



# YOUR SPACE YOUR SAY

**Youth views on Shepton Mallet LCN**

**A youth report produced by  
Make the Sunshine**

**Commissioned by Shepton Mallet Town Council  
and Somerset County Council**



**Somerset  
Council**



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# Your Space, Your Say

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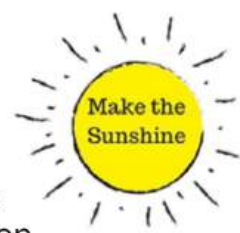
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# ABOUT MAKE THE SUNSHINE



Make the Sunshine was commissioned by Shepton Mallet Town Council to lead this research because of our long-standing experience of working creatively with children and young people across the Shepton Mallet LCN area.

For over eight years we have worked in partnership with local primary schools, community organisations and artists, delivering projects rooted in creativity, imagination and co-creation. Alongside our local work, Make the Sunshine has developed a strong regional and national reputation for high-calibre, co-created arts events and commissioning, creating work with young people rather than for them - from social action projects and creative interventions to large-scale productions and festivals.

Despite our small size we are nationally recognised for our work. MTS have been members of the prestigious Without Walls network and in 2025/6 we have been recipients of Hugo Burge's Creative Education funding in recognition of our work with Children and Young People (with just a 1% success rate nationally).

We are a small not-for-profit CIC (changing to CIO) with a wide network of organisations and freelance artists. Make the Sunshine are ambitious to grow our capacity and to build on our experiences and expand inclusive, youth-led creative opportunities across the LCN area. Our approach centres on young people's voices, using creative methods to build trust, encourage honest expression and support young people as active contributors. We are committed to working with every young person across Shepton Mallet and its surrounding villages.

“

“We are so lucky to have Make the Sunshine in our community. Your vision, talents and skills to bring schools together and provide incredible arts experiences and opportunities for our young people”, **Caroline Owen Headteacher, St Paul's Junior School**

## Our Key Areas of Expertise

- Eight years experience of co-creation and commissioning with communities running Youth Boards, programming panels and Young Leader programmes
- A network of hugely talented artists and practitioners
- Outstanding imagination-rich practice
- Youth-led social change
- Creative education programmes
- SEND and alternative provision
- Intergenerational and community experiences
- Events coordination



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**What do you want to do when you grow up?** It's a question we often ask young people.

Adolescence is that time for exploration, testing identities, skills and experiences - finding out what makes us tick, what gives us the confidence and self-belief to go further...

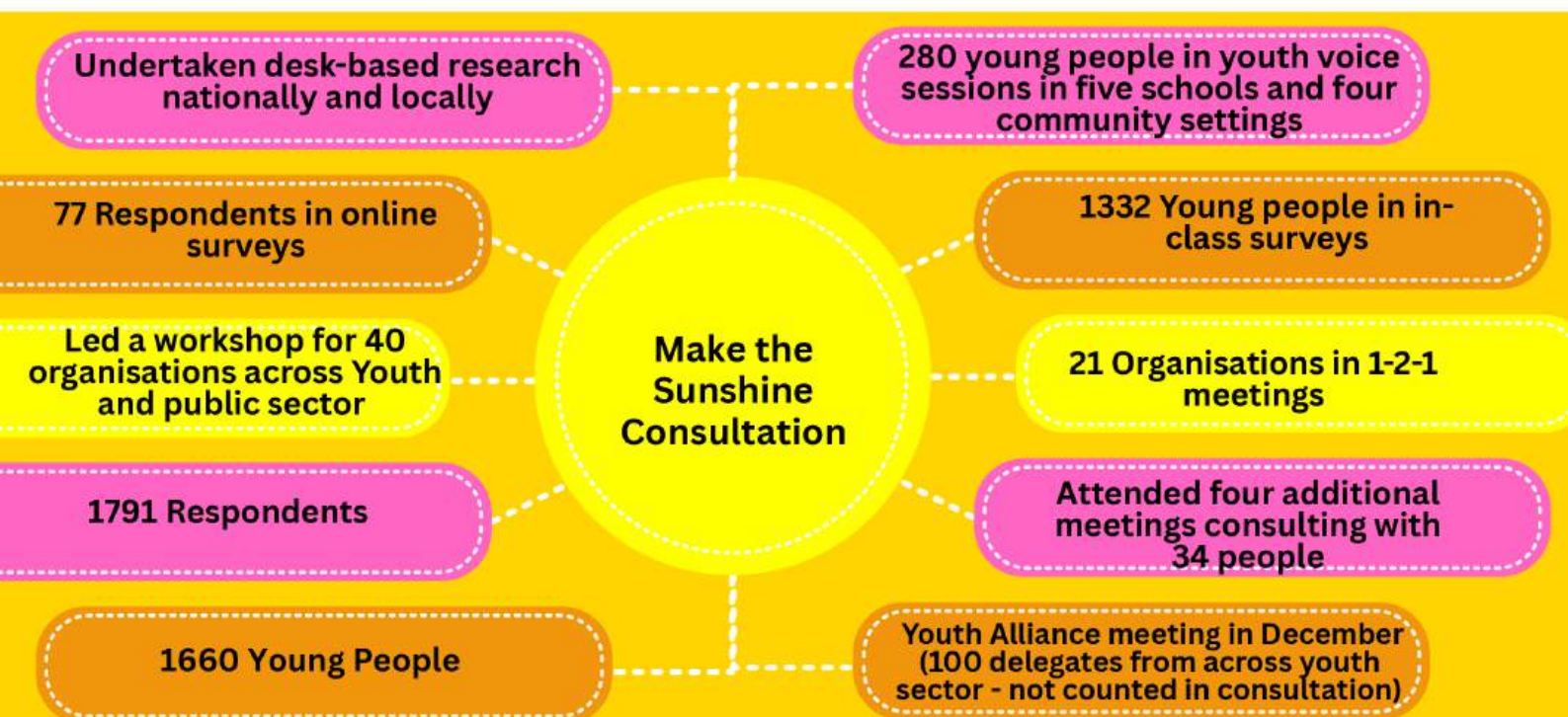
**And yet, in Shepton Mallet, just 3% of young people feel there is enough to do. And a staggering 97% feel a gaping absence of provision** - something that was echoed across the youth sector feedback, youth voice sessions and in youth and parental surveys.

This report brings together the voices of children, young people, families and professionals to understand what it is like to grow up in Shepton Mallet LCN today. What emerges is not a lack of interest or motivation, but a picture of young people who are keen to take part, want to be taken seriously, and are ready to engage and have a say. These young people are held back by a lack of accessible opportunities, poor transport, rising costs and spaces that no longer feel welcoming or safe.

Adventure, exploration and a sense of possibility should be part of every teenage life. In Shepton Mallet, too many young people describe their teenage years as shaped by boredom, limited choice and a growing sense that opportunities exist elsewhere, not here. Over time, the impact of this on mental health, connection and engagement is profound. Leading to a chronic lack of pride and a loss of belonging at exactly the point when young people most need connection and new opportunities.

With an entire online landscape at our fingertips it has arguably never been more important for investment in youth services and provision. We hope this report will be a call to action to prioritise the needs of young people in our town.

This is not about disengaged young people or a lack of interest. It is about barriers. **Cost, transport and safety consistently emerge as the strongest factors shaping whether young people can take part in community life at all.** For older teenagers and college-aged young people in the villages transport becomes the single biggest blocker, with high fares, cancellations and unreliable services making participation impossible regardless of motivation or interest. Cost further compounds this, with many young people priced out of activities that do exist.



**Young people are also clear that this is not simply about the number of activities on offer.** It is about the absence of accessible, affordable and welcoming spaces that are designed with teenagers in mind. **Across the evidence and conversations with young people we spoke to it is clear that happiness, safety and fun are all about relationships and trust - provision that works with young people.**

Having worked with many of these young people throughout primary school we were genuinely humbled by their experiences; and their sense of honesty and shock at being consulted. Young people are not making outrageous requests. They are simply asking for the ability to access opportunities and spaces that build connection.

**Concerns about safety, drugs, drink and public safety are widespread and contribute to young people avoiding public spaces, particularly in the evenings and at weekends.** These concerns increase with age and disproportionately affect young people in Shepton Mallet compared to peers in surrounding areas.

**Despite these challenges this report identifies strong foundations and real opportunity.** Young people express a clear desire for places that are fun, social and adventurous, as well as calm, safe and welcoming. They want opportunities to spend time with friends, make their own choices, try new things and feel trusted in public space. **They value play, creativity, nature and shared experiences - places they are part of - not just structured clubs or formal activities.**

Shepton Mallet has committed and experienced local organisations, schools, volunteers and a Town Council already investing in play, culture and youth engagement. These existing assets provide a strong base for growth – **but only if action is coordinated, barriers are addressed, and young people are meaningfully involved in shaping what comes next.**

The evidence in this report is consistent across young people, colleges, professionals and youth organisations. Improving outcomes for young people in Shepton Mallet requires a joined-up response that tackles transport, cost, safety and infrastructure alongside provision. Without fixing these foundations, new activities will continue to exclude the very young people they are intended to support.

This report aims to be a roadmap for how Shepton Mallet can become a place where young people belong, are visible, and are valued – not just as children, but as teenagers and young adults.

The real question, then, is: **what do we want Shepton Mallet to be like when today's young people grow up?**

A place that feels ambitious - where young people can test ideas, try new opportunities, take risks and build confidence. A place that offers them the fun, care and respect they deserve.



# SCHOOL 5QS - WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT

## Key Priorities

01

### HANG-OUT SPACES AND YOUTH SOCIAL AREAS WITH CO CREATION AT THEIR HEART

Teen hang-out spaces that are cheap or free, welcoming, and designed by and with teenagers. Places to belong and socialise.

02

### DYNAMIC AND EXCITING PROVISION

Many young people shared aspirational ideas for high-energy, destination-style provision. While some ideas are ambitious, they clearly demonstrate a lack of exciting leisure options. There was an emphasis on being able to try a range of opportunities.

03

### AMENITIES AND LOCAL FACILITIES

Respondents expressed a desire for a greater range of shops and services, food and social venues were frequently mentioned, with young people calling for more accessible and affordable places to eat and meet friends. Popular suggestions included well-known fast food outlets.

04

### SPORTS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROVISION

Young people also emphasised the importance of free or low-cost access, particularly to astroturf, football goals and sports equipment. Closed and inaccessible leisure facilities need addressing.

05

### PUBLIC REALM AND SAFETY

Concerns were raised about a lack of public toilets and insufficient pedestrian crossings, lack of lighting in some areas was identified and feeling unsafe in certain zones at night and walking home after school. Transport was a key issue with expense and lack of transport especially problematic for college aged students.

06

### OUTDOOR PROVISION AND GREEN SPACES

Young people demonstrated a strong appetite for high-quality outdoor spaces that are engaging, creative, and functional. Suggestions included adventure playgrounds, better-equipped parks, and free play opportunities such as rope swings and dens.



# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

## THE SCOPE OF DATA AT A GLANCE

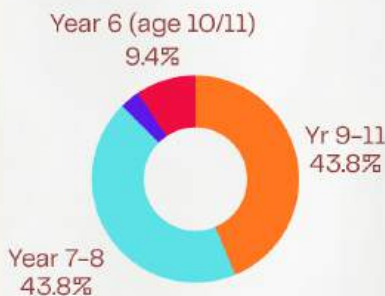
**1791**

1791 participants took part in the consultation process

93% (1660) were young people themselves



### PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES FROM YOUNG PEOPLE



### Age of Young People Participating in the process



### In-Depth Consultations

375 people were consulted through in-depth in-person discussion. 21 1-2-1 meetings, 280 via youth voice sessions and 74 via facilitated meetings

**104**  
Organisations Consulted

### Organisational

The types of organisations we consulted



Libraries



Police and PCSOs



Arts & Leisure Organisations



Health Connectors / GPs



Town and Parish Councils, Council intervention services



Head-teachers, SENCOs, PFSAs



Venues



Charities and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector orgs



Youth Organisations



## KEY ACTIONS AND PRIORITIES

### Priority 1: Fix the Barriers to Engagement

**These issues block progress across all other areas and must be addressed first**

#### Transport

- Address affordability of public transport
- Explore local, village-based, or mobile delivery where transport cannot be fixed quickly (e.g. models such as Youth Connect South West)
- Support the development of community transport approaches

#### Safety and Basic Infrastructure

- Improve lighting, toilets, cleanliness, and maintenance in parks, skate parks, and public spaces
- Ensure a visible, trusted adult presence and communicate this through school networks (clearly identified wardens, consistent staffing)
- Provide clear, coordinated responses to concerns about drugs and alcohol in youth spaces—build on the excellent relationship between PCSO and local communities

#### Cost

- Prioritise free or heavily subsidised provision

#### Awareness and Communication

- Improve awareness of local facilities, activities, and opportunities through clearer communication with schools and visible promotion in the town centre. Option to coordinate weekly highlights in assembly or via school communication systems about opportunities available. Or a monthly/weekly bulletin aimed at young people

#### Mental Health Access

Establishing an in-person counselling space in Shepton Mallet for young people would be a significant asset, particularly where travel to Cheddar, Wells, or Frome is a barrier

### Priority 2: Listen and Act Together on Key Issues

**Young people have been clear about what they need. The next stage is ensuring that design, planning, and delivery actively involve them throughout.**

Use existing youth boards, school councils, and local youth groups to shape and steer developments. Identify immediate decisions that can be made and ask groups to consult and provide feedback on these individually and help develop plans ongoing.

