



# GROWING UP IN READING

Key findings from a report by Reading Voluntary Action's  
Youth Social Action Team and the University of Reading  
Participation Lab

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The full *Growing up in Reading* report, from which these key findings and recommendations are taken, was written by Dr Lorna Zischka, the Youth Social Action Team and John Ord.

For a copy of the full report, or further information about the project, please email [info@rva.org.uk](mailto:info@rva.org.uk).

**A note on dates:** The research and engagement period was November 2019 to February 2020, and the full report was compiled in May 2020. These key findings were published in March 2021.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Schools and organisations who hosted focus groups, including Reading Borough Council's Children in Care, St Laurence's Youth Club, Starting Point and The Avenue School.

All the young people who completed questionnaires and participated in focus groups and case studies.

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# GROWING UP IN READING

## KEY PRIORITIES IDENTIFIED BY THE YOUTH SOCIAL ACTION TEAM



### Mental health and wellbeing, especially tackling loneliness

- Ensuring young people are heard and have space and opportunities to be themselves.
- Older teenagers have more complicated issues and need confidential space to share their emotions.



### Being and feeling safe

- Address intolerance in order to ensure our community is safe and stays diverse.
- Tackle racism and homophobic abuse online.
- Consider the safety and freedom of children and young people when designing and managing public and open spaces.



### Creating a sense of community

- Explore how to support all young people in social action.
- Introduce 'topic' sessions for secondary school children – open to all, but not at school – to discuss and gain knowledge or advice about safety, social isolation, finding activities and how to maintain mental wellbeing.



### Widen the diversity of activities and opportunities available for young people

- Create a non-competitive environment to ensure anyone who attends extracurricular activities feels equal and has a heightened sense of community.
- Open clubs and extracurricular activities for older teenagers and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) youth.
- Create more clubs for niche interests or general spaces for young people to be themselves.

# INTRODUCTION

This report investigates how young people experience growing up in Reading. The research was shaped and carried out by a Youth Social Action Team supported by Reading Voluntary Action and the University of Reading Participation Lab.

We're publishing these key findings from *Growing Up in Reading* a year after the fieldwork was completed, just before the start of the coronavirus pandemic. So, are the findings still relevant? We think the answer is a resounding yes. The pandemic has made the priorities identified by the Youth Social Action Team – especially tackling loneliness among young people and supporting the diverse communities in Reading – even more urgent. (For an account of how the pandemic has affected young people in Reading, we recommend the report by No.5 Young People: *The Impact of Covid-19: the voice of young people – as told by No5 Young Ambassadors*.)

It has also underscored the importance of strengthening the voice and participation of young people in social action, so that they can help shape future services and planning. For any adult involved in the provision of services to young people in the town, the findings may not always make easy reading – but this makes it all the more important for us to pay attention, work together and facilitate change.

These findings are extracted from a much longer report and we want to pay credit to the large team of people who have contributed to this work. The central place of young people in shaping and carrying out this research has not only affected the output, it has also had an impact on those who got involved – expanding their experience, aiding that vital ability to reflect on a problem, influencing their thinking and opening up new connections and opportunities. Turn to the back of the report to read the Youth Social Action Team's reflections on the work.

## Rachel Spencer

Reading Voluntary Action Chief Executive



## THE RESEARCH

### AIMS

The aims of this research – initiated and overseen by Reading Voluntary Action (RVA), in consultation with partners including the University of Reading and the Whitley Researchers – were to:

- Identify and train young people who can strengthen the voice and participation of young people in social action.
- Support the development of a youth campaign and advocacy group informed by a greater understanding of concerns and vision for the future.
- Inform our understanding of how young people experience growing up in Reading, to help shape future services and planning.
- Increase partnership working across sectors.

### METHODOLOGY

Several focus areas were identified including health, security, activity, independence and respect. In September 2019, the opportunity for young leaders to get involved with the research was advertised openly and widely through schools, colleges, community networks, partner agencies and a range of youth associations. Young people who were interested were invited to attend a youth social action programme.

A youth social action research programme began in November 2019 with ten young people. The University of Reading Participation Lab provided training for the young people and supported the process in partnership with RVA. The young people were paid £8 per hour (up to a maximum of 30 hours each) for their participation. The course leaders were Charlotte Netherton-Sinclair, RVA's Youth Project Co-ordinator and John Ord, a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Reading and the Whitley Researchers Project Manager.

The training included a 10-session course introducing a range of research skills and training in research ethics. They were expected to engage fifty young people each to meet the challenging target of collecting views on growing up in Reading from 500 peers. The Youth Social Action Team agreed to collect responses using a mix of a questionnaire and focus groups and the field work was completed in February 2020.

A total of 608 questionnaires were completed – some online and some on paper. Returns came from 13 schools and one college. Focus groups were also held in eight locations including six schools and two youth organisations – a total of 94 young people attended the eight sessions. The content of the questionnaire and focus group topics were decided by the Youth Social Action Team – they led the distribution of the questionnaire and moderated the focus groups.

## THE QUESTIONNAIRE ASKED ABOUT THE FOLLOWING:

- The demographic profile of the respondents (age, school, ethnicity, gender, place of residence).
- Information about clubs the young person attends (if they attend any) and their opinion on whether they have a voice and the opportunity for self-expression.
- Self-reported life-satisfaction and opinions on key issues affecting young people, including mental health, having things to do, diet, social media, loneliness, safety, and support networks.
- What young people want for themselves in the future (which threw up career-related goals but also other priorities and ambitions).
- Problems young people have experienced growing up in Reading.
- The views of young people on the meaning of 'community', how the term applies to Reading and whether people feel they 'belong' to a Reading community.
- Changes young people would like to see in their communities
- Issues important to Reading's young people, and whether or not they would like to get more involved in addressing these issues.

The research generated an immense amount of data including thousands of quotations. The full *Growing up in Reading* report, from which the following key findings are taken, was compiled by Dr Lorna Zischka at the University of Reading, the Youth Social Action Team and John Ord. The full report includes appendices with all the quotations, and detailed notes on the focus groups and case studies, to preserve the richness of the data set. For a copy of the full report, or further information about the project, please email [info@rva.org.uk](mailto:info@rva.org.uk).

