



Grown up? New evidence on young people's journeys to adulthood

17 Sept 2026



A Nuffield welcome

Gavin Kelly

Chief Executive, Nuffield Foundation

Nuffield Foundation



Growing up today: what have we learned?

Gavin Kelly

Chief Executive, Nuffield Foundation

Nuffield Foundation



Grown up? What have we learned and what's next?

Carey Oppenheim

Grown up? Programme Lead, Nuffield Foundation

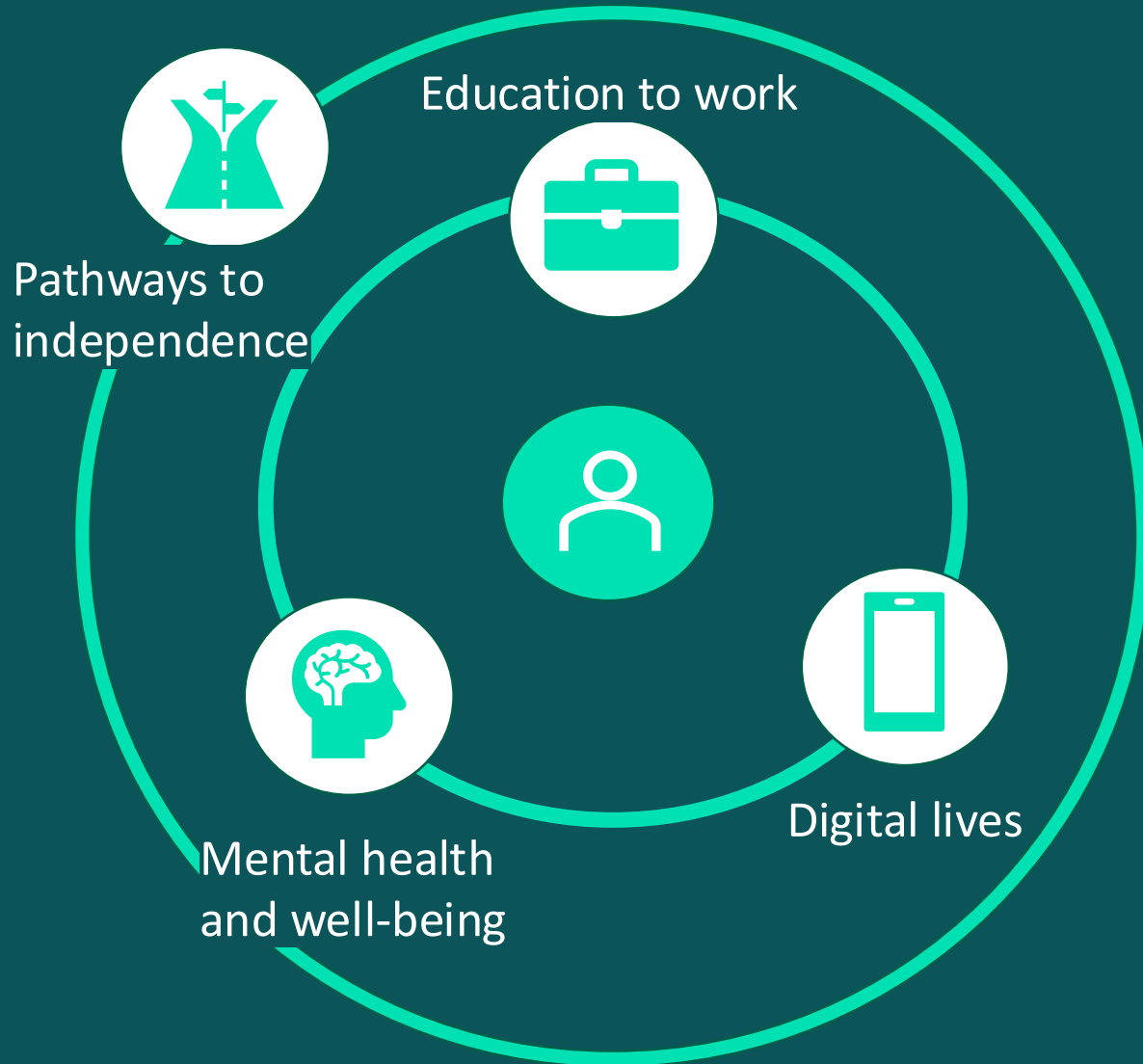
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Grown up? Transitions to adulthood

Session 1: What we have learned and
implications for policy and practice

Carey Oppenheim

Grown up? Journeys to adulthood



- Understand young people's journeys to adulthood and what this means for policy, research, wider society
- Young people aged 14 to 24
- Gen Z born between 1996-2012
- Interconnections

What does it mean to be 'grown up' today - our approach

- Foregrounded youth insight and engagement and peer research
- Evidence: data commentaries, wider research
- Expert features



Grown Up? Journeys to adulthood

Born connected: How Gen Z navigate their digital lives.

Hopkins Van Mil
Commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation
August 2025



Grown up? Journeys to adulthood

Mental health and wellbeing deep dive workshop report - "pushed from pillar to post"

Hopkins Van Mil
Commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation
December 2025



Grown Up? Journeys to Adulthood

Education to Work 'Deep Dive Workshops' findings report

Hopkins Van Mil
Commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation
May 2025



Grown up?

Rethinking journeys to adulthood:
An introduction



Grown up?

'I love it, but I hate it'
Young people's experiences and expectations of growing up digital



Grown up?

'Higgledy piggledy':
Systems of support for young people aged 14–24 with poor mental health



Grown up?

Raising the bar:
Why good jobs for young people are good for us all



Grown up?

Generation abandoned?



Grown up?

Growing up online



Grown up?

Parental co-residence, intergenerational support and transitions to adulthood



Grown up?

Social thinning in a digital age:
The case for rebuilding the social foundations of adolescence



Grown up?