### **Priority 3: Support trusted organisations to go further. Shepton Mallet LCN already has a strong network of experienced and committed organisations with trusted relationships and a proven track record. Many are currently constrained by funding, capacity and access to suitable spaces.**

The fastest way to improve youth outcomes is to support trusted organisations to do more.

- Support for joint partnership bids and collaborative funding applications
- Targeted funding to increase capacity and extend services

#### **Key partnership opportunities include:**

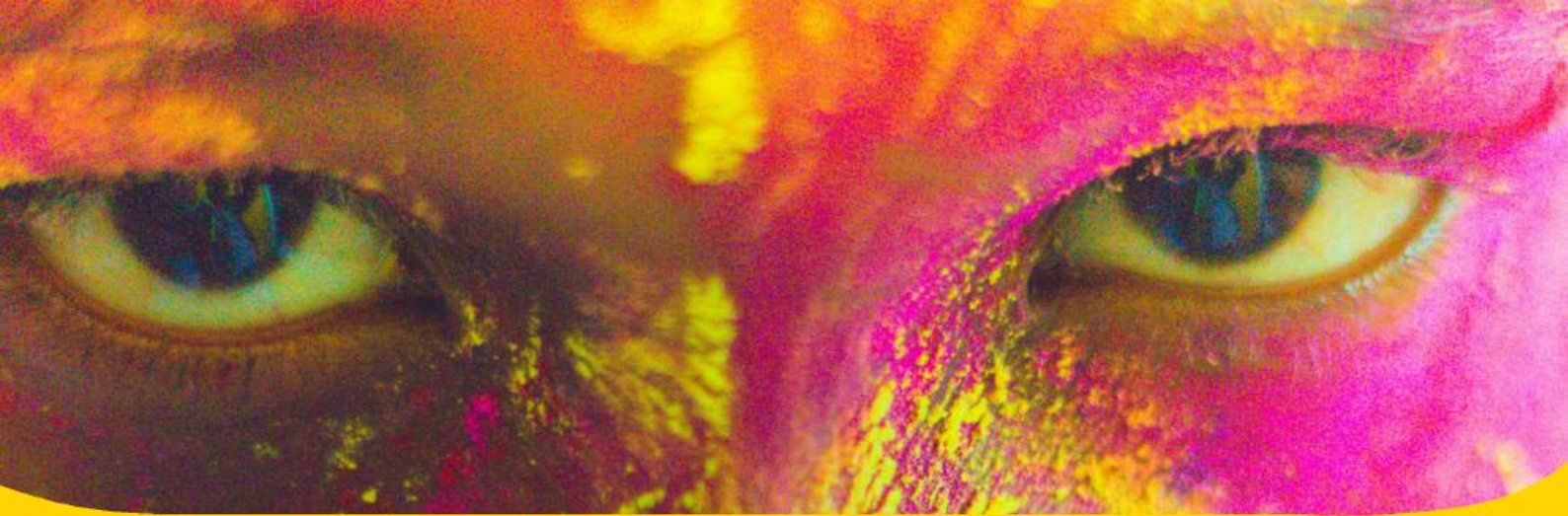
- **Interim Spaces** – national and local expertise in re-purposing buildings, with potential to link youth provision to skills, training and apprenticeships.
- **Make the Sunshine (MTS)** – 8 years' experience in co-creation. Keen to extend secondary-age and SEND provision developing new youth-led space.
- **Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership (SASP)** – strong partner for sport and leisure development
- **Schools, Parent Family Support Advisors (PFSAs), Somerset Parent Carer Forum and Health Connectors** – critical insight into social prescription, SEND and inclusion gaps.
- **Somerset Youth Alliance and SPARK Somerset** – training, guidance and infrastructure support.
- Community-led initiatives and organisations – including **The Art Bank** (keen to extend opportunities for young people and home education) and **The Amulet** (keen to grow youth music provision and develop community offer). **Park Run, Roller Disco, Strawberry Line**, offer strong community-led models.
- **Woodland Tribe** – nationally recognised expertise in risky play & co-design
- **YMCA Mendip & Youth Connect South West** – specialists in youth work locally
- **Young Somerset** – county-wide expertise in mental health and wellbeing

There is a strong base for collaboration and shared delivery across the Shepton Mallet LCN comprising partner networks, local practitioners and artists.



### **Priority 4: Make existing spaces work better**

- Stabilise venues so provision is regular, predictable and trusted
- Reduce hire costs and practical barriers for youth organisations
- Improve opening times (after school, evenings and weekends)
- Ensure spaces feel calm, youth-friendly and welcoming, not overly controlled
- Work strategically with other organisations to open the leisure centre in Shepton Mallet and allow young people free or low-cost access to leisure facilities
- Improve the public realm by re-purposing disused shops and empty buildings.



## **Priority 5: Expand provision**

### **Grow imaginative, youth-led informal social provision where young people can make their own choices**

- Develop regular, visible youth spaces across the town
- Ensure SEND inclusion is designed in from the outset, not added later
- Extend youth provision into surrounding villages
- Invest in different experiences for young people: imaginative and adventurous play for older children and teenagers as well as quieter offers. Simple changes could have big impact, especially in villages.
- Make direct efforts to attract recreational facilities to the area that will appeal to young people

**See Appendix 2 for breakdown of short / medium / long term aims and aspirations delivery in more detail**

**“Everything in Shepton is for kids” is a phrase we heard a lot**



**“The hardest things about growing up here is boredom. Less people will be vandalising things if they weren’t bored.”  
Whitstone Student**

# QUICK ACTIONS (NEXT 6–12 MONTHS)

## 1. Make existing spaces safer, usable and welcoming

Low-cost, high-impact changes that immediately improve how young people experience the town. Improve lighting, cleanliness and basic maintenance in key youth spaces, particularly parks, skate areas and town-centre routes.

Ensure toilets are unlocked, usable and well maintained at peak after-school, evening and weekend times.

Introduce a visible, trusted adult presence in key spaces (e.g. wardens, youth workers, caretakers) to increase safety without over-policing.

Trial simple shelter, seating and calm spaces in parks (as achieved in Collett Park) and public areas so young people can stay longer and feel welcome.

## 2. Remove cost as a barrier to participation

Cost is the single biggest reason young people are excluded – this must be addressed first.

Prioritise free or heavily subsidised youth provision, particularly for evenings, weekends and holidays.

Support organisations to offer free drop-in sessions rather than pay-per-session models.

Explore equipment libraries or loan schemes (sports, creative, games) to reduce individual costs.

Clearly communicate what is free, what is low-cost, and how to access support.

## 3. Improve transport access now

If young people can't get there, provision doesn't exist.

Pilot local, village-based or mobile provision where transport barriers are highest.

Work with partners to trial community transport solutions for evenings and weekends.

Advocate collectively for affordable youth travel, using clear evidence of £6/day and £30/week costs.

Coordinate activity times with transport availability to reduce stranded young people.

## 4. Strengthen and stabilise youth provision with a focus on SEND

Increase regularity and visibility of youth sessions so provision is predictable and trusted.

Reduce hire costs and access barriers for youth organisations using council-owned spaces.

Stabilise venues so youth provision doesn't move constantly or rely on short-term arrangements.

Ensure provision is available after school, in the evenings and at weekends, not just in school hours.

## 5. Work with and through schools to reach young people

Young people need to know what exists. Improve communication about local opportunities through assemblies, PSHE, newsletters and noticeboards.

Share consistent, simple messaging across schools, town spaces and online platforms.

## 6. Back what already works

Build capacity instead of starting from scratch.

Provide targeted funding and space access to trusted local organisations to expand delivery.

Support joint funding bids and partnership approaches rather than isolated projects.

Enable access to central, youth-friendly venues so provision is visible and accessible.

Invest in staff time, not just activities – relationships are what keep young people coming back.

## 7. Keep young people at the centre

Nothing about young people, without young people.

Establish regular youth voice mechanisms (youth boards, school councils, creative forums).

Involve young people in designing spaces, shaping programmes and testing ideas.

Set immediate areas of this report for young people to act on

Feedback clearly on what has changed because of what they said.



## WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

### In 1 year

- Young people know where they can go after school and in the evenings.
- Youth provision is more regular, visible and predictable, particularly in the town centre.
- Small but meaningful improvements are felt in public spaces – better lighting, cleaner facilities and communication about this is positive
- Young people are actively involved in shaping provision through youth boards & co-design sessions
- Attendance in youth settings increases
- Public perception that things are changing in regard to young people in the area

### In 3 years

- Older teenagers report feeling safer and more welcome in Shepton Mallet, particularly in parks and town-centre spaces.
- Pride in place increases, especially among older teenagers.
- There is a clear, diverse youth offer spanning social, creative, physical and calm activities.
- Youth provision extends beyond the town into surrounding villages through outreach, a detached youth worker running youth clubs and working across villages and pop-ups or shared transport solutions.
- Young people with SEND can access inclusive provision locally, without needing to travel out of area.
- Young people can access more options in terms of recreation and leisure and are well informed through clear communications in schools and locally.
- Local organisations are better resourced and working together with shared spaces and more stable funding.

### In 5 years

- Shepton Mallet is seen by young people as vibrant place with plenty of opportunities to socialise, have fun and hang out.
- Youth-designed spaces and programmes are ambitious and are embedded into town planning, and community life.
- Young people report stronger wellbeing, lower isolation and higher confidence.
- Youth provision is stable, well-used and sustainable
- The town is recognised as a place that takes young people seriously and invests in their future.



# BEING HEARD & CO-CREATION

One of the core themes from the research is young people feeling like their voices and opinions are not valued locally.

Co-Creation was a core theme in many workshops. Giving ownership gives far greater value, and involvement early on will ensure that young people are invested in new ideas. This was regularly cited by young people we spoke to who said that if they were involved in the development and ownership of plans vandalism is far less likely to occur.

We hope this report can be a catalyst for Shepton Mallet to take a lead in co-creation and local youth decision-making. This is a real opportunity to try something ambitious in scope like allowing young people to vote on core decisions that impact them, having a youth council or a youth rep on the council.

**65% of respondents in the Youth Voice surveys referenced wanting to have a say or be heard**

## Where consultations took place



# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT EXAMPLES BY COUNCILS ACROSS THE UK

**Councils nationally that have developed effective models that give young people genuine influence over local decision-making and service design.**

**Oldham Youth Council** is democratically elected and holds a formal agenda slot at Full Council meetings.

**Lewisham**, the long-running Young Mayor programme mirrors a real mayoral election, engaging thousands of young people through schools and building political literacy and participation.

**Westminster's** youth-led scrutiny panel feeds directly into adult policy committees, ensuring that young people's lived experience informs service delivery rather than sitting alongside it.

**Shropshire Council** used creative methods such as scrapbooks to engage young people with moderate to severe disabilities, leading directly to new, tailored respite services.

In **Wiltshire**, young people shaped transport priorities through a youth-led conference and participatory budgeting, influencing the allocation of £100,000 of local funding.

Several councils have linked youth voice to wider systems change. **Somerset's Rural Youth Project** engaged nearly 10,000 young people to inform policy and service design, particularly around rural isolation.



## Case Study: Blackbird Leys Youth Hub, Oxford

The Blackbird Leys Youth Hub shows what can be achieved when councils, community organisations and young people work together. Based in the Leys Pools & Leisure Centre, the hub offers free, welcoming sessions for young people aged 11 - 18 (and up to 25 for young people with disabilities), focused on wellbeing, confidence and connection.