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

### Questionnaires

Questionnaires were completed anonymously.

### Focus groups

Towards the end of the youth social action programme considerable time was spent in preparing and planning the focus group sessions – including organisational and ethical concerns, guidance on conducting focus groups and the potential themes and topics that might be covered. The Youth Social Action Team decided on the themes or prompts for the focus group sessions and made the necessary arrangements with a designated teacher or group/club leader. Permission was obtained from head teachers or club leaders prior to each session and this helped with safeguarding and wellbeing requirements as well as formal validation for the sessions. For participants, assurances were given about anonymity and confidentiality and all those attending were asked to complete a consent form. The Youth Social Action Team moderated the sessions which were recorded by one of the programme staff members. Session recordings were then sent to the Youth Social Action Team moderators as well as the designated teacher or club leader to check and verify as acceptable and accurate – all records were satisfactory.

### Who participated?

- 9 members of the Youth Social Action Team aged 15 to 18 years led, shaped and implemented the engagement and survey.
- 702 participants – aged between 11 and 18 years with a high number of 15- and 16-year olds.
- 608 questionnaires were completed, a mix of online and paper.
- 13 secondary schools and 1 college participated.
- 94 young people attended 8 focus groups (within 8 schools and 2 community settings).
- 27% of those completing questionnaires were from grammar and private schools, 73% were from both mainstream secondary and SEN specialism schools.
- Gender (self-described): 64% of respondents said they were female. 23% identified as male. 12% did not specify which gender they were (leaving the question blank or putting nonsense answers). 1% wrote that they preferred not to say. Overall, females were significantly more willing to respond to the questionnaire than males.
- Ethnicity (self-described): 37% of respondents left this question blank or else wrote 'British' or 'English' which did not allow classification by ethnicity. A handful also wrote about their character rather than defining themselves by race. Out of those who gave a clearer indication of their ethnicity, the predominant description was 'white'. 59% indicated white or some variation of white – mostly 'white British' but also 'white English' or 'Caucasian' or 'white European'. The other 41% self-described themselves as from a BAME community (almost half were Asian but not Chinese, predominantly of Indian or Pakistani origin, and the rest split between black and mixed heritage. A few people were Chinese, Arab, North African, or South American). The survey clearly succeeded in capturing the views of a diverse mix of young people in Reading.

Some 600+ young people resident in Reading constitute a powerful sample collection. The ONS (Office for National Statistics) were contacted and confirmed that the most recent data they had showed that the total number of 16–19 year olds in Reading in 2018 was 8,012 – allowing for relatively few outside this cohort and some slight population changes since 2018 our sample still represents approximately 7.5% of Reading's older teenagers.





# KEY FINDINGS

## KEY FINDINGS: VOICE AND SELF-EXPRESSION

Young people were asked whether they felt their views were heard. They were also asked about the clubs they attend and whether they felt they had enough opportunity for self-expression in Reading.

- Having one's views heard and self-expression are both associated with a greater level of wellbeing in young people. Around half of the young people felt that Reading offered creative opportunities to freely express themselves and half did not. 22% felt that their views were never heard.
- Attending clubs appears to contribute to positive outcomes if they:
  - meet the niche interests of the young person;
  - deliberately aim to give each young person a voice, providing a platform through which they can express themselves; and
  - young people feel personally supported and encouraged in their endeavours by others (and especially by teachers).
- Belonging somewhere appears to be more important to outcomes than the frequency of attendance.
- Young people attending mainstream schools lag behind grammar schools and private schools in the degree to which they participate in clubs.
- Efforts need to be made to create spaces in which older teenagers feel engaged, and in which BAME youth (particularly black youths) can feel at home. These two social groups are significantly less engaged than others. Niche interest groups are better at engaging these social groups. Also, some people want a non-competitive environment in which to engage. Multiple older teenagers were looking to get more help into a career.
- Young people want spaces in which to 'hang out' with one another informally. Although some clubs may be very structured and focused on a particular interest, others should provide safe spaces in which the young people have more control. For example, multiple respondents mentioned wanting facilities like a bowling alley, ice rink and more swimming pools.
- A lot of young people are simply not aware of what is out there. Personal invitation and encouragement to engage is important. A non-judgemental environment helps. Help should be made available to families with low income.



## KEY FINDINGS: LIFE SATISFACTION

Young people were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

*I am satisfied overall with my life;*

*Health and social care people do support young people's health, especially mental health;*

*Social media currently has a positive impact on young people's wellbeing;*

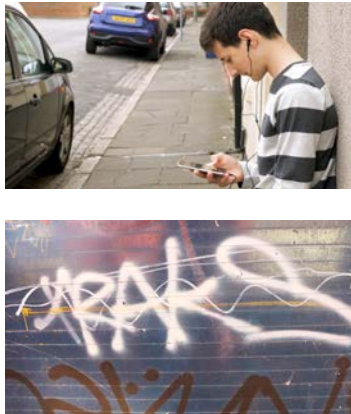
*I believe that healthy eating makes the main difference in weight control;*

*Too many young people are isolated or lonely;*

*In Reading, there are plenty of facilities for sports and social activities.*

- Where teenagers report having supportive relationships with others (and particularly with adults), their life satisfaction is significantly higher. Such relationships are also associated with being less worried about mental health care and being less concerned about loneliness and isolation. The better the school, the more likely it is that young people report supportive relations with others (and especially support from their teachers). However, the pressures of high achievement put some counterbalancing strain on mental health and on concerns for loneliness.
- It is generally agreed that social media can be used for good or bad, but the balance of opinion expressed by young people (and particularly those attending the better schools) tended to tip towards the negative impacts rather than the positive. In the free comment sections, social media had a few mentions in connection with poor mental health but did not feature prominently among the issues that the young people felt concern about.
- While healthy eating is important for weight control, many if not most young people think that there is more to weight control than diet (possibly other stress factors are felt to play a part).
- There is scope to improve Reading's offer of sports and social facilities, although half of the respondents were fairly positive about the current offer. The problem may not be only with the variety of clubs and facilities on offer, but also with helping new people to engage with what is already available.
- Although wider support networks may be available to teenagers in theory, it is family, friendship networks and teachers who most significantly impact the wellbeing of young people. The best outcomes are recorded among young people who experience multiple strands of support.

