

Appendix 4

In Their Own Words: Young Voices on Safety and Protection in Cheltenham

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St Giles

Forward

For all the young people who took part in our survey and for those who feel that they haven't been heard, for all the young people faced with the challenges of our world, for all their fears, their worries, for all their hopes and dreams, for all of the incredible individuals in Cheltenham doing amazing work by serving our young people and their communities....

This is for you

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Executive Summary: Young Voices on Safety and Protection in Cheltenham

This report presents the findings of a comprehensive study on young people's perceptions of safety and well-being in Cheltenham. Commissioned by Cheltenham Borough Council and conducted by St Giles Trust, the research aims to inform the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative and improve youth services in the area. The study, led by Principal Investigator O.J Smart, employed a mixed-methods approach to gather insights from Cheltenham's youth population.

Key Findings

1. Voices of Young People:

- **Only 18% of young people felt their opinions were valued by adults and professionals.** Many expressed a desire for more direct communication platforms and greater action taken on their feedback.

2. Perceptions of Safety:

- **Many young people reported feeling unsafe in specific areas of Cheltenham,** particularly at night. The town centre, Hesters Way, St. Paul's, and Whaddon were frequently cited as unsafe. Dark alleyways and parks, such as Pittville Park and Spring bank Park, were also areas of concern.
- **Online, 47% of respondents had seen disturbing content, but only 18% felt comfortable reporting this to adults.**

3. Youth Activities:

- Hanging out with friends in parks (32%) and the town centre (23%) were the most popular free-time activities. However, a significant number of young people cited a lack of affordable and accessible recreational spaces.
- Sports, music, and creative arts were important to young people, but many felt there were not enough safe, well-maintained facilities for these activities.

4. County Lines and Exploitation:

- **Cheltenham is vulnerable to County Lines** activity due to its proximity to larger cities and relatively small police presence. The report highlights that **as much as 20% of those involved in County Lines are children,** often exploited due to social and economic vulnerabilities.

5. Digital Safety:

- **The increasing use of social media by young people poses significant risks,** including exposure to exploitative content and harmful interactions. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat were commonly used, **but respondents felt ill-equipped to handle online threats.**

6. Desired Improvements:

- Respondents called for increased police presence, better lighting in public spaces, more youth-oriented activities, and accessible mental health support.

Affordable recreational spaces and improved public safety measures were also top priorities.

Recommendations

1. Enhanced Safety Measures:

- More visible policing in identified hotspot areas and improved lighting in parks and public spaces should be prioritised to address safety concerns.

2. Digital Literacy and Safety:

- Schools and community organisations should implement digital safety education to equip young people with the skills to navigate online risks. Strengthening the Online Safety Act (2023) to hold platforms accountable for youth safety is also recommended.

3. Youth Engagement and Inclusion:

- Cheltenham must create inclusive and transparent decision-making processes, where young people feel empowered and see tangible results from their participation. Initiatives such as youth advisory councils and participatory budgeting could help bridge this gap.

4. Infrastructure for Recreation:

- Investment in youth-friendly recreational spaces, including sports facilities and creative arts centres, is essential. These spaces should be affordable and accessible to all young people.

5. Mental Health Support:

- Expanding access to mental health services, including counselling and peer-support programs, will help address the emotional and psychological needs of young people.

By addressing these concerns and incorporating the voices of Cheltenham's youth, this report sets the foundation for more targeted and effective interventions aimed at improving safety, well-being, and inclusivity for young people in the area.

Introduction and Background

Cheltenham received funding for UK charity St Giles Trust to carry out a scoping piece of research to better understand young people's perceptions of safety within the area and to understand what they would want from any future provisions provided. The results of the research would feed directly into The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative in Cheltenham, a community-driven program aimed at addressing child poverty and inequality. It was launched in response to findings that nearly 4,400 children in Cheltenham live in poverty and face significant challenges, including poorer educational outcomes, higher rates of school exclusion, mental health issues, and increased involvement with social services.

Junior Smart was elected as the Principal Researcher for the investigation owing to his extensive experience and qualifications in the field of youth justice, criminal exploitation, violence and desistance.

Research Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of the investigation was to draw out and explore young people's perspectives of safety, both in the physical as well as in online spaces and in specific there were a number of key areas which the council wanted to be explored. These included:

- How do young people feel about their free time?
- Where do they go or hang out?
- What are they doing?
- Why do they do/go there?
- What is missing for them?
- Do they feel safe?
- Where do they feel safest?

In addition, the council wanted to know whether young people felt that they were being heard in all aspects of their lives and how their voice could be better heard by the arenas and services around them. There was a specific focus on having a solid representation from those aged 13 and above and other typically underrepresented groups when it comes to research involving the youth voice.

Background and Literature

Terminology

The term 'gang' remains a highly contentious subjective phrase, drawing and perhaps rightfully warranting more meaningful debate than what is required here¹. Hallsworth and Young's typology characterises three distinctive groups: peer groups, street gangs or collectives and Organised Crime Groups (OCGs). The National Crime Agency (NCA) estimated there were 4,772 OCGs in the UK in April 2020. A quarter of these groups (around 1,200) were estimated to be involved in violent criminal activity. Other OCGs are involved in fraud, cybercrime, and immigration crime.²

However, part of the issue with typologies is that it can be challenging to discern where the understanding of 'gang' ends, and organised crime group begins because the terms are so loosely based. For the purposes of the research and report it is opted to simplify organised crime groups and street gangs as one and the same and consider it as co-offending groups who engage in criminal activity for "personal gain" be that drug dealing or enacting violence and the purposes of this investigation it is proposed that we view the matters of their involvement be that through exploitation or otherwise as mitigating factors.

County Lines

The impact of county lines is evident. Firstly, county lines activity has become characterised by gangs and with it the predication for violence and territory. Then there is the impact that an unwavering supply of drugs and other illegal commodities has on rural areas, many of which lack the policing capacity as their urban counterparts³. Then there are the harms associated with young and vulnerable people being groomed and exploited. Then there are the risks associated with the actual carrying and distribution of the drugs which includes health and criminal sanctions. Finally, there is the effect on the individual; county lines overlap with other forms of abuse and exploitation; therefore, it can lead to serious physical and emotional harm⁴.

Data regarding the ages of those involved is concerning, the NCA state that at least 20% of those involved in county lines drug dealing were children with the average age of those caught being around 15 years of age⁵. The NCA maintain that county lines

¹ Harding, S. (2020). *County lines: exploitation and drug dealing among urban street gangs*. Policy Press.

² Havard, T. (2022). Serious youth violence: County lines drug dealing and the Government response.

³ McLean, R., Robinson, G., & Densley, J. A. (2019). *County lines: Criminal networks and evolving drug markets in Britain*. Springer Nature.

⁴ Wroe, L. E. (2021). Young people and "county lines": a contextual and social account. *Journal of Children's Services*.

⁵ NCA, NPCC & ROCUs, NCLCC County Lines Strategic Assessment 2020/21,

are the most frequently identified form of coerced criminality with “at least 14.5%” of modern slavery referrals relating to county lines activity (NCA, 2021).

Thematic Trends of Involvement

Although anyone can become criminally exploited, academic research has been able to draw out the thematic trends around involvement with significant research evidencing the association between gangs and criminal activity and deprivation and low social mobility. Those involved are more likely to reside in areas of deprivation; have experienced victimisation; have psychological or emotional wellbeing issues such as low self-esteem; trauma or self-harm ⁶. They are also likely to have experienced more than four Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE’s) for example:

- abuse, violence, and neglect
- alcohol or drug addictions either individually or in the family
- family members in prison
- experiencing the death of a loved one at a young age
- low self-esteem
- lack of positive role models
- having a close family member involved ⁷.

Furthermore, academic literature is congruent in its identification of motivating factors for those involved including amongst others, a sense of belonging, financial gain, support and a sense of identity, all of which can meet the deficits which would otherwise be gained from the family home or society.^{8,9}

Cheltenham’s Socioeconomic backdrop status

Cheltenham's socioeconomic backdrop is characterised by a mix of areas of affluence and areas of deprivation. As a Regency spa town, Cheltenham has long attracted an affluent population, with key sectors including finance, technology (especially due to GCHQ), education, and tourism, particularly with its renowned festivals. The town has historically low unemployment rates and a high proportion of residents with higher education qualifications, contributing to its economic vitality¹⁰

However, socio-economic studies in 2021 highlighted notable social disparities. □ Despite its affluence, Cheltenham is not immune to social and economic inequality. Certain wards within Cheltenham, such as St. Paul’s and Hesters Way are

⁶ Harding, S. (2014). *The street casino: Survival in violent street gangs*. Policy Press.

Havard, T. E., Densley, J. A., Whittaker, A., & Wills, J. (2021). Street gangs and coercive control: The gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 17488958211051513.

⁷ Wolff, K. T., Baglivio, M. T., Klein, H. J., Piquero, A. R., DeLisi, M., & Howell, J. C. (2020). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and gang involvement among juvenile offenders: Assessing the mediation effects of substance use and temperament deficits. *Youth violence and juvenile justice*, 18(1), 24-53.

