not done anything, whereas I felt like I was going to get older in that time, do you know what I mean? So now I'm - because I remember being Year 11 looking at sixth formers being like, 'Oh my God, they're adults,' and now I'm going into sixth form in three weeks and I'm like, 'I'm the same'." (Female, 16, England)

5. 2. 3.   Exam grades and educational progression

Young people in the UK were particularly concerned about exam results and how their grades will impact their university options and future careers. This was particularly the case for 16-year olds and 18-year olds who were waiting for their exam results:

"The 2021 people taking their exams, now, we're in a state of stress of, are they going to get changed? Is this going to impact jobs? Is the mark scheme going to change? Should we revise the same things? I think that's just so stressful." **(Female, 14, Scotland)**

For some people, this sense of anxiety and frustration about exam results bordered on panic, and there was a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness as young people had so little control over their exam grades. Many young people felt that their exam results would dictate the rest of their lives, and felt that the lack of agency afforded to them in determining these results was very unjust:

"We're all struggling to focus on what's happening when we're so anxious about grades that we've been told will affect us for the rest of our lives. That's been so drilled in, you have to do well, us getting a good job, and now we're told you can't even try, you're just getting an average, which is really upsetting." **(Female, 16, Northern Ireland)**

This sense of anxiety about exams and their impact on the future was not unique to young people in the UK, and young people in Lebanon and Italy described the impact on their mental health as a result of the constant worry about exam results:

"If it continues like this and I won't be able to take my baccalauréat[7], then I won't be able to have a scholarship and go to university. This makes me feel depressed." **(Female, 16, Lebanon)**

"The French exam, we were supposed to do it during the lockdown, but obviously it wasn't possible, and I'm afraid we still won't be able to do it in the next year or so. Exams make me a bit anxious because I'm scared that if I fail one, the rest won't go well either." **(Female, 16, Italy)**

Young people waiting for exam results and those preparing to go to university were also very worried about how the pandemic would affect their university experience, and whether they would achieve the grades they needed to go to university. Young people nearing university age were frustrated that they would not receive the same university experience as previous cohorts, in terms of both the academic and social opportunities that university life normally entails:

"Even if you look past the fact that I won't get a traditional university experience, even if I'm able to go to freshers[8], I'm not going to get a university experience. If you just look at the academics, I won't be able to engage with professors and engage with academics on the same level that I would have been able to if we weren't in this situation." **(Female, 18, England)**

"Will we study online? Will we go to the campus when we are going to study? This is what's going into my mind, because this is what it's all about, I think at my age." **(Male, 17, Lebanon)**

Uncertainty about what the university experience will look like and the chance of getting into university was also a source of great concern and worry for younger people when considering their future academic and career plans. Some described how they were disheartened by the prospect of an entirely virtual experience that they were considering delaying their place.

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7   End of high school examination.

8   Social activities at the start of University

5. 2. 4. The economy and future employment prospects

In addition to worrying about the impact of the pandemic on higher education, many older young people were concerned about the impact of interrupted schooling and cancelled exams on their future job prospects and were concerned that employers will not take their grades seriously because they did not take the exams:

"The government are saying, 'Oh, the results will be treated the same by employers', but then we still didn't sit them, and people know that 2020 was the COVID year, whatever." **(Female, 17, England)**

Young people were highly aware of the long-term economic impact of the pandemic, and there was a sense of panic and anxiety about their own financial security. Young people across the panels were beginning to consider their career options, with some young people deciding to focus on more secure jobs in case of a second lockdown and continued redundancies:

"There's also talks about economies and recession and stuff like that. I feel like that's going to have a huge impact on jobs and future careers and aspirations. For example, I've heard one of my friends has completely decided to change their career route because of the pandemic." **(Female, 16, England)**

"Like how am I going to afford certain things in the future? When I'm in my 20s and I'm not financially stable, how is my life going to be impacted by the higher cost and tax going on? Will I have a lower standard of life because of that is something that I've heard a lot of people talk about and that's something that I've thought about as well." **(Female, 16, Wales)**

In addition to worrying about their own job prospects and future financial security, young people also expressed concern about the state of the economy more generally, and the impact on their families and communities. This was particularly the case for young people from Singapore. For example, one young person was worried about their father's financial situation as well as the long-term impact of the pandemic on the global economy:

"Yes, I'm quite concerned about because my dad, the pay of his new job isn't really good, so I'm concerned about whether the economy will recover, and he will be able to find a better job. Also, for other people, I think our family is able to cope as we have savings, but what about those people who lost their jobs, and they have nothing left?" **(Female, 14, Singapore)**

"Our government has repeatedly said, 'Our economy might not be able to get back the original state again,' because a lot of people actually are predicting the growth of our GDP, but actually our GDP has dropped." **(Female, 16, Singapore)**

Concern about the economy was also echoed by young people in the UK. Young people were worried by the Government's emphasis on rebuilding the economy in the short-term, with little consideration of the financial prospects of young people in the long term. Some young people were particularly concerned about the sustainability of the current economic system, and worried that the pressure to rebuild the economy will result in further environmental degradation.

"They [the government] are more focussed on the economy but I'm also worried about the amount we're spending right now and how my generation's probably going to suffer with that, we're going to have higher taxes probably, higher VAT, which is going to be quite scary for the future." **(Female, 16, Wales)**

"I'm very worried that we're going to go backwards environmentally and in terms of climate change, following this, and that they're not going to take our futures into account when they're rebuilding an economy." **(Female, 18, England)**

5. 2. 5. Coping with the pandemic for a sustained period

Despite media and the majority of the scientific evidence suggesting that young people are less likely to be infected by the virus, and far less likely to die from it, young people across the groups were concerned about catching the virus, and the possibility of the virus mutating to become more dangerous to the young and healthy. One young person in the UK, who lives in a remote rural area was worried about the prospect of tourists bringing the virus to the island as the local population did not have immunity, while others expressed fears about the virus mutating.

