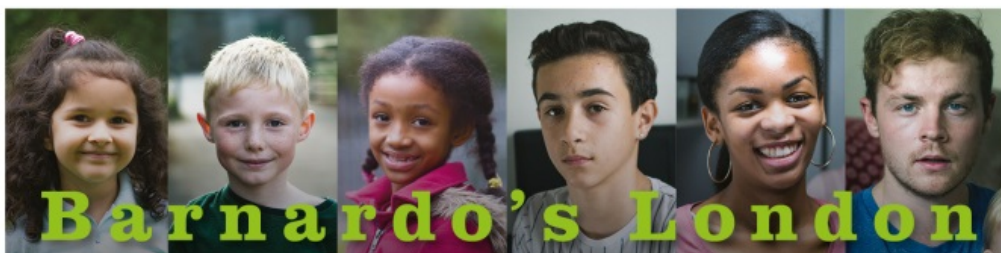




Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020



London Futures building **Stronger Families**, to ensure
Safer Childhoods leading to **Positive Futures**

Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Aims and Objectives	5
Project Phase One	6
Project Phase Two	10
Project Phase Three	13
Lessons Learnt	25
Conclusions	27
Reflections	28
Next Steps	29

Executive Summary

In order to understand more about the emerging vulnerabilities that young Londoners are facing, Barnardo's teamed up with Brandwatch, a UK-based market research company to listen to what young people are talking about in conversations online.

This report explains the reasons for undertaking this piece of work, the main findings from the research, reflections from staff involved in the project and what Barnardo's plan to do in response to the information that young people have provided us with.

The project involved three phases of research, each phase more narrow and detailed in its focus than the last. Over the course of the project, 11 initial priority areas identified by the digital listening working group were narrowed down to **three key issues affecting young Londoners: mental health; loneliness and the impact of the digital world.**

Poor mental health was a significant obstacle for many young Londoners, but particularly for those identifying as Trans and for young people aged between 19 and 21 years old. Low self-esteem and school-related pressure contributed to much of this, however reasons for poor mental health differed among different groups.

A considerable proportion of young Londoners responded that they frequently felt lonely however; this was amplified among young Trans people in London. Almost 40% of Trans young people said that they experience feelings of loneliness 'all of the time'. We found that many young Londoners do not have adequate social support networks, however there were other reasons at play as to why many young Londoners feel such levels of loneliness.

Young Londoners had mixed feelings about the impact of the internet and social media in their lives, with the majority feeling neutral about its overall influence. We found that exposure to negative online experiences such as pornographic and violent content was particularly high amongst younger age groups. Bullying was prevalent on the vast majority of social media platforms; however it was Trans young people who really stood out in their experiences of bullying online.

Despite the project's limitations, the digital listening pilot has enabled London Futures to learn more about what young Londoners are talking about online and has given us the breadth and depth of insight that would normally not have been possible in the time frame allotted for this piece of work. **London Futures will use the findings from this project to continue these conversations with young Londoners, learn how we can better meet the needs of young people in London and to start discussions around how this work can inform our influencing work in London.**

Introduction

Why a Digital Listening Report?

The project started with a discussion about the shaping of London Futures and the need for digital solutions to really capture insight about emerging vulnerabilities that young people are facing and how this learning could be used to change the systems that young people navigate for the better.

We first asked the question 'what are young people in London talking about and what can this tell us?'

We felt that really listening to what young people are talking about would give us an insight into their hopes, fears, aspirations and concerns - telling us things that as adults might not even be aware of. It started from a real passion for finding out about what young Londoners were saying online so that we could target our responses and services to what they need rather than what we **think** they need.

We decided that we wanted to work collaboratively with a technology-driven company to identify these emerging issues, understand where and how they are trending, galvanize knowledge and to use technology to inform good practice with the goal of delivering better outcomes for young people in London.

Working with Brandwatch

Brandwatch are a digital consumer intelligence company that typically provide services that help organisations to track public perception about a brand or product. Brandwatch were one of three organisations that responded to the digital listening tender.

Brandwatch were chosen as the company to take this piece of work forward for a number of reasons: Brandwatch demonstrated that they had capacity to complete the work within the timeframe required; they built a team around us as the client; they offered a collaborative approach to the three phase project, allowing us to check in on their findings and discuss how this aligned to our needs and expectations; they had the experience and expertise to respond creatively to changing needs; they had the ability to provide both quantitative and qualitative analysis along with compelling visualisations, and finally they responded appropriately to the additional safeguarding requirements that were needed in a project like this that involved listening to young people.

The digital listening working group

The digital listening working group worked directly with Brandwatch and young people on this project. The working group was made up of five London Futures staff across the Digital team (Andrea Sasu), Voice and Influence (Babette Bleach), Children's Services (Kathryn Uche), Research and Evaluation (Ed Stagg) and project management (Rachel Curnock).

Aims and Objectives

The aims of the project were twofold:

- To explore the use of digital technology to surface, understand, quantify and track emerging issues for young people in the region;
- To get a greater understanding of how and where issues are trending to help define services requirements, inform good practices with the goal of delivering better outcomes for young people.

The key research questions we wished to answer with this project were:

- What are emerging themes/topics/trends within specific issues impacting young people?
- How does an issue impact boys and girls differently?
- Are there patterns of events observed within an issue that point to potential crisis (i.e. sleep disruptions, dropping grades)?
- What are voices emerging in discussion of an issue? (i.e. kids, parents, educators, therapists)
- What are the perceptions, emotions, needs of those varying voices relative to an issue?
- What are opportunities to provide/alter services/offerings relative to these issues that arise?



Phase One

Scope of work

Track a broad range of issues affecting young people aged 13-25 in the UK taking place in conversations and discussions on the internet. To understand the scale of the discussions, where these discussions are taking place and the different target audiences involved.

Method

Brandwatch sifted through publically available websites using search queries. The websites searches included online new sites, Twitter, Instagram, discussion forums, blogs and other networking sites. Barnardo's digital listening working group identified 11 priority issues that we wanted Brandwatch to use as queries in their mining of publicly available websites. The search was carried out on conversations taking place between 1 November 2018 and 31 October 2019.

The 11 priority areas that the Barnardo's digital listening working group identified were as follows:

- Impact of the digital world;
- Gangs and knife violence
- Violence and challenging behaviour
- Loneliness and isolation
- Low self-esteem and self-confidence
- Mental health
- Drug, alcohol and substance abuse
- Sexual abuse and exploitation
- Education and training drop-outs
- OCD and ADHD and;
- Austerity and poverty.

Brandwatch produced a dashboard for each of the 11 priority issues identified by Barnardo's which brought together the overall themes of each priority issue, the volume and pattern of conversations happening online and the audiences participating in these conversations.

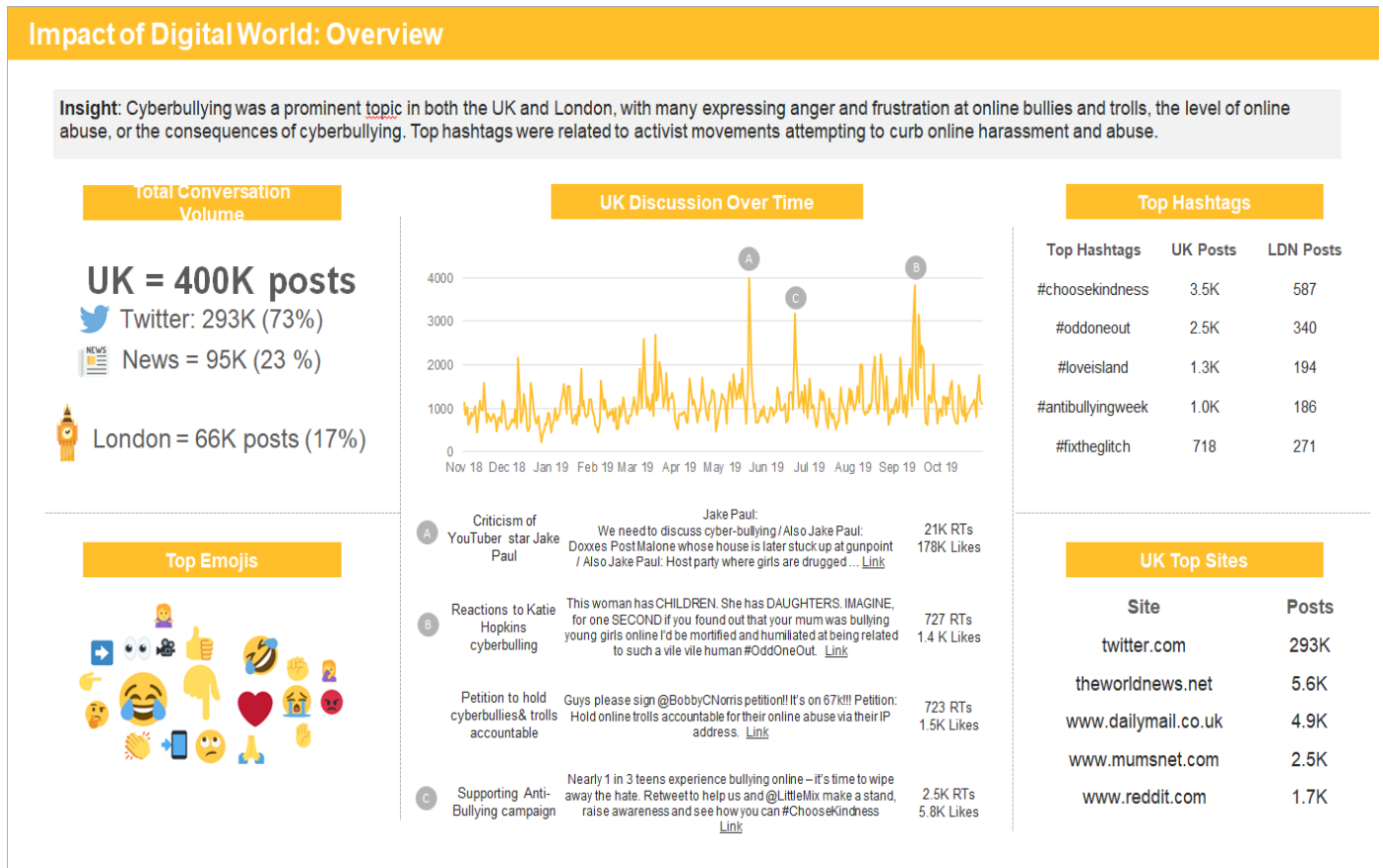
Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020

Findings

Impact of digital world

Cyberbullying was a prominent topic, particularly as a reaction to prominent musicians, athletes, and politicians being threatened online.



