North East and North Cumbria
Child Health and Wellbeing Network

Working Together Strategy Report

January 2021

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Contents

Foreword

The Network places Children, Young People and Families at the heart of our work and our Working Together Strategy is a key part of this, to ensure the voice of children and young people is heard and meaningfully considered throughout.

I am delighted to receive the first report on the Working Together Strategy from the team at Children North East and to hear the responses and feedback from our Young Advisors on the work of the Network so far and what we need to consider as we move forward.

'I found presenting to the network excellent because I think that young people should have a say in the decisions that are being made that affect our lives and the network listened and valued our thoughts genuinely so that we all felt as though we had a voice in decision making.'

The young people involved in the strategy to date have amazed us with their frank and constructive feedback, and we hope to work alongside them into the next stages of our work, joined by more impressive young people from across our region. The findings from this report will help us to shape the next phase of our planning and projects.

We have been told that **"*Society treats young people different to adults*"** and **"*Adults don't get how we feel, they've been children once but this is the new generation, it's different*"**, it is clear there is no way we can move forward and affect real change without working together.

Reading through the report it is clear that a bond has formed amongst the young people in the steering group and that this has given them an opportunity to network and develop new connections across the region. We really look forward to a time where we can meet in person and celebrate all their hard work.

'The group has been great in helping develop my confidence. I have had to think, create and present to a multitude of people from various professional backgrounds ensuring that I speak with clear concise language that can be understood by all. It's also helped me get a better insight into the problems of young people in the area, allowing me to contribute to ideas and put forward problems that, as a young person, are specifically challenging for us.'

Below are the key considerations from this report and our initial responses; thanks to our Young Advisors for this, such a powerful list which will help us focus our energies to the right area and help our commitment to give a voice and influence to Children and Young People.

You Said: How can Network members ensure that within their individual services and organisations children have opportunities to have their voice heard?

Really important point, we are pleased that we have a couple of things going on that start to look at how we can support this…….

In February the Network are hosting a Huddle around participation and co-production, sharing theory and exploring practical applications with Network members across the North East and North Cumbria.

We are also about to undertake an extensive mapping exercise to explore how organisations across the region involve young people and ensure their views influence decision-making. This resource will be available to facilitate connections between member and young person's groups; further expanding the reach of the voice of our children and young people across sectors and services.

You Said: How can Network members promote opportunities for young people to share their views?

So important that we address this, thank you for picking it up!

So far, the Network has committed to support the Young Advisors Group for the next year, to facilitate space and opportunities to express their views, and to further develop membership across the region.

The results of the mapping exercise are also intended to be a resource for young people to explore opportunities to participate and have their voice heard and crucially, listened to.

You Said: What role do young people play in shaping the services and programmes offered by Network members?

Brilliant question, one we will do our best to find the answer to!

The Network has a clear commitment to the Working Together Strategy, and aims for Youth Participation to be the rule and not the exception. The Engagement Mapping resource will highlight examples of how young people are actively involved across organisations and services.

We share and promote this work to our 700+ members, highlighting and influencing the importance of hearing and acting upon the views of young people; also through activities and projects such as our Engagement Mapping exercise and our Participation Huddle to enable sharing of best practice.

You Said: What opportunities can the Network facilitate for young people with shared experiences to support and connect with each other?

Fantastic idea!

The Network is already supporting a number of groups of young people with shared experience to develop their voice and influence. For example, young people with Type 1 Diabetes, Learning Disabilities and those leaving Care. The results and recommendations of this report will further support this ongoing work- thank you.

The results of the mapping exercise will be a resource for young people to explore opportunities to connect with those with shared experiences.

You Said: In what ways do Network members consider how to reduce barriers that those experiencing financial difficulty face?

Another insightful and truly important question…..

Another Network-funded project explored "Poverty Proofing" health settings, the first phase of this piece of work specifically asks what barriers exist and need to reduce. We are delighted that the first phase of this is now complete and we are looking forward to moving to the second step by looking at initiatives to address these barriers to ensure fair access to healthcare.

I hope you find our responses demonstrate our commitment to acting upon the views and input of children and young people. This group will continue to influence our work; and we would ask that other children, young people and families wanting to get involved make contact- we would love to have you join our journey!

We hope this report also proves useful to member organisations across the region, who are looking to involve Children and Young People and include their views.

Dr Mike McKean

Clinical Director Children's Services - The Great North Children's Hospital

Clinical Lead for Child Health and Wellbeing – Integrated Care System

Introduction

The North East and North Cumbria Child Health and Wellbeing Network[1] have placed children, young people and families at the centre of all of their work. Initial consultation carried out with professionals, families and young people when the Network was initially established identified priority areas and projects within each of the areas have been commissioned. This Working Together project was established to ensure that the voices of children and young people remain at the heart of the work undertaken by the Network. The purpose of this project was to provide young people with the opportunity to develop their own 'Working Together Strategy', to share their thoughts on the ways in which they would like to engage with Network and to suggest ways in which this collaboration could take place. The Network provided a broad remit to allow the children and young people that took part to think about how the partnership between young people and the Network can take place and to ensure that the Working Together strategy is genuinely constructed and led by young people in the region.

To understand how the young people would like to work with the Network in more detail this project explored four specific questions:

-How do children and young people think that the Network can address each priority area?

-What feedback do the children and young people have on the current work the Network has started within each priority area? Would they be able to / willing to be involved in any of the programmes?

-How can children and young people feedback on the priorities and the work of the Network?

-How can children and young people be signposted to relevant organisations or opportunities across the region?

