

Institute for Public Policy Research



THE LONELIEST GENERATION

**WHAT IT IS LIKE TO GROW
UP IN ENGLAND TODAY**

**Ellie Harris, Conor Carleton,
Avnee Morjaria, Hollie Wright,
Jamie O'Halloran and Kshama Saju**

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IPPR
4th floor,
8 Storey's Gate
London
SW1P 3AY

E: info@ippr.org
www.ippr.org

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SC046557 (Scotland)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ellie Harris is a principal research fellow and head of children and young people at IPPR.

Conor Carleton is a children and young people's expert, providing policy consultancy for IPPR.

Avnee Morjaria is associate director for public services at IPPR.

Hollie Wright is a research fellow at IPPR.

Jamie O'Halloran is a senior research fellow at IPPR.

Kshama Saju was a policy intern in the public services team at IPPR in the summer of 2026.

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SUMMARY

Connection should be the fabric that binds society together. But today's young people have never felt more disconnected.

A connected society is one in which we care about how others are doing and, in turn, others look out for our wellbeing. It is the state and public services, family, communities, places and institutions working together to improve opportunities for everyone. It is what gives our places life and our lives shape.

We have spent the past few months travelling across England speaking to more than 150 young people and carrying out new analysis of data on how young people are faring. We found that, while adolescence is a period of profound opportunity, young people today no longer have the support they need to live fulfilling lives and become well-rounded adults. Growing up is now defined by disconnection.

Our research found:

1. **The foundations of a good adolescence have eroded.** A generation are coming of age in the shadow of a digital childhood, a pandemic, and the erosion of the services and spaces that once helped them navigate the journey to adulthood. Young people today have fewer close friends than they did 10 years ago, and the friendships they do have are less strong. One in 20 young people now have no friends at all. Poor mental health, meanwhile, is now a productivity crisis as much as a wellbeing one: the share of young people saying poor mental health means they have accomplished less has quadrupled since 2010–12.
2. **Transitions to adulthood are blocked.** The traditional indicators of early adulthood are all happening much later, leaving young people in a longer, hollower and more precarious adolescence. Buying and renting a house is harder, with the average age of a first-time buyer now 34 and nearly one in five young people spending half of their income on rent. Jobs and training are more difficult to find, with apprenticeship starts among 16–24-year-olds down by 40 per cent over the past decade and growing numbers of young people not earning or learning. Ever more young people are stuck in limbo: they are no longer children and yet are unable to access adult life.
3. **As a result, young people feel disconnected on three fronts:**
 - **Young people feel disconnected from themselves.** Young people feel a loss of agency and self-esteem. They no longer feel they have the support they need to realise their big ambitions. When they reflect on their lives, they conclude they have little control over what happens next, with fewer opportunities to change course. They form identities online, like themselves less and feel less satisfied with their lives.
 - **Young people feel disconnected from each other.** Young people have fewer friends and a lack of spaces to build in-person connections. They feel like they belong less in school and are more likely to be bullied there. 'Doomscrolling', a fundamentally solitary activity, has become the daily pastime of a generation.
 - **Young people feel disconnected from wider society.** Young people can see that our current health, education and support services are not structured to meet their needs. They are no longer confident in their futures, with the proportion expecting to become long-term unemployed trebling in a decade.

Society only functions if people feel part of something that offers them more than they can offer themselves alone. But young people have surveyed the world around them, reflected on their experiences, and concluded that this is not what society is offering them. This is a rational response with serious consequences. It risks pulling us into a downward spiral in which people no longer believe things can get better, individuals no longer look out for each other, and faith in the state deteriorates.

Today's disconnection is the result of political choices made by adults in the name of neoliberalism. Our young people have grown up in a country reshaped by an ideology that professes that 'there is no such thing as society'. The disconnection young people describe can trace its origins back to a shift away from collectivism and towards the privatisation and marketisation of public services and assets, the adoption of identity politics over the politics of inclusion, and a deference to unaccountable tech oligarchs.

The solutions do not lie in changes to youth policy: a collective effort is required to offer young people a new settlement that reaches across their lives, on education, work, housing and health.

This report is the first in our State of a Generation programme. Here, we set out what it is like to grow up in England today. In the next phase of this work, we will convene young people, the people who support them, experts, business and other stakeholders from across the country to design the radical new settlement that will build the connections that bring us together as a nation.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report sets out the key challenges facing the 10 million young people aged 11 to 24 in England¹ today (ONS 2025).

The young people we spoke to, and the data we analysed, focused on those born between 2002 and 2016, encompassing both ‘gen z’ and the first few years of ‘gen alpha’. The wants and needs of today’s young people are not dissimilar to those of previous generations: to be happy, enjoy school, spend time with their friends and family, do well enough in their exams to have choices about what they do next, and be supported through this stage of life towards adulthood.

Today’s young people are growing up in a novel set of circumstances. A combination of a digital childhood, austerity, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and an increasingly unpredictable set of global, economic, ecological and technological circumstances have changed the experience of growing up. Some of this is not specific to England, but it does appear that young people in England and the wider UK are experiencing these challenges more acutely than comparable nations. The UK has the lowest life satisfaction of teenagers in Europe (The Children’s Society 2024), our youth-to-adult-unemployment ratio reached nearly twice the OECD average in 2024² (PwC 2025), and we have the second highest child poverty rate in the G7 (HM Government 2025). This might be due to the lack of safety net caused by austerity, which the Institute for Fiscal Studies found rolled back the size of the state more in the UK than other G7 countries (Emmerson et al 2024).

Many of these challenges also affect older adults, but adolescence is a unique stage of life that, just like the earliest years of childhood, is characterised by rapid physical, neurological and social development (Backes and Bonnie 2019). When one part of this process is strained, the effects reverberate throughout a young person’s life. At the same time, the neuroplasticity of adolescents’ brains presents enormous opportunity: to build skills, undo earlier adversity, form new relationships, and define their place in the world. There is still much to be hopeful about. Most young people don’t have a mental health condition, and most do get the qualifications they need to have choices about what they do next. What this report shows, however, is that too many trends are heading in the wrong direction.