Screenshot from Brandwatch dashboard

Gangs and knife violence

Key topics included the role of police and government in curbing gang violence, and potential drivers including music, media, and police and education budget cuts.

Violence and challenging behaviour

Many discussed violent crimes in the news as well as sharing experiences of racist and misogynistic abuse.

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020

Loneliness and isolation

Conversations on loneliness often overlapped with mental health. Disabled and LGBT+ youth were discussed as demographics more prone to experience loneliness.

Isolation & Loneliness: Audiences

Insight: Parents dominated the conversation on loneliness. Young mothers expressed feeling isolated from friends and older parents cited concerned for their university-aged children adapting to life away from home. Young people talked about their own feelings of loneliness, which tied in with depression and wanting to feel accepted by others.

			Parent	Youth
	UK	London		
Educators	3	0	"I have a two year old and a new baby. I don't seem to fit in anywhere anymore. I made lots of friends when I had my first baby. Now many are back at work and those working part time do exciting days out with their toddlers that I just don't feel up to with a baby in tow. ..." Source: mumsnet.com	"A couple of favourite moments, from the same wonderful teacher. When I was living in Japan, I got the news that a relative was very sick. I cried in my teacher's office. She was so kind to me when I was lonely and sad." Source: Twitter
Health Care Professional	5	0		
Parents	6191	1307	"I couldn't agree with you more, pregnancy is very isolating, for a first time mum i felt being a parent was isolating. I lost friends when my daughter was born. Shes nearly 2 and have had to start again." Source: Twitter	"... I haven't accomplished anything either. I'm so terrible at everything. I can't do anything right. I have no hobbies, no job, no interest. The only thing I have going for me is the fact that I am a student but I don't know what to do anymore. I feel so lonely ..." Source: dealingwithdepression.co.uk
Social Workers	1	1		
Young People	403	53	"I think my DS's problem is that he is used to being part of a wide social group at home, and indeed, being one of the pivotal organisers of social events. He just isn't used to being alone or just having 1 or 2 people to call on, and with no obvious place to hang out. Hopefully it will settle down. I have pointed out to him that he is a better position than many." Source: mumsnet.com	"Knowing what I know now, I wouldn't change my sexuality, at all. But back as a teenager I hated feeling so alone, wanting to fit in, and mostly wanting to know I was normal. And accepted. ..." Source: Twitter

Screenshot from Brandwatch dashboard; Phase 1: Isolation and Loneliness

Low self-esteem and self-confidence

Discussions on low self-esteem and self-confidence often highlighted the effects on young people, the overlap with broader mental health and the role of relationships in self-esteem.

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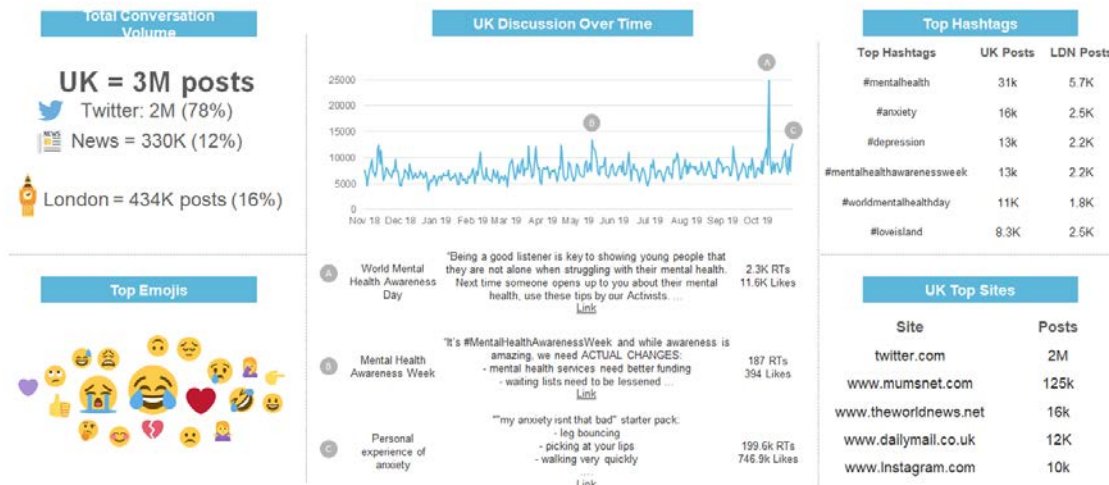
September 2020

Mental health

Health awareness occasions like Mental Health Awareness Week drove conversation. Mental health issues amongst young people were discussed, as well as lack of support.

Mental Health: Overview

Insight: Peaks in conversation centered around World Mental Health Awareness Day and Mental Health Awareness Week, prompting many to share their experiences of mental health and call for better services to help with mental health problems.



Screenshot from Brandwatch dashboard; Phase 1: Mental Health

Drug, alcohol and substance abuse

The conversation was dominated by reactions to the hypocrisy of MPs revealing that they have taken drugs in the past (particularly Michael Gove) but who want to impose harsh punishments on other drug users.

Sexual abuse and exploitation

Conversations were largely driven by reactions to high-profile rape and abuse cases, as well as gangs who many believed were grooming children.

Education and training drop-outs

Peaks in conversation around dropping out were mostly humorous. Lack of school attention and support was discussed as a cause for dropping out.

OCD and ADHD

The conversation centred around people sharing their personal experiences and those looking for advice and support with the conditions.

Austerity and poverty

Many reacted with anger, disbelief and sadness to government actions and the growing levels of poverty in the UK. Parents voiced concern for their children.

Phase Two

Scope of work

To take a deeper dive into five to seven issues affecting young people aged 13-25 in the UK from the original 11 issues tracked in phase one of the digital listening project. To break the initial issues down into more focussed themes, providing quotations from those taking part in the online discussion.

Method

Barnardo's digital listening working group decided on the seven priority areas for Brandwatch to focus on during phase two. The seven issues chosen represented the most common themes from the phase one findings and issues that the group felt young people could offer a particularly unique perspective on.

The seven priority areas were as follows:

- Impact of the digital world;
- Gangs and knife violence;
- Violence and challenging behaviour;
- Loneliness and isolation;
- Mental health
- Drugs, alcohol and substance abuse and;
- Education and training drop-outs

Brandwatch then conducted a more thorough search of the conversations taking place on publicly available websites using more detailed and specific search queries. The websites searches included online news sites, Twitter, Instagram, discussion forums, blogs and other networking sites. The search was carried out on conversations taking place between 1 November 2018 and 31 October 2019.

Key Findings

Impact of digital world

Cyberbullying was the key topic in this theme, being prevalent both on social media and in **online gaming**. Children well **under 13** were already exposed to abuse online despite social media age restrictions. Abuse of **LGBTQ+ children** in particular was common and less hidden than some other types of cyberbullying. Parents thought **schools should take a more active role** in prevention, spotting and handling of incidences.

"As a girl gamer I get harassed and experience bullying by men during online gaming, some of which is sexually explicit and I'm fed up of the way I am treated as a girl who plays online gaming, I've had to resort to using a inconspicuous name to avoid harassment"

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020

Gangs and knife violence

Cuts to key support and service for young people and rising school exclusions were all seen as factors in the increase in youth violence. The role of girls in gangs was seen as an important but under-explored topic and there were mixed opinions on the role of drill music in gang crime. Parents were becoming more aware of County Lines gangs but often felt helpless to protect their children.

"There's no EMA, families are struggling financially, rents are increasing, wages are low, and competition for part-time jobs are high. So gangs, drug dealing and easy money is more appealing. Hence, knife crime"

Violence and challenging behaviour

Parents, teachers and schools were all **struggling to cope** with the effects of challenging behaviour. There were concerns about the effects not just on the children with challenging behaviour but the impact on others around them, **both at home and in the classroom**. **LGBTQ children** were seen as being **most vulnerable to violent bullying**, with long-term effects.

"I was beaten up regularly and posters were put up about me all around the school. All because I was gay. It ruined my chance of an education and left me with mental health issues. I thought about taking my own life because of it"

Loneliness and isolation

Many young people were struggling with change and transitions i.e. between school and college, college and university, moving out of home or starting work. Social media was often blamed for the rise in feelings of loneliness but was also seen as having an important role to play in alleviating isolation. Care leavers and LGBTQ young people were seen as being at particular risk of loneliness and isolation.