Child Health & Wellbeing Priorities

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[1] North East and North Cumbria Child Health and Wellbeing network will be referred to as 'the Network' throughout this report

Consultation with Children and Young People

Methodology

Children and Young People from across the region were invited to take part in small focus groups to share their views. In early spring before the first lockdown a small number of focus groups took place in person in schools. When lockdown was announced in March focus groups were rescheduled and reformatted to take place virtually. The majority of the focus groups took place with young people while they were in a setting outside of their home such as school or youth group, which meant that they were able to use the computers and internet connection of the partner organisation. This was especially important for young people without digital access at home as it meant that they were not prevented from taking part and sharing their views.

The young people that took part in focus groups were asked to share their views about a range of topics including all of the Network priority areas as well as more general questions about health, health settings and health information. More specifically young people were asked what they find works well and what their preferences are as well as how they would like to see things changed or done differently when thinking about topics and issues that impact on health and wellbeing. Young people were asked about a selection of the topics, not all young people were asked all questions. Whilst topic guides for the focus groups were prepared in advance young people were asked to choose which topics they wanted to discuss and the conversations were very much young person led. This approach meant that young people were able to talk about the topics and issues that are most important to them.

All responses from young people were collected anonymously. Limited individual data about the young people who took part was collected due to working remotely and challenges around gaining parental consent for this personal information to be recorded. The youngest child that took part in a focus group was seven and the eldest twenty-three years old. Focus groups were arranged and hosted by a number of partner organisations including schools, youth clubs, and youth participation groups. While individual data for each young person was not collected partner organisations were identified and approached to ensure that we had a diversity of responses. Organisations and groups that work with young people with learning disabilities, childhood illnesses, and Children in Care, including Care Leavers opted to take part, meaning that these findings also include views from young people from these specific vulnerable groups. In total one hundred and seventeen children and young people took part in this part of the project (see Figure One below).
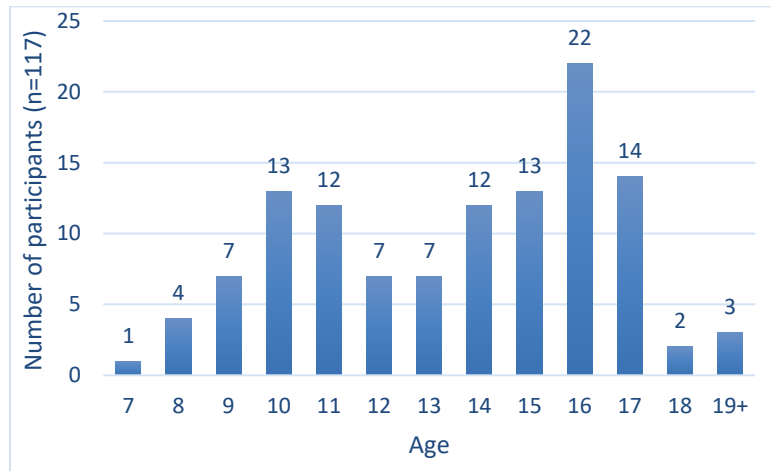
Figure One: Age of children and young people that took part in the project

How to read the findings

This report seeks to highlight the key themes that were identified by children and young people in relation to each of the different network priority areas as well as general themes that were present through all of the discussions. Within each thematic area an introductory overview of what the children and young people were asked as well as their general responses to each area will be presented followed by a more in depth discussion of the specific feedback given by participants. Text presented in bold is a direct quote from a young person or child. Each section will conclude with some further points to be considered both by individual Network Members and organisations, and the Network as a whole. The concluding section of this report will highlight common themes that emerged across the different priority areas and some broader, non-subject specific considerations that have relevance for all strands of the Network's current work plan.

Young People's Group

Getting Started

Young people who took part in the focus groups, came from a range of organisations across the region were invited to join our Working Together Young People's Group. They have met regularly over the past few months and after some initial ice-breaker activities to get everyone used to using Zoom and introduced to each other they have been meeting regularly to talk about the issues raised from the initial consultation and to shape the development of this report. The young people have volunteered their time to be part of this project and when discussing why they opted to get involved shared a range of motivations for wanting to take part. The young people have written and shared their reasons for choosing to get involved:

> **'I heard about the Network through a teacher, who told me about the Mental Health First Aid project. In my Psychology A-level we studied Mental Health as a topic. I feel as though something needs to be done to raise awareness of the Mental Health issues that young people are facing at the moment. I encourage more young people to get involved because their opinions matter the most when it comes to projects aimed at them! It feels good to voice my opinions and work towards making a difference in improving the lives of young people.'**

> **'I first heard about the group when my teacher approached me and asked if I wanted to participate as she knew I had an interest through my wider role in school. I would like to achieve more of an input from young people within the group as I believe it is important for the people who are being affected to have a say.'**

> **'I decided to get involved in this project because I love helping people! Young people deserve to have a voice that is heard, the basis of the project rests on these values; therefore, I believe that being part of this group will help me gain the skills and experience I need for my future job as a doctor and allow me to represent young people in the borough giving each individual voice.'**

> **'I decided to get involved in this group, as particularly this year due to Covid restrictions it's very difficult to gain the correct experience that universities are looking for therefore I seen this as a great opportunity to get involved with not only to ensure that young people get a voice and that adults hear from our point of view for once, but to be able to reference a great thing like this into my university applications.'**

> **'I have helped run a group that helps children with type one diabetes of the past couple of years through Investing in Children. However, I decided to get**

involved with Children North East do a bit more voluntary work and further develop my skills whilst helping more children and young people.'