- Above all other issues, consensus is strongest around the issue that too many young people are isolated or lonely. Mental health is also an issue that some young people feel strongly about, and the importance of dealing with past trauma so that it does not carry into other areas of life is recognised. However, concern for mental health is certainly linked to social isolation, as well as to greater levels of concern about loneliness and isolation. This finding again points to the critical importance of supportive interpersonal relationships for good mental health, and particularly to the importance of adult-teen relationships. Safety from crime is another significant concern for young people. Dark and deserted places were particularly feared. Many young people also mentioned being intimidated by other teens.





## KEY FINDINGS: THE FUTURE

Young people were asked an open question about what they want for themselves in the future. 33% either gave no response or wrote something along the lines of 'I don't know' or said they had wishes for their future but did not specify what those wishes were. Other responses were vague, which makes it difficult to accurately categorise the data. However, some broad themes emerged.

**Careers and jobs** were mentioned by 62% of those giving a response. People wanted 'a good job', and some went on to define 'good' in various different ways, including: a stable job, being able to earn lots of money, being able to enjoy their job and being successful. Although a good job was most frequently linked to having a good income, many emphasised their desire for a stable income and some even said that they did not need a lot of money, but enough to get by and to feel safe.

Under half of those mentioning careers mentioned the specific job they wanted to do, for example: 'I want to be a chef and own my own restaurant' or 'I want to go to university and become a midwife'. For a majority the options were open:

'I want to have a successful job and be able to provide for myself and I want good exam results.'

'Financial stability in a job that I enjoy.'

'A well-paying job.'

'To be successful in job and life.'

'To get a job I'm happy with and enjoy an adult life.'

'To be happy in my career and relationships and to be able to support myself financially without stress.'

'A good stable job.'

**Happiness and good mental health** were mentioned by 28% of respondents. The greater part of these simply stated that they wanted to be happy: 'Happiness in whatever I do'; 'I want a full life. A life full of love and happiness. Others mentioned goals relating to more specific aspects of good mental health, including a desire to feel safe, relaxed, proud and without regrets: 'Mental stability', 'To be happy and proud of what I have done', 'Happy, safe life', 'I want to be happy with myself and my life and the life I've lived before then'.

Happiness was also linked by some to their family and friends, and to their health, lifestyle and possessions: 'Happy family', 'Children, money, happiness', 'Happy, healthy life', 'I want a job that I enjoy, with a good salary. I want to be content with my life and live comfortably'.

**Family, friends, and community** were mentioned by 26% of respondents. These respondents talked about having a good family life, getting married, having kids, and having good friendships as well:

'To become a solicitor, make a lot of money and have a good life for my family.'

'A stable career, house and family.'

'A successful life with a beautiful family.'

'To be surrounded by people who have a positive impact on my life'

A smaller number talked about the wider community and, specifically, wanting to help others, either in their family, or in a wider sense via charities or through their job

'Happiness of course, as number one :).'

'A job I enjoy doing, that helps other people and gives them good wellbeing. A family that continues to love and support me through my life, as I do for them.'

'I want to help others. I'd like to go to university, and then get a job. I'd like to live comfortably but not excessively.'





**Space:** 20% talked of desires linked to where they wanted to live or to lifestyle preferences. For example, there were many references to wanting a nice house to live in, and many to wanting a stable or safe living environment. Some wrote about wanting the opportunity to engage in hobbies and interests.

“A safe place to live, access to more local gyms and swimming pools, my own little business and a nice place for my children to grow up’.

‘A supportive community that is not only a safe space for mental well-being but also physical well-being’.

A few had locations or travel plans in mind: ‘[I want to] leave Reading’. A handful wrote about wanting to live (and others to live) in ways that protect the environment and the common good:

‘I want a future. A real one, where the environment is safe to live in and we don’t have to worry about destroying the planet on which we live’.

‘To be able to feel safe and comfortable in my own town’.

This links to the ‘community’ responses above. A wish for independence was also mentioned. ‘To be more independent and have places that I can go to socialise safely. Better sports facilities’.

**Education:** 13% mentioned school goals or university. These were sometimes mentioned on their own, and sometimes in connection with the career related goals above: ‘I want to go to university and work to hopefully get a doctorate or PhD’, ‘Go to university and study medicine’, and ‘To do my best in my GCSEs’.

**Money:** While financial security was most frequently mentioned in connection with having a career, 8% of those giving a response mentioned wanting lots of money without directly linking this goal to having to work for it: ‘[I want to be] rich and famous’, ‘Lots of money’.

**Good physical health** was mentioned by 6% of those giving a response: ‘I don’t know exactly but I do want a healthier future’, ‘Happy and healthy’, ‘Fit and healthy lifestyle, active social life, job that I enjoy, enough money to get by’.

**Stability:** an overarching theme of stability came through repeatedly and across all the themes above, particularly ‘careers’, ‘happiness’, ‘family’ and ‘space’. A desire for stability and safety is, indeed, a recurring theme throughout this research.



## KEY FINDINGS: CHALLENGES AND CHANGES NEEDED

Young people were asked an entirely open question: 'What is the biggest problem for you growing up in Reading?' 34% of respondents left the question blank or said that they had not grown up in Reading or that they were not sure. Out of those who responded, 8% said that everything was good – they did not have problems growing up in Reading, while 1% (5 people) expressed generalised disgust, saying there was nothing good about Reading. A summary of all other responses is given below, in order of mentions. Most of these responses were felt by males and females alike, by young people from all ethnic backgrounds, across all schools and across all ages to a similar degree. Any notable exceptions are recorded.

### 35% MENTIONED FEELING UNSAFE WHEN GOING OUT

Crime rates were mentioned frequently, as were drugs. So were 'dodgy' or aggressive people, and risky areas. A few people mentioned feeling unsafe when waiting for public transport.

'Lots of gang type people hanging around.'

'Feeling uncomfortable when walking in the street, due to homeless people and antisocial behaviour.'

'Some places are unsafe after a certain time.'

'The dodgy areas'

'Aggressive people sometimes.'

