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# The health and well-being of young people in Wales

## Do they think Brexit will make a difference?

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## Key messages

- The majority of young people in the UK voted remain in the 2016 EU referendum. Three years down the line, with the country on course for Brexit, Public Health Wales' publication *The Public Health Implications of Brexit in Wales: A Health Impact Assessment Approach* (January 2019) found that Brexit could have, or may already be having, a negative impact on the health and well-being of young people in Wales.
- To explore this further, Public Health Wales commissioned research in the summer of 2019 that engaged over 60 young people from across Wales. The purpose was to understand what young people thought was important for good health and well-being, and whether they thought Brexit was having an effect, positive or negative, or if it might do in the future.
- The research findings highlighted that mental health was the foremost issue for young people in relation to health and well-being. They identified worries about exams and employment opportunities, peer pressure and social media, and cuts to NHS, public and community services as having a negative impact on their mental well-being. Only a small minority specifically mentioned Brexit.
- When asked about Brexit, young people tended to see it as something that would have a negative impact on health and well-being, including mental health, but that it would act to make existing issues worse, rather than as a separate cause. The negative impacts they highlighted included the effect on people of uncertainty, loss of EU funding and economic decline, increased pressure on public services, job losses and risks to food supply. A small number identified some opportunities.
- Despite identifying these issues, few said that they were particularly concerned about the impacts of Brexit on their own lives. Instead, they talked about the potential implications of Brexit in an impersonal way, and as a concern for the future. This was in stark contrast to their views on climate change, which was seen as a far greater risk to their health and well-being and something many were already taking action on in their own lives.
- Young people's general lack of interest or concern about Brexit was despite the fact that a number of the potential negative impacts of Brexit they identified affected issues they said were important to their health and well-being. These included opportunities for secure, meaningful work, the continuation of the NHS and loss of community and youth services. The fact that so few young people made this link may explain why, for the vast majority, Brexit was not a significant factor in shaping their current health and well-being or their future plans.
- Some young people said they felt that Brexit was still too uncertain to worry about now, others said that news coverage could not necessarily be trusted. Many young people felt that not discussing politics in general, or Brexit specifically, during their education meant that it was much harder for them to understand the issue, how it might affect them or how they might try to influence it; making it feel less important.
- Young people were keen to see their priorities and needs reflected more in education. In particular, they called for schools to teach more about mental health and life skills, as well as about politics and current political issues.



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## Executive summary

In the years that have followed the European Union (EU) referendum in 2016, Brexit has seldom been out of the news. Despite considerable activity, there was still uncertainty around Brexit at the time of this research; not just around the logistics of if, when and how the UK might leave the EU but also what the implications of Brexit might be for the UK and for Wales – or even what effect the last few years might already have had.

Following the findings of the *Public Health Implications of Brexit in Wales: A Health Impact Assessment Approach*, Public Health Wales wanted to better understand whether and how Brexit might be affecting health and well-being among young people in Wales, both in the present but also in how it may have changed their plans for the future.

To do this, Public Health Wales commissioned an independent research organisation, Opinion Research Services (ORS), to undertake focus groups and in-depth telephone interviews with young people aged between 16 and 24 years from across Wales. The fieldwork was undertaken during July and August 2019. In total 64 young people were involved in the research, 25 through focus groups and 39 through telephone interviews.

In this study, we wanted to explore what young people understood by health and well-being, and what factors were currently shaping this in their own lives. We were interested to see if young people raised Brexit as an important issue affecting their health and well-being at present and, if not, whether they saw it as something that could have a positive or negative effect in the future.

### Our research identified four key findings:

#### 1. Young people identify a range of stressors impacting negatively on their health and well-being, with the implications for mental health at the forefront of their concerns

When we asked young people to think about health and well-being overall, everyone we spoke to raised concerns about mental health first and foremost, either their own or regarding young people in general. A range of stressors were identified, from national issues like climate change to the pressure and expectation they felt from peers, family or society; especially through social media. Others said they were worried about exams, getting employment or not being financially stable. Many young people also highlighted how perceived cuts to the National Health Service (NHS) and poor access to mental

health services, or a lack of support from schools and communities, made it harder to deal with the challenges they face. They talked about how this can lead to destructive behaviours as a way of coping, such as drug use. Whilst the vast majority of young people identified many of these as issues that could be affected by Brexit when asked directly (see key point 2), only a very small number automatically connected this to their present concerns. As a result, almost all of the young people we spoke to failed to independently raise Brexit as a factor currently shaping their health or well-being (see key point 3).



## 2. Overall young people see Brexit as something that could impact negatively on health and well-being in Wales, although they also identify some opportunities

When asked directly about Brexit, young people mainly talked about how they expected it to have a negative impact on health and well-being. They primarily raised the issue of mental health and how the uncertainty of Brexit, as well as its potential impacts, could make people more stressed and anxious. They also focused on how the loss of EU funding and a shrinking economy could have a negative effect, for example through reduced funding for healthcare, community and youth services, as well as the increased threat of job losses, lower wages and fewer job opportunities. Others talked about it becoming harder to access a range of healthy foods

and the risk that food standards could be reduced. A point made by a number of young people was that while they saw Brexit as something that could make health and well-being in Wales worse, the issues themselves already existed and were not caused by Brexit. The opportunities some young people mentioned included changes to immigration policy preventing loss of talent from Wales and reducing competition for Welsh jobs, as well as increasing opportunities for international trade and buying British agricultural produce.



