

School Hackathon

Hackathon conducted by Jen Finnimore, Jack Oldcorn, Jamie Blair and Alison Simm on the Edinburgh Brighter Futures team. Write up by Alison Simm.

In order to effectively gather the views and opinions of the care experienced young people we support on issues that effect them, at Brighter Futures we conducted a group Hackathon. This was based at one of the high schools we already work in and consisted of S1s and 2s from our Youth Social Action project and additional S3/4s referred by the school.

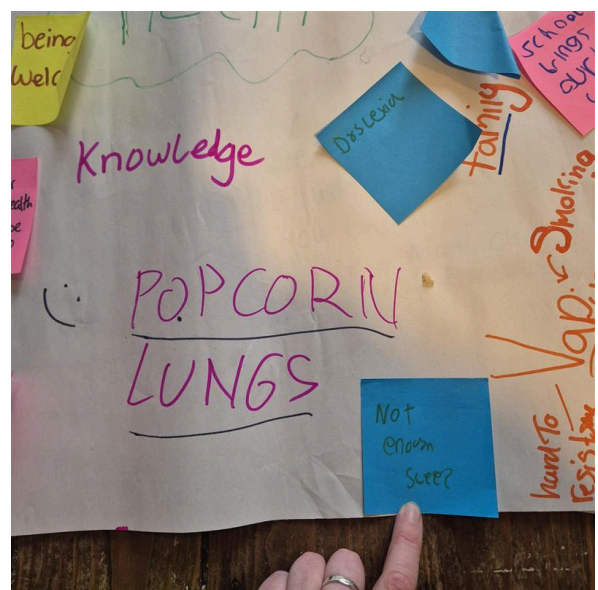
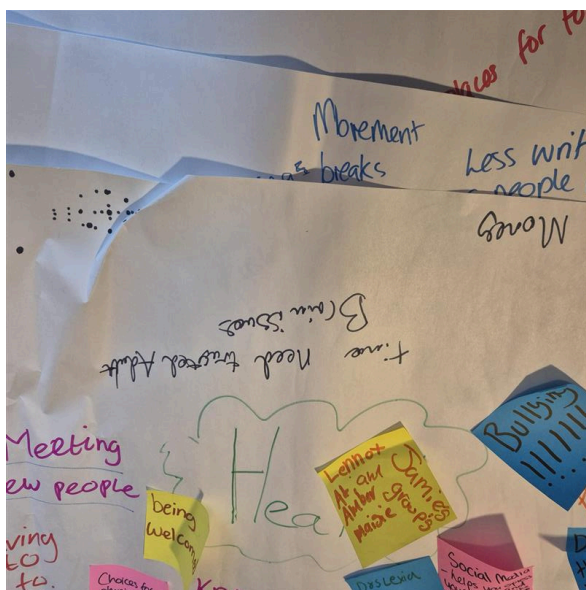
To ensure the young people were at the forefront of this work as active participants, Brighter Futures staff were there as a scaffolding role, to support the young people - with work being young person led and driven. Young people discussed in smaller groups issues of Community, Health and Education, coming up with barriers to these and potential solutions.



Collecting Young People’s Views

The young people were encouraged to be creative in their participation. Mind maps with topic headings were placed with each group, and use of colours, post it notes and felt tip pens were encouraged. Whilst some young people needed help scribing, as Youth Engagement Managers, we made sure their words were their own and simply helped them get this onto the page.

Each group rotated theme, so all participants had an opportunity to share their views on each topic. This collaborative approach meant they could build off the previous group’s work and add their own ideas - allowing for a range of ideas and issues to be raised. This also helps to identify issues were most frequent or important to the young people.

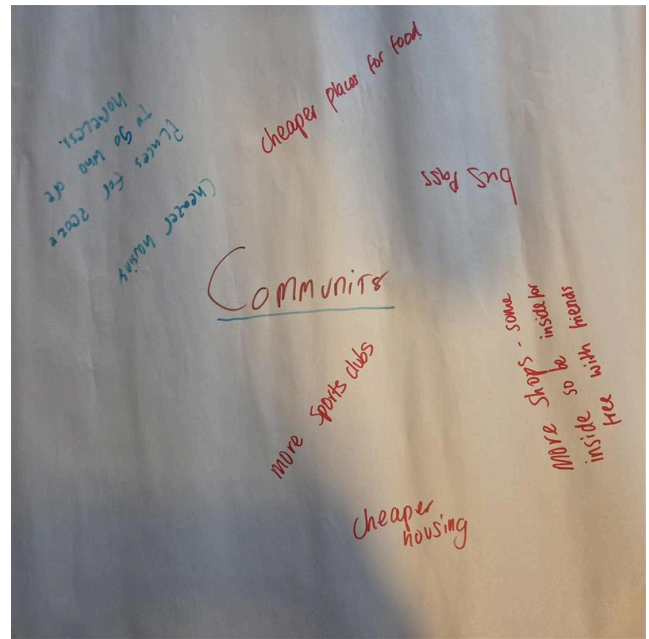


Community

A central theme discussed by the group was Community. This covered groups and activities in the local area, access to indoor and outdoor spaces and transport.