⁸ Densley, J. (2013). *How gangs work*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan,

⁹ Firmin, C. (2010). *Female voice in violence project: A study into the impact of serious youth and gang violence on women and girls*. Race on the Agenda.

¹⁰ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000078/>

recognised as having higher levels of deprivation, with lower household incomes and challenges related to education and health. Property prices in Cheltenham are relatively high, driven by its desirability as a place to live and its proximity to both London and Birmingham. This has led to issues with housing affordability for some segments of the population, particularly young professionals and low-income families¹¹. It is the researcher's view upon visiting the sites that the levels of poverty were intergenerational.

Initiatives such as "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) aim to address these inequalities by supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who face challenges such as poorer educational attainment and mental health. The NCLB initiative in Cheltenham has received praise for its proactive approach to addressing child poverty and educational inequality. It targets the nearly 4,400 children living in poverty within Cheltenham and aims to provide support across various areas such as mental health, education, and social inclusion¹².

However, critical analysis highlights several concerns. Some critics argue that while NCLB focuses on providing resources and opportunities, it risks treating poverty and inequality as isolated problems rather than addressing the broader structural and systemic issues that perpetuate them. Additionally, the program's heavy reliance on local partnerships and community engagement means that its success may be uneven, depending on the resources and capabilities of different local organisations

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¹¹ https://www.ilivehere.co.uk/statistics-cheltenham-gloucestershire-7858.html#google_vignette

¹² <https://nclbcheltenham.org.uk/>

¹³ https://www.cheltenham.gov.uk/downloads/file/7729/cheltenham_needs_analysis_2019

Cheltenham and County Lines Activity

Several factors contribute to Cheltenham being a hotspot for county lines activity:

- **Location:** Cheltenham is strategically located near major cities like Birmingham and Bristol, making it an attractive hub for drug trafficking. Its proximity to the M5 motorway also facilitates easy transportation of drugs and people^{14 15}.
- **Affluence:** Cheltenham is known for its affluent areas and thriving economy, which can provide a lucrative market for drug dealers. The demand for drugs among some of the town's wealthy residents may attract county lines gangs.
- **Educational institutions:** Cheltenham is home to several prestigious schools and colleges, which can be targeted by county lines gangs for recruiting young people as drug runners or dealers this is because these areas have transient populations and link with illicit recreational economies ^{16 17}
- **Transportation links:** The town has excellent transportation links, including regular train services to London, Birmingham, and other major cities. This makes it easier for gang members to move between locations and transport drugs¹⁵
- **Vulnerable populations:** Like many other towns, Cheltenham has vulnerable populations, such as individuals struggling with poverty, family problems, or mental health issues. These people, particularly children and young adults, are at a higher risk of being exploited by county lines gangs ^{18 19}.
- **Established drug market:** Cheltenham has an established drug market, which may have attracted the attention of county lines gangs looking to expand their operations and take over existing drug territories ¹⁷.
- **Relatively Small Police Presence:** Smaller towns like Cheltenham tend to have fewer police resources compared to major cities. Criminal networks may see this as an opportunity to operate with less scrutiny or oversight from law enforcement ²⁰.
- **Perceived safety:** The town's relatively low crime rates and perceived safety compared to larger cities might have given county lines gangs the impression that they could operate with less scrutiny from law enforcement.²⁰

¹⁴ Home Office Report on County Lines (2018)

¹⁵ NCA Annual Strategic Assessment (2021)

¹⁶ <https://www.bi.team/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/BIT-London-Violence-Reduction.pdf>

¹⁷ Home Office Report on County Lines (2018)

¹⁸ NYA Out of Sight (2020)

¹⁹ The Children's Society – Counting Lives Report (2019)

²⁰ Windle, J. & Briggs, D. (2019). "It's a no-go zone": County lines, vulnerable youth and police resource allocation. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*.

These factors, combined with the persistent demand for illegal drugs, have made Cheltenham a target for county lines activity, requiring ongoing efforts from law enforcement and the community to combat the problem.

Lack of Intervention Guidance

Within the arena of gangs, county lines or CCE, there is an apparent lack of evidence-based practice in terms of what works. Is it a matter of providing support to those vulnerable individuals or groups at higher risk of being groomed or does the solution lie in enforcement processes in such as stop and search and subsequently criminalisation. This continues to be a challenge for local authorities who are frequently left to come up with their own intervention and diversionary strands. Lead agencies or teams vary from locale to locale; those responsible could be children's services, social workers, police, or youth offending teams²¹.

Research Methodology

The study adopted an inductive approach to the data, including site visits and focus group style meetings with stakeholders and service providers in the areas. This enabled the principal researcher to experience the locations first hand, draw observations and connect them with conveyed stakeholder experiences. This 'ground up' approach is recognised in academia has been used successfully by scholars such as Simon Harding (2014) in research into gangs and Kristin Ferguson (2011) in developing a set of recommendations for interventions involving homeless youth.

Research Design

Given that the investigation was draw out young people's perspectives it was the original intention of the researcher to engage with the youth voice or council; a formal body or organisation made up of young people, typically aged between 11 and 25, who represent the views and interests of their peers to local or national governments, organisations, or decision-making bodies. The primary aim of a youth council is to give young people a voice in public affairs, help influence decisions that affect them and promote active citizenship and most areas have them. However, in Cheltenham it was a notable omission, thus the approach took the form of establishing a Research Advisory Steering Group; a collective whose members were comprised of remarkable individuals working or delivering services in the area. These were people with direct contact with young people and were known for their work, subject matter expertise, perspectives and/or lived experience which would benefit the investigation. This method is well known within research especially those that attempt to reach and involve hard to reach groups for example mental health, sexual health and youth justice ^{22 23}.

²¹ Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. (2020). It Was Hard to Escape: safeguarding Children at Risk from Criminal Exploitation.

²² Nuffield Foundation (2019).

²³ Cane, F., & Oland, L. (2019)

The Advisory Group served as a 'critical friend' to support the research project. Its key responsibilities included offering impartial advice when required, assisting in the development of research questions, supporting the distribution and implementation of questionnaires, and potentially aiding in the organisation and execution of focus groups. This collaborative approach ensured the project benefited from external expertise and guidance throughout its various stages. The fact that the investigation had such a significant reach and met such a high standard was largely down to the efforts of the group.

Recruitment to the group was achieved via **snowball sampling**. Enquires were made to establish leaders in the field and these were personally approached by the principal researcher, these members were then asked who they considered would be beneficial for the group and these were also then approached. In the initial meeting all recruited members were then asked if felt any participants were missing from the collective These were also approached.

Over 30 meetings were held between the principal researcher and potential members. Ultimately the group consisted of 20 members in total with one member dropping out due to other commitments.

The finalised investigation took the form of anonymised questionnaires via Microsoft Teams and disseminated by way of the group members and partner agencies. Thanks to this approach, a total of 578 responses were received, which whilst not as substantial as the numbers acquired by Gloucestershire for the Pupil Wellbeing report for 2022 (24,077), remains a substantial sample size for a local youth study, providing a good basis for drawing meaningful conclusions about the perspectives and experiences of young people in Cheltenham. The large number of responses adds credibility to the findings and also allows for more nuanced analysis across different demographic groups.

Given that 25,800 is roughly the youth population in Cheltenham, 578 only represents 2.24% of the youth in the area. While this is a small proportion of the total, it is large enough to potentially identify statistically significant trends and differences among subgroups, which could be valuable for targeted policymaking and program development.

One thing that cannot be under-estimated as a key strength drawn from the research is the collective efficacy of the partnerships. These fantastic individuals pulled together to make this research possible.

Demographic Overview

This section presents an analysis of the demographic composition of the survey respondents, providing context for the subsequent findings and their applicability to Cheltenham's youth population.

Sample Size and Representation

The survey garnered responses from 578 young people residing in Cheltenham, constituting a substantial dataset for analysis. This sample size enables the identification of statistically significant trends and offers valuable insights into the perspectives of the town's youth.

Age Distribution

Analysis of the age distribution reveals a pronounced concentration in the early adolescent years:

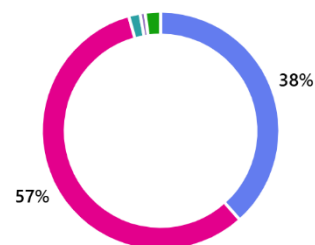
- 11-12 years: 48.44% (n=280)
- 13-14 years: 32.01% (n=185)
- 15-16 years: 15.40% (n=89)
- 17-18 years: 1.73% (n=10)
- 10 years and under: 2.42% (n=14)

The significant representation of 11–14-year-olds (80.45% of respondents) provides robust data on this crucial developmental stage. Moreover, it meets the research requirements of having a solid representation from those aged 13 years and above. However, the underrepresentation of older adolescents (15-18 years) should be noted when interpreting the results and may indicate a need for targeted research with this age group.