## 3. Very few young people are worried about the impact of Brexit on their own health and well-being – despite saying Brexit will make some of the issues important to them worse

Although the young people we spoke to said that the uncertainty of Brexit could negatively affect people's mental well-being, only a small minority felt it was having an impact on them. For the majority, Brexit was a minor concern, if a concern at all. Young people said Brexit had not changed how they felt about their communities or their strong sense of Welsh identity, even though most young people's views on the 2016

EU referendum would have been out of step with the general Welsh population. Young people had also not altered their plans for the future, even if they were planning to work or study abroad. This apathy was despite overlaps between what young people said was important to their health and well-being and what they were worried could be made worse by Brexit, such as access to NHS or youth services, or meaningful employment opportunities in their local areas.



## 4. Climate change feels more important to young people than Brexit – which many put down to not learning enough about political issues in school

The general lack of interest or concern about Brexit among the young people we spoke to was in stark contrast to their views on climate change, which was seen as a far greater risk to their health and well-being. They tended to be very clear on what needed to change to address climate change and what they as individuals, as well as what societies and governments, should be doing to act. In comparison,

while some young people talked about wanting to be 'listened to' more on Brexit, very few seemed keen to explore this further. Young people largely attributed this to not being taught enough about 'how the political system works' while in education. Many talked about wanting more politics to be taught in school, with some feeling that Brexit itself should have been discussed.

## Discussion and conclusion

The research findings highlighted mental health as the foremost issue for the young people we interviewed in relation to health and well-being. It also revealed that the young people we spoke to tended to see Brexit as something that would have a negative impact on health and well-being, including mental health.

Despite this, few said that they were particularly worried about the impacts of Brexit on their own lives. Instead, they talked about the potential implications of Brexit in an impersonal way and as a concern for the future – even though a number of the potential negative impacts of Brexit they identified affected issues they believed were important to their health and well-being.

Most young people felt that the reasons why Brexit was not an important issue for them was partly down to being uncertain about what was going to happen, and partly because they did not feel they understood enough about politics. Many said that having more politics taught in school, and even political issues like Brexit talked about specifically, would mean that they would feel more engaged.

Now that the voting age for Welsh local and general elections has been lowered to 16, it is more important than ever that young people are given the tools to be able to understand political issues and feel able, and motivated, to have their say.

While this is a small-scale study reflecting a single snapshot in time during ongoing Brexit uncertainty, and can therefore only be considered indicative of the sentiments of young people in Wales, it does raise important issues that warrant further consideration.

In line with what young people told us was important to them or needed to change, we have identified three areas for action:

1. Mental health is an ongoing and significant concern for young people in Wales. There is a strong feeling among young people that **more needs to be done to help them understand and manage their mental health and well-being**. For example, by improving school education on mental health and the provision of support services in schools, and giving sufficient funding to youth groups and NHS mental health services.
2. A number of the issues young people identified as being important to their health and well-being were the same as those that they thought could be made worse by Brexit. **Decision-makers need to urgently engage with and take preventative action on these issues**, which include worries about access to NHS and community services or the ability to find good jobs, **in order to safeguard young people's future health and well-being**.
3. Young people feel that having a **greater understanding of politics and political systems would make it easier and more likely that they would engage in political issues** like Brexit. Consideration needs to be given to how this can be done, for example, by looking at what can be learned from other countries or how climate change is communicated to young people.





# Well-being, young people and Brexit

## Definition of well-being

Well-being is about more than just the absence of illness. It captures how people feel about their lives as a whole, which includes their physical and mental health but also things such as whether they feel secure, have a sense of purpose and are connected with their community.

The definition of well-being developed by the UK Office for National Statistics as part of their Measuring National Wellbeing Programme<sup>(1)</sup> is:

*“Wellbeing, put simply, is about ‘how we are doing’ as individuals, communities and as a nation and how sustainable this is for the future.*

*We define wellbeing as having 10 broad dimensions which have been shown to matter most to people in the UK as identified through a national debate. The dimensions are: the natural environment, personal well-being, our relationships, health, what we do, where we live, personal finance, the economy, education and skills and governance.*

*Personal wellbeing is a particularly important dimension which we define as how satisfied we are with our lives, our sense that what we do in life is worthwhile, our day to day emotional experiences (happiness and anxiety) and our wider mental wellbeing.”*

In the years that have followed the European Union (EU) referendum in 2016, Brexit has seldom been out of the news. Despite considerable activity, there was still uncertainty around Brexit at the time of this research; not just around the logistics of if, when and how the UK might leave the EU but also what the implications of Brexit might be for the UK and for Wales – or even what effect the last three years might already have had.

Following the findings of the *Public Health Implications of Brexit in Wales: A Health Impact Assessment Approach*<sup>(2)</sup>, Public Health Wales wanted to better understand whether and how Brexit might be affecting well-being among young people in Wales, both in the present but also in how it may have changed their plans for the future.