Alongside the long-term impact of the virus on education, young people across all the different countries were particularly worried about a resurgence of the virus and the possibility of a second wave, and second lockdown. Young people in the UK were particularly concerned about this:

> *"I've a feeling, and I'm pretty sure there's going to be another lockdown closer to Christmas months, because they're usually the high flu seasons. I think everyone – no one's had their – no one's been interacting, so everyone's a bit – immune system isn't used to everything, so I think there'll be another one, so just trying to get over that."* **(Female, 16, Northern Ireland)**

> *"Things that are scaring me are like if there's going to be another lockdown, how's it going to be? What's it going to be like again? How's the school going to act? How's things going to work online again?"* **(Female, 16, Scotland)**

While many young people across the different countries felt that a second wave of the virus was almost inevitable, some of the young people from Italy had little faith in the general public's patience, and were worried that if there was to be a second lockdown, the public would not be as compliant as the first time:

> *"People have been allowed their freedom back fully, and they may not be willing to give it up again if there is a second lockdown."* **(Male, 18, Italy)**

> *"We'll keep seeing the negative impact for Italy, especially when airports will reopen fully, and tourists will fly over. That's why they talk about September [2020] as the time for a second wave, that's when things will get disastrous again."* **(Male, 14, Italy)**

5.3. Young people's recommendations for recovery

In this section, we present the recommendations that young people provided as a way to ensure that during this and future crises, as well as in the recovery phase, young people's needs are understood and met. Recommendations have been provided across a number of areas of young people's lives. In line with the rest of the report, these are youth participation in the decision-making process, fair access to quality education, physical and mental health, management of the crisis at the government level, and social issues of international relevance.

Although these areas were mentioned by all young people as the most relevant to their experiences of the crisis, we also noted some differences between countries. The small sample does not allow us to draw any conclusions in terms of the wider population of young people, but nonetheless these political and cultural contexts provide one of a number of contextual factors shaping young people's experiences. In Lebanon, for example, young people focused more on the need to secure access to essential services, such as IT infrastructure and quality education.

Young people from Italy, Singapore, and the UK, in turn, delved deeper into the different services that they are used to receiving, how they might be adapted and improved in response to the additional needs triggered by the pandemic, and the importance of their engagement in planning. On this matter, young people from the UK groups were on balance more 'participation experienced' and generally had higher expectations for what participation should look like. Finally, the need for more mental health support was expressed strongly in the UK. This appeared to partly reflect different cultural predispositions to discussing the subject.

5.3.1.   Political representation

Across countries, young people believed that in order to meet young people's needs, in the current and future pandemics, as well as in the path to recovery, **public authorities should first listen to young people, and their opinions and needs should inform decision-making:**

> *"I think mainly if they want to protect young people's rights, I think actually whoever's in charge, they should actually go and talk to young people."* **(Female, 17, England)**

> *"I would just like to see young people being listened to, like actually being listened to and not just being there for show."* **(Female, 17, Scotland)**

This would ensure that young people's needs, and the specific impact that the pandemic has had on them, are **fully understood, instead of assumed or interpreted by adults.** Although some young people believed they are too young and inexperienced to deal with complex decision making, others maintained they are aware of what their needs are and should be asked about those.

> *"I think the main thing is, first of all, making sure to communicate with them. Making sure you have a way to get their opinions, find out what they're worried about, get their suggestions, so that they're not just saying, 'We think young people are worried about X and Y, we'll fix this', when we're really a bit worried about something else more so."* **(Female, 18, Northern Ireland)**

Young people particularly considered that **consulting a diverse group is important to ensure that a range of voices are heard,** and the differential impact that the pandemic has had on different groups of young people – depending on their individual conditions and background, and on whether they have protected characteristics – is fully understood. Involving young people bringing a diverse set of needs can then help the government to take appropriate action. This is particularly important in areas such as education – which has impacted students more than anybody else.

> *"Try and talk to as many young people of different ages and different backgrounds as you can, so then you get more of a broader understanding of the different things that people go through. It's more representative. By doing that, that's the best option I think in terms of recovery."* **(Female, 17, England)**

5.3.2.   Education

Education, and the management of the school system during the pandemic, is the area that has probably been the most impactful for young people. As such, it has generated a number of recommendations, as follows.

Improving communication between government, schools, teachers and young people

Improving communication about how the response has been managed in the education sector was constantly highlighted by young people and was identified as crucial to better respond to young people's needs, in current and future pandemics. Young people referred to the **need for clear and regular communication** between government, schools, and students; and the provision of concise guidelines and strategy on how to manage the situation, including online teaching, as well as hearing from young people about their concerns returning to school. They felt that guidelines should be developed collaboratively, to ensure they are feasible and effective.

> *"The primary thing that I would say would be just clear instructions and a clear mandate on what schools are going to be, and just us to be able to actually know what the next phase of our life is going to look like. I think that would go miles."* **(Female, 18, England)**

> *"We need the government to work with schools, and teachers are the ones who know about running a school, and they know what can be done."* **(Female, 14, England)**

"Definitely have better communications between schools and the children, because I feel they're pretty much talking to the news, but then not all the kids watch the news. [...] It definitely feels like we've been left in the dark." (Female, 16, England)

This also related to ongoing communication, with young people desiring more clarity about the regularity and purpose of contact and support that they could expect from teachers.

"Increase some form of interactions for teachers to check in on students to ensure that they are doing well, and they are coping well with whatever situations that they might be facing at home or at school." (Male, 17, Singapore)

"I think we probably need some more resources provided by the school and set things that you have to do within a deadline, because I think it's been very fluid, like do this if you want, and a lot of people aren't opening their emails. I think a lot more communication, open and honest communication is needed." (Female, 16, Wales)

Young people often felt that schools should provide teachers with more precise guidelines, for example, concerning home based learning and ensure these are communicated to young people, rather than relying on the discretion of individual teachers.

Ensuring a good quality education for all

Young people believed that, in relation to education, the best way to address young people's needs during and after the pandemic is to ensure that good quality education is delivered fairly. Given the difficulties that students have experienced during the last academic year, decision-makers should provide students, especially the most vulnerable, with the support they need to catch up and be prepared for the next school year. Young people suggested more **individual support, more regular engagement, and additional classes** as ways to support students who may feel that they are falling behind. Young people believed that younger students in particular face extra difficulties as they are less able to study autonomously and plan their schedules, and may find it difficult to seek help from friends, given that not all have access to digital technologies.

A potential solution that was proposed to those difficulties was to support the development of peer-to-peer tutoring (either face-to-face or online) where older students help younger students in their schools and creating extra courses after school to support students who have feel that their progress is being hindered.