Growing up is not a homogeneous experience. The nature of adolescent development means that the experiences of tweens and young teens will be very different to older teenagers and young adults. Equally, poverty compounds many of the challenges young people face, and other experiences, circumstances and identities can all impact how young people grow up. This report does not look in detail at any subgroup and instead focuses on the trends that have worsened over time for young people, regardless of their age or background.

We have an opportunity to set a new direction. At the next general election, votes at 16 will give around 1.3 million young people in England a say in the country’s future

1 We have focused this report on England, and our novel analysis uses England-only data. Occasionally, particularly for international comparisons, data is only available for the UK as a whole and where this is the case we have clearly indicated so.

2 In 2024, the OECD youth unemployment rate was 2.5 times the unemployment rate for older workers, whereas in the UK it was 4.8 times as high.

for the first time (Johnston 2026). Meeting that new voice with real change means closing the gap between what young people need and what they currently receive.

1.1 METHODS

Quantitative

We analysed two longitudinal datasets: Understanding Society³ and the Family Resources Survey.⁴ Understanding Society collects data in ‘waves’ over two-year periods. All data is for England.

Qualitative

We held 13 in-depth qualitative workshops with more than 150 young people from across England, aged 11 to 24. Eight sessions took place in schools, two were held online, and three were delivered in community settings like youth clubs and support groups. We also held two online workshops with more than 30 parents and carers of young people with disabilities.

Participants were recruited through existing networks of community organisations, headteachers and MAT leaders, youth workers and practitioners. Recruitment aimed to overrepresent participants from communities who find it hardest to have their voices heard in national policy conversations. Qualitative findings should be read as illustrative of experiences of young people in England rather than representative claims.

In each session, facilitators used several activities, including open questions and agree/disagree statements, to encourage participants to reflect on their personal experiences growing up in England.

Transcripts of the sessions were manually coded. Listening to what people tell us (the content), helps us see the breadth of their experiences. Noticing how they talk about their experiences (emotive language, for example), helps us to understand more about why people make the choices they make, what they think about the opportunities and support they receive, and where there might be gaps.

Key quotes from the workshops were collated. All quotes published in this report have been edited for clarity and have had any identifying information removed.

3 See: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>

4 See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/family-resources-survey--2>

2. THE FOUNDATIONS OF A GOOD ADOLESCENCE HAVE ERODED

The teenage years have changed. A generation is coming of age in the shadow of a digital childhood, a pandemic, and an erosion of the services and spaces that once helped young people navigate the journey to adulthood. This has left them isolated and disconnected from their friends and communities.

2.1 AN ALTERED STATE OF ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence is a distinct phase of development. The science tells us that adolescent brain development moves quickly on ‘sensation-seeking’ and risk-taking behaviours, but is slower to develop planning, working memory and impulse control (Backes and Bonnie 2019). Coupled with the unfamiliar effects of puberty, this leads many young people to experience challenges during this phase; with their friends, identity, relationships with parents, exam stress and new experiences. This can make adolescence a difficult period for many.

This generation of young people, however, are experiencing challenges far outside the norm.

A digital childhood

Young people aged 15–17 spend around six and a half hours online every day, usually on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat (Ofcom 2025a). It is not just the teenage years that are marred by technology; even 3–5-year-olds are using social media (37 per cent) and own a mobile phone (19 per cent) (Ofcom 2025b). Childhood is now mediated through a screen.

“As I wake up, first thought, TikTok, and then I eat. First thought after that, TikTok, and then I shower and then TikTok; and then I’m on the bus, guess what I do? TikTok and then during school I don’t use TikTok, but after school, as soon as I get out I’m like let me check my TikTok.”

Young person

Whether a social media ban for young people is the right policy or not, it arrives too late for the generation that has already grown up online. For young people, the digital world is not a distraction from real life; it is real life. Friendships are formed and fractured on Snapchat; identities are explored on TikTok; new passions are discovered on YouTube.

Young people are keenly aware of the downsides of a life lived online. They talk about ‘doomscrolling’; they know how many hours a day they’re clocking online and how this is affecting their sleep, their friendships and their mental health. The majority of parents do not think the benefits of social media, messaging and video-sharing apps outweigh the risks (Ofcom 2025b).

Evidence shows an increase in emotional difficulties in young people, relating to concentration, lost sleep over worry, and lost confidence in themselves (DHSC 2026). The young people we spoke to link these difficulties to social media:

“You just end up doomscrolling, which isn’t good for you, and it ruins sleep, and you just don’t get stuff done, where you could be out, and it’s better for you.”

Young person

“The algorithm’s going to suck you in and it’s just going to make you feel worse and worse about yourself.”

Young person

Given identity formation and building social connections are key developmental tasks during adolescence (Backes and Bonnie 2019), significant time spent on social media means these tasks are now undertaken online. In practice, this means developing a sense of self amid the architecture of ‘likes’, ‘views’, ‘comments’ and a constant comparison to the lives of others.

Significant time spent online also means greater exposure to online harm, with over two in three (71 per cent) of 11–17-year-olds exposed to harmful content (Ofcom 2025a). This has consequences for individuals who are forced to see shocking and upsetting content, but it also has wider implications for how protected young people feel by the adults and institutions around them. The young people we spoke to described some of the extreme content they had seen and their perception that this was preventable had tech companies, governments and other adults in society taken steps to protect them.

“The companies don’t do anything. There’s all this stuff that you shouldn’t be seeing on there, whether it’s porn or people dying. There’s stuff we shouldn’t be seeing, but they’re just allowing it to be out.”

Young person

In one workshop with 14- and 15-year-olds, we asked whether anyone had seen someone die online. Every single child in the room said yes. Young people described feeling deserted by the adults who have a duty to protect them, fuelling the disconnection they feel to wider society.

“They [the government and social media companies] need to take responsibility for creating those algorithms that got us addicted.”

Young person

Fractured friendships

Friendships are now mediated by social media and messaging services. Young people tell us that, while being able to talk to your friends on your phone can be good, there are downsides:

“You can’t escape it, your phone’s with you all the time, so if you and someone got in an argument at school, you’d go home and it could still carry on.”

