

The Impact of Covid-19 on young people in Merton



Partnership
for Young
London



Acknowledgements

This research was designed, carried out, and analysed by Merton's Young Inspectors. A group of young people who live, and learn, in Merton.

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Contents

Introduction	01 - 09
Key findings and recommendations	05 - 06
Methodology	10 - 17
The impact of Covid-19 on health	18 - 29
The impact of Covid-19 on personal relationships	30 - 35
The impact of Covid-19 on education	36 - 45
Safety in Merton and the police	46 - 53
Safe, Place, and Our Merton	54 - 59
What next?	60 - 61
Credits and thanks	62 - 63

Introduction

I believe that it is not enough to listen to the voices of young residents in Merton. Young residents need to actively participate with senior decision makers to make Merton a better place for both adults and young residents. This research project explored the impact of Covid-19 on our young people who live or study in the London Borough of Merton. This peer research project was designed and conducted by us, the peer researchers, as we spoke to hundreds of young people face to face in interviews and focus groups, and over 2,000 young people in a survey. We want to thank all the young people who took the time to do our survey or speak to us in person.

One interview that stood out for me was with this girl, who was around 11 or 12. Whilst everyone around her was saying “Oh yeah, I spent a lot of time with my family. We had a lot of fun.” She vocalised that she became a sort of third parent despite her young age, helping her brother make breakfast, helping her siblings with their clothes while still preparing for school herself. Far from being passive, the pandemic had pushed this young girl into having an active role supporting her family during this difficult time, a role that you wouldn't expect someone so young to have.

As well as gathering research, the research team consulted and reviewed the analysis with the Merton Youth Parliament to make meaningful change within the borough using the findings as our foundation. While we were going through the research, people were saying “Oh yeah, I agree this happened to me” and they added their own personal anecdotes just to show that it's happened to everyone. This isn't sort of a singular issue, or one group or person, the whole of Merton is experiencing this. The Merton Youth Parliament are passionate to make a change. We need to act and be the voice of young people.

We found that Covid-19 and the pandemic impacted and is still impacting everyone, regardless of age or their socio-economic background. However, it's important to note that certain groups were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. One data point that stuck out to me was how care experienced young people were more likely to say that they have to skip a meal because there isn't enough food. The whole point of our research was that we were getting the voices of different groups of young people like children in care. These demographics are often not represented, and yet are disproportionately affected by Covid-19 and the pandemic. There is no single answer to this issue for young people because the challenges you face, and the severity, change depending on who you are.

For me, there's three purposes for the report. One is to inform adults, those parents, teachers, and those that work with young residents so that they think “Is this how my child feels?” or “is this how young people in Merton were affected by Covid-19?” and “What should I do about it?” Secondly, the report is there for the young people to read it and be “Wow, this is my borough, I relate to this, this, and that. I'm glad my voice was heard because this is exactly what I told the researchers”. We want to see their experience reflected in this report. Lastly, the report is a resource for senior decision makers to read and for them to make actual tangible change from. We want to see a response to the issues that were identified in this report.

Denise Vidal-Candengue
Peer Researcher



Key findings

The impact of Covid-19 on health:

- **Covid-19 negatively impacted the mental health of young people:** Covid-19 and lockdown has had a negative impact on the physical and mental health of young residents in Merton. However, young people are feeling better, and are more active now that lockdown has been lifted.
- **Young people look for support from friends and family over professionals:** Over a third of young residents worried about their mental health during lockdown, feeling bored and isolated. They seek informal support for their mental health, speaking to friends and family.
- **Food poverty is disproportionately experienced by different groups:** One in ten young people has had to skip meals because there wasn't enough food, while one in twenty went a whole day without eating. Additionally different groups disproportionately are impacted by food poverty.

The impact of Covid-19 on personal relationships:

- **Lockdown brought many people together:** Young people had more time to spend with their family, which was overall a positive experience. As a result of lockdown many residents got to build better relationships with parents or siblings.
- **It was harder to see friends, and make friends:** Young people were less able to see friends, and found it harder to make friends, however many relied on their friendships more during lockdown. As a result, this strengthened existing relationships, and support between friends played a huge role.

The impact of Covid-19 on education:

- **Many young people found the transition to online learning difficult:** There was a mixed experience of online education and learning. Older young people and those who were impacted by changes in exams were more likely to have a negative experience of education during lockdown.
- **Young people feel anxious about falling behind:** Young people are worried about their education after lockdown. Many felt that, despite the often-good support provided by schools, that they had fallen behind in their studies.

Safety in Merton, and the police:

- **There is a mixed experience of safety in Merton:** Generally young people feel safe across Merton, however this varies significantly for certain groups of young people. Additionally, some young people also felt more anxious or worried about their safety outside because of Covid-19.
- **Stop and search impacts on young people's view of the police:** Young people are strongly divided on their views on the police, depending on their ethnicity, and whether they had been stopped and searched.

Space, Place, and Our Merton:

- **Green spaces were important for young people in lockdown:** Covid-19 and lockdown made young residents feel positive about their local area, and the community that they lived in, and used local parks and green spaces more.
- **Young people don't think that they have a say in decision making:** Young residents feel excluded, and not listened to, when it comes to decisions that impact them locally. Their perception that their voice does not matter also means that they're less likely to want to get involved, whether that's having a say, or volunteering.

Merton Youth Parliament's recommendations

The Young Inspectors presented the findings of this research to Merton's Youth Parliament to think about the changes that they want to see in the borough.

Meeting twice in November, they have come up with the following six recommendations.



1. **An ongoing conversation:** Going forward with the post-Covid-19 recovery, young people need to be continuously part of the decision-making process. A first step is for decision makers in Merton to meet with the young inspectors and young people who were part of this project to discuss the key findings and next steps.
2. **Young people speaking to young people:** We spoke to over 2200 young residents in Merton during the past six months. For many of them it was the first time they had been asked questions in person by other young people about the future of their borough. Merton Council should continue to support young people to have these conversations, by replicating the approach of this project every two years.
3. **Reaching out to young people:** Merton Council does seek the views of young residents, yet many young people don't feel like their voice matters or that they have a say. More needs to be done to communicate specifically to young people in the borough, so they receive information about the council and the work it does in a way that's accessible and relevant to them.
4. **Young people participating in funding decisions:** Youth Parliament members want to be part of wider discussions on funding for youth groups and youth-based initiatives: in practice, this means members want to be included in discussions, and guide funding towards aspects such as working towards the 'sense of community'.
5. **Better support for our underrepresented young residents:** Youth Parliament members want to see more support for underrepresented groups. Proposals are as follow:
 - i. lessons on underrepresented groups to raise awareness and tackle xenophobia,
 - ii. forums to be held for underrepresented groups with the Council to give a voice and a platform to a. identify issues, and b. contribute towards solving issues.
6. **Creating a better environment for all:** Youth Parliament members want to tackle environmental concerns. Proposals are as follow:
 - i. increase awareness of recycling and issues around littering targeted towards young people,
 - ii. proposed catchment areas around schools which would act as a zone within which pupils are required to use a low carbon way of getting to school if possible and within reason.



What's one good thing, and one bad thing about Covid-19 and lockdown?

At the start of interviews and focus groups, the young inspectors asked young people what they thought was one good thing, and one bad thing about Covid-19 and lockdown. This is some of what they said.

"One good thing is you can get a better relationship with your family. One bad thing is that you can't see your friends."

"One bad thing is, I'd say, not being able to do sports. One good thing is staying at home. I couldn't go out as much."

"One bad thing is that I woke up late every single day, so I couldn't do as much, but one good thing was school since it was all online."

"One good thing was relaxing at home, one bad thing was not seeing friends."

"I would say, one good thing is staying at home, one bad thing was not doing anything outside."

"One good thing was staying at home, but one bad thing was I wasn't able to go to my cousin's house."

"One bad thing was I missed school to be honest. One good thing, ah, there was no good thing."

"Good thing was that I got some time to myself. The bad thing was that I missed education. I fell behind."

"It was alright. It was alright because we didn't have to go to school. One good thing about lockdown is you can stay home and do online school. One bad thing about lockdown is you can't go anywhere. You always have to put a mask when you're with other people."

"I think the good thing about lockdown is that you can still see your family. The bad thing about it is that you are stuck indoors, and you can't do the same things that you've done before."

"I think it's a bad thing because it's been making people die. I think it is a good thing that people can't all bunch up and it is a good thing because you're allowed to see your family and I think you're allowed six people to see."

"Good thing about lockdown is not going to school, doing online school. Bad thing is lots of my family's friends died. That wasn't fun. It was just generally boring because you're stuck inside."

"The one thing that's good about lockdown is that we don't have to go to school or do a lot of homework. And the bad thing about lockdown is that you can barely see your friends and you have to stay three feet away."

"Spending time with my family, is good. Bad thing: I felt like I was trapped in my house all the time."

"A good thing about lockdown is that you don't have to go to school, but you can't go out to play football with a down side."

"A good thing is that I can just stay in my house and chill. But bad thing is I didn't get to talk to my friends or socialise as much as I'd like to."

"A bad thing is I didn't like the learning on the computer, and the good thing is that I didn't have to go outside as much."

"The good thing was school was a lot less stressful. And the bad thing was I had to stay at home. 24/7 so I couldn't get to see my friends."

"A bad thing, firstly would be, you can't really play football. The good thing is that you got to reflect on where you're at."

"Good I didn't have to go to school, bad thing is I couldn't go out."

"Good thing is I got to spend more time with family, but I couldn't go out to play football."

"Yeah bad thing is I just got very lazy."

"My stresses with school kinda went away. Bad thing was that I couldn't see my Nan."

"Good thing is that you don't really have to do much work, when doing school stuff. The bad thing was just being alone, it was repetitive, you're not going out the house much, it's boring."

"Good thing was I got more sleep, bad thing is I wasn't learning as much at home."

"One good thing was probably I got to play my Playstation more, bad thing was that I got abit lazy."

Methodology

Peer research approach

This research took a peer research approach and has been steered and conducted by young people who grew up and live in Merton. Over the past six months Partnership for Young London (PYL) and Merton Council have worked with a group of six young residents to design and conduct research and analyse the findings. This project has been guided by four key principles:

1. **Power sharing:** Our group of peer researchers have been equal partners with Merton Council and PYL in designing this work. It was not only vital that they be part of all decisions, but that they had the final say on all decisions.
2. **Mutual respect for experience/expertise:** This project recognised the value of their lived experience as young people who live and study in Merton, and the expertise they bring to the research. Their time is valuable, and the peer researchers were paid an hourly rate for their involvement.
3. **Informed decision making:** Peer researchers were provided with training and support to make informed decisions at each stage of the process. It was vital that they are gaining skills and learning alongside the decisions that they were expected to make.
4. **Maximum involvement:** This project aimed to get peer researchers involved in as many aspects of the research project as possible; research aims, designing methods, conducting interviews, analysing results, and report design.

Process overview

The peer researchers have been supported with the design and fieldwork for this project over three key stages:

- **Stage 1: Research planning and training:** The peer researchers worked with PYL to decide on the key topics of the research and design the survey and interview guides.
- **Stage 2: Fieldwork stage:** The peer researchers, accompanied by staff from PYL, went to youth clubs, parks, and schools across Merton to conduct in-depth interviews and focus groups with a range of young people.
- **Stage 3: Analysis stage:** The peer researchers worked with PYL to analyse the data from the survey, interviews, and focus groups, coming up with the key findings and the structure of the report.

Stage 1: Research planning and training

Merton Council commissioned Partnership for Young London to conduct a peer research project looking at the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown on young people who live and learn in Merton.

The six outcome areas as set out by the Children and Young People's Plan 2019-23 were used to give a base framework for peer researchers, as they fleshed out which topics in each area, they wanted to explore the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown on. Overall, they decided to focus on:

Local young people were recruited from Merton's Young Inspector programme and were firstly involved in deciding on what they wanted to focus on. They decided to look at:

- **Being healthy:** The impact of Covid-19 on mental health and wellbeing, and exercise
- **Staying safe:** Feeling safe in Merton and the impact of Covid-19 on feelings of safety
- **Enjoying and achieving:** The experience of learning during Covid-19 and the impact of Covid-19 on hobbies and leisure
- **Getting involved, having a say:** The impact of Covid-19 on engaging with community/fair groups and other settings
- **Becoming independent:** The impact of Covid-19 on feelings about the future, and the relationship with parents
- **My Merton:** The impact of Covid-19 on friendships and leisure time

Training and skills

Peer researchers, being Merton Young Inspectors, came with existing research and interview skills from previous projects. They were provided training on specifically the peer research method, and were supported to learn new skill as they made decisions about the research. For example, they took part in:

- **Introduction to research:** The peer researchers looked at research, why it's important, and the differences between qualitative and quantitative research.
- **Survey design:** It was important that we looked at how surveys were designed, and what good and bad survey questions looked like.
- **Conducting interviews:** Peer researchers learnt about in-depth interviews and focus groups, and gained hands on experience speaking to their peers across the borough.
- **Analysing data:** Peer researchers learnt about data analysis, before looking at survey data and interview data to come up with key themes.



Stage 2: Fieldwork stage - the survey

2073 young people who live or study in Merton took part in the survey.

The survey took place between June and September 2021, with the majority of responses in August and September. We collected the following information from young people: gender, school year group, ethnicity, religious beliefs, disability, area of Merton, whether they have care experience, or are a young carer. This was used to look at the difference in responses in different groups and areas.

- School years:** We asked young people what Year group at school they were, speaking to Year 5 to Year 13. The average age across the sample was Year 9, with our survey sample having slightly older young people and less in primary school. Those in year 12 and 13, we found that the majority (92.3%) were doing an academic course, while less than one in ten were doing a vocational course (7.7%).
- Merton schools:** The survey had respondents from 42 different primary and secondary schools from across Merton. The majority of the results came from Ursuline High School (26.1%), Rutlish School (16.4%), Wimbledon College (15.2%), Harris Academy Morden (8.7%), St Mark's Church of England Academy (7.5%), and Raynes Park High School (7.1%).
- Gender:** Slightly more young men (50.2%) responded to our survey compared to young women (43.7%), with a minority preferring not to say (2.7%), non-binary/third gender (1.9%), or said other (1.6%).