"I moved away from home for a new job but I am struggling to meet anyone or make any new friends. I work random shifts so I can't do any hobbies or sport as I can't commit to the same time every week and I'm never at home at the same time as my flatmates. I am starting to feel really low"

Mental health

Mental health issues were seen to be **increasing** amongst young people, notably **anxiety** and **eating disorders**. Health-care professionals, parents and young people all expressed **concerns and frustrations with CAMHS** in terms of **access, waiting lists and treatments**. In addition, **Transitions between CAMHS and AMHS were often problematic**. Parents were **struggling to cope** with their children's mental health and **felt under-supported**.

"The NHS is great and everything but their mental health service for young people is actually horrible. It's ridiculous what how many teenagers are having to go through because CAMHS tells them their problems aren't bad enough to treat"

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020



Drugs, alcohol and substance misuse

Drug use amongst young people was considered to be **on the rise**, with many using them to deal with **mental and emotional health issues**. Drug use and dealing in **schools** were seen as becoming more prevalent, which shocked many parents. **Cannabis** use in particular was seen as becoming **normalized** amongst young people, with many users **refusing to believe it had any negative side-effects**. However, many examples of **cannabis-induced psychosis** amongst young people were reported.

"With the deep web dealers you can get whatever you want really easily and you learn about new stuff you haven't heard of before"

Education and training drop-outs

Many young people felt that they had been pushed into a course of study that was not suited to them which had led to them dropping out. For many, the pressure of study had led to an increase in mental health problems and they felt that they received little support for this. Many parents also pointed to cannabis use as a reason for dropping out, particularly amongst boys.

"I dropped out of college because I was under so much stress and my mental health was suffering. I didn't get enough communication with my tutors and it was so disorganised, it made me ill"

Phase 3

Scope of work

To explore issues emerging from the previous two phases of the project directly with a sample of young people aged 13-25 living in London.

Method

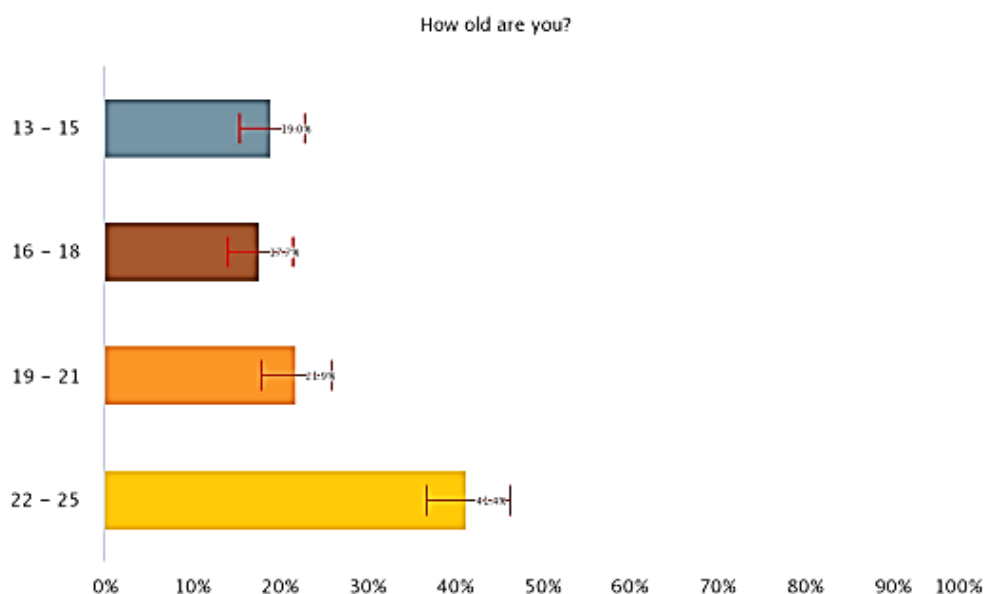
The digital listening working group chose three issues that emerged from phase two findings to take to young people. The three issues taken into phase three of the project were chosen by the digital listening working group as we felt that young Londoners would be able to offer a particularly unique perspective on these issues based on the results of the phase two findings. The survey was designed by the digital listening working group in collaboration with the Brandwatch Qriously team who delivered the survey.

We agreed on 20 questions in total, centred around the topics of mental health, loneliness and isolation and impact of the digital world. Youth colleagues were consulted on the language of questions and answer options. In total, we surveyed a sample of 1,009 13-25 year olds across London. Survey responses were weighted to reflect the age and gender profile of the population of London. This means that responses were broadly representative of the 13-25 population (with respect to age and gender). The survey was circulated by Brandwatch in advertisement space on a number of websites.

Findings

Demographics

A total of 1,009 young Londoners aged 13-25 responded to our survey. Responses were weighted to reflect the age profile (**Figure 1a below**) and gender profile (**Figure 1b, next page**) of London.



Sample size 1 009

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020

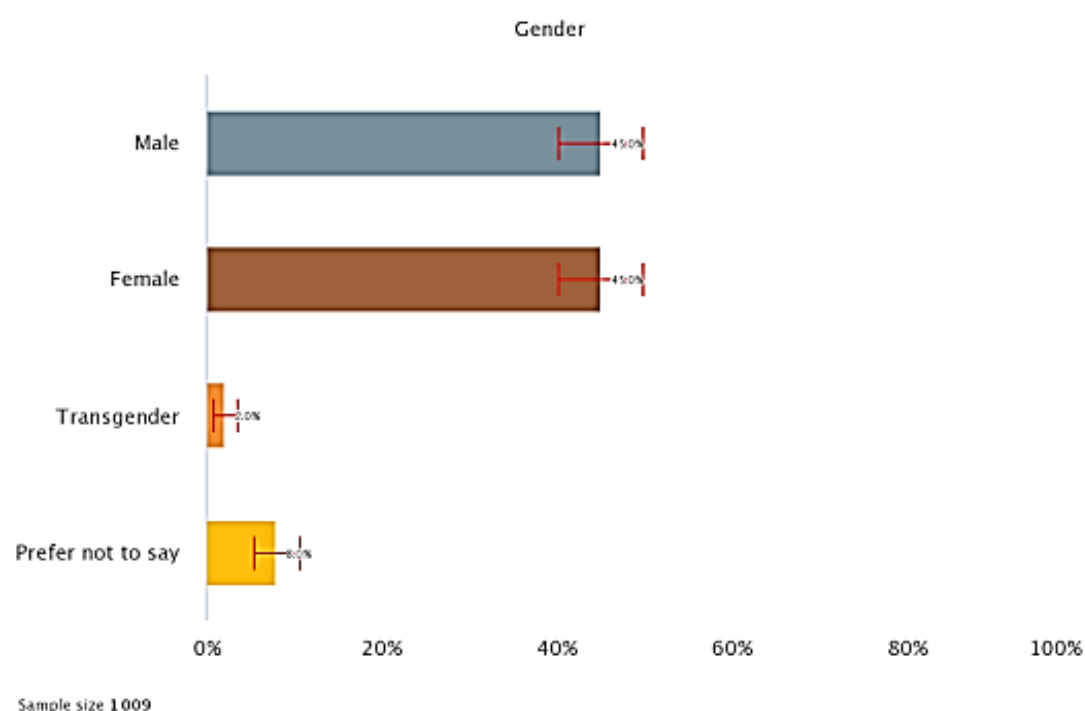


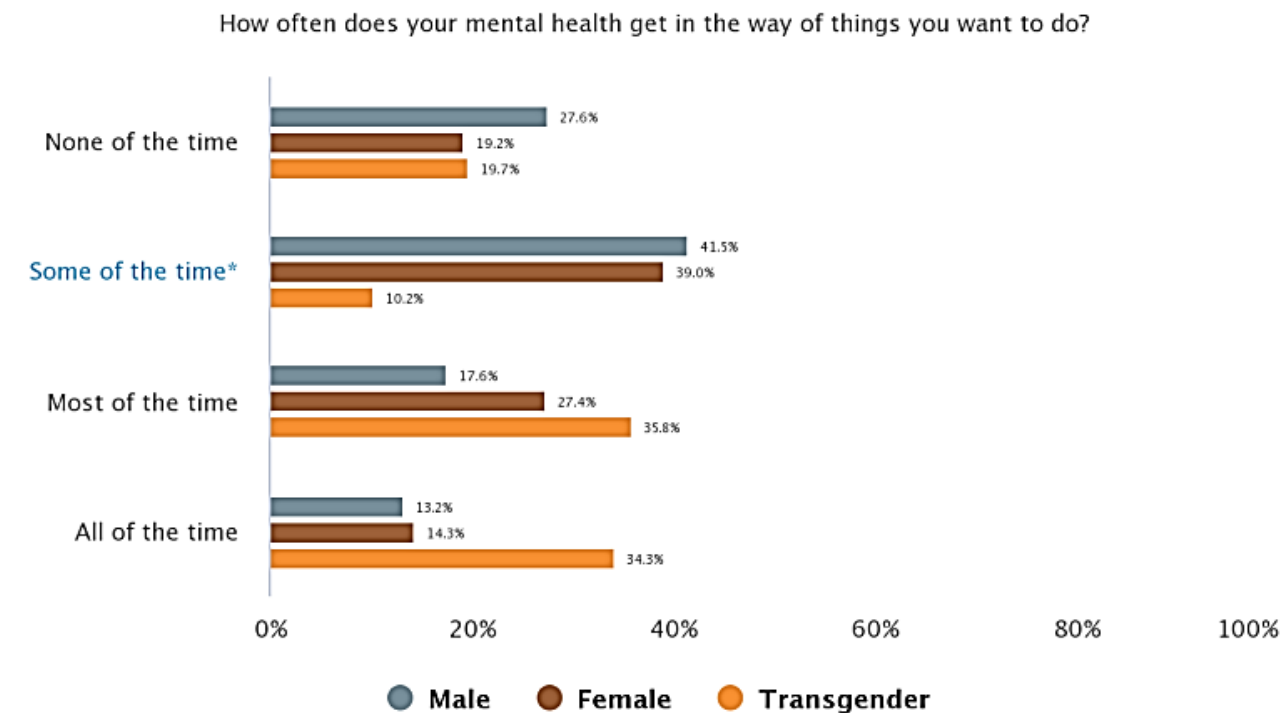
Figure 1b

Mental health

Trans young people were considerably more likely than girls and boys to say their mental health was a significant obstacle in their life (**Figure 2: 34.3% vs. 14.3% vs. 13.2%**), young people aged 19-21 were more likely to say their mental health was an obstacle than any other age group (**Figure 3**).