Friend or foe?
How young people are using AI for mental health support



Growing up amid fundamental shifts and shocks

Global crises, war, climate change

Long-standing economic stagnation and cost of living crisis

Ever present digital technology, social media, AI

Rise of mental health difficulties

Loss of in-person social connections



Unequal family resources

Unequal educational resources

Unequal access to labour market

Unequal place-based resources

Experiences of discrimination

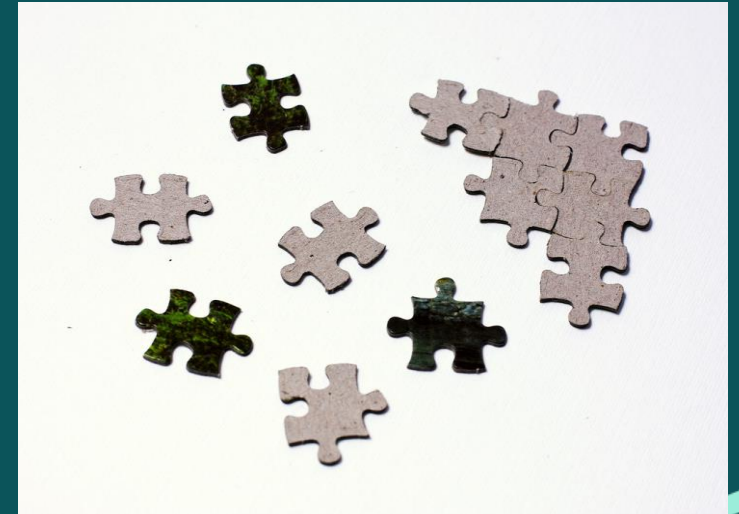
Later, more complex and precarious transitions

- Reaching traditional milestones changed
- Education to work transitions have more challenges
- Financial self-sufficiency more out of reach
- Living at home for longer
- Changing roles of parents and carers



Public policy and social institutions not kept pace with young people's changing realities

- Fragmented and siloed
- Cliff-edges
- Shift away from prevention and early intervention
- Limited support for early adulthood



Just a number?

Clear age divide
in public policy
vs. the messiness
of growing up

16 18

24

- Cliff-edge in mental health support
- No meaningful relationship with state for many young people who are NEET post-18
- The relationship between the benefit system and apprenticeships distorts post-16 choices
- Young people living at home for longer, not reflected in housing benefit, few housing choices
- Lack of protection for older young people navigating social media and AI

From foreword contribution by Youth Insight Group member Amani

"We are analysts, innovators, and problem-solvers in our own right... Too often, choices about young people's futures are made in rooms where no young person is present. ... we have the insight, courage, and imagination to be part of the solution... If you truly want to understand it — and to build a future where young people can thrive — start by listening to the voices of young people captured here."





Youth voice

Farzana and Leon

Members of the Grown up? Youth Insights Group



Reflection: young people's aspirations and opportunity

Shuab Gamote

Strategic Adviser to the Milburn Review on Young
People and Work

Nuffield Foundation

Young people want to move forward.

What is stopping them,
and who can help?

DEMOS

INSIDE THE MIND OF A 16-YEAR-OLD

From Andrew Tate to Bonnie Blue to Nigel Farage - what do first time voters think about social media, politics, the state of Britain and their futures?

SHUAB GAMOTE
PETER HYMAN

NOVEMBER 2025



INSIDE THE MIND OF A YOUNG NEET

A story of resilience, untapped potential - and a system
with too many snakes and not enough ladders.

Shuab Gamote
Peter Hyman



Common thread: So much moral panic.

Too often, sensationalist headlines shape the discussion.
“They don’t believe in democracy.” “They’re radicalised.”
“All left wing.” Then, a week later, “all right wing”.

That’s not what we found at all.
Ask people who work with young people what gives them
hope, and so often the answer is young people.

Ambitious. Driven. Talented. They do want to work.

Gen Z did not all grow up in the same world

The transition into adulthood is ever-changing.

Even within one generation, the experiences that shaped and moulded young people can differ drastically.

Gen Z 1.0

Gen Z 1.5

Gen Z 2.0

Inside the mind of a 16 year old: Hope for the future. A need for connection.

About 85%

believed they would have better opportunities than their parents.

Online life can also be about company:

“just so it feels like there’s someone else around.”

Work can offer independence, purpose and a place to belong.

Too many transitions are cliff edges

Leaving school: pushed towards courses that don't fit.

Entering work: expected to have experience, denied the chance to get it.

Leaving care: expected to cope alone because you've turned 18.

“Never told what to do next. So I kind of just stayed in the house, and I was like, right, well, this is just the end.”

Young woman, Belfast, after leaving school at 16.

So what problems is this generation facing?

Rejection economy

Confidence deficit

Uncertain futures

This can lead to learned helplessness.

**Two stories that I think sum up
what young people are facing**

Ready to work. Still waiting for a way in.

23-year-old woman, London
Wheelchair user

First-class degree. Paid internship.

Still shut out by inaccessible
workplaces.

**“I just want the
chance
to actually use what
I have worked for.”**

The environment can make the difference

19-year-old man, Glasgow
Autistic

Overwhelmed in hospitality.
Proud of his landscaping work.

Then came winter layoffs.

**“let me show you
I’m committed to
at least learning.”**

What worked was often a human touch

A trusted adult at the right moment.

Incentivising care

Spotting an opportunity.

Giving someone confidence to try.

Helping them recover from rejection.

Staying alongside them for the next step.

Give people the time and space to build relationships.

“They kind of gave me the push to go.”

Moving away from a deficit-based model. Building confidence.

Start with their ambition, talents and strengths.

Remove the barriers in their way.

Give them a chance to show what they can do. Build the relationships that help them keep going.



