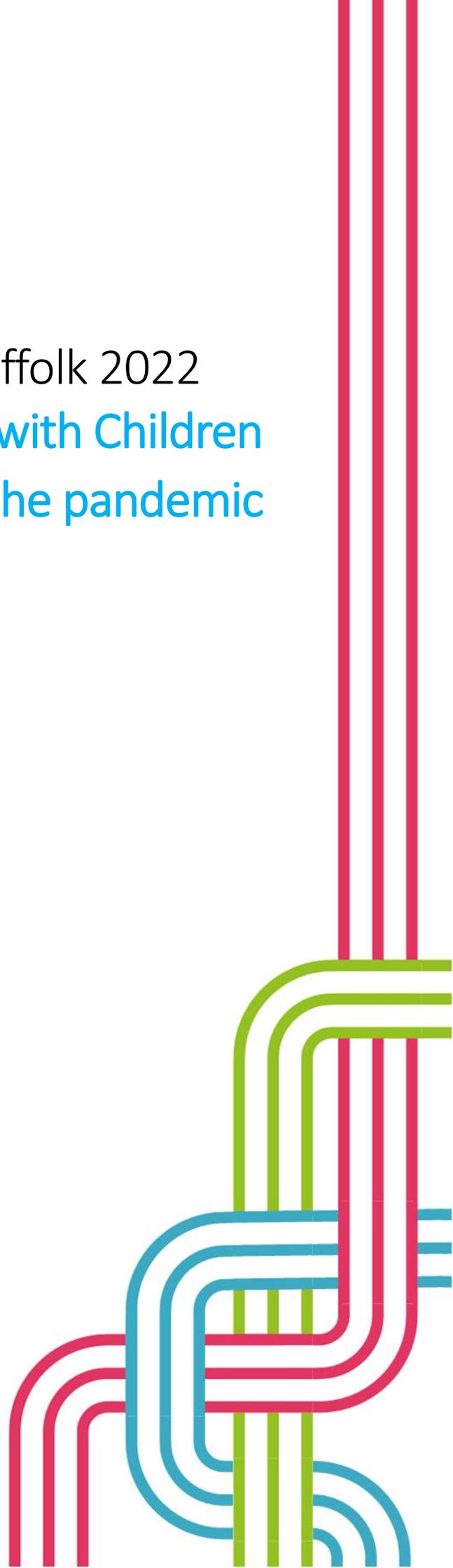


The State of Children in Suffolk 2022  
**Summary of Engagement with Children  
and Young People during the pandemic  
(2020 – 2022)**



# Summary of Engagement with Children and Young People during the pandemic (2020 – 2022)

## Key points

1. Whilst COVID-19 restrictions led to some positive experiences (such as spending more time with carers), young people also reported a range of negative experiences including missing family and friends, increased arguments at home, and concerns about the health of loved ones.
2. Anxiety, fear, worry and poor mental health were common in the feedback from children and young people during the pandemic.
3. Children and young people were concerned about the impact of the lockdowns on their future. However, lockdowns also gave some young people time to reflect and reconsider what was important to them. This included study or career choices, as well as religious belief and personal identity.
4. There was recognition that going to school/education is important. However, some children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities felt helped by the lockdowns. Many groups, including those at high risk of infection, felt anxiety about returning to school.
5. Loneliness is seen as a cause of poor mental health and increased self-harm. Young people and families don't know where to go for support for mental ill health and waiting lists can be long.

## Why is engagement with children and young people important in Suffolk?

It is important to include the voices of children and young people in work that affects them. Ways of involving and reporting the experiences of children and young people will vary depending on the work being carried out. Examples from the past two years include:

- Involving service users and people with lived experience in existing work, such as including young people in tendering processes (Children in Care Council, Suffolk County Council), young people with lived experience delivering training to NHS staff
- Co-production with the CAT Network (Children & Young People, Action & Transformation Network) of information for children and young people presenting at Accident and Emergency at Ipswich Hospital with self-harm injuries, and the new Crisis Help and Risk Intervention Service (Chris)
- Engagement with children and young people through groups such as Brighter Futures, and the Children in Care Council (Engagement Hub, Suffolk County Council)<sup>1</sup>
- Collecting feedback on plans, such as the mental health transformation plan (#averydifferent conversation)
- Gathering the thoughts and feelings of Suffolk children and young people through work such as My Health Our Future (produced by Healthwatch Suffolk)<sup>2</sup> which also involve children and young people in the design
- National surveys that use statistical tools such as weighting to ensure results can be representative of a nation such as the Mental Health and Young People Survey<sup>3</sup>