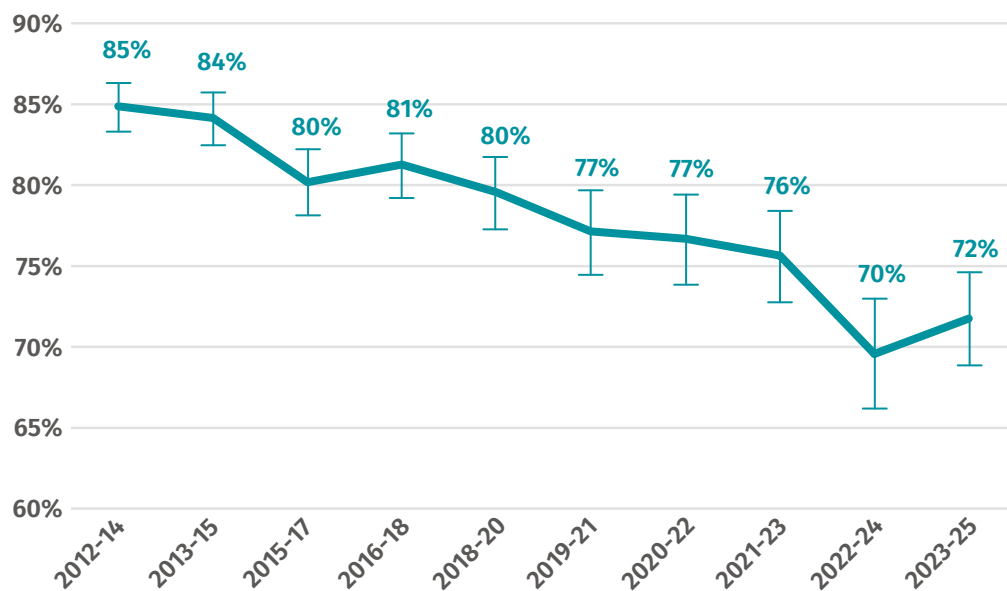
Young person

The nature of teenage friendships is changing. Today’s young people have fewer close friends than a decade ago, with the proportion reporting at least three close friends falling by 12 percentage points over a decade, down to only 72 per cent. Some are becoming completely isolated: one in 20 (5 per cent) young people report having no friends at all.

FIGURE 2.1

Young people have fewer close friends than a decade ago

Proportion of young people aged 16–21 who have at least three close friends

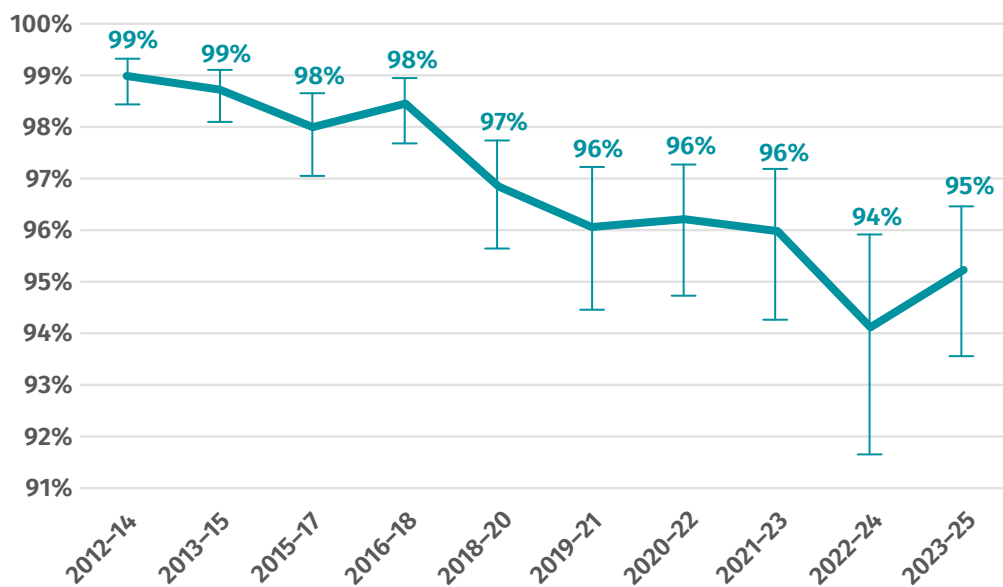


Source: IPPR analysis of Understanding Society dataset

FIGURE 2.2

In 2023–25, 5 per cent of young people reported having no close friends at all

Proportion of 16–21 year olds who have at least one friend



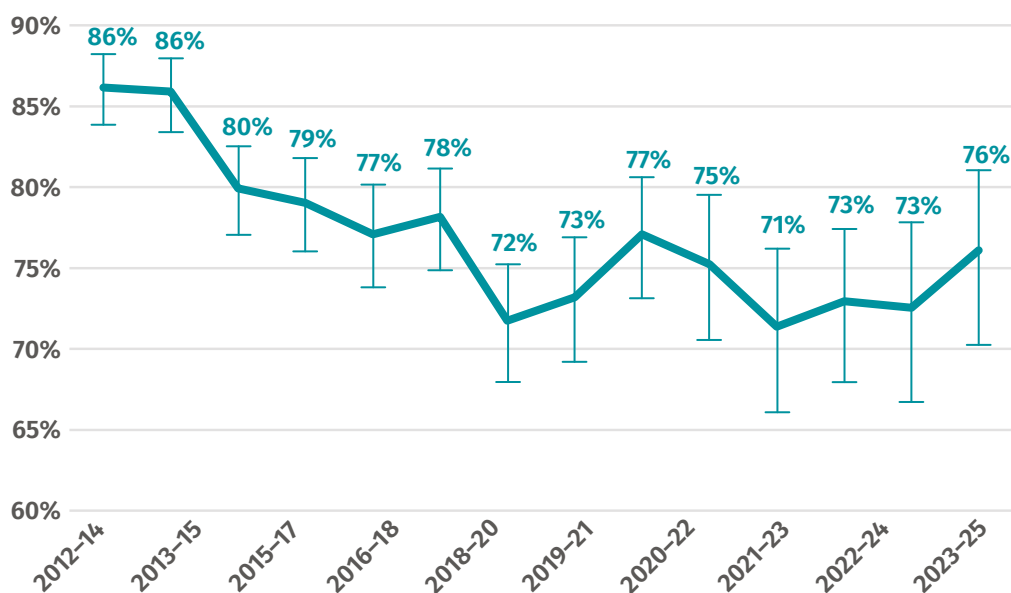
Source: IPPR analysis of Understanding Society dataset

Young people also rate the quality of their friendships less highly. Since 2010–12, those aged 14 and 15 who report positive perceptions of their friendships have declined by 10 percentage points from 86 per cent to 76 per cent in 2023–25, suggesting the social connections underpinning adolescence are fraying.