Responding to the work readiness challenge

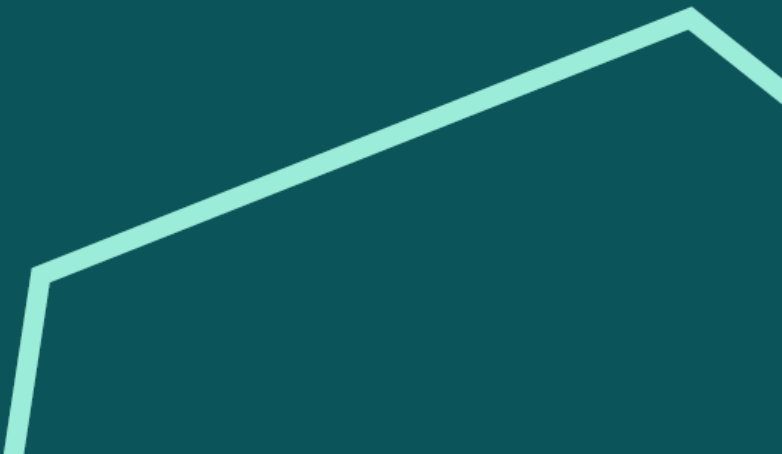
Dr Emily Tanner

Post-14 Education and Skills Programme Head,
Nuffield Foundation

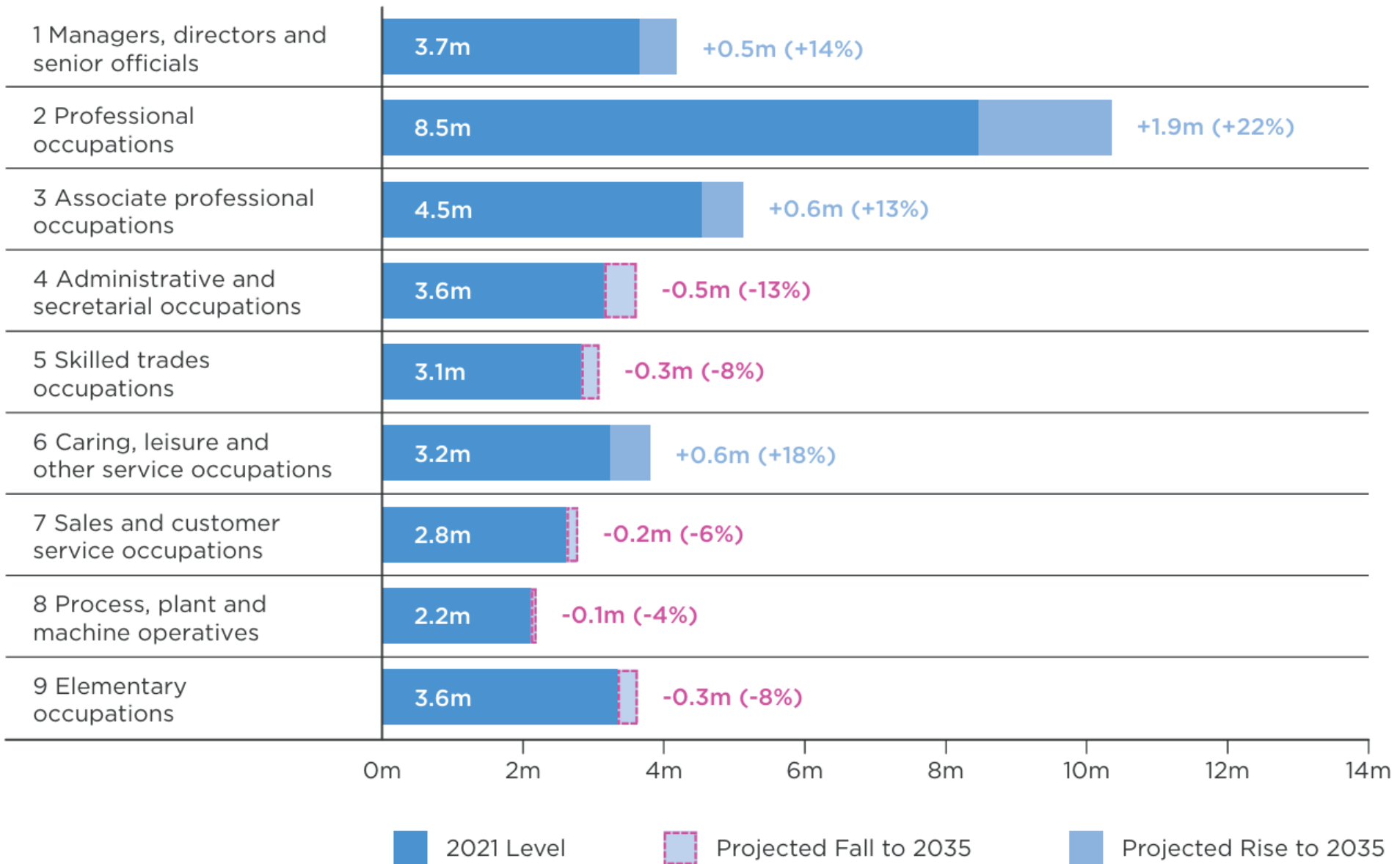
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What skills do young people need for future work?



UK Employment (Jobs)



Source: [The Skills Imperative 2035: Equipping tomorrow's workforce with essential skills through a lifelong learning system](#) | NFER and the Nuffield Foundation

Essential employment skills

- Communication
- Collaboration
- Information literacy
- Organising, planning and prioritising
- Problem-solving and decision-making
- Creative thinking



The Skills Imperative 2035:

Creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce

Luke Bocock, Michael Scott and Jude Hillary,
National Foundation for Educational Research

2

*How well-prepared are
young people today?*



Inequalities

- EES in the adult population linked to age, qualifications, employment status, adult training, childhood socio-economic status.

(Source: Skills Imperative 2035, Working Paper 4)

- Essential skills and career readiness in young people lower for those on FSM, with SEND and boys.

(Source: CEC Future Skills Questionnaire)

Learning opportunities

- Skills development is cumulative and shaped by material, emotional and learning environment.

The Skills Imperative 2035: The implications of research on childhood skill development for addressing future skills needs in England - NFER

- Inequalities in access to out of school activities.

Out of school activities and the education gap - Nuffield Foundation

- Inequalities in access to work experience.

Careers education in England, 2024/25
Youth Voice Census 2026



3

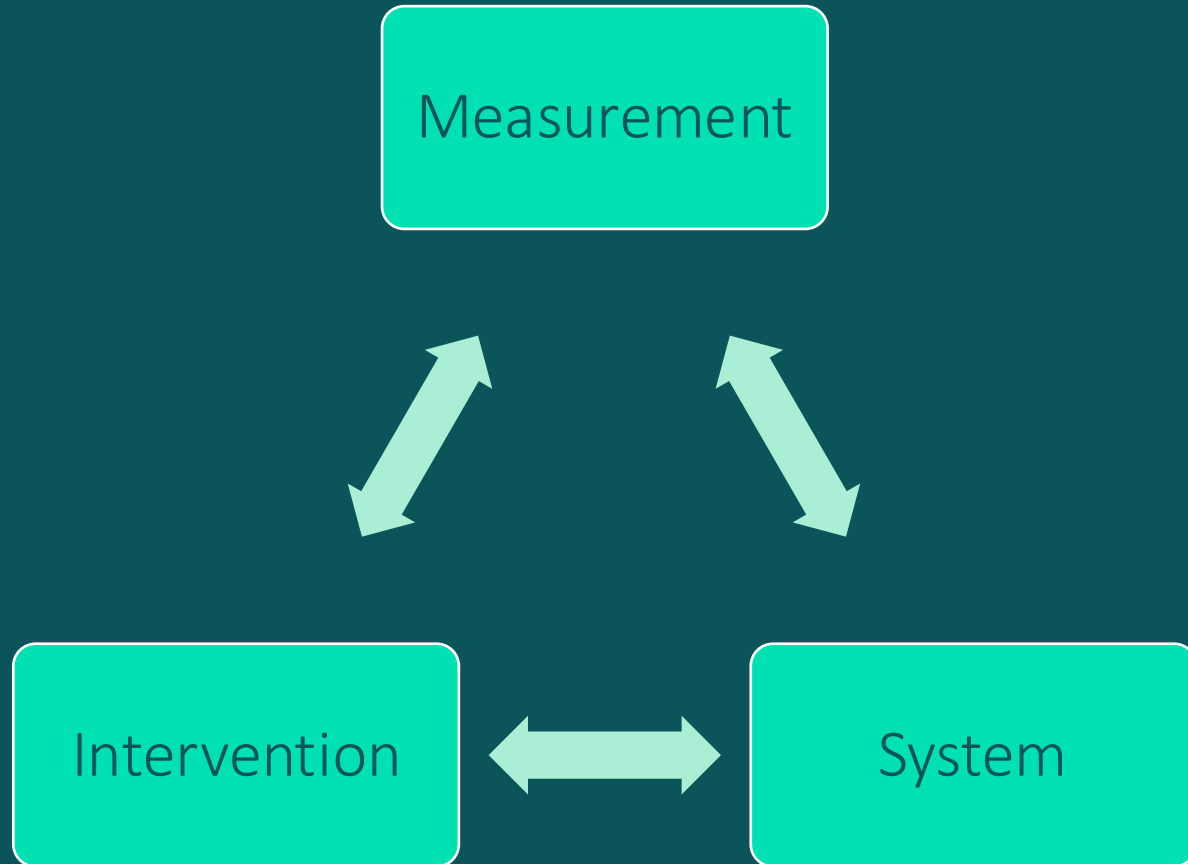
What are the opportunities for improving the system?