Gender Distribution

The survey achieved a reasonably balanced gender representation:

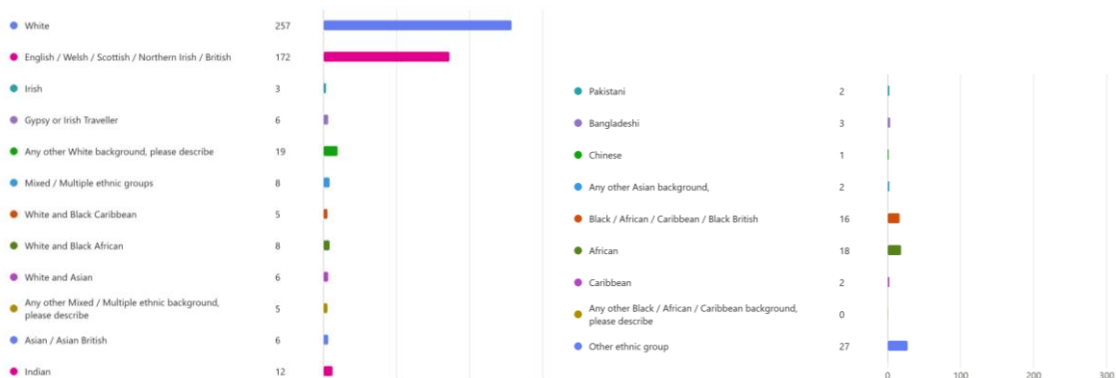
● Male	222
● Female	331
● Non-binary	9
● A gender not listed here	4
● Prefer not to say	12



This diversity allows us to explore how experiences and perspectives might vary across different gender identities, providing valuable insights for inclusive policymaking.

Ethnic Diversity

The ethnic composition of respondents reflects Cheltenham's diverse population:



This diversity enables analysis of experiences and perspectives across various cultural backgrounds, although it should be noted that the proportion of White respondents is slightly lower than in Cheltenham's overall population (estimated at 85.7% in the 2021 census).

Geographic Distribution

Respondents represent a wide range of Cheltenham neighbourhoods, including but not limited to Hesters Way, St. Pauls, Whaddon/Oakley, Prestbury, Town Centre, Pittville, and Spring bank. This spread encompasses both more affluent neighbourhoods and areas facing socio-economic challenges, allowing us to explore how location within Cheltenham might impact young people's perspectives and experiences.

Youth Activities and Social Spaces

Respondents were asked about their preferred activities during free time. The most frequently mentioned activities were:

1. Hanging out with friends (mentioned by 62.3% of respondents)
2. Online activities (58.7%)
3. Sports and physical activities (45.2%)
4. Music-related activities (41.9%)
5. Art and creative pursuits (28.4%)

Other activities mentioned, though less frequently, included reading, dancing, and drama. Hanging out with friends emerged as the most popular activity among respondents, with over 60% mentioning this as a preferred way to spend their free time. This appears to underscore the importance of social connections for young people and highlights the need for suitable spaces where they can gather. Close behind were online activities, reflecting the significant role that digital spaces play in

youth culture today. Sports, music, and art also featured prominently, indicating a desire for diverse recreational opportunities.

Where do they go?

Young People were asked: When you are hanging out with your friends outside where do you go?

1. Parks were the most common cited place (185 mentions, 32.0% of respondents). Most commonly mentioned places included Spring bank Park, King George V (KGV), and Pittville Park.
2. Town/Town Centre was the next highest noted place (134 mentions, 23.2% of respondents), ranked in order of frequency:
 - The Brewery Quarter (including mentions of Hollywood Bowl within it)
 - High Street
 - Pittville
 - Montpellier
 - Coronation Square
 - St. Paul's
 - Hesters Way
 - Spring bank
 - Whaddon
 - Leckhampton Hill
 - Priors Park
 - Cheltenham Racecourse
 - Kings ditch
 - Fiddlers Green
 - Cleeve Hill (slightly outside Cheltenham proper)
 - The Honeybourne Line
 - Benhall
 - Arle Farm
 - St. Mark's

Additional observations:

- "Town" or "town centre" was frequently mentioned without further specification, being one of the most common responses overall.
 - Some respondents mentioned general types of places within the town, such as shops, fast food restaurants (particularly McDonald's), cafes, the cinema, and bus stops.
3. Friends' Houses was also quite common (44 mentions, 7.6% of respondents)
 - Includes references to visiting friends' homes or each other's houses
 4. Shops (37 mentions, 6.4% of respondents)
 - General references to shops or shopping areas

5. Fast Food Restaurants (25 mentions, 4.3% of respondents)
 - Predominantly mentions of McDonald's, with some other fast-food places
6. No Outdoor Hangouts (22 mentions, 3.8% of respondents)
 - Responses indicating, they don't go out or don't hang out with friends outside

Other notable locations mentioned include:

- Fields/Open Spaces (15 mentions, 2.6%)
- Walking Around (14 mentions, 2.4%)
- Specific Neighbourhoods (13 mentions, 2.2%)
- Cinema (5 mentions, 0.9%)
- Bowling (4 mentions, 0.7%)

Less frequently mentioned locations included the lido, restaurants, cafes, leisure centres, libraries, specific streets or roads, bus stops, and skate parks.

Taking it all into account, when it comes to physical spaces, parks stand out as the most popular hangout spots. Nearly half of the respondents mentioned parks, with Pittville Park, Spring bank Park, and King George V Playing Field receiving frequent mentions. The town centre also appeared to have a major appeal for respondents, attracting over 40% of young people surveyed. This preference for public spaces suggests that young people value areas where they can gather freely and without cost.

However, private spaces are also important, with a third of respondents mentioning friends' houses as preferred hangout spots. This could indicate a desire for more intimate, controlled environments, especially among those who might feel less comfortable or safe in public spaces.

Why Do They Go There?

Respondents provided various reasons for their choice of hangout spots. The most common reasons were:

1. Proximity and accessibility (mentioned by 37.2% of respondents)
 - "It's close to my home" or "It's easy to get to"
2. Fun and enjoyment (35.9%)
 - "Because it's fun" or "We enjoy spending time there"
3. Affordability (28.4%)
 - "It's free" or "We can afford to go there"
4. Social aspects (26.1%)
 - "It's where we can meet friends" or "Good place to socialize"
5. Lack of alternatives (18.7%)
 - "There's nowhere else to go" or "Not much choice in our area"
6. Safety and familiarity (15.3%)
 - "It feels safe" or "We know the area well"
7. Amenities and facilities available (13.8%)
 - "There are things to do there" or "Good facilities for our interests"

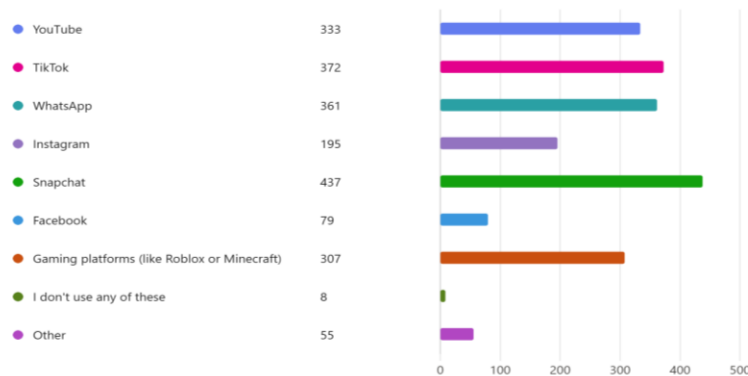
These responses support the view that many young people prefer locations close to home or easily reachable. This highlights the importance of having youth-friendly spaces distributed throughout Cheltenham, not just concentrated in the town centre. Fun and enjoyment are also key factors, reminding us that young people seek spaces that cater to their interests and allow for enjoyable experiences.

Affordability emerges as a significant consideration, with many respondents citing the free or low-cost nature of their chosen hangout spots. This suggests that financial constraints play a role in young people's choices and underscores the need for affordable or free recreational options in Cheltenham.

Interestingly, a notable portion of respondents mentioned a lack of alternatives as a reason for their choices, indicating that some young people feel limited in their options. This sentiment is echoed in the responses about desired improvements, where many expressed a wish for more youth-oriented spaces and improved recreational facilities.

Young People and Online Spaces

Young people were asked "Which of these do you use to talk to friends or watch videos?" the respondents indicated several platforms they commonly used for both purposes. From their responses it's evident that there is a strong usage of social media platforms and online services for communication and entertainment.



These include:

1. **YouTube** – This was frequently mentioned as a primary platform for watching videos, indicating its popularity among the respondents for consuming content.
2. **Instagram and Snapchat** – These platforms are primarily used for communication with friends, especially through messaging and video-sharing features.
3. **TikTok** – Many respondents mentioned TikTok as a go-to platform both for entertainment and, at times, to communicate with friends through shared content.
4. **WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger** – For more direct communication, some respondents mentioned using these messaging services.
5. **Gaming Platforms** – In addition to social media, some respondents mentioned using gaming platforms to talk to friends while playing games, suggesting that gaming is also a social activity for many respondents.

It is important to raise that these digital environments, whilst designed for benign social interaction, have each been implicated in various exploitative practices. Numerous reports such as the NCA report on county lines (2021)²⁴ and Children's Society²⁵ have identified several recurring issues across these platforms that contribute to their misuse:

1. **Anonymity:** The capacity for users to obscure their true identities on these platforms is frequently exploited by malevolent actors. This anonymity enables perpetrators to initiate unsolicited communications and entice vulnerable

²⁴ <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines>

²⁵ <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/child-criminal-exploitation-and-county-lines/what-is-county-lines>

youth into high-risk activities, particularly those related to County Lines operations.