"I think they need some support and help coming into the new academic year in September, because a lot of people might've fallen behind, and they need help... The government needs to be proactive in supporting these people, instead of just waiting until... loads of people have fallen behind a lot. I think it'd be better to address the problem now, or at least start thinking of a solution early on." (Male, 15, England)

"When returning to school or university perhaps the counselling department should maybe have a greater role, and more time dedicated to that, and perhaps people could get individual meetings that they're not having to request, but they're checking on everyone, talking about their situation." (Male, 18, Northern Ireland)

Going forward, to prevent against this and future pandemics and to capitalise on the positives of COVID-19, it was widely believed that **home-schooling should be further developed.** Young people expressed quite strongly that teachers should be better prepared to deliver high-quality, more structured online classes, which resemble real lessons and provide students with the knowledge, preparation, and support that they need. Once better trained on how to capitalise on new technologies, teachers should adapt their teaching methodologies to online tools. For example, they could prepare online presentations supported by slides, or ask students to create their own slide decks and present on a topic to the whole class, as a way to keep students actively engaged.

"There could be regulations or policies, or guidelines based on how schools should be delivering online teaching and online learning, and it isn't just up to individual teachers to do as they're pleasing. It needs to ensure there's a number of contact hours, a minimum number, that there is feedback being given on adequate standards, that there are opportunities to ask questions, that there is different resources being utilised and making it an equal playing field. If students don't have access to the technology or the internet, that provisions or screens are put in place to solve that as well." **(Male, 18, Northern Ireland)**

"Why are we spending money to buy these tools, if professors don't let us use them because they themselves have no idea how to integrate them in their teaching? Teachers should do trainings, innovate themselves; some of them do it on their own, but others don't. If teachers had been trained and prepared ahead, home-based learning and online classes would have worked much better; we could have kept the normal pace in every subject." **(Female, 16, Italy)**

Young people thought that better planning is needed, to make home-schooling as accessible as possible, in particular assessing and responding to the different needs of students who find themselves in vulnerable conditions. Young people suggested solutions that included delivering class content through a mixture of online and in-person teaching; incorporating more practical subjects or teaching components even in online classes, and to deliver face-to-face classes only to smaller groups that have specific needs:

"If you're going to have blended [learning], if you're going to have online, we need to make sure that people who have disabilities, whether it's hearing loss, whether it's their eyesight or anything, how they actually are being taught. If you have someone who's blind, giving them notes isn't going to do anything. How are you actually teaching them?" **(Female, 18, Northern Ireland)**

"I think the government needs to make sure that, ... regardless of whether there's a second wave or not, they collect the information of students who might need extra resources during these times. Just in case, for an emergency, God forbid if something like this were to happen again, they know exactly which students to cater, to make sure that these students have not just the resources for themselves, but for their family and the environment around them, so that they can study and be okay if something happened." **(Female, 15, Singapore)**

Sustaining young people's motivation and resilience

Some young people felt overwhelmed by the load of homework they received during the lockdown, and felt like schools and teachers should have been more understanding and given them less homework to do and more time to rest and reflect about what was happening around them:

"A lot of people I know... go to school to get away from a family drama that they may be having. For them, it must have been really, really hard, to have to be at home with people that exacerbate that sense of pain in them. I think that in order to make that a bit better, they could probably have lowered the workload... It didn't matter if they extended school, so long as in between, we had breaks to just not, to be in school, but be away from everything else." **(Female, 15, Singapore)**

Other young people would have enjoyed more support and resources from schools, to tackle the lack of motivation to study, difficulty to concentrate, and the fact that many of them were feeling guilty or sad of the school time that they were missing. A few solutions were suggested, including a YouTube channel to give motivation support to students, informal support groups whose members send each other motivational videos, a list of hotlines young people can contact if needed, as well as giving young people access to sites and resources that provide ideas on things to do at home and more structured initiatives that, through photographs and videos, encourage young people's imagination even when confined at home.

5.3.3. Access to technology

Access to technology is strictly related to areas that have proved important for young people, such as education, work, and socialisation. Young people recommended that **governments consider all the benefits a wider access to technology might bring,** as well as the obstacles that young people and their families may face in accessing technology. This is crucial first of all to make home schooling more accessible:

"The decisions taken to give people, to hand out iPads and tablets, should really be taken into account. I think they should be doing this on a regular basis, and they should make sure that having a tablet or a device, an electronic device with you in school, is no longer a status symbol, but it's more something that everyone has in the digital age." (Female, 15, Singapore)

"They should respect our needs like internet connection for every family. We need the internet and laptops. They should care more about our schools and our online teaching [and] make more activities online for young people because we can't meet." (Female, 14, Lebanon)

An Italian young person believed that the Government should provide more support to young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. She thought it would be useful to **create a public, national Wi-Fi network,** with local hotspots covering small areas, so that families who cannot afford paying for faster (or any) internet have an option.

"So many young people had issues with home schooling due to technical problems, including lack of internet connection, and there wasn't much they could do about it. These families should receive some more economic support; if you only have one computer at home, and your mum needs it to work from home, obviously her job takes precedence." (Female, 16, Italy)

5.3.4. Physical and mental health

Young people made several recommendations with regard to physical and mental health. Across countries, but especially in the UK and also in Singapore, there was a shared belief that **decision-makers should put a greater focus on young people's mental health,** facilitating access to counselling services for example through access via texting, increasing funding to youth and mental health services and providing young people (and their families) with more opportunities to talk about the difficulties they are experiencing. As noted by one Singaporean young person, these opportunities should be external to young people's families and friends, to respect young people's privacy and give them the opportunity to speak freely about any issues they might be experiencing:

"A lot of us maybe are feeling different things that we don't know how to explain to our parents or our friends. I think there should be more mental health resources that are made free and available. Things that some can access without having to tell their parents because it tends to be a stigma that's attached to, if you are seeking therapy then you have to tell everyone around you." (Male, 15, Singapore)

A school in the UK sent students daily reflection PowerPoints providing advice on how to preserve one's own mental health, but for one young person this was not the most effective way to deliver support. Young people suggested that school tutors and counsellors could rather have online chats with young people, to offer support and compensate for the lack of contact with friends and peers that made online schooling so difficult to handle for many. However, views were mixed on the sufficiency of this approach (see also Chapter 2). In either scenario, young people from across countries considered that mental health support needed to be scaled-up considerably in the aftermath of the pandemic, to address the effects of the pandemic on those who had struggled.