'Being a female alone in the dark in town isn't always safe.'

'Violence and knife crimes.'

'There are a lot of drug dealers in Reading and puts off my parents letting me go out at certain hours.'

'I'm anxious when going out either on my own or with people, this is because I know that there are people doing drugs and could potentially target me.'

'I feel unsafe when accessing public transport links after 4pm – the train station and most bus stops are in the "dodgier" areas of town beyond the oracle and main high street.'

This category also included a significant number who felt intimidated by other young people or who felt distressed by the irresponsible behaviour of other young people: 'Aggressive groups of young people', 'The fear of drug users and drugs being passed around and hurting people & bullies', 'Amount of young people involved in smoking/drugs', 'Roadmen [intimidating young men]'

Pupils from schools rated by Ofsted as in need of improvement were particularly likely to stress such problems. Those classifying themselves as 'white' were also more concerned about safety than BAME youth: 'We don't have safe enough places that teenagers can roam around in without feeling unsafe at times, such as parks or town centres.'

### 16% MENTIONED A LACK OF THINGS TO DO AND LACK OF FACILITIES IN READING

The problem was not just with a lack of clubs, but a lack of places to hang out or roam around.

'Lack of opportunities in terms of extracurricular activities.'

'Not many clubs', 'Not many social activities for young people.'

'Not enough places to go out with your friends.'

'Lack of things to do i.e. leisure activities.'

'There isn't much for young people that aren't clubs that you have to commit to. Places people used to be able to hang out in have shut down.'

'Having to travel to other places to do things.'

'There is nothing accessible for teens. Where there is stuff for us it's not interesting.'

'Sports facilities are limited. Central swimming pool as well as Bulmershe Leisure Centre have been being repaired for years now and the nearest ones to where I live are quite far away. The gym membership only applies to children over 16 so it's difficult to prevent obesity in children if we aren't given the opportunity and choices to stay healthy.'





## 15% MENTIONED LACK OF COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Lack of community, connection, integration, and acceptance were the sort of comments placed in this category. Some young people felt unsupported, and some mentioned a lack of people being helpful to one another. Some wanted more opportunities to mix and make a difference. Some talked of not having local friends. Others feel judged by others. A few mentioned bullying, which links also with the 'lack of safety' issues already mentioned. Comments were made to the effect that some are cocooned in their own world from other people:

'A lack of community and support from others, especially for the homeless and people in poverty'.

'Feeling alone and afraid'.

'Growing up as a mixed child without a strong understanding of who I was, especially in an area known to be diverse but not as embracing as it might seem'.

'I don't do anything with the community of Reading and it's dangerous'

'Isolation'.

"People being rude to you"

'Police harassment'.

'Everyone competing'.

## 9% HAD A PROBLEM WITH MONEY-RELATED MATTERS

About half of these mentioned a personal lack of money and/or the cost of things in Reading making things inaccessible to them: 'There are many opportunities for people if they have the right connections. However, it may be difficult to get involved if you are of a lower income'. The other half were concerned with a lack of support for the poor more generally. The plight of the homeless was especially prominent (and was also mentioned in connection with feeling unsafe): 'Lack of support for the homeless and people in poverty', 'Seeing homeless people a lot because it's upsetting'.

## 8% COMPLAINED OF VARIOUS PRESSURES ON MENTAL HEALTH

They also talked of the difficulties in accessing support and help, and a lack of awareness and action when it came to mental health related issues: 'I worry a lot about many different things', 'Lack of free mental health support. There is support out there but there are always really long waiting lists', 'Lack of information for big issues like mental health – only given to people when they're at breaking point, not beforehand in order to stop the problem growing'.

**Peer pressure** was also mentioned under this category: 'The pressure to be accepted by the right people. Growing up some people had to like you because they were popular and it didn't feel safe or normal to disagree with them'. Those who classed themselves as 'white' were particularly likely to mention this problem.

## 8% MENTIONED A PROBLEM WITH CONSTRAINTS ON THEIR LIFE CHOICES

These constraints fell into three broad areas:

- Not being able to get a job and earn money as a young person.
- Lack of independence (feeling constrained by parents and by authorities) was another – for example, some complained about school, and some about parents not allowing them out due to safety concerns.
- The felt lack of education options or ongoing opportunities following school.

Pupils from so-called 'elite' schools were less likely than others to cite such problems. BAME young people were particularly likely to cite constraints on their life choices.

## 7% MENTIONED PROBLEMS WITH TRANSPORT

These people felt public transport was unpleasant and often delayed or infrequent: '[Public transport is] more expensive every year and difficult to afford. They're never on time, trains are delayed/ cancelled too often and regularly disrupts daily life'. A problem of feeling unsafe when waiting for public transport was included under 'feeling unsafe' above, and the problem of cost is also categorised separately.

A second transport-related problem in this category concerned traffic being too busy: 'Traffic is terrible and it amazes me that anybody manages to get anywhere on time', 'The constant roadworks and traffic – maybe only one project at a time' and 'Travelling into Reading is hard as it's full of traffic'. It was also said to be 'dangerous for school children'. Traffic pollution was also mentioned. Transport problems were a particular issue for pupils from elite schools, who did not necessarily live within walking or cycling distance of their school.

## 7% HAD A PROBLEM WITH READING'S PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Some felt it was ugly. Some said there were not enough green spaces. Some said it was spoiled by litter. Some mentioned pollution. Some were concerned that Reading is not doing enough to save the planet. Overcrowding in Reading was also a problem for some (which adds to the traffic problem already mentioned): 'Educational facilities and communal areas need money to help clean the area up and provide more social spaces that aren't commercialised'.

Within the categories previously listed, **only a very few people mentioned school-related problems** such as lack of teaching and poor-quality teaching, lack of school funding, and a couple disliking school generally.



## KEY FINDINGS: COMMUNITY IN READING

The young people were asked: 'Based on your past experience, what changes would you like to see in our communities?' and they could name up to three changes. 38% did not respond to the question (some of whom did not live in Reading) but there were still around 370 respondents. What follows is a summary of the key changes desired, ordered by the number of mentions received. A lot of the issues mirror those raised under the section, 'Problems faced by young people growing up in Reading'. Many of the issues were overlapping and comments could have been categorised in multiple different ways. The percentages reporting one way or another are therefore only a rough guideline to the levels of demand.