FIGURE 2.3

The proportion of young people who are satisfied with their friends has fallen

Proportion of 14 and 15 year olds who are completely or very happy with their friends



Source: IPPR analysis of Understanding Society dataset

Forming and maintaining friendships is one of the most important developmental tasks in adolescence (Güroğlu 2022). There is also strong evidence that quality friendships are associated with lower rates of depression and, conversely, that poor peer relationships increase loneliness and reduce life satisfaction (Alsarrani et al 2022, Schwartz-Mette et al 2020). With a decline in the quality and quantity of friendships, we are likely to see lonelier, more depressed and more disconnected teenagers.

Places to go and people to see?

Young people have told us that communicating with friends online is not the same as seeing them in person:

“You can’t get the same gratification that you would if you actually spoke to someone in real life.”

Young person

They also told us that they want to spend more time with their friends in person:

“I feel like social media, is sometimes less connected. I preferred, just knocking on friends’ houses and just going around, just going on bikes. I feel like I’m more connected in person.”

Young person

The opportunities to build these kinds of in-person connections have withered away. Austerity decimated youth services, reducing funding by three-quarters (76 per cent) since 2010–11 (YMCA 2026); leaving many young people with limited access to free spaces and activities. The number of youth workers halved in England between 2012–13 and 2018–19 (ibid). These cuts were the result of political choices that withdrew public funding from young people. A ‘Big Society’ that could never materialise was supposed to fill the gap (Gibbons and Hilber 2022). This resulted in reduced attainment and increased crime in areas where youth clubs closed (Villa 2024).

One young person recognised that the lack of spaces for young people was a new phenomenon. Recalling a conversation with their dad, they shared:

“In the old times, there’d be youth clubs, communities and places where young people could go to without having to spend money. There’d be people at the youth club that were older. If you ever had something, you’d go and speak to them ... I think that’s also a bit lacking now that there aren’t these places where you can just go and hang out.”

Young person

Even if young people spent less time in front of a screen – which they want to do – there is almost nowhere for them to go. An online childhood has transformed the way friendships are formed and maintained, while austerity has stripped away many of the places where young people once met in person. Some families can cushion the impact of a lack of free third spaces for young people. They can pay for extracurricular activities or have space in their homes to accommodate friends. This increases inequality; children from more wealthy families are more likely to take part in every type of extracurricular activity, but especially music and sport (Social Mobility Commission 2019).

Living through a pandemic

The trends we have identified in this report predate the Covid-19 pandemic, but the pandemic has had a profound impact on this generation of young people. Those aged 25 today – aged around 19 during the pandemic – made their transitions into adulthood during a time when many workplaces were closed. Those now aged 11 experienced substantial interruption to their early education. For all children and young people, the pandemic represented a period of immense disruption. The Covid-19 Inquiry spoke to 600 young people and found that many recalled a period of “empty time”, where important milestones disappeared, and many carried a “weight of responsibility” as they took on challenging caring roles and responsibilities (UK Covid-19 Inquiry 2025).

The pandemic likely accelerated many of the changes to adolescence that we have identified, particularly around the use of screens, changing friendships and time spent indoors. It also disconnected many young people from school (Hunt and Wielar 2025), sparking an attendance crisis that is only just starting to turn a corner (DfE 2025a).

Small problems become big challenges

A weaker support system in the present turns small problems into bigger challenges. Young people face predictable challenges, but they have fewer places to get early help. Austerity halved real-terms spending on early intervention between 2010/11 and 2020/21, cutting it from £4.4 billion to £2.2 billion (Horton and Franklin 2026). Parenting programmes, youth outreach, community engagement, and joint working between local authorities, health services and schools all suffered as a result.

The consequences of this can be seen littered throughout children’s policy. Special educational needs have skyrocketed (Morjaria et al 2025), as have the number of children entering care (Horton and Franklin 2026).

Schools have absorbed much of the pressure. They are described as the “fourth emergency service” (Adams 2019), running food banks, offering housing advice and buying winter coats for children every year (Harris et al 2025). Services have fallen away, but young people’s needs have not. If the institution that young people know best and interact with them most struggles to meet their needs, it is rational for them to conclude that society is not working well to provide the opportunities they need to thrive.