The period of the pandemic has been challenging for everyone. Children and young people, and their families, experienced reduced social contact, limited support, altered services, and increased stress

(see [State of Children in Suffolk: Impact of COVID-19](#) for more information). Families may have faced financial and social pressures, as well other impacts from the lockdowns, e.g. home-schooling. Some children and young people who required extra support or were living in challenging situations before the pandemic may have faced particular hardships.<sup>4</sup> They may have lost access to support: schools, children’s centres, health visitors, networks of family and friends, home visits from social workers.

## Data and sources

This report pulls together findings from engagement work with children and young people in Suffolk collected in 2020 and 2021. The information presented should be used to help improve support and interventions, and to help reduce disparities.

Much of the work uses children and young people’s own words, and so is not easily represented as percentages and rates. Quotes from reports are given in inverted commas (“example”), while quotes from children and young people are also emphasised with coloured bold text (“**example**”).

The Engagement Hub, part in Suffolk County Council’s Children and Young People’s Service continued collecting views throughout the lockdowns, disseminating what they were told through regular reports to the Tactical Management Team (TMT), a group set up to respond to COVID-19 and led by Children and Young People’s Services. This report uses reporting from the Engagement Hub including TMT reports from April 2020 (TMT1) to June 2021 (TMT14):

TMT1 April 2020	TMT8 October 2020
TMT2 April 2020	TMT9 November 2020
TMT3 May 2020	TMT10 December 2020
TMT4 June 2020	TMT11 January 2021
TMT5 June 2020	TMT12 February 2021
TMT6 July 2020	TMT13 April 2021
TMT7 September 2020	TMT14 June 2021

The Engagement Hub also reported from the Children in Care Council (C2C), Care Leavers Council, Children’s Action and Transformation Network (CAT), and the network of young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND YPN).

Special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) “I” statements were formed from “conversations and experiences of young people around the things that matter most to them” and then converted into easy read. The SEND services Outcomes Framework and Strategy will be based on the young people’s “I” Statements, and some have been incorporated into an “ideal worker” document.

CoronaCollections<sup>5</sup>: Suffolk young people’s experiences during COVID-19 and the transition back to education (“a rapid prospective qualitative study exploring young people’s perceptions of life in lockdown” between August and October 2020) was produced by the University of Suffolk and funded by The Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and the Ipswich Opportunity Area.

The Suffolk Safeguarding Partnership produced The Appreciative Inquiry into the Impact of Covid on Safeguarding in Suffolk<sup>6</sup> (using an ethnographic approach to give a snapshot, published November 2021, updated February 2022).

## Impact of COVID-19

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK have been felt and experienced by young and old alike, and will affect people’s lives both in the short, medium, and long term. This engagement work was undertaken during the pandemic: more work will be needed to assess the longer-lasting impacts.

One of the many consequences of the pandemic has been its impact on data collection. Across many areas, such as the economy, education, health and wellbeing, the pandemic has affected what data has been collected, how it can be collected, and what has been published. Even when published, not all data has been comparable with pre-COVID-19 data. For example:

- Engagement events moved online, which may have improved access for children and young people without easy access to transport but might have limited access for those without access to broadband or their own electronic device.
- In 2019, 11,950 young people responded to Healthwatch Suffolk's My Health, Our Future survey<sup>7</sup>, in 2021 4,522 responses were received<sup>2</sup>.

## What is the local picture?

### Family and friends

The importance of friends and family has been set out in the general "I" statements for the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) strategy:

- **"I want good relationships including family, friends, boyfriends and girlfriends."**
- **"I want support to live independently from my family if that is right for me."**
- **"I want support to do activities with my peers and not my parents."**

Most respondents to My Health, Our Future (77% of respondents)<sup>2</sup> like leaving home to go out to meet friends or to do things with family, so lockdowns were challenging: **"it's been really hard just staying in one place"** (TMT 13, April 2021). Social distancing sometimes made situations harder:

- **"It was horrible, it was worse than not seeing them at all. When we see them next, I do not want to social distance as it's impossible to not be close to your family"**
- **"I'm worried because I went to see my Gran at the gate, and she made me come inside"** (TMT4 June 2020).