The Working Together Group has provided the opportunity for young people to connect with other young people from across the region at a time when meeting others has been more challenging. It has also provided a chance for young people to engage in something outside of compulsory education, to develop their skills and knowledge which will support applications as they move on to their next steps. Lastly, and most importantly it has provided young people with an opportunity to talk about issues and topics that matter to them and to share their views and those of their peers with professionals and network members.

Benefits of taking part

When asked how the young people have found participating in the Young People's Group the young people wrote down their thoughts on this experience.

Young people said:

'I have enjoyed being involved in the project because it has allowed me to talk to other people the same age in an informal way whilst still talking about serious and important topics that I am interested in.'

'The group has been great in helping develop my confidence. I have had to think, create and present to a multitude of people from various professional backgrounds ensuring that I speak with clear concise language that can be understood by all. It's also helped me get a better insight into the problems of young people in the area, allowing me to contribute to ideas and put forward problems that, as a young person, are specifically challenging for us.'

'So far, the best thing about getting involved with the group so far definitely has to be meeting everyone, people who I may never have necessarily crossed paths with. Each and every one of the members in group all have such amazing stories to tell and share with us all, it's also very interesting to hear the other young people's opinions on such topics with some being very different to mine but also very similar which then allows me to think differently and more openly into different topics too with the help of them.'

Working with the Network

As well as meeting with each other the representatives from the Young People's Group through this Working Together Project have taken up opportunities to meet with and engage with Network Members. A young person from the group attended the last Core Leaders Meeting to develop their understanding of the work that the Network is

undertaking. When they returned to the group they talked about and shared this experience with their peers. They said:

'In the Core Leaders Meeting that I attended, all of the projects that the Network is working on were outlined and updates were given on them. People in the meeting added their thoughts on ways to improve them. Funding for the projects was also discussed and permission was given to carry on with them. I found it really interesting to hear about all of the projects and I feel as though they will come in useful to so many people. It is amazing that technology is being brought into healthcare. I felt a bit scared to attend the Core Leaders Meeting as many professionals were involved but I managed to add some suggestions about the website at the end, realising that everyone in the team is really friendly.'

In preparation for the composition of this report the Young People's Group has met regularly to discuss the feedback received from the region-wide initial consultation. Their insight has contributed to and shaped the considerations that are proposed. As part of their ongoing involvement with Working Together the Young People's Group presented the key findings from this report to Core Leaders and Network Representatives. This event was the beginning of a powerful and important dialogue between young people and the Network. As well as presenting prepared speeches about Network priority areas the young people also responded to a wide-range of questions from Network members and leaders. This event was mutually beneficial for both the young people who took part and the Network, meaningful engagement that all participants are committed to continuing. The young people relished the opportunity to share their views and opinions and (as shown in the comments below) felt as though they were heard.
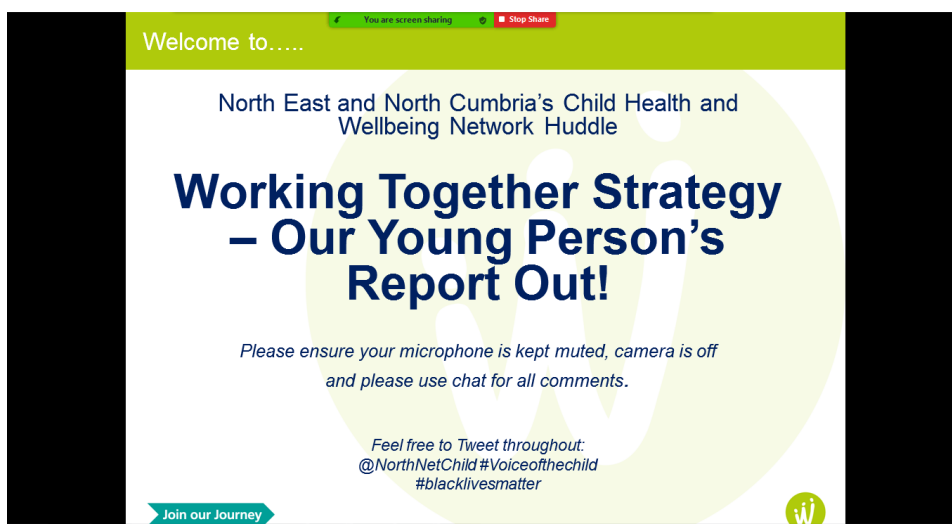
When asked how they found presenting at this event young people said:

'The event was great, at first, I was very apprehensive and nervous about presenting as I've never done anything like that before. Once we got started all my nerves were eased, I felt really comfortable sharing my views as the other members of the call took a great interest in what I had to say which made me feel really proud to be involved.'

'I found presenting to the network excellent because I think that young people should have a say in the decisions that are being made that affect our lives and the network listened and valued our thoughts genuinely so that we all felt as though we had a voice in decision making.'

Inequalities and Access

Context

Listening to children and young people, and creating opportunities for them to be involved in the Network based on their insights, is crucial to developing work streams that keep young people and their families at the centre of all projects carried out.

Young people were asked the ways in which they would like to engage with the Child Health and Wellbeing Network and how the Network can ensure that young people's voice is heard. This strand of the Child Health and Wellbeing Network's work plan was one of the topics that young people across all age groups were most keen to talk about and often elicited passionate and comprehensive responses. Out of all of the topics covered through focus groups it was the subject which all young people had something to say. It is also one of the areas where there was the most agreement among young people. When talking about being listened to and opportunities to participate the feedback from young people was unanimous. It's powerful and impactful that across all age groups, from primary school children all the way through to young adults the messages in relation to this area were consistent.