We wanted to hear from young people about the factors that shape not just their physical and mental health but those that they felt shaped their overall well-being. This meant that as well as being interested in their views on health and care services, we also wanted to hear about the underlying factors contributing to their well-being. These wider determinants of health include things like the natural and built environment, employment and job

satisfaction, income and financial stability, diet, water and sanitation and social and community connection.

The Health Impact Assessment identified that Brexit would be more likely to have a negative impact on the health and well-being of young people in Wales and that this could occur through a number of mechanisms. These included the vulnerability of young people to reduced funding for skills, education and employment programmes, and changes to freedom of movement and immigration rules affecting their opportunities to work and study in the EU.

Young people who are themselves non-UK EU citizens or whose families are from a non-UK EU country would likely be exposed to increased uncertainty, while those living in poverty, are from Black Minority Ethnic (BME) communities or live in rural areas, would have the potential to experience cumulative and compounding negative impacts from Brexit.

The Health Impact Assessment additionally recognised that, across the UK, nearly three quarters of those aged under 24 voted to remain in the EU in 2016<sup>(3)</sup>, and 16 and 17 year olds were unable to vote at all. It was suggested that a perceived lack of influence or control could negatively affect their mental well-being.

## Research methods

Public Health Wales commissioned an independent research organisation, Opinion Research Services (ORS), to undertake focus groups and in-depth telephone interviews with young people aged between 16 and 24 years from across Wales. The fieldwork was undertaken during July and August 2019. In total 64 young people were involved in the research, 25 through focus groups held across Wales and 39 through telephone interviews. ORS recruited participants carefully to ensure a spread across geography, age, gender, ethnicity, education and employment status. A demographic breakdown of participants is available in the Annex.

During the focus groups and interviews, young people were first asked about what health and well-being meant to them and what affected it positively and negatively, both in terms of themselves and young

people in Wales more broadly. They were then asked what impact they thought Brexit might have on health and well-being and whether they saw this as positive, negative or neutral. They were asked if they felt that Brexit had changed anything in their lives, specifically how they felt about their communities or living in Wales, or their plans for the future. Young people were also asked what they thought could be done to take advantage of any opportunities or mitigate any negative impacts of Brexit, and whom they thought should be responsible for taking these actions.

For analysis, transcripts from the focus groups and interviews were created and the key themes drawn out by the researchers, supported by qualitative analysis software. Verbatim quotes have been included in the report to help illustrate the findings. Further details of the research methodology, including limitations of the study, are available in the Annex.



## Research findings

In this study, we wanted to explore what young people understood by health and well-being and what factors were currently shaping this in their own lives. We were interested to see if young people

independently raised Brexit as an important issue affecting their health and well-being at present and, if not, whether they saw it as something that could have a positive or negative effect in the future. Our findings revealed that:

### 1. Young people identify a range stressors impacting negatively on their health and well-being, with the implications for mental health at the forefront of their concerns

When we asked young people to think about health and well-being overall, everyone we spoke to raised concerns about mental health first and foremost, either their own or regarding young people in general. A range of stressors were identified, from national issues like climate change to the pressure and expectation they felt from peers, family or society; especially through social media. Others said they were worried about exams, getting employment or not being financially stable. Many young people also highlighted how perceived cuts to the NHS and poor access to mental health services, or a lack of support from schools and communities, made it harder to deal with the challenges they face. They talked about how this can lead to destructive behaviours as a way of coping, such as drug use. Whilst the vast majority of young people identified many of these as issues that could be affected by Brexit when asked directly (see key point 2, page 14), only a very small number automatically connected this to their present concerns. As a result, almost all of the young people we spoke to failed to independently raise Brexit as a factor currently shaping their health or well-being (see key point 3, page 17).

#### Exams, work and finances

Worries about getting work after finishing education was a key concern for the young people we spoke to. Gaining meaningful and secure employment was seen to support positive mental health and therefore not achieving this would put their well-being at risk.

For many young people, this concern was linked to a lack of work or further education opportunities in Wales. They felt that the job market, especially in rural areas, was restricted to specific sectors or employers, such as agriculture and manufacturing.

Young people talked about the prevalence of 'zero hours' contracts preventing them from holding onto a job long-term, making it hard to feel financially stable. At the same time, young people talked about it being hard to get "good" jobs because all employers wanted previous experience. Many felt under pressure to get work experience on top of their studies and talked about schools not doing enough to help them achieve this. In rural areas, getting work experience was felt to be particularly difficult if you did not already have links into the agricultural sector.

**"I think everything comes down to stress I think in this situation, because you fall into a pattern, you find it hard to get a job, you're applying for so many jobs each day, you're getting thrown back into a situation, you're not good enough for a job, or you're over qualified for a job...then you get down, you get depressed"** Female, 21, Anglesey.

An immediate concern for many were upcoming exams. They felt that young people are put under unnecessary pressure to do well in exams. This was often felt to be societal pressure, where good grades are seen as a marker of success rather than recognising alternative routes into further learning or work that may be better suited to the individual, such as apprenticeships. Other sources of pressure were young people's own expectations as well as those of their families. Young people from BME communities expressed this particularly strongly.