Common barriers identified were not knowing people in the area to go to activities with and being unfamiliar with what was on in the area, with some young people stating “there is nothing on”, but some being aware of there being a good range of activities in the area for sport, leisure and opportunities. A lack of “interesting” activities in the area was raised, but young people also identified their own lack of interests in general as a barrier. Their streets and immediate neighbourhoods were seen as positive, with the young people feeling connected to these.

Money was also raised as a barrier, with young people mostly being unsure of how and where to access free/affordable activities and groups. The young people identified that there were some good outdoor spaces, such as parks, that they could access, but were often put off by the weather. Transport and ease of transport however was generally viewed positively, with young people having free bus passes and knowledge of how to travel to different places within their community and further.



Solutions

A need for more indoor spaces was prominent, with young people wanting more places to socialise with friends. The availability of food diners was also raised as something that would make them engage more with their community.

Cheaper and more accessible groups and activities and cheaper food venues was a common theme - highlighting that young people often feel restricted on their ability to engage with their community due to financial ability.

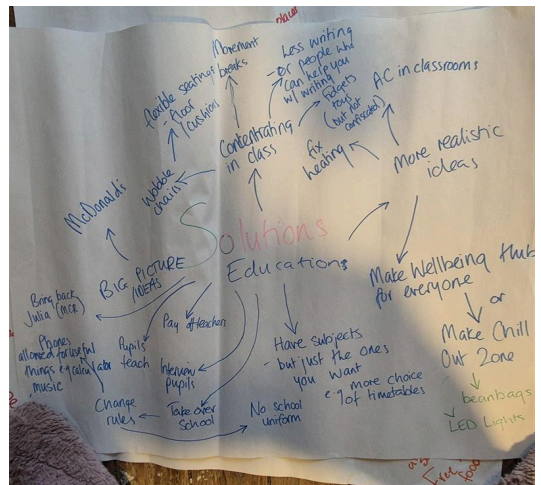
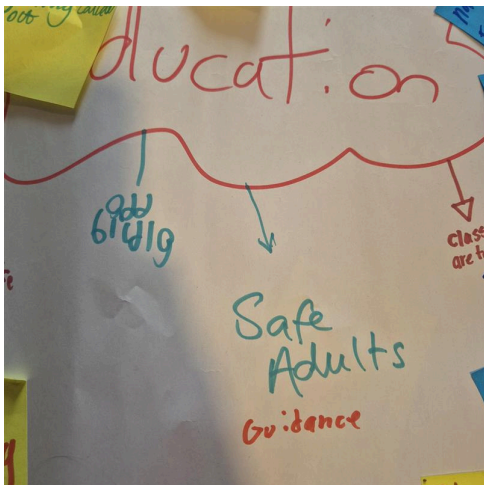
A new theme that young people highlighted, completely independently, was the issue of housing. They wanted cheaper homes and somewhere in the community for those without housing to be able to go. This shows a real level of awareness of wider societal issues from the young people and a proactive desire for solutions.

Education

The other central theme was education - with the school building; transport; sitting in lessons; safe spaces; and trusted adults as sub-themes. We used “trusted adult” to mean a person the young people felt they could talk to genuinely, who held some kind of supportive role.

Typical themes included school rules that were perceived as overly harsh, particularly surrounding phone use. Bullying was also raised, with one young person really as though “the teachers don’t do anything”. Issues with the school building were also raised - with it’s age and heating system highlighted. Class time lengths and lack of breaks were flagged - with many young people raising they found it hard to concentrate for long periods of time. Academic issues were also raised - with young people struggling with the amount of writing and with additional support needs, such as dyslexia. The most prominent theme was their experience of teachers. Frequently the mood, patience level and level of discipline of teachers was raised as having a significant impact on their experience of school. Teachers were often seen as “moody” and too strict - although some raised certain teachers as sources of support.

When asked specifically about their experience as a care-experienced young person in the school environment, the group highlighted that while they sometimes felt comfortable talking to teachers about this, it was very much dependant on the teacher themselves - with some being seen as approachable and some not. Similarly when discussing ‘trusted’ adults more broadly this was variable - some young people identified teachers, guidance staff, PSAs etc. as being people they could talk to - however some would not feel trusting of any staff, or highlighted that it was hard to find staff with the time to do so. One young person mentioned confidentiality in relation to trusted adults - with the awareness that adults within the school talk to each other and being uncomfortable with this.