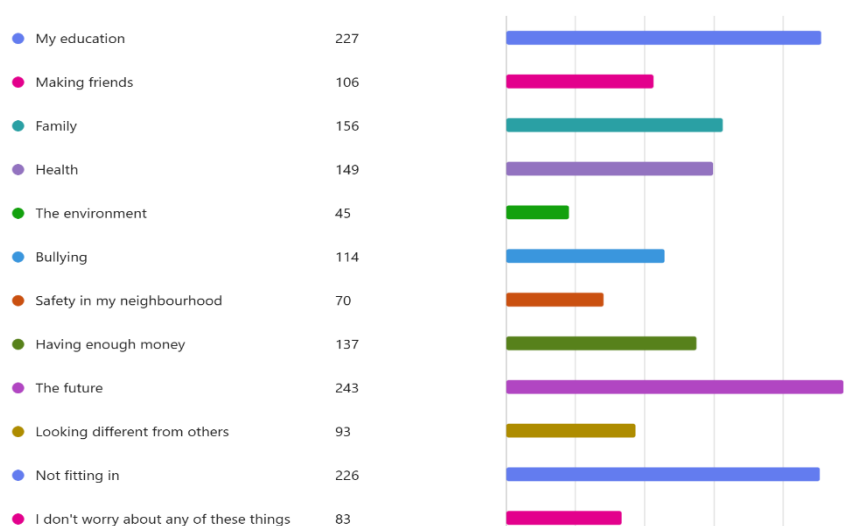
- 2. Susceptibility to Psychological Manipulation:** These platforms provide a medium through which perpetrators can establish false rapport and exploit the psychological vulnerabilities of users, particularly those experiencing social isolation or seeking validation. This manipulative process can culminate in the exploitation of young individuals for illicit activities, including drug trafficking within County Lines networks.
- 3. Inadequate Regulatory Measures:** Despite the implementation of certain safeguarding protocols, there remains a pervasive concern regarding the insufficiency of protective measures employed by these platforms to shield young users from potential harm.

These identified issues underscore the urgent necessity for enhanced regulatory frameworks and ultimately this is where arguably accountability has fallen short as it is a question whether the new **UK Online Safety Act 2023** is doing anything to mitigate the exploitation risks inherent within these platforms.

What Worries Young People

Young people were asked what things they worry about the most and were allowed to choose four categories from a broad selection of answers including 'other'

When asked what they worry about most, the respondents, primarily born between 2008 and 2012, painted a complex picture of their inner lives.



Education emerged as a dominant concern for many of these young people. The frequency with which "My education" was mentioned suggests a keen awareness of the importance of academic performance in shaping their future prospects.

This focus on education is closely tied to another prevalent worry: the future itself. Many respondents expressed anxiety about what lies ahead, indicating that even at their young age, they are acutely conscious of the challenges and uncertainties that await them in adulthood.

Family concerns also featured prominently in the responses. The specific nature of these family-related worries wasn't detailed, but their prevalence hints at the significant role that family dynamics play in the emotional lives of these young people. It's possible that these concerns range from worries about family relationships to concerns about family members' well-being or stability.

Health was another common worry, demonstrating that these young individuals are not only thinking about their current well-being but also potentially about long-term health issues. This health awareness might be influenced by broader societal discussions or personal experiences within their families and communities.

The social sphere is clearly a significant source of anxiety for many respondents. "Not fitting in" was a frequently mentioned concern, highlighting the importance of peer acceptance and social integration during these formative years. Related to this, many young people worried about making friends and bullying, further emphasizing the central role that social relationships play in their lives and well-being.

Financial concerns were also present, with some respondents worried about "having enough money." This suggests an awareness of economic pressures, possibly reflecting their families' financial situations or broader economic uncertainties.

Interestingly, while mentioned, environmental concerns were less prominent than other worries. This could indicate that while young people are aware of environmental issues, more immediate personal concerns take precedence in their daily thoughts.

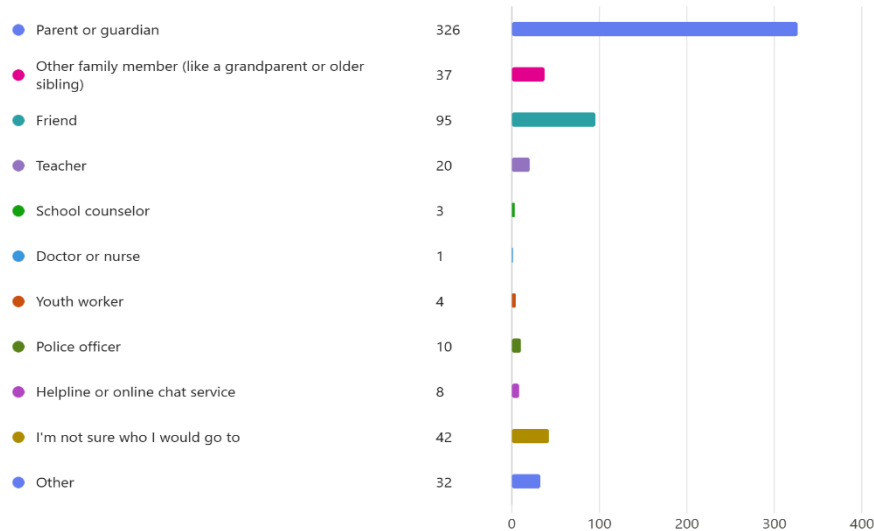
It's important to note that the responses weren't uniform. Many young people selected multiple worries, indicating the complex and interconnected nature of their concerns. Some respondents added personal worries not included in the predefined list, such as concerns about specific family members or teachers, showing the individual nature of their experiences.

Conversely, a minority of respondents indicated that they don't worry about any of the listed items. While this group was smaller, it's a reminder that not all young people experience the same levels of anxiety or concern.

Navigating Help: Where Today's Youth Turn for Support

Young people were asked in the survey "Where would you go for support/help if you needed it?"

The table below shows their responses



1. Family

The most frequently mentioned source of support was family members, with many young people expressing trust in their parents, siblings, or other close relatives when they needed help or advice.

- **Parents:** Parents were the first choice for a large number of respondents. Many felt they could confide in their parents about a range of issues, from personal problems to school-related stress.
- **Siblings:** Some young people mentioned turning to their siblings for support, especially for issues they felt more comfortable discussing with someone closer to their age.
- **Extended Family:** A smaller number of respondents mentioned other family members, such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles, as trusted sources of support.

Family remains a crucial pillar of support for most young people, reflecting the importance of strong family relationships in fostering emotional well-being.

2. Friends

Friends were another key source of support for many respondents, particularly for personal and emotional issues.

- **Peer Support:** Young people frequently mentioned that they would go to friends for advice or just to talk when they were feeling stressed or anxious. Friends were especially important for discussing topics they might not feel comfortable sharing with adults.
- **Social Circles:** For some, their social circle at school or in the community was a major source of comfort and security when dealing with problems.

Friends provide an important support system for young people, especially in areas like emotional well-being and social pressures. This reflects the significance of peer relationships during adolescence.

3. Teachers and School Staff

For certain issues, such as academic stress or bullying, many respondents indicated that they would turn to teachers, counsellors, or other school staff.

- **Trusted Teachers:** Some young people identified specific teachers they felt comfortable approaching for support, particularly in times of academic or social difficulties.
- **School Counsellors:** School counsellors were mentioned by some respondents as helpful sources for discussing both personal issues and school-related stress.

Schools are seen as a supportive environment by some young people, particularly when trusted teachers or counsellors are available. This underscores the importance of having approachable and empathetic staff within schools.

4. Community Resources/Authorities

Some respondents noted that they would turn to community resources or authorities for help.

- **Community Centres:** A small number of young people mentioned using local community centres or youth services when they needed assistance or guidance.
- **Police/Authorities:** For issues related to safety or legal concerns, a few respondents said they would turn to the police or local authorities.

Analysis: While fewer respondents mentioned these sources, community centres and authorities are still seen as vital resources for those who need them, particularly in cases of safety concerns.

5. Online Resources

A portion of respondents said they would seek help or information online. This reflects the growing reliance on digital resources, particularly among young people.

- **Trusted Websites:** Some mentioned turning to trusted websites or forums to seek advice, especially for issues related to mental health or well-being.
- **Social media:** A few respondents indicated that they would reach out to online communities or friends via social media for support or information.

The increasing use of online platforms for seeking support highlights the need to ensure that young people have access to safe, reliable, and accurate online resources.

6. Barriers to Seeking Support

While most respondents had clear sources of support, a small yet significant number (6.9%) expressed uncertainty, reluctance or discomfort about seeking help.

Here a reoccurring phrase was “**I'm not sure who I would go to**”

This indicates that whilst many young people have access to support networks, some young people still may **feel alone** in terms of **problems or issues** they may face and may benefit from **increased awareness of available resources** or **encouragement** to seek help when needed.