"Maybe there'll be an increase in obesity or PTSD or anxiety from the whole thing and I really think that the government should be focussing on young people's mental health post-lockdown, because a lot of young people are worried about going back to school. A lot of people have lost loved ones and stuff like that, so I think the government should be focussing on a plan." (Female, 17, Scotland)

Young people also thought that **physical health needs more attention.** Suggestions included governments and other service providers setting-up social media initiatives helping young people exercise from home; and subsidising sports centres and gyms (when they are not locked down), to incentivise their attendance and ensure they do some physical activity.

5. 3. 5. Economic support

On the economic side of the crisis, many young people believed **financial support should be given to young people,** to compensate for the increased difficulty in finding a job and to ensure young people who live on their own, like university students, are able to pay rent. This also included having a clear plan or strategy to help students and young graduates to apply for jobs and get work experience, even at a time when job opportunities have been dramatically reduced. To recover from the current crisis, and prepare for future ones, young people thought that government should prioritise funding schools, especially those in areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

Finally, given the likelihood of future pandemics, young people wanted to see **more funding go into vaccine development and scientific research** on how to predict and better fight similar events.

5. 3. 6. Social issues of international relevance

Young people were clear that one of the main issues for them is **climate change,** which has not stopped during the pandemic and should not be overlooked, given its likely impact on young people's future. The COVID-19 pandemic could, and should, be taken as an opportunity to take bold action on this matter:

> *"Now is an amazing time that we've stopped normal society and we can restart it a lot better and with the climate in mind, so that young people growing up can live safely and not all die of climate change." (Female, 14, England)*

Young people recommended that **governments adopt and enforce a rights-based approach** inspired by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a way to ensure that children's and young people's rights are safeguarded in the current pandemic, during the recovery and should similar events occur in the future.

> *"I think that the UNCRC should be put into law in every single country all over the world, but I know that that takes time." (Female, 17, Scotland)*

> *"if you take that rights-based approach, and then you look at the fact that a third of children in the UK live in poverty... then child poverty would then be the abuse of a human right if was enshrined in law... and then from there you can properly look at how you'd end it... and you end reliance on the food banks among children. That's how I'd do it." (Male, 16, Scotland)*

5.4. Young people's recommendations for future participation in decision making

Section 5.3.1 presented the widespread opinion, among young people in the study, that in order to better address young people's needs, they first need to be listened to. This section documents a number of practical recommendations that young people provided on how this can be done, and how their voices can be strengthened in the decision-making process. Several options and concrete actions were suggested, considering advantages and disadvantages of these and restating the need to go beyond listening, and actually turn young people's voices into action. These recommendations ranged from consultative forms of participation, to those that might be considered more collaborative, to examples that were more 'youth-led' in their approach (Lansdown, 2001).

Past individual experiences, cultures of political representation and exposure to opportunities for participation may all account for differences between countries. Italian young people, for example, typically reported having been offered very few opportunities to express their views and contribute to the political debate. As such, they insisted more on questionnaires as ways of gathering young people's views, and shared Singaporean young people's opinion that not all of them want to be engaged in the decision-making process. In contrast, young people from the UK included those who had already been involved in youth parliaments, youth advisory boards, and local council initiatives, as well as opportunities offered by youth organisations. Mistrust of government was common across Lebanon and the UK, with young people from the former suggesting options for participation that involve the private sector rather than the Government, as a more reliable means of being heard.

5. 4. 1. Widening young people's representation in decision-making

Across countries, the first and most common recommendation on how to strengthen the voice of young people was to **actively involve a broad group of them in government decision-making:**

> *"You would have to be broad, but it would be worth it, because we are the children of tomorrow. If you don't include us now, how are we supposed to handle this any better if it happens again, if we were not included the first time?"* **(Female, 15, Scotland)**

Young people suggested several options for that and to increase interaction between policymakers and young people, as follows:

Increased exposure to political decision making

Young people believed that, in order to be more involved in politics, they should be given more and better **opportunities to learn** about how politics and the decision-making process work.

> *"It goes in a cycle [...] They want to get us involved, but they say we're too young to vote, but that's because we're not taught about them, but if we're taught more, then we'll be able to form an opinion and then maybe we'll be able to vote younger and be involved more."* **(Female, 14, England)**

Young people recognised that **school has an important role to play in providing political education,** teaching students about how politics works, discussing government decisions and enabling young people to better understand what is going on around them and make informed decisions. As a positive example, a Singaporean young person mentioned a programme his school used to deliver:

> *"They went to the parliament and they tried writing bills and rules, and bills and laws and stuff. I felt that was quite interesting, but if that could be extended to a bigger group of people and not just a specific group in a specific school... maybe you could involve the whole school... Just making students know that it's okay for them to be aware about stuff."* **(Female, 16, Singapore)**

Local councils were also recognised to have an important role to play in giving young people more exposure to politics, engaging them in discussions and initiatives.

Improving political participation and representation

Young people were clear that, as a right enshrined in the UNCRC, all decisions that affect young people should be made with young people themselves. They were also aware that this has not been done in the case of the current pandemic, and that it was important to learn from these shortcomings. Young people suggested several avenues to ensure that young people are involved in all decisions that matter to them, as follows.

Youth surveys and online consultations: some young people wanted to see more effective and visible national surveys and consultative exercises on topics that matter to them, and to see more evidence-based policy:

"They could give, maybe if they know that there's a certain issue that's really impacting us, they could give us certain solutions that they had in mind, let us vote for them, or maybe we could suggest some more that we think that might benefit us more." **(Female, 16, England)**

"Another way could be to conduct a survey across households with young people, to understand what their situation is. This could be another way to make young people feel included and inform the government about their sentiments." **(Male, 14, Italy)**

Some young people believed that schools could assist in administering these questionnaires, as young people would be more likely to fill in the survey at school than at home, and a greater number of them could be thus reached. Schools' online platforms could be particularly helpful to administer the survey.