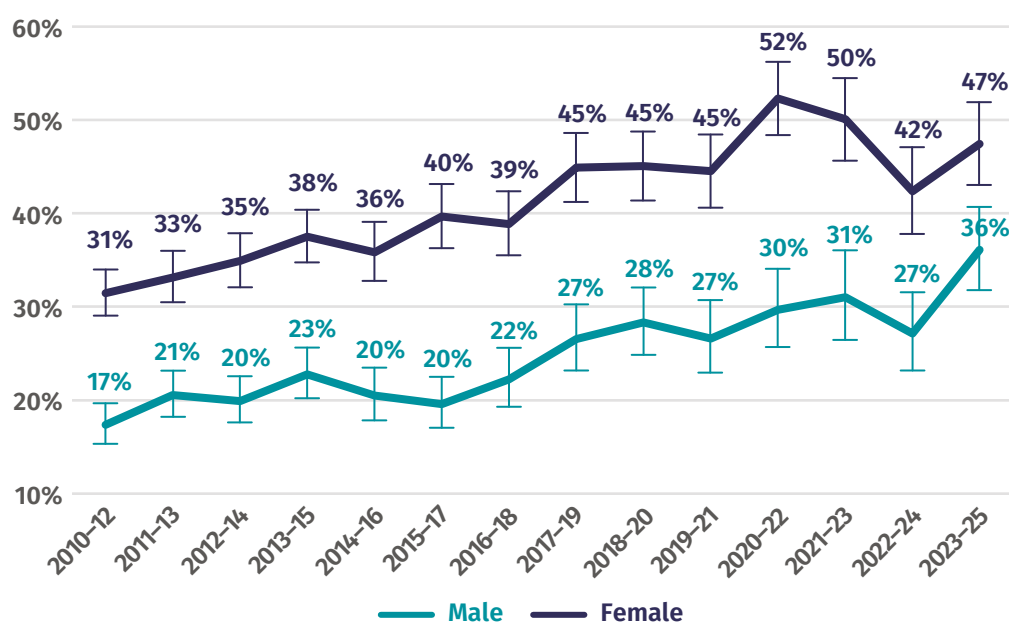
2.2 A STATE OF DISTRESS

Given everything that young people have faced in recent years, their declining mental health is no surprise. Our analysis shows nearly half (47 per cent) of young women and over a third (36 per cent) of young men report psychological distress. And, according to NHS data, around one in five 8–25-year-olds has a probable mental health condition (Newlove-Delgado et al 2023).

FIGURE 2.4

The proportion of young people experiencing psychological distress has increased rapidly since 2016–18

Proportion of 16–24-year-olds experiencing distress



Source: The data is drawn from the Understanding Society dataset, using responses to a 12-question validated tool for measuring mental health

Note: The graph shows the proportion of young people who scored 14 or more (out of a possible 36) and as a result demonstrated psychological distress (see Comotti et al 2023).

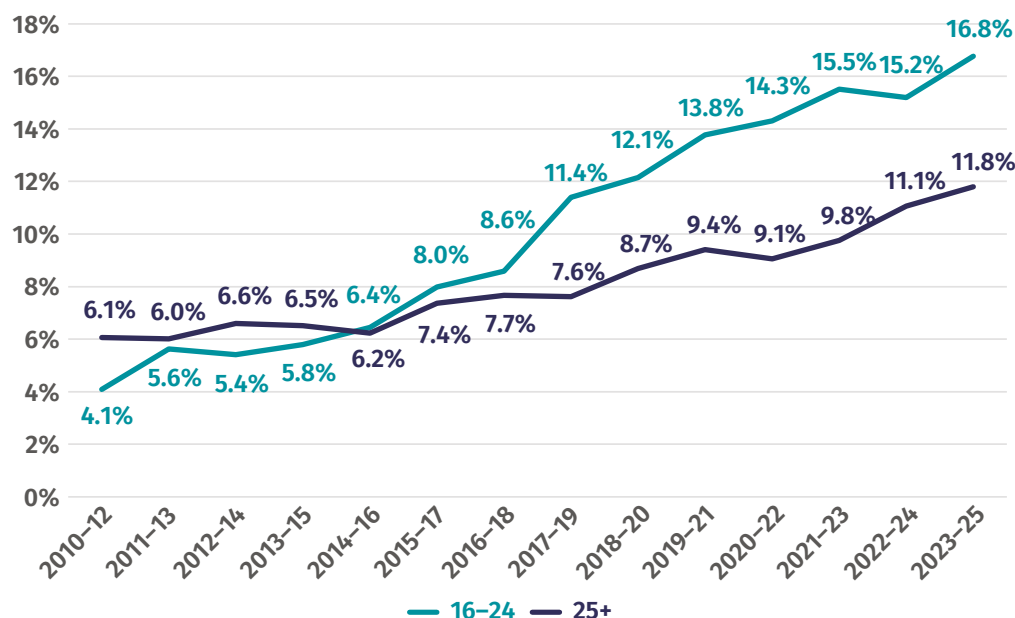
There is discussion on whether rising poor mental health reflects a ‘real’ deterioration in young people’s health, or wider social changes like reducing stigma, over-identification and a medicalisation of a normal range of emotions (Burn-Murdoch 2026). The Department for Health and Social Care has commissioned an independent review into the prevalence of mental health conditions to help answer this question. Their interim report finds strong evidence that there has been a real and meaningful deterioration in the mental health of young people (DHSC 2026). In particular, internalising distress – anxiety, low mood, worry and social strain – has been rising (ibid). The most recent data suggests that more than one in five young people aged 16–24 have self-harmed, up from one in 20 in 2000 (ibid).

Our analysis is consistent with the DHSC review’s findings. If distress were rising mostly due to young people being more willing to report it, or because we are medicalising normal emotions, then we would expect the *impact* of distress to have reduced. Instead, we find the consequences of distress have intensified, suggesting a genuine decline in young people’s wellbeing.

FIGURE 2.5

The proportion of young people whose mental health meant they accomplished less in the past four weeks has quadrupled since 2010–12

Proportion who report their mental health meant they accomplished less over the past four weeks



Source: IPPR analysis of Understanding Society dataset

Before 2016–18, the impact of young people’s mental health was broadly in line with other age groups. As the prevalence of distress has increased, so has its impact. Nearly one in five (16.8 per cent) young people now report that their mental health means they accomplish less. This is up from 4.1 per cent in 2010–12. This is now a productivity crisis as well as a wellbeing one. As one young person described:

“The medications, I feel like they really mess with my mind and my body itself, and I feel like some days I feel worse and then I feel better, then I feel worse and I just feel like there’s no like balance.”

Young person

Interestingly, the review’s findings are more mixed with regards to rising identification of ADHD and autism, with further analysis required to understand if underlying prevalence has changed (ibid).

2.3 REBUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS OF A GOOD ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence has always involved uncertainty, change and some amount of turbulence. However, what young people in England are experiencing today goes beyond the ordinary challenges of growing up. Adolescence shouldn’t be endured but enjoyed. It is a period of enormous change and opportunity, and young people deserve to delight in their teenage years.

For too many young people, we are not getting it right. They are growing up lonelier, more anxious and less supported. For individuals, this means navigating the transition to adulthood from increasingly fragile foundations. For society, it means we have broken the thread that underpins a connected society. Decisions made by adults in institutions have left young people disconnected and distressed.

3.

TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD ARE BLOCKED

The traditional indicators of early adulthood now take place later, leaving young people in a longer, hollower and more precarious adolescence. While there is no ‘right way’ to grow up, the young people we spoke to were clear that they were unable to access the things they need to begin their adult lives. The data shows how much harder it is to pass the milestones that previous generations achieved in work, housing and education.

3.1 THE POST-SCHOOL LANDSCAPE IS FRACTURED

Just over a million 16–24-year-olds, 13.5 per cent of the age group, were not in education, employment or training in January to March 2026, up by 89,000 in a single year (ONS 2026a). For many young people who are not earning or learning, the disconnection did not start at age 18, but earlier during difficulties at school with attendance, attainment and exclusion (DWP 2026, Harris et al 2025).

Whether it is work, college or university, the options out of school have fractured and the barriers increased. While young people still have ambitions, they lack the support to realise them. Young people feel alone navigating a complex post-16 and post-18 landscape that limits their ability to exercise their own agency:

“It doesn’t feel like anybody’s helping you or leading you.”

Young person

While around half of young people engage in higher education by age 25 (DfE 2026), a university degree no longer guarantees a good job and a financially secure life. Graduate job postings have fallen by over 40 per cent – the steepest annual decline on record (Adzuna 2026) and debts of £50,000+ are now the norm (House of Commons Library 2026).

Young people entering further education and apprenticeships are doing so against a backdrop of funding cuts, with total spending on adult skills and apprenticeships around 23 per cent below 2009–10 levels (Tahir 2025). Apprenticeships are harder to come by: starts among 16–24-year-olds are down by roughly 40 per cent over the past decade (DfE 2025b). Where you live often defines whether an apprenticeship is even available (EPI 2025).

This might explain why the UK performs particularly poorly compared to our neighbours on rates of young people out of employment, education or training (Hoffman et al 2025). The main reason for their comparative success is a much higher rate of participation in education among their young people (Clegg et al 2026). In England, the existing education and training pathways leave too many young people without the opportunities they need to progress.

3.2 WORK IS HARDER TO FIND

Young people are entering the weakest labour market in a decade. Our youth-to-adult-unemployment ratio reached nearly twice the OECD average in 2024⁵ (PwC 2025).

One of the drivers of this crisis is the weakening of the first rung on the career ladder. The sectors that often give young people their first jobs, like retail, hospitality, the arts and recreation, have seen vacancies fall acutely (Parkes forthcoming 2026). The experience of applying for jobs has changed too, so that a young person who might once have walked into a workplace and asked for a chance is now screened by a portal or a recorded interview before anyone meets them (DWP 2026).

Young people described the experience of applying for their first jobs as a catch-22:

“They want experience, but how can you get experience if you don’t have a job?”

Young person

For some the wait runs on for over a year:

“I’ve been out of work for about 16 months because I just can’t seem to get work anywhere. I’m either too qualified or underqualified and nowhere in between.”

Young person

Those in work have benefited from higher pay, via successive minimum wage rises, and new rights via the Employment Rights Act. However, while the reward for getting a job has risen, the odds of finding one have fallen. Employers report the rapid combination of changes has lowered their confidence to hire young people.

Those out of work are losing out on more than wages. The Milburn review found that nearly half (45 per cent) of those aged 24 who weren’t in education, employment or training had never had a job (ibid). Thousands of young people are missing out on the social and personal benefits of work: routine, making friends, building new skills and the experience of learning that they are capable. The longer young people are disconnected from the labour market, the harder it is for them to return (ibid).

3.3 HOUSING CHOICES ARE LIMITED

Young people have different housing aspirations, from living alone, to with a partner, friends or family. Whatever their aspiration, young people should have access to a safe, stable and affordable home. For too many, this is not the case.

Owning a home before your mid-30s has become close to an inherited trait, open mainly to those with high earnings or familial wealth. Nearly two-thirds of first-time buyers come from the two highest income quintiles; the average deposit is £78,131 (MHCLG 2025a). One in three first time buyers needs help from family and friends, an increase from less than one in four in the mid-1990s (MHCLG 2023a). This has pushed home-ownership later for some – the average age of buying your first home is now 34 – and completely out of reach for many (MHCLG 2025b). By contrast, home ownership has risen for the over-65s, who are the first generation of retirees to benefit from ‘right to buy’. Almost three-quarters (74 per cent) owned their own home in 2017, up from just over half (56 per cent) in 1993 (ONS 2020).

5 In 2024, the OECD youth unemployment rate was 2.5 times the unemployment rate for older workers, whereas in the UK it was 4.8 times as high.

While buying has become harder, renting socially has become near impossible. The number of social houses has declined every year since 1981, as more are sold off or demolished than are built (Shelter 2026).

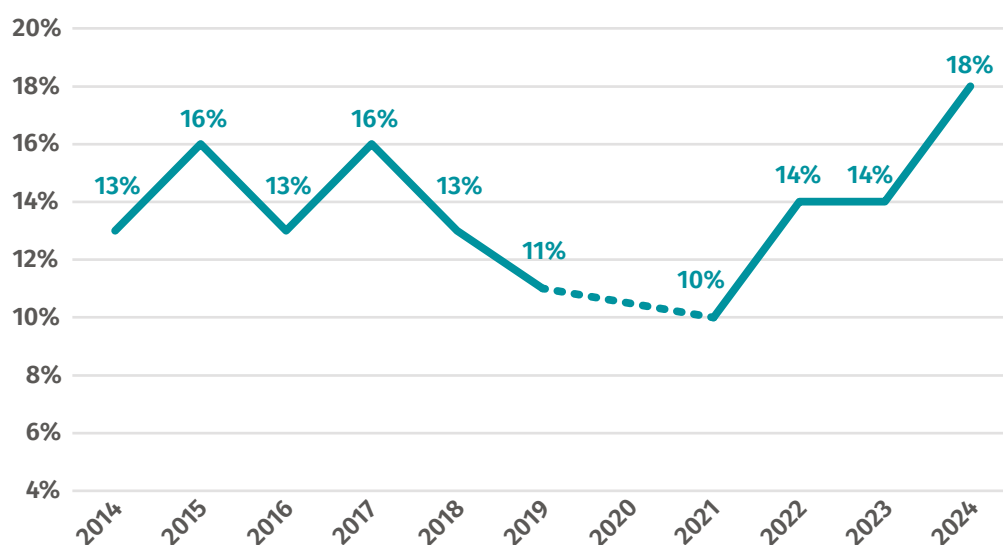
With homeownership and affordable social rent unavailable, young people are left with two options: rent from the private sector or continue to live at home. Both are on the rise. While social renters outnumbered private renters three to one in 1981, since 2013 renting privately has become the default (Shelter 2026). Similarly, the proportion of young adults living with their parent(s) in 2025 increased by over 10 per cent in 10 years (ONS 2026b).⁶ This means that over half of young men do not move out of the family home until they are 25 or older (ibid). Interestingly, young women appear more independent with only one in three living at home at aged 24 (ibid).