The space was co-designed with young people, shaping everything from layout to furniture. It includes social and quiet spaces, a kitchen, music and digital rooms, and a climbing wall. Activities range from art and creative writing to cooking, games, film nights and physical challenges.

The hub is delivered through partnership. Alongside Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council, community organisations including Body Mind Soul, Wempower, Dancin' Oxford and Oxford Community Action co-deliver sessions, bringing specialist skills, trusted relationships and local knowledge into the programme. Funded through the Youth Investment Fund and National Lottery, the hub demonstrates how shared leadership, community delivery and youth co-creation can create a high-quality, sustainable youth space that feels safe, relevant and genuinely owned by young people.

# YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD BE ABLE TO...

During our meetings in schools and community settings with young people one of the key opening questions was 'Young People Should be Able to...'

Asking very open ended questions was a really important way of ensuring every young person had a voice, without judgment or influence. These questions could be answered individually and didn't need to be shared publicly.

When young people were given an open-ended prompt, their responses did not generally result in unrealistic demands. Instead, they consistently spoke about their rights as young people, rights to safety freedom and feeling a valued part of the community.

## I think young people should...**Be Heard**

When asked to complete this sentence repeated phrases across these sessions focussed on having more recognition, being heard being listened to.

Phrases like:

*Have a say*

*Be heard*

*Have a right to choose*

*Have a say in our town*

"I worry I might be kidnapped walking from Youth Club. There's no lights"

**Over 65% of respondents expressed a need to be heard. Clearly showing that young people want agency. They are asking to be treated as valued citizens in community life, making a clear call for youth voice in decision-making, not just youth provision.**

## **Be Safe**

Repeated ideas

***Go out without being scared***

***Better safer streets***

***Not be bullied***

Young people want to move about freely without fear, this was regularly cited as a barrier to engagement.

## I think young people should...**Be Safe**

60% of responses mentioned safety as an area of key importance. This was especially a concern for older teenagers and was particularly an issue for girls. Safety focused on walking home and concerns about drink/drugs in more urbanised areas. Hotspots were identified on a map indicating areas of concern at Collett Park (from 7pm); Cornwall Road area and in the town centre at night. In villages such as Coleford and Stoke st Michael young people raised concerns about local parks and vape use.

# FREEDOM & INDEPENDENCE

Lack of safety, or perceived lack of safety, is a real barrier for young people who are searching for opportunities to be independent and exercise their own choices and rights.



**58% of respondents referenced language around freedom and independence in their responses.** Young people want space to grow without constant restriction.

Repeated phrases like:

- *Young people should be able to go out without being scared*
- *Be free*
- *Be more independent*
- *Do what they want*
- *Be allowed out by parents*

## Other key trends in young people's answers:

**40% referenced infrastructure or transport** in some way asking for “better public transport” or “Safer streets” or community spaces.

**30% mentioned leisure time and wanting to experience a more adult and everyday engagement** in life “Go to McDonalds” “Hang Out”, “Do normal things” - especially important for older teens.

**28% Mentioned wanting to be actively involved in local communities:** “Help the environment”. “Volunteer”, “Work” wanting to be actively involved in their local communities.

**25% Focused on play, fun and wellbeing** “Have fun”, “Have free play”, “Be active”

What is really striking in these responses is that none of the young people mentioned status, personal success or wealth - their focus was on basic rights - freedom, safety, being heard and wanting to contribute.

There was genuine shock from many young people that their opinions were not only important but would be listened to as part of an on-going strategy. This desire from young people locally to be involved, combined with a council keen to listen and evolve, presents a really exciting opportunity for the local area and the future of youth provision.

When do young people feel happiest?

I feel happiest at home watching TV or just chilling

At the skate park

I'm at home

When I'm at home with my dog and boyfriend

When I have more play

When I'm with my mates

With my family

When I'm with my best friend

I feel happiest when I'm out with all my friends and don't feel left out

When I score a goal

With my sister and crafting

When i'm active

When I can walk outside and have a nice calm time

# WHEN DO YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL HAPPIEST?

Across both town-based and rural schools, the data is strikingly consistent. Happiness is not about money, facilities, or formal provision, but about relationships, safety, and freedom.

The the most consistent finding across all responses was:

- **Being with family**
- **Being with friends**
- **Being with siblings, pets, or trusted people**

Across these youth sessions what is clear is that happiness is to do with relationships rather than activity-led. Young people feel happiest when they are connected and in a trusted, familiar space.

Home is the primary place of safety and comfort. Across both contexts and ages, young people repeatedly reference:

- **Home**
- **Comfort**
- **Familiarity**
- **Safety**
- **Calm**

Home acts as the grounding point for wellbeing, especially when public spaces feels uncertain or inaccessible.

Informal play and socialising encourages happiness more than structured activity

Young people most often describe happiness when:

**Playing football**

**Being outside**

**Dancing, making, creating**

**Playing games (digital or physical) with others**

**Exploring, acting, building dens, fishing**

“  
**Being a young person in Croscombe is fun, beautiful and is full of community.**  
”



Young People value the freedom to choose how they play over adult-led or programmed activities.

### **Outdoors and in Nature**

**All groups mention:**

- Parks
- Outdoors
- Fresh air
- Animals
- Walking, biking, scootering

Access to safe, nearby outdoor space is a key wellbeing factor, especially when shared with others.

Outdoor, age-appropriate equipment and facilities was a key concern for young people. For older teens it was important to have a dedicated space for them in terms of play.

### **What Young People Do Not Reference in terms of Happiness**

It is really interesting to note that across all groups, young people rarely mention:

- Money
- Shopping
- Paid activities
- Formal clubs
- Screens used alone

**Teenagers are now the least well served age group for play and informal provision, despite clear evidence that adolescence is a high-risk period for loneliness, anxiety and disengagement.**

**“ Amongst young people in villages the importance of nature and its impact on wellbeing was especially prominent. ”**



### **Key findings when prioritising the happiness of young people locally**

- Connection is key - feeling known, valued, part of a community
- Safe spaces that feel home-like and are familiar to Young people
- Places that offer freedom to choose activities, co-created offers where young people have a say
- Outdoor space and provision is crucial for wellbeing

**“For me it's more of an age bracket issue. It feels like there's lots of provision in primary schools, but that it drops off a cliff edge for secondary school kids.” Parent Feedback**

## **YOUTH DESCRIPTIONS OF SHEPTON MALLET**

What do young people really think about Shepton Mallet and their local area? One of the questions we asked young people was what three words they would use to describe Shepton Mallet. This simple question offered really enlightening insights into how young people view their local area and how they see themselves in their local community. This question was asked with no preconceived notions or suggestions - the significant distinction between the responses between 10-12 year olds and 13-16 year olds is really telling in the shift in opportunities and provision in the town.

Young people aged 10-12 were much more likely to respond with positive, warm responses focused on nature, community, safety, and enjoyment. Commonly used words identify the Shepton Mallet area as safe, fun and friendly; demonstrating a strong place-based attachment.

In contrast Secondary students were more critical, expressing frustration, lack of opportunity, feeling overlooked, raising concerns about safety and relevance. Using words like boring, unsafe and neglected.

As one young person at the Skate Park said “Everything in Shepton Mallet is for kids” This isn't just teenage apathy. This feedback is very much echoed across all areas. Organisations and parents agree the Shepton area meets the needs of younger children far better than teenagers.

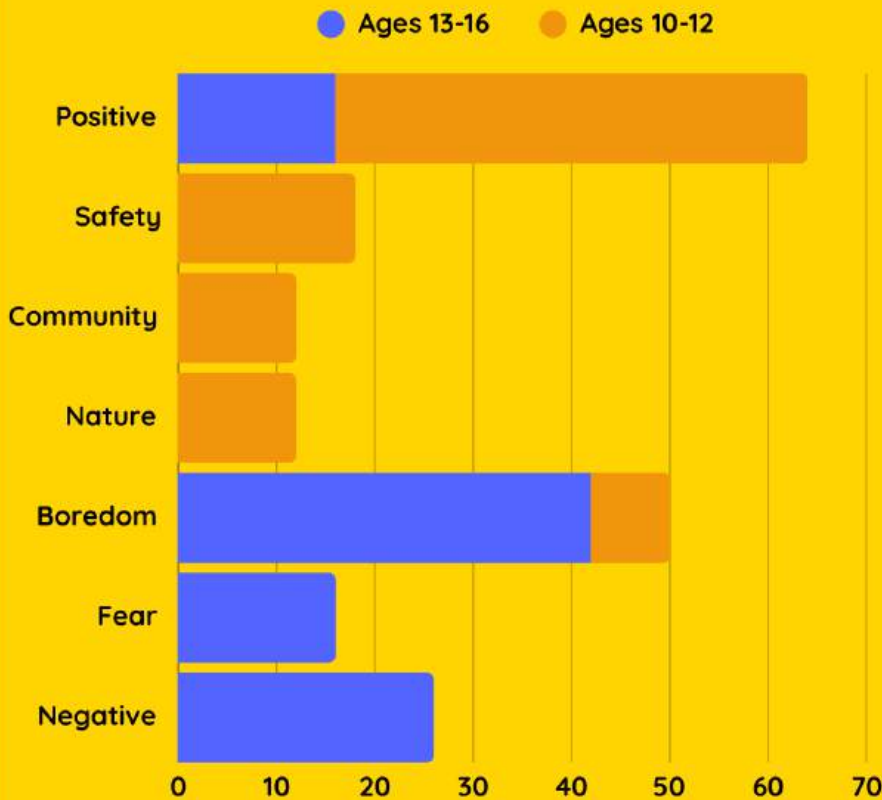
**“The centre of town would be better if there were more people around - it feels unsafe. There's lots of drunk people in town after 6pm.”**

**“Everything in Shepton Mallet is for kids”, Youth Club Feedback**



**#AMAZING#GOOD#CALM #RURAL#EXCITING#KIND  
#JOYFUL#COMMUNITY #HAPPY #FRIENDLY #SHEEP**

## Thematic Coding of Responses



**78% of responses from ages 10-12 were positive**

**For ages 13-16 just 16% were positive. 68% of responses showed a negative connection to their local area**

**#BORING#GREY#QUIET#DANGEROUS#GLOOMY  
#DIRTY#SHIT-HOLE#NOT THE BEST#LIFELESS#SCARY**

### **A Loss of Belonging**

As young people move into their later teens their sense of belonging in Shepton Mallet drops away sharply. Many begin to talk about the town from a distance using words like boring, lifeless or rubbish. They compare Shepton with nearby towns and are quick to point out what feels missing.

Adolescence is a time when identity and belonging matter deeply, yet it is also the stage at which many young people start to feel unwelcome in public spaces.