Embedding skills learning

- Enrichment framework
- Work experience
- National Youth Strategy
- Adoption of skills frameworks
- Local coordination of skills plans
- Curriculum

Build evidence





Essential Employment Skills Fund

 Funding opportunity for evaluating programmes supporting young people into work.

Grants of up to £500,000 each are available for projects that will build robust evidence on how best to support young people aged 16-24 who face significant barriers to employment.

The fund will support evaluations of programmes focused on developing young people's essential employment skills, and help successful programmes share learning and scale their impact.

[Essential Employment Skills Fund | Apply for Funding](#)



Audience Q&A and session one reflections



Break



Digital lives and mental health and well-being

Ann Phoenix

Professor of Psychosocial Studies, UCL Institute of
Education and Nuffield Foundation Trustee

Nuffield Foundation



What a whole generation is telling us about their digital world

Imogen Parker

Associate Director, Ada Lovelace Institute

Nuffield Foundation

“I love it, but I hate it”

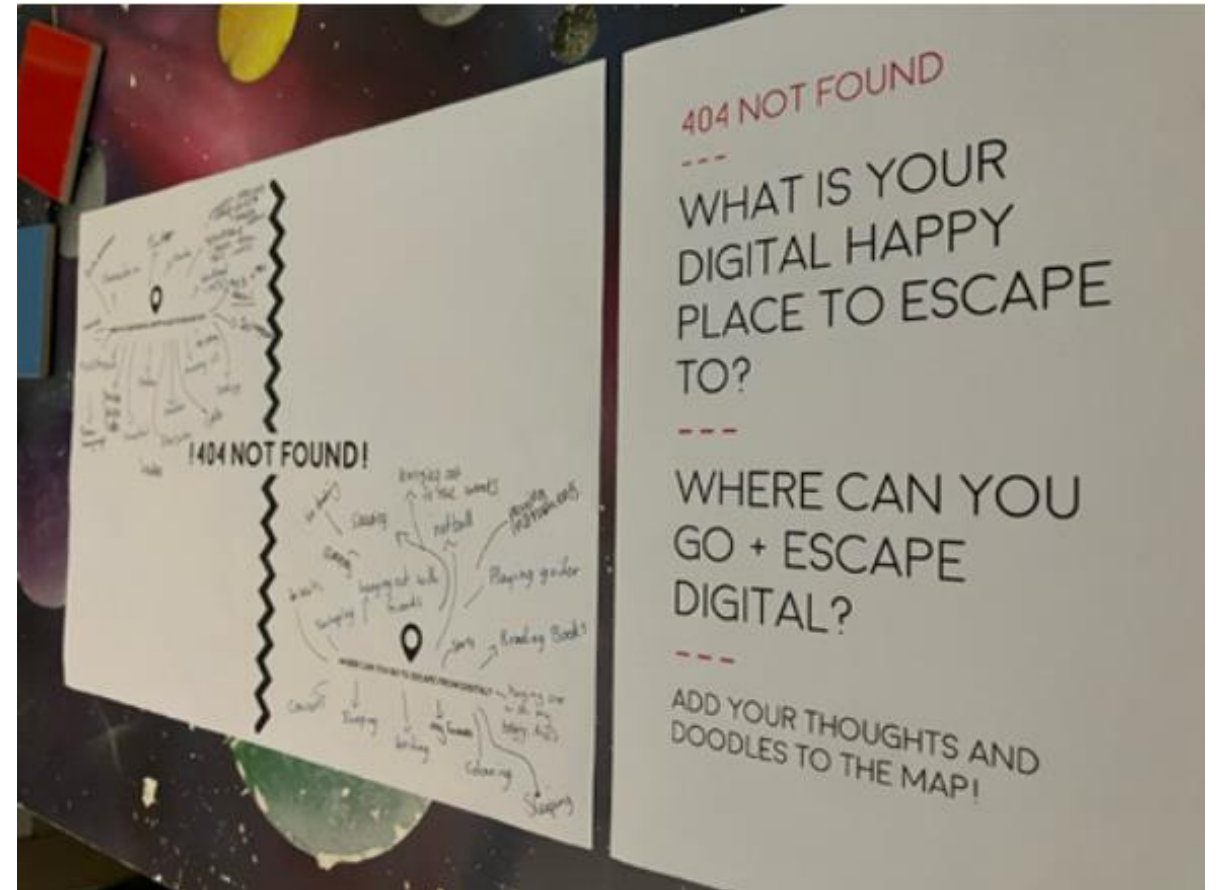
Imogen Parker, Ada Lovelace Institute

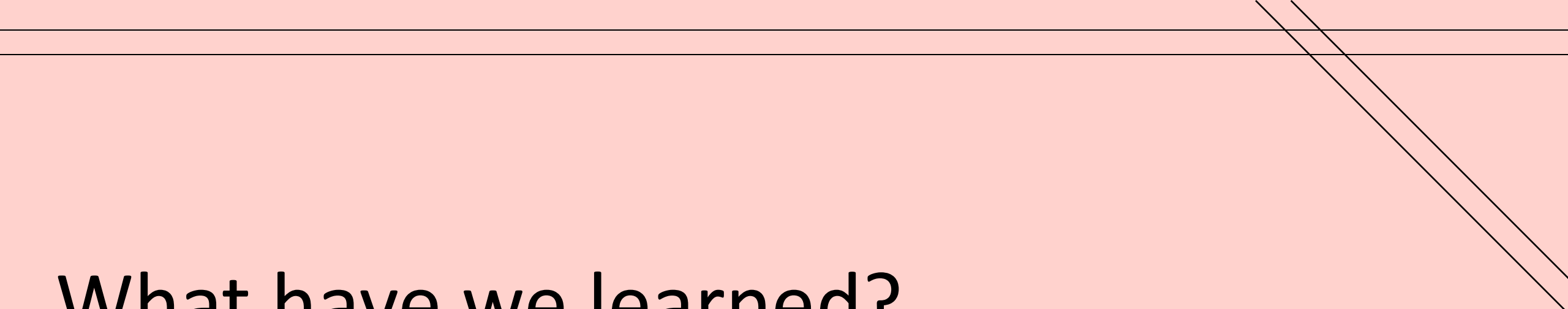
17 September 2026



Method and sample

- Sample: 49 14-24 year old participants across four locations: Dundee, Shetland, London Borough of Islington and Sandwell
- Method:
 - Peer research with young people aged 14-24 years old. 10 x peer researchers + 29 participants
 - Creative interviews with young people 20-24 years old – 10 interviewers
- Partnership with Hot Chocolate Trust and Social Work Reimagined





What have we learned?