7. Healthcare Professionals

For physical or mental health concerns, some respondents said they would seek help from healthcare professionals such as doctors or therapists.

- **Doctors:** For physical health issues, many respondents indicated they would visit their general practitioner or another medical professional.
- **Mental Health Professionals:** A few respondents specifically mentioned seeking out therapists, counsellors, or other mental health specialists for emotional support or when feeling overwhelmed.

Healthcare professionals are viewed as critical sources of support, particularly for issues related to physical and mental well-being. This highlights the importance of ensuring that young people have access to healthcare services.

Conclusion

The responses to **Question 12** reveal that family and friends are the most trusted sources of support for young people in Cheltenham, followed by school staff, online resources, and healthcare professionals. However, a small number of respondents were unsure of where to go for help, suggesting the need for greater awareness and

accessibility of support services. Schools, community centres, and healthcare professionals can play a crucial role in ensuring that all young people know where to turn when they need assistance.

Assessing Youth Representation : Do Young People Feel Heard?

Question 17 of the survey asks, "Do you feel that your opinions/ideas have an impact in decisions that are made?" The table below shows the breakdown of responses:



- **No:** 266 respondents (indicating they feel their ideas do not have an impact).
- **Unsure:** 209 respondents (indicating uncertainty about whether their opinions have an impact).
- **Yes:** 103 respondents (indicating they feel their ideas do have an impact).

Though a minority (18%) feel their voices are heard, the overall sense of youth influence remains low. Young people may want to engage but feel the process is superficial or their impact is limited.

Implication: Engagement processes need to be more authentic and empowering, where young people see tangible results from their contributions.

Without addressing these concerns, young people may become disengaged from civic life, leading to future challenges in fostering active participation. This could result in long-term disconnection from decision-making processes.

It is a recommendation of the report that Cheltenham must create inclusive, transparent opportunities for youth participation to prevent alienation and ensure continued engagement.

Enhancing Youth Engagement: How Adults and Professionals Can Better Listen and Respond to Young Voices

Question 18 asks “What can adults and professionals do to listen to you more?” Whilst many respondents expressed uncertainty or a lack of concrete ideas, several proposed clear solutions for improving communication and ensuring their voices are heard and respected.

Key Themes

- 1. Active Listening:** A common suggestion was the need for adults to genuinely listen to young people, rather than dismissing or ignoring their opinions.
 - **Responses:**
 - “Actually, listen and not just say yeah for the sake of it.”
 - “Stop talking over me and listen to what I’m trying to say.”
 - “Listen to us when we are in need.”
- 2. Creating Direct Communication Platforms:** Respondents expressed a desire for more structured and direct ways to communicate with adults and professionals. Many suggested forums, surveys, and voting mechanisms that would allow them to express their views on important issues.
 - **Responses:**
 - “Have voting things at school so they can vote for things that they feel is necessary.”
 - “Visit schools and hold one-to-one meetings with students, with everything confidential.”
- 3. Taking Action on Feedback:** Several respondents emphasised the importance of not only listening but also taking concrete action based on their feedback. There is a desire for follow-through on the ideas and suggestions provided by young people.
 - **Responses:**
 - “Actually, do what I say instead of agreeing and then forgetting.”
 - “Enforce it to action.”
- 4. Respect and Trust:** Many respondents highlighted the need for adults to respect young people’s opinions and treat them with trust and maturity. They want their ideas to be taken seriously and not dismissed due to their age.
 - **Responses:**
 - “Take us seriously.”
 - “Treat us more like adults with respect.”

- “Trust us.”

Common Challenges

- **Uncertainty and Lack of Solutions:** A significant number of respondents (e.g., “idk,” “I don’t know”) expressed uncertainty about how adults and professionals could better listen to them. This may suggest a broader issue of disengagement or a lack of experience with effective communication channels.

Young People and Safety

Perceived Safe and Unsafe Areas

A notable pattern emerged in the respondents' perceptions of safe and unsafe areas in Cheltenham. While many young people reported feeling generally safe in their local areas, certain places were frequently cited as areas of concern, these were:

1. Town Centre/Town: This was the most frequently mentioned area, with many respondents specifically noting it feels unsafe at night.
2. Hesters Way: This area was mentioned often, coming in as the second most common response.
3. St. Pauls: Another frequently mentioned area where respondents reported feeling unsafe.
4. Whaddon: This area was also noted by several respondents as feeling unsafe.
5. Spring bank: Mentioned by some respondents, though less frequently than the above areas.
6. Parks (in general): Some respondents mentioned feeling unsafe in parks, especially at night. Specific parks mentioned included Pittville Park and Spring bank Park. The same park that many young people choose to spend their time.
7. Alleyways/Dark streets: Many respondents mentioned feeling unsafe in poorly lit areas or alleyways, regardless of the specific neighbourhood.
8. "Unfamiliar areas": A number of respondents noted feeling unsafe in areas they don't know well.

Other responses included:

- Feeling unsafe at school or near their school.
- A few respondents mentioned feeling unsafe "everywhere" or "anywhere at night".
- Some respondents mentioned feeling unsafe near pubs or areas where there are often intoxicated people.
- A significant number of respondents answered, "I don't know" or "Nowhere", indicating they either couldn't identify a specific unsafe area or generally felt safe in Cheltenham.

It's important to note that perceptions of safety varied among respondents. An area that one respondent found unsafe might be considered safe by another, often depending on their familiarity with the area or personal experiences. The safety both inside and outside of school warrants further attention as there is substantial evidence (see work by The Children's Society (2018), The Children's Commissioner for England (2019) and Firmin, (2020)) supporting the occurrence of grooming for Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) in and around schools. Research shows that perpetrators often target vulnerable children within educational settings, using tactics such as manipulation, coercion, and the exploitation of peer networks. County lines operations, in particular, have been identified as a key form of CCE that begins in schools and extends beyond them.

What Young People are Concerned About

Young people were asked what the three most important things were that other young people living in the area should be worried about. The survey allowed respondents to choose up to three options from a predefined list, The table shows a breakdown of the responses:

The most frequently stated issues include:

- Pressure to try drugs or alcohol (cited by 42.7% of respondents)
- Unsafe places in the neighbourhood (38.9%)
- Peer pressure to engage in risky behaviours (36.2%)
- Strangers online (33.6%)
- Getting into fights or physical confrontations (31.8%)

There were also several other highlighted options selected:

1. Unsafe places in the neighbourhood: Many respondents identified this as a concern, suggesting awareness of potential physical dangers in certain areas.
2. Strangers online: This option was frequently chosen, reflecting concerns about online safety and interactions with unknown individuals on the internet.

3. Not knowing who to trust: This option was chosen by many, suggesting issues around trust and relationships are important to young people.
4. Being bullied: While not as frequently selected as some other options, bullying was still identified as a concern by a notable number of respondents.
5. Unsafe roads or traffic: This was selected by some respondents, indicating awareness of road safety issues.
6. Feeling left out or lonely: While not among the top concerns, this was still chosen by a number of respondents, highlighting social and emotional challenges.
7. I don't think there's anything to be careful about: A small number of respondents chose this option, suggesting they generally feel safe and unconcerned.

Experiences of Safety of Young People in Cheltenham

Question 13 in the survey, attempted to solicit further information from the young people by asking them to respond to a set of statements related to personal safety and their experiences within the community. These statements explored the influence of peer pressure, perceptions of safety in certain areas, and the carrying of protective items.

1. "I have gotten in trouble because of something someone else got me to do?"

This statement explores the extent to which young people feel that their actions have been influenced by others, leading to trouble. The responses were quite evenly divided:

- **308 respondents (53%)** indicated that this statement was **untrue**, meaning they had not been in trouble due to someone else's influence.
- However, **270 respondents (47%)** said this was **true**, showing a significant portion of young people feel they have been led into trouble by others.

This near-even split highlights the importance of peer influence in the lives of young people. It suggests that nearly half of the respondents feel vulnerable to being pressured into negative situations. The data implies a need for programs that help young people build resilience against peer pressure and make independent, positive choices.

2. "There are places within Cheltenham that I wouldn't go, especially at night?"

This statement sheds light on young people's perceptions of safety in different areas of Cheltenham, particularly at night but was also to cross reference a similar question earlier on in the survey:

- **506 respondents (88%)** agreed that there are places in Cheltenham they avoid, especially after dark.
- Only **72 respondents (12%)** said this statement was untrue, indicating they felt comfortable going anywhere in the town.

The overwhelming majority of young people avoid certain areas at night, suggesting concerns about safety in specific parts of Cheltenham. This response indicates the need for improved lighting, policing, or community safety measures in the areas that are perceived as unsafe. Further community engagement could help identify the specific locations where young people feel most vulnerable.

3. "I know people that have carried something in order to protect themselves?"

This statement addresses whether young people are aware of peers carrying objects, such as weapons, for self-protection:

- **358 respondents (62%)** said this was **untrue**, meaning they do not know anyone who has carried something for protection.
- **220 respondents (38%)** agreed that they know someone who has carried a protective item.