Renting privately comes at a cost. Our analysis found that nearly one in five (18 per cent) of 20–29-year-olds renting privately spend more than 50 per cent of their net income on rent. The affordability threshold is 30 per cent (Hobbs et al 2026).

FIGURE 3.1

Nearly one in five of 20–29-year-olds renting privately spend more than 50 per cent of their net income on rent

The proportion of young people aged 20 to 29 spending 50 per cent or more on rent



Source: IPPR analysis of the Family Resources Survey

Note: No data in 2020 due to disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In practice, this equates to an average rent of £1,442 per month in England – rising to £2,294 in London (ONS 2026c). England is an outlier in the UK, with the average rent in Northern Ireland and Wales consistently more affordable (ONS 2024). The young people we met knew the figures without being told them:

“If you’re looking for a one-bed flat in London, you’re looking at £1,600 to £2,200. In [my city] it’s not too far off. And then if you just try going out with mates to have a pint, that’s £7.50. It’s expensive.”

Young person

⁶ 25.4 per cent of 20–34-year-olds lived at home in 2015; in 2025 this had risen to 28.7 per cent. This is an increase of 12.9 per cent.

It can be harder to feel like you have a stake in society when you rent privately. Profit is extracted for a necessity and human right. While both social renting and property ownership guarantee a form of long-term security, renting privately is more precarious and expensive. Half of private renters have been in their home less than three years, compared to only 17 per cent of social renters and 14 per cent of owner occupiers (MHCLG 2023b). This prevents young people from putting down roots and forming strong connections with their neighbours and local communities.

The young people we spoke to were acutely aware of the cost of renting and buying. The cost of renting privately directly relates to the ability to save: only around half of private renters have any savings at all (MHCLG 2025a). There is mounting evidence that this is causing a disincentive to save and leaving young people unsure of their futures (O'Halloran et al 2026). The recent Renters Rights Act may have improved conditions for private renters, but for too many young people the high cost of renting privately has prevented them putting down roots.

3.4 YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE BEEN DENIED A STAKE IN OUR SOCIETY

When there are barriers to entering adulthood, we limit the choices open to young people. For young people already facing adversity, caring responsibilities, mental health challenges, learning disabilities, poverty or being in care, the impact compounds. This is the consequence of stripping a generation of agency and choice over what they do next.

Society only functions if people feel part of something that offers them more than they could offer themselves alone. Young people have big dreams and aspirations. They want to live good lives and become successful adults. But their transitions out of adolescence are blocked. When, despite their best efforts, a substantial number of young people are locked out of the job and housing markets, we disconnect them from a wider society that they want to contribute to. Without a strong stake in the fabric of society, we risk alienating young people from the idea that, with collective effort, we can make things better.

4.

A DISCONNECTED GENERATION

Society only functions if people feel part of something that offers them more than they can offer themselves alone. But fractured foundations of childhood and adolescence alongside blocked transitions to adulthood have left young people feeling disconnected on three fronts: from themselves, from each other, and from wider society.

4.1 DISCONNECTED FROM THEMSELVES

If one thing united all the young people that we spoke to – from the south coast to the North East – it was their aspirations for the future. Like every generation, today's children and young people have enormous and inspiring goals and have every intention of making these goals a reality. "I want to fly planes," one young person told us. "I want to do social work," said another. Audiologist, chef, artist, musician, painter-decorator, doctor, psychologist, youth worker, soldier or firefighter were just some of the aspirations young people mentioned in our sessions.

"In two years' time, I want to be in the army or the fire brigade. You're putting your life at risk to help other people, and that is absolutely wicked – and inspiring."

Young person

Young people need more than aspiration to make their dreams a reality. They need trust in the adults and institutions around them, connections with their friends and peers, and confidence in themselves to navigate the challenges they face. However, young people today are the most sceptical of any age group that hard work and talent pays off (O'Halloran et al 2026).

Low agency and low self-esteem represent a disconnection between what young people want to achieve and what they can realise. Having agency means having the belief and ability to take actions that change your life. It is associated with better academic outcomes for pupils in England (Jerrim 2026). Many young people now see long-term unemployment as a more likely outcome and success less achievable (O'Halloran et al 2026). This reflects a deep scepticism about their ability to shape their own futures and a profound lack of faith that life-changing support exists to help them fulfil their potential.

"You can just put in so much effort and it can take you absolutely nowhere. A lot of life becomes just relying on other people's goodwill, which is not so useful."

Young person

"If you're poor, you could work as hard as you can, but if you ain't got the money ... do you know what I mean?"

Young person

Some young people seemed resigned to this state of affairs: "It's not fair, but there's nothing you can do about it really," one young person shrugged.

Young people's self-esteem is also low. Young women have had low satisfaction with their appearance for some time, with only one in three pleased with how they look (IPPR analysis of Understanding Society dataset). Today, boys' satisfaction now mirrors this. Ten years ago, over half of boys were pleased with their appearance, this has dropped to only two in five today (38 per cent) (IPPR analysis of Understanding Society dataset). While being comfortable with one's appearance is only one aspect of self-esteem, these low rates demonstrate a crisis of confidence among young people.

Some may argue that demonstrating agency is a choice. Young people could pull themselves up by their bootstraps, despite the challenges they face, and show resilience and grit in the face of setbacks. That, while we wait for policy solutions to the structural barriers young people face, they should navigate the challenges with their own agency.