For those at or wanting to go to university, student funding was a concern. Some young people talked about how they thought poor student finance was impeding social mobility.

## Peer pressure and social media

The majority of young people talked about the impact of social media on their mental health. Many said it was easy to compare themselves to others online and to feel like they needed to have the same things as others, even when they knew it was not possible. Others talked about feeling “overwhelmed” by the negative news shared on these platforms. These experiences were often viewed as making feelings of anxiety and depression among young people worse.

Some talked about how social media is used for bullying. Although a few participants felt that social media was not a big issue and something that could be avoided if problems arose, many more said it was not simply a case of being able to ‘log off’. This was because they saw social media as so woven into the fabric of modern day living that it would mean young people disconnecting themselves from their sources of news, information and entertainment, as well as a whole network of their peers.

Despite the obvious importance of social media as an issue to young people, some said they thought the government was wrongly prioritising clamping down on social media platforms over other priorities, such as funding for healthcare services.

## NHS funding and access to mental health services

Perceived cuts to public service funding, particularly the NHS and mental health services, was a concern for many young people. They felt that not being able to access the help and support they needed, when they needed it, meant that the impact of other factors on their mental health was worse. They said that low awareness among their peers of the services available was one issue but that, even where services do exist, waiting times can be extremely long. Young people living in rural areas highlighted this in particular. Some expressed the view that a consequence of not getting the right support could be increased suicide rates and drug use problems.

**“Because I have myself suffered with it, and family members have suffered with it as well... you’ll have to go on a waiting list to be seen by somebody, or you have an appointment and then it’s, “I’ll see you in another three months.” Well within those three months something might happen”**  
Female, 21, Anglesey.

Young people said that talking about mental health had generally become more socially acceptable, which they felt was a good thing. However, those from rural communities said that poor mental health in the farming community was still “taboo”, despite being a prevalent issue. Many of the young people we spoke to from those communities were aware of farmers who had died by suicide and felt that this tended to be “brushed under the carpet”. Regardless of where they lived, young people agreed that the increased awareness of mental health issues and demand for support was not being met by the availability or quality of current services available, and that more needed to be done.

## Other sources of mental health support

Young people felt that having a support network of friends and family, or a hobby or social or physical activity, were vital to good health and well-being, including mental health.

Young people felt that schools and employers had a vital role to play in helping young people to manage their mental well-being. A small number talked about how school had helped them. Others said that their school or employer took very limited steps to promote positive mental health and suggested ways in which they could do more by promoting practices like mindfulness, for example, or providing more support services, like counselling. Many also felt that additional support developing ‘life skills’, such as financial independence, should be provided as this would better prepare them for the future and could also help support their mental well-being.

"I think schools need some more support really in mental health... I have been stressed previously due to exams and my teacher wanted to put me in for counselling, but at the time they were using an outside agency, and I was on the list for four months and in that time ... I'd already gone somewhere else and gotten what I needed and had done what I needed to do"  
Female, 16, Vale of Glamorgan.

"In school we take 25-minute sessions and go through some of the sort of steps that we take with mindfulness, like noticing your breathing, noticing yourself. That kind of stuff is really useful, and it's nice as well being there with other young people, so you know, you can do it but also you do know you're in a group of people who are going through much of the same thing"  
Male, 16, Cardiff.

A small number of the young people we talked to shared their experiences of supporting friends with mental health issues. They recognised how this can take its toll on their own well-being.

### Drug dealing and use

Young people described drugs as being easily accessible, with drug use and dealing felt to be widespread among their peers. Those living in rural areas talked of how "easy" it was to become involved in drug dealing and 'county lines', especially when paid work can be difficult to come by. Some young people talked about how drug use can stem from a need to deal with life's stresses and mental health concerns, especially when support is not available in a timely way. Others saw drug use as something that leads to poor physical and mental health.

### Climate change

A big concern for young people was climate change. This was raised during the focus groups in particular but also in the telephone interviews. Young people talked about how both their physical and mental well-being could be impacted by climate change because of issues around food supply, extremes in weather, and air and water pollution. There was a strong feeling that acting on climate change should be a priority.



## 2. Overall young people see Brexit as something that could impact negatively on health and well-being, although they also identify some opportunities

When asked directly about Brexit, young people mainly talked about how they expected it to have a negative impact on health and well-being. They primarily raised the issue of mental health and how the uncertainty of Brexit, as well as its potential impacts, could make people more stressed and anxious. They also focused on how the loss of EU funding and a shrinking economy could have a negative effect, for example through reduced funding for healthcare, community and youth services, as well as the increased threat of job losses, lower wages and fewer job opportunities. Others talked about it becoming harder to access a range of healthy foods and the risk that food standards could be reduced. A point made by a number of young people was that while they saw Brexit as something that could make health and well-being in Wales worse, the issues themselves already existed and were not caused by Brexit. The opportunities some young people mentioned included changes to immigration policy preventing loss of talent from Wales and reducing competition for Welsh jobs, as well as increasing opportunities for international trade and buying British agricultural produce.