Having younger people in the parliament: young people felt that, in order to bridge the intergenerational gap that currently characterises the decision-making process, and leaves young people's needs unheard and unaddressed, they should be given a formal role within the government. Young people who are assigned responsibilities across levels of government should come from diverse backgrounds and be adequately trained on how government processes work and how to represent young people.

"I'm not saying they should put a ten-year-old in parliament, but just seeing a 30-year-old, or a 20-year-old as like a politician, they would be a lot better at helping young people when it comes to making decisions, so just putting younger people into more positions of power." **(Male, 15, England)**

Some young people believed the Youth Parliaments represent a good opportunity for young people to get this kind of training and exposure, and channel young people's opinions to political parties and the government. However, other young people were more critical, accusing youth parliaments of lacking a broad representative base and of being too confirmed to time-specific consultations that were dictated by adults.

Establishing youth advisory boards: another option suggested by participants was to establish a board of young people that would comment on and influence decisions taken by the government. The board should be diverse, representing all the young people that might be affected by a certain decision and their diverse set of needs:

"You would have to get young people that weren't born here, they moved here, so they primarily speak another language, or they're just from somewhere else in the world and it was just culture shock to them... You would have to cover a lot of your bases: disabled young people, LGBT young people [...] people from rich areas and poor areas [...] It would be hard, but you can't just rule out an entire group of people because it's easier, which I think is what they kind of did." **(Female, 15, Scotland)**

Youth members of the board should in turn consult other young people on each policy decision that is under discussion, to ensure that a multitude of youth voices are heard and incorporated into the decision-making process. Youth advisors should also **feedback to other young people about the outcome of this process,** to gain and retain their trust and ensure continuous engagement:

"So if they're making a decision that will eventually effect young people, have government officials contact those young people who will then go and consult people in their borough, and then come back with feedback on what young people are thinking." **(Female, 16, England)**

Young people from the UK identified positive examples of youth participation that, at the national level, give young people the opportunity to give their opinion about policy decisions. This includes the meetings organised by the Children's Commissioner, the NICCY youth panel or a Young Scot Co-design Project through which a group of Scottish young people were given the chance to imagine how a post-COVID-19 Scotland would look like, and on this basis, suggest policy options that were incorporated into a letter to the Scottish Government five years in the future.

Engaging more actively with youth organisations: young people presented a further option for government and other public authorities to consult with already established youth organisations, on matters that concern young people. For example, there could be more dialogue and cooperation between authorities and university groups, school representatives, youth organisations (such as the Police Cadets), as well as companies and organisations implementing projects that actively involve young people, as long as a representative pool of under 30-year-olds is actively engaged in the discussions.

> *"There could be an organisation set up, it doesn't have to be linked to the government, that brings young people's views together, like experts look over them and publish them, or give them to the government, like representing the views of young people and as an organisation that has influence and is well-respected, I think that could have a role."* **(Male, 18, Northern Ireland)**

Holding open discussions: young people appreciated and recommended open discussions and press conferences involving the government and young people:

> *"The Minister of Education did something good, he had a public Zoom meeting with young people and teenagers to discuss online learning. They should do more things like this."* **(Female, 16, Lebanon)**

Similar discussions could be held online, through video calls or chat rooms where young people are asked direct questions and given time to share their opinion. Young people recognised that limited access to technology and broadband might prevent some people from participating, but given the current conditions and social distancing measures, holding such discussions online seems to be the best option.

Capitalising on social media: a wider and more strategic use of social media were recommended by several young people as an underused way to improve communication between the government and young people:

> *"Social media could be a means to express young people's views, because that's the space we took over for ourselves, to have a voice at all. But so far, social media haven't spread young people's voice to the rest of society."* **(Male, 15, Italy)**

Social media, including Instagram, the most widely used among young people in the study, Twitter, TikTok and Facebook to a lesser extent, provide a platform to put in practice many of the **options for youth participation** mentioned above. They can be used to administer surveys and get young people's opinion, via Instagram stories, Twitter, or comments in response to posts; to promote initiatives for youth participation; and to increase awareness on what the government is doing, or on what young people think. A post or tweet that goes viral can even lead the government to change its mind on a certain decision. Social media, including school's Instagram pages or government officials' Twitter accounts, can also be used to **present key messages in a more creative and approachable way** and attract the attention of those young people who are less engaged:

> *"I suggest using surveys on Instagram stories, which young people still read through, even if there's a lot of content to read."* **(Female, 16, Italy)**

The above-mentioned youth advisory boards could use social media to feedback to other young people on any discussion points and decisions made:

> *"Definitely have a committee of young people and make sure that they use social media to the best of their ability to communicate policies clearly."* **(Female, 17, Italy)**

Above all, to convince young people that their involvement is meaningful and will result in change, **young people wanted to see the results, where their views were sought.** Across countries, young people agreed on the importance of receiving feedback on whether and how their views have been incorporated into decision-making, and what outcomes this has generated:

"As long as young people are included in decisions that affect them from the start, the middle, and the end, and then see what results - and then come back and feed back and see if it's made a difference, how much it's affected them. Because I know the amount of times I've been on a project or something, I've been asked to give opinions for one focus group, and then we've never heard anything else about the policy, anything that happened, it's just ridiculous. Making sure the feedback - and knowing that your voice has influenced something, made a change, and coming back with the feedback will make more young people more likely to feed back into the next discussion as well." **(Female, 17, Scotland)**

Direct social action and social enterprise

In the absence of meaningful opportunities for participation in established adult-led structures and organisations, some young people saw **direct social action** as the way forward – whether through lobbying, mobilising online via youth-led networks, or through social enterprise. For example, one Lebanese young person observed that NGOs and private organisations had done more than government to respond to young people's needs and concerns and in taking action to address pressing social issues that emerged during the pandemic. On this basis, they advocated that young people mobilise to form their own organisations to fill the participation gap.

"When it comes to protests, online protests, actual protests, private organisations which help the people in need. I know some private medical experts, in private hospitals have opened their doors for Coronavirus patients because the governmental hospital is suffering it's under pressure and there's not enough places. I feel like instead of relying on the government, young people have to take matters into their own hands, and to act like the government doesn't exist... well, they have to obey the lockdown rules." **(Female, 14, Lebanon)**

Strengthening young people's influence over education policy and provision

Education is an area where young people felt the impacts of the pandemic strongly. Young people felt the need to make their voices heard on how to manage the crisis in the education system. Again, it was felt that **student advisory boards** could provide opportunities to engage virtually, with a selection of young people from different schools and age groups (especially those facing exams) to gather a range of views from diverse young people, and that more could be done to engage with **school councils** that already exist in most UK schools. In Italy, it as relieved that class representatives could play that role, reporting students' concerns to the school.