What young people said

There was a strong sense from young people that adults don't always understand the challenges that young people today face. While young people recognise that many of the adults that they come in to contact with including parents, teachers, health professionals listen there was a sense from the young people that this listening does not always lead to understanding or action. Young people talked about the issues that they feel are particularly unique to their generation including a growth in mental health difficulties, pressure linked to social media use, higher stakes exams and greater uncertainty about the future as a result of the pandemic. Being a young person today brings about its own unique set of challenges that they are keen to talk about.

Also linked to feelings of not being understood or heard properly young people gave feedback about feeling as though their thoughts and opinions are dismissed by adults when they share them, including when talking about topics relating to their health and wellbeing. Young people reported that this seems to be more prevalent when they are talking about their mental health, with worries and concerns dismissed as a normal part of adolescence or insignificant in comparison to stresses and strains faced by adults. Young people also expressed that they feel as if they are thought of as immature or 'hormonal' and that this impacts on their ability to have their ideas and opinions recognised and more importantly valued.

Young people said:

- **'They just don't listen to you they say they understand but they don't'**
- **'Adults don't get how we feel they've been children once but this is the new generation its different'**
- **'Adults don't understand the feelings- they're not with the times'**
- **'They don't understand we make mistakes'**
- **'Society treats young people different to adults'**
- **'They can't really relate to you'**
- **'They say when I was your age we didn't have this'**
- **'I think a lot of the time they feel they need to get "down on our level" which is true in one sense, realistically however we just wanted to be treated as equal and like adults'**

Young people also talked about opportunities for them to express their views being valuable because they recognise that they all have different experiences, priorities and needs. It is recognised by young people across the region that the understanding of individual experience should continue to be an important part of partnership work between the Network and young people and families. Young people appreciate that as part of the strategy around providing opportunities for the sharing of views and opinions a diverse range of young people must be included. Young people also commented that those that are 'seldom-heard' should also be supported in sharing their views, so that the insights gained and built upon are reflective of the needs and experiences of young people with different backgrounds.

Young people said:

- **'Everyone is different, not everyone is facing the same thing they need to know the background and the story'**
- **'They need to get the hint not everyone has the same background'**
- **'Don't just pick and choose who to talk to-it's always the same people'**

Young people want to be involved in the Child Health and Wellbeing Network. As has been highlighted by the young people from the Young People's group, children in our region are passionate about issues relating to their own health and wellbeing and that of their peers. However, while the young people spoken to were adamant that opportunities for their involvement in the network should exist they weren't easily able to suggest ways that this could or should practically happen. This is partially because young people do not yet know enough about the Network, its structure, organisation and work plan and therefore do not have an awareness of what opportunities there may be for them to get involved. In bringing together a range of professionals and organisations the Network is not a structure or concept that is familiar to young people who are often more used to giving feedback and ideas to single institutions such as schools or youth groups. It is a challenge to explain the wide range of partners and breadth of work undertaken by the Network to young people who do not have any other comparable organisations that they currently engage with which can be used to draw parallels. As a result young people are open and willing to get involved and engage with all aspects of the Network's current

operations and work streams. Greater involvement and engagement with all of the Networks activities will aid young people in developing ideas about how they can and would like to develop further participation opportunities.

Although young people did not make specific suggestions on how they would like to be involved in the Network one key theme was clear, listening and consultation whilst important, in their opinion, is not enough. Young people want to be involved in decision-making, they want actions to be developed based on their feedback, and to be included at all stages of project development, not just at the initial planning stage. Young people welcome regular, meaningful opportunities to engage with the network and are open to further exploration on the ways in which this can practically be facilitated.

Young people said:

- **'It's giving people a voice, an outlet'**
- **'We need to be involved in decision making'**
- **'We need adults to listen more'**
- **'There are serious things going on- we need to be involved'**
- **'Should always be a young person there'**

Considerations - Inequalities and Access

Considerations

- Explore ways to communicate with young people about the work undertaken by the Network.

- Develop further opportunities for young people to be involved in the work that the Network undertakes.

- Invite young people to all network activities. Consider if, and how young people can become network members.

- Consult with network members to develop a cross-network strategy and set of principles for including children and young people within all network activities.

- Explore with existing network members the ways in which their services and organisations currently listen to the voices of children and young people.

Mental Health

Context

Research suggests that between one in six and one in eight of young people have a diagnosable mental health disorder (Young Minds, 2020). For adults that experience mental health difficulties, 75% of their difficulties have emerged by the time they are twenty-four years old (Young Minds, 2020). As a result, the support available to young people and children around mental health is of paramount importance.

When presented with the choice in focus groups of which topic to discuss mental health was the most frequently chosen topic, it is a familiar health-related issue which young people are used to discussing in their schools. As shown in the introduction concerns around mental health, and prior involvement with projects relating to mental health was one of the key reasons young people listed for joining the Young People's Group. It is the health topic that young people were most knowledgeable about and as a result required the least introduction. Young people already have a shared vocabulary which they can draw upon and feel comfortable using when discussing mental health issues. It's also one of the areas where young people were able to suggest a larger number of practical ideas that they would like to see introduced to address some of the challenges and difficulties that they face.

For young people mental health is intertwined with many of the other priorities. Talking to young people about mental health in focus groups often provided a vehicle for beginning conversations about other network priorities. Similarly, comments about mental health were often made by young people when chatting about other areas, there was overlap and connection when talking about mental health.

Young people were asked what impacts on their mental health and what additional support they would find most useful. They were also asked to give their thoughts and opinions on the Mental Health First Aid programme and if this is a project that they would be interested in getting involved in.