**One college age student we spoke to at The Sunday Market said “We used to go to the park when there was an area for older kids. Just to hang out. But since they re-did the park mums with toddlers give us a look if we go in as if we are up to no good. It’s the same in the town centre.”**



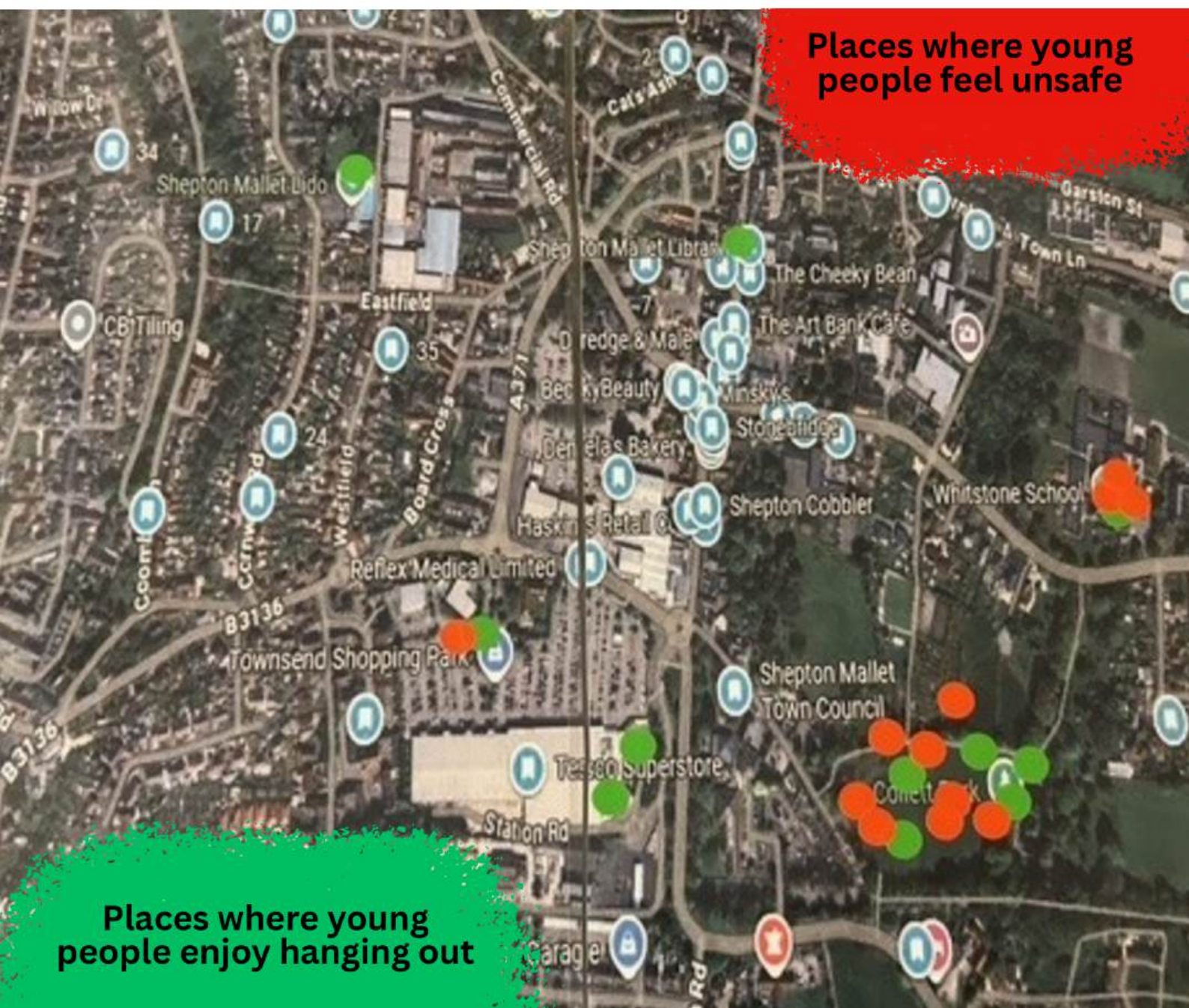
# LACK OF INSPIRATION

By the teenage years fun seems far less frequent in public spaces. When you look at where young people actually spend their time across all ages, the places they mention most are the park, Tesco and Greggs. These aren't places designed for young people – they're just warm, familiar and somewhere you're allowed to be. But if you don't have money to spend these spaces have limits.

This lack of offer for teenagers locally results in a lowering of ambition and connection. Young people aren't asking for huge changes. They are asking for simple things: better lighting, toilets in the Skate Park, somewhere free to sit, somewhere they can be with their friends without being moved on.

Contrary to the desired aims, upgrades to Collett park feel like they have alienated older teens who now feel unwelcome there and that it is purely a space for younger children.

Young people aren't disengaging from community life because they don't care. Quite the opposite. EVERY young person we spoke to throughout this process was keen to input ideas, be listened to and contribute. Young people are disengaging because they don't feel listened to or valued in the community - they need spaces that feel safe, welcoming and homely, places that are co-created with young people.



# KEY ACTIONS TO IMPROVE THE LOCAL AREA FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Co-design visible spaces for teenagers, particularly in parks and the town centre, to build belonging. This could be as simple as a swing on a rope or a more purpose built risky play area or a youth hub.

Create free places to hang out, with seating, shelter, warmth and toilets, so young people can spend time together without needing to spend money.

Safety improvements where young people already gather, including the skate park, Collett Park and the town centre, increasing community policing after school, making sure park rangers are known to young people and evaluating the option of lighting and CCTV at The Skate Park and Collett Park.

Provide warm, accessible indoor spaces during winter, reducing isolation and over-reliance on private homes.

Prioritise informal, youth-led use of spaces with co-created inspiring and engaging programming, allowing young people to choose how they spend time together.

Use creative empty shops and underused spaces for youth-led events.

Embed youth voice as an ongoing process, with clear feedback so young people can see how their ideas shape decisions.

Act quickly on small, practical improvements (lighting, seating, shelter) to rebuild trust and show young people they are being listened to.

Broaden outreach beyond existing youth provision, using schools and visible, in-person communication to reach all young people.



**I think young people should be able to go out without being in some sort of danger.**

## MENTAL HEALTH

### **National Picture - Wellbeing and Mental Health**

Across the UK, children and young people's wellbeing is under increasing pressure. While average happiness with school has remained broadly stable, a growing proportion of pupils report low happiness, and mental health difficulties remain higher than pre-pandemic levels.

National data shows that around 1 in 5 children and young people now have a probable mental health disorder, rising to around 1 in 4 among 17–19-year-olds (NHS England; DfE).

School is consistently one of the areas young people feel least positive about. More young people report being unhappy with school than with most other aspects of their lives, and dissatisfaction increases sharply during secondary school years.

**Overall, around 11% of 10–17-year-olds report low well-being, with UK teenagers ranking among the lowest in Europe for life satisfaction (The Children's Society, 2024).**

There are marked inequalities within this picture. Girls consistently report lower wellbeing than boys, particularly around self-image and confidence. National evidence shows that nearly 1 in 6 children (15.6%) are unhappy with their appearance, with girls disproportionately affected (The Children's Society, The Good Childhood Report).

The long-term cost of unmet mental health needs is substantial. It is estimated that childhood mental health difficulties will cost the UK economy around £1 trillion in lost lifetime earnings, driven by reduced educational attainment, lower employment outcomes and increased demand on public services (Centre for Mental Health; cited by The Guardian).



# MENTAL HEALTH NATIONAL PICTURE

Make the  
Sunshine

**1 in 5 Children and young people have a probable mental health disorder**



**1 in 4 for 17-19 year olds**



**11% OF 10-17-YEAR-OLDS REPORT LOW WELLBEING, WITH UK TEENAGERS RANKING AMONG THE LOWEST IN EUROPE FOR LIFE SATISFACTION**



**Nearly 1 in 6 (15.6%) are unhappy with their appearance**



**Estimated lifetime economic cost of untreated childhood mental health difficulties**

## IN SOMERSET



Around 3 in 10 pupils in Years 6, 8 and 10 reporting elevated scores for emotional difficulties.



By Year 10 (age 14/15), two-thirds of pupils said they worried about exams and tests, and nearly half (45.8%) said they worried about their mental health ([cypsomersethealth.org](http://cypsomersethealth.org)).



Youth Barriers to support: 80% of young people felt they needed emotional help in the last year, but 47% didn't seek it, and 11% were unaware of local services (Healthwatch Somerset).

## Somerset Data Mental Health and Wellbeing

The Somerset Health & Wellbeing Survey provides one of the most detailed local insights into the experiences of young people across the county. This biennial study involves over 5,000 pupils aged 6–18 across 87 schools. The survey shows as children get older, wellbeing declines. These results highlight the importance of early intervention and accessible support for teenagers as academic pressures and emotional challenges mount.

Local services in Shepton Mallet and the wider Mendip area are responding to these needs. The Somerset Eating Disorder Association (SWEDA), based in Shepton Mallet, provides counselling, self-help groups, training, and school outreach for young people and families affected by eating disorders ([somerset.gov.uk](http://somerset.gov.uk)). Mind in Somerset's Youth Matters Listening Service is praised by young users as "a fun inclusive experience... staff really care about young people and are easy to talk to" ([Mind Somerset](#)). In addition, Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs), delivered by Young Somerset and Child, Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), now work in schools to provide early intervention through low-intensity Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), resilience building, and whole-school mental health strategies. Young Somerset are emerging as the most accessed support provider ([Healthwatch Somerset](#)). Together, these services offer a strong local foundation of targeted, school-based, and youth-led support.

Wider strategic reports confirm the scale of the challenge and the need for joined-up responses. The Somerset Children & Young People's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Transformation Plan (2021–24) noted a "concerning rise in rates of mental illness and distress amongst late teenage girls" and increasing referrals for eating disorders and self-harm ([NHS Somerset ICB](#)).

## Local priorities in Shepton Mallet LCN

Young people experiencing mental health difficulties are more likely to face bullying, school exclusion and barriers to social participation compared with their peers (NHS England Children and Young People Surveys). Mental health challenges often have a significant impact on educational engagement, confidence, peer relationships and access to extracurricular activities, particularly where cost, transport and safe spaces are limited.

**Amongst youth professionals working across the Shepton Mallet LCN, mental health was consistently identified as one of the highest priority issues affecting children and young people. Professionals reported that young people often struggle to access appropriate support locally, particularly those who do not meet clinical thresholds but experience persistent low-level anxiety, isolation or emotional distress.**



**“Come to Shepton:  
Free depression”  
Whitstone, Youth  
Voice**

## College students Personal Challenges – 51% reported mental health, safety, confidence, or additional needs as barriers.

### Access to services and gaps in provision

While some counselling and mental health offers exist in neighbouring areas such as Wells, Frome and Cheddar, access remains difficult for many families in Shepton Mallet due to lack of local provision, timings of sessions, travel barriers, cost and limited capacity. National and online programmes, including phone-based or digital support, were noted as helpful for some young people in building connection, but insufficient for many in addressing the need for in-person, relational support. Conversations with PFSA's and local youth professionals in the Shepton LCN area evidenced a lack of accessible mental health services within Shepton Mallet itself, particularly for young people outside specialist CAMHS thresholds.

### Transitions, trust and early intervention

Professionals strongly emphasised the importance of trusted adults, particularly during key transition points such as the move from primary to secondary school. The cultural shift between primary and secondary was described as significant. Emotional Based School Avoidance and judgement towards families were identified as barriers, with a clear need to prioritise supportive, relational approaches that work with families.

### Young Somerset and systemic challenges

Young Somerset plays a vital role locally as an early intervention and prevention service, supporting children and young people aged 5 -18. Most referrals occur at ages 12-13, often around school transitions, with common presenting issues including anxiety, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, behavioural difficulties and neurodiversity-related challenges. Provision is currently focused on short-term intervention models, with limited local venues and staff based outside the region, delivery in Mendip is primarily online. Conversations with Young Somerset highlighted the challenges of cross-border referral patterns (where children are referred to B&NES and young people are diverted young to services outside Somerset and obscure the true scale of local need in the reporting statistics). Professionals also highlighted gaps in youth groups and informal provision in Mendip, reinforcing the need for integrated, place-based youth and mental health support within the Shepton Mallet LCN.



“Most young people are referred at ages 12 to 13, and we see a clear spike around transition points.” Charlotte Jobbing, Young Somerset

Over the past five years, the needs and challenges faced by young people have shifted significantly. Mental health concerns have become far more prevalent, with anxiety, depression, and stress linked to academic pressure and social media use. The influence of online platforms has also introduced new challenges around cyberbullying, self-image, and exposure to harmful content. Financial hardship and cost-of-living pressures have impacted families, leading to increased demand for free or low-cost activities and support services. Rural isolation and limited transport options remain persistent issues. Overall, young people now need more holistic support, covering mental health and opportunities for meaningful engagement than they did five years ago.



## Key Mental Health Suggestions for Shepton Mallet

### 1. Invest in safe, welcoming, non-clinical spaces

Mental health support should be embedded in warm, informal community spaces where young people already want to be. Youth cafés, creative hubs with a trusted adult can reduce anxiety, isolation and stigma far more effectively than clinical settings alone, particularly for young people who do not meet CAMHS thresholds.

### 2. Expand early intervention and prevention for ages 10–14

There is a clear spike in mental health need around transition from primary to secondary school. Targeted, structured interventions at this stage—delivered in schools and community settings—should be prioritised to prevent escalation.

### 3. Develop an all-age social prescribing model

Children and young people should be formally included within Somerset's social prescribing offer. Funding is a key issue but there could be possibilities to trial such a model using community partners, youth workers and volunteers - this is something locally that NHS England and Spark are looking to change with making commissioning opportunities for children and young people more accessible to smaller community based organisations.

### 4. Strengthen trusted adult relationships

Consistent, trained adults (youth workers, play workers, mentors and community connectors) are central to young people's mental health. Long-term funding is essential to allow relationships to develop over time, particularly for neurodivergent young people and those with anxiety or low confidence.