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black	Chinese	Other/Prefer not to say
Survey sample	49.8%	13.1%	16.6%	13.7%	0.9%	5.8%
Key stage 3 student data	46.9%	12%	17.4%	18.2%	0.5%	3.8%

- Ethnicity:** It was important to reflect the diversity of Merton in our sample. When we compare it to ethnicity data of secondary school students in Merton, we find our survey sample has a slight overrepresentation of White young people (49.8% to 46.9%) and an overrepresentation of Black young people (18.2% to 13.7%).
- Area of Merton:** We had young people from every part of Merton in our survey, with the most common areas being Lower Morden (10.5%), Raynes Park (8.7%), Wimbledon Park (8.7%), Colliers Wood (8.2%), and Merton Park (6.3%). We had the least number of respondents from the areas of Hillside (0.3%), Trinity (0.3%), Longthornton (0.4%), Village (0.6%), and Abbey (1%). However, a third of respondents (28.6%) did not live in Merton, but studied there.
- Religious belief:** Around a third (27.3%) of our sample said that they followed no religion, while the rest said that they followed Christianity (56.4%), Islam (10.6%), Hinduism (4%), Sikhism (0.6%), and Judaism (0.5%). A small minority (3.8%) said that they followed other and specified what religion they followed.
- Disability:** Around one in twenty (4%) said that they identified as either D/deaf or disabled person, or have a long-term, with the majority said that they did not (91%) and a small minority said that they preferred not to say (5%).
- Care experienced:** A minority (3%) of the sample said that they had been in care, with the majority (93.7%) saying that they had not been, and a minority (3.3%) preferring not to say.
- Young carer:** Around one in twenty (5.2%) said that they were a young carer, with the majority (91.8%) saying that were not, and a minority (3%) preferring not to say.

Stage 2: Fieldwork stage - interviews and focus groups

Over 200 young people who live in study in Merton took part in focus groups or interviews.

Peer researchers went across the borough to conduct in-depth interviews or focus groups with young people across the borough. Interviews were semi-structured, with the interview guide being created by peer researchers and inspired by the survey that they previously designed.

On average the interviews lasted around 20 minutes, with focus groups varying between an hour to 15 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded for those above 16, and notes were taken for those below 16. The quotes throughout this report are taken from those interviews and focus groups.

Interview and focus group map

- Total:** The peer researchers managed to conduct 13 interviews, and 27 focus groups, in conversations lasting a total of 13.3 hours. This was turned into anonymised transcripts for analysis.
- Age:** They spoke to 60 young people aged 9 to 12, 60 between the ages of 13 and 16. The rest, over 80, were aged above 16. In the interviews and focus groups there was an under presentation of over 16s.
- Places:** The peer researchers spoke to young people in a range of spaces and places, including three primary schools (Liberty Primary School, Merton Abbey Primary School, Bond Primary School), a high school (Richards Lodge), a college (Merton College), two youth clubs (Uptown Youth Club, Acacia Adventures Playground), three Merton Council Services (My Futures, Youth Offending Services, Children in Care), two SEND services (Persied Upper School, M.A.G.I.C youth project), and three sports projects (Fulham FC Kicks Projects at Harris Academy, Goals Wimbledon, Lavender Park).
- Specialist support:** The peer researchers also tried to reach young people who would not be well served by the survey, or might have been impacted by Covid-19 and lockdown differently. They conducted interviews and a focus group with young people with special education needs and disabilities, interviews with young offenders, and a focus group with Merton's Children in Care Council.



Stage 3: Analysis stage

The peer researchers then came together to look at the survey, interview, and focus group data. It was important that they were given research skills to conduct the analysis themselves and decided on the key findings as they saw them.

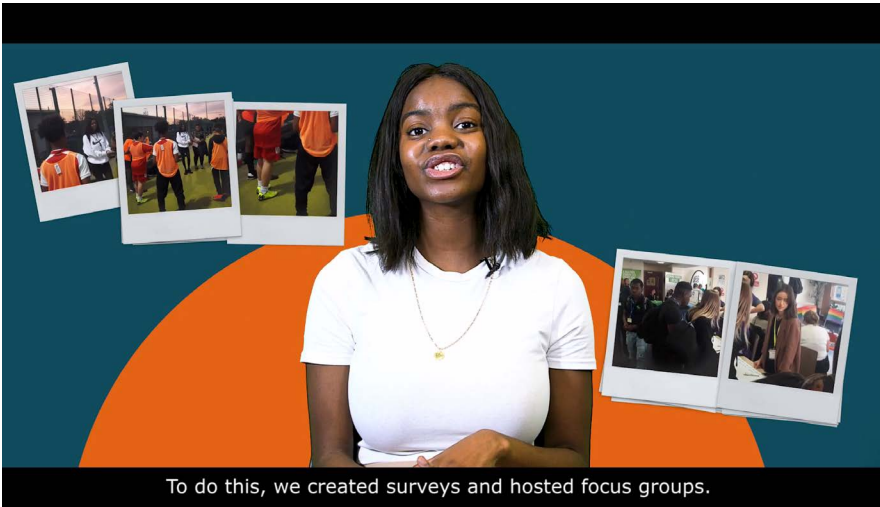
Quantitative analysis

- Learning:** The peer researchers learned about statistical analysis software (SPSS) and how analysis is done on quantitative surveys.
- Familiarisation:** PYL presented the peer researchers with all the data from the survey, including the basic percentages for each question, and all relationships that were found to be statistically significant (p-value of 0.05 or less).
- Interpretation:** The peer researchers then wrote an interpretation of each data point and made a judgement about how significant it was.
- Structure:** They then organised all the data into a structure that they thought made logical sense, which the final report would be organised into.

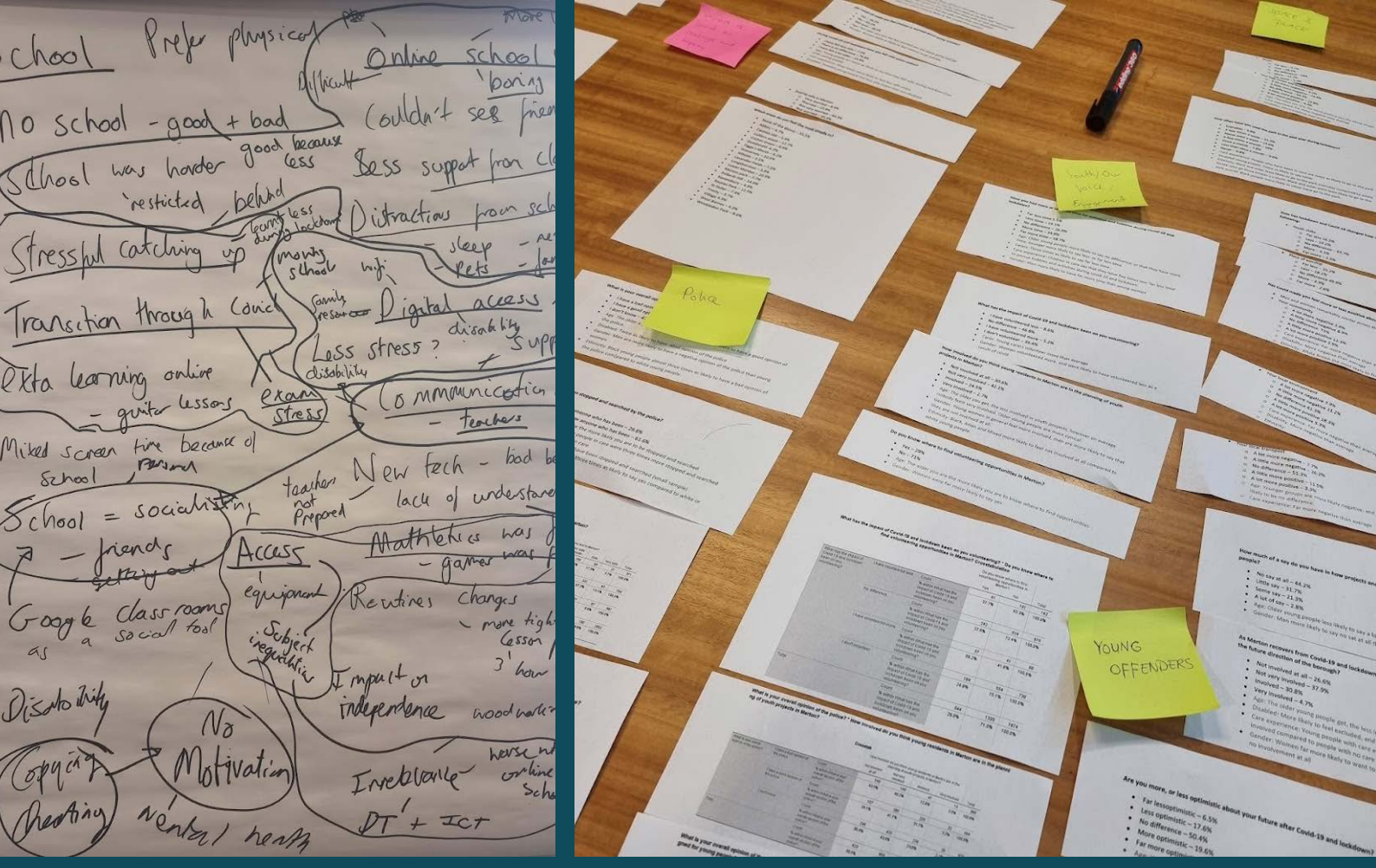
Qualitative analysis

- Learning:** The peer researchers learned about qualitative data analysis, like content and thematic analysis, and how to code transcripts.
- Familiarisation:** PYL presented the peer researchers with completed anonymised cleaned transcripts from the interviews and focus groups to read through.
- Interpretation:** The peer researchers coded the transcripts looked for the key themes and ideas that came out of each.
- Structure:** The peer researchers brought all their codes together, and the frequency that they occurred, to generate some structured key findings from the qualitative data.

The peer researchers also worked with Filmanthropy over two sessions to learn how about film making and were supported to create a video that features the peer researchers sharing their key findings. Young people from Uptown Youth Centre attending the filming day to share their experiences based on the key findings of the report.



To see the full video, please click the image or scan the QR code:

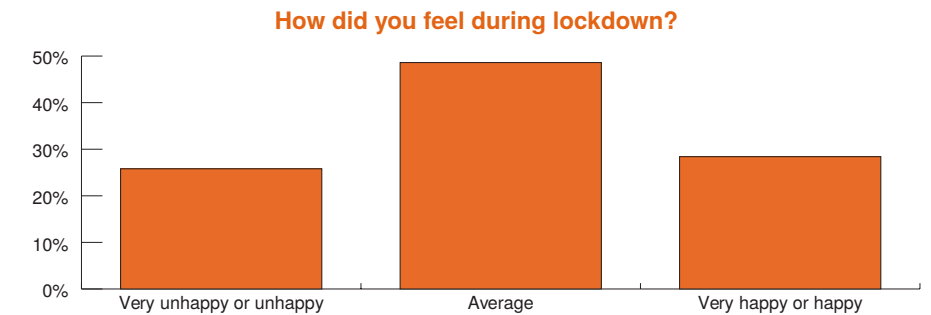


1. The impact of Covid-19 on health

Happiness during and after Covid-19

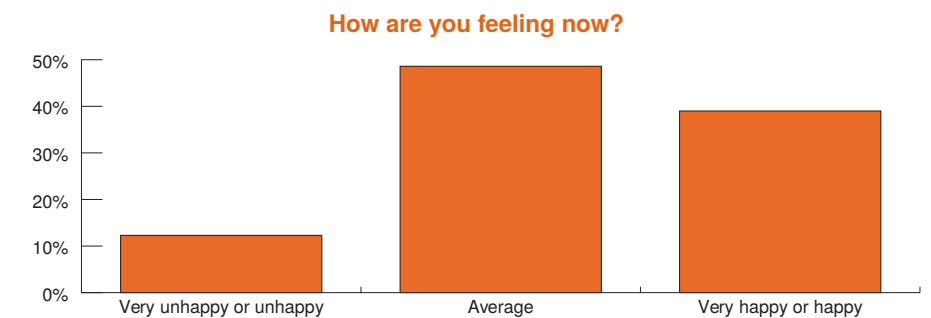
Young people in Merton had a very mixed experience of lockdown, ranging from being bored to feeling more isolated and anxious about their mental health.

We asked young people how they felt during lockdown and one in four (23.8%) told us they felt unhappy or very unhappy, while slightly more than one in four (28.4%) said that they felt happy or very happy. However, certain groups were more impacted during lockdown than others. For example, disabled young people were far more likely (39%) to say they were unhappy or very unhappy.



"I have ADHD and it's mad. I got diagnosed when I was in year 5, and I was talking about how lockdown got me anxious. I was scared to get Covid, and when I used to eat around people, it made me feel weird."

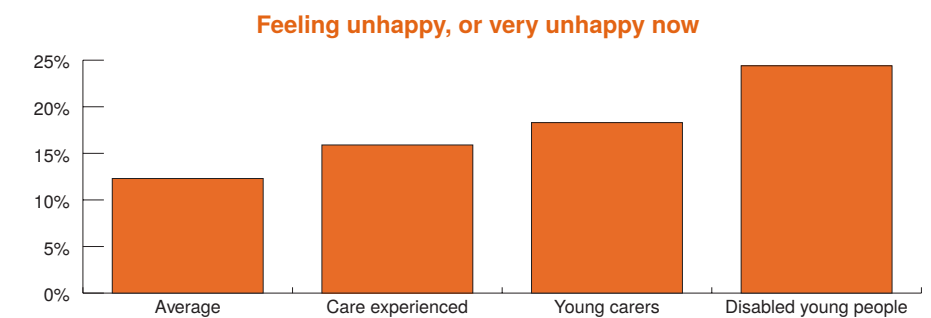
This contrasts with how young people were feeling at the time of the survey, after lockdown in Summer, with two in five (39%) saying they now feel happy or very happy and only around one in ten (12.3%) saying they felt unhappy or very unhappy.



Clearly young people are feeling far happier now than they did during lockdown. There was also a clear difference in the experience of the first lockdown compared to subsequent summer lockdowns.

"The first lockdown we couldn't really do nothing so we just stuck at home playing games and stuff but the second one was pretty calm you could still go out and do stuff so that was alright."

While all groups were more likely to feel happier now than during lockdown, certain groups were still more likely to be unhappy or very unhappy such as disabled young people (24.4%), care experienced young people (15.9%), and young carers (18.3%).



Young people who were unhappy during Covid-19 and lockdown were more likely to say that they were unhappy now.

The impact of Covid-19 on mental health

Almost two out of five (37.1%) young people said that they were worried or very worried about their mental health during lockdown. Young people who said they felt unhappy during lockdown were far more likely to have been worrying about their mental health during this time.