What young people said

In line with the findings of the practitioner survey carried out earlier in the year young people also identified mental health as being one of the topics that should remain a priority for the Network. One young person said **'mental health and home life the top two things that affects the rest of your life not just your childhood'** and **'mental health is a priority.'**

Young people commented that **'it's mental health this and mental health that'**, that the term is used frequently but that they would like further discussion and exploration of what this term means and the issues that it encompasses. Young people requested **'more awareness about different types of mental health'**, **'hear more examples'** and that

professionals **'talk about difficult things- we usually sugar coat it too much for young children.'** As discussed when exploring participation and access opportunities for young people, mental health is a topic that they are comfortable discussing and equipped to discuss in more detail than is sometimes the case. It's an area that young people are particularly passionate about and eager to learn more about.

The other key issue relating to mental health from a young people's perspective is that **'it's not enough to just speak to someone'**. Young people feel as though there is a growing focus on opening up and talking about struggles with mental health, but for those that are experiencing difficulties identifying that there is a problem and sharing it with a professional is not always sufficient. A common request from young people in relation to mental health was for more support and practical advice to develop their skills to be able to respond to stresses and situations that they face. One young person said **'you need stuff to do when you get home'** and another commented **'we need techniques to feel better or things to do'.** A young person also commented that **'everyone needs emotional resilience projects.'** Young people recognise that if they are equipped with the right skills and knowledge they are able to practice more self-help techniques when they face difficulties and challenges which impact on their mental health. The discussions highlighted that young people would like much more practical advice and support in relation to this issue.

Many of the young people were positive when asked about the possibility of working with a Mental Health First Aiders, and lots were also keen to take up the opportunity, when it is available, to undertake the training to be able to support their peers. Young people were particularly positive about the opportunity to support other young people who may have experienced similar mental health difficulties or issues. Some young people said that they would find it easier to speak to someone their own age than an adult if they were finding things difficult. The young people also suggested that this type of peer support would be beneficial as it is easier for other young people to understand the unique challenges that children face growing up today. There was a sense that (with some additional training) the shared experiences that young people have would be an important foundation for setting up an effective and impactful peer Mental Health First Aiders system.

Young people said:

- **'I think it would be good to have a teenager going through the same thing-it can be hard to talk to adults -you trust young people more'**
- **'I want to help people going through similar stuff that I've been through'**
- **'Mental health is a big part of people's lives- it would be nice to help people'**
- **'People might feel more comfortable going to someone more close to their age- they don't understand out struggles are real- younger generation gets it more'**

Considerations - Mental Health

Considerations

- Consider ways to provide a universal mental health offer across the region which equips young people with skills and tools to support their wellbeing in times of challenge.

- Provide further programmes which support the development of resilience and coping skills for young people.

- Explore ways to develop further opportunities for young people to support each other.

Health Promotion

Context

On average school aged-children in the UK are spending more than two hours a day online, and in recent years the amount of time our young people spend online has overtaken the amount of time they spend watching T.V. (Ofcom, 2018). Social media and online usage has been particularly heightened with the pandemic with an increasing number of services for young people, including education, as well as some health services being delivered online. As the time our young people spend online increases for both leisure and education purposes it raises an important reflection point about how young people interact with health services and health information online and in particular through social media.

Young people were asked where they currently access health information including how they make decisions about which health settings to access. Young people were asked to give their thoughts and opinions on whether they would prefer to have more health information and services available online, through social media or through apps. This topic proved to be a complex issue. The discussions with young people centred on the use of technology and social media in relation to health, and health promotion led to interesting and at times conflicting discussions. It was the priority area which elicited the most disagreement amongst young people and which it has been most difficult to draw definitive conclusions as the feedback was significantly mixed and at times polarised.

What young people said

For some young people accessing health services online is a step that they are comfortable with since so much of their social time is spent online- it is a sphere that they are familiar and comfortable accessing. As a result of the growing use of technology some young people recognise the benefits this medium offers and welcome the prospect of additional health information, support and services being available online. For young people who were positive about opportunities to engage with health services online they talked specifically about getting access to relevant advice and support more quickly and easily than when accessing face-to-face services. Another positive that was discussed is that when utilising online methods young people do not face transport costs or difficulties and can feel more comfortable talking about health issues or topics in their homes rather than in a clinical setting. Young people also spoke positively about specific apps that are available for certain health conditions.

Young people said:

- **'There are some apps for some health conditions like digibeat [that are good]'**

- **'I would like texting them [health professionals/services]- like royal mail get an answer straight away'**
- **'Apps gives you more advice instead of reading through pages and pages'**
- **'We do everything on our phone now-it's a lifeline'**
- **'There is a lot of content online now, especially with Covid, if anything, access to info has increased in the pandemic and we are now sharing news and advice on multiple platforms'**

However, while some young people were really positive about the potential growth of online health services and information an equal number of young people expressed reservations about this and supported instead a continuation of face-to-face services. A number of young people expressed concerns around access to reliable and accurate information about health topics online, particularly on social media and the difficulties that they face in trusting the information that they read. The young people showed a detailed awareness of the dangers of 'fake news' which makes them distrusting of online sources for information relating to important topics such as health. This distrust of online information among young people had been heightened by the misinformation that has been promoted online about Covid-19. While it is positive that young people are conscious and cautious about the sources that they access online it also raises some challenges when delivering and developing services aimed at young people.