But agency is not a characteristic. It is a skill that needs to be developed, nurtured and practised (Clauss-Ehlers et al 2006). Schools and other institutions working with young people are instrumental in developing the skills and practice of agency. This can be done effectively through creating an environment where relationships are strong, mistakes are a part of learning, and there are opportunities to demonstrate choice and resilience.

We are failing to create these conditions for our young people in England. The experience of schools for English pupils is "lopsided" (Menzies 2024). Despite progress in academic areas, children in England have worse experiences in school around belonging, wellbeing and feeling safe, than their OECD peers (ibid).

For the young people we spoke to, this has resulted in a perception that there are limited second chances – reserved for people with buffers of wealth, family support and connections. Young people described a system of high-stakes decisions, like choosing GCSEs, A-levels, degrees or apprenticeships that had no bailout options should they not go to plan.

"Some people don't get second chances as easily. If you don't get that first thing that you wanted, if you don't have the privilege to be able to redo things or afford to stay in places, it all depends what position you're in."

Young person

In all our workshops, young people spoke of the pressure they were under to get their decisions right. "[Teachers] explain it to you like it's a life or death situation," one year 12 pupil reflected on being asked to choose their GCSEs two years earlier, "they act like it affects your future." In that same workshop, another participant interjected: "I think a lot of the decisions we make now *do* impact our whole future [emphasis added]."

Young people have surveyed the world around them, reflected on their experiences, and those of their friends and concluded that they have little control over what happens next. This is a rational response to the challenges we have set out in chapters 2 and 3 and represents a fundamental disconnection from their own lives.

4.2 DISCONNECTED FROM EACH OTHER

Young people are also isolated from each other. Building and sustaining friendships are some of the most important developmental tasks of this period of growing up, but young people today are more exposed to conflict with peers and surrounded by fewer real connections than a decade ago.

Nowhere can we see this more clearly than in levels of bullying in English schools. Pupils in England are more likely to be bullied than their OECD peers: 20 per cent report being made fun of by other pupils at least a few times a month, compared to 12 per cent of pupils across the OECD (DfE 2023). At a time when young people should be learning how to build connections with each other, there is instead significant distance (see chapter 2).

How young people spend their time outside of school, or once they have left school, also fuels peer-level isolation. When we asked young people in our sessions what they spend a significant amount of their time doing when they are not studying or working, the most common answer was ‘doomscrolling’. Young people know spending this time scrolling on social media is bad for them. They know it ruins sleep, and that it is addictive, and yet they cannot stop. Doomscrolling as a pastime is inherently isolating. It is a solitary act performed in place of real connection, and it typically shows heavily personalised, curated and idealised versions of other people’s lives. Instead of alleviating isolation, it deepens it, as young people are comparing their own reality to the highlight reel of an online creator whom they do not know personally.

The result is a generation growing up with less practice at one of the key things adolescence is supposed to teach them: how to build and sustain connection with other people. Fewer friends, more conflict, and hours spent alone comparing themselves to strangers online leaves less room for young people to be building the relationships that support them through this stage of their lives.

This has created the loneliest generation. Community Life Survey data shows that nearly 1 in 10 of 16–24-year-olds felt lonely ‘a lot of the time’ in 2024, compared to around one in 20 of those aged 25 and over (DHSC 2026).

4.3 DISCONNECTED FROM WIDER SOCIETY

“There’s no signposts anymore ... We’re expected to have everything organised, to have everything sorted for when we’re out of education. But there’s no checklist.”

Young person

Every generation feels like those that preceded them don’t ‘get it’. To an extent, that is always true. But the pace of modern social, economic, political and technological change means that today’s young people are growing up and coming of age in a world that is radically different to the world even 10 years ago. Among the young people we spoke to, there were strong notions that other generations faced completely different challenges to those that young people today face.

This has resulted in young people’s life satisfaction, particularly for the most disadvantaged, plummeting. Ten years ago, in 2016, more than half of young people living in the most deprived parts of England said they were mostly or completely satisfied with their lives. That figure has since fallen by 40 per cent, with just one in three young people now satisfied with their lives (Carleton et al 2026).

Young people today, compared to the generations that came before them, have been uniquely asked to carry the burden of a decade defined by austerity and the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Today’s young people missed formative years of development in lockdown and have been playing catch up since, a difficult task compounded by the impacts of austerity and decreasing investment. Young people have grown up watching the institutions and processes other generations enjoyed dismantled in real time.

This has impacted the experiences that young people face in their search for support. When seeking help for mental health, employment guidance or post-16

options, for instance, they told us of the long waits, stigma or unhelpful feedback. As one young person observed: “There’s long waiting lists for NHS mental health services. Also, there’s a stigma of fear of judgment or [an idea that] you should solve problems alone.” Other young people told us they don’t reach out for support because they don’t know where to go. For many, support that exists in theory is inaccessible in practice. As one young person explained: “The support isn’t widely available and even if there is support, there’s no awareness about it. Young people don’t really know where to get that support.”

4.4 A NEW SETTLEMENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IS DESPERATELY NEEDED

The disconnection that young people feel reveals the extent to which society is not functioning for this generation of citizens.

“I don’t really know what I’m doing. I’m lost most days of my life.”

Young person

Young people want to live fulfilled lives, to realise the big dreams and ambitions they still aspire towards, and to become the best possible adult versions of themselves. But the result of their threefold isolation is lives that feel unbalanced and unsettled.

One young person expressed particularly clearly a sentiment echoed by young people across the country: “My life is very unbalanced and just all over the place really.” While another young person told us that “I feel like I’m just rotting away in bed.”

As atomisation builds, the fabric that binds young people to each other and to wider society frays. We have let the next generation down. We haven’t given them good enough reasons to believe in the collective pursuit of betterment. We have broken that fundamental promise that the next generation will fare better than the last. This is not simply a problem of ‘youth policy’, it is a reflection on the society they are growing up in.

It is not too late to change course. While this report has focused on the worsening trends experienced by a generation, we also know that young people are a source of immense talent, ideas and potential. Our challenge now is to work with these young people, the adults that support them, and others to create the changes young people deserve to see. In our next report we will set out what those changes should be.

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