### 39% MENTIONED MAKING COMMUNITIES SAFER

'Safer streets' and 'safer places to go' were overriding themes, although many other respondents broke these down into more specific concerns:

- **Drug and alcohol abuse:** 'Stricter drug control', 'Less drug abuse', 'Less alcohol', 'Better policing as there are drug dealers everywhere and it isn't safe'.
- More police presence and better policing were recommended, but also police brutality was a concern (and this was before the 2020 news focus on this issue): 'More police presence', 'Police actually doing something', 'More protection' and 'Better police management – less harassment'.
- More street lighting and CCTV control were recommended. There was particular concern over safety at night-time and in 'dodgy' areas.
- Crime and violent crime were concerns: 'Stop crime', 'Lower knife crime', 'Less violence in our community'.
- Protection from intimidating individuals (including other teenagers): 'More measures to prevent bullying', 'Roadmen', 'No hooligans or teens raiding the park and the street'.
- Antisocial behaviour and hate crimes were also mentioned: 'Less hate and discrimination', 'People respecting other people's property', 'Stop teenagers causing trouble'. In one of the focus groups someone said 'There is damage to property and graffiti and no-one is held accountable'.

The request for reducing crime and drugs was often coupled with wanting better support in place for people. There is a recognition that both victims and offenders need help and support into a better life: 'Schools to identify drug problems but help victims of it instead of getting them into trouble', 'Clear direct and published courses of action and help for children found to be involved in drugs or alcohol'. This also came through in the focus groups: 'There should be a special organisation that focuses on young people and helps them with life skills. Roadmen could be good if they have a strong sense of identity – some sense of belonging'.

### 37% WANTED MORE THINGS TO DO AND PLACES TO GO

Again, this is partly about clubs, but also public spaces where youth can gather informally, indoors as well as outdoors. Swimming pools and bowling alleys were frequently suggested, as well as an ice rink and other sports facilities and shops and eating places – in general, young people wanted more spaces for informal meeting links to 'helping people connect'.

'More places to swim'.

'Better sports facilities'.

'More clubs'.

'More places for young people to hang out (e.g. bowling alley)'.

'Social space'.

'More places for teens to hang out with friends'.

'More exciting things to do'.

'More activities for children 12 and above to do with friends'.

'Better places for teenagers to go'.

'More public indoor spaces for young people especially to socialise and hang out'.

'More shops', 'More fast food joints' and 'More parks'.

Similar kinds of comments came out of the focus groups: 'The council doesn't care about people' said one person. This was echoed by several comments about nothing for young people to do or places to go: 'even an arcade might help'. 'What's happened to our youth clubs?' was a common concern. There was a plea for places for young people to go, not open-air sites but somewhere indoors 'just to sit with people and talk'. In one of the focus groups it was said of parks that there is 'No wheelchair friendly play equipment', 'There's nothing for older teenagers – it's the younger children who have more to do'.

In the survey responses, multiple requests were made for places to meet where you don't have to spend a lot of money: 'more free events for young people to socialise in a safe environment', 'More free sports areas that are looked after', 'More things for teens to do for free or cheap'.





## 31% MENTIONED THE PROVISION OF OTHER SUPPORT BY WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE CAN FLOURISH

*Counselling, having someone to talk things over with and mental health support* came up quite frequently as did making these things more affordable and accessible. For example, it was said that mental health services were only available after things had gone too far.

'Increased support for people suffering with mental health.'

'More counselling in schools.'

'Access to actual support for mental health – raising awareness is good but doesn't actually help those struggling.'

'Better support for young people.'

'Mental health talks compulsory in schools from year 7, as only including older years is too late for some.'

'Adults being aware of mental health.'

'People to talk to or go to for advice.'

'Strict confidentiality rules for councillors: teachers and parents are regularly told about things discussed in confidence with a counsellor and this is a massive factor putting people off going to school counsellors.'

Mental health was also a hot topic in the focus groups: 'There are services for if you have severe mental health problems, but there's nothing for you if you have mild-moderation mental health problems, or if you are just having a bad day and want someone to talk to,' 'Maybe pastoral or other mental health support should be on tap without having to go through teachers only.'

*More opportunities for personal, educational and/or career development* were also mentioned: 'More places to study,' 'Uni fees abolished,' 'Better schools that have better funding and can actually support students individually,' 'More job opportunities for young people,' 'More jobs for teenagers to earn money,' 'Opportunities being offered by local companies,' 'More experiences' and 'More opportunities'.

In the focus groups and case studies it was suggested: 'More awareness of events happening around us, especially events for youth such as charity events that youth can take part in or small summer jobs at care homes/child care that youth can take part in. It was also said that children can 'slip through the educational net'. For families with money this can be helped but it is still a long struggle and is 'a massive problem in the educational system.' Those with less severe forms of dyslexia can miss out on support – wider help in the educational system is 'almost nil'.



There were multiple mentions of *giving young people a voice and a platform* through which to help shape the services that affect them and the wider community.

- 'More youth-based projects.'
- 'Encouraging kids at all ages to do sport and volunteering.'
- 'Trying to involve young people into helping others (like donation boxes / charities) as it all stops after primary school.'
- 'More opportunities for younger people to get involved in decisions which involve the community.'
- More opportunities for people to express voices.'

A focus group participant asked: 'What about public panels where young people might question those who make decisions locally such as local councillors or police?' and 'Is there an on-line forum for young people?'

## 29% MENTIONED THE NEED TO BUILD COMMUNITY AND HELP PEOPLE TO CONNECT

These requests overlap closely with the points categorised above and below. Examples include:

*Promoting tolerance and respect and understanding between people.* In the focus groups it was said that 'Reading is a racist town and all religions are judged and discriminated against. Homeless people also get abused'. A role for schools in educating people and pointing out hurtful language and misconceptions was mentioned.

'More acceptance (race, religion, LGBTQ+).'

'A decrease in 'segregation' of social classes at secondary schools.'

'Some people don't have respect for us because we're young. At the same time some students could be more respectful too'.