We found in our interviews and focus groups that Covid-19 and lockdown that young people's mental health was most impacted by the health risks of Covid-19. Some young people were worried about getting the virus, others about giving it to family and friends. A few young people even spoke about how they suffered a bereavement as a result of the virus, and the impact that had on their mental health.

"I felt really scared of Covid during lockdown. Because my Dad actually passed away during lockdown because of Covid. Yeah, I had no idea it was that bad, I thought it was just a cough or a sneeze, but he had a heart attack because of it. So that had a really big toll on my mental health."

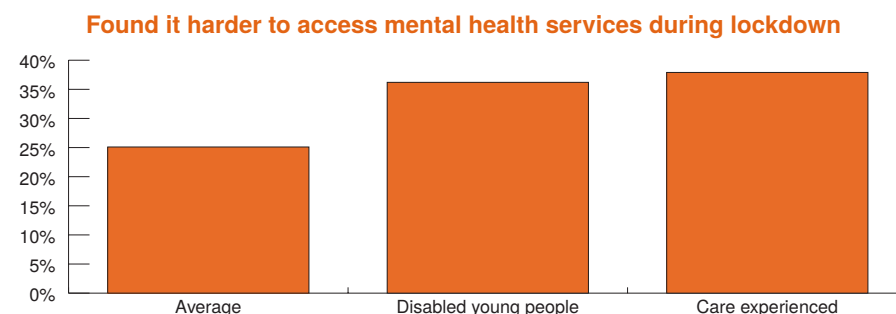
Young people are most likely to seek support from parents (63.5%) followed by friends (54.3%) and family members (47.9%). They are far less likely to turn to professionals such as teachers (28.4%), GPs (14.1%), CAHMS professionals or mental health workers (9.9%), or social workers or youth workers (6.1%).

Worryingly one in six (15.5%) said that they had nobody that they trusted with their mental health, with young men more likely than young women to say nobody.



"If you just want to get something off your chest, or you just need to be listened to, you love your friends and your peers. But sometimes you need a responsible adult, who can tell it how it is."

One in four (25.1%) also told us that they had found it harder or much harder to access services for their mental health. Groups like disabled young people (36.2%), and those in care (37.9%) were more likely to find it harder.



"But watching people around me that have been on the news suffering and watching how many families were impacted..."

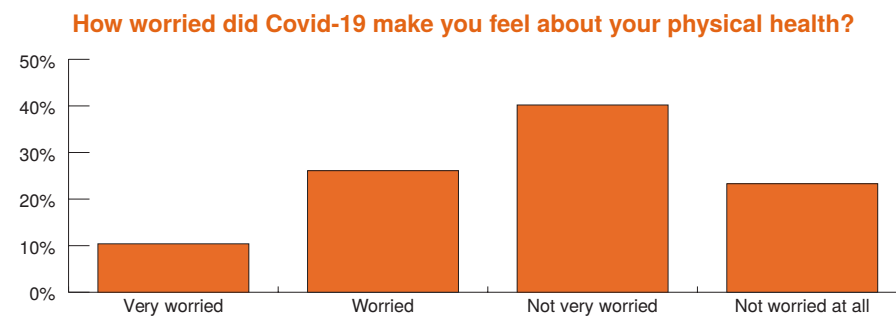
This really happened and those families that were not eating properly, not having money for gas, and stuff like that, I find that really depressing."

The impact of Covid-19 on physical health

During lockdown young people were less able to go out and exercise and remaining indoors has a clear impact on their physical health and wellbeing. Over a third (33.9%) of young people said that Covid-19 had made them feel more negative or a lot more negative about their health and general wellbeing, though half (51.3%) said that Covid-19 made no difference to it.

"Lockdown made my fitness worse. I just started feeling lazy."

Similarly, over a third (36.5%) of young people said that they were worried or very worried about their physical health during Covid-19 and lockdown. Worries ranged from feeling more unfit due to lack of exercise, eating too many snacks, or getting the virus. However, a majority (63.5%) said that they were not very worried or not worried at all about their physical health during this time.



Exercise during lockdown

Young people told us that they got less exercise during Covid-19 and lockdown, as it was harder with their gyms and their local sports clubs being shut. One in five (20.6%) young people said that they got less than an hour or no exercise during Covid-19 and lockdown, while almost half (49.2%) of the young people in the survey got two hours or less of exercise.

The amount of exercise a young person got varied across different groups, with young men getting more exercise than young women overall, and White young people far more likely to get more exercise than Black or Asian young people.



Furthermore, young people who did two hours or less of exercise were more likely to say that Covid-19 and lockdown had a negative impact on their health and were more likely to be worried about their physical health.

Sleep and routine

One of the most common things we heard about the experience of young people during lockdown was that they were bored. The words bored or boring came up over 75 times in interviews and focus group and was usually the first reaction to questions about their lockdown experience.

"Sleeping, just sleeping. Wake up, eat a little bit, sleep again. Go on your phone for a bit, sleep again. That's just how it was."

However, we also heard about irregular sleeping patterns, late nights, and increased screen time before bed which meant that while many were sleeping more, the quality of sleep was mixed. This seemed to have a real impact on the mood and mentality of young people we spoke to.

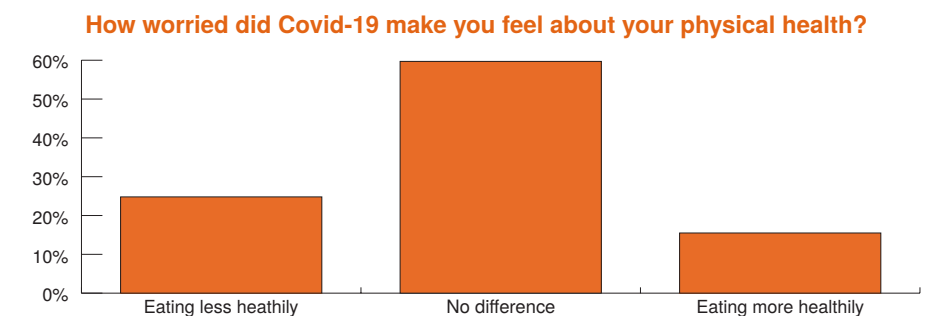
Food and diet during lockdown

Young people had a mixed experience of healthy eating during lockdown overall, with many eating more healthily with their parents at mealtimes but eating more snacks or treats throughout the day.

"I used to eat well, but during lockdown it was just boring so I was just eating."

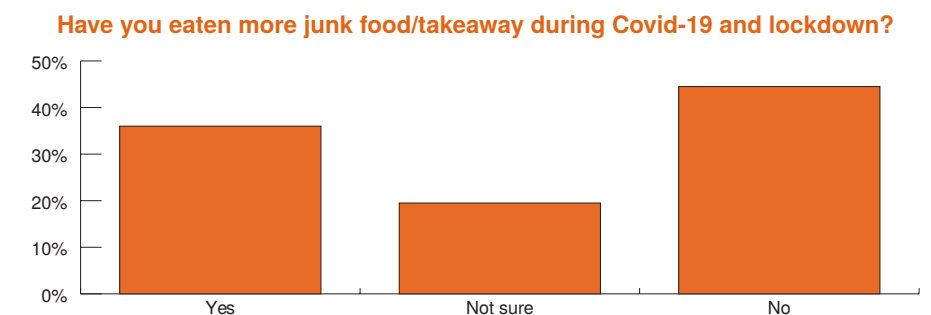
Overall while young people told us that they were eating less healthily compared to eating more healthily (24.7% to 15.5%), the majority (59.7%) said that lockdown made no difference to how they are.

We found that the older a young person was the more likely they were to say that they were eating more healthily during lockdown, and that young women to say that they ate less healthily.



"I had no schedule. I didn't take breaks for lunch. I just ate in front of my computer because I wasn't going to stop and eat because it was lunch time."

Young people's diets in lockdowns became far more tied to the choices of their parents, as they were not able to make their own decisions with shops and takeaways being shut, and not making the journey into school. Over a third (36%) said that they had eaten more junk food during Covid-19 and lockdown, with young women more likely to say that they had.



"My mum noticed I was putting quite a bit of weight on so she tried to like encourage me to eat healthy foods and stuff so just eat a lot of kiwis and almonds and grapes and stuff."

This reflects what we heard in interviews, where junk food and snacks became an activity for many young people who were bored indoors.

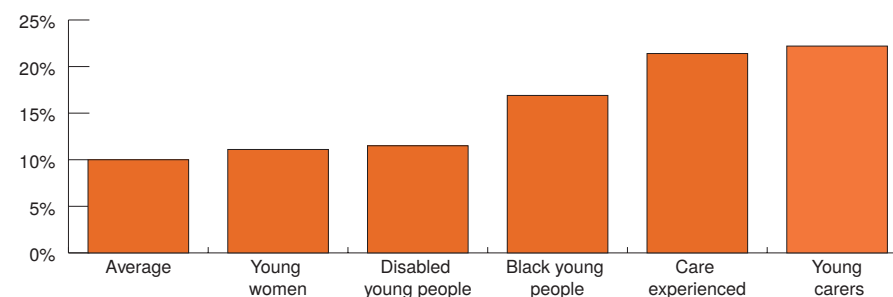
Food poverty

We found that many young people living and studying in Merton face food poverty, skipping meals or not eating for a full day because there isn't enough food. We only asked secondary school students as it was not appropriate for primary school students.

Firstly, one in ten (10%) young people said that their meals were smaller, or they had to skip meals because there wasn't enough food, while one in ten (10%) were not sure.

However, different groups were more likely to tell us that they had eaten less or skipped a meal: young women (11.1%), disabled young people (11.5%), Black young people (16.9%), care experienced young people (21.4%), and young carers (22.2%).

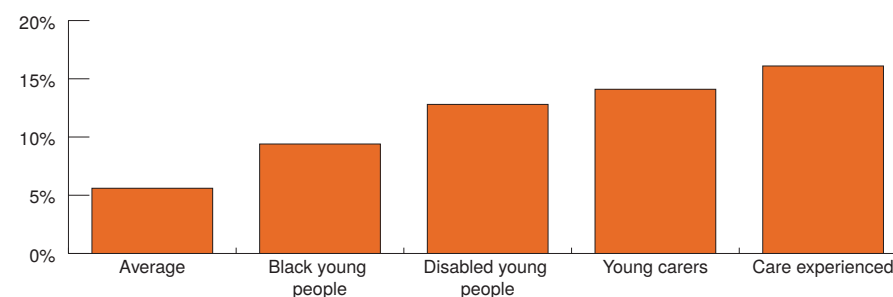
Said yes to "Were your meals ever smaller than usual or did you have to skip meals completely because there wasn't enough food?"



Secondly, one in twenty (5.6%) young people said they had to not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough food, while one in twenty (5.5%) were not sure. Unsurprisingly all those who said they have had to not eat for a whole day also have all skipped meals because there was not enough food.

Once again, different groups were more likely to tell us that they had not eaten for a whole day because there wasn't enough food, like Black young people (9.4%), disabled young people (12.8%), young carers (14.1%), and care experienced young people (14.1%).

Said yes to "Did you ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough food?"



"I was lucky enough that I was getting support from a local food bank. So they would bring me food once a week, like the general stuff, but there's not everything that you eat in there or that you will want or need."

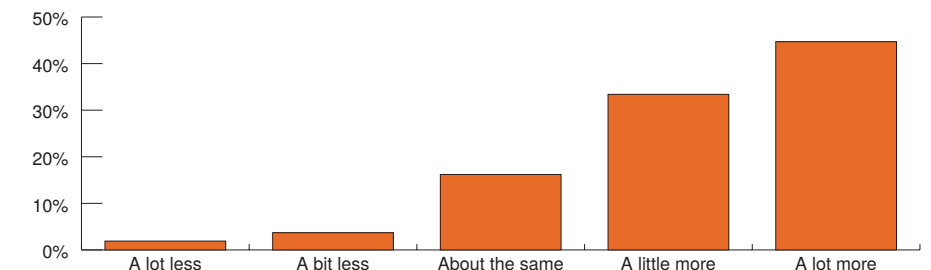
Young people turned to screens during lockdown

Many young people turned to their screens during lockdown, from their televisions to play video games, their computers to attend school, or their phones to socialise.

Four out of five (78.1%) young people said that they spent more time on screens during lockdown compared to before, with many (44.7%) saying they were spending a lot more time.

This had a clear negative impact on the amount of physical activity young people had, and some spoke about the strain to their eyes or neck.

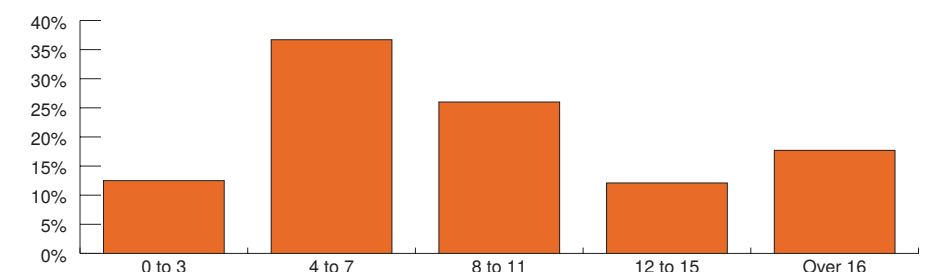
Have you spent more or less time on screens during the pandemic, compared to before?



"It wasn't just emotionally difficult, but it was physically difficult as well. You were sitting at a screen for six hours a day. I got neck cracks; my back was aching. I got headaches. Your eyes as well because you're looking at a screen. It was physically draining."

When we asked young people how many hours they spent on screen during lockdown, one in three (29.8%) said that they were spending more than 12 hours a day on screens. Certain groups with more responsibilities in the household, like young carers, saw smaller increases in the amount of screen time during lockdown compared to the average.

How many hours did you spend on screens a day during lockdown?



Screens as a social lifeline

Yet while increased screen time may have negatively impacted the physical health of young people during lockdown, many of them told us how screen time was a lifeline for their mental health during lockdown. In part it was an activity and something to do in a time where everything was shut.

Yet the most important aspect of screen time was in providing a social aspect outside of the household that provided young people a way to keep in touch with their friends. Young men spoke about playing with friends online, while all young people spoke about talking on WhatsApp or social media with friends.

"It was tricky over lockdown to see my friends, so when I could see my friends online, I was very happy."

In some cases, screen time would help young people connect with family in other households too, especially older relatives that they could not visit because of fear of spreading the virus to them.