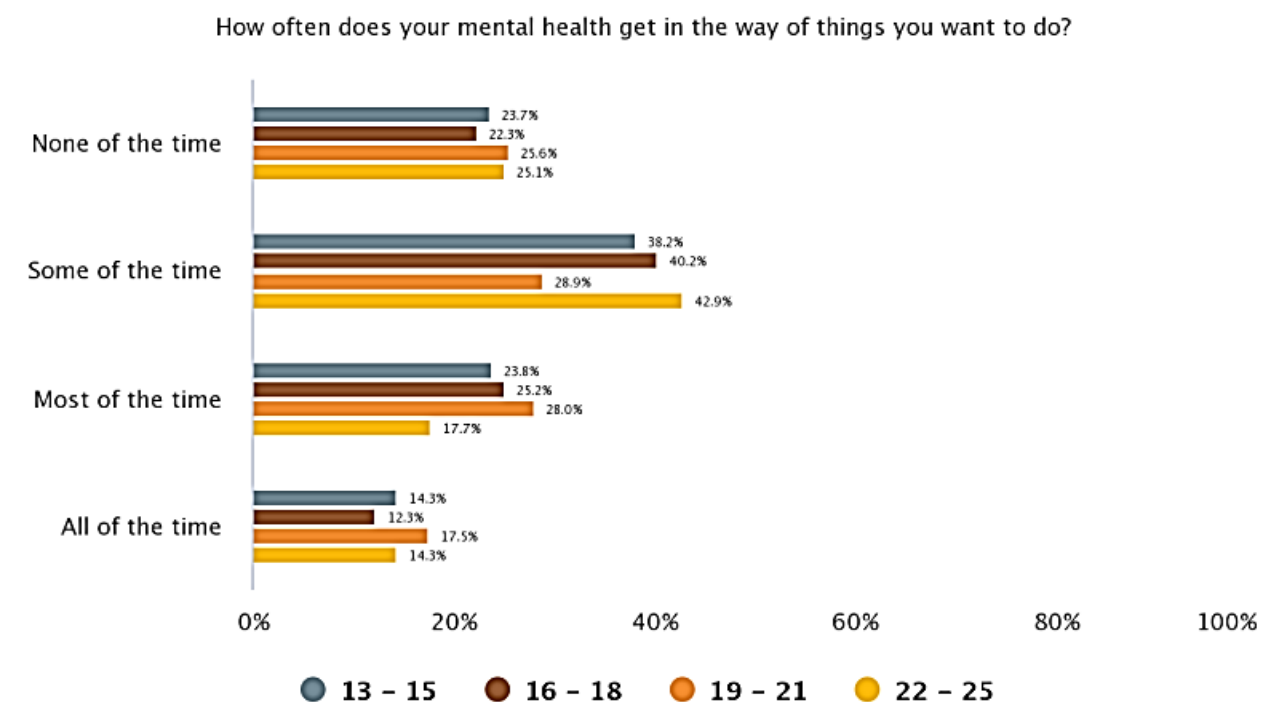
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September 2020



* significant

Figure 2



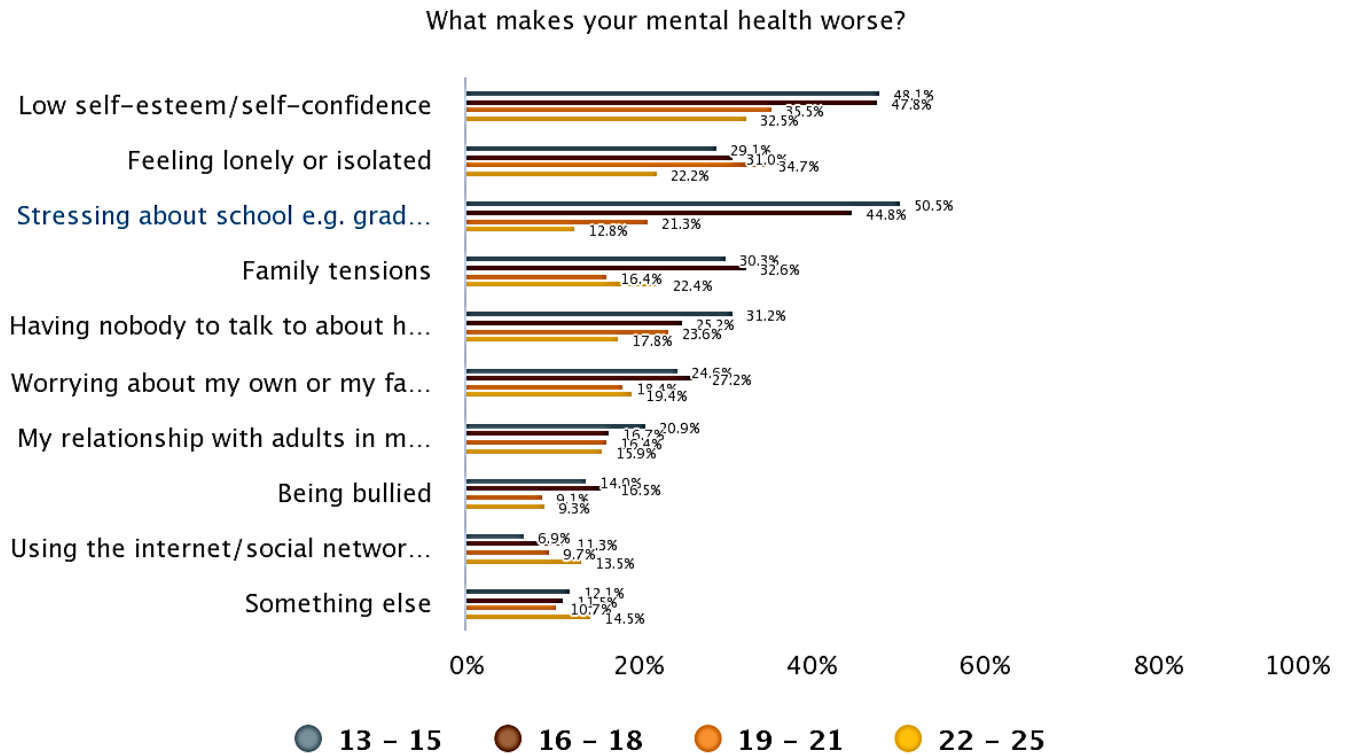
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Figure 3

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020

Low self-esteem was cited as the greatest contributor to poor mental health, particularly among younger age groups. 13-18 year olds also pointed to stressing about school as a significant contributing factor to poor mental health (Figure 4).



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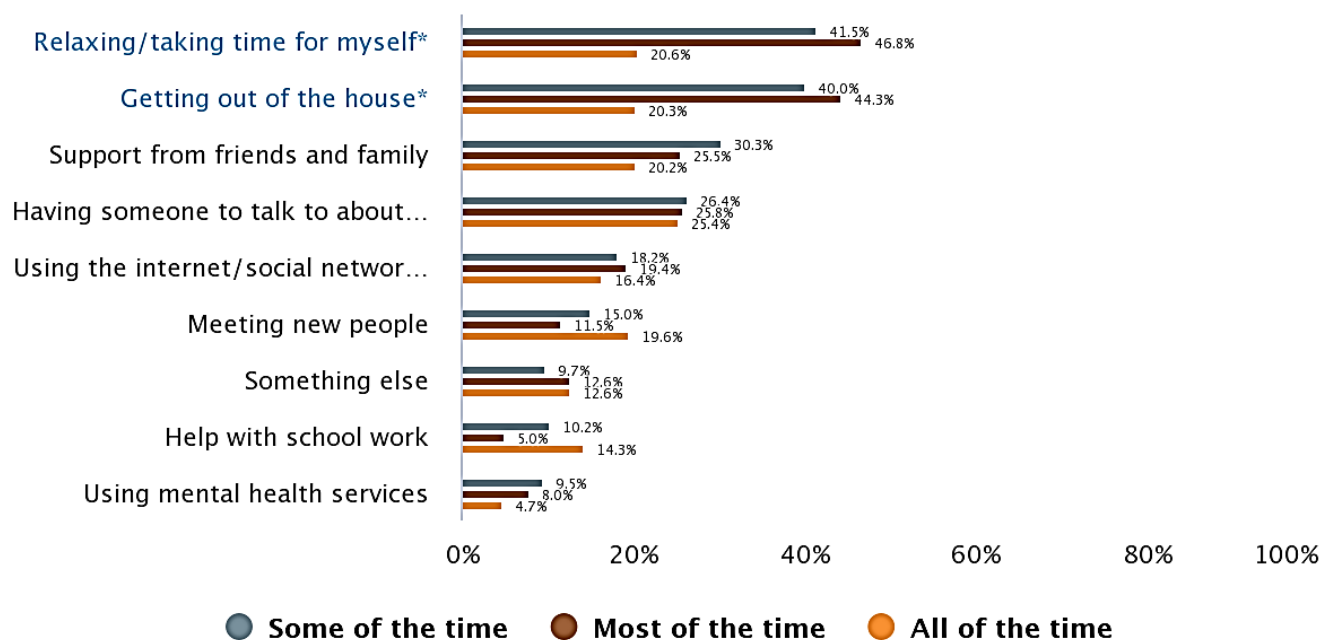
Figure 4

Having someone to talk to was the most common contributor to improved mental health among respondents whose mental health affected them 'all of the time' (Figure 5). Relaxing/taking time for oneself and getting out of the house were prominent supportive actions for those who said that their mental health was a significant obstacle i.e. 'most of the time'.