Solutions

Many creative solutions were discussed by the young people to improve their educational experience. More relaxed phone rules were suggested - with phones being allowed for use of calculators, tools etc.

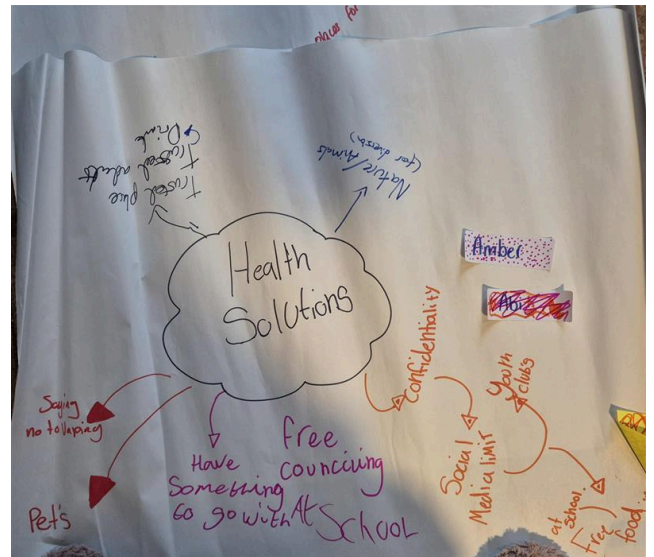
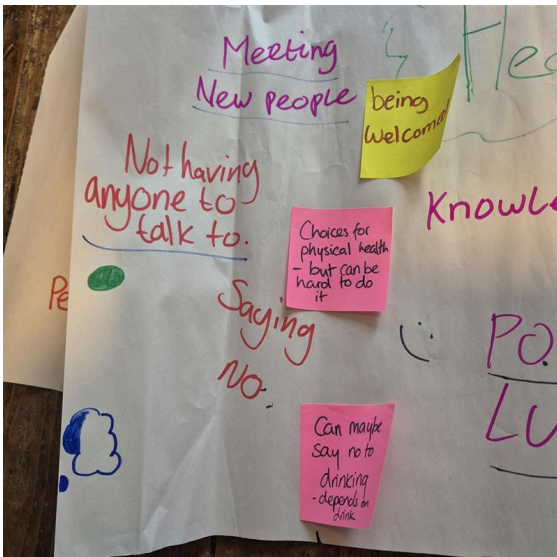
Improvements for general classroom experience included more frequent movement breaks, stimulus such as wobble chairs and more fidget toys, to help the length of time sat in class and improve concentration levels. In order to help with writing, scribes were suggested. The young people also raised the importance of having a space to go when they felt overwhelmed - some were able to access the Wellbeing Hub, but this was not open to all students at the school.

Health

The last theme discussed was Health, with sub-themes of mental health; physical health; mood; body image; trusted adult and vaping/alcohol.

Bullying and feeling unwelcome within school were raised as common issues negatively effecting mood and mental health. Social isolation was common as well - with young people feeling as though they had no one to talk to and finding it hard to meet new people. Having a trusted adult to go to health appointments with and to talk to about these was raised. Physical health was seen as somewhat supported in the area, with young people identifying options to improve physical health - gyms, clubs etc. - but often found it hard to self-motivate to engage with these.

Alcohol, vaping and pressure were heavily discussed. Young people were well informed about dangers and health issues around substance use/abuse, but often found it hard to say no. Vaping in particular was described as “hard to resist sometimes”. Young people felt they could sometimes say no to drinking but “depends on the drink”. This shows the variability in the effect of peer pressure.



Solutions

Young people created many inventive solutions to health issues, both in school and in their wider communities.

The importance of animals and nature and their positive impact on their mood and mental health was identified, with ‘bring your pet to school day’ being a popular suggestion. Free in school counselling was suggested as a measure to help support mental health. Free food for all students was raised as one way to improve physical health and mood.

There was an overarching theme of support highlighted by groups. Young people wanted a safe place where they could have greater access to trusted adults - linking back to their ideas around community and education, where these spaces were identified as being needed - or existing spaces made more accessible.

But where next?

As we can see above, young people are so engaged with the world and community around them and are able to articulate both positives and negatives of this. As youth workers, it can seem like there is a flurry of information and opinions from the young people we support. But next steps from running events such as this can be tangible.

Creating more opportunities for them to feedback, in events like a Hackathon, can provide an outlet for all the opinions young people have. Smaller scale group work or projects around individual issues tailored around interests can help to create spaces for change. Co-creating and supporting campaigns at school or MSP level can help young people feel a sense of political agency on the issues that are important to them. But overall, the most important thing we can do - no matter how 'simple' it feels is listen - continue to turn up and provide a sounding board for our young people's voices.