Digital is a central part of growing up, offering core routes for information and community

A lot [was] going on back when I was younger, so gaming gave me an excuse to stay away from everything kicking off in the house and stuff. And meeting other people and gaming with them [...]. I never had friends growing up, especially in school. I was definitely not one of the popular kids. So to be able to go home, go online and game with people I met online was certainly a lot more beneficial than I would have realised back then. But it was definitely beneficial, because I had something instead of nothing.



The benefits don't justify the harms: young people's accounts starkly highlighted how they had experience – and continue to experience – harm on online platforms

Anyway, I've had a lot of experience with people on servers who I've spoken to maybe once or twice, they've added me and then they're like "Hey, how are you?" Then they're like "I'm going to kill myself" and randomly dump it on you [murmur of agreement from two other group members] and it's like "What? I don't know you, why are you telling me this? What am I meant to do about this, we're on the other side of the earth, I can't come stop you!" And all I can do is be like "Please don't do it, I care about you" and I don't even know you.



Young people try to moderate use, but adult life requires logging on

I spent more time just speaking to people instead of sat on my phone. I kind of, I think I watched a few documentaries, which is something I do anyway, but I would kind of be on my phone and not pay attention as much. I think I spoke to my family. I just kind of lived more in the moment. That feels just kind of weird to say.



Platform design choices lead to young people feeling unable to be in control or set boundaries around technology

Short bursts of dopamine [...] It's short bursts of relief, happiness, laughter, but it never lasts. Which is where I'd say it's like an addiction, as the same with narcotics or drugs. They give you relief in a sense, for a short period of time, and then you're just chasing that same relief. Over and over again.

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Choice

I think the idea of choice is complex when we talk about being within the digital world.

My algorithm is filled with constant opportunities for me to compare myself to others.

"How to lose weight", **"the best makeup products you HAVE to try"**, **"here's how I moved out and paid off my mortgage at the age of 20"**. Although that last statement may be slightly far-fetched, it is not all that far from the truth.

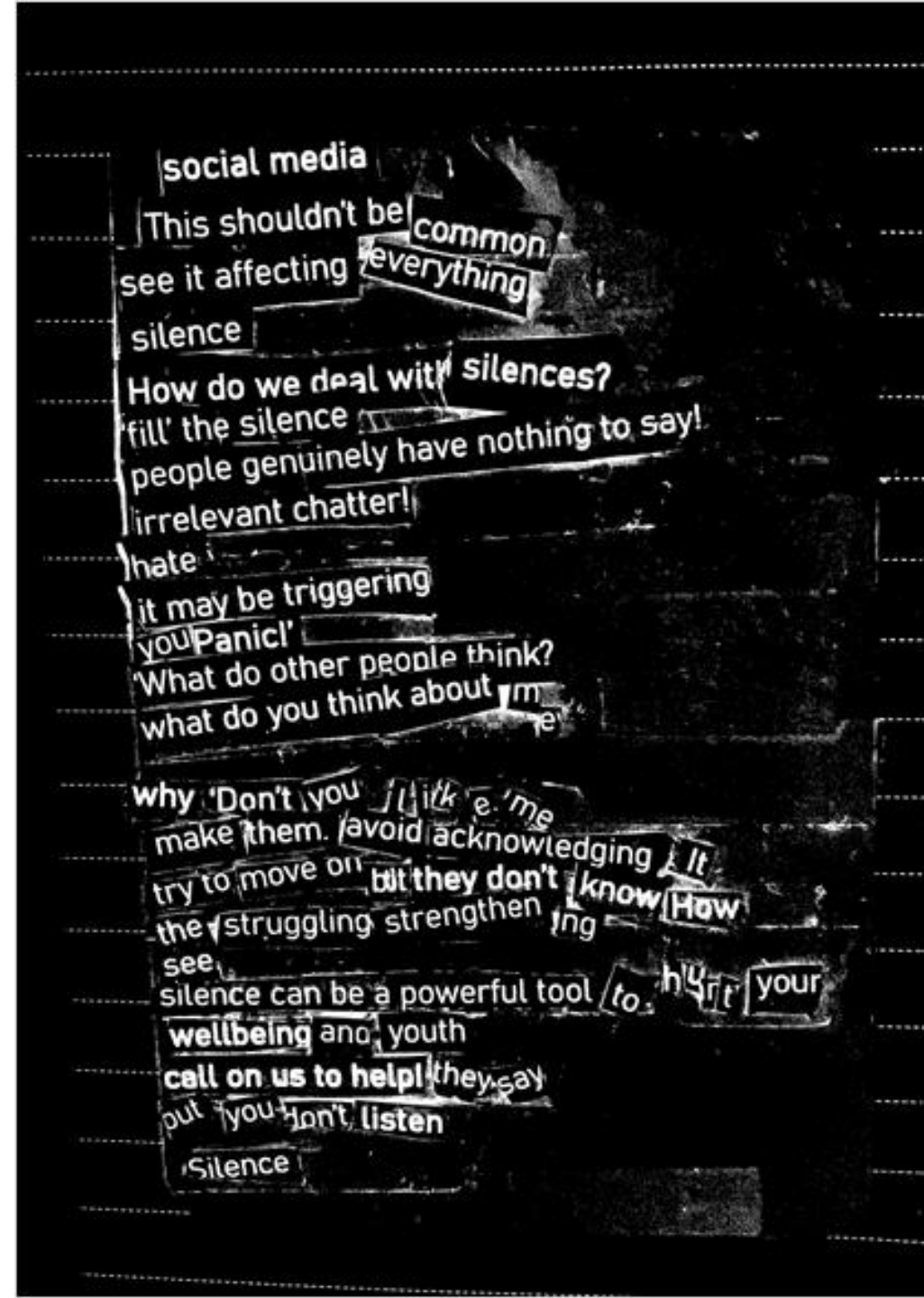
I don't believe you have a choice on what you see online, I feel as because algorithms are catered to you personally, we cannot filter what we see online. For me, the digital world is absolutely consuming, I can't remember the last time I went a full day without using anything digital, because realistically, how could I?

In contradiction though, being online is how I talk to people, and without it, I'd struggle I think. I wish I didn't *HAVE* to be online constantly, but at the same time, is it my choice?