'Respect for the area (so people can live in a nicer area).'

'People being more respectful to others.'

'People to stop judging.'

Putting on events that draw everyone in, providing more community centres which serve as meeting spaces, and advertising what is on better.

'More community centres.'

'Getting teens to socialise more with adults to end the stigma between the two parties.'

'Doing more activities as a community.'

'More events to bring people together.'

'Improvement to care homes e.g. volunteering for younger children, integration with society.'

'Improving local entertainment services to give people places to socialise.'

'More visibility for community programmes/clubs.'

'More advertisement about what there is available.'

Also in a case study it was suggested that 'There should also be groups mixing older and younger generations so that the older generations could give wisdom and a slower pace to young people and the younger generations could give technology and new perspectives on life'.

While leadership plays an important part in making all this happen, it was also mentioned multiple times that individuals also need to become more friendly towards one another and listen more to one another.

'A more compassionate society'.

'People to be nice'.

'For people to be more considerate of everyone'

'More welcoming'.

'Everybody coming together'.

Inclusivity'.

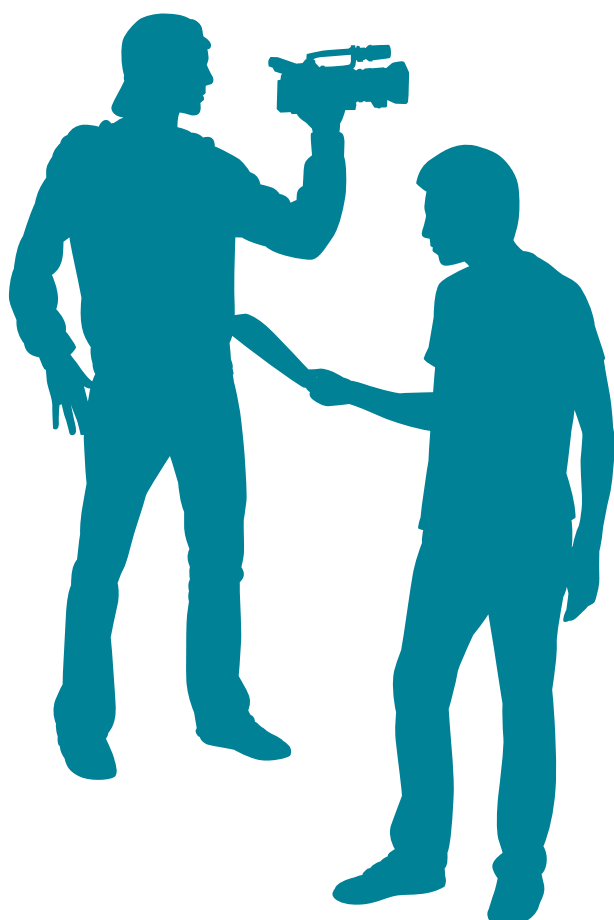
'More support for one another'.

'More friendly people'.

'People to be careful of their actions'.

'To do little things because it changes a lot'.

**18% said to clean up litter and beautify Reading** with flowers and green spaces, address vandalism and maintain buildings.



**17% said tackling poverty** – the most outstanding issue was doing something for the homeless. Also comments on the welfare state and ensuring that everyone can flourish, with particular care for the most vulnerable. Provision of health services, limiting smoking, help with obesity and tackling other social issues came up. Provision of housing was an issue – but flats in place of houses were not looked upon favourably.

'Support for homeless/more awareness/more homes for the homeless'.

'More work on poverty'.

'Better and more available houses, not more flats, that are affordable!!!'.

'Less expensive food and living facilities'.

'Financial support for those in need'.

'Better health care'.

'Drug rehabilitation centres'.

'Endorse sexual health clinics'.

'A decrease in the use of cigarettes and vapes'.

'Child obesity'.

'The laziness of the council'.

**16% wanted action on transport** They wanted cheaper and more accessible public transport, better traffic management, improvements to safety and improved roads.

**9% mentioned action on climate change**, which included planting trees, raising awareness, and reducing emissions:

'Less pollution'.

'Act on climate change'.

'More green energy and transport'.

'Greener public transport and all vegan/low resource places to eat'.

'More environmentally conscious actions to improve the quality of our community'.

Once again, the big four are making neighbourhoods safer, having things to do, creating opportunities for young people to flourish and improving the connections between people. Addressing homelessness also stands out to young people. Addressing poverty more generally, providing a clean and green environment and improving transport systems are less prominent issues but also on the radar.



## KEY FINDINGS: ISSUES IMPORTANT TO YOUNG PEOPLE

The last two questions young people were asked were 'What issues (personal, political or social) are most important to you?' and 'Would you like to be more involved with the issues you named above?' Most of those who came up with an issue (and 41% did not) also wanted the opportunity to be more involved with that issue. These were open questions and the issues mentioned are grouped into broad categories. As before the percentages are a rough guide to the level of interest expressed among those who answered the question.

### 38% MENTIONED POLITICS AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

Brexit and the subsequent government elections were hot and emotive topics in the news at the time of the survey. There was a lot of frustration about not having the right to vote over Brexit as this is an issue which affects the lives of young people going forward: 'I think that the youth should have more of a say in politics, seeing as the decisions made today will affect us the most tomorrow, and it frustrates us younger people that we have no effect or say for our futures'. BAME youth were particularly likely to mention this topic.

Under this category (although it would go equally well under the category of social justice) was also political activism with respect to LGBT rights, women's rights and multicultural acceptance. Some said that everyone should have a voice and to be listened to – including young people. A few lamented corrupt or incompetent political leaders.

### 23% HAD AN ISSUE WITH WELFARE/ SOCIAL JUSTICE

They wanted more equality in resource distribution and were concerned about the provision and funding of services like the NHS, education, transport and sports.

'I'd like to see a government which can benefit all different types of people for example different classes.'

'Healthcare, Education and Equality are really important to me. We should be kind towards everyone, and give what we can to benefit not only ourselves but other people.'

'The preservation of the NHS'.

'Looking out for the homeless'.

'There shouldn't be homeless people'.

'Breaking the poverty cycle'.

'Quality of education'.

'Help younger people who struggle to find opportunities to get them to the next stage in their lives, or to help them understand the different paths they can take'.