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020

What helps improve your mental health? (Mental Health is an obstacle Some of the time/Most of the time/All of the Time/All of the Time)

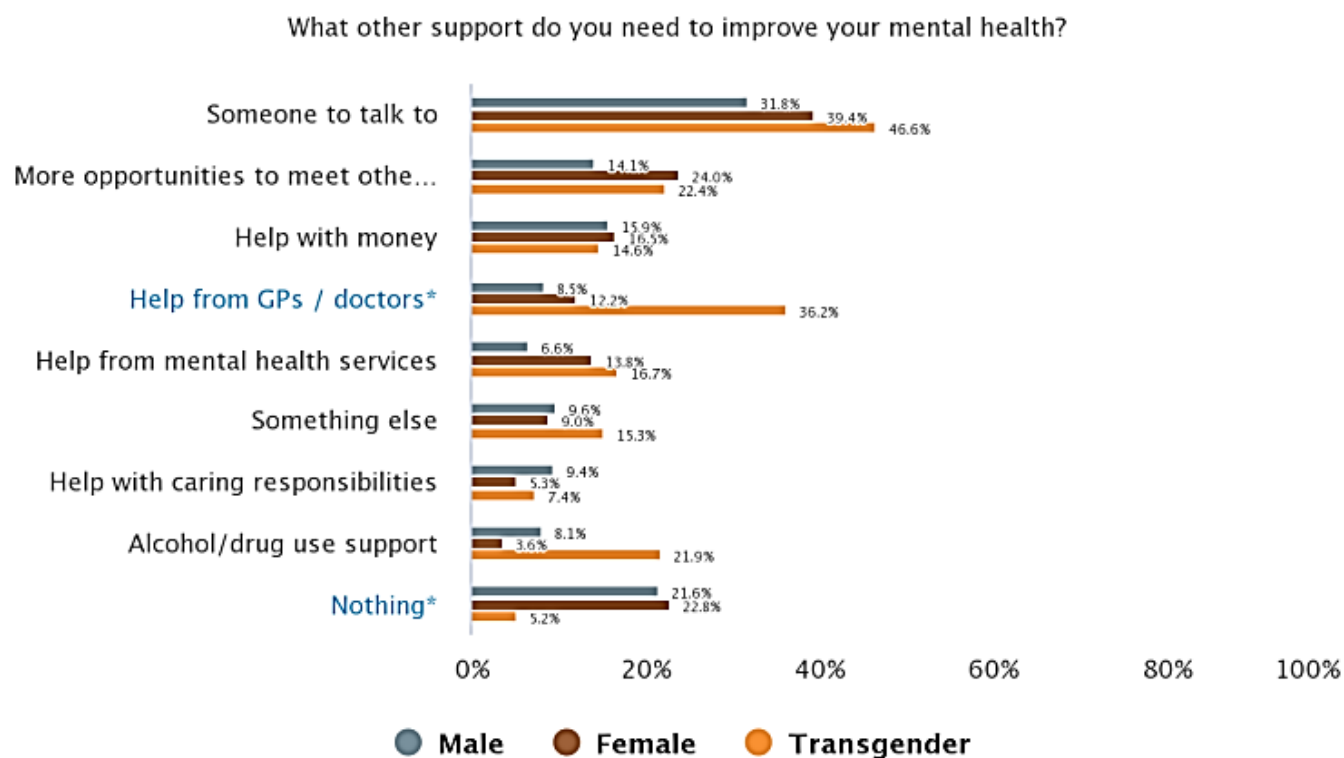


* significant
Figure 5

In terms of mental health support requested by young people, someone to talk to was overwhelmingly the most common response. Among Trans young people, clinical support from GP's and alcohol/drug support emerged as significant responses (Figure 6).

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September 2020



* significant

Figure 6

Loneliness

Nearly 40% of Trans respondents expressed constant feelings of loneliness compared to 15% of girls and 14% of boys (**Figure 7**). The greatest driver of loneliness is a lack of social support; either in having nobody to talk to or lacking a friendship network. Boys were most likely to say that having nobody to talk to contributed to their loneliness (**Figure 8**).

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020

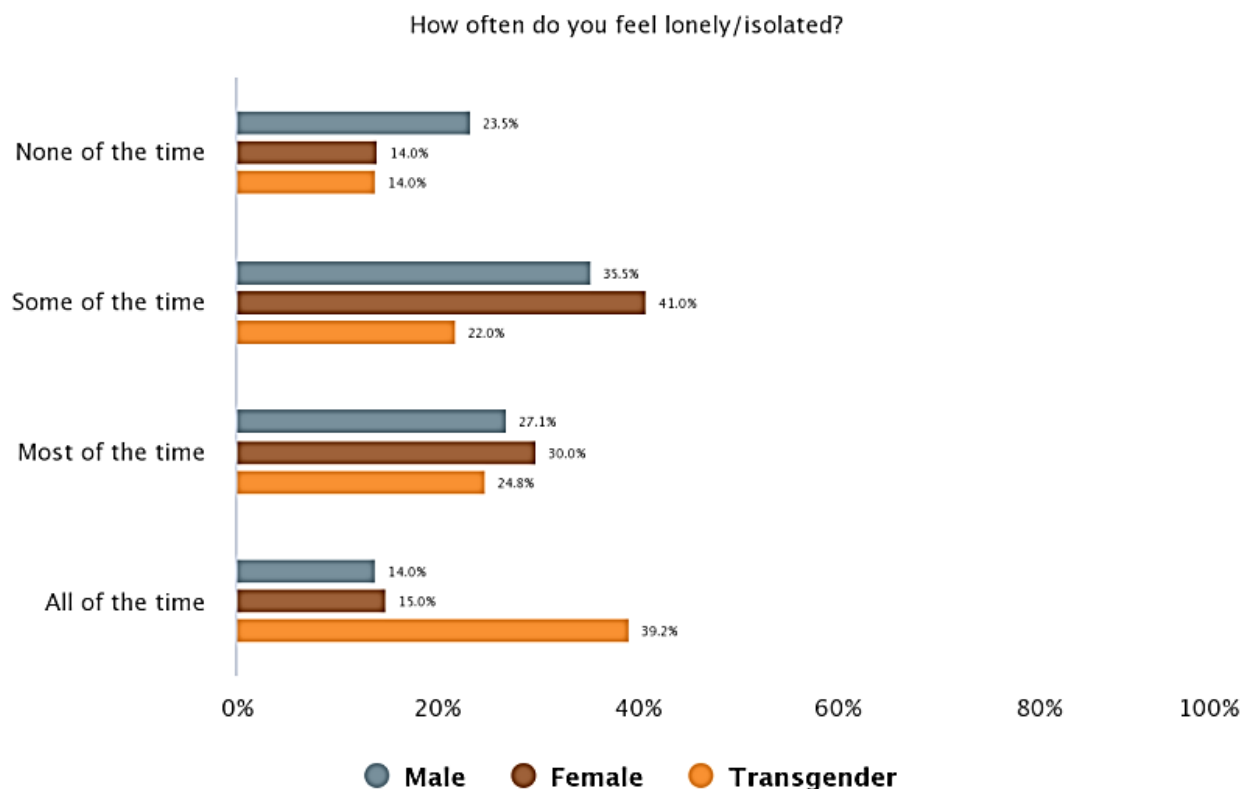
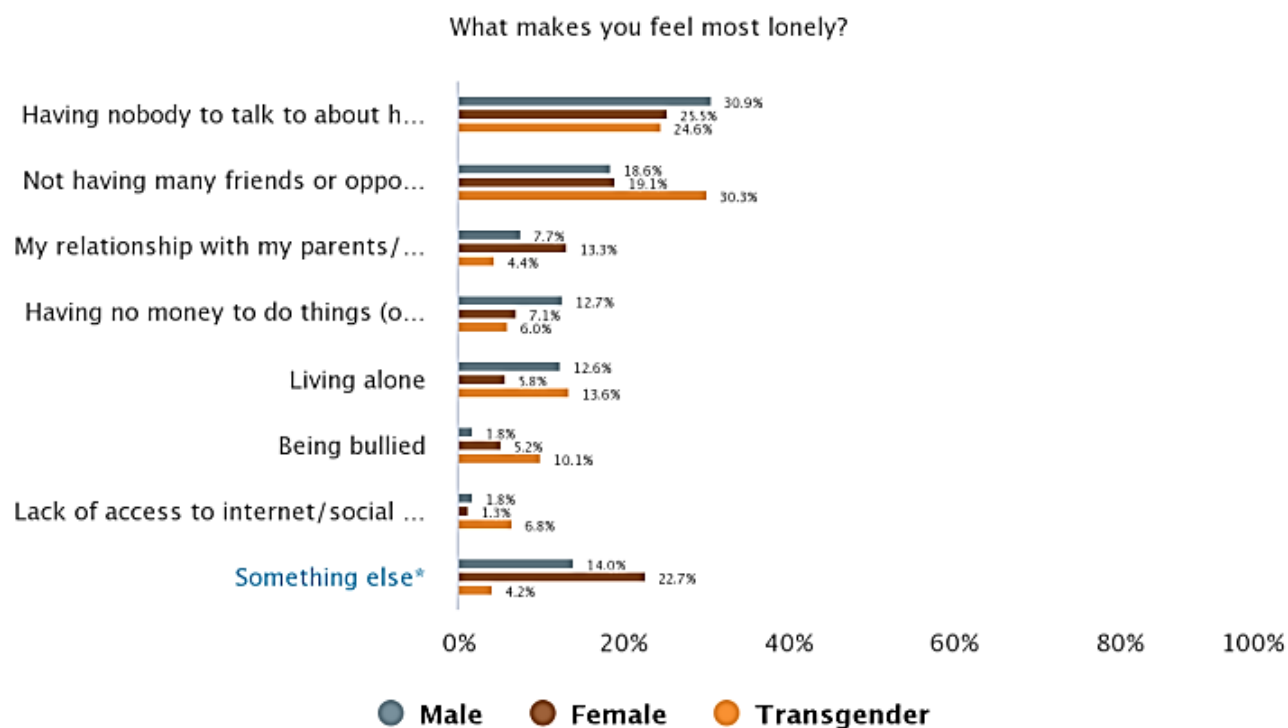