Whilst the majority of respondents reported that do not know anyone who carries protective items, the fact that 38% do suggests that a significant portion of the youth community is aware of peers engaging in this behaviour. This is a concerning statistic, indicating that almost 2 in 5 young people (who took part in the survey) are aware of others resorting to protective measures, which could imply a perceived or real threat of violence or danger in their environments.

4. "I have carried something myself in order to protect myself?"

This statement explores whether young people have personally carried an object for protection:

- **475 respondents (82%)** indicated that this was **untrue**, meaning they have not carried anything for protection.

- **103 respondents (18%)** admitted that they had carried something for their own protection.

Whilst the majority of young people have not carried protective items, it is concerning that nearly 1 in 5 respondents feel the need to do so. This suggests that a notable minority of young people feel unsafe to the point where they resort to carrying objects for self-defence. This could reflect deeper issues within the community regarding safety and security.

Young People's Perceptions of Online Safety

Question 20 of the survey, attempted to solicit information from the young people in relation to online safety by asking them to respond to a set of statements related to what they might have seen online **and** whether they had reported these concerns to adults. They were invited to respond with either: 'Over the last few weeks', 'Over the last couple of months', 'Over the last year or more' or 'I have not seen anything.' These were the responses we received:

Social Media-Related Questions Analysis

1. "I have seen things online that have shocked, scared, or bothered me?"

- **Responses:**
 - **254** said, "I have not seen anything."
 - **111** indicated that they had seen such things **over the last year or more.**
 - **110** said they had experienced these things **over the last couple of months.**
 - **103** responded that they had seen concerning content **over the last few weeks.**

The data shows that nearly half of the respondents have encountered disturbing content online, with many experiencing this in recent months. The fact that so many young people report seeing shocking or scary content over time reflects the ongoing nature of online safety concerns among youth. While many have not encountered such content, a substantial proportion are vulnerable to potentially harmful experiences.

2. "I have seen things online involving people or places in Cheltenham that have shocked, scared, or bothered me?"

- **Responses:**
 - **304** said, "I have not seen anything."
 - **97** indicated that they had seen this content **over the last year or more.**
 - **94** said they had seen it **over the last couple of months.**
 - **83** said they had seen this kind of content **over the last few weeks.**

While more than half of respondents had not seen concerning content specifically related to Cheltenham, a significant number had experienced disturbing material involving local people or places. This suggests that some youth in Cheltenham are exposed to online content that directly impacts their sense of local safety and well-being, which can be particularly troubling for those involved in the community.

3. "I have told adults about things I have seen online that have scared or worried me?"

- **Responses:**
 - **360** said, "I have not seen anything."
 - **95** reported that they had shared their concerns with adults **over the last year or more.**
 - **65** had shared concerns **over the last couple of months.**
 - **58** had told adults about these issues **over the last few weeks.**

While the majority of respondents either had not seen anything alarming or had not spoken to adults about it, there are still a notable number who have reported concerning content to adults. This shows that although young people are encountering troubling material online, many are not raising these issues with trusted adults, potentially indicating a gap in communication or a reluctance to share concerns.

Enhancing Safety: Young People's Perspectives and Solutions

Youth-Led Strategies for Safer Spaces

When asked in the survey, "What would help you feel safer in your local area?" young people responded with numerous suggestions about what could be improved:

1. Increased Police Presence

Many respondents indicated that a greater police presence or more community support officers (PCSOs) in their local area would help them feel safer.

- **Specific Areas:** Locations like Hesters Way, St. Paul's, and Spring bank were frequently mentioned as areas where young people would feel safer with more police patrolling.

2. Improved Street Lighting and CCTV

Better infrastructure, particularly improved street lighting and more CCTV cameras, was a common request to enhance safety.

- **Street Lighting:** Many young people felt that certain public spaces, especially parks and alleyways, were unsafe due to inadequate lighting, particularly at night.

3. Reducing Anti-Social Behaviour

Respondents consistently mentioned that reducing anti-social behaviour would significantly improve their sense of safety.

- **Crime and Violence:** Many highlighted the need to address specific issues such as drug dealing, gang violence (there were references to 'road men'), and fights in their neighbourhoods. There was a call for interventions to remove dangerous individuals from these areas.
- **Weapons and Violence:** Some young people mentioned concerns about individuals carrying weapons, particularly knives. They suggested measures such as stop-and-search efforts to mitigate the threat of violence.

4. Safer Public Spaces

Public spaces such as parks, town centres, and alleyways were often identified as areas where safety improvements were needed.

- **Parks and Squares:** Several respondents expressed concerns about the safety of parks and squares, particularly during the evening or when there were fewer people around. They proposed creating safer environments by reducing anti-social activities in these areas.
- **Local Landmarks:** Specific places, such as Coronation Square, were frequently mentioned as areas where young people felt unsafe.

5. Support Networks and Trusted Adults

Some respondents emphasised the importance of knowing there are trusted adults or community support networks available in their area.

- **Trusted Adults:** Having access to adults they could trust or contact for help, such as teachers or family members, was noted as an important factor for feeling safe.
- **Community Support:** A few respondents mentioned the need for better community support, suggesting that having a visible network of people they could rely on in their area would contribute to their sense of safety. The sense of **belonging** and **support** from the **local community** was an important factor for some young people. A few respondents mentioned that knowing more people in their community and having friendly interactions with neighbours would help them feel safer

6. Concerns About Nighttime Safety

A common theme in the responses was the increased sense of vulnerability during the evening or at night.

- **Night-time Safety:** Many young people mentioned they felt unsafe walking alone or being in public spaces after dark. They expressed a need for better lighting, more patrols, and improved general safety measures to address this concern.

7. Other Suggestions

- **Personal Security Measures:** Some respondents mentioned carrying personal protection items, such as **self-defence keychains** or feeling safe by walking with **trusted friends or family members**.
- **Community Awareness:** A few suggested that having **more security or neighbourhood watch groups** would help monitor and prevent crime in their areas.

The feedback from young people in Cheltenham demonstrates that safety concerns are widespread, particularly in certain areas like Hesters Way and St. Paul's. Respondents frequently called for more police presence, better lighting, and CCTV, along with efforts to reduce anti-social behaviour and make public spaces safer. Addressing these issues through community engagement, policing, and infrastructure improvements could significantly enhance the safety and well-being of young people in Cheltenham.

Digital Guardians: Youth Solutions for Online Safety

The survey posed a crucial question to young respondents: **'What could adults do to keep you safer online?'** The responses yielded a rich tapestry of insights, illuminating the digital landscape's vulnerabilities as perceived by young people. These valuable suggestions, emanating directly from those most affected, cover a diverse range of online safety concerns. Put into themes, they offer a unique lens through which to view and address online safety:

1. Increased Education and Guidance

Several respondents emphasised the importance of adults providing more education and guidance regarding online safety. They expressed a desire to understand better how to avoid risky behaviours and situations online, particularly regarding interacting with strangers and avoiding scams or online threats.

- **Example Response:** "More education on security measures would help." This sentiment underscores the need for formal and informal educational interventions from adults to help children navigate the complexities of the online world.

2. Active Monitoring and Involvement

A recurring theme was the request for more active involvement from adults in children's online lives. Respondents mentioned that parents, guardians, or trusted adults should take a more hands-on approach in monitoring their online activities and being available to provide guidance when needed.

- **Example Responses included:** "Having adults around more and monitoring what we do online would make us feel safer." "Mum to check in on me more often"
This response suggests a preference for increased adult supervision as a way to ensure a safer environment.

3. Technological Solutions

Several young respondents mentioned that they believe technological tools and platforms could be improved to offer more protection. They highlighted the need for advanced security settings and tools that are more user-friendly and proactive in protecting them from harmful content or individuals.

- **Example Responses included:** "Better filters and software to stop people from contacting us or showing us things, we don't want to see." "Apps that block stuff"
This shows that respondents are aware of the need for improved digital infrastructure that could act as a protective barrier.

4. Creating Clear Boundaries

Respondents often stated that adults should help establish clear rules and boundaries for online use. This included educating children about what is appropriate and what is not, especially regarding interactions with strangers online.

- **Example Response:** "They should tell us not to talk to strangers and help us set boundaries about what to share online."
This response reflects a recognition of the importance of adult intervention in creating a safer online environment by teaching children how to set personal boundaries.

5. Collaborative Safety Efforts

Some respondents wanted more community-wide efforts where adults and children could work together to improve online safety. This could include group discussions, peer education, and workshops where both adults and children are involved in learning about the risks and how to protect themselves.

- **Example Response:** "We should work with adults to come up with solutions to keep us safe online."
This indicates that young people see value in being part of the conversation about their own safety.

In summary, respondents believe that adults can play a critical role in keeping them safe online by providing education, monitoring their online activities, implementing technological solutions, and setting clear boundaries. They also value collaboration between adults and children in efforts to create safer online spaces.

Cheltenham's Future: What Young People Want More Of

In our survey, we posed the question to young recipients: 'What do you wish there was more of for young people in Cheltenham?' Their responses have been analysed and grouped into key themes. These themes illuminate the shared desires and perceived gaps in resources and opportunities for Cheltenham's youth. By examining these categories, we gain valuable insights into what young people believe is missing or insufficient in their local environment, providing a roadmap for potential improvements and initiatives.