Young people said:

- **'You can't rely on social media'**
- **'Anyone could make fake NHS website'**
- **'Facebook is full of covid-19 and half of it isn't true half of it is fake'**
- **'People can say what they want with no consequences and evidence'**
- **'Search my symptoms on the internet- diagnose myself with instant death, scary sometimes'**
- **'If you search or google your looking for a straight forward answer and there's loads of links'**
- **'People can say what they want with no consequences and evidence'**
- **'It's always worst case scenarios on social media'**
- **'You can start to get really scared if it says you've got a serious condition.'**
- **'Googling isn't helpful.'**
- **'Google, web search google jumps to the worst conclusion. If you've got a headache Google thinks you've got a brain tumour'**

For many young people their parents and family play an important role in supporting them in accessing health services and young people also shared concerns that if online

platforms or social media is utilised they will be more responsible for arranging their own appointments, attending health settings alone and speaking to health professionals. While online access may make it easier for young people to seek out health services and support independently, this is not necessarily a service that all young people would be willing to engage in. There is anxiety among young people that a move to more online support will lead to a reduction in face to face support, which is valued.

Young people said:

- **'I like to take my mum or partner'**
- **'I like to take my mam in with me they talk to me and ask me what I want but I still look at my mam'**
- **'If can be quite overwhelming [attending/managing appointments] we've had our parents with us for the past however many years'**
- **'I've never been to the doctors on my own my mam books everything- they're like a stranger'**
- **'It's a comfort thing to have someone with you '**

Considerations - Health Promotion

Considerations

- Trial different online methods to communicate with young people about health related topics.

- Explore further pre-existing health apps, particularly those targeted at young people with specific conditions to understand further what works.

- Continue to consult with young people when designing health promotion materials.

- Explore ways to uncover the extent of digital exclusion among young people in the region and ways to address this.

- Explore ways to signpost young people to trustworthy health sources. Could there be an accreditation scheme where it could be made clear to young people reliable sources to access.

Poverty

Context

4.2 million children (30%) in the UK are currently growing up in poverty (End Child Poverty, 2020). The Institute for Fiscal Studies predicted (prior to the pandemic) that by 2022 this figure will be 5.2 million, the highest child poverty levels the UK has seen since modern record-keeping on this issue began back in the 1960s (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2017). In the North East of England this number is even higher, with over 35% of all children in the region living in poverty (End Child Poverty, 2020), the highest level outside of London. As well as having some of the highest levels the region has seen the largest increase in child poverty levels since 2013 (IPPR North, 2020).

Poverty affects all aspects of children's lives including their leisure opportunities, education and health outcomes. Discussing the impact of poverty and possible solutions to issues associated with poverty with those that have lived experience of this, including children and young people is a vital to ensuring that responses are appropriate.

Young people were asked how poverty impacts on their lives and in what ways they think that the Network and Network members can address this issue. Many young people talked about making things more affordable, reducing costs or removing them in relation to a range of different topics, they recognise that money is often a barrier to their participation. Young people were open and honest sharing the ways in which poverty impacts on their lives and the way that it restricts their opportunities but found it more difficult to suggest ways that they network could address this issue. They were also asked to give their thoughts an opinions on the Poverty Proofing Health Settings project, and if it is a project that they would be interested in being involved in.

What young people said

Young people were candid about the ways in which poverty or their family's financial circumstances impact on their lives. Many young people talked about missing out on opportunities, such as days out with friends, clubs and sports because of the cost. Young people also recognised that this has become more difficult for some are a result of the pandemic and talked openly about concerns for their changing family finances as a result of redundancy, furlough and reduced hours. Cost is a real, practical barrier for children and young people in the region which limits their ability to partake in a range of different opportunities.

Young people said:

- **'Parents have different price ranges some people can't afford expensive ones [clubs]'**
- **'Peer pressure- you've got to have what everyone else has'**

- **'£15 a month for a club we'd rather spend that on going for a meal or going out with friends'**
- **'Give us ideas to do things that don't cost that much money'**
- **'Help people living in poverty by providing new things and places to live in where it isn't poor'**
- **'Educating people on it like teachers- when you come in to school the teachers can't see that they don't think about the reasons behind it there's more to people's lives'**

Additionally, young people, particularly those with employment of their own, also talked about making choices on how to allocate the limited resources that they themselves have which also means that they miss out on valuable experiences that their peers access. For young people in Further and Higher Education they also talked about finding it difficult to balance the need for employment with education, and that the pressure that they are under to earn money impacts on their ability to study outside of school hours.

Children and young people said that they would be willing to be involved in the Poverty Proofing Health settings work. While many of them expressed that they have not previously considered the costs associated with attending health settings and that this usually falls to their parents or carers some of them did list transport costs as being a barrier to them accessing health settings and thought that further exploration of this issue would be beneficial. Young people often talked about feeling as if they don't have a choice in which health settings they access, their choice is determined by location and ease of access with many young people regularly accessing the same services with little variation. Young people were interested in finding out more about what the differences between individual health settings might be, and what other services may be available in their local area and being involved in Poverty Proofing Health Settings would promote opportunities around this. As with Mental Health First Aiders Young people stated that using a peer researcher model where young people work with other young people to hear their views would be beneficial as there is a shared understanding, and it may make it easier for young people to be more open and honest about their experiences. The benefits of peer-based working and discussions was one of the aspects of Poverty Proofing Health Settings that the young people had most relevance to them. While the direct costs associated with accessing health settings generally do not fall to young people themselves, understanding the range of experiences that people have in health settings and the broader barriers that they face is an area which young people would be willing to get involved in.

Considerations - Poverty

Considerations

- Explore how Network Members can offer further opportunities for children and young people experiencing poverty- map out the opportunities that are available.

- Develop ways of promoting further local opportunities for children and young people, this could be linked to the work undertaken around health promotion.

- Encourage Network Members to reflect on the ways in which poverty may be a barrier to young people accessing their services and provisions, and involve young people in these discussions.