### 5. Address loneliness through connection

Loneliness and disconnection emerged as a major issue locally. Despite anticipated outcomes that young people have a preference for online activity and gaming, in contrast we found that the majority of young people are craving connection but need a safe known space and regular engaging opportunities to achieve this.

## 6. Shift culture from reactive to preventative

There is a strong need to move away from crisis-led, reactive responses towards preventative, relationship-based approaches. This includes reducing judgement towards families, supporting schools to notice early signs, and offering low-level support before problems escalate.

### Other priorities identified elsewhere in the report:

- Reduce isolation in villages & improve access by tackling transport barriers
- Increase SEND-appropriate mental health pathways
- Embed co-creation and youth voice throughout
- Improve co-ordination and shared infrastructure



# I LIKE TO HANG OUT IN PLACES THAT ARE...

## Key Priorities

### 39% SAFE AND CALM

The biggest focus from young people about the feel of the space referenced feeling calm and safe.

Words repeated:

- Safe, safe-place, family-friendly
- Calm, not busy, small
- Friendly, kind
- Not scary, not boring
- Places that are quiet sometimes

### 24% OUTDOORS & ACTIVE

Words repeated:

- Outdoor space, comfortable
- Green space and Trees
- The park
- calm, with wildlife
- Sporty

### 39% FUN, CREATIVE & SOCIAL

Words repeated

- Big hangout space
- Playful, fun
- Open and free
- Enjoyable
- Colourful
- Entertaining
- Cool
- Places that are mysterious

# SENSORY, CALM SPACES & SEND PROVISION

UK research on community spaces shows that well-designed community hubs and youth centres offer vital low-cost and depressurised spaces that can be vital in supporting children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing. These spaces act as neutral “third” spaces” - relaxed environments away from the pressures of school and home.

Youth work best practice guidance, published in the UK, emphasises the importance of creating safe, supportive environments where young people can engage without pressure – including provision of quieter spaces as part of blended youth work delivery. (Making Safe Spaces for Young People, UK Youth.)

## SEND provision

Almost 1.9 million children and young people (around 11% of all pupils in England) were identified as having special educational needs (SEN) in January 2024, including those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). (National Audit Office, Support for Children with Special Educational Needs)

**A UK government participation study found that young people with limiting disabilities or health conditions are less likely to participate in clubs, sports, arts and youth activities than those without disabilities, and that they are less likely to agree there are enough groups and clubs in their area.**

(Barriers and Enablers to Participation in Youth Activities Research)

Children with SEND are much more likely to require additional services outside mainstream education, including community and therapeutic provision, because schools and local services are often unable to meet complex needs through ordinary and SEN support alone.

**“I like to hang out in places that are safe and quiet”, Youth Voice Feedback**



### **Inclusive Provision for young people in Shepton Mallet LCN**

Community provision for young people with SEND is extremely limited in this area and parents and families continually cite the many challenges they face finding genuinely inclusive provision. This is a challenge that was echoed by professionals working across the youth sector, school leaders, as well as families.

### **Inclusive Provision for young people in the area**

Schools in the area run many events in partnership with local groups and organisations as well as running their own outreach provision.

**Somerset Parent Carer Forum (SPCF)** is a parent-led organisation that creates opportunities for families of children and young people with SEND to have their voices heard, be involved in consultations, share views with professionals and shape services. They organise events, workshops and “Chill and Chat” meet-ups that help parent carers connect, support each other, access information and resources. SPCF also runs SEND navigation and informal peer support sessions – no diagnosis is required to access this support.

- SPCF directly runs monthly youth club sessions for children and young people with additional needs (e.g., ages 8–12 and 13–18) which include games, craft activities and social opportunities, with parents/carers attending initial sessions as needed.
- Specialist and inclusive youth groups run across a range of wider locations; groups such as **The POD** youth club in Frome, **The Space** in Cheddar, but many of these involve considerable travel times for families.

### **Other inclusive community providers in Shepton Mallet include:**

- **Somerset Youth Theatre** in Shepton Mallet runs weekly neuro-affirming theatre sessions for young people
- **Make the Sunshine** works across 4 local SEND settings and schools, has established the ASCEND Inclusive dance group, an inclusive Youth Board.
- **Connect South West** runs inclusive youth programmes and alternative provision
- **The Art Bank** runs groups for young people who are home-educated
- A range of clubs and youth groups eg **YMCA youth clubs, Scouts and Girlguiding**

“A lot of recreational activities locally are all sport based due to availability of land, but for those who don’t participate in sport. I feel outdoor groups/ young walking groups would be beneficial.”



# PLAY, CULTURE AND CREATIVE PROVISION: WHY IT MATTERS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Play, culture and creative provision are essential to mental health, confidence and developing a sense of belonging.

Evidence consistently shows that young people who have safe, welcoming places to meet friends and take part in creative or physical activity are less likely to experience loneliness, anxiety and low wellbeing.

As a society we often focus on open-ended, creative play for young children, and yet adolescence is a critical period for social and emotional development and a period when opportunities for play become far more structured and regimented in school and community settings.

During this stage, when access to play and cultural provision drops away most sharply, (particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas) excitement, play and creativity is most needed.

Creative and cultural participation has been shown to reduce stress, build confidence and help young people feel connected to their community. Physical play and activity are linked to lower rates of anxiety and depression.



Older children and teenagers are least likely to have access to age-appropriate play and social spaces, particularly in deprived and rural areas (Playing Out, Play England).

## Youth Voice Data

82% Said they enjoy trying new things

74% Wanted hang out/play spaces

63% Wanted attractions

52% Wanted arts and sports provision

8% Wanted youth worker/mentor support



Nationally, there is growing concern that opportunities for play, culture and informal socialising have not kept pace with the needs of teenagers. Funding for youth services has reduced significantly over the past decade, and many local authorities report a sharp decline in open-access youth provision, adventurous play and creative spaces for older children.

Locally, these national trends are reflected in Shepton Mallet and the wider LCN area. Young people and professionals consistently report a lack of safe, affordable places to go after school, in the evenings and at weekends. Across all feedback groups the need for a safe space for young people to go, to play and socialise was the most regular feedback. Experimentation, creativity and play should be a fundamental cornerstone of all lives.

### **We asked young people why play is important for young people and teenagers in Shepton LCN**

- Reduces anxiety
- A sense of freedom
- Develops resilience
- Develops imagination and dreaming
- Helps to consider things outside of our comfort zone
- Relaxing and easy to do
- Develops creativity and drama skills
- Supports happiness and kindness
- Important for your well-being.

**Young people who engage in cultural activity are more likely to feel a sense of belonging in their community and to develop positive aspirations for the future (Let's Create, Arts Council England).**



**“I feel happiest when I have more space. A big space”**

**In-class and Youth Voice Survey: When do young people want activities?**

30% After School

38% Evening (6-10pm)

22% Saturday

10% Sunday

“

**“[There is a] Lack of cultural freedom; many students seem in their bubble, with a lack of ambition and aspiration. Many students say they will continue to live in Shepton and don't have a real idea of opportunities they could pursue, this is linked to a lack of things to do outside of school. There is a real lack of social connection and creative opportunities, and a real need for space for girls to feel safe and not judged. [...] The biggest impact for young people would be more evening and weekend extracurricular provision. Extracurricular provision at school has dipped significantly due to pressure on teachers' time and school budgets. The biggest changes would be providing a space for young people, raising ambition, having regular staffing to build trust, and offering intergenerational opportunities.” Senior Secondary School Leader at a Local School**

# OPPORTUNITIES YOUNG PEOPLE WANT

## Voice, Rights, Choice and Being Heard

- Being heard and have opinions
- Make their own decisions
- Speak for themselves, speak up for their rights
- A right to speak when someone did something without consent
- Go out and about without an adult
- Have more screen time
- Less technology, more options
- Helping young people have more confidence
- To be more bold to try and get involved in more and different things

## Gaming, Board Games

- Live gaming
- Gaming, football, graffiti, art
- Gaming in a public place
- Board game café / venue
- Board game venue
- Ping-pong club
- Table tennis clubs
- Pool table dartboard
- Game exchange
- IT/coding clubs
- Gaming clubs

## Arts, Culture and Creativity

- Theatre group
- Local Theatre
- Acting classes
- Making necklaces
- Art and making
- Artwork
- Pottery and arts activities
- Arts and crafts
- Graffiti art
- Photography
- Sculptures
- Music venues
- Cinema music
- Band
- More opportunities for music
- Folk group
- Youth led Folk group
- Contemporary dance
- Cooking and baking
- Cooking/ baking workshops
- Designing games
- Immersive and virtual elements

## Events, Trips and Experiences

- Live events
- Events
- More community social events
- A fun and different events program for young people
- Trips and camping
- Film Nights for teenagers
- Group volunteering days to meet new friends
- Activities during the holidays where local businesses work with the council and School to offer cut price opportunities e.g. horse riding art lessons

## Social Spaces, Youth Clubs and Hanging Out

- Youth club
- Open the youth club more often
- Fun and inclusive youth club facility
- Safe space with supportive adults to model play
- A Home feeling
- Somewhere to go
- Somewhere to meet Friends for food and drink
- Hangout spaces
- Indoor spaces
- Supervised hang out areas
- Quiet areas
- Home clubs

## Work, Volunteering and Education

- Jobs for kids 10 and up, able to help contribute and help buy food for their family
- Summer jobs
- Sixth-form college so that we don't have to travel to Bath and Strode
- After-school access to school facilities with light supervision (not formal clubs)
- I would like to help the school in the community, happiness with fun, leisure activities

# Case study: Frome Town Council – embedding youth voice into strategy, grants, parks and partnerships

Just 20 minutes up the road, Frome offers a progressive approach to youth strategy with a council receptive to sharing information, approaches and collaboration.

We spoke to Melody Hunter Evans, the Council's dedicated Children and Young People's Officer. Frome has built a model where the town council doesn't "tender out" youth provision. Instead, it invests in the Council's staffing capacity, coordination, evidence-gathering, and partnership-working, while using small grants to seed and grow provision. The approach is designed to avoid duplication.

## How it works

- Dedicated youth role linking young people/families with schools, health, statutory and voluntary services
- Networks to coordinate activity, share venues/resources, and support joint funding bids
- Open data-sharing so organisations can evidence need without duplicating research

## Youth voice and influence

- Structured school engagement across ages
- Developing youth-led participatory grant-giving: young people shape criteria and make funding decisions
- Strong themes include free/affordable activities and safe places to spend time

## Place and infrastructure

- Play strategy embedded in park improvements; engagement required for changes
- Natural/risky play builds co-designed and built with young people (e.g., Woodland Tribe model)
- Skate park renewal planned by funding a dedicated fundraiser to unlock larger grants rather than allocating funding directly to the programme

## How could this model inform Shepton?

- We have already initiated an open data sharing approach with this report
- Employ a youth engagement/partnership lead
- Set-up a quarterly network meetings around Youth Provision
- Youth-led micro-grants/participatory budgeting panel - Make the Sunshine already work with school and young people around programming and have a Youth Arts Board that could feed into this
- Shared evidence and "You said / We did" feedback with communities
- Prioritise free/affordable provision and hangout spaces as a core equity issue
- Allocate staff time or employ a fundraiser to directly respond on youth needs locally and to fundraise collaboratively to support plans
- Develop a play strategy for the town
- Co-design outdoor hangout/play spaces and infrastructure planning

# PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND CIVIC PRIDE

## Civic Pride

For many young people, Shepton Mallet feels like a place they grow out of rather than grow into. Pride and engagement declines sharply as they move through secondary school. Although some loss of connection is common during the teenage years, the scale of the drop - and the contrast with neighbouring towns and villages - is striking.

In the Shepton Mallet LCN area, 53% of Years 7–8 say they feel proud of where they live. By Years 9–11, this falls dramatically to just 23%, indicating a significant loss of connection during adolescence. A similar pattern is seen in perceptions of opportunity. Only 26% of younger students feel there is enough to do locally, dropping to just 8% among older teenagers. This suggests that local provision does not keep pace with young people as they grow older.

When compared with neighbouring villages and towns, the picture becomes even starker. Across villages and schools outside Shepton Mallet, 21% of students feel there is enough to do locally. At Whitstone School in Shepton Mallet, only 6% agree – a 71% decrease. For older teens in Years 9–11 at Whitstone, this figure drops further to just 3%, indicating extremely low confidence in local opportunities.