Merton Children in Care Council

We spoke to the Merton Children in Care Council, a group of six young people aged 16 to 25, about the impact of Covid-19 on care experienced young people in the borough. We found that Covid-19 had a disproportionate impact of children in care, who were more likely to rely on services that were impacted during lockdown. However, many of the key issues they spoke about pre-dated Covid-19 like how care givers are involved in fostering.

Lack of informal support and mental health support

While we found that many young people relied on their friends and family during Covid-19 and lockdown, many of those in the Merton Children in Care Council could not rely on informal support from their family. Especially for those young people who had to shield, tasks such as getting groceries delivered could be far trickier or costly.

“So, I don’t keep in contact with my family because I don’t really have family.”

We found that young people in care did have a strong sense of reliance on their peers and friends, however often the challenges they faced required formal support. Many were far more reliant on social services, being a young parent, or in I need of food bank services. Access to these services was impacted by Covid-19 and lockdown, which had an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many care experienced young people.

“I just feel like there should be more services...There are more for behavioural issues, than mental health, I’ll say. You don’t actually have an organisation that just deals with mental health in Merton, not that I know of anyway.”

The Merton Children in Care Council also felt that existing mental health services need to be expanded and believed there was a general lack of promotion or awareness of the support available.

Many would turn to other professional health services like GPs, but often experienced insufficient support of either not being referred or not receiving the appropriate treatment. Others would not go to healthcare professionals, believing GPs were there only for what they thought were “more serious issues”.

“You go to doctors [saying] I’m struggling with my mental health, and they just slap a packet of tablets.”

Challenges with the care system

The Merton Children in Care Council raised many issues that they felt needing changing with the care system and social services. Firstly, they told us that a lack of consistency and familiarity was negatively impacting their experience of the care system. Changing families and social workers made young people feel “tossed around” and prevented young people from building those trusted relationships that are key to them seeking professional support.

“Going to so many different families, having so many different social workers. You know, it gives you trust issues, attachment issues. Now, the age that I am right now, it’s really affecting me, especially in relationships, [...] I’m starting to put links together, like my childhood and the way I am now.”

Covid-19 also brought challenges with the shift to remote and online working, with many telling us about the importance of in person contact to build personal and trusting relationships with social workers or caregivers. They placed less importance on the skills or procedures of social service, and more on the trust in those relationships.

“And when you’re so settled with someone or family and then they just move you on, for like, practical reasons. It just doesn’t make any sense when you look at the big picture.”

Expanding on the procedures of being assigned to foster families, many instances were raised for the need for more careful and suitable selection of placement. A desire for having similar cultural backgrounds has been mentioned to be important towards feelings of being understood and feeling accepted. Moreover, the instance of family members as obvious caregivers without more careful consideration has been flagged to be highly problematic.

“The situation that I went through could have been easily avoided if they just went and took those slight extra measures just to check if that person was mentally capable to take care of a [child] that was going through puberty.”

Apart from careful selecting the appropriate family to the young person in care, the need for equipping foster families with (social) skills was raised as highly necessary as well, especially concerning families who do not have children of their own.

“I feel like those types of foster carers need more training because 1) they’ve never dealt with a child before. 2) It’s not just any child. We have trauma. We’ve been through things that most children haven’t. So they’re dealing with those two things: the child and the trauma”

This was especially lacking when potentially being in foster care together with siblings, when the burden of dealing with trauma falls on other siblings.

“In my own prepubescent mind, I don’t even know how to absorb and deal with trauma yet, but I’m looking after my sibling, because this foster carer was not trained on how to do that.”

Many young people also expressed the need for professional support around trauma, especially in situations which require restoring family relationships and personal recovery.

“I’m a child talking to another child, and trying to act as a professional, that’s insane.”

Although there was no mention of direct improved experiences, most experienced massive improvements of social services compared to when they entered the system. Most young people in in care are committed to help future generations and are passionate about both sharing their stories, reaching out to those going through similar experiences

“So as much as our trauma and upbringing in the care system isn’t the best for some of us, we can only hope that the younger generation has it better and Merton social services have improved massively from when I first come into it.”

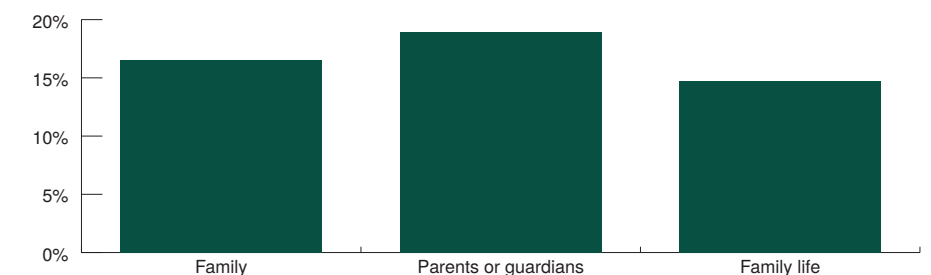
2. The impact of Covid-19 on relationships

Young people spent more time with family

During lockdown, being stuck in the house, young people ended up spending far more time with family which we found was a generally positive experience.

We found that consistently a third of young people told us that there was a positive or very positive impact from Covid-19 and lockdown on their relationship with their family (30.3%), parents or guardians (31.2%), or general family life (31.9%).

Net positive impact of Covid-19 and lockdown



However, there was also a consistent minority that told us there was a negative or very negative impact from Covid-19 and lockdown on their relationship with their family (13.8%), parents or guardians (12.3%), or general family life (17.2%).

"I spent so much time with my family. Before my sister would always be in her room, I would always be in mine. And my parents would be downstairs. But because of Covid-19 and because we spent most of our birthdays inside, we had a game night that we would do."

"It was so much fun spending time with them and being able to talk to them. Now I'm so much closer with my mum, I always tell her about my mental health, about what happened at school. When I get home, she's first person I go to. And that's because of Covid-19 and me being able to talk to her more."

Many we spoke to use the time that they spent with family to bond, learning from their siblings or taking part in activities with parents. As family was many young people's only social interaction, as they could not see their friends, it became more valued. Although, not everyone had the same experience and a minority spoke about the rising tensions in the household.

"My mum's a teacher, so she also had to teach on zoom, my brother had to do online school and we didn't always have enough computers. So, we couldn't all do the work at the same time. Because there were so many constraints, there was a lot of head butting, and it made us a bit less close."

We asked over 2000 young people what had been the best part of their year. There were three key themes in the answers they gave:

1. **Spending time with family:** Young people told us that spending time with their family during lockdown, or seeing family members again after lockdown was lifted was one of the best parts of their year. Some young people enjoyed their parents working from home, and the opportunity to see them more as a result.
2. **Spending more time at home:** For many young people not having to go into school and staying at home was one of the best parts of the year. Young people enjoyed having more free time to reflect, speak to friends, and play video games.
3. **Lockdown being lifted:** The best thing of the year for many young people was lockdown being lifted and the freedom that came with it. Young people felt relieved to go outside, see friends, and take part in activities.

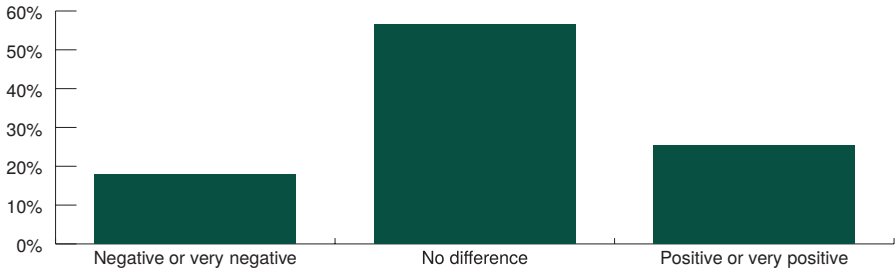


Friendships during lockdown

Covid-19 and lockdown had a clear impact on the friendships that young people have, and a young person's ability to make friends. Young people were not able to go out, and see their friends, and social media apps became vital to keeping in touch.

Young people were mixed on the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown on their friendships, with around one in four believing it had a positive impact (25.4%) compared to less than one in five (17.9%) who thought it had a negative impact. However, a majority (56.6%) said that it made no difference.

What was the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown on your friendships?

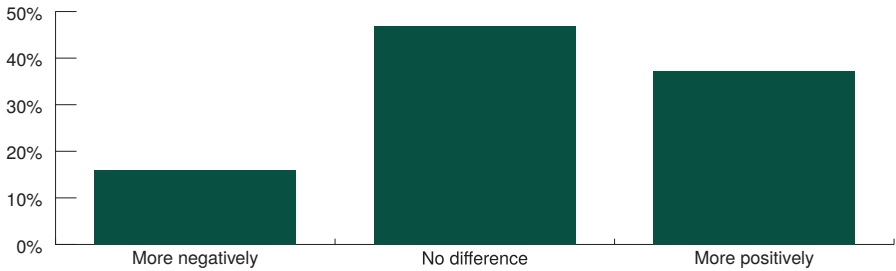


We heard in interviews how lockdown strengthened the closer friendships young people had, but could mean that many of the more casual friendships from school would be lost.

I remember I became so close with people during lockdown but I also lost a lot of friends. Some friends I called all the time, we would watch movies together. But with other friends who I only really saw in school and because I can't go out and meet them I didn't really communicate with them. So, we've lost our bond."

For those who already had friends, Covid-19 and lockdown could strengthen those relationships, with young people far more likely to say the pandemic had made them feel positive about their friends (37.2%) than to say it had made them feel more negative (15.9%).

How did Covid-19 and lockdown make you feel towards your friends?



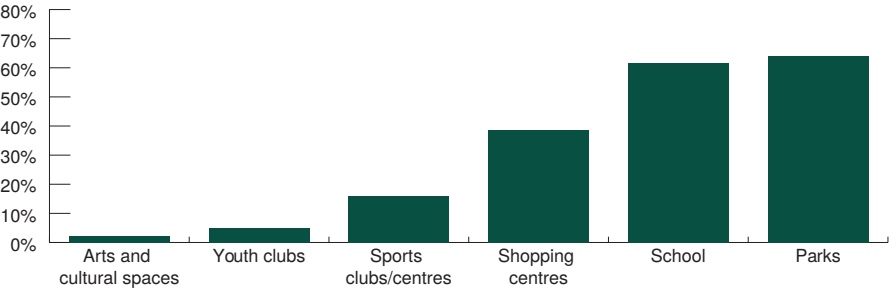
Keeping in touch and making friends

We asked young people what spaces they hang out in Merton with friends, and found that parks (63.9%), school (61.6%) and each other homes (43.2%) were the most common spaces.

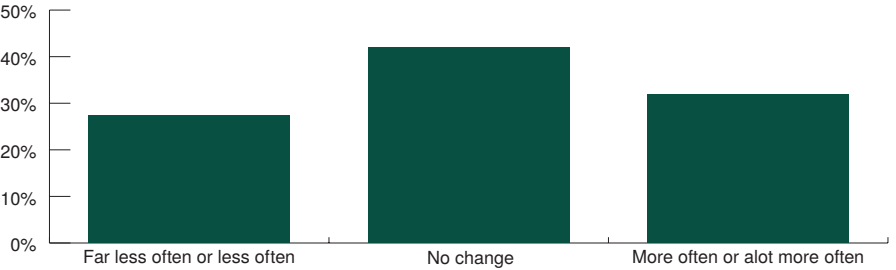
Meanwhile arts and cultural spaces (2.2%) and youth clubs (5.1%) were the least likely to be used.

During Covid-19 and lockdown young people were unable to see their friends and resorted to other means to stay in touch. We found that slightly more young people said that they spoke to their friends more often during this time than less (31.8% to 27.3%), though the most common answer was that (41.9%) there was no difference. However, we found that disabled young people were more likely to say that they spoke to their friends far less because of Covid-19 and lockdown (40.7% to 26.2%).

What spaces do you hang out with friends in Merton?



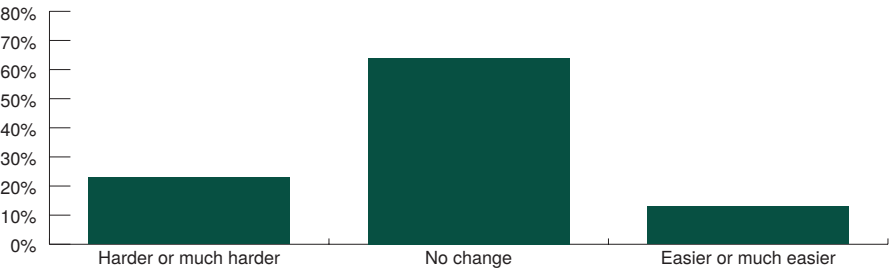
How did Covid-19 and lockdown change how often you speak to friends?



"I lost almost all of my friends. It's nothing sad, like we just grew apart or you guys have your friendships change. You can't really see your friends in person, sometimes it's just like sad. It's just awkward when it's normal. We just looked at each other and didn't really talk."

Almost one in four (23%) young people said that they found it harder or much harder to make friends during Covid-19 and lockdown, though over one in ten (13%) said it was easier and a majority (64%) said that it made no difference. Again we found disabled young people more likely to find it harder to make friends (30.8% to 22.5%).

Has Covid-19 and lockdown impacted on your ability to make friends?



There was a clear relationship between how often young people spoke to their friends, and their ability to make friends. Those who spoke less to their friends also found it harder to make friends.

Anxiety about family, and support

We found that almost half (42.6%) of the young people we spoke to said that they were either worried or very worried about their family during lockdown, however over half (57.4%) said they did not worry much or at all. While a third (32.2%) of young people said that they were worried or very worried about their friendships during Covid-19 and lockdown.

The majority (67.8%) said that they were not very worried or not at all worried about their friendships.

In interviews and focus groups we found that the anxiety of Covid-19 and lockdown was usually linked to anxieties and fear about or from parents. Young people would worry about their family members contracting the virus and dying from it, but also their anxiety from Covid-19 would come from parents.