### Uncertainty, anxiety and stress

When asked about the potential impact of Brexit on health and well-being, the young people we spoke to generally talked about mental health implications first. They linked this to ongoing uncertainty but also to the additional financial worries they predicted would be a consequence of Brexit. The majority felt that the cost of living would go up and there would be cuts to welfare support, putting additional strain on individuals and people trying to provide for their families when they may already be struggling financially. They felt this could be a direct cause of anxiety and depression.

**“There’s some seriously economically deprived areas, and they’re not given any support whatsoever...I think it could be quite harsh for a lot of people, and all our people with mental health problems... so, there’s lots of people struggling who I know.”** Male, 16, Swansea.

### Loss of EU funding and economic decline

Linked to the above, most young people thought the biggest impact of Brexit would be a negative effect on the economy. This included uncertainty affecting business decisions and changes to trade reducing the value of the pound, causing prices to rise and the cost of living to go up. However, some young people also cited Brexit as an opportunity to increase international trade.

Most young people were aware of the funding Wales currently receives from the EU, and that this is greater than other parts of the UK. They felt that the loss of this funding to Wales, unless the same degree of investment was forthcoming from the UK Government, was a potential threat to health and well-being due to cuts to healthcare and community and public sector services (this is described in more detail below). They saw this as compounding the effect of austerity on these services.

### Decreased funding for the NHS and other public services

The direct risk to health and well-being, if NHS funding was reduced after Brexit, was a concern for many young people when asked to consider the potential impacts of Brexit. They noted that this would be on top of cuts they had already seen to general practice and ambulance services, and expected it to make problems, such as increased hospital waiting times, even worse. Many young people also talked about NHS staffing problems and the number of NHS staff currently recruited from EU countries and further afield. They felt that changes to immigration policy after Brexit could make it harder to recruit the number of staff needed to keep pace with demand, or even fill existing vacancies.

Several young people talked about their concerns that Brexit could lead to the privatisation of the NHS. Some thought that this might happen regardless of Brexit because the NHS was already struggling to get the staff and money it needed to carry on as it is.

Ensuring that the NHS continued to get the resources it needed after Brexit was a key priority for young people. For some this meant having the funding to boost recruitment and training, and being able to reduce the stress and burden on current NHS staff by decreasing workload and paying a ‘fair wage’. For other young people, it meant being able to provide at least the same level of service in their communities and meet increasing demand.



Second to NHS services, young people were keen to ensure mental health services in community or educational settings were supported after Brexit. They also talked about how cuts to policing and education services after Brexit, including less money for schools and increased tuition fees, could negatively affect people's health and well-being.

**"I just feel like it is going to go downhill, because like the way things are going like with the NHS and like the education and people's mental health, it is just, I feel like there's not much support there, where there needs to be"** Female, 19, Swansea.

There were also concerns around cuts to other local authority services including libraries, sport centres and community venues.

### Decreased funding for community and youth services

For young people, concerns around reduced funding after Brexit also extended to community groups and youth centres. They talked about the importance of these services to health and well-being and how their decline would mean less mental health support, and that the sense of community would be eroded in areas where they were lost. A small number were specifically aware that their local youth service was part-funded by the EU, others were more generally concerned about less funding being available after Brexit.

**"Youth centres, after school activities particularly [are important]. Where I live in the Vale of Glamorgan, the youth service is fantastic... I wouldn't have expected there to be many opportunities for me to go out to places to see other people and meet other people, and there's always something on every day of the week... that I can go to and get involved with all sorts of things"** Female, 16, Vale of Glamorgan.

There were also concerns around cuts to other local authority services including libraries, sport centres and community venues.

### Job losses and reduced employment opportunities

Young people talked about their worry that Brexit would cause a further decline in employment opportunities, particularly in rural or traditionally industrial areas. Many had heard reports of manufacturers planning to close operations in Wales due to Brexit, or talked about how less EU funding for agriculture potentially put farms and jobs in this sector at risk. They talked about the importance of meaningful and secure employment to good mental health and how, on the other hand, losing your job or finding it harder to get a job can be very difficult to cope with.

**"With more people moving towards cities to get more opportunity, but we've got a shortage of jobs in the rural areas, then it's just a vicious circle then there's less jobs, more people are moving away, and then I feel like that's just going to decline."** Female, 16, Carmarthenshire.

Another issue raised was that changes to freedom of movement after Brexit would mean that young people in Wales had fewer opportunities to explore careers abroad. However, a small number thought that this could be a positive, preventing the loss of talent from Wales. Similarly, some felt that making it harder for EU citizens to work and study in the UK would mean less competition for Welsh people.

## Risks to food supply and quality

When questioned about Brexit, some young people said they were concerned about how it might affect food supply and consequently people's health and well-being. They worried that changes to trade would reduce access to a variety of healthy foods and that, coupled with higher costs of living, it would be harder for individuals and their families to eat a healthy diet. A small number of young people also talked about their concerns that loss of EU regulations would result in processed food containing ingredients that are currently banned being allowed to be sold in the UK. Conversely, a few young people mentioned the opportunity Brexit presented to focus more on buying British produce.

## But not everything is about Brexit

Most young people we spoke to stated that while they saw Brexit as something that could make health and well-being in Wales worse, the issues themselves already existed and had not been caused by Brexit. This was mentioned especially in the context of austerity and previous funding cuts to services, with young people recognising that many people are already struggling.