Figure 7



* significant

Figure 8

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September 2020

The research showed both boys and girls felt most lonely at home, but Trans young people stood out in their sense of isolation at school with 21.3% of respondents feeling isolated in this setting compared to 11.3% of girls and 6.1% of boys.

Friendships were the greatest combatant of loneliness for boys and girls (Figure 9), and for those who said that loneliness was not a significant problem in their life. Almost 45% of young people who said that loneliness affected them 'none of the time' said that having friends helped them to combat feelings of loneliness. This is compared to around 30% of those who said they were affected by loneliness 'some of the time' and 'most of the time' and just 13% of those who were most affected by loneliness. Pet ownership was also identified as a clear supportive tool for Trans young people with 27.7% of respondents saying this could make a difference (Figure 9).

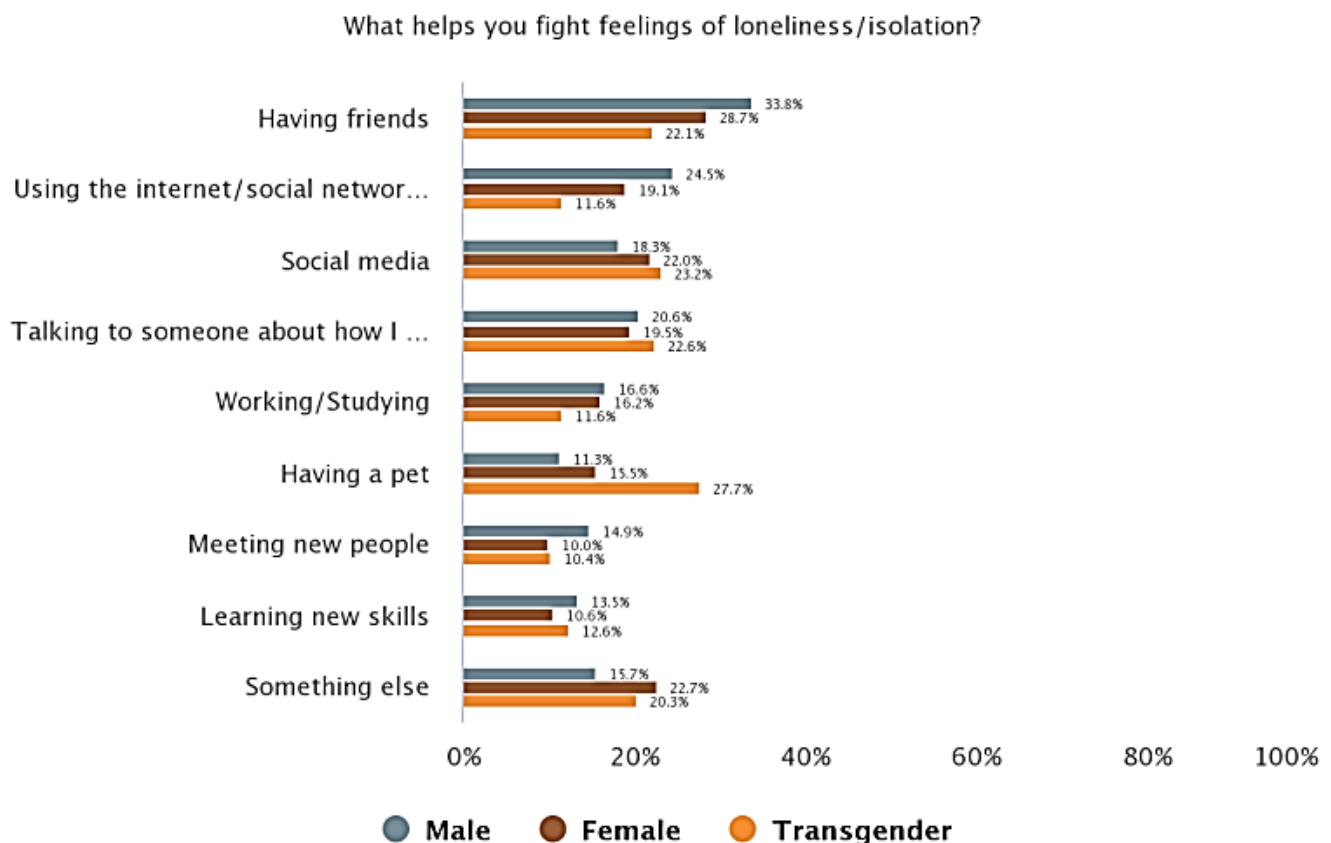


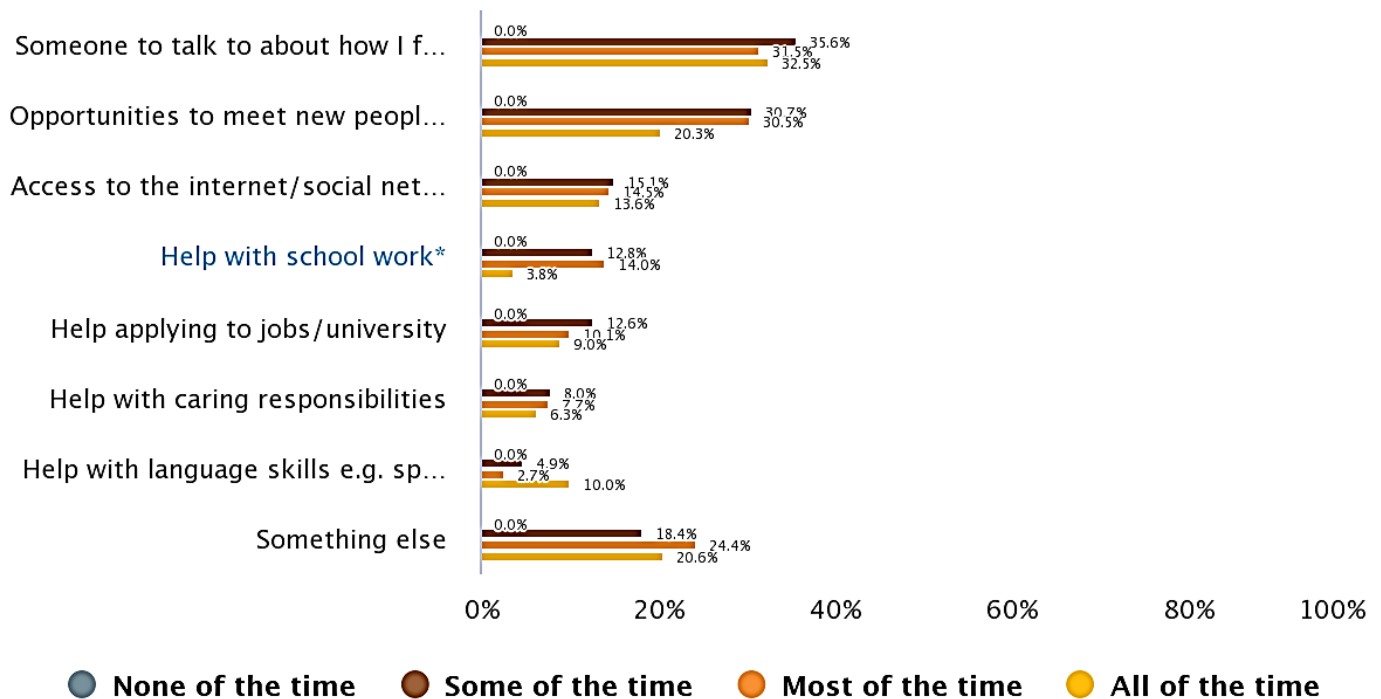
Figure 9

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September 2020

Those who felt lonely all of the time were one-third less likely to request opportunities to meet new people their age than other respondents. This group of young people were equally less likely to request support with school work. Instead, help with language skills surfaced as uniquely significant for this group (Figure 10).

What other support do you need to help you feel less lonely/isolated?