**Feelings of safety and welcome also decline sharply with age. Among Years 7–8, 41% say they feel safe and welcome in their local area, compared with 22% of Years 9–11. For older students attending the local secondary school in Shepton Mallet, this falls to just 7%, compared with 24% of young people attending neighbouring secondary schools. This suggests that older teenagers in Shepton Mallet feel significantly less safe and less welcome than their peers elsewhere.**

Cost is another major factor shaping young people's experience. 42% say they cannot afford local activities. This figure is likely to underrepresent the true scale of the issue, as it reflects only those willing to state this openly in a group setting.



“I think the new head teacher at the high school is great, but it's an awful lot of pressure to put on one person or one place to provide everything in the community. There is provision for sporting activities but not enough. I think a lot of the creative activities seem to stop for the secondary school kids. I think there's a lack of spaces for them to hang out in each other's company and I do think that we really miss a structured youth centre type environment to encourage kids to try new things and discover new skills”,  
Parent Survey Feedback

### **Safety, drugs and alcohol**

Concerns about drugs and alcohol are widespread and further undermine young people's sense of safety. In the Whitstone Youth Voice sessions, 100% of participants agreed that drugs are an issue locally. More specifically, 10 out of 12 identified drugs as a problem in Collett Park, 7 out of 12 at the skate park, 5 out of 12 outside of town, and 8 out of 12 identified alcohol as an issue. These concerns contribute to avoidance of public spaces, particularly in the evenings, but young people also raised safety concerns about daytime use at weekends and walking home from school.

### **Barriers to Participation: Financial and Transport**

High transport costs and the cost of paid activities prevent participation. Limited local jobs and opportunities reduces young people's ability to afford activities. As a result, online socialising is often used out of necessity rather than choice.

The strongest message from college-aged students is that the primary reason they are excluded from activities is the financial cost. An overwhelming 87% of respondents say money is a barrier, making this by far the most significant issue.

Transport is also a major barrier, with 58% of young people saying they struggle to get to activities. This is particularly acute for those living in villages and rural areas. Even where provision exists, many young people cannot access it independently, meaning opportunities are effectively out of reach unless they are local, brought into communities, or supported with transport. Rural students feel forgotten compared with peers in towns such as Glastonbury, Street or Wells.

Transport was consistently described as unreliable, frequently cancelled and expensive. Young people reported costs of £6 per day or £30 per week to travel. Young people with SEND are particularly affected, often requiring parents or carers to advocate on their behalf.

**100%**  
of students in  
Whitstone Youth  
Voice Sessions said  
they thought drugs  
were an issue locally

**I'd love to spend more time with my friends in person but because it's so expensive and there are no working opportunities in the area, I turn to digital means to hang out with them. It doesn't cost me, as a person still living with my family, any money is to run my devices and so it's an easier option for me. I would love for there to be cheaper alternatives for younger individuals to make us go out more.**



### **Lack of safe, affordable places to socialise**

Students expressed a strong desire for simple places to spend time together. Safety concerns, especially in the evenings, mean many young people go home early or avoid going out altogether.

“None of these suggestions mean anything if young people can't access them. The local transport system is DIRE. People in the village are at the mercy of Libra Transport no. 669, who regularly cancel buses with no notice, left Pilton with zero public transport for a month over the summer holidays, refuse to let young people on leaving them stranded in Street or Glastonbury and are ridiculously expensive. Return ticket is £6 a day!!!! That's £30 a week - what teenager or parent can afford this weekly?”, Parent Survey Feedback

### **Youth Organisations and Professionals**

At the Connect meeting, which brought together professionals from across the youth sector, transport emerged as the single highest priority concern affecting young people. Attendees consistently highlighted that unreliable, expensive and limited transport is a fundamental barrier preventing access to education, activities, support and social opportunities, particularly in rural areas.

This was closely followed by concern about the lack of safe, welcoming spaces for young people to spend time after school and in the evenings. Cost was also identified as a significant and interlinked issue, with many professionals noting that even where provision exists, young people are often priced out. Together, these priorities underline the need for locally accessible, affordable provision and joined-up solutions that address transport, space and cost simultaneously.

**“I think the invite, like the space or the environment, is quite important. And having a big enough space or differentiated stuff that can handle quite a large group of kids. Mixing is really important as well, that you're getting all different kids, you know, some who are the quieter end, some who are into everything, and some who perhaps need more support.”**

**CRIME RATE STATS:** Shepton Mallet is listed among the top 10 most dangerous small towns in Somerset, and is the 50th most dangerous overall out of Somerset's 414 towns, villages, and cities. The overall crime rate in Shepton Mallet in 2025 was 69 crimes per 1,000 people. This compares poorly to Somerset's overall crime rate, coming in 2.7% higher than the Somerset rate of 67 per 1,000 daytime population. The most common crimes in Shepton Mallet are violence and sexual offences, with 455 offences during 2025, giving a crime rate of 40. This is 16% higher than 2024's figure of 392 offences (crimerate.co.uk)

### **Limited Facilities and Infrastructure**

Young people repeatedly highlighted practical gaps, including a lack of accessible toilets, poor lighting, limited indoor spaces and a town centre that feels unwelcoming. These gaps shape how young people use the town day to day, with many avoiding certain spaces altogether in the evenings or relying on places like supermarkets simply because there are no alternatives.

Professionals working directly with young people echoed these concerns. YMCA staff reported that even where suitable buildings or spaces exist, high hire costs, storage fees and ongoing maintenance issues make them difficult to use consistently. This results in unstable provision, frequent venue changes and reduced session frequency, all of which undermine attendance, trust and continuity.

Across the youth sector there is a real civic challenge around sustained investment in shared, youth-friendly infrastructure. Without reliable, affordable and well-maintained spaces, with staff and youth services forced into fragile or short-term arrangements, and young people left without places that feel safe, welcoming and designed with them in mind.

Addressing infrastructure is therefore not simply a facilities issue, but a basic requirement for improving youth safety.



**“CCTV is not a good idea in the skate park. It will get smashed and we wouldn't go there if there was CCTV.”** Year 10 skater

# CIVIC CHANGES

## YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO SEE

### Town Centre, Shops and Environment

- More shops
- Sweet shops
- Bookshops
- Magic shop
- More gaming shops
- Kids barbershops
- More food restaurants
- Milkshake stand
- Fast food such as KFC/McDonalds
- Nandos
- Primark
- B&M
- Lidl
- Arcade
- Shopping centre
- Less vape shops and takeaways
- Less barbers
- More charity shops
- Buildings are old need to be brightened
- The town doesn't look pleasant it could look more beautiful
- It's dirty everywhere and needs more flowers
- Vacant shops and damaged buildings negatively affect how safe and welcoming the town feels
- The centre of town it would be better if there were more people around
- More community fridges
- Tuck shops
- Cafes and meeting places for young people
- Just eat

### Transport, Roads and Access

- Transport
- Better bus shelters
- More road safety - zebra crossings
- Quieter traffic
- Fix the roads, I ride on my bike lots and the potholes are really annoying
- More convenience shops in more places - too many new houses being built with no facilities

### Deal with the drugs issue

- Help for the homelessness
- Concerns were raised about shops selling energy drinks and vape-related items to very young children

### Facilities: Toilets, Lighting and Infrastructure

- Collett Park toilets often locked or often rank
- If we use the skate park we have to go to the toilets at Tesco
- Lights in Collett Park
- Better lighting
- Decorative lights
- Maintenance of communal areas, keeping them useable and clean
- More equipment available, maybe stuff we could borrow or loan so that it doesn't get vandalised or taken

### Safety, Fear and Antisocial Behaviour

- In the night-time too many people drink, feel scary, especially late at night
- Less bars, smelly and drunk and feel less safe
- Lots of smoking
- More things to prevent teens buying Vapes  
We feel unsafe after school in the evening even midday on the weekend
- Never go to Collett Park Friday after 7pm. Scary people, people vaping and taking drugs, people from our year and college
- The threat comes from people our age and older
- More police in the town centre
- More security cameras to make us feel safe, and more street lighting
- CCTV is not a good idea in the skate park. It will get smashed and we wouldn't go there if there was CCTV. (Year 10 boys)
- Deal with the drugs issue
- Help for the homelessness
- Concerns were raised about shops selling energy drinks and vape-related items to very young children



## Recommendations

### Quick wins

- Improve lighting in key youth spaces, particularly Collett Park, the skate park, to improve safety and evening use
- Explore community transport options / remote youth services to reach the villages
- Unlock, clean and maintain public toilets in parks and town-centre locations. Explore the option of toilet facilities at the Skate Park
- Increase visible maintenance of communal areas (cleaning, repairs, litter, planting flowers) to improve how safe and welcoming the town feels
- Introduce low-cost, youth-friendly town-centre spaces, such as pop-up cafés, book clubs, board-game sessions or youth meet-ups in existing buildings
- Improve bus shelters and road crossings, especially near schools, parks and youth spaces, to make independent travel safer
- Strengthen communication about safety measures, including clearer information about wardens, lighting plans and where young people can go safely
- Work with retailers and enforcement partners to address underage sales of vapes and energy drinks

### Longer-term aims

- Prioritise exploring town planning and strategy from a youth perspective
- Invest in youth-focused spaces and detached youth worker running youth clubs in surrounding parishes
- Negotiation with bus companies, MPS and relevant partners regarding travel costs for young people.

“I think young people should have more rights and be free to play on more equipment” Year 6 student, Doultong



## SPORT, RECREATION AND PARKS

### National recreation trends - young people

Recreation plays a vital role in children and young people’s wellbeing, yet the national evidence shows a mixed picture in terms of participation and access. According to Sport England’s Active Lives Children and Young People Survey 2023–24, 47.8% of children are achieving the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity, while nearly 30% remain classed as less active. Activity levels are closely linked to wellbeing: children who are active every day report higher resilience, life satisfaction and social trust.

Sport England’s survey also shows that girls are less likely to be active than boys (45% compared with 51%), and activity levels are also lower among children from Black and Asian backgrounds and those from less affluent families.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s Youth Participation Pilot Survey (2024) found that while two-thirds (66%) of young people took part in at least one organised activity over the past year, participation rates fell significantly for older teenagers (44%), for young people with disabilities (56%), and for those in deprived areas (56%).

The types of recreation engaged with also varied: 52% took part in sport or fitness, 19% in arts or music, 11% in uniformed groups, and only 8% in youth clubs ([DCMS, 2024](#)).

Outdoor recreation remains a key part of young people’s lives. Natural England’s Children’s People and Nature Survey 2024 reported that 66% of children visited a garden and 62% visited a park or playground in the past week, with over half spending time outdoors every day during school holidays. However, access is uneven, with rural isolation, transport challenges, and affordability creating barriers for many young people ([Natural England, 2024](#)).

## Recreation in Somerset

In Somerset, there are clear disparities in access to recreation and opportunities to be active. The Somerset Active Lives Report (2025) highlights that just 43% of disabled residents feel they have the same opportunity to be active, compared to 69% of non-disabled people. This gap reveals serious barriers to equitable access, particularly around issues of accessibility, inclusion, and tailored provision for disabled young people and their families. Without addressing these challenges, the risk is that existing inequalities in health and wellbeing outcomes are further entrenched.

## What young people want from recreation and leisure

Conversations with young people show a strong and consistent desire for more varied, age-appropriate and accessible recreation across Shepton Mallet and the wider LCN area.

While parks and play spaces are valued, many young people feel that current provision is largely aimed at younger children and does not grow with them into their early teens and beyond. There is a clear appetite for adventurous outdoor play, spaces that allow challenge and independence, and a broader range of sport and leisure options that are safe, welcoming and affordable.

**Requests range from simple additions such as swings, shelters and equipment in parks and play spaces, through to skate park improvements, bike tracks and nature-based play, alongside access to indoor facilities such as swimming, climbing, bowling and trampoline spaces. The closure of the leisure centre is a key concern locally. And requests for football goals and access to astroturf were considerable.**

Many conversations regarding leisure opportunities highlighted that there needs to be better communication about local leisure and recreation opportunities so young people are aware of how to access provision.