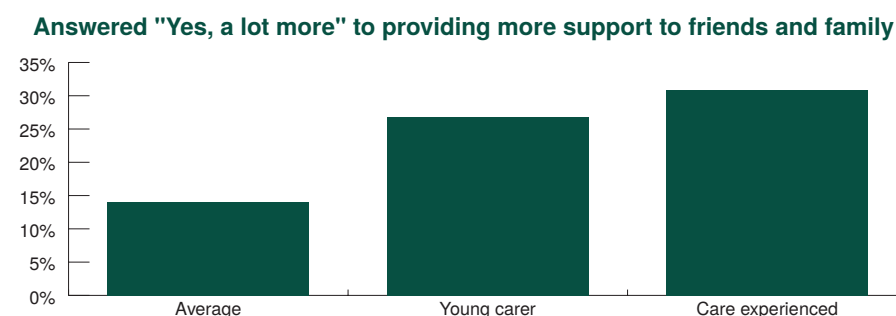
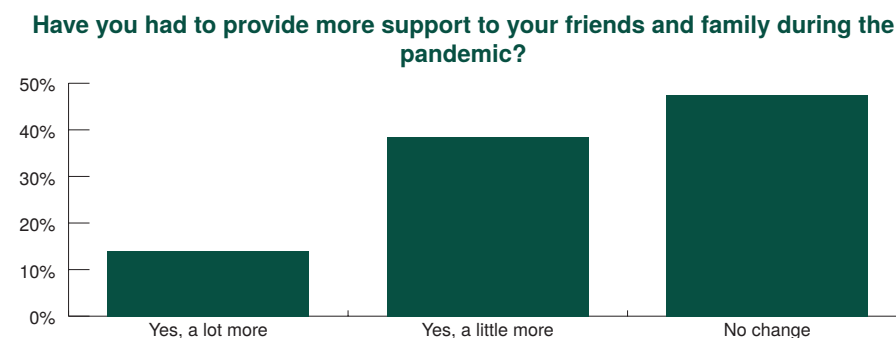
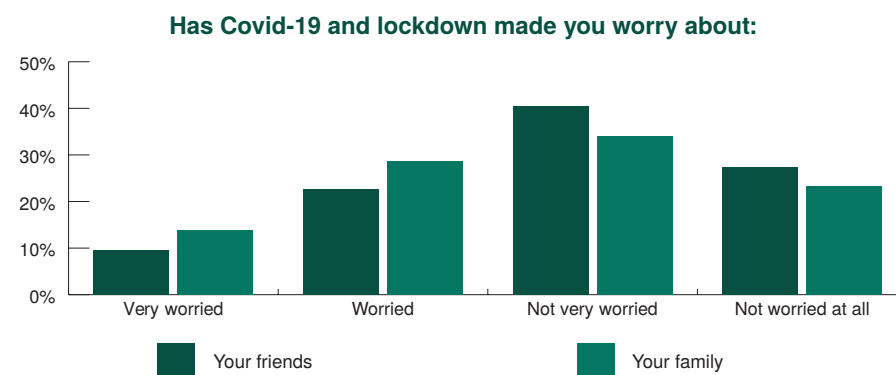
"My mum has always been superstitious about the tube. She won't sit down on the tube. Now she's more superstitious: don't touch anything, and sanitize your hands."

Supporting friends and family

Young people worried about their friends and family also found themselves providing more support to them during Covid-19 and lockdown. Over half (52.5%) of young people said they had to provide either a little or a lot more support to friends and family during the pandemic, while less than half (47.5%) said there was no difference.

The support provided by young people to their peers was more common with certain groups. For example, young people in care were far more likely (65.4% to 12.1%) than those with no care experience to provide support to their friends and family.

When we asked young people if they felt able to help their friends with their challenges during Covid-19 and lockdown the majority (57.9%) said they did. Only a small minority (13.6%) said they did not feel able to provide help to their friends. Certain groups felt less able to help friends like disabled young people (42.7%), those with care experience (50%), and young women (64.5%).



"I lost almost all of my friends. It's nothing sad, like we just grew apart or you guys have your friendships change."

You can't really see your friends in person, sometimes it's just like sad. It's just awkward when it's normal. We just looked at each other and didn't really talk."

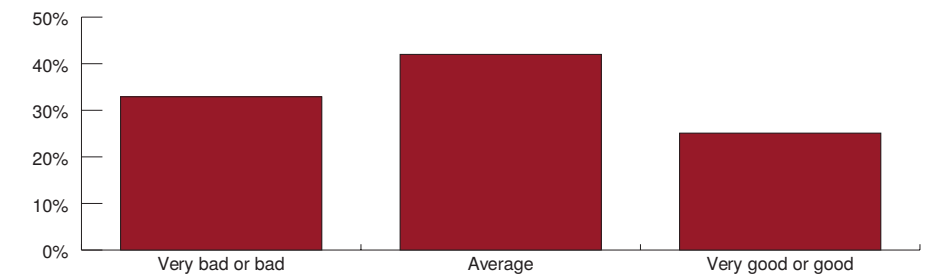
3. The impact of Covid-19 on education

The transition to online learning

One of the biggest impacts of Covid-19 and lockdown was on the young people's education.

We found that a third (32.9%) of young people said that they had a negative or very negative experience of learning during Covid-19 and lockdown. One in four (25.1%) had a positive or very positive experience. Additionally, young men were more likely to say that they had a bad or very bad (37.9%) experience of education online than young women (25.3%).

What was your experience of learning during Covid-19 and lockdown?



In interviews and focus groups, we largely found a more negative experience of online school. Firstly, many found the work far harder than normal online. Some felt that there was more work set during online school than normal. Subjects with a focus on hands on learning, such as Design and Technology, were also far harder to learn online compared to mathematics.

"Some lessons you can tell that they are so irrelevant because they don't have any work to give us because we don't have the resources. I do textiles. And throughout the whole of last year, I haven't stitched a single thing since I started the course. I haven't made a single product using the sewing machine because of Covid you can't touch it, or we don't have stuff at home. So, you can tell that they don't have anything to give us. They're just making it up on the go."

Online learning was particularly challenging for young people with a disability, who found it harder to easily access support from their teachers.

"My sister, she's got a learning disability. So, it was really, really hard on her because she needs that help in person from a teacher and she couldn't have that when she was back home. And then the teachers would be calling my mum to say that she's not doing this work. And my mum said : she's finding it very hard to do the work because she needs extra help and she's not getting it at home."

Many also felt that support from teachers was far harder to access online, as one to one help or interactions over a desk were replaced with group video platforms which made this hard to impossible. Additionally, many young people missed the support from their classmates in person.

"(I prefer in person learning) because teachers could actually explain – and see where you're going wrong or what you're doing. They can talk to you physically and it's just easier, you can hear them more clearly, understand it more."

Experience of online education was also dependent on young people's living situation, with many young people finding it hard to concentrate at home with additional distractions like pets, entertainment, or having to do work for their family.

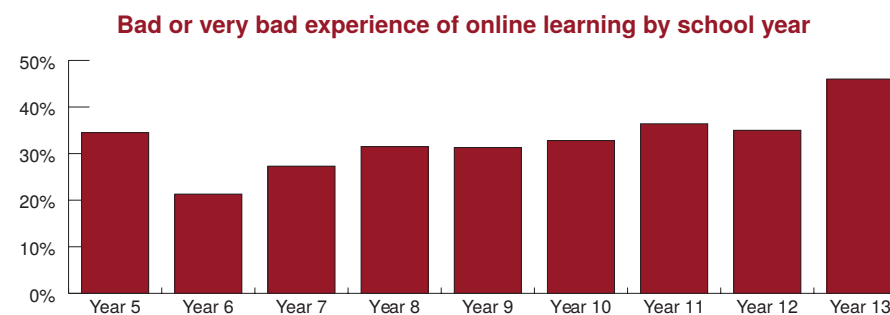
Online learning at critical moments

We found that young people were more likely to describe online learning as negative or very negative if they were older, or in transitional stages. Those who had exams, or mocks, or were looking to move onto university or school found online learning harder.

"They were just giving us too much work. Just overloading. I couldn't handle it, I just took my time. I told the teacher that they gave me too much work. I can't do it all at once and they kept on threatening me like, they're the ones that's going to be decided my grade and using it as a threat to rush me and stress me."

Older groups of young people were slightly more likely to say that they had a bad or very bad experience of education, like Year 13 (46%), Year 12 (35%) Year 11 (36.4%), and Year 10 (32.8%).

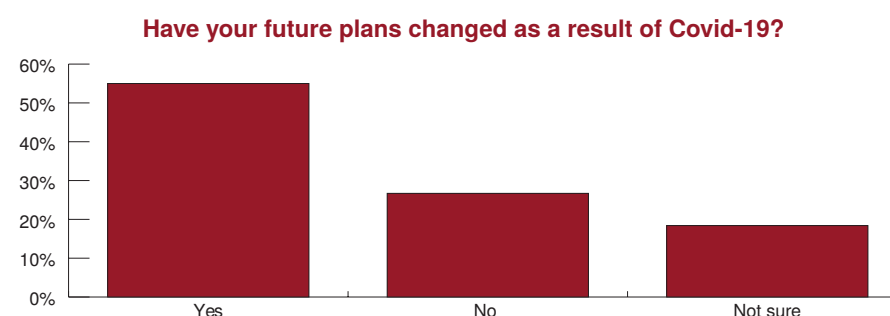
This chimes with the experience of many who had mock exams or exams and the learning for them disrupted.



"I think it also impacts how we feel now even the lockdown has finished because the work that we were set during lockdown, we still get tested on now. So, every time we get tested on this and we get low grades, teachers will put you down a set. We feel really demotivated; our self-esteem goes down."

There was a mixed experience of online education and learning. Young people in transitions (year 11 and year 13) and those who were impacted by changes in exams, were more likely to have a negative experience of education during lockdown.

As a result of the disruption, a majority (55%) of young people said that their plans for the future had changed as result of Covid-19 and lockdown, with only one in four (26.7%) said that their plans had not changed.



"I think it's just extra pressure because we are the year that is probably going to sit the real GCSEs. Because after two years, those processes haven't evaluated their teaching assessments."

"Are they going to be harder? Are they going to be easier? We don't really know."

"The exam boards haven't exactly told us what's going to happen. Last year, they got things taken off the syllabus. So, are they going to be put back on for us?"

"We have to catch up with all the things that we've been doing during lockdown too. So there are a lot of things that have been piled onto us."

The support from schools during lockdown

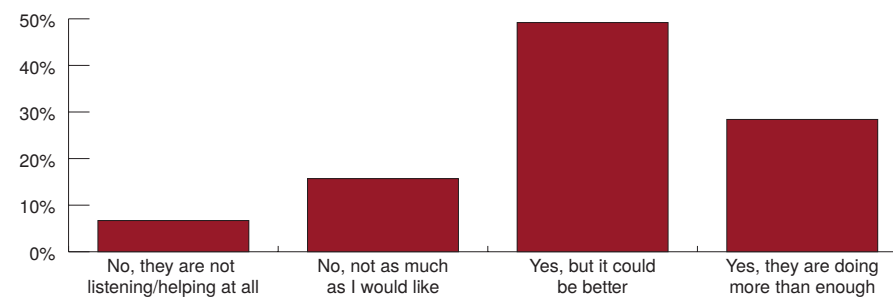
We found that for the majority (61.4%) of young people in our survey said that school was all online during Covid-19 and lockdown, with only one in ten (9.4%) still attending school throughout.

If there was one clear positive of online learning, it was that some younger people enjoyed not having to go into school in person. The other key positive from young people about this period of online learning was the way in which schools attempting to support them with their learning remotely. Many schools during this time provided additional support to students, such as providing them with laptops to work.

We found that a good majority (77.6%) of young people said that school was doing enough to support them, and we heard from many about the laptops they had been provided to support their learning.

For many having to learn away from school presented many predictable issues around digital access such as unreliable Wi-Fi, having to share computers with siblings, or programmes not working how they were supposed to.

Do you think schools are doing enough to support you (equipment, education, etc)?

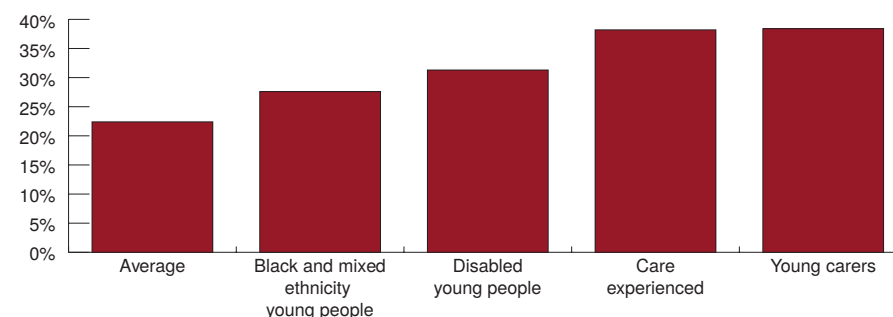


"A lot of people could also couldn't get online as well. Some people I know only have one computer between their family and her sister was working. She couldn't work at the same time as her sister. So she'd say: Oh, I can't attend this lesson right now because my sister is using the computer. I don't know about you, but I would have to be in my room because my mom would be working downstairs. My sister would working downstairs. So there was not one set space where I can work."

One in five (22.4%) said that school was not doing as much to support them as they would like, or not helping or listening at all.

Certain groups especially felt that their schools were not helping them enough, such as young carers (38.4%). Black and Mixed ethnicity young people were also far more likely to feel unsupported (26.3% and 28.9%), compared to White and Asian young people (19.7% and 20.2%).

Answered "No, they are not listening/helping at all" or "No, not as much as I would like"



"Some people like slacked off over lockdown. They weren't doing as much work. But now we have to make up for all that time."

I don't really know. I feel like I have to reevaluate everything that I thought I wanted to do.

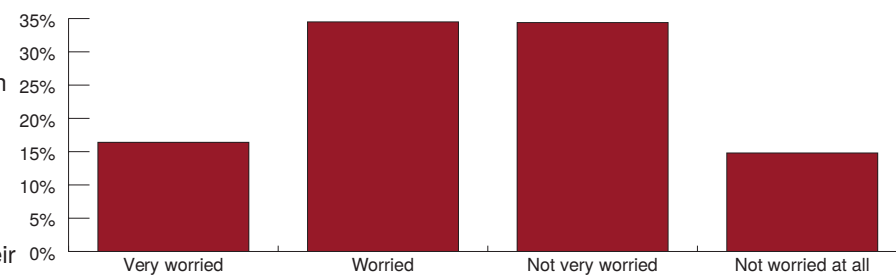
What if something big, like a pandemic happens again? How do I approach it now? How do I approach my life now?"

Anxiety about their educational future

Young people did not just have a mixed experience of online education but were divided on how much they worried about their education during Covid-19 and lockdown.

Around half (50.9%) told us that they were either very worried, or worried about their education during Covid-19 and lockdown, and the other half (49.1%) being not very worried or not worried at all. This was largely divided across all groups.