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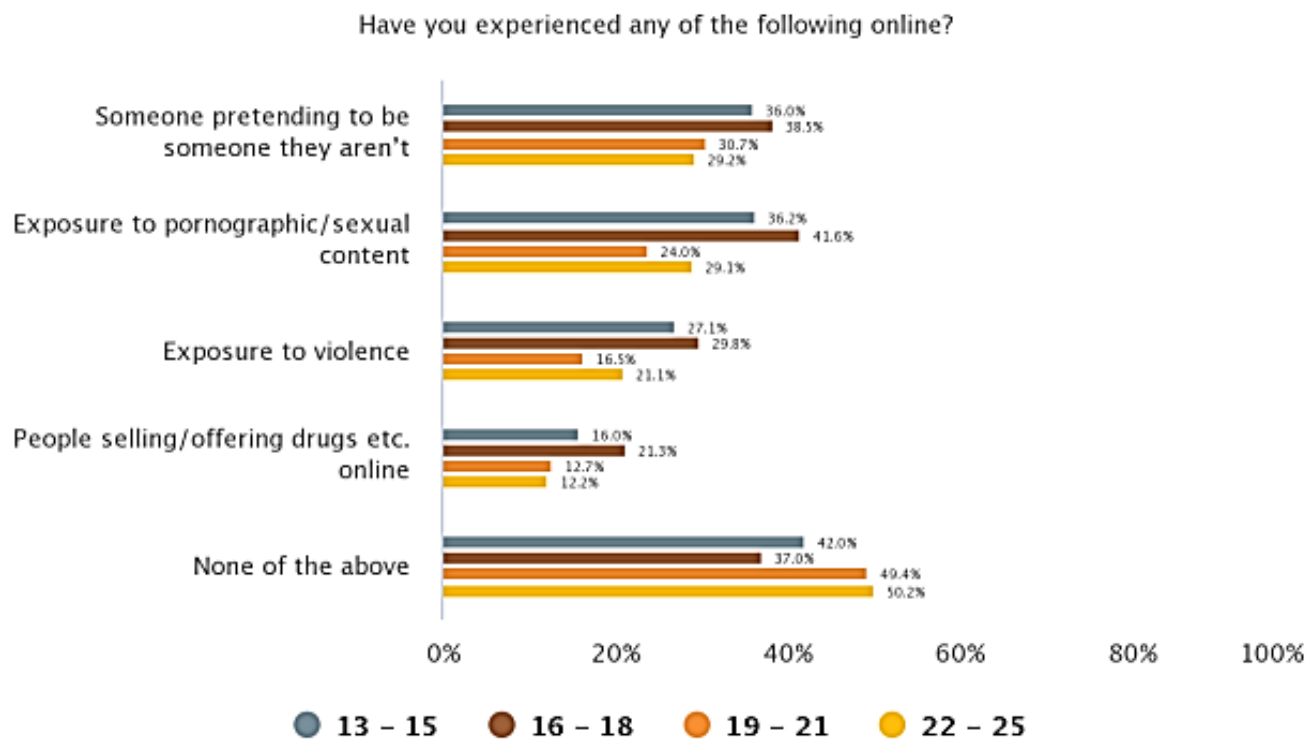
Figure 10

Impact of the digital world

Barnardo's also asked about the impact of digital/social media on young people's lives. While the majority of young people said that digital/social media had neither a positive or negative influence on their life (42%), the research found as many as 36% of 13-15 and 42% of 16-18 year olds reporting that they had been exposed to pornographic content online - with younger age groups at greatest risk of being exposed to all forms of negative online experiences included (Figure 11).

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020



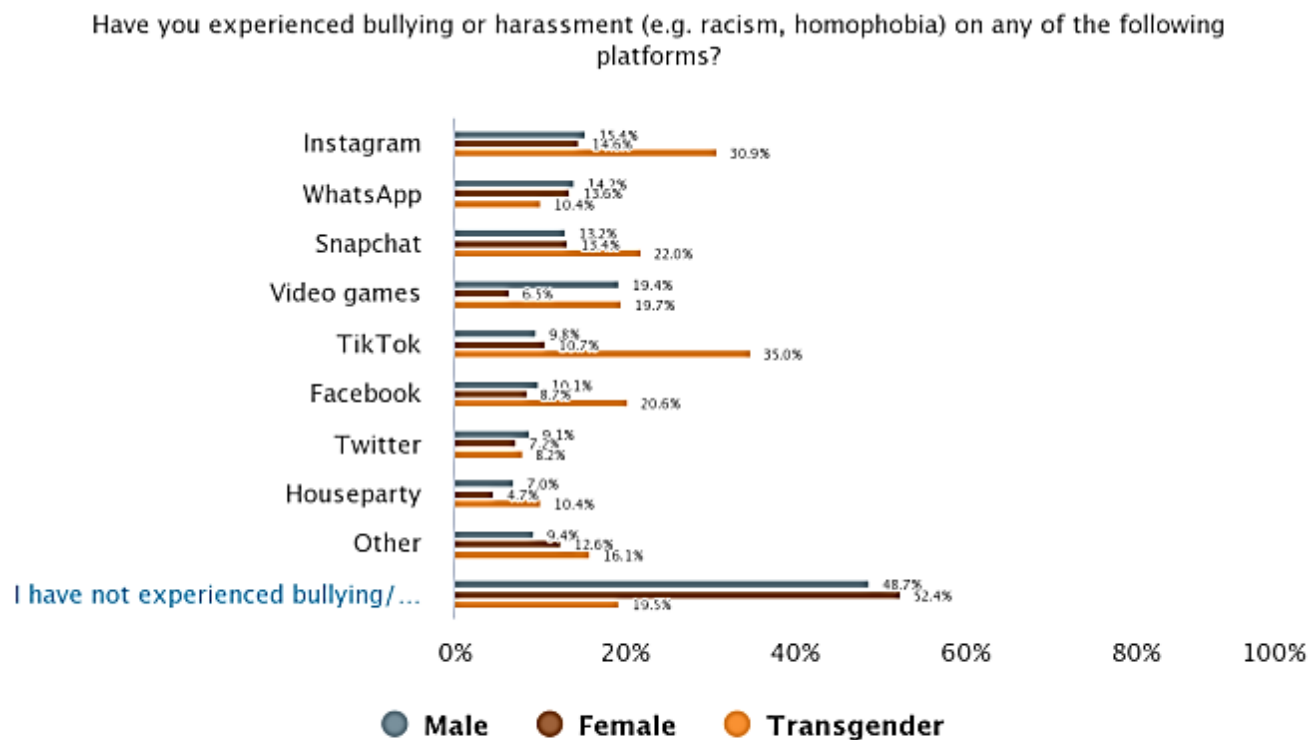
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Figure 11

Trans young people were more likely to see harassment and bullying on various platforms of social media than boys and girls (Figure 12), and less likely to see digital as a positive impact on their lives.

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September 2020



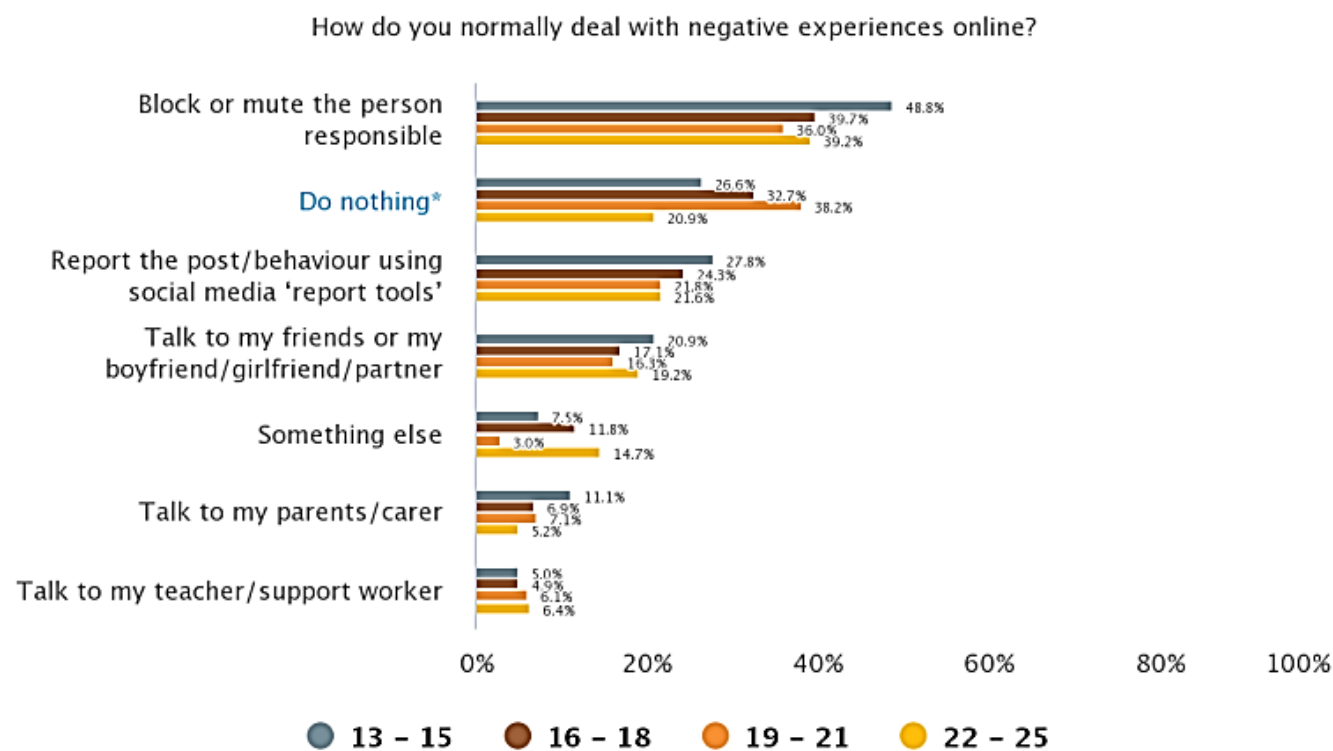
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Figure 12

More than one in four young people (27.9%) did nothing in response to negative experiences online, with younger age groups more likely to take action against online perpetrators such as by blocking, muting or reporting the perpetrator (Figure 13).