### 21% MENTIONED RELATIONAL/COMMUNITY CONCERNS

They wanted people to be kinder and more helpful to each other. They wanted get-togethers. They were concerned with friends and family. Some simply wrote 'social' (i.e. social issues were important to them) which could refer to community/relational concerns, but also to safety concerns, to social justice and welfare and to health and mental health: 'Relationships between people are very important to me', 'I want more connection between the young and the old', 'Be nicer to people', 'Fun activities to do together'.

### 18% MENTIONED MENTAL HEALTH ACTION A COUPLE OF PEOPLE MENTIONED OTHER BROAD HEALTH ISSUES SUCH AS OBESITY AND SMOKING.

'Local CAMs institute is severely under-funded. It needs more resources and more staff. It took me months to get an appointment - anything could have happened by then'.

'Mental health. NOT random talks by representatives to sufferers/ victims but actual support and stopping the issue in the first place rather than how to deal with it'.

### 16% MENTIONED CLIMATE ACTION AND LITTER REDUCTION

'More things should be done to help the environment'.

'Climate change is a really important to me trying to save the planet is needed also'.

### 14% MENTIONED 'PERSONAL' CONCERNS

Many of these gave no further explanation. But also categorised in this section are expressions of concern for the future, for grades and career. Personal health issues were also mentioned. Overprotective parents were mentioned. BAME youth were more likely to mention personal concerns than those classifying themselves as white: 'Personal issues are important to me. My state of wellbeing, etc'.

### 14% ONCE AGAIN RAISED THE ISSUE OF SAFETY

This included protection from crime (drugs, alcohol, violent crime, vandalism and domestic abuse with child abuse were all mentioned). Also disarming peer pressure and bullying, and some mentions of social media pressure. There were even 3 mentions of fear of war/world war. It was emphasised that protection should be extended to all. Those from schools in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Reading and 'white' youth (as opposed to BAME) were particularly likely to be concerned about safety issues. "I don't feel safe at school as many people I know have done things they are not meant to do at their age. Also walking around in Reading in the dark isn't very comforting as I don't think Reading is a safe place at night."

Because the question asked, 'What issues (personal, political or social) are most important to you?' some obviously thought they needed to choose between these three and simply wrote 'personal' 'political' or 'social' in answer to this question, and multiple people mentioned all three as being important to them. Someone added 'religious' to these three.

# GETTING INVOLVED

Following the question about what issues are felt to be important, the young people were asked whether they would like to be more involved with the issues they had named. The split of responses was as follows:

- No answer to the question: 45%
- No or not really (I do not want to get more involved): 13% (or 24% of those giving an answer)
- Don't know or depends: 4% (or 7% of those giving an answer)
- Yes, I want to get involved: 38% (or 69% of those giving an answer)

Most of those who had come up with an issue also wanted the opportunity to be more involved with the issues mentioned.

A few of those not wanting to get more involved added reasons for their answer. Some of these reasons revolved around the feeling that change was outside of their personal capacity. This was either because the change required was too big (for example, wanting change in crime levels or the benefits system) or because the respondent did not have much confidence in their own ability to make a difference. For example, respondents said they did not want to get involved as 'I wouldn't help' or 'because I can't' or 'I don't have the voice or confidence to'. One said 'I have no power to change them. And I know you'd probably say, well you do, but I don't. I really don't. It's not me who can make the big differences – it's the people at the top'. However, others were simply not interested in getting involved: 'I don't care enough', 'I like to watch from afar', and 'someone else can do it'.

Some of the people who did want to get involved also felt unsure that they could make a difference, either stressing the need for wider engagement (not just them) or stressing their own weaknesses. Some were not sure how they could get involved or make a difference but were open to suggestions. It is notable that while issues like crime were at the top of the list of concerns, they were at the bottom of the list for issues the young people want to get involved with – clearly some issues are felt to be beyond the capacity of the young people to resolve alone:

'Yes, but I feel like my opinion will never make a difference.'

'Yes, I would. I'm not the most confident public speaker or advocate, but I would try my best to spread the word and get people talking and acting on our local issues.'

'I don't know how I could help but I would like to.'

Some yeses were conditional, and some would be willing to get involved regarding one issue but not another. Indeed, some of the respondents expanded on the very particular issues that they were interested in getting involved with. It may be noted that personal connection with an issue can be a driver of a willingness to get involved. Some involvement was conditional on having an organised structure which provides a way in:

'Definitely, if all the items/issues were dealt with and introduced I would want to get involved.'

'Yes, but not political or social issues. I am not really concerned with them.'

Yes, political because I disagree with the choices and decisions chosen by our parliament and governments.'

'As a victim of severe bullying in the past I want to be a main advocate in resolving it as a whole. No one should suffer as I did.'

Some gave rather lukewarm assent, such as: 'Maybe', 'Depends how', 'I don't mind', and 'If you want'.

Many gave a plain yes and some were very enthusiastic to get involved if they could, saying things like 'Yes definitely', 'Absolutely! 100%', 'Very much so', and 'I'd love to play an active role in my community'.

Others said they were already involved and even gave details such as 'I am pretty involved with some of the above by using my social media platforms for good but I would like to be more environmentally friendly and "aware" this year'.

Some were willing to engage but only at a minimal level. Some felt that change would involve a change in the attitudes of everyone ('people need to deal with their own problems'), and that as an individual they can just play their part ('practice what I preach').

Since levels of enthusiasm were quite varying, further encouragement could make a lot of difference to those on the margin.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## A YOUTH SOCIAL ACTION MOVEMENT FOR READING

The recommendations set out here provide the basis for a youth social action movement in Reading and they start with young people themselves. If successful, a movement will engage all residents, set the agenda, make decisions that matter and bring about change in a collective and collaborative way – this is the challenge presented by this youth report.

1: The Youth Social Action Team and other young people should be supported to organise a **Reading-wide dialogue** that maximises engagement: of other young people primarily but also local agencies and organisations. This extended dialogue could include a conference in which young people lead on how best to link the report's content to local social action – within the framework of a social innovation movement. Joint or panel dialogues should be initiated with **open-ended discussion focused on youth needs and concerns** with agencies including Reading Buses, police, mental health agencies, teacher unions, Reading Borough Council and BAME organisations.