**"I think the media and, and the government would love to play it off as, like, it's Brexit that's causing these things. But, in reality, it's because people are struggling on their pensions, people are struggling on their benefits. People aren't getting the same kind of support that they used to. People don't have as much money as they used to."**  
Male, 21, Cardiff.

**"I don't really feel that it's... Brexit's fault. It's more that it's other people taking advantage of the fallout of Brexit, I think. I feel that Brexit could be a lot easier to deal with if people prepared for it"**  
Male, 16, Swansea.

Many also said that, for the most part, Brexit was not a topic that interested them. They were unlikely to discuss it much with family and friends, and it was not something they talked about at school, university or in work. Most young people said they got their information about Brexit from news channels and social media. Many talked about the risk of 'fake news' being spread online and that media outlets and newspapers often had their own bias.



### 3. Very few young people are worried about the impact of Brexit on their own health and well-being – despite saying Brexit will make some of the issues important to them worse

Although the young people we spoke to said that the uncertainty of Brexit could negatively affect people's mental well-being, only a small minority felt it was having an impact on them. For the majority, Brexit was a minor concern, if a concern at all. Young people said Brexit had not changed how they felt about their communities or their strong sense of Welsh identity, even though most young people's views on the 2016 EU referendum would have been out of step with the general Welsh population. Young people had also not altered their plans for the future, even if they were planning to work or study abroad. This apathy was despite overlaps between what young people said was important to their health and well-being and what they were worried could be made worse by Brexit, such as access to NHS or youth services, or meaningful employment opportunities in their local areas.

#### Apathy over anxiety

Overwhelmingly, the young people we spoke to did not feel that Brexit was having an impact on their health and well-being at present. Instead, there was a clear sense of apathy about Brexit, with young people saying that it didn't feel "real" anymore, that there was no point worrying when "no one knows what's going to happen", or even doubt that Brexit would happen at all. When discussing Brexit as a group, it was clear that the young people involved felt disengaged by and almost fed up of the topic.

It was also notable that even when young people were talking about Brexit and going through the mainly negative ways in which they thought it might affect health and well-being, they did so in an impersonal way. Rarely did young people naturally discuss Brexit in the context of their own lives, worries or future plans, even when pushed to do so; tending instead to discuss Brexit in a theoretical way or in relation to others.

"Well I mean because like I dunno that much about it I don't really know how to feel about it. I know that like when they voted on Brexit it was like almost an equal thing and like then people protested against it. So, I know that like the majority of people here it's like sort of a bad thing, but I haven't ... like I don't know that much about it to give that much of an opinion about it."  
Female, 16, Blaenau Gwent.

There were two groups of young people, however, who did have strong feelings about Brexit and felt it was having a negative effect on their health and well-being. The first were the non-UK EU citizens working or studying in Wales. They talked about feeling afraid that they would be made to leave Wales after Brexit. This was partly because they did not believe the promises politicians had been making about being able to stay, and partly because they felt there had been a rise in xenophobia since the referendum that made them feel less welcome – a concern that was also echoed by some of the BME young people we spoke to. The non-UK EU citizens also said they felt a sense of injustice at not having been allowed to vote in the 2016 EU referendum due to their non-residency status (demographic breakdown of participants is available in the Annex).

The second group were young people who were more politically engaged. They had strong feelings of worry and anxiety because they thought Brexit would make some of Wales' existing problems worse. They particularly mentioned their concerns around economic decline and job losses post-Brexit.

## Feeling at home in Wales

Feeling connected to your community is an important part of well-being. Despite young people in the UK tending to have voted to 'remain' in the 2016 EU referendum<sup>(3)</sup>, putting them at odds with the majority of people in Wales<sup>(4)</sup>, most of the young people we spoke to said that their feelings towards their communities, and Wales, had not changed. In fact, a number said they were surprised by reports of increased hate crime and polarisation after the referendum. The few who said their feelings had changed cited tension between 'leave' and 'remain' voters, while a small number felt that the outcome of the 2016 EU referendum had reinforced their belief that "racist" and "bigoted" views existed in their communities.

Overall, young people were positive about living in Wales, highlighting the friendliness of Welsh people, close-knit communities and the ease with which they could get outdoors and appreciate nature. Those involved in youth groups, sports teams and other social groups had a particularly positive outlook. Young people living in urban areas tended to be more satisfied by the facilities and opportunities available to them. This chimed with some young people's concerns that their communities could suffer in the future if Brexit meant that large companies chose to move away.

**"It's kind of like I feel safer living in Wales, just because I feel like the type of people that live here and the environment that Wales has, compared to other places, I think it's a lot more like peaceful and it is like everybody minds their own business, but they're still like involving you in whatever they do... People are really friendly here"**  
Female, 19, Swansea.

**"I live in Swansea for Uni and there's so much more going on there, there's so many more opportunities for young people. Jobs and things like that, and even socialising. Yeah, there's just more things to do, there's more opportunities"** Female, 23, Carmarthenshire.