1. Safety and Protection

One of the most prominent themes in the responses was a need for safer spaces. Many young people expressed concerns about their safety when spending time in public places. The request for "**safe places**" and "**protection**" was repeated multiple times. This includes the desire for safe parks, spaces free from antisocial behaviour, and areas where they don't feel threatened by "**unsafe drivers**" or "**bullies**."

- **Example responses:**

- "Safe places to hang out."
- "Places to go where you won't get bullied by 7-year-olds."
- "More people able to protect and teach young people."
- "Safer areas and less to no knives."

2. Leisure Activities and Youth Clubs

Another strong theme was the need for more recreational activities and social spaces where young people can enjoy themselves and bond with others. They expressed a desire for a range of activities, including youth clubs, sporting facilities, and **"fun places"** such as **"gaming arcades"** and **"fun parks."** Youth clubs were particularly mentioned as important places where they can meet others in a safe environment.

- **Example responses:**

- "More leisure activities like ice skating, more youth clubs."
- "Fun parks, carnivals."
- "Places to go to hang out with friends in different areas."
- "More football pitches as they take down the goals sometimes."

3. Affordability and Accessibility

The affordability of activities was a significant concern. Many respondents voiced frustrations over the high cost of entertainment options in Cheltenham. There was a clear call for more **"cheap shops"** and **"cheaper activities"** that allow young people to participate without financial strain.

- **Example responses:**

- "Activities to do that aren't super expensive."
- "Cheap shops because I'm broke."
- "Cheaper places to go out with friends."

4. Support Systems and Emotional Well-being

Several responses highlighted the need for better emotional support systems. Young people mentioned a lack of access to **mental health resources** and **therapy**, and some suggested the need for places where they can receive help when they feel vulnerable or upset. The call for **"youth clubs and actual therapy"** indicates a gap in mental health support services that cater specifically to their needs.

- **Example responses:**

- "Youth clubs and actual therapy."
- "A place they could go for help."

- "More help if you are sad."

5. Socialisation and Friendship Opportunities

Social connection was another key theme. Young people wish for more spaces where they can meet others, build friendships, and socialize. Several expressed a longing for opportunities to meet "**friendly kids**" or participate in group activities that facilitate bonding.

- **Example responses:**

- "Opportunities to make friends."
- "Places to socialize and create new experiences."
- "More youth clubs to talk and chill with friends."

6. Better Public Spaces and Infrastructure

Many responses focused on improving the physical infrastructure of public spaces, particularly parks and sports facilities. Young people want **better-equipped parks**, with sports pitches that are consistently maintained. They also want more diverse offerings, from **bike parks** to **better football grounds**.

- **Example responses:**

- "Bike parks and places to hang out safely."
- "More football pitches in the parks."
- "Parks and fun activities."

7. Educational and Social Development Opportunities

Lastly, young people in Cheltenham expressed a desire for places that help them develop their skills and personal growth. Some wanted **learning centres** or clubs focused on improving their social skills and providing education in a non-traditional format. Others highlighted the need for "**good children**" and "**more mature behaviour**," pointing to a desire for environments that foster respect and personal development.

- **Example responses:**

- "Learning centre where you can learn about the world."
- "More mature behaviour in young adults."
- "Teachers that aren't power hungry."
- "More jobs to earn money."

The responses paint a vivid picture of young people's desires in Cheltenham. They are seeking **safer, more accessible, and affordable spaces** where they can feel secure, enjoy leisure activities, and form meaningful social connections. Additionally, the need for **emotional support** and better infrastructure, such as youth clubs and sports facilities, reflects their desire for a community that supports their overall well-

being. Providing young people with these amenities would not only enhance their quality of life but also empower them to grow and thrive in a supportive environment.

Imagining Youth Spaces: Designing the Ideal Hangout in Cheltenham

The survey asked young people to envision their perfect hangout spot with the question: 'If you could create a new place for kids to hang out in Cheltenham, what would it be like?' Their responses paint a vivid picture of what young residents desire in a social space. By analysing these ideas, we can better understand the features and atmospheres that appeal to Cheltenham's youth. These insights could prove invaluable for future community planning and development projects aimed at engaging young people.

Frequently Mentioned Responses:

- **"idk" / "Idk" / "I don't know"**: Like with the previous question, uncertainty was common among the responses, indicating that some young people were unsure of what an ideal space would look like.

Key Themes Were:

Safe, Inclusive, and Fun Spaces

A common desire among young people is for **safe and inclusive spaces** where they can hang out, play, and feel secure. Many emphasized the importance of safety, both in terms of physical security and creating environments free from bullying or other dangers.

- **"A park with lights, so you can see in the dark with equipment, so if they were ever being chased, they would have somewhere to hide."**
- **"A safe place with people looking after you."**
- **"A place where no bullies are allowed."**

In addition to safety, these spaces should foster inclusivity, where everyone feels welcome and comfortable participating in activities and socializing with others.

- **"A place filled with fun activities of all sorts where everyone is included."**
- **"Somewhere everyone feels welcome."**
- **"A space where people can talk and play with their friends."**

Recreational and Creative Activities

Young people clearly expressed a desire for **recreational spaces** filled with fun, creative, and engaging activities. They envision places that offer a wide variety of options, including sports, games, and creative outlets.

- "It would have fun things like a trampoline park and slides."
- "A place with sports, gaming, and chill areas."
- "A place where you can do crafts, play video games, and go on trampolines all in one building."

Creativity also played a key role, with some envisioning spaces where they could express themselves through **art, music, and learning**, alongside entertainment.

- "A learning centre where you can create art and learn about things."
- "A place with crafts, music, and space to be creative."

Outdoor and Nature-Oriented Spaces

The natural environment also came up as a key feature of young people's ideal hangout spots. Many envisioned **parks and outdoor areas** where they could engage with nature while still having space for recreational activities.

- "A big park with trees and space to play."
- "A park with different equipment and areas to relax."
- "A magical forest with treehouses, zip lines, and secret tunnels."

These responses reflect a desire for spaces that blend **nature and recreation**, providing relaxation as well as adventure.

Technology and Modern Features

Several young people incorporated technology into their vision of a hangout space, showing a clear interest in more modern **tech-oriented environments**.

- "A place with virtual reality games and places to chill after school."
- "Gaming arcades where you can compete with friends and have fun."

These responses indicate that while traditional outdoor activities are valued, there's also a strong interest in **tech-based entertainment**, which could make a space more attractive to today's youth.

Multipurpose Spaces for Socialising and Growth

Many responses highlighted the desire for **multipurpose spaces** that combine socializing, fun, and personal growth. They expressed a need for places where they can not only play but also develop friendships and new skills.

- "A place where people can socialize and create new experiences."

- **"A space where you meet others, feel safe, and have fun."**

Some even suggested spaces where they could grow emotionally or creatively, with environments designed to foster **learning, support, and personal development**.

- **"A place with crafts, music, and room to talk about your feelings."**
- **"A learning centre with areas to paint, make music, and learn new things while having fun."**

In consolidating the responses, it's clear that young people in Cheltenham are looking for **safe, fun, and creative environments** where they can hang out, explore, and grow. Whether it's through **recreational activities, modern tech features, or nature-oriented spaces**, these places should provide a **welcoming, inclusive atmosphere** that allows for both social interaction and personal development. The inclusion of quotes directly from the youth adds a layer of authenticity and insight into what matters most to them.

Research Limitations and Considerations

As with all forms of research, there are numerous factors to consider with interpreting the data.

Sample Size

The sample size of **578 responses** is strong for a local survey and allows for meaningful insights. However, when interpreting the results, it is important to consider how representative the sample is of Cheltenham's broader youth population. If certain groups (by age, gender, or geography) are underrepresented, this could limit the generalisability of the findings. The demographics of participants, such as **age, gender, and location**, can have a significant influence on the responses and overall results in various ways.

Age, gender and location

Younger participants (those born around 2010-2012) are more likely to use platforms that are popular among their peers, such as **TikTok, Snapchat, and gaming platforms** like **Roblox**. Older participants may lean more towards communication platforms like **WhatsApp** and **Instagram**, which cater to more mature interactions. They may also have different perceptions of safety compared to older participants.

Understanding of Issues: Younger participants may not fully grasp certain social or safety issues, leading to higher rates of "I don't know" or "unsure" responses, as seen in questions like "Do you feel like your opinions/ideas are heard in Cheltenham?"

Gender

Gender can influence how respondents experience social spaces, safety, and even social media platforms:

Safety Concerns: Females may report feeling less safe in public spaces or may be more likely to avoid certain areas at night. This was evident in the survey, where females had slightly higher rates of expressing safety concerns than males.

Social Media Preferences: Gender can also influence the choice of social media platforms. For example, females may be more inclined to use platforms like **Instagram** and **Snapchat**, which focus on visual content and social interaction, while males may be more drawn to **gaming platforms** like **Roblox** and **Minecraft**.

Perception of Issues: Gender may also affect how young people perceive community involvement, with one gender potentially feeling more or less heard in local decisions depending on social dynamics.