Strong start in life

Context

The importance of a strong start in life for our children and young people has been well-documented from an abundance of research which has highlighted how important good foundations are for children's health, wellbeing and education outcomes (Education Policy Institute, 2020), (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Early intervention and support for families and babies is rightly a core consideration when looking to improve child health and wellbeing.

Young people were asked what they think is important for children to have a strong start in life. They were also asked to give their thoughts on the TryLife interactive film project, if it is a project that they would like to be involved in and what support they may need to get involved. This was a topic that young people in the age range involved in the focus groups (7-25 years) found difficult to talk about and engage with. The title of this priority area 'strong start in life' was not a phrase that the young people readily understood and required further more detailed explanation to facilitate and prompt discussions around early childhood. In discussions, the young people spoken to were unable to draw on their early childhood experiences and many of them instead focussed on what their own or future children may need to have a strong start in life. However, this was difficult for the majority of young people to imagine and forecast without having had experience of being a parent or caring for a young child themselves. As a result, further exploration of this topic with younger children and parents would be beneficial.

What young people said

The young people were really positive when asked about the TryLife film project. Many of them talked about not always feeling as if there is enough time within their busy school curriculums to talk about and find out more about the issues covered in the film, and that it would be a good mechanism for prompting those discussions. As with mental health, young people have suggested that more time in school to talk about challenging topics would be beneficial.

The young people were also really interested in the idea of being able to explore alternative scenarios and outcomes in a classroom setting and with the opportunity to discuss choices and consequences with staff and their peers. Young people recognise that this project provides a safe environment to explore challenging themes and topics and to equip young people with skills and confidence to deal with real-life situations. Any projects that enhance the PSHE offer of schools was spoken of positively by children and young people who think that projects delivered as part of compulsory education and support them with practical life skills as they transition in to adulthood are valuable.

Young people said:

- **'They [schools] don't do enough SMC (Social, moral, cultural) and health'**
- **'Sounds good- it would be good for it to be interactive'**
- **'It could reassure people- give them more confidence'**
- **'I never did anything like that – it would be good for us'**

Considerations- Strong Start in Life

Considerations

- Explore as a network ways to gather the experiences of younger children and babies to inform planned work.

- Continue to promote and make available the resources that have been produced by Trylife so that more young people have access.

Childhood Illnesses

Context

Childhood illness was not discussed as a standalone topic on its own during focus groups with children and young people, however whilst not explicitly asked, children and young people were really open when talking about their own experiences of a range of different childhood illnesses. Useful insight to inform this strand was gained through general conversations about health and health services. During discussions about a range of different priority areas children and young people with personal experience of childhood illnesses were candid and gave valuable feedback. Many of the topics discussed in relation to this area are linked to themes from the 'inequalities and access section'. The feeling of not having opportunities to have their voice heard was more prominent among young people who shared that they have health conditions or illnesses.

What young people said

For young people with childhood illness or health conditions the perception that they are not always heard, and their opinions and feelings not always valued was particularly heightened. Children and young people in the focus groups who access health settings more frequently or have childhood illnesses, talked about feeling as though their conditions are not always understood, by those have not directly experienced the condition themselves. They also shared a feeling of frustration when those who have not had direct experience of the same condition don't listen to how they are feeling or dismiss how they are feeling.

Linked to a feeling of not always being understood or listened to the children and young people reported that they appreciate opportunities to speak to other people with similar conditions or illnesses. The opportunity to meet with others facing similar circumstances not only supports young people but also reduces the isolation that they face. They value opportunities to spend time with others who similar experiences who are more able to empathise and understand the unique challenges that they face associated with their health conditions and illnesses.

Young people said:

- **'Try to understand our condition but don't say you understand 'cos you don't its really irritating to me'**
- **'They say that they understand about the tiredness of they know how we feel but they don't'**
- **'When I'm low (type 1 diabetes) I wish they could feel the way I feel'**
- **'Struggles we go through they [adults] take as minor and say get over it'**

- **'Do more groups with people who have them [health conditions] and meet up so they don't feel as isolated'**

In general conversations about accessing health settings and services young people with health conditions also talked about finding the transition between children's and adult services particularly difficult. They reported feeling as though children's services are often aimed at younger children, but that as they get older that health settings are not always set up to accommodate older children and young people in the same way. This was particularly prevalent among young people who shared experiences of hospital overnight stays where this issue was much more pronounced. Young people talked about hospital stays becoming more difficult as they got older in comparison to earlier childhood with services not responding to the needs of teenagers as well as they pitch support to younger children.

There was a sense from young people that they are often treated as younger than they really are, shielded from difficult conversations or in some instances excluded entirely from conversations with adults which take place about them rather than with them. Young people said that they are frustrated when conversations from professionals about them are directed at their parents or carers when they are present, and that they can find it difficult to have their voice heard and more importantly questions and concerns answered when this is the case. Conversely, young people also expressed concerns about being prematurely classed as an adult and the level of responsibility that increases as a result of this shift. Young people would like more support and preparation with this shift, with more knowledge in advance about what will happen as they transition to adult services and for their views and feelings to be taken in to account at all stages. Young people described this shift as being **'sudden'** and **'dramatic'** and as a result anxious and not fully prepared for this significant change. For professionals it is a balance between these two opposing points that young people with childhood illnesses and health conditions find most beneficial. They want to be heard and valued in all discussions and decision-making but still supported, nurtured and guided as their independence and autonomy increases as they get older.