Suffolk County Council's Children and Young People's Services Engagement Hub reported **"relationships with and seeing grandparents and other family members is so important"** (TMT12 February 2021). **"Many children in foster care blossomed because their carers were at home more"**<sup>6</sup>. Pets are also important (TMT12 February 2021). This was also seen in Healthwatch Suffolk's Key Stage 2 survey,<sup>8</sup> which found that children who experienced negative emotions (feeling cross, scared or frustrated) "a lot" experienced these emotions less when with pets.

Negatives included:

- Missing hugs – **"I feel fed up of this thing that's covering the world and eating up all the hugs and kisses"** (seven-year-old, TMT5 June 2020)
- More arguments and tension in families (TMT4 June 2020, TMT6 July 2020)
- The virtual world cannot fully replace the physical one. (**"It's weird trying to get by texting and Face Time but it's better than nothing"** TMT1 April 2020)
- Children and young people have been and still are worried about the virus and their loved ones getting ill or dying (TMT12 February 2021).

Children and young people who might need extra support, such as those from separated families or in care were particularly affected by lockdowns, who couldn't see other members of their families even though contact had been permitted in the lockdown guidance:

- **"I wasn't able to see my dad and my baby brother"** (TMT11 January 2021)
- **"I haven't seen my dad properly since lockdown"** (TMT5 June 2020)

- “Chaotic lifestyles are still chaotic, but even harder being isolated from friends and family.” (TMT3, May 2020)

Suffolk County Council’s Children and Young People’s Services Engagement Hub reported on how important friendship was to young people:

- **“Friendships and seeing friends is so important”** (TMT12 February 2021).
- “Young people have been supporting each other” (TMT12 February 2021).
- “Going to school/education is important.” However, some children with SEND found the lockdowns helped them: **“lockdown has really helped our son who has special needs,”** while returning to school caused anxiety to many groups, including those in high risk groups: **“it’s going to be very difficult because you are on the high list who might get COVID. You might not be strong enough to fight COVID if you get it and I am one of those people”** (Views and experiences of Covid/lockdown from children & young people with special educational needs and disabilities & their families. March 2020 – May 2021)
- “bubbling” and online classes made it difficult for students to make friends in a new school year<sup>5</sup>, and some young people worried **“that friends have been in touch with each other and not me”** (TMT5 June 2020)

Being alone “is not necessarily a bad context to be in, for some children it is a place where they felt happy/very happy. Healthwatch Suffolk’s Key Stage 2 survey found:

*“Children who are very happy don’t typically feel so when they’re alone, and children who aren’t very happy often do feel very happy when they’re alone. And the opposite is also true (and significant), children who are very sad a lot don’t feel so when they’re alone, but children who are very sad very little do feel so when they’re alone.”<sup>8</sup>*

Loneliness is seen as a cause of poor mental health and increased self-harm (SEND YPN views and experiences, TMT12 February 2021, TMT1 April 2020), and children and young people commented on the impact of lockdowns (Newmarket CAT group, TMT10 December 2020):

- **“I have felt really lonely this year”**
- **“really missed social interaction; it has been awful.”**

Care leavers highlighted the challenges of loneliness and isolation, particularly at night (Children in Care Council - C2C, Children in Care and Care Leavers Council report 2020-21). Care leavers also reported feeling **“scared and lonely”** having to self-isolate (TMT1 April 2020): **“I’ve struggled with not being able to meet up with friends”** (care leaver, TMT10 December 2020).

Views and experiences of Covid/lockdown from children & young people with special educational needs and disabilities & their families (March 2020 – May 2021) recommended “Tackle loneliness in young people as a priority as it leads to poor mental health and increased self-harm, especially out of hours support with a trusted adult.”

## Fit and healthy

Lockdowns meant children and young people couldn’t play sports such as football, boxing, and squash (TMT4 June 2020, TMT14 June 2021, TMT10 December 2020) which also affected their emotional wellbeing. Young people with SEND at West Suffolk College designed a badge to show they might need extra support when accessing leisure facilities, as “they felt anxious around going to a gym or a swimming pool as they did not always understand what they needed to do” (SEND young people’s report June 2021).

SEND children and young people, like others, had “appreciated outdoor activities and nature more,” and families appreciated Activities Unlimited as it meant they could afford to do activities together and engage with others (SEND Young People’s Network views & experiences). While lockdowns meant some children spent more time outdoors (“**going for a walk or having a campfire or playing in the river is fun to do with friends. We probably would have just gone round the shops or to the cinema,**” “**we were still able to go on dog walks**”), others felt less physically fit (TMT13 April 2021).