Location (Area)

Where a respondent lives can have a profound effect on their perceptions of safety, community engagement, and social behaviour:

Safety Perception: Participants from areas with higher crime rates or fewer recreational spaces, like **Hesters Way** or **Spring bank**, may report higher concerns about safety, especially at night. In contrast, those from more affluent or well-policed areas may feel safer.

Community Engagement: Participants from different areas may have varying levels of community engagement. For example, respondents from areas with active youth programs or community centres may feel more heard and involved, while those in underserved areas may feel neglected or ignored.

Access to Resources: Location can also determine access to social spaces, activities, and opportunities for young people, affecting how they respond to questions about what they wish there was more of in Cheltenham.

Socioeconomic Factors

Though not explicitly measured in the survey, socioeconomic status, often tied to location, can also shape responses:

Access to Technology: Participants from wealthier backgrounds may have greater access to a variety of social media platforms and devices, while those from lower-income areas may have more limited access, which could affect their responses about social media usage. This matter was raised within the research steering group as we wanted it to be as inclusive as possible for everyone.

Opportunities and Concerns: Socioeconomic status can affect how young people view their opportunities and concerns. Those from lower-income areas may be more

worried about safety, while those from more affluent areas may have fewer concerns but higher expectations for youth services.

Self-Selection Bias

It is well worth noting that participation in the survey was non-incentivised and there was no pressure to complete any or all of the survey. Therefore, respondents who chose to participate in the survey might differ from those who did not. More engaged or vocal individuals may be overrepresented, while those who feel less connected to community activities might not have participated.

Cultural Background

While ethnicity wasn't a major focus of the survey, it's worth considering how cultural differences might affect young people's perspectives:

Social Norms: Cultural background can influence how young people engage with social media, particularly in terms of the types of content they view or share. Some may be more reserved, while others might be more vocal and interactive online.

Sense of Safety: Different cultural groups may experience safety and inclusion differently in a community, impacting their responses about avoiding certain places or feeling heard in local decision-making and also where they go for help or to find solutions.

Understanding these demographic influences can help ensure that any actions or programs developed from the survey results are targeted appropriately to address the needs of various groups within Cheltenham's youth population.

Empowering Professionals: Turning this Evidence Base into Strategies for Youth Support

Taking this entire investigation into account, key recommendations for professionals emerge. These recommendations: drawn from young people's responses aim to help youth services, educators, community workers, and health professionals in Cheltenham better meet the needs of young people and create environments that support their well-being and development.

Addressing The Perceived Lack of Influence

Though a minority (18%) feel their voices are heard, the overall sense of youth influence remains low. Young people may want to engage but feel the process is superficial or their impact is limited.

This suggests a widespread perception among young people that their voices are not being heard or valued in decision-making processes. This could lead to feelings of disenfranchisement and apathy, where young people may be less likely to engage in future civic or community activities because they believe their input will not make a difference.

This underscores the need for local authorities, schools, and community leaders to reassess how they engage with young people. More meaningful, transparent, and impactful youth engagement strategies need to be developed to combat this sense of disempowerment.

Increasing transparency and providing feedback loops where young people can see how their input has influenced decisions could help address this uncertainty. Clear communication from decision-makers on how they use youth input could build trust and reduce the number of respondents who are unsure of their impact.

Policy and Program Development

These findings should inform the development of policies and programs aimed at youth engagement. There is a clear need to create more inclusive platforms where young people feel their opinions are valued and can lead to real change. Decision-makers could consider youth councils, participatory budgeting, or advisory roles for young people in local governance as ways to bridge this gap.

Effective youth engagement programs should not only gather input from young people but also show them how their input is used in decision-making. This will foster trust and a sense of ownership among the youth, making them more likely to engage in and support local initiatives.

Educational Opportunities

The findings present an opportunity for schools and educational institutions to play a key role in fostering engagement. Educators can introduce programs that teach young people about civic engagement, democracy, and decision-making processes, empowering them with the knowledge and skills to participate more effectively.

Expand Digital Engagement and Safety Education

The survey revealed that young people spend a significant portion of their free time engaging in online activities. However, they also express concerns about inappropriate content and the potential risks associated with digital platforms. Addressing both their digital engagement and online safety concerns is crucial.

Recommendations:

- **Create Online Safe Spaces:** Local services should develop or collaborate with existing digital platforms to offer moderated, youth-friendly online spaces where young people can engage in activities safely.
- **Deliver Digital Literacy Programs:** Providing workshops and resources that teach young people about responsible online behaviour, cybersecurity, and how to recognize and handle inappropriate content will help them navigate the digital world safely.
- **Engage Parents and Guardians:** Involving parents in these discussions through webinars or information sessions equips them to support their children's safe online behaviour at home.

Given the high level of digital engagement and the potential harm posed by inappropriate content, professionals must ensure young people are not only engaged online but also protected. This approach ensures both digital literacy and safety are prioritised.

Increase Access to Physical Activity Programs and Spaces

The survey showed a strong interest in sports and physical activities like football and gym sessions. Providing access to such opportunities will enhance physical health and contribute to overall well-being.

Recommendations:

- **Enhance Sports Infrastructure:** Investment in youth-specific sports facilities—such as more gyms, football pitches, and recreational areas—is essential to meet the demand.
- **Offer Affordable Physical Activity Programs:** Collaborating with local sports organisations to offer free or low-cost programs will help remove financial barriers and increase participation.
- **Promote Inclusive Sports Opportunities:** Developing programs that cater to a wide range of interests and abilities will ensure all young people, regardless of skill level, feel welcome to participate.

With high interest in physical activities, expanding affordable, accessible sports programs will not only address physical health but also provide structured, positive outlets for social interaction and well-being.

Develop Safe and Inclusive Social Spaces

The survey indicated that young people highly value socializing with friends, but there is a shortage of safe and accessible places for them to gather. This highlights a gap in youth services that must be addressed to encourage positive peer interactions.

Recommendations:

- **Create Youth-friendly Social Spaces:** Professionals should work with local authorities to develop or improve existing community centres and youth clubs where young people can meet safely and comfortably.
- **Supervised Drop-in Programs:** Offering supervised, flexible programs that allow young people to drop in without long-term commitments would encourage more participation and meet the need for safe socializing environments.
- **Partnerships with Schools and Libraries:** Collaborating with schools and public libraries to provide after-hours spaces where young people can study, socialize, or engage in creative activities can fill the gap in accessible social spaces.

By creating inclusive social spaces, professionals can provide safe and constructive environments for young people to engage with peers, thus reducing potential risks associated with unsupervised socializing.

Support Mental and Emotional Well-being

While mental health wasn't the survey's central focus, the concerns raised about online safety, peer pressure, and limited social spaces indirectly point to the importance of supporting young people's mental health.

Recommendations:

- **Provide Accessible Mental Health Resources:** Ensure young people have access to mental health services, including counselling and peer support programs, both online and in-person.
- **Promote Well-being Programs:** Offer resilience-building workshops, stress management sessions, and other programs that focus on emotional well-being. These can be incorporated into schools or community centres.
- **Foster Peer-led Initiatives:** Encouraging peer mentoring and leadership programs can help create networks of support that are more relatable to young people, fostering a culture of emotional support.

By integrating mental health support into the wider youth service offering, professionals can help young people cope with challenges, improve resilience, and build stronger emotional well-being.

Foster Creative and Intellectual Engagement

Many young people indicated an interest in creative activities such as music, reading, and art. These intellectual and creative outlets are essential for self-expression and personal growth, particularly for those not engaged in sports or physical activities.

Recommendations:

- **Develop Arts and Culture Programs:** Create or expand arts workshops, music lessons, and creative writing clubs that provide young people with outlets for creative expression.
- **Leverage Libraries and Cultural Institutions:** Public libraries and cultural organisations should partner with youth services to offer creative spaces and programs that encourage intellectual engagement, such as maker spaces, art studios, or book clubs.
- **Multi-use Community Spaces:** Design community centres with areas designated for creative activities, allowing young people to choose how they want to spend their time and explore diverse interests.

Engaging young people in creative and intellectual activities fosters personal development, critical thinking, and emotional expression. Providing these outlets ensures that young people with diverse interests have access to supportive services.

Involve Young People in Decision-making

Including young people in decision-making processes ensures that services remain relevant and effective. This approach empowers young people, makes them feel heard, and increases engagement with the services designed for them.

Recommendations:

- **Establish Youth Advisory Panels:** Create opportunities for young people to have direct input into the design and implementation of youth services through advisory boards or regular feedback sessions.
- **Conduct Regular Youth Consultations:** Continue engaging young people through surveys, focus groups, or open forums to ensure services adapt to their evolving needs.
- **Encourage Youth Leadership:** Provide training and opportunities for young people to take on leadership roles in youth programs and activities, helping them develop leadership skills and fostering a sense of ownership in their community.

Involving young people in decision-making not only makes services more relevant and responsive but also empowers them to take an active role in shaping their community, fostering leadership and a sense of agency.

Conclusion:

By implementing these recommendations, professionals can ensure their services are not only aligned with the needs of young people but are also adaptable and responsive to future changes. Offering diverse, accessible, and inclusive programs—while involving young people in decision-making—will help create a supportive environment that encourages well-being, creativity, physical activity, and emotional health.