Young people said:

- **'In hospital stays- nothing for young people it's really boring- they have lots for babies and little kids'**
- **'Specifically with young people speak to them themselves rather than the parents sometimes I feel I'm not even there.'**
- **'16 and suddenly classed as an adult'**
- **'I've got questions too but they just talk to my mam'**
- **'Young people not taken seriously- dramatic, blamed on hormones when female'**
- **'I feel like it happens dramatically [shift to adult services]. They don't tell you anything they expect you to know what to do'**

Considerations- Childhood Illnesses

Considerations

- Explore opportunities with Network Members for the development of support groups for children and young people with childhood illnesses.

- Explore ways to develop peer support opportunities for young people with childhood illnesses.

- Discuss and share with Network Members the themes that have emerged around the transition from children to adult's services and explore the work undertaken by Network Members currently around this issue to share examples of best practice.

- Explore with Network Members opportunities to involve children and young people in conversations about their health conditions and illnesses.

Additional Needs and Vulnerability

Context

Poverty alongside other barriers such as adverse childhood experiences and mental health difficulties mean that the region has a significant, and increasing number of children and young people that are vulnerable and have additional needs. Therefore, projects to ensure that despite the barriers faced young people that are vulnerable do have access to a wide range of opportunities are important. Putting children and families at the centre of all projects undertaken by the Network includes putting those that are vulnerable at the centre. Whilst it is a standalone area links between additional needs and opportunities should be made with all of the other work streams and the impact of all projects on children and young people who do have additional needs and vulnerabilities should be a consideration in all project planning, regardless of the thematic area that it sits under.

Young people were asked to share their views and opinions on the Tees Valley Art Project. They were asked what, if any, barriers there would be to them taking part and what would encourage them to get involved. These discussions around this topic linked closely to the discussions about poverty and access to opportunities for young people, and there is overlap in the feedback that the young people gave when talking about these two distinct strands of work.

When presenting the Network's priority areas to young people this strand was the topic that the young people had the most questions and least understanding about. The terms 'additional needs' and 'vulnerability' are familiar to professionals working across a range of different sectors but not vocabulary regularly used by young people. It is a broad topic with lots of different factors contributing to 'vulnerability' that is challenging to talk to young people about in an age appropriate and sensitive manner that accurately describes what this strand encompasses and is seeking to address. Young people valued specific examples of what constitutes 'additional needs' and 'vulnerabilities' and found it easier to talk about specific areas within this strand rather than focussing on the overarching topics. This strand links to many of the other strands, and young people talked about topics that were relevant when discussing more concrete themes such 'mental health' 'poverty' and 'childhood illnesses'. As a strand on its own young people found it challenging to engage in meaningful conversations as it has an unfamiliar and difficult to define title.

What young people said

When asked about the Tees Valley Arts Project specifically young people and children showed interest and enthusiasm when asked about the opportunity to take part in more arts and cultural opportunities at school. As discussed in the 'poverty' section many young people said that they miss out on these opportunities outside of school so the possibility of these being delivered as part of the school day were welcomed by the young people

consulted. One child commented: **'It's fun, I'd like to show my parents'.** The range of events and activities planned as part of this project was appealing to the children.

One of the barriers that children identified to fully participating in this project was around perceptions of dance and movement in general and ballet specifically. Primary school aged children said**: 'If its ballet I'm not doing it. I'd do break-dancing or something like that'** and **'I don't like ballet'.** For some young people, particularly those that are vulnerable they are keen to have access to a wider range of opportunities but may also require support and encouragement to get involved in new and unfamiliar activities.

Considerations- Additional Needs and Vulnerability

Considerations

- Unpick further with young people the aims of this strand, and how to talk about in a way that is accessible.

- Explore how Network Members can offer further opportunities for children and young people who do have additional needs and vulnerabilities including mapping out the opportunities that are available.

Common Themes and Considerations

Across the thematic areas and individual work streams considered discussions with young people have highlighted some common themes and raised some broader considerations. These common threads are considerations for the strategic board to explore moving forward. There are three key themes to be highlighted:

Young people value being heard

The overarching message from young people in relation to all of the thematic areas is that young people have a lot to say about issues that matter to them. They are keen to be a part of responses to issues, to be able to input their ideas and opinions and most importantly they want to be involved in decision-making. They have valuable insight which should be considered and included at all stages of project planning and delivery. Our young people don't always feel heard or understood and there are steps that can and should be taken to address this, starting with reflecting on what opportunities are currently provided for young people to be listened to. Young people are open to different ways of engagement and have shown a genuine interest in finding out more and working more closely with the Network as projects continue to grow and develop.

Young people value opportunities to meet with those with shared experiences

Across a number of the different thematic areas discussed including mental health, childhood illnesses, and poverty children and young people talked about the importance of spending time with others with similar shared experiences. Young people talked about not always being understood, both by their peers and adults and that opportunities to talk about issues that matter to them with other young people facing the same circumstances and challenges are always positive. As well as looking at universal provision and support for all in relation to these specific areas, the feedback from young people was that they would like more facilitation of groups and networks which focus on particular issues.

Young people in the region would like more opportunities

Poverty, additional needs and vulnerabilities impact on children and young people across the region accessing a wide-range of opportunities. The strength of the Network is that it has brought together a wide variety of fantastic organisations that do offer opportunities for young people, the challenge is ensuring that through collaborative working all children in our region get access to these. Mapping of these opportunities to identify gaps and barriers to participation would add to equity of opportunity for the regions young people.

Key Considerations

Key Considerations

- **How can Network members ensure that within their individual services and organisations children have opportunities to have their voice heard?**

- **How can Network members promote opportunities for young people to share their views?**

- **What role do young people play in shaping the services and programmes offered by Network members?**

- **What opportunities can the Network facilitate for young people with shared experiences to support and connect with each other?**

- **In what ways do Network members consider how to reduce barriers that those experiencing financial difficulty face?**