Young people identified a need for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between student representative bodies and the wider school community, to establish credibility. In the absence of being taken seriously, however, some young people advocated more direct youth-led action:

"There ought to be very strong communication... to the leaders of the school for whatever action that they think might be useful... [And] maybe these students actually taking further action and trying to mitigate the issues on their own, even without the help of the school." **(Male, 17, Singapore)**

A further recommendation was that that schools more systematically gather young people's views, concerns, and ideas through consultations and surveys, and **provide more opportunities for the wider student community to discuss** their experiences, opinions, difficulties, and concerns about the COVID-19 situation. In particular, young people wanted an opportunity to evaluate the home-schooling experience, to put across their views about how well their school had adapted the challenges they experienced, and their proposed solutions.

"Every school can write a paper included every class opinions, or every class problems that they faced doing online learning, or during... other problems that they may face, and this written paper, they should collect it from all the schools in Lebanon and go to the government." **(Male, 17, Lebanon)**

Specifically, some young people felt that **greater self-reflection was needed by teachers and school leaders** on the development needs that were highlighted by the pandemic. It seemed unfair that young people had to adapt to online learning, but that gaps in digital skills and competences among staff may go unaddressed. Young people sought specific assurances from their school that action would be taken in this regard.

> *"It could be beneficial for teachers, we could suggest some ideas for their professional development, especially because teachers themselves wanted students' help to understand how to use technology. It can be a trade: I teach you how to use a device, and you teach me your own knowledge. But that has to go through some process to provide suggestions and a voice for young people, and I don't think that's going to happen based purely on teachers' initiative."* **(Male, 14, Italy)**

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This report has presented a snapshot of life during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the perspectives of young people from seven countries, who are taking part in the Growing-Up Under COVID-19 action research project. In the previous chapters, we examined the personal, familial, social, and political dimensions of the crisis, and their interconnectedness, before examining young people's main hopes and fears looking ahead. In this final chapter, we draw together and conclude on the evidence, and we present some

6.1. Reflecting on the key messages

Throughout this report it has been apparent that the pandemic had **impacted on the lives of young people in ways that are both profound and somewhat contradictory.** At one level, there were widespread concerns about a lost period of adolescence, missed education, and potential scarring effects for future education and work. Alongside this, however, young people spoke of having made unexpected positive changes to their lives. Indeed, many used the time afforded to them by the pandemic as an opportunity to invest in their self-care, wellbeing, and their relationships. The pandemic also brought a renewed interest in politics, and in issues of global significance, to which some had responded through action within their everyday lives. This contributed towards mixed emotions regarding the past six months - young people often felt a sense of anger and frustration at the social injustices that played out as a direct and indirect consequence of COVID-19, and in the shortcomings in how the crisis was handled globally and within their country, while having emerged as more resilient and self-aware.

The research has also underlined the polarising effects of the COVID-19 crisis. **What, for some, was a period of self-reflection and re-connecting, was for others isolating and traumatic.** For young people with pre-existing mental health problems or trauma, the lockdown was immensely challenging and exacerbated the issues that they faced. Moreover, a shift online for professional and peer support had brought its own challenges where these support systems were ill-adapted to the pressures of the COVID-19 crisis. Similarly, young people had faced additional challenges where they found themselves locked down with family members who misunderstood them, or where there was more serious family conflict. We saw how several LGBTQ+ young people had found themselves in a difficult situation where their decision-making about how and when to come out to friends and family was taken partly out of their control. Young people also expressed concerns about more vulnerable friends or wider members of their peer group with whom contact became more difficult due to the privacy issues that were presented by lockdown in communicating about risks that they might encounter within their family.

More positively, **lockdown showcased the untapped potential of social media and online platforms** – in maintaining contact with peers and family, triangulating news and information about the pandemic and global events and supporting wellbeing. Some young people had set-up WhatsApp study groups with their peers, and others had participated in youth-led online forums or webinars to discuss educational priorities post-COVID. The interviews suggested that teachers were not always keeping pace with these developments, however, and that the rapid shift of education online had exposed an underinvestment in digital tools and competencies within school systems in the UK and Italy. As before, young people's experiences were more positive overall within the Singaporean context, although even here young people were often frustrated that more had not been done to integrate technologies within school education. It was hoped that the pandemic would highlight this issue.

6. 1. 1. Access, accountability and entitlements

The research particularly highlights **problems that young people have encountered with access to services during the pandemic,** although the circumstances differed considerably between the countries within the study and their infrastructure prior to the crisis. While young people understood the need to deprioritise routine medical treatments during a public health emergency, the pace and scale of lockdown and social distancing measures left many cut-off from professional support, and highlighted strains within the system. This was especially so for clinical mental health services in the UK, which faced increased demand at a time when it was necessary to shift appointments and treatments online. This was managed with varying degrees of success.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, and consistent with prior research carried out with young people in 'emergency' situations (Save the Children, 2015; Ray 2010), **education was the main focal point when it came to young people accessing entitlements during the pandemic.** This was also one of the subjects where young people

were the most politicised and vocal. **Irrespective of national education systems and policy frameworks, young people understood and valued their right to education and were concerned about decisions that were being taken on their behalf that stood to influence their future.** While national government decisions about school closures were central to this, the pandemic also highlighted the issues presented by school autonomy within the UK. Young people witnessed wide variations in how and when schools closed, the pace at which they mobilised online learning, and the quality and breadth of curricula that were offered. They consistently reported feeling marginalised from key decisions and saw first-hand how their disadvantaged peers had fallen behind. The exam-marking controversy in the UK symbolised these wider injustices for many, despite the subsequent reversal of the policy.