**“Our top priority would be free 4G Astroturf”, Feedback at YMCA youth club**



# SPORT AND LEISURE CHANGES YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO SEE

## Parks, Playgrounds and Outdoor Play

- Climb trees
- Treehouses at Colett Park
- Opportunity for a swing on the tree near the river in Stoke St Michael
- More equipment in the park
- More toys for the park
- Older playground area
- Adventure playground
- Pump track at the park in Stoke St Michael
- Dirt track for bikes
- Bike jumps
- Swing board like Collett Park
- More shelters in parks from sun / rain
- Better playgrounds
- More Nature reserves
- Areas for dog walkers
- More areas like Millennium woods
- We need more things to do in the park
- Most the equipment seems aimed at 5 to 10 year olds
- There's not much for 11-year-olds to do

## Sport and Physical Activity (General)

- More dodgeball classes for different ages
- Sports groups relaxing and safe space
- More sports clubs
- Spend money on football goals
- Football Goals with nets
- Football Pitches and Tennis Courts
- Netball club & teams
- Pickle Ball
- Badminton courts
- Rugby
- Rounders
- Fishing lakes or areas
- More fishing areas to fish
- Public Martial Arts School
- Self defence and MMA
- Exercise equipment in the park
- Gym park and treadmill
- A gym for gymnastics
- Climbing wall
- Rock climbing centres
- Mountain bike track

## Skate Parks, BMX and Wheels

- A new skate park in the town centre
- Upgrade the skatepark or have an indoor skatepark or zone
- Trampoline Park
- Pump track
- BMX
- Racetrack
- Go karting
- Drag strip
- Motocross track
- Colford, I go to the skate park. I go with my sister but there's people that vape and swear
- CCTV at the skate park
- It'll be really good to have lights at the skate park
- Improve safety in evening at Skate Park
- Age limits for different times and sessions were older children supervise new skaters

## Leisure Centres, Swimming and Indoor Facilities

- Leisure centre - swimming pool a long way to travel to access these facilities
- Sport centre being re-opened
- Bowling
- Indoor swimming pool
- Year-round swimming or an indoor pool
- Mini golf
- Astroturf space
- Astroturf open to the public
- Basketball courts
- Free netball/basketball courts
- 4g Football Pitch
- 3G football pitch
- Indoor activities (rock-climbing)

## Youth Opportunities in Shepton Mallet that can be built on:

**SASP** is a key organisation who can guide on Sport and Leisure and have also confirmed they can support with the loan of equipment for sporting and physical activity.

**The Roller Disco** is an excellent community driven initiative with young marshalls who run the sessions as well as local young people DJ-ing. This is an excellent example where young people are highly engaged and involved.

There are lots of other examples of groups which very successfully engage young people: **Park Run** has young marshalls and attracts a big following, **Chapel Dance Studio** has student leaders and is an excellent example of young people getting involved and continuing involvement into teenage years and adulthood learning professional skills.

**Woodland Tribe** are ambassadors for risky play and very well regarded running pop-up play and temporary builds all across the UK. One of the core directors lives in Shepton Mallet. They also work directly with towns and communities (including projects with Frome Town Council) where they are currently co-creating a permanent build with young people as well as working in contexts like City of Culture programming.



## Recommendations

### Quick wins

- Improve communication about existing leisure and recreation facilities, including clear information on opening times, age suitability, cost (or free access), and how spaces can be used. Use youth-friendly channels (schools, social media, posters in parks, youth clubs, assemblies) to share what's available and when.
- Improve lighting and visibility at skate parks and key outdoor recreation spaces.
- Add low-cost play and sport equipment to parks (e.g. equipment to hire, rope swings etc where gaps are clear). This is especially essential in villages where young people struggle with transport and there is a lack of structured provision.
- Create age-specific zones or time slots at skate parks to support younger or newer users.
- Continue to introduce shelters and seating in parks to make spaces usable in different weather and for socialising as well as activity.
- Pilot pop-up or temporary recreation features (e.g. bike jumps, adventure play elements) to test demand before permanent investment.
- Open up existing facilities (Astroturf, courts, halls) for informal use at low or no cost outside school hours, with clear communication about access.
- Install more fixed football goals in parks and community spaces

### Longer-term aims

- Develop a clear, joined-up leisure and recreation offer, ensuring new facilities are promoted consistently through schools, youth services and community networks.
- Develop age-inclusive parks and play spaces, ensuring provision for older children and teenagers, not just under-10s, incorporate risky play and areas specifically designed for older teens.
- Upgrade or expand skate and wheeled sports provision, including consideration of an indoor skate or wheels space for year-round access.
- Work to actively attract investment in leisure facilities, including bowling, swimming, indoor sport and climbing, reducing the need to travel long distances.
- Create a connected network of outdoor adventure spaces, including pump tracks, bike trails, nature play and walking routes.
- Design recreation spaces with young people, embedding co-creation, safety and positive use from the outset.

# OPPORTUNITIES

The Government has just published the New Youth Strategy “ Youth Matters Your National Youth Strategy” which announces significant new funding, including:

- £60m Richer Young Lives Fund to deliver high-quality youth work in under-served areas over the next three years
- £350m to expand the Better Youth Spaces Fund, with up to 250 youth work facilities built or refurbished over the next four years
- £15m to recruit and train youth workers, volunteers, and other trusted adults
- £5m to strengthen local youth sector partnerships and digital infrastructure

The Strategy also references previously announced funding, including: the £820m Youth Guarantee; more than £600m for the Holiday Activities and Food programme; and the rollout of 50 Young Futures Hubs by 2029.

It also commits to reviewing the Statutory Duty on local authorities to provide a ‘sufficient’ youth offer, which raises the exciting potential of a stronger statutory protection for youth services.

***There are many other grants and funding opportunities available to meet youth needs, including:***

- *Youth Alliance in Somerset - opportunities for free Youth work training and partnership also exciting new software opportunities for youth clubs to share.*
- *Youth Investment Fund and Youth Endowment Funds - now closed but potential for applying for future rounds.*
- *Civic Power Fund,*
- *Anchor Fund*
- *#IWillFund*
- *Worshipful Company of Weavers Charitable Grants Programme*
- *Children in Need*

The information in this report provides a solid foundation to explore partnership fundraising bids, generate significant investment for youth provision in the Shepton Mallet LCN area and to work strategically between partners to respond to the needs and ambitions of young people in our region. We hope it will be a call to arms for action across youth based organisations to listen to young people and develop and strengthen local services.



# CONCLUSION

This report shows clearly that the challenges facing young people in Shepton Mallet are not about aspiration, motivation or willingness to engage. Young people here are curious, creative and ready to take part. What they lack is access: to safe places to go, affordable opportunities, reliable transport, and spaces that feel designed with them in mind.

The evidence also makes clear that this is not something any single organisation, school or service can fix on its own. Young people's wellbeing, sense of belonging and opportunities are shaped by the physical environment, transport, public space, culture and community life. These are civic issues, not just youth issues.

Shepton Mallet already has strong foundations to build on: committed organisations, active volunteers, creative practitioners, schools and a Town Council that has shown a willingness to invest in play, culture and youth engagement. What is needed now is coordination, consistency and the confidence to act – particularly for teenagers, who are currently the least served and most at risk of disengagement.

The choices made over the next few years will shape whether young people grow up feeling pushed out of their town, or rooted within it.

This report offers a clear direction. With practical action, shared leadership and the meaningful involvement of young people themselves, Shepton Mallet can become a place where young people are not just an afterthought, but are an integral part of civic life.

We hope this is a call to action for something ambitious, bold and created with young people at its heart.



# APPENDICIES

## Appendices

1. The purpose of the research
2. The Shepton Mallet LCN context
3. Data limitations
4. SEND Case Study
5. Short / medium / long term aims
6. LCN Provision research
7. Survey questions
8. Provision mapping will be available to view on the Shepton Mallet Town Council website



## PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

Shepton Mallet Town Council identified a clear gap in youth provision within the town and surrounding area, particularly for young people aged 10+. This concern arose out of an evidenced lack of dedicated spaces, affordable leisure options, and activities that reflected the needs and aspirations of young people as they grow towards independence.

In response, this project was commissioned to inform future provision both in Shepton Mallet and across the wider LCN area.

Following a successful funding submission to Somerset Association of Local Councils this research was commissioned by Shepton Mallet Town Council and Make the Sunshine were asked to deliver the community engagement.

**It was agreed that the research would focus on young people aged 10–19, capturing their voices and lived experiences through schools, youth forums, and informal community settings. The primary purpose of the study was to understand the needs, priorities, and aspirations of Shepton Mallet’s young people and young people in surrounding villages, as well as the barriers they faced in accessing existing services.**

This included consideration of recreation, wellbeing, safety, and aspirations for the future. The research also highlighted where current provision was working well, where there were gaps, and what new opportunities could be developed to ensure young people felt supported, valued, and included in their community.

By engaging directly with young people and local stakeholders, this project aims to provide a robust evidence base to guide future investment, partnership working, and service development supporting Shepton Mallet Town Council and its partners to make informed decisions about youth provision grounded in the realities of young people’s lives.  
Context: Shepton Local Community Network

The Shepton Local Community Network (LCN) covers a population of around 27,800 residents, spread across a cluster of rural parishes alongside the market town of Shepton Mallet. The LCN provides a framework for collaboration between local councils, voluntary organisations, and statutory services, enabling communities to identify shared priorities and address local challenges collectively.



# LCN FEEDBACK

We consulted every parish council. Below are the parishes that responded to the survey and their youth needs identified.

## ASHWICK

**Challenges:** lack of engagement / boredom, social media and online engagement, disconnection, rural living, lack of opportunity.

**Main gap:** activities for 12-18.

**Key aims:** The Ashwick Parish Community Review November 2024 listed a number of ideas for improving opportunities for Young People & Teenagers. The principal ones included provision of a Bike/Skateboard Park, Running track around the Rec, scope for team sports (Football, rugby, hockey, etc), Youth Club, Forest School & a Hang Out Shelter. Current plans include providing for a Running/Walking track around the perimeter of the Rec and finalising the design for a Pavilion (Hang Out Shelter) and fundraising to achieve them.

## CHILCOMPTON

**Challenges:** Financial, Educational, Lack of Engagement / Boredom, Social Media and Online Engagement, Rural Living, Lack of Opportunity.

**Main gap:** provision for ages 5-11 (have a small youth club for 11-17).

**Key aims:** additional youth club capacity for young people, funding to support diverse provision.



## EVERCREECH

**Challenges:** Educational, lack of engagement/boredom, gang / peer challenges, social media and online engagement, deprivation, disconnection, rural living, lack of opportunity

**Main gap:** Evercreech Youth Club is currently being run entirely by volunteers as funding cannot be sourced for a Youth Worker salary despite robust efforts.

**Key aim:** Opportunities for young people to access resources and events outside the parish. Also a real lack of transport.

**Key aim:** Youth worker to help grow provision

## BATCOMBE

**Challenges:** Lack of engagement / boredom, rural living, lack of opportunity

**Main gap:** Lack of places for young people to socialise

**Key aim:** Opportunities for young people to access resources and events outside the parish

I think young people should be able to be brave to tell people what ideas and feelings they have.

## THE SHEPTON MALLET LOCAL COMMUNITY NETWORK (LCN)

The LCN covers a population of around 27,800 residents, spread across a cluster of rural parishes alongside the market town of Shepton Mallet. The parishes within the Shepton LCN include Coleford, Cranmore, Croscombe, Doulling, Downhead, East Pennard, Evercreech, Holcombe, Kilmersdon, Leigh-on-Mendip, Milton Clevedon, Pilton, Pylle, Shepton Mallet, Stoke St Michael, Ston Easton, and Stratton on the Fosse. This geography is notable for its mix of small rural villages and the town of Shepton Mallet, alongside nationally significant events such as Glastonbury Festival which takes place in Pilton.

The town of Shepton Mallet itself has an estimated population of 10,500–10,800 residents (2022), across roughly 4,600 households. The housing profile shows a predominance of single-family traditional homes (83%), with a modest proportion of social housing (14%). Around one-third of households are owned outright, one-third with a mortgage, and about one-fifth are rented privately.