There was also a strong sense of cultural identity among the young people we spoke to. They talked of Wales as a place where culture is celebrated, both in terms of 'Welshness' and in terms of the cultural diversity of its residents. They did not consider this to be under threat by Brexit. Young people felt that cultural celebrations should be encouraged and could be an important antidote to any tensions that did arise because of Brexit.

A number of young people mentioned the idea of Welsh independence as something that was becoming more popular because of Brexit. Many of the young people we spoke to said they preferred living in Welsh communities rather than bigger cities in England, such as Manchester or London.

**"I would like Wales to be independent, but from, at the moment, I don't think it's, it's necessary and it's possible"**  
Male, 22, Gwynedd.

## No change to future plans – for now

When asked about their future plans, most of the young people we talked to spoke about further study. Although the picture was mixed, many wanted to study outside of Wales, either because they preferred the courses on offer or because they felt other locations had more to offer in terms of lifestyle.

For some young people, this meant going to Europe to study – and they had not changed those plans because of Brexit. Most were aware of EU-funded educational programmes that allowed them to do this, such as Erasmus<sup>1</sup>, but were unsure how they might be affected. The majority said they wanted to see how things would "pan out" before they changed their plans, and were "staying positive" for now. Some were reticent to believe that Brexit could have a bearing on their ability to study in Europe, while others started to talk about how Brexit may force them to rethink their plans as their conversations with the researchers developed.

<sup>1</sup>The Erasmus programme (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is an EU funded scheme that organises student exchanges. It is designed to offer students the opportunity to experience studying or undertaking a traineeship abroad. The exchange can last up to 12 months and can be accessed through participating universities in the UK and partner providers across Europe.

**“In my school we do the Erasmus+ scheme where certain students get picked and we go to an EU country to meet new people so then will those sort of schemes carry on? They’re so beneficial because you’re immersed in different cultures and you just meet so many new people, and you get so many life experiences from it, but then obviously with Brexit will we still have access to those services?”**  
Female, 16, Carmarthenshire.

Other young people talked about their future careers, which for some of the older participants included their hope to gain and sustain a career so that they could settle down and start a family. There was a general feeling that Brexit could have an impact on opportunities to get and keep work but that being overly concerned or making any decisions at this stage would be “pointless” as there was still so much uncertainty.

**“I was thinking about looking for another more stable job, as in changing jobs, but then, because nobody knows where they stand and there’s no point changing my job until I know where we’re going with it sort of thing”** Female, 21, Anglesey.

A small minority mentioned that they had begun to put “contingency plans” in place, such as trying to save a little extra money, or were looking at the possibility of moving abroad for work. Non-UK EU citizens expressed concern that they may not be allowed to continue working in Wales, or would be made to feel like they should leave.

## The paradox

It was clear that the uncertainty that still surrounds Brexit played a big role in shaping how worried young people were about it, or the extent to which they felt able to prepare for or adapt to the changes it might bring. It was also notable that when young people talked about the potential impact of Brexit on health and well-being, it tended to be in an impersonal way;

identifying how they thought it would affect others, rather than themselves or young people like them. These are likely to have been important factors in shaping what we found to be young people’s feelings of boredom and apathy towards Brexit, rather than worry or anxiety. This was even though some of the things young people said were important to their health and well-being right now were the same as those they thought Brexit could make worse or put at risk. This included:

- **Opportunities for secure, meaningful work:** Young people talked about how important this was to good well-being, especially mental health. Difficulty finding employment was a real concern for young people that they felt was negatively affecting their mental health. It was also one of the things that young people felt could become substantially harder post-Brexit, especially in rural areas where large employers could leave.
- **Continuation of the NHS:** The NHS being overburdened or having its funding cut was another critical worry for young people, especially in terms of being able to access mental health support. Even further reductions to NHS funding was one of the negative impacts they thought Brexit might have, compounded by difficulties recruiting enough staff, due to changes to immigration rules, and an increased risk of privatisation.
- **Loss of community and youth services:** Being able to access these services and facilities played an important role in how happy young people were about living in Wales and how supported they felt in coping with mental health worries or stresses. Loss of EU funding to support these services was something young people identified as a negative impact of Brexit, as it could lead to these services being closed down.
- **Climate change:** This was identified by young people as a prominent worry and something they saw as having “huge” impacts on their health and well-being, now and into the future. Although young people didn’t make the connection when asked about Brexit, changes to the UK’s supply chains and the consequences of post-Brexit trade deals could have an impact on climate change<sup>(2)</sup>.

## 4. Climate change feels more important to young people than Brexit – which many put down to not learning enough about political issues in school

The general lack of interest or concern about Brexit among the young people we spoke to was in stark contrast to their views on climate change, which was seen as a far greater risk to their health and well-being. They tended to be very clear on what needed to change to address climate change and what they as individuals, as well as what societies and governments, should be doing to act. In comparison, while some young people talked about wanting to be 'listened to' more on Brexit, very few seemed keen to explore this further. Young people largely attributed this to not being taught enough about 'how the political system works' while in education. Many talked about wanting more politics to be taught in school, with some feeling that Brexit itself should have been discussed.