Other factors were involved, of course. In Lebanon, technological infrastructure had a significant impact on young people's schooling during lockdown and was perceived to have left low socio-economic status families with minimal access to educational resources post school closure. This was in stark contrast to the situation in Singapore, where the public health and educational responses to an epidemic had been road-tested with SARS, and where young people generally described better preparedness for a switch to teaching online. For young people across the project, experiences of online learning included both positives, such as flexibility and the acquisition of independent study skills; and negatives, deriving from wide variations in the quality of teaching resources, gaps in teacher assessment and feedback, and an overall sense that online teaching was being developed reactively rather than proactively by many schools. While young people were sympathetic during the early stages of the crisis, they did not always remain so where schools appeared to have no longer-term plan or clear leadership.

Beyond access and entitlements, **the interviews painted a very mixed picture of professional accountability at a time of crisis.** Young people recalled where teachers, social workers and counsellors had been resourceful and adaptive, finding ways to maintain one-to-one engagement even where schools were closed, and services delivered remotely. Too often, however, young people felt that communication was at the discretion of individual professionals, with no obvious recourse if this fell short of expectations. There were numerous examples given where teachers or other professionals had significantly reduced or ceased direct communication with young people and shifted from relationship-based modalities to providers of information. Young people had pondered how trust and credibility might be restored when schools and other services opened, and contact was re-established.

6.1.2. Minding the participation gap

The research highlighted **a disconnect between media portrayals of young people during the pandemic, and their lived experiences.** Young people were consistently frustrated by the narrow set of media discourses. In the UK, these alternated between a 'victims and villains' narrative, from school closures and the exam marking fiasco in the first instance and subsequent coverage of young people gathering to party or protest in defiance of social distancing responsibilities. In Italy, young people were felt to have been more-or-less erased from mainstream news coverage of the pandemic. This was in stark contrast to young people's experiences of participating actively in civic and political life through volunteering and youth groups. Young people resented having been homogenised and stripped of their agency – rather than focusing on their personal sacrifices and choices, the coverage focused on young people as benefactors of adult decision making. To some extent, this seemed to mirror a wider disconnect between the national and local levels during the pandemic. For their part, many of the young people within the project had turned away from mainstream news and were drawing on a range of sources, from trusted media outlets to vloggers and peer social networks, whilst being mindful of the pitfalls of fake news and misinformation during a time when they were more reliant than ever on digital platforms.

More fundamentally, the research supports other recent studies from the UK, Europe and international contexts, in **highlighting the shortcomings of accepted forms of political and social representative democratic participation during the crisis** (Day, et. al. 2020; Cuevas-Parra and Stephano 2020). Young people expressed deep concerns at the lack of young voices in respect of decisions taken by school leaders during lockdown by national government; at a local or municipal levels, and in respect of decisions taken by school leaders. Even in the UK, where many of the young people involved the project were also active within youth forums and associations, there was frustration at having been held at arms' length from key decisions. **Young people wanted partnership and collaboration with adults, and to be a part of a civil society**

transformation project that stood to impact on their futures. They vocalised a wide range of political and social priorities through their action research, from educational reforms, to financial support, employment, tackling the widening socio-economic divides arising from the pandemic, and reassurances about action on environmental sustainability, and BAME and LGBTQ+ rights. They wanted evidence that their governments had a longer-term plan for recovery, and that young people were part of this process. They called for more sophisticated and diverse modes of engagement, including vulnerable or marginalised youth, while also mobilising on their own terms through direct social action.

6. 1. 3.   A contextualised view of 'participation'

Different traditions and cultures of participation were apparent from the interactions with young people through the project, and in the interviews. In particular, it was apparent how much young people's expectations were framed by the socio-political backdrop within their country. In Lebanon, participation often had a more immediate 'everyday' resonance, in access to the internet or basic amenities, and longstanding civil rights issues had informed young people's views on political processes. In Italy, by way of contrast, civic participation was somewhat muted, and young people had generally lacked the opportunities for youth voice that have been mainstreamed within the UK through an active NGO sector and a longstanding tradition of youth forums.

While there were many commonalities in the outcomes that young people hoped to see, **these cultural differences became apparent in how young people thought change should be achieved.** The 'participation experienced' young people in the UK were wary of consultative forms of participation such as surveys and panels, whereas a greater need was perceived for these mechanisms in Italy. This partly reflected a need to establish lines of communication with adult decision makers where they did not exist. However, it also underlined the importance of learning in action – where young people had no direct experience of the alternatives, prior expectations of what participation 'looks like' often mirrored adult-led democratic representative formats. In Lebanon, it was a desire to operate independently of government that had provided the impetus for more youth-led forms of participation and an interest among the young people in social entrepreneurship as an alternative route to empowerment.

6. 1. 4.   Re-engagement with a fundamental rights agenda

The research **also underlined how far young people's fundamental rights have been marginalised within the public and political responses to the pandemic.** This was the most visible in the sacrifices to young people's education in the interests of the public health greater good – not only in relation to school closures per se, but also in the less visible transgressions reported by young people through problems with access, school responsiveness, and failures of professional accountability. However, the missing rights dimension was apparent in other areas of young people's lives too. Indeed, the narrow focus on educational participation within the recovery illustrates just why a rights-based agenda is so badly needed. Young people's identities and freedom of expression, their health and wellbeing, their civic participation, have all been at stake during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research points towards **the need for a more holistic strategy for managing the pandemic and future public health emergencies of a global nature,** and indeed of the crisis of global governance that young people articulated through the interviews. These include for example, measures to tackle the evident decay in the democratic process and the consequent lack of trust and respect society, including young people, experience with elected leaders, the underlying lack of public funding, stark inequalities at the heart of society, the lack of accountability across the political classes and the predominance of economic over social priorities. These factors are balanced only to a limited extent by the hope and optimism young people experience from local community action and volunteering working alongside others to make a difference. This signals **an urgent need for political leaders to stop and listen to those they are elected to serve, to engage in dialogue and be open to learning from the lived realities of different groups.** In this project we have sought to do just that, allowing us to draw on evidence from young people to formulate recommendations to inform future

decision making.

6.2. Overall recommendations

The report comes at an interim stage in the Growing-Up Under COVID-19 project and is based on a specific time period, from the onset to the end of the first wave and easing of social distancing restrictions. As such, caution is needed when identifying recommendations for policy and practice at this relatively early stage. Nonetheless, the young people often had strong views about managing subsequent phases of the pandemic and the plans for recovery. The analysis of the interview data also points towards some priorities for action. We have highlighted these below, for further refinement in discussion with young people and members of the advisory group.