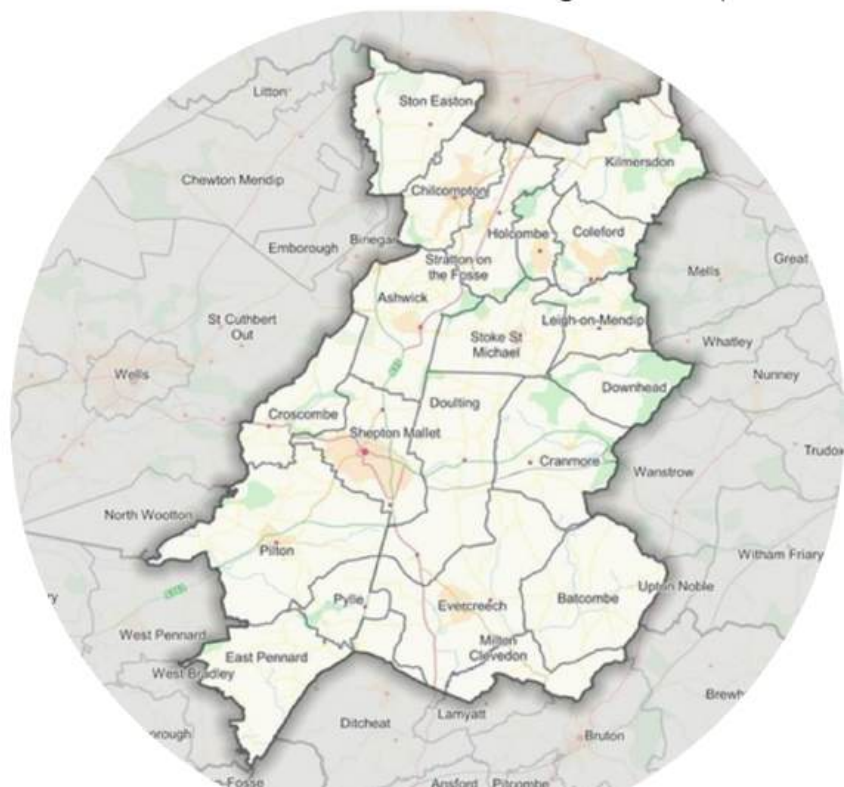
The Shepton LCN represents a broad and predominantly rural population, with Shepton Mallet acting as the main service and population hub. For youth and community initiatives, it is important to recognise this rural context.

### Limitations of the research

Make the Sunshine is a small locally based organisation. We work across the LCN with a core base in Shepton Mallet and surrounding parishes. As part of this research we have contacted every school, community, parish council and youth group across the whole LCN. However we have had less input from organisations and primary school communities in the northern part of the LCN (although through accessing secondary schools we have spanned the whole area in terms of young people's views). Given the time-limit of the research and the wide geographic area this is a limitation - more detailed research could be undertaken in the villages in this part Shepton Mallet LCN.

The town of Shepton Mallet itself has an estimated population of 10,500–10,800

Shepton Mallet LCN includes 17 rural parishes



# Case Study - Parent and SEND consultant Heather-Juliette Wedgwood

## Navigating Community, Education, and Support Systems as a Parent of Neurodivergent Children

This case study explores the lived experiences of a parent in Shepton Mallet in Somerset caring for two neurodivergent teens, focusing on the challenges with school exclusion, community participation, access to SEND-friendly activities, and navigation of health, education, and social care systems.

A parent to two teenagers with autism and additional needs. Both children have spent extended periods out of school due to trauma, burnout, and lack of suitable provision. The family's journey involves periods of intense social isolation (with one child not leaving their room for two years), struggling to access community activities, and ongoing advocacy with educational and local authorities.

### Key Challenges:

- **School Trauma and Exclusion:** Both children left school due to negative experiences, anxiety, bullying, and insufficient support for their SEND and mental health needs. Transitioning to home education brought social isolation and practical barriers.
- **Lack of Inclusive Community Activities:** Local activities are either inaccessible due to geography/transport, scheduled at unsuitable times, or too loud and overwhelming.
- **Activities and groups for autistic teens** are especially limited.
- **Financial and transport barriers:** strict, delayed systems for EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan) funding, rigid budgets, and costly or infrequent transport options limit the family's ability to access support and enrichment.
- **Systemic navigation and advocacy:** The parent spent years battling for suitable educational provision, financial compensation, and carer support—facing lengthy bureaucracy, inconsistent local authority responses, and frequent disappointment.
- **Social care gap:** difficulty accessing reliable, suitable carers; social support structures assume parental capacity for driving or additional childcare, which are not a given.
- **Peer support and knowledge gaps:** support groups exist but are often inaccessible due to logistics, childcare needs, or lack of specific SEND focus.



**“ It was a scary, unsafe environment [the youth club]... he was the only person there with SEND and with a carer, made him obviously different... We want quiet provision. We don't just want loud, banging, we want a calm space.”**

## Case Study continued

### Personal and Systemic Impact:

- The parent highlights the profound effect of isolation and discrimination on young people with SEND, including declining mental health and social skills.
- School retention/attendance is prioritised over individual well-being, with parents feeling judged and unsupported when withdrawing children for safety.
- Despite adversity, the parent built creative solutions: utilising online mentoring/tutoring, setting up alternative peer groups, and helping create new inclusive spaces and support for parents in similar situations.
- Continuous pushing for inclusion and system change, including legal action against local councils, advocacy for alternative provision, and support for new parent-carer networks.
- Persistent gaps, for example in parent respite, LGBTQ+ inclusive youth support, accessible transport, and “drop-and-collect” group models.



### Recommendations & Lessons:

- Flexible, person-centered educational options (e.g., flexi-schooling, online tutoring, home-based provision) should be normalized for SEND children.
- Local authorities and schools must simplify and expedite SEND funding and support processes, recognising hidden costs and parental burden.
- Community activities must consider accessibility beyond physical needs - including sensory environment, transport, and carer respite.
- Parent-carer input and lived experience should inform service design, with co-production at the heart of provision.
- Inclusive, safe spaces for neurodiverse and LGBTQ+ youth remain an urgent gap.
- Mitigating parental isolation, supporting advocacy, and providing practical respite are as important as direct provision to children.

**Conclusion:** This case study demonstrates the resilience and resourcefulness of families navigating SEN provision and the pressing need for systems to adapt to the real-world needs of disabled and neurodivergent children, teens, and their parents. This story underlines the urgency of shifting to trauma-informed, flexible, community-based support.

**For me, I think [the top priority] is accessible SEND provision, whether that's out of school, evenings or just something safe, safe groups for young people, because there are a lot of things for elderly people, there's quite a lot of stuff for kids that are in school to access. I feel like there's a massive gap, especially for teens and young people."**

<b>QUICK WINS</b>		
<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Key Considerations</b>	<b>Estimated Cost</b>
<b>Sports / physical equipment for loan or hire</b>	Potential to partner with SASP to offer this.	Free if using SASP equipment £300-£700
<b>Football Goals installed in parks for young people to play with</b>	Permanent football goals offer a simple free opportunity for young people to exercise and play.	£1000 - £4000
<b>Increasing the sense of safety for young people accessing Collett Park.</b>	Key messaging around park wardens as a responsible and approachable adult could alleviate some of this and provide a quick fix solution. A series of assemblies to highlight this Additional patrolling of Collett Park at night (7pm) - asking the PCSO and police team to undertake this	FREE
<b>Investing in SEND provision</b>	Greater investment in SEND friendly provision in the area through arts / sports / social groups is a real need.	Costs depending, partnership support could leverage greater more sustainable provision
<b>Open School Spaces</b>	Possibility of encouraging schools to offer open access to outdoor spaces on site after school for young people – allowing an hour of play on the school site outdoors with a supervising adult	Cost of additional minimal supervision.
<b>Temporary lighting at the skate park</b>	Temporary lighting here could help alleviate some concerns.	£1000-£10,000
<b>Promotion of facilities and tailored events</b>	Having set session times at the Skate Park  The option of also having ‘lessons’ or learner sessions .  Models such as youth leaders would work very well as is used by the Roller Disco and Make the Sunshine.	£1,0000 +

<b>MEDIUM TERM</b>		
<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Key Considerations</b>	<b>Estimated Cost</b>
<b>Increase provision for young people across the town.</b>	Funding a programme of FREE youth activities (especially wanted in the later evening time 5-8pm)	<p>Opportunities for partnerships with various organisations across the town.</p> <p>Cost dependent on provision.</p> <p>£1000 - £6000</p>
<b>LONG TERM</b>		
<b>A dedicated space for young people in Shepton Mallet</b>	A space for young people to hang out / teen lounge permanent youth space. Somewhere that offers both a quite SEND space and also offers well designed activities that offer a sense of real interaction – e.g. themed events, bowling etc.. Also the possibility of a detached youth worker across the villages providing	Opportunity to partner with a range of organisations across the town.
<b>Greater outdoor play opportunities for young people</b>	A new more adventurous playground, risky play style facility for teens and older teens. This could include options such as a climbing wall.	Cost dependent on the scope of provision and location.
<b>Skate Park improvements</b>	The need for toilets and lighting at the skate park. CCTV was very much in demand by current non-users and by more advocated for by girls but very much not in demand by current users – a controversial point	Cost dependent on the scope of provision
<b>Access to Leisure Facilities</b>	Renstatement of the leisure centre. There were also significant issues around the cost of access to leisure provision.	
<b>Attracting bigger facilities to Shepton Mallet</b>	Pickleball, Trampolining, Rage Room, Fast Food Outlets - there is a definite request from young people to have more dynamic and exciting leisure opportunities in Shepton Mallet	

## **SURVERY QUESTIONS**

What is your postcode? (or what area do you live in)

Please list **THREE** words that describe how you feel about activities and opportunities for young people where you live.

"I feel proud of my local area and where I live"

Please rate on a scale of 1-5? (5 = very proud)

"I feel there is enough for young people to do in my area"

*Please rate on a scale of 1-5 (5 = lots to do)*

*"young people are safe and welcome in my local area"*

*Please rate on a scale of 1-5 (5 = very safe)*

*"I think young people's voices are listened to in my local area"*

*Please rate on a scale of 1-5 (5 = yes, 100%)*

*What kind of activities would you like more of for young people in your area?*

*What challenges / barriers do you face accessing things for young people?*

*Finally, what would be your top priority for young people in your local area?*

*Anything else you would like to share?*

## **IN CLASS SURVEY**

What challenges / barriers do you face accessing things for young people? [Row 1]

Name of School + Year Group

Number of students in the class

"I feel proud of my local area and where I live"

Please put the number of young people with hands up who agree with this

"I think there is enough for young people to do in my area"

The number of young people with hands up who agree with this

"young people are safe and welcome in my local area"

The number of young people who agree with this Q4. What kind of activities would you like more of for young people in your area?

Each young person can vote for **TWO** categories (please input numbers for each category in boxes below)

ARTS + SPORTS CLUBS events and workshops

YOUTH SUPPORT + VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES eg youth worker / mentor / young volunteer schemes

ADDITIONAL PAID ATTRACTIONS eg Escape Room / Rage Room / Bowling

OUTDOOR EQUIPMENT + HANG OUT SPACES eg climbing wall eg teen lounge

The cost of activities prevents me doing more activities - number of students who agree

Any other ideas / thoughts / things you would like to see?

## **Additional questions College Survey**

"I think loneliness is a big issue amongst young people"

***Please rate on a scale of 1-5 (5 = yes, 100%)***

What challenges / barriers do you face accessing things for young people?

## **YOUTH VOICE AND COMMUNITY WORKSHOP QUESTIONS**

### **Key Questions**

*Age*

*Rural / Village / In Shepton*

### **Independent Views**

*What three words would you use to describe Shepton Mallet*

*I feel happiest when...*

*I like places that are...*

*I think young people should...*

*What would you like more of*

### **Gauging numbers**

*I feel proud of my local area*

*I feel there is enough for young people to do in my local area*

*Young people are safe and welcome here*

*I feel young people have a say in our town*

*I enjoy trying new things*

### **What would you like to see more of?**

*Arts and Sports*

*Youth support*

*Attractions*

*Hang Out Spaces Indoor and Outdoor*

### **When is your preference for events - After School / Evening / Saturday / Sunday**

### **Young people were also asked to discuss safety in public spaces**

*We used a heatmap of areas in the town centre*

*We discussed opportunities for play*

*We asked some groups around safety and fear and how much of an issue they felt drugs / drink where in the local area.*

### **Question prompts to discuss...**

*Shepton Mallet is the best place to grow up*

*THIS is the best place to grow up*

*I feel proud of Shepton when...*

*I feel proud of my hometown when...*

*The hardest thing about growing up here is...*

*If I had £1million pounds to spend on my area I would...*

*The best time for activities is...*

*Shepton is better than wells*

*If this was the best place ever for teenagers it would have...*

*The best time with my friends is when go to...*

*I spend most of my time...*

*If I were going to hang out with my friends here I would go to...*

*I would come to activities if...*

*Activities I would love to try...*

*Play is important for young people because..*

*If I could change one thing about my local area it would be...*

*If you could take one thing from another town and put it here it would be...*

*If young people were put in charge of decision making here they would...*