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Young people viewed social media and AI as contributing to mental health harms

I feel like it probably has some contribution to my anxiety or my mental health to some degree, because it's not great if I'm honest, my mental health and that. And I bet the fact that I'm so desensitised to everything because of how much I got to see of that stuff on the internet, has probably weighed into a wee bit. There's obviously the moral value for the Gaza videos too. Like you see it, and it's children bleeding and dying. And it's horrible to look at – it hurts. But at the same time, when I'm looking at it, it's not like I'm wincing or anything. I'm just seeing it, and I just feel terrible emotionally. But the content itself doesn't really hurt. Like I could look at it and it's sad, but I'm not gonna turn my eyes. I'm just so desensitised to that. Which is kind of brutal.



Young people have been left to navigate the online world in isolation, taking responsibility for their own safety and the safety of young people around them

I just used to talk about it so casually, like, “oh, they sent me that”.’ And then looking back now, I’m like, that’s actually really messed up. But I think it just for me, it just showed how normalised it still is, even years on.



Profound change is needed to enable people to take control of their relationship with technologies, tackle harms, address corporate power and shape a better future.

What would I like my future to look like? I would like for phones to become less important and less of an extension of people because a lot of it just feels like a dumpster fire. Or it to become more positive and less unhealthy, at least.

If I could have chosen to, I would have loved to have grown up at a time when it's not, like, if it's still there, but a much lesser thing. It's a smaller thing in life. You know, how it's just consuming everyone's life. The whole time.



Policy Implications

1. Ambitious action required which moves beyond content to design and impacts
2. Protections needed post 16, 18 and 21
3. Privacy needs to be recommitted to
4. Shape and invest in alternative physical and digital spaces
5. Shape a coherent and holistic vision for technology's role in young people's lives

Thank you

For any further questions or follow up find me on
LinkedIn or Bluesky @imogen-parker.bsky.social





Youth voice

Owen

Member of the Grown up? Youth Insights Group



Changing patterns of mental health among young people, and priorities for public policy

Dr Dominic Kelly

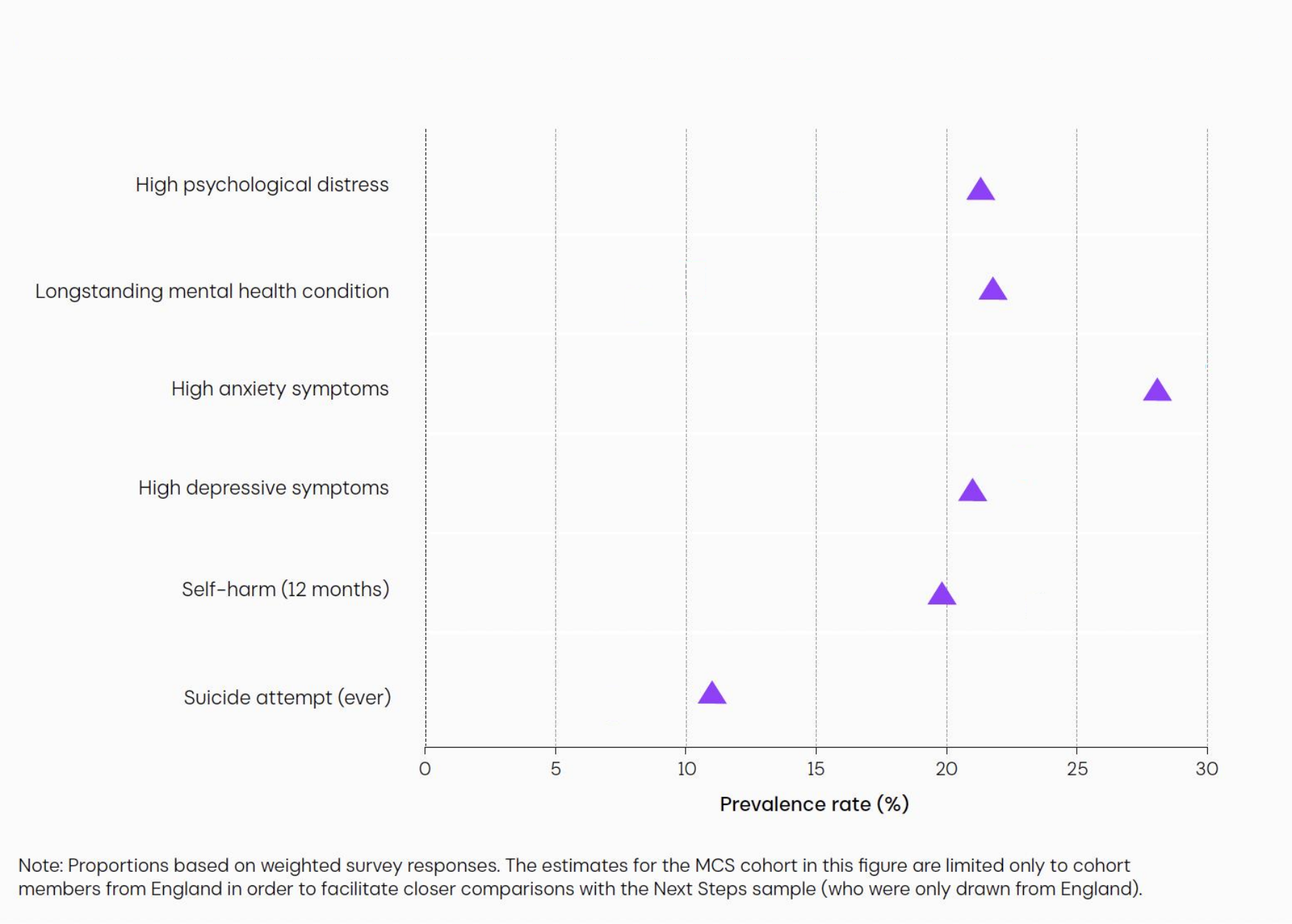
UCL, Centre for Longitudinal Studies

Nuffield Foundation

Changing patterns of mental health among young people, and priorities for public policy