During Covid-19 and lockdown, did you worry about your education?



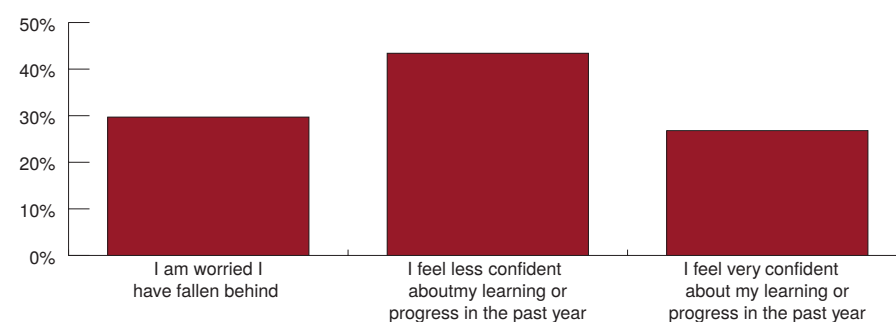
“The first lockdown was just so sudden, we didn't really have work to do, we were kind of relaxed. The weather was nice, it was warmer. When we came to the second lockdown, we had work to do. We realized that: Oh, wait, we've missed like tons of work. Oh, no. Let's get back to work. And it was a lot. We started doing live online lessons.”

In interviews we found that young people were less divided in feeling more worried about their education, especially as they have returned to in-person learning. Many young people who enjoyed online learning and not going into school felt taken back with how much they had missed, and how much they needed to catch up on when they got back.

“It was quite a struggle when we came back to school because all teachers expected and relied on us knowing new things that we supposedly did during lockdown, but we didn't know.”

We found a majority (73.1%) said that they were worried about falling behind or less confident about their learning because of Covid-19 and lockdown. Only one in four (26.8%) said that they felt very confident about their learning and progress. As a result, many young people we spoke to in interviews and focus groups felt anxious about falling behind and their education.

How have you felt about your learning and education in the past year during Covid-19 and lockdown?



“It was really hard to engage with the teacher and ask questions, because even though we're often in the same class, it's harder to like to turn on your mic and speak because it sounds different or whatever. We'd come back and feel like we've missed a lot of the content.”

Children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

We spoke to young people with special educational needs and disabilities about how Covid-19 and lockdown had impacted on their lives. We conducted three interviews with young people from M.A.G.I.C youth project, and a focus group of four young people at Perseid Upper school, all aged between 12 and 22.

General impact

We found that SEND young people seemed to be less concerned about the wider risks about Covid-19, but far more concerned about the lockdown and the impact it had on their lives and daily routines. We heard about the dislike of changes like social distancing or online learning, and the boredom that came from activities being cancelled. This had an impact on SEND young people's wellbeing, with the teachers and youth workers supporting them receiving a range of messages from parents about their child being anxious or stressed at home. However, although SEND young people were not particularly concerned about Covid-19, many of them had underlying health conditions, which was worrying for their support networks.

“Some of them have underlying health conditions, so you have to be careful.”

Online school and lockdown

Unlike most of the survey participants, the SEND young people we spoke to did not express feeling anxious or being worried about Covid-19. The biggest impact from Covid-19 was lockdown and being forced to stay indoors and missing school, and the social element that came with that. We heard how online learning could be very challenging, with technical issues with technology, but it was the lack of in-person support from their teachers, friends, or youth workers that had the biggest impact. We heard though that the majority of SEND young people easily transitioned back into school and seemed to proceed their classes and activities as like before lockdown.

Outside of education, many SEND young people expressed mixed feelings about lockdown at home, with some enjoying it and others finding it hard to stay indoors. We heard how many SEND young people spent their time playing video games, watching movies and TV, and being with family members, however many were more limited in their ability to do activities especially when having a parent or caregiver with special needs.

““Some young people don't have access to things and some of their parents can't fully move. The things they can do are very limited.”

Large impact on support networks

SEND young people did not explicitly speak about the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown on their mental health, but those who support them like teachers and social workers highlighted a clear impact to their support networks. The families, caregivers, teachers, and social workers who make up SEND young people's support network were disrupted during Covid-19.

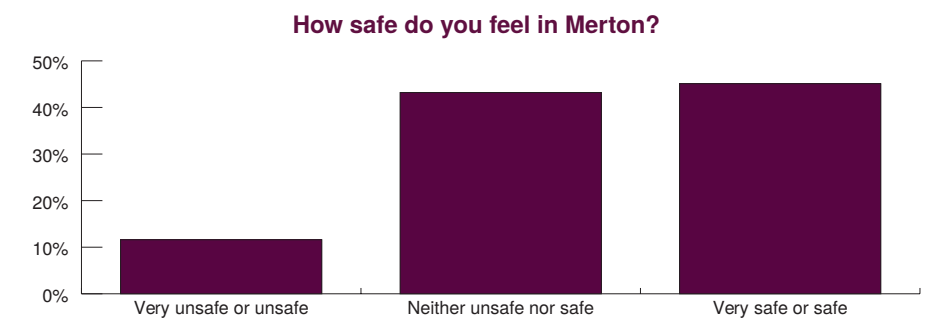
For example, the support for the complex needs of some SEND young people that would have been provided at school and special services were shifted to family homes, which could be particularly impactful for those living in small and/or cramped conditions. The shift from in-person services to online also presented additional challenges, such as working out how to use platforms like Zoom, or Microsoft Teams.

4. Safety in Merton and the police

Young people have a mixed experience of safety

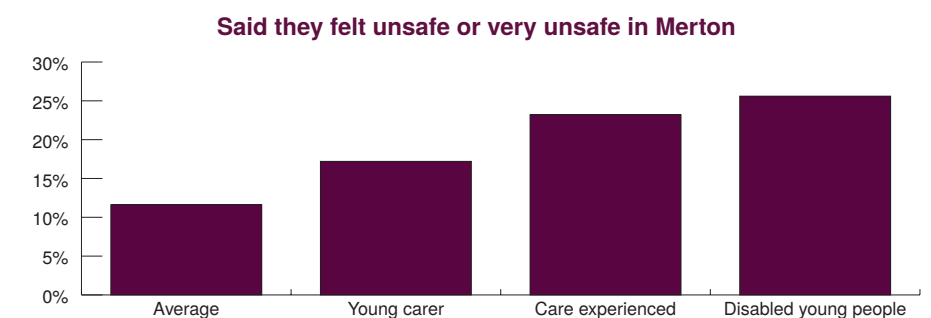
Young people in Merton feel uncertain about their safety in the borough, with many being acutely aware of safety issues like knife crime and gangs but not personally feeling unsafe.

Almost half (43.3%) said that they feel neither safe nor unsafe. Only one in ten (11.6%) said that they felt unsafe or very unsafe, with four times as many (45.1%) saying they felt safe or very safe.

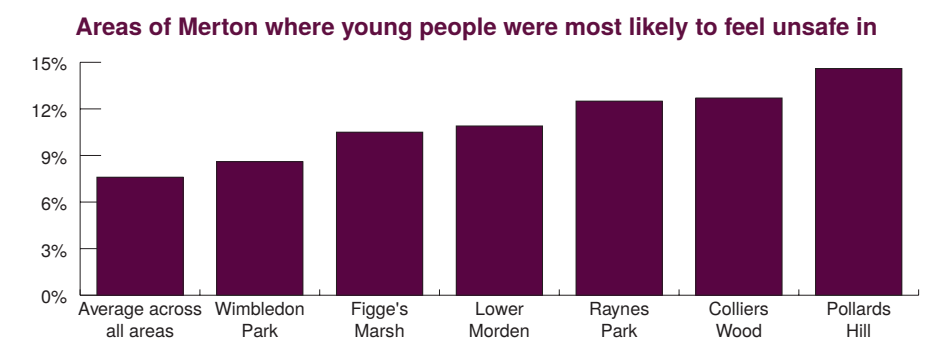


"I feel like if you live outside of Merton, you're safer. If you come from outside of Merton, no one really knows who you are, nobody knows, so nobody cares, you can do what you're doing. I feel like when you live in Merton, then you create a name for yourself or you're known or whatever."

Safety was experienced differently across Merton, with some groups feeling more unsafe than others. Young men were more likely than young women (12.5% to 9.3%) to feel unsafe. One in four (25.6%) disabled young people said that they felt unsafe or very unsafe, compared to one in ten (10.5%) for non-disabled young people. Similarly, young people with care experience were twice as likely to feel unsafe compared to those with no experience of care (23.2% to 11.6%). This is interesting as many young people are aware of crime and safety as an issue in London, but only a minority in the survey told us that they felt unsafe.



We also found that young people in Merton have certain perceptions about different areas of the borough, with certain areas like Colliers Wood and Pollards Hill being seen as more unsafe. However, half (55.5%) of the young people we asked said that they felt unsafe in none of the areas of Merton.



"I think knife crime is everywhere but still there's like... Mitcham, obviously they created a name for it over the years, I think it's kind of died down now but it's still there. You have like Wimbledon but they're all silent, but everyone knows what is going on in them places as well, so it's just like Merton is safe but only if you just don't do anything stupid."

Staying safe during Covid-19 and lockdown

Young people in Merton also had to contend with the impact of Covid-19 on their feelings of safety, whether it was catching and spreading the virus or the increased amount of time they spent online.

One in five (20.3%) said that they felt worried or very worried about staying safe in Merton during Covid-19 and lockdown, compared to four out of five (79.7%) who said they were not very worried or not worried at all.

Certain groups again were more likely to be very worried or worried, like those with care experience (23.7%), disabled young people (26.9%), young carers (31.3%), and younger children in year 5 and year 6 (31.5% and 29.1%).

Staying safe from Covid

We heard in interviews and focus groups that feeling worried about staying safe from Covid-19 was often from young people who were at risk or had family members who were shielding.

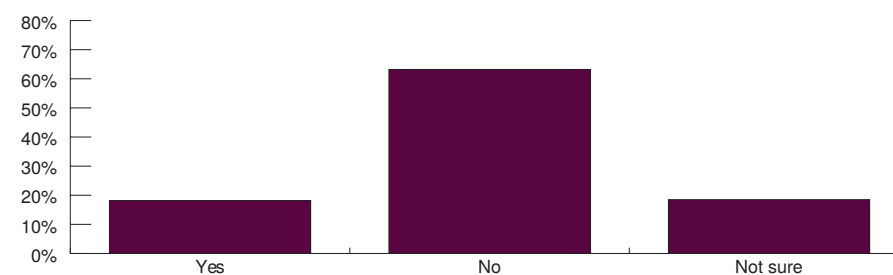
"My Grandma died during lockdown, before that I wasn't really afraid or certain of what was going on with Covid but I just felt kind of scared and frightened."

Young people were less concerned about getting Covid-19 themselves, as they had heard the experiences of peers who were okay, or they had it already and it wasn't serious.

"I got covid, I was really happy. I couldn't taste and smell, I could eat everything, even vegetables because I couldn't taste it anyway."

We found that one in five (18.2%) said that they felt anxious or worried about going outside because of Covid-19, though a majority (63.2%) said they did not. While one in five (18.5%) were not sure. Similar to previous questions around safety, certain groups were more likely to feel anxious like young women (22.4%) and younger children in Year 5 and Year 6 (31% and 20.8%).

Has Covid-19 made you feel anxious or worried about going outside?



"Yeah, after lockdown, if I saw someone wipe their nose but not clean their hands, I'd get annoyed. Especially now, I can't help it, like wash your hands. That annoys me so much, like allow it man, wash your hands bruv. Oh jeez, I'm not trying to get Covid."

"Yeah, after lockdown, if I saw someone wipe their nose but not clean their hands, I'd get annoyed."

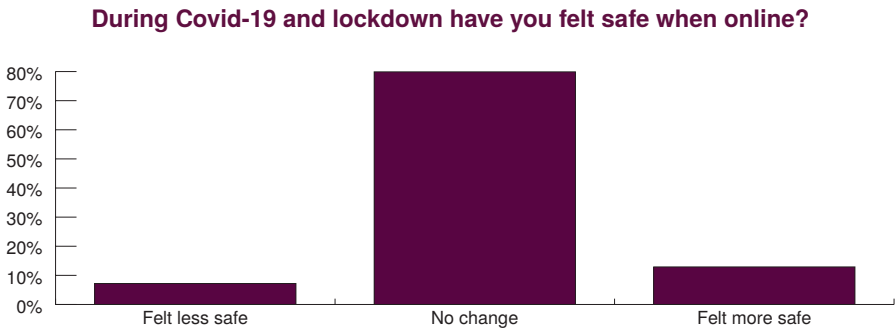
Especially now, I can't help it, like wash your hands. That annoys me so much, like allow it man, wash your hands bruv.

Oh jeez, I'm not trying to get Covid."

Safety online during lockdown

As we have seen previously, young people in Merton were spending a lot more time during lockdown on screens and online.

We found that for most people (79.9%) said that there was no difference to how safe they felt online during lockdown. In fact, slightly more young people felt a lot safer online during lockdown (12.9%) than less safe (7.2%).

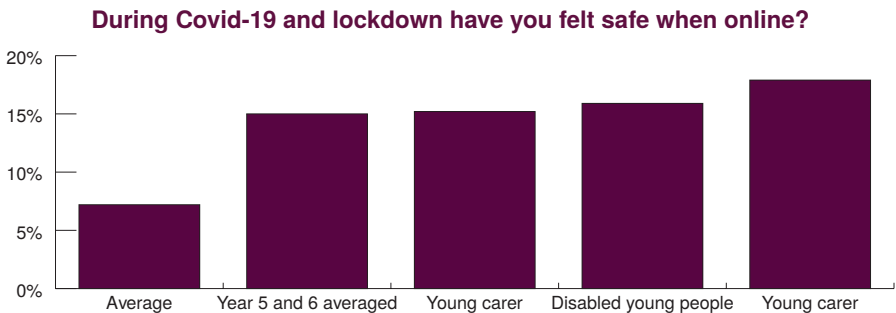


"I think Covid-19 could of made people more vulnerable to different things online. Because we were spending more time online and spending more time on social media and stuff. As a 14-15 year old hearing all the stuff that's happening to people is really disheartening and really hard."

Young people we spoke to generally did not think much about online safety and felt generally safe or savvy about their own personal use of the internet. When thinking about safety and online use, young people were far more likely to have a negative mental health impact of social media than being a target or victim of crime.

"Because we've been on social media so much, people want to try new things, because they now have the time to do it. They'll try new things but they won't really consider the safety of it. So that also makes them much more vulnerable to everything."