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020



* significant

Figure 13

Lessons learnt

Limitations

- Emerging and rapidly changing use of language among young people means that it is **likely that some conversations were missed** in phase one and two.
- The approach taken by Brandwatch **does not capture conversations taking place outside of publicly-available internet and social media sites** e.g. dark web, in-app messaging, Snapchat, WhatsApp
- **Difficulty understanding the demographics of young people involved in online conversations**, particularly in phase one and two. In phase three this information was captured, however as this was self-reported by respondents it is likely that some of this is inaccurate.
- We had no prior relationship with young people who responded to our survey, this may have affected **how truthful young people with their responses**. Young people may feel more comfortable sharing how they feel once we have built that relationship with them.
- **Questions about ethnicity were not included in the survey**, meaning we do not know how each of the three priority issues (mental health, loneliness and impact of digital) differ among different ethnicities of young Londoners.
- **Collaboration with young people** took place but **was limited** due to time constraints.
- Selection bias was likely present - the type of young people who complete surveys are likely different to those who do not complete surveys. **It is unlikely that we are capturing the voices of the most vulnerable.**
- **Potentially underestimated the number of Trans young people who responded to the survey in Phase three** as many will rightly choose Male/Female as their gender.
- Priority areas were chosen by Barnardo's digital listening working group, meaning that **the research was done through the lens of Barnardo's staff and not led by young people.**

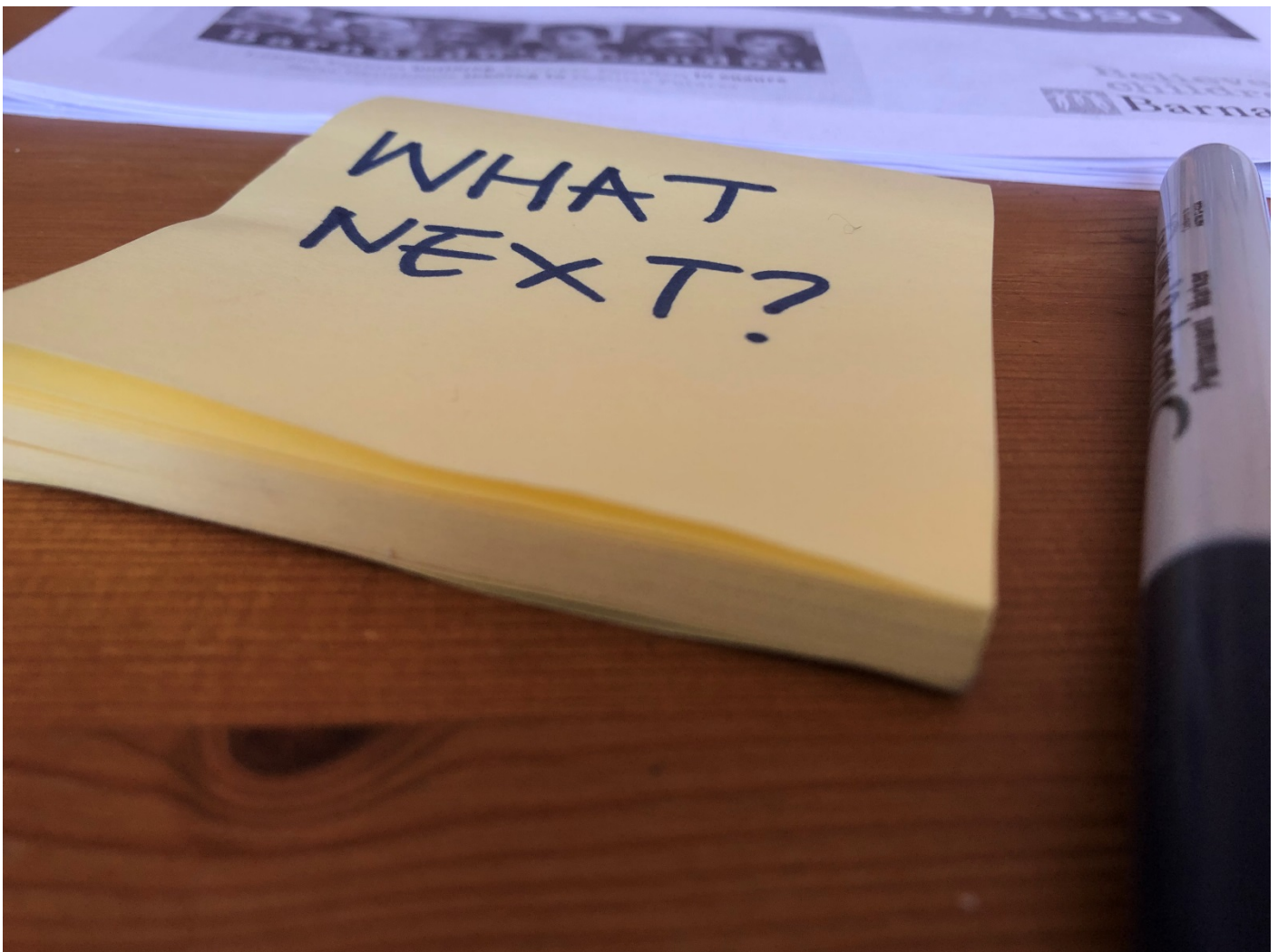
Strengths

- The phased approach enabled us to **narrow the focus of the research** at each point.
- **Multi-disciplinary working between staff from children's services**; voice and influence; strategic impact team; Brandwatch and the digital team. We were able to draw on expertise from each area.
- Wide reach across London - unlike much of our research, **the survey was not aimed at Barnardo's children but targeted to 13-25 year olds across London.**
- The **survey sample was large and broadly representative of the London population** in terms of age and gender, enabling us to tentatively draw some conclusions about the key issues facing 13-25 year old's in London.

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020

- **The survey was tested with a sample of young people** accessing Barnardo's support before finalising. Young people suggested changes to the language, survey format and survey length. This helped us to ensure the survey was appropriate for young people completing it.
- **Brandwatch used an innovative method to advertise the survey** meaning that we may have reached young people that Barnardo's may not have had access to through other survey methods.



Conclusion

Summary of findings

Findings from phase one and two were used to decide three areas of importance that the Barnardo's digital listening working group felt best represented Barnardo's core aims and could appropriately be asked to a sample of the 13-25 population of London.

Mental health is a significant obstacle to a large proportion of the sample of young Londoners we surveyed, particularly Trans young people and those aged between the ages of 19 and 21. Low self-esteem and school pressures explained much of this. Different groups of young people requested different types of support to improve their mental health. A common response was that young people wanted social support in the form of having someone to talk to. For Trans young people clinical support was most sought after.

Trans young Londoners stood out in their loneliness - almost 40% of the sample surveyed said they felt lonely 'all of the time'. Much of the loneliness young people experienced was explained by a lack of social support - either having nobody to talk to about issues they were facing or not having a strong friendship group. Those who felt most lonely however did not request social support as a priority area to help combat their loneliness.

In terms of the impact of the digital world, Trans young people were more likely than those identifying as girls and boys to experience harassment and/or bullying on the majority of social media sites that we included in our research. Younger age groups, particularly those aged 16-18 were most likely to be exposed to a range of negative online experiences. While younger age groups were more likely to take action against online perpetrators of harm, more than one in four young people 'did nothing' in response to online harm that they witnessed.

Reflections on the project

We knew that the project would be a learning piece and we knew it would challenge us. We have no doubt there are things we would do differently with the hindsight we now have. Despite this, we feel that **we have been given a real insight into what young Londoners are talking about in their digital worlds. The breadth and depth of the insight we have gained from this project would have simply not been possible to obtain using more conventional methods.**



Next steps

To focus on the pertinent issues emerging from the report, particularly around the additional vulnerabilities faced by Trans people in London and to commission some further research either internally or externally to define what the issue is, who is affected, how they are affected and what Barnardo's can do to support Trans people in London. We will look to apply for funding from the Barnardo's foundation to support this work.

To this end, we will share this report with the Barnardo's Innovation Lab to start conversations about the involvement of service design in the work planned to dive deeper into the issues raised in this report.

We will form a working group to see what Barnardo's are currently doing from an LGBT/Trans perspective and identify where we need to be doing more. This may or may not include working with other charities with expertise in the area.

We will discuss the issues raised in the report with our policy and public affairs teams and use these discussions to inform Barnardo's influencing objectives in London.

We will investigate how the three issues we have identified are mediated by young people in relation to both race and ethnicity, as this data was not collected through this initial research.

We will continue to explore creative ways of listening to young people digitally to inform how we support young Londoners and work with our corporate partners to explore cost-effective ways of doing this.

We will share the findings of this report with children and young people in a way which is accessible and engaging.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the young people who took part in this research. Without their voice, this project would not have been possible.

Links to full findings

[Phase 1 findings](#)

[Phase 2 findings](#)

[Phase 3 findings](#)

Listening to young Londoners: a digital listening project

September 2020

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barnardos.org.uk

Barnardo House Tanners Lane, Barkingside,
Ilford, Essex IG6 1QG. 020 8550 8822.

Northern Ireland 542–544 Upper Newtownards
Road, Belfast BT4 3HE. 028 9067 2366.

Scotland 111 Oxfangs Road North, Edinburgh
EH14 1ED. 0131 446 7000.

Cymru/Wales Trident Court, East Moors Road,
Cardiff CF24 5TD. 029 2049 3387.

Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos.216250 and SC037605 21474shc20