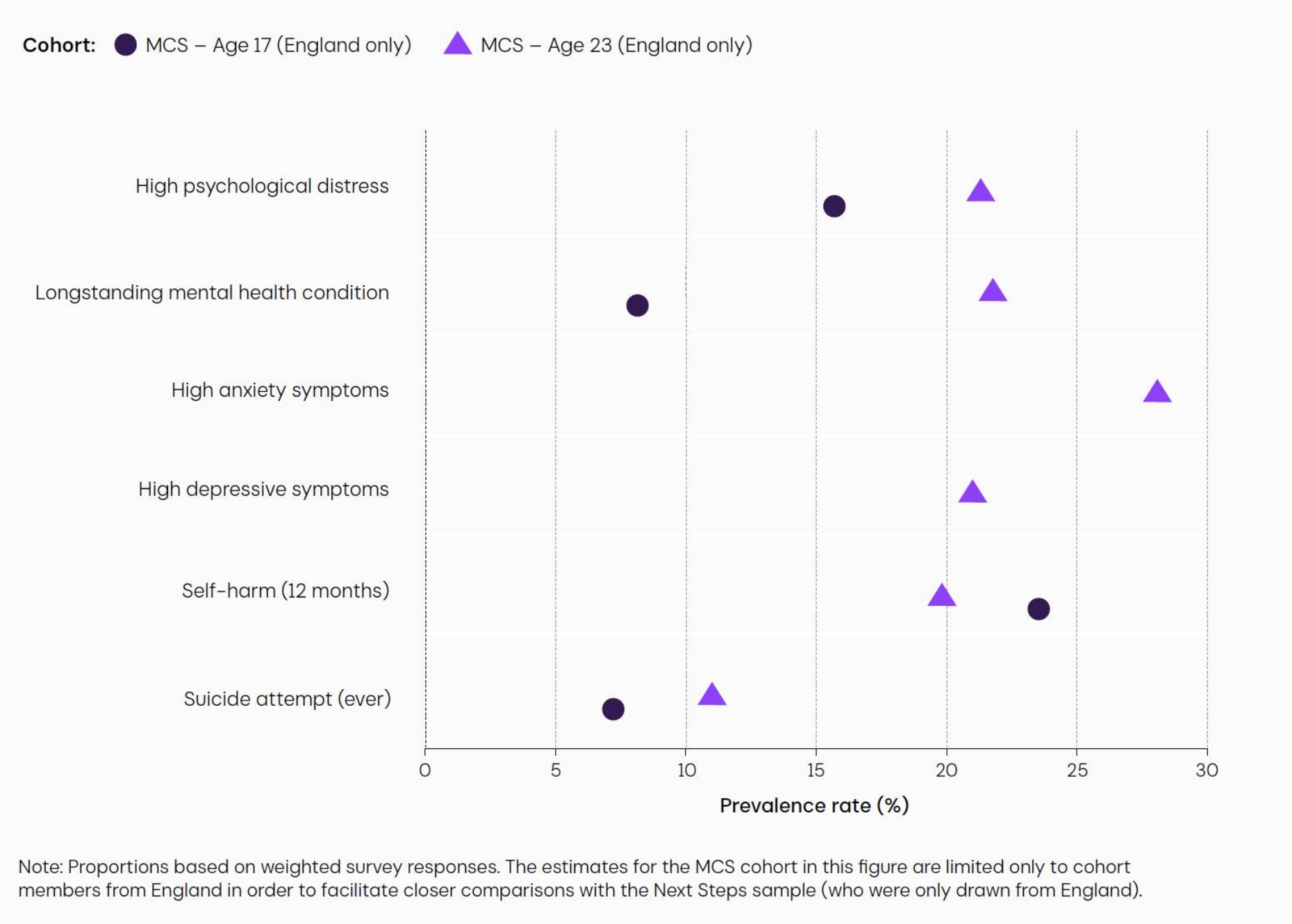
Dr Dominic Kelly
UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies

At least 1 in 5 young people at age 23 report mental health problems.



Preliminary
findings, not
peer-reviewed

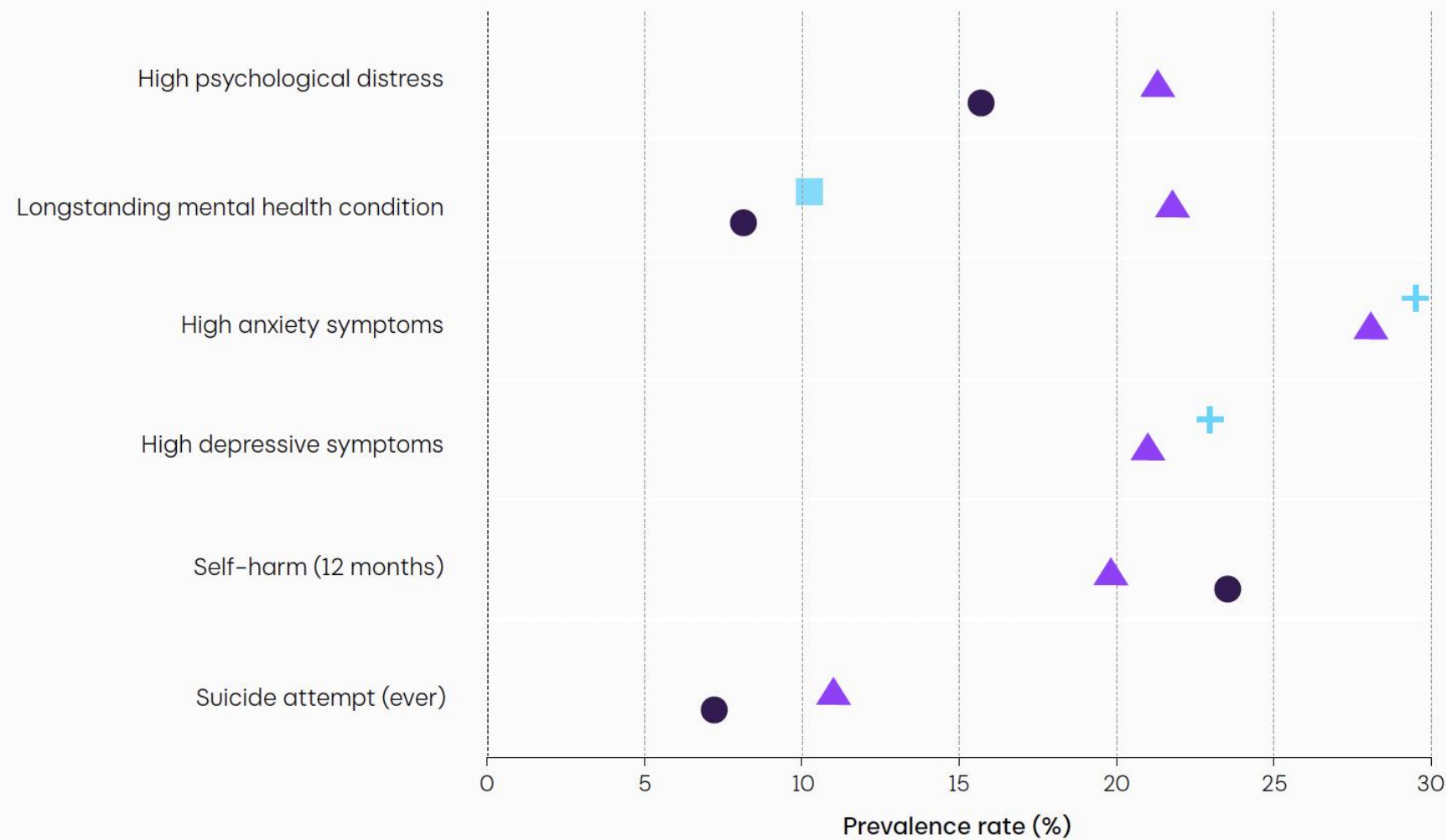
The prevalence of most problems increased between ages 17 and 23



Preliminary
findings, not
peer-reviewed

Gen Z seem to report more problems than comparable Millennials

Cohort: ● MCS – Age 17 (England only) ▲ MCS – Age 23 (England only) ■ Next Steps – Age 25 + Next Steps – Age 32



Note: Proportions based on weighted survey responses. The estimates for the MCS cohort in this figure are limited only to cohort members from England in order to facilitate closer comparisons with the Next Steps sample (who were only drawn from England).