When schools reopened, some restricted break and lunchtimes, or prevented students going outside, which young people reported as being detrimental to their wellbeing, as this reduces opportunities to connect with others and to exercise.<sup>5</sup>

Some children and young people with long-term health wanted more “actual support from doctors for both physical and mental health” during lockdowns, and worried about relapsing (TMT14 June 2021). COVID-19 control measures exacerbated some young people’s difficulties:

- “She is walking around with a domestic bottle of sanitizer and if anyone gets near her, she tells them they’re in her space. (it’s her ASD gone mad)”
- “Children are missing out on vital speech and language support and the family is unsure if they will continue to receive a service and when.”
- Children and young people with additional needs were worried about the increased risk of catching COVID-19 when their schools reopened (SEND YPN views & experiences).

In 2020, Suffolk Youth Parliament wanted “young people to receive education on the PHSE [Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education] topics they find important” (including the new relationships and sex education curriculum).

The Poverty Reduction Strategy (2020) highlighted the increased challenges lockdowns put on families already in poverty “as they are more likely to have been required to self-isolate, have been furloughed or not eligible for any additional financial or other support as well as being more likely to be in poor health, disabled or caring for others.” Poverty is linked to food injustice: “It is 3 times more expensive to get the energy we need from healthy foods than unhealthy foods”. One care leaver commented “**It’s hard being on your own through this. Making money last and trying to plan meals. Trying to keep yourself uplifted and not to worry**” (TMT1 April 2020).

## Feelings

### General findings

In 2020/21, Healthwatch Suffolk reported that KS2 children (aged 7-11) in Suffolk were broadly happy: 84% said they were very happy and 85% said they were happy “a lot” or “sometimes” (at least 80% of children in each year group). However, the percentage of children who felt worried seemed to increase as children got older, while the percentage who felt excited “a lot” fell as children got older.<sup>8</sup> The most popular ways KS2 children managed their feelings were:

- Play games with others 54%
- Listen to music 53%
- Be active 44%
- Talk to someone 43%

In general, KS2 children were more likely to want to learn more about how to manage their feelings with their families (43.1%), trusted adults in school (35.4%), or friends (34%).<sup>8</sup> Although sample numbers were small, KS2 children who identified as non-binary or described themselves another way were most keen to learn more about how to manage their feelings (70%), and would prefer to learn with friends (50%).<sup>8</sup>

Support to communicate and manage feelings formed part of the SEND strategy: **“I want support from a young age with my mental health, like anxiety, how to calm down and how to deal with and communicate complex feelings.”** (“I” statements, SEND strategy 2021)

Healthwatch’s survey of young people (year 7 to year 10) showed wellbeing in Suffolk fell between 2019 and 2021, with low wellbeing up 17% and low self-esteem up 8%.<sup>2</sup> They were most likely to report that support from parents or carers (82%), friends (82%), or school/college (62%) was helpful for their mental wellbeing (82%).<sup>2</sup>

### Support for emotional wellbeing and mental ill health

In 2020, Suffolk Youth Parliament wanted mental health to stay high on the agenda, and not just be “mental health week or a wellbeing day”, feeling that young people don’t know what services are available, and are reluctant to seek help. Healthwatch Suffolk reported that half of young people who self-harm don’t know where to go for support.<sup>2</sup> After a year gathering views from children and young people, parents, carers and workers, the engagement hub (TMT12 February 2021) reported “Mental health support is overwhelming. Young people and families don’t know where to go for support. There is too much to navigate!”

The pandemic disrupted help and support:

- **“Initially it was very hard for me as a long-term sufferer of poor mental health... I have developed coping mechanisms and strategies but unfortunately most of them rely on seeking help from others or removing myself from a situation and doing something nice like going out for a meal or to the cinema. Lockdown has made me reach to the bottom of my arsenal and try to find new ways to deal with my issues, initially it felt like I was discovering my mental illness all over again”** (TMT9 November 2020).
- **“I was worried my depression would get worse in lockdown, but I have had support from C2C, my social worker and staying close.”** (Care Leaver, TMT6 July 2020)
- “Health visiting and school nursing services were experiencing unprecedented pressures with some teams running on less than 50% staffing and with workloads for children and young people with SEND plus Covid backlogs rising by the day.”<sup>6</sup>
- Lockdowns made it difficult for some care workers to check on some young people, for example one isolating care leaver seriously self-harmed during a crisis episode (TMT1 April 2020).
- “Social workers can’t go and sit with them,” referring to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children with conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (TMT5 June 2020)
- “The mental health support at Uni is a bit up in the air because of the situation with COVID” (TMT8 October 2020).
- Telephone/online therapy is harder than face-face, and so it is often not possible to go into as much depth. Part of this is because therapy is taking place in the young person’s safe space. (TMT5 June 2020)
- **“I was surprised at how awful it can be in crisis situations – like not being able to go with people in A&E and even in some mental health appointments and waiting rooms too! It made me feel so helpless.”** (TMT9 November 2020).
- Demand for the Emotional Wellbeing Hub increased around the period schools went back (TMT9 November 2020).
- Eating Disorder and OCD referrals increased (TMT9 November 2020).

## Impact of the pandemic

Anxiety, fear, worry and poor mental health were common in the feedback from children and young people during the pandemic:

- **“My mental and physical health is really bad at the moment. I’ve been fighting for years but everything feels hard and I don’t feel good, even walking around is difficult”** (TMT12 February 2021).
- **“I’m surprised I’m still alive. People think they know me as I’m smiley and always talking but it’s all a lie, I lie through my teeth to everyone, it’s all an act.”** (TMT12 February 2021)

In the early stages of the pandemic, engagement staff noticed a switch:

*“Children who had mental health difficulties prior to lockdown are feeling better being now at home. School causes stress, pressure of work and peer pressure to conform, look a certain way, behave a certain way. Anxiety going back to school... Children who did not have mental health difficulties before lockdown now experiencing them due to the situation”* (TMT2 April 2020).

“Young people’s normal struggles harder in lockdown. Chaotic lifestyles are still chaotic, but even harder being isolated from friends and family” (TMT3 May 2020).

Children and young people were affected by the emotions of their parents and carers (TMT1 April 2020, TMT3 May 2020): **“Parent’s anxieties about sending children to school is rubbing off on the kids”** (Year 11 student, TMT8 October 2020).

Children and young people worried about themselves, family members or friends getting ill (TMT1 April 2020, TMT10 December 2020, TMT12 February 2021, TMT3 May 2020, TMT4 June 2020)

- **“I’m scared I might get it; some people follow the rules and others just don’t care”** (TMT10 December 2020)
- **“I can’t sleep at night, I keep feeling really panicky and anxious. I’m worried about dying. I don’t want to die, but we all have to, we can’t stop it and it’s so scary. I don’t want to leave this world.”** (TMT5 June 2020)
- “Their world’s become so small that the small worries in that world have become big.”
- (Parent of 3 year old, TMT5 June 2020)
- Young adult carers talked about their anxiety and depression and said that they are battling feelings of wanting to go out with feeling fearful about going out. (TMT12 February 2021)

Uncertainty around school and employment caused anxiety:

- **“I hope school doesn’t close again ... I think it’s also bad for children’s mental health as they can’t get away from what’s happening at home.”** (TMT9 November 2020)
- **“The stress/pressure/anxiety on going back to school and ‘catching up’ with work is really affecting my mental health.”** (TMT7 September 2020)
- **“I feel so ill and stressed at the moment. They are cutting my hours at work in this lockdown .... I am so worried this time round its feels far worse mentally. I really need support at night when it’s the worse.”** (TMT9 November 2020)
- **“I really don’t know what is going to happen about my exams I’m so worried... I am quite an organised person who likes to plan so not knowing what I need to do with regards to schoolwork and revision is causing me some stress.”** (TMT11 January 2021, TMT14 June 2021, TMT2 April 2020)

What would help you the most at the moment? (TMT14 June 2021)

- **“Actual support from doctors for both physical and mental health. More help for my family, more outlets for my brother who has special needs. More help from college or anyone who is around me at home or out and about. More explanation of what support there actually is so that I can work out what it is I want/need.”**
- **“I would like to go to clubs [and activities] but they are too expensive, how can you help people like me?”** (Young person with SEND)

A shooting in Kesgrave (involving two 15 year olds) and George Floyd’s death (Black Lives Matter campaign) had impacts in addition to the change and uncertainty around COVID-19 and lockdowns. Young people felt unable to discuss topics such as anti-Black racism, global affairs, and the climate crisis in schools. “Most young people reported avoiding watching the news to prevent further anxiety”<sup>5</sup>:

- **“I had such a rough night last night, I didn't dare watch the news, just couldn't deal with anything else bad happening”** (TMT12 February 2021)
- **“I’m really scared about what’s going on at the moment, what with the Kesgrave shooting and them finding bones in the river, that’s freaky stuff... I’m worried to leave the house and always looking over my shoulder, you just don’t know who’s about, nothing happens like that usually where I live”** (young person with SEND, TMT7 September 2020)

The Children’s Action and Transformation Network (CAT, a group of young people across Suffolk who have lived experience of mental health services or an interest in mental health and wellbeing) co-produced a leaflet to support 11-18 year olds who presented to Ipswich Hospital A&E with self-harm injuries (CAT young people’s report June 2021). Young people from CAT also ran drop-in sessions for students and refreshed a campaign (“stop the awkward”), as well as delivering training for mental health workers and working on CHRIS, the new Crisis Help and Risk Intervention Service.

## Future hopes and dreams

In 2020/21, “young people are worried about their futures, being behind in their education and not having the qualifications they need to progress” (SEND YPN views & experiences). There were worries that further lockdowns would be needed and education would continue to be disrupted<sup>5</sup>.

Short-term hopes (for the next year) were that the pandemic and lockdowns would end, and normal activities could resume, such as celebrating Christmas and birthdays (TMT10 December 2020), going on holidays, and returning to school or college:

- **“I hope the vaccine will bring back some normality.”** (Hopes for 2021, TMT10 December 2020, Care Leavers)
- **“Restrictions lifting is definitely something we are going to welcome as it has stopped us from doing so many things that we normally would take for granted. I think being able to see many other people at the same time (being able to gather as a group) is something I’m looking forward to and being able to go on holiday.”** (TMT13 April 2021).
- **“I would like to see lots of people at Christmas!”** (6yr old boy) (TMT9 November 2020)
- **“I’m looking forward to the New Year and looking for a job.”** (Care leaver) (TMT10 December 2020)
- **“I want to start high school to make more friends and meet other people.”** (10-year-old girl) (TMT11 January 2021)
- **“I can’t wait to get back to college”** (16 year old boy). (TMT12 February 2021)
- **“Looking forward to Uni and it being normal for fresher’s week.”** (TMT13 April 2021).
- **“I would like to go to Spain because this is what we used to do as a family.”** (TMT12 February 2021)

- **“I’m just missing my girlfriend; she lives in Ipswich.”** (TMT12 February 2021)
- **“Going and staying at my aunties, it’s been really hard just staying in once place”** (TMT13 April 2021).
- **“Going shopping, eating at restaurants, having sleep overs”** (TMT13 April 2021).
- **“Go drinks with my friends as I’m now 18”** (TMT13 April 2021).
- **“I’m looking forward to spending time with family especially being able to hug them again!”** (TMT13 April 2021).

Time away from the usual school environment made some young people re-evaluate their opinions of school and education:<sup>5</sup>

- **“I’ve got more interest in doing some work or school so I can study really hard for my GCSEs because I used to not care.”**
- **“These GCSEs reflect my future. And I didn’t think education was important for me, I thought education is just there to keep us busy.”**

The lockdowns gave some young people time to reflect and reconsider what was important to them. This including study or career choices, as well as religious belief and personal identity<sup>5</sup>:

*“the period also reinforced the idea of ‘life is short’ which has led some young people to re-think their outlook on life, that they are not in control of all aspects of life, so should focus on those that make them happy.”*

Longer-term wishes included:

- **“I want my plans to focus on my skills and interests, likes and dislikes, and to help me fulfil my dreams.”** (“I” statement SEND strategy 2021)
- **“I hope the ‘new normal’ will include a better respect for the environment and so we will take more action on climate change and other more positive changes to our society.”** (TMT13 April 2021).
- **I’ll leave you with this lyric from the 2Pac song Ghetto Gospel, “It ain’t about black or white cause we’re human. I hope we see the light before it’s ruined.”** (TMT5 June 2020)

## References

TMT reports from The Engagement Hub (part of Suffolk County Council’s Children and Young People’s Service) produced from April 2020 to June 2021, also their reports from engagement with children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), well as reports from Suffolk Youth Parliament, the Children in Care Council, CAT (Children & Young People, Action & Transformation) Network. These are listed in Data and Sources at the beginning of this document.

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