There were some key differences in feelings of online safety across different groups again. Young people with care experience were three times as likely to feel less safe online compared to those with no care experience (17.9% to 6%).

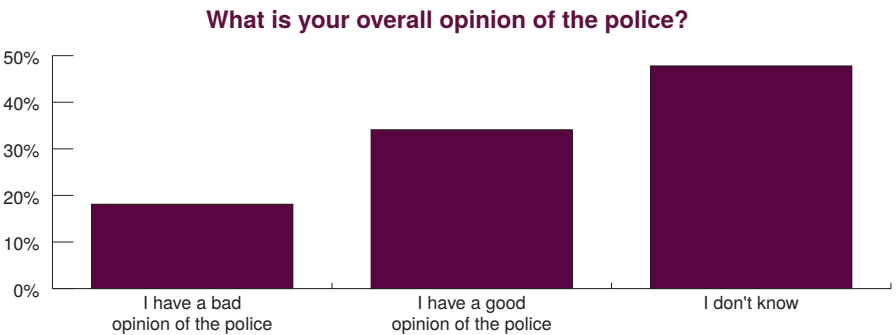


Disabled young people were over twice as likely to feel less safe online during lockdown (15.9% to 6.5%) and were the only group that more people felt less safe than safer during this time online. Young people in Year 5 and Year 6 were far more likely to say that they felt less safe online during Covid-19 and lockdown than average (17.4% and 10.7% respectively).

Young people have a mixed experience of the police

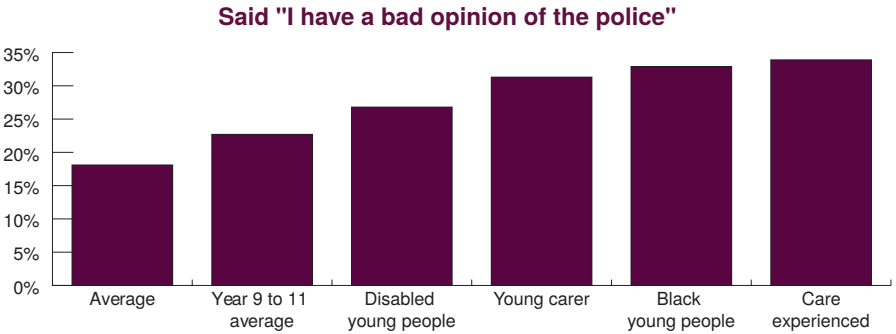
While young people generally feel safe in Merton, they were far more divided in their opinions of the police, especially between different groups of young people depending on their experience with the police.

We found that overall, almost twice as many young people had a positive view of the police than a negative one. Over a third (34.1%) of young people had a good opinion of the police, compared to just less than one in five (18.1%) who had a bad opinion of them.



However, the majority of young people (47.8%) said that they did know what they thought of the police. This was especially true for younger groups like those in year 5 (55.2%), and young women (54.8%).

There were only three groups where a higher proportion had a bad opinion of the police than a good one: young Black and Mixed ethnicity young people (32.9% and 25.4%), those with care experience (33.9%), young carers (31.3%), and disabled young people (26.8%).



Stop and search

One key issue around trust in the police is the police of Stop and Search, which we found was relatively known about in Merton if not personally experienced.

Less than one in ten (9.2%) said that they had been stopped and searched by the police, while one in three (31.1%) said that they had not been stopped and searched but knew someone who had been.

The majority (59.7%) had not been stopped and searched and did not know anyone who had been. However, we found that different groups were far more likely to have been stopped and searched or knew of someone who has been.

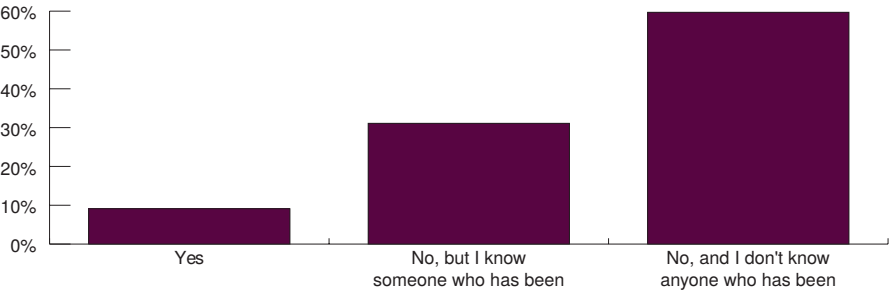
"I don't really like the police, the police pulled someone over and everyone got out the cars and we started videoing it. People say they're helping us but how are they helping us? Some people were filming the police so if like they did anything wrong they'll be on video. It's just a bit sad that people have to film the police to make sure they don't do anything wrong."

For Black and Mixed ethnicity young people in interviews there was a clear distrust with the police and their presence in the community. During Covid-19 and lockdown there were highlight visible news stories around Black Lives Matter or the murder of Sarah Everard which likely had an impact on the perceptions of young people about the police.

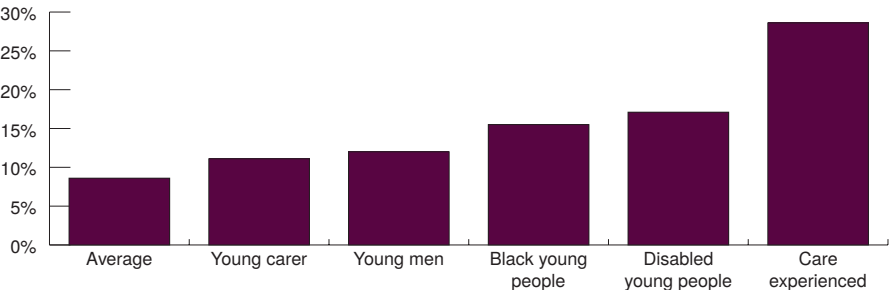
Black young people in particular were three times more likely to be stopped and searched than White young people (15.5% to 5.6%), but disabled young people and care experienced young people were the most likely to be stopped and searched by the police.

Those who had been stopped and searched were five times more likely to have a bad opinion of the police than those who had not and knew nobody who had been (53.1% to 10.2%). Those who knew someone who had been stopped and searched were twice as likely as those who did not to have a bad opinion of the police (24.2% to 10.2%).

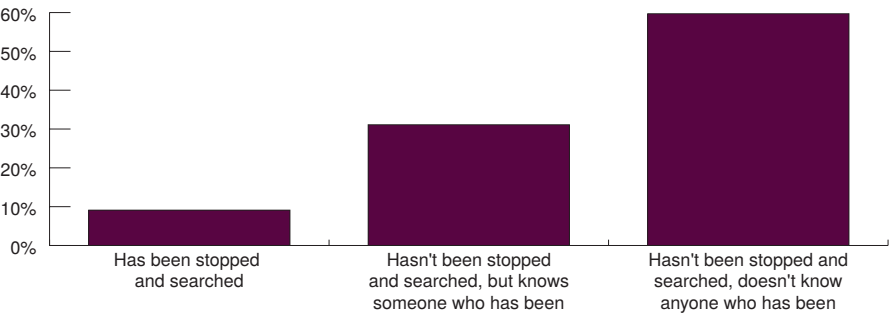
Have you ever been stopped and searched by the police?



Said "Yes" to having been stopped and searched



Said "I have a bad opinion of the police"



Young Offenders in Merton

Five individual interviews were conducted with young people aged 16, 17 and 18 at the end of their order with Merton Youth Offending Services, covering topics of the impact of Covid-19 and its lockdown on health, relationships, education, future aspirations, and on living and socialising in Merton.

In general, young people serving their time did not experience the same impact as others from Covid-19, especially those who had already experienced a form of lockdown previously in prison. Moreover, all young offenders stated that they did not experience any worries, anxiety, or unsafety because of Covid-19. On the other hand, similar to most survey participants, they spoke about being bored, becoming lazy, and the lack of alternative activities.

Mental health and seeking support

Most of the young people we spoke to told us how they relied on themselves when in need of support for their mental health. This was because, for many of them, there was a perception that others were not able to help or wouldn't want to help or wouldn't be as effective as self-help.

"If you're worried about something, who you would you go to?"

"No one. Because I got myself... You should have the skills of independence as not everyone is going to stick around."

We found that young people with experience of the justice system were less likely to seek help from their friends and family, and less likely to have that support available to them as a result of this lack of belief that others would want to support them, or that external support is effective.

Authorities and Police

Young people with experience of the justice system had a real mixed view of policing and the authorities, that ranged from clearly negative to apprehension. One young person experienced being stopped and restrained which left them with a fractured bone, which gave them a strong distrust of the police.

"You never know, you get stopped for a dumb reason. Yesterday, the officer was struggling to tell me why I had been stopped."

However, others spoke about the reform and change of the police system that they wanted to see. There was a clear anxiety about police behaviour, and the worry and fear that they felt from being stopped and searched for doing nothing wrong. There was a lack of belief that they would be able to go about their day unimpeded even if they have done nothing wrong.

"If an officer doesn't show me respect, why do I have to show them respect? Yeah. Respect works both ways."

This lack of understanding of the reasons why they have been stopped and searched felt interpreted as simply a lack of respect by the police of them. Many interviewees mentioned the need for a two-way street of respect when being approached by the police.

Interestingly though, the young people we spoke to have a clear distinction between the youth offending service and the police. While many initially felt that the Youth Offending Services was a punishment, the majority said that they now see it as a service trying to help them, for example helping them with getting into employment.

"At first I saw it as a punishment, but now I see it as people trying to help me."

6. Space, Place, and Our Merton

Young people and local spaces

Covid-19 and lockdown meant that young people across Merton spent far more time in their local area, and many came to feel more positive about it as a result.

Across a range of spaces, most young people said that Covid-19 and lockdown made no difference to how they feel about their local environment (61.3%), local high street and businesses (64.3%), local community (71.9%), and local transport (52.5%).

However, if we only look at those for whom Covid-19 and lockdown did impact how they feel, we can see how different spaces were impacted.

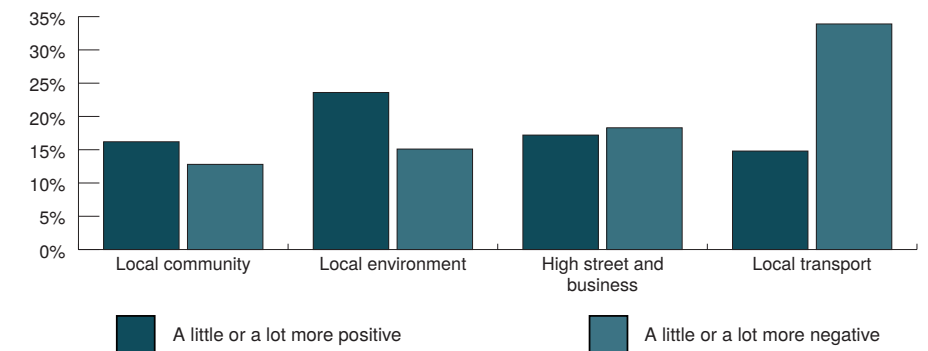
Firstly, more young people felt that Covid-19 had a positive impact than a negative impact on how they feel about their local community (16.2% to 12.8%) and their local environment (23.6% to 15.1%).

While more young people felt that Covid-19 had a negative impact on how they feel about their high street and businesses (18.3% to 17.2%) and local transport (33.9% to 14.8%).

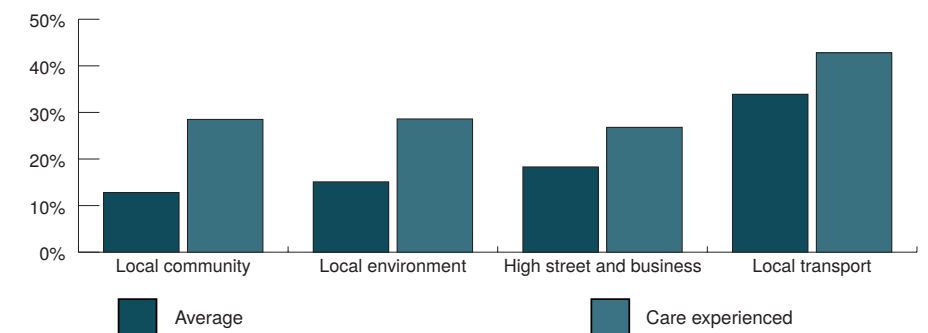
This reflects what we found in our interviews and focus groups, as many young people used the Covid-19 and lockdown period to explore that their local environment and community, like green spaces or parks. While young people felt generally less positive about shops and on transport because of the number of people and anxiety about being safe during Covid-19.

Only one group were particularly negatively impacted by Covid-19 in the way they felt about local spaces: care experienced young people. They were more likely to say that they felt a little or a lot more negative across all spaces.

How has Covid-19 and lockdown made you feel about your:

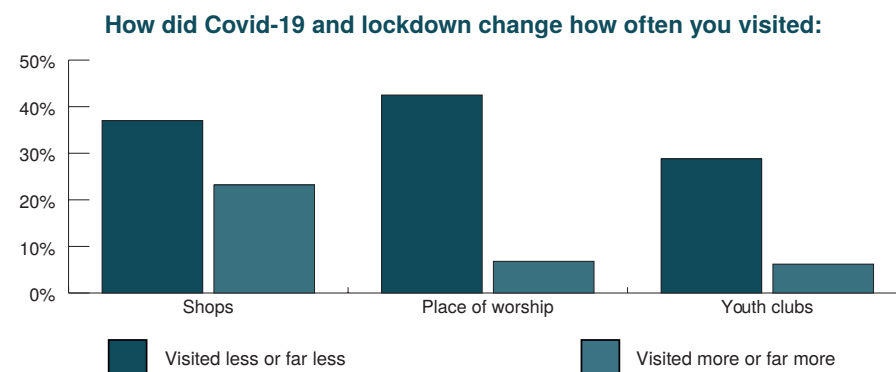


Feels a little or a lot more negative as a result of Covid-19 towards:



Visiting spaces during Covid-19 and lockdown

We found that commonly Covid-19 and lockdown did not have a huge impact on how often young people visited certain spaces. Young people told us there was no difference in how often they visited youth clubs (64.9%), places of worship (50.6%), and shops (39.8%). However, this is likely reflecting that many young people did not visit places of worship or youth clubs anyway, so Covid-19 and lockdown had very little impact.