Preliminary
findings, not
peer-reviewed

Mental health and digital lives

- *'I love it, but I hate it'* report by Nuffield highlights the experiences of being online on mental health.
- Is it the online activity or the motivation for the online activity that matters the most for mental health?
- New paper links social media activity and NEET:
- Much more participant-led research is needed!



Priorities

- Confront the ‘cliff edge’ between child and adult services at age 18.
- Build support for young people with moderate needs, before crises.
- Tackle the ‘postcode lottery’ in terms of support.
- Give young people a meaningful voice in policy conversations.
- Address disparities based on gender, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, etc.
- Personalise support to each young person’s identity and circumstances.



Audience Q&A and session two reflections

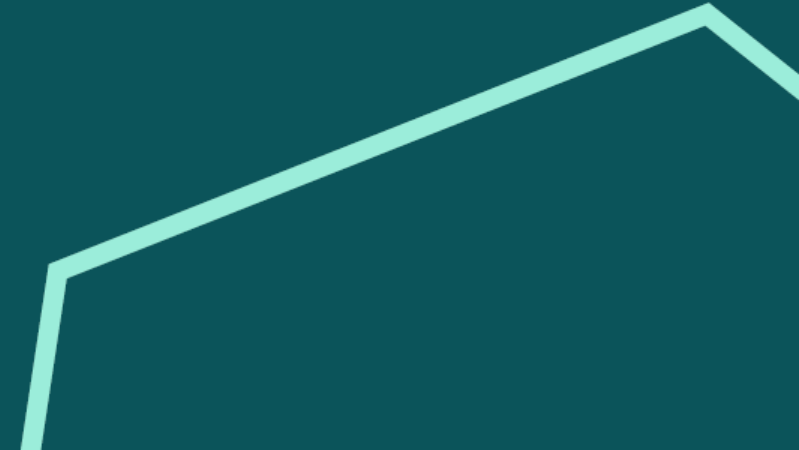


What's next?

Gavin Kelly & Carey
Oppenheim

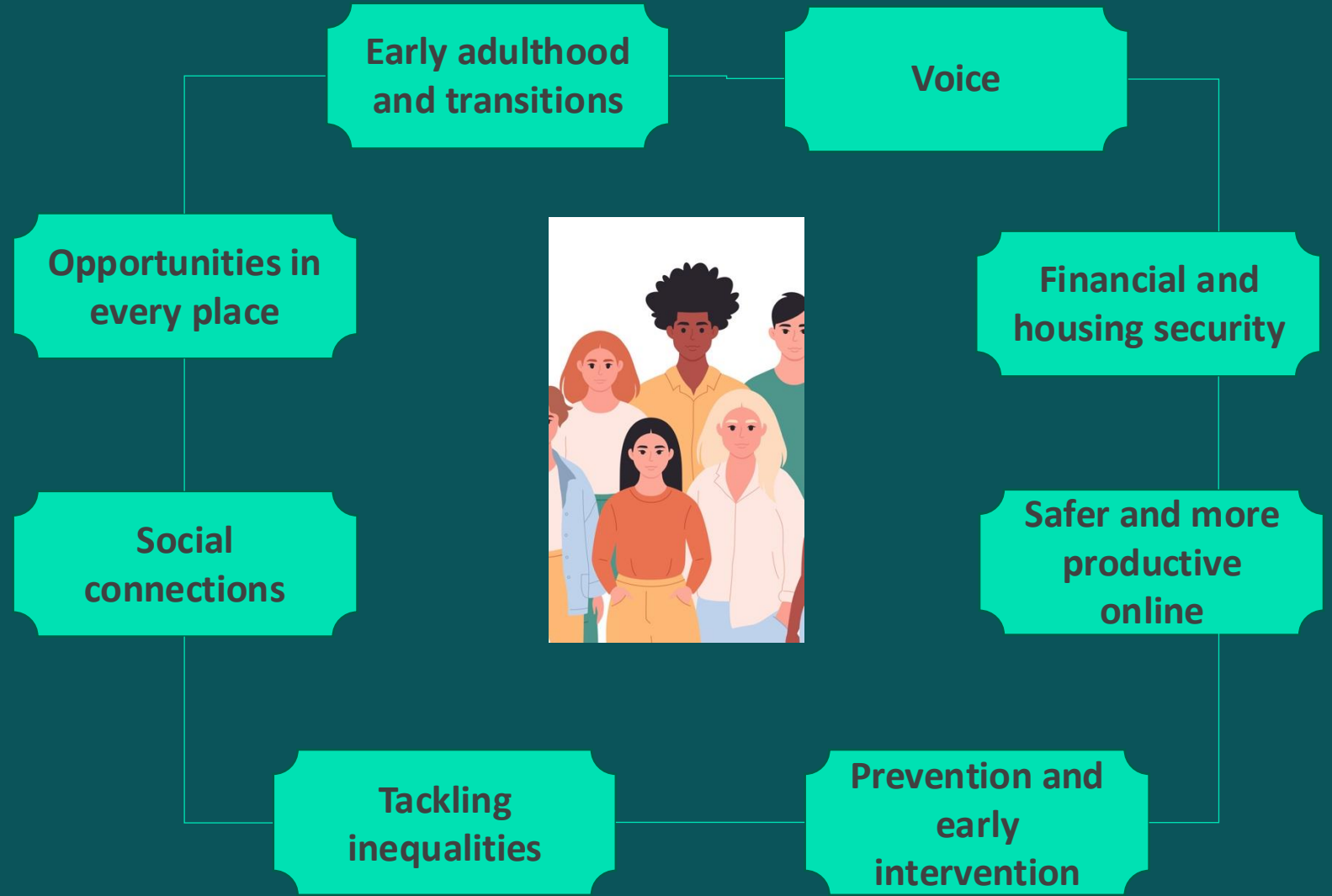
Session 3

Do we need a new social contract?



New social
contract
for young people?

Key areas for
change



New social contract for young people?

Questions to all



- Is a new social contract the right approach?
- What big areas for change need to be covered?
- Can you share examples of where you are already working to deliver or galvanise change for young people?
- *What gaps are there in evidence?*

For further information

Visit [Grown up? Journeys to adulthood](#)

Contact:

coppenheim@nuffieldfoundation.org.uk





Closing remarks

Lisa Harker

Director, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Thanks for coming

Scan the QR code to find out more
about *Grown up?*