2: Other **Youth Social Action Teams** could be organised engaging more of Reading's youth – particularly those who expressed an interest in getting involved. These leadership programmes will link together to support a local social action movement and could include training and paying **youth counsellors or youth guides to support their peers** across Reading in community as well as institutional settings.

3: **Set up youth hubs around Reading** that are youth-led but resourced and supported by adults. Ideally, they will offer a range of facilities including cafés, rest rooms, computers, and stocked activity spaces.

4: **A review of current activities open to young people** should be undertaken with relevant agencies and with youth leadership to consider how best to significantly improve the options open to Reading's young people and how to encourage and support engagement.



# THE YOUTH SOCIAL ACTION TEAM

Members of the Youth Social Action Team and the coordinator, Charlotte, reflect on the value of this research



## CHARLOTTE NETHERTON-SINCLAIR

'This project had the purpose of encouraging young people to speak up and get involved in local initiatives that matter to them. You'll see quotes in the report that relate to the fact young people feel helpless to initiate change, that there is nowhere or no structure available to them to have their voices heard – so how can they make a difference when no one is listening? It's up to us as organisations to provide our youth with those support structures and platforms they need in order to speak up and to appreciate the value young people can bring to any conversation – political, social or otherwise. We hope that this research and report is the start of a new wave of youth voice, change, and action in Reading.'

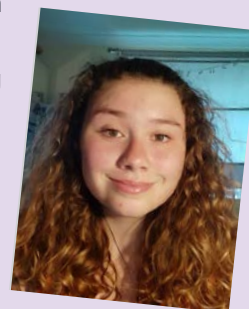
## PRADNYA DABHOLE

'As Reading Youth Council's Equality and Diversity Officer, I was excited to see that there was a chance to amplify the forgotten voices of the youth and wanted to ensure that our research targeted a full range of people including historically marginalised groups. I particularly appreciated the fact that the Youth Social Action Team were given the freedom to devise the research methods and execute our plan how we saw fit, so that we could fulfil our self-set aims to the best of our ability. Having led a similar research project about mental health, it is clear that this research is especially critical for civil servants to utilise in order to elevate stigmatised issues such as mental health and isolation. Additionally, action must be taken on the issues that are solely discussed and nothing more; this report brings to light the racial and religious harassment and abuse that young people have had to endure. I hope that substantial and where necessary systemic change is made to fully support the youth of Reading.'



## LUCY BURROWS

'I think I've learnt a lot from our research. I've learnt about what people from different walks of life and backgrounds feel about this town and the communities within it. For myself, I've had to consider several questions about how I really feel about Reading and my experiences as a young person. I think my views on Reading as a whole have now changed. For example, I now really believe we should have a better support system in place for mental health as it's a problem that can really affect young people.'





### MARYA WASEEM

'I wanted to discuss important issues with young people who cared about improving the same aspects of Reading that I did. Although face to face meetings aren't currently possible, I enjoyed every single one I attended as it was inspiring to meet people with fresh perspectives and gain more insight into different schools and youth groups. It's been a lot of fun meeting people with passion for similar subjects and how we all brainstormed ideas. . . . I remain just as keen to continue trying to make the little changes we can as a youth in order to prevent potential more serious problems occurring. Our findings have given me a lot of hope that we'll be able to reach out to those who stated specific issues more regularly, as if a lot of people all want to meet the same goal, we will be able to build and grow together!'



### GEORGE ROBERTS

'Having frank conversations with peers and young people across Reading about their experiences growing up in the town has been an eye-opening experience and the process of conducting the research has taught me a variety of transferable skills that I can take into the future. This experience has taught me that we should be more hopeful for the future – young people in Reading have shown that they are engaged and hungry for positive change. The passion from young people I spoke to about the need to improve the town has been inspiring and I hope that their thoughts and ideas expressed in this report are listened to carefully and positive action is taken.'



### JOANNE MUSHI

'As well as being a researcher for Reading Voluntary Action, I am also the Health and Wellbeing Officer for Reading Youth Council and I am passionate about improving the lives of young people in Reading in any way I can; I am glad to have worked towards this by being part of this project.

Conducting the research was made much easier by the diversity within our group and our range of backgrounds, and so as a collective we were able to reach a far more representative sample of young people to make the research more accurate – which I had initially been worried about. This experience has caused me to realise that the experience of Reading by children from different schools or communities can be vastly different, which I believe has made me more curious to learn about the backgrounds of new people I meet and broadened my mind. It has also inspired me to continue trying to change the experience of Reading for young people as through interviews and focus groups I have been able to see first-hand how statistics and research links to concrete experiences of individuals more clearly. In particular, the most enjoyable part of the experience was hearing about people's experiences in in-depth interviews. What surprised me the most was the number of ideas I heard that young people had to improve the Reading community. For example, a programme to connect older and younger people, which gave me hope for the future because it showed how innovative and enthusiastic a lot of young people are to make Reading better for the next generation, which I hope I will see come to pass.'

### ZARAH KHAN

'This research project has given me the awareness that it is possible to reach out to a large number of young people. Each individual has a unique and distinctive experience of growing up in Reading and we should be more understanding of their thoughts and emotions. It was thought-provoking to see mutual views amongst young people, such as the deficiency of mental health services and anti-social behaviour in the streets due to insufficient youth social hubs. Whilst empathising with the majority of the respondents' views, I believe that more needs to be done about ensuring that prejudice doesn't occur, particularly against race and religion. This is partially due to a lack of resourceful PSHE lessons and the narrowness in Religious Education in schools, leading to many misapprehensions towards ethnic minorities. This has made me determined to combat the stigmas that may ascend, and overall, I am more willing to advocate for the youth so that we live in a more respectful, safe, friendly and supportive town.'



### KALVIN GABRILOV

'I've found the experience rewardingly insightful and eye opening to what else needs to be done to benefit the young community. I see this as the common motivation of every member of the group.'



**For more information:**  
Visit [www.rva.org.uk](http://www.rva.org.uk) or email [info@rva.org.uk](mailto:info@rva.org.uk)