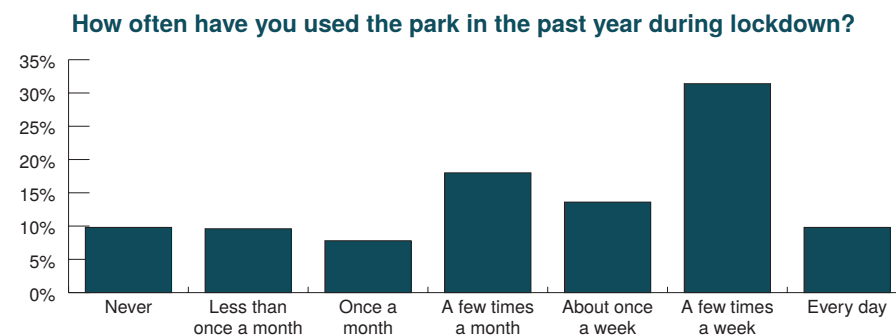


If we look at those that Covid-19 and lockdown did impact on, we find that overall young people visited places of worship (43.3%), youth clubs (29.7%), and shops (37.9%) less often. However, with shops one in four (23.1%) ended up visiting them more often.

"I would change a lot of things. I would only let three people at a time in the shop. I'm not shaming people. I would tell a massive group of people to get out because that's too many people in one shop."

Parks and green spaces

Parks and use of green spaces were the exception, with many young people telling us that parks and green spaces were important to them and their mental health during Covid-19 and lockdown. Two out of five (41.2%) young people told us that they used the park either everyday or a few times a week during lockdown, and a majority (72.8%) using parks at least a few times a month. Less than a third (27.2%) used parks once a month or less, however one in ten (9.8%) said that they never used the park.



"When we were allowed to like see one person and go to the park. I really took advantage of that as well. Especially because in Merton, there's a lot of greenery."

Park use differed by ethnicity too, with White young people being the most likely to use the park every day or a few times a day (48.5%) and least likely to use the park less than once a month or never (13.6%). While Black young people were the most likely to use the park less than once a month or never (30.5%) and the least likely to use the park everyday or a few times a day (27.6%).

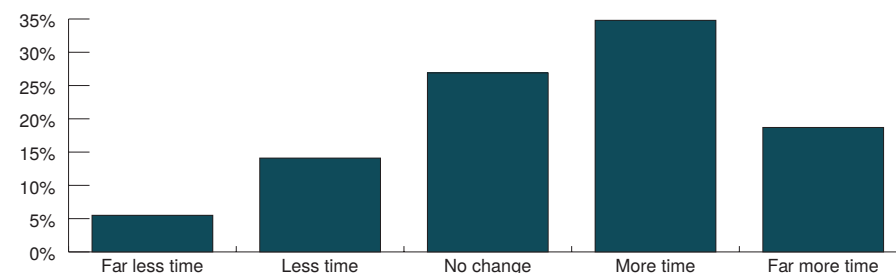
"I would change a lot of things. I would only let three people at a time in the shop."

I'm not shaming people. I would tell a massive group of people to get out because that's too many people in one shop."

Free time and volunteering

The majority (53.5%) said that they had more time or far more time for activities and hobbies during Covid-19, with one in five (19.6%) saying they had less time or far less time. Those with care experience were far more likely to say they had less time or far less time (39.3%), as were young carers (27.2%).

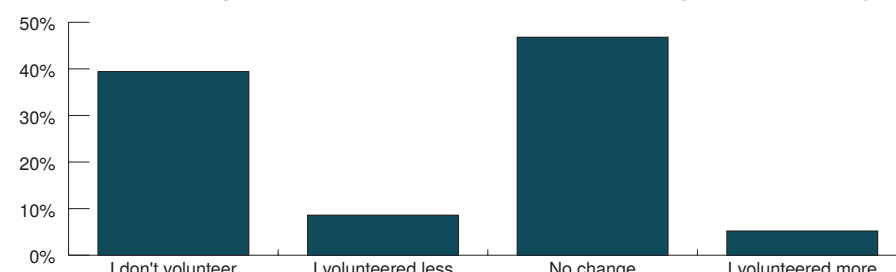
Have you had more, or less free time for activities and hobbies during Covid-19 and lockdown?



Boredom was one of the key challenges for young people during lockdown, as many had more time to look at learning additional skills. This mainly pertained to activities and hobbies that could be done inside.

Volunteering was one way that some young people used their additional free time during Covid-19 and lockdown. However, only one in twenty (5.2%) said they volunteered more, with far more either volunteering less because of lockdown (8.6%) or not volunteering at all generally (39.4%).

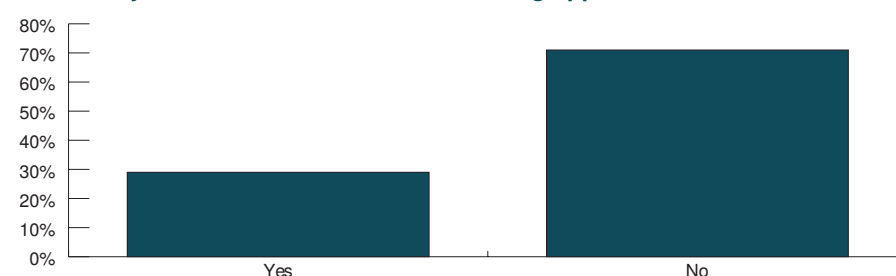
What has the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown been on you volunteering?



“So, before the pandemic I volunteered as an instructor...I would teach disadvantaged young children But obviously, you couldn't do that with Covid-19. So I missed having that interaction with young people in my life.”

A majority (71%) of young people said that they did not know where to find volunteering opportunities in Merton, with only one in three (29%) saying that they knew. Young people were less likely to know the younger they were, and young women were more likely to know than young men (37.6% to 22.4%).

Do you know where to find volunteering opportunities in Merton?



“I would have more community services. Volunteering and stuff. At least advertise them even more. I know there's a lot around, but especially on people they don't know, people don't know about it.”

Young people feel excluded from decision making

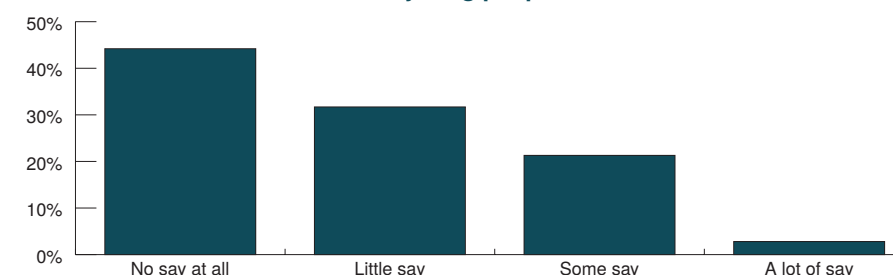
Young residents feel excluded, and not listened to, when it comes to decisions that impact them locally. Their perception that their voice does not matter also means that they're less likely to want to get involved, whether that's having a say, or volunteering.

We asked young people how much of a say they had in how projects and activities are designed for young people.

Almost half (44.2%) thought that they had no say at all, with a further third (31.7%) saying they had little say.

Only one in five (21.3%) thought that they had some say in project and activity design, and a tiny minority (2.8%) thought that they had a lot of say. This was reflected in interviews with many young people feeling like their voice did not matter to those who make decisions.

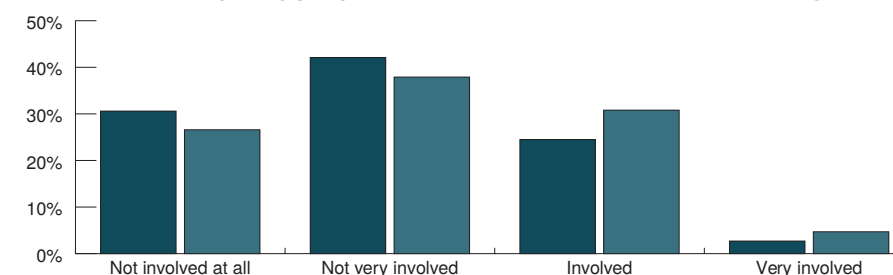
How much of a say do you have in how projects and activities are designed for young people?



“I just don't trust them (Merton Council).”

We also asked how involved they think young people in the borough are in the planning of youth projects in Merton. Again a majority felt that they were either not involved at all or not very involved (72.7%), compared to a minority who felt that they were involved (27.2%).

How involved young people think they are in decision making vs how involved young people want to be involved in decision making



There was also more apathy and pessimism about the voice of young people mattering from groups more likely to be traditionally marginalised. For example, Black, Asian, and Mixed ethnicity young people were far more likely to feel like they have no say. Care experienced young people and young carers were less likely to feel like they have a say and less likely to want a say in the future as a result.

We found that the less say a young person thought they had in how activities are planned or the less involved they thought young people were in decision making, the less likely they were to say that they wanted to be involved.

Part of the challenge is that young people are less likely to distinguish between their local authority, regional, and central government, especially in the context of Covid-19 and lockdown. Questions about how they felt about Merton as a local council would sometimes lead to responses about Boris Johnson, or Central Government's approach to the pandemic. In many cases the apathy young people felt towards the overall political situation impacted how they felt about local decision making.

What next?

Going forward as Young Inspectors

Our responsibility as Young Inspectors working with the London Borough of Merton is to ensure that our voices and views are represented within decision-making throughout the Council.

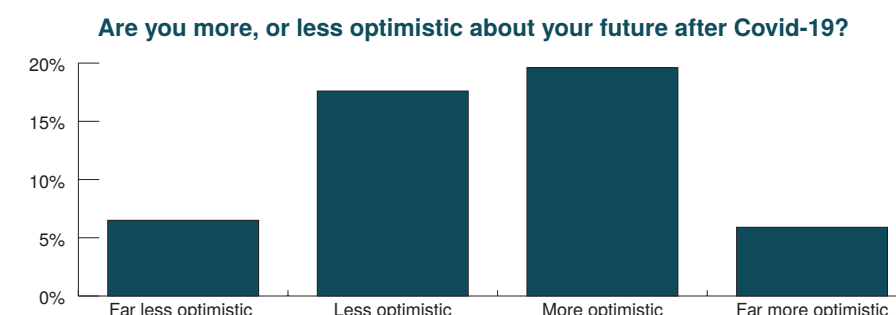
Having spoken and worked with you all over the last few months, we have a clear vision as to what it is young people need from us, and Merton Council going forward. As young people, we faced unique challenges as we rapidly transitioned from a hyperconnected world to one marked by physical isolation, loneliness, and a host of unprecedented challenges posed by the Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic.

It is clear that one of our key asks is to have a seat at the decision-makers' table. It is clear that we want more recognition of the issues directly pertaining to us, for example adequate and functioning mental health services. We want to be able to see our friends, continue thriving in our academic pathways, and achieve the dreams and aspirations we want.

It is also clear that the Covid-19 lockdowns affected our access to education, be it from Primary school level all the way through to University; this is something we as a generation feel very strongly about. We need our teachers, professors, and lecturers to be supported in delivering the education we deserve in the current contexts we face.

Our generation feels strongly about our local area and environment. We want to take care of our spaces and we want recognition that we deserve to thrive in healthy, safe communities. We need a working relationship with the police and local services, and we need to know that our social backgrounds will not be a determining factor in how likely we are to be stopped and searched. We need to be able to trust the people tasked with ensuring community safety, and furthermore we want to have a community that we are proud of.

We found that many young people feel less optimistic about their future after Covid-19. Many of the challenges they faced existed before the pandemic, and some have just gotten worse because of it.



This is why we, as Young Inspectors in Merton, will be ensuring that the recommendations established by young people living and learning in our local Borough will be pushed as far as possible. We have been trusted with your time, your views, and your aspirations and it is our duty to ensure that these are carried as far as we can possibly take them.

Halima Mehmood
Young Inspector, and Peer Researcher

Credits and thanks

We want to thank all the young people who took part in this research and either did our survey or took time to speak to the Merton Young Inpsectors in either interviews or focus groups.

Young Inspectors (Merton Council)

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Emma Wiles (Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme)

Mellisa Stewart (Merton Young Carers)

AFC Wimbledon Foundation at Liberty Primary School
With special thanks to: Fiona Sutherland and BJ Patterson

Uptown Youth Services
With special thanks to: Joan Simms

My Futures (Merton Council)
With special thanks to: Gareth Plumb, Micheal Griffiths and Abigail Frimpong

Merton Abbey Primary School
With special thanks to: Andrew Knox and Michael Bradley

Ricards Lodge High School
With special thanks to: Henrike Wilford

Perseid Upper School
With special thanks to: Leanne Golightly

Merton College & Carshalton College
With special thanks to: Sarah Nicholass, Michael Helene and Lisa Jones

Youth Offending Team (Merton Council)
With special thanks to: Ruth Hearty and Jamie Cottington

M.A.G.I.C. at Phipps Bridge Youth Club
With special thanks to: Lisa Tharpe

Shine Project at Bond Primary School
With special thanks to: BJ Patterson, Steph Iwegbu and Kristina Burton

Kicks Projects at Fulham FC (Harris Academy, Wimbledon, Lavender Park)
With special thanks to: Paul Smithers, Tyvon Kesse, Samantha Hadley and Hussein Mohammed

Acacia Adventures Playground
With special thanks to: Julie Moore

Children in Care (Merton Council)
With special thanks to: Kezziah Hallam and Lola Kareem

Credits and thanks

Merton Youth Parliament

With special thanks to
Hannah Green
Toby Podger-Taylor
Recruiting participants

Steering Group Young Residents Participation Survey

Merton Council: Keith Shipman, Jude Simmons, Karl Mittelstadt, Nick Wilson, Hetty Crist, Rebecca Doherty, Kris Witherington, Catherine Dunn, Maisie Davies, Dominic Mackie, Elizabeth Fitzpatrick Chinelo Nwajiobi, Lynne Milford, Robert Carrick, Rebecca Watson, Hannah Green, Gareth Plumb,

Young Inspectors: Halima Mehmood, Denise Vidal, Lola Kareem, Toby Podger-Taylor

Partnership for Young London: Sharon Long, Matthew Walsham, Iris Bos

Research and Film making team:

Film production team

Filmanthropy

Interviewees (in order of appearance)

Uptown Youth young people
Samantha Hadley
Uptown Youth Worker
Counsellor Eleanor Stringer

Interviewers and script writing:

Halima Mehmood
Denise Vidal-Candengue

Coordination and execution research project

Sharon Long
Matthew Walsham
Iris Bos
Lisa Jones
Denise Vidal-Candengue
Halima Mehmood
Lola Kareem