For governments and public authorities

- To ensure the representation of young people on central decision-making forums and committees overseeing the management of the pandemic at a government level, and engaging young people directly in evidence gathering, analysis, dialogue, planning, and formulation of National Recovery Plans.

- To review the representation of young people on established national or regional youth democratic participatory structures, to ensure that they actively reflect the diversity of the populations that they purport to serve, and to take action to draw a membership from grassroots organisations and groups, including those that work with vulnerable or marginalised young people.

- To establish national minimum standards, setting out and ensuring effective communication of young people's educational entitlements during the COVID-19 pandemic and minimum requirements for schools; to establish monitoring mechanisms, and to consider instituting new policies or legislative measures where necessary to ensure that standards are met.

- To independently evaluate schools' responses to the COVID-19 crisis, establishing the range of measures taken and their sufficiency; to appraise the relative effectiveness of educational, welfare and safeguarding measures adopted during the crisis, and publish and disseminate the findings. This could include or might be supplemented with a nationally representative survey of young people on their learning and wellbeing.

- To review the availability and access to mental health and wellbeing services for young people in a post-COVID context, to include consideration of the role and capacity of school-based counselling and therapeutic services and support and to share good practices regarding online support for mental health and wellbeing.

For schools, youth organisations and service providers

- To review and strengthen forums for engaging young people in school or organisational planning and decision making during the COVID-19 pandemic; ensuring that mechanisms for decision-making are inclusive, and that these forums actively reflect the diversity of the populations that they purport to serve.

- To ensure the full transparency of decisions taken by school or organisational leadership regarding access, quality and inclusion within school education during the COVID-19 pandemic and to set out a service charter, or equivalent, formalising schools' commitments to ensure that young people's right to a quality education is upheld.

- To facilitate young people to create and oversee peer support and self-help forums with regard to coping and thriving during lockdown, such as study groups, wellbeing support, and service-user forums.

- To create a school environment which values 'everyday' opportunities for dialogue between professionals and students about their needs and rights for their education and wellbeing during the

recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, while ensuring that follow-up actions are transparent.

For broadcasters and the media

- To redress imbalances in the portrayal of young people during the pandemic, with more young people in journalistic and reporting roles; greater visibility of young people from diverse ages and backgrounds, and a celebration of young people's civic and social actions during the pandemic through personal stories.

Appendices

Appendix One: Sampling information

The tables below provide further details on the profile of young people within the sample for the qualitative interviews informing this report. In total, interviews were completed with 62 of the 70 young people who are engaged on the action research project. The remaining participants opted out of an interview for a variety of personal reasons. Beirut's devastating explosion occurred during the fieldwork period was also a factor in a number of the young people from Lebanon electing not to take part in an interview under the circumstances.

Table A1.1: Respondents by country

Country	Number of young people
England	20
Italy	11
Singapore	11
Scotland	7
Lebanon	6
Northern Ireland	5
Wales	2
Total	**62**

Table A1.2: Respondents by gender

Gender	Number of young people
Female	42
Male	19
Other / prefer not to say	1
Total	**62**

The young researchers included representation from young people with the following characteristics, living in both urban and rural settings and in diverse family and household circumstances.

- Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME)
- LGBTQ+
- Low income / low Socio-Economic Status (SES)
- Young people with experiences of the care system
- Young people with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND)
- Young people living in insecure or temporary accommodation
- Young people experiencing family conflict

Appendix Two: Coding framework

1. **Personal experiences of life during the pandemic**
   1.1. Initial reactions to news of the pandemic
   1.2. Impact of the pandemic on young people individually
      1.2.1. Access to services
      1.2.2. Civic participation
      1.2.3. Education
      1.2.4. Family
      1.2.5. Friends and peers
      1.2.6. Health and wellbeing
      1.2.7. Identity and beliefs
      1.2.8. Work and income
   1.3. Impact of the pandemic on significant others (e.g. family and friends)
   1.4. Coping mechanisms
   1.5. Access to education

2. **Actions taken by adult decision-makers and the public**
   2.1. Views on actions taken by politicians and other decision makers
      2.1.1. Global
      2.1.2. National
      2.1.3. Local
   2.2. Social issues of greatest importance during the pandemic (e.g. homelessness, racial equality)
   2.3. Views on public attitudes, values and behaviours during the pandemic
   2.4. Young people's influence over decision making during the pandemic
   2.5. Media coverage / reliability of information / portrayals of young people

3. **Lessons learned – safeguarding young people's rights and wellbeing in the future**
   3.1. Recommendations to meet young people's needs / protect their rights during recovery
   3.2. Recommendations for strengthening young people's decision making in future pandemics

4. **Coping, adjustment, and life under the 'new normal'**
   4.1. Most significant and lasting impacts of the pandemic, up to this point
   4.2. Things they are looking forward to / optimistic about
   4.3. Ongoing causes of worry or concern about COVID-19
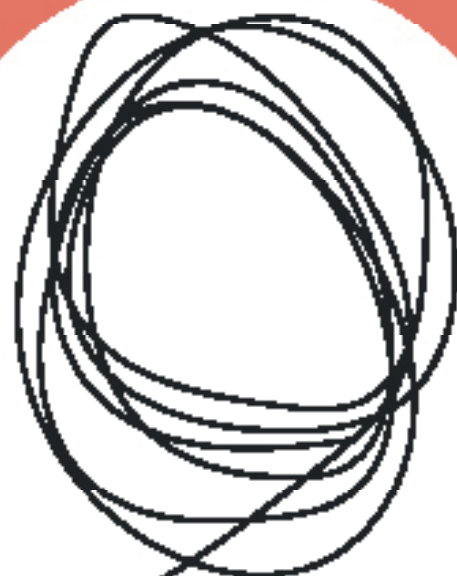
Case classification

Individuals, by age, gender and country (including UK nations)

Additional variables from preliminary interview:

- Living arrangements
- Duties of care
- Caring responsibilities for siblings, other family members
- Physical and mental health and wellbeing, including whether the young person experiences anxiety, stress, depression or panic attacks
- Access to internet (types of device(s) they have access to (e.g. smart phone, tablet, PC or laptop), whether this is shared or sole access
- Privacy – access to a secure private space

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