### Fired-up by climate change

Young people spoke knowledgeably, passionately and urgently about climate change. They had a clear picture of how it could affect their lives, including their health and well-being, highlighting disruption to food supplies, extremes of weather, or polluted air and water supplies. They felt strongly that climate change was an issue that needed to be addressed urgently, and that young people had an important role in making that happen. Many young people talked about how they had changed their lifestyle habits because of climate change, such as cutting down on plastics or using less energy. They also had a sense of what action they thought government needed to take, and pointed to the youth climate strikes and protests as being a key part of making that change happen.

**"If you look at the climate change protests, I'm quite pleased that things are actually being done as a result. In some aspects we're taking matters, steps forwards in progression"** Female, 17, Bridgend.

This was all in contrast to how young people spoke about Brexit. While talking about climate change seemed to galvanise them, Brexit seemed to deflate them. Some put this down to how Brexit is talked about in the media, with people saying that coverage was always negative and could not necessarily be trusted, or their feeling that much of the problems around Brexit were being caused by politicians

handling the situation badly. In comparison, young people pointed to the climate protests as something that made them feel hopeful about their own and society's ability to act.

**"You know, taking part and sort of viewing the climate change protests, the extinction rebellion protest, those kinds of ones do give me a bit of optimism about the world and to know that these young people are passionate about saving the planet and working to reduce climate change. That gives me lots of hope"** Male, 16, Cardiff.

### Lack of political understanding or agency

The level of political knowledge among the young people we spoke to was generally limited. They tended to talk about 'the government', without differentiating between the UK government and its parliament, and did not talk about the devolved Welsh Government and its parliament. Despite this, the majority of young people felt that it was 'the government', more than the individual, who should take responsibility for people's health and well-being.

Many young people talked about not "having a voice" within politics. Other than some saying they supported the lowering of the voting age to 16, few young people seemed to know what they as individuals could do to get their views heard by politicians or had a particular appetite for doing so. They largely felt that this was because they either did not know enough about "how the system works" or were unable to trust information in the media about political issues.

Overall, those who were politically engaged and looking to influence Brexit, or other issues, were in the minority. Young people involved with youth and community groups were an exception. They talked about the importance of these centres for learning about politics and providing a platform to influence politicians. Some gave examples of being shown how to complete ballot papers or having Brexit explained to them at these groups.

Interestingly, the young people we spoke to from non-UK EU countries felt that knowledge of politics and political structures among young people in their countries was much stronger. They felt that this brought with it increased agency and engagement, and a better understanding of how politics can affect people's health and well-being, as well as what its limitations are.

**"I'd probably say as much political education as possible. I know a lot of people my age don't know anything about politics, or if they do, it's self-taught, and I feel like that's really wrong"**  
Female, 17, Bridgend.

### Calls for more politics in school

There was an appetite for more political education to be embedded within schools and universities. Many talked about the fact that improved education on political structures, especially at an early age, would boost young people's participation in democratic processes and their interest in trying to influence politicians. Some suggested that more should have been taught specifically on what the impact of Brexit could be. Many said they felt that they would be more engaged in politics at this point in their lives, and Brexit, if this education had been available to them.





## Discussion and conclusion

Mental health came out quite clearly in this study as the most important health and well-being issue for young people in Wales. Throughout discussions, the young people we spoke to considered the potential implications for mental health first and foremost, whether that be their own mental health or that of their peers or the population as a whole.

This finding is not new – mental health is regularly identified as a top priority for young people, including in a recent survey by the Welsh Youth Parliament<sup>(5)</sup>. Similarly, a UK survey of young people aged 14 to 25 found that while only 15% thought their physical health would be worse than their parents' generation, 69% thought their mental health would be<sup>(6)</sup>.

The Health Impact Assessment identified Brexit as something that could have a negative impact on young people's mental health because of increased stress, anxiety or frustration<sup>(2)</sup>. This was based on the fact that young people had tended to vote against Brexit and that they could be among those most likely to feel its effects, both in the short-term and into their futures. It was therefore somewhat unexpected that the vast majority of young people we spoke to did not raise Brexit independently as a present concern or strain on their mental well-being.

Research conducted since the publication of the Health Impact Assessment in January 2019 has revealed a mixed picture on young people's feelings about Brexit. The Welsh Youth Parliament survey identified it as the sixth most important issue<sup>(5)</sup>, while another UK study ranked it at eighth<sup>(7)</sup>. When young people in the UK aged 10 to 17 were asked if they were worried about Brexit, most said they weren't at all worried (30%), 1 in 10 said they were very worried, while over quarter said they weren't sure<sup>(8)</sup>. In contrast, another UK survey found that 62% of young people aged 14 to 25 thought Brexit was one of the most important issues facing our country over the next 5 years – even more than the number who said climate change (54%)<sup>(6)</sup>.

In comparison, research into adult attitudes to Brexit has found a general consistency over time in the proportion of people with strong feelings about Brexit, for or against, with less than a quarter of adults (23%) expressing a more mild view<sup>(9)</sup>.

An important contributing factor to the variation seen in young people's attitudes could be the extent to which the young people spoken to in each study connect Brexit to the other issues that concern them. In this study, it was notable that young people talked about similar issues when describing what is worrying them now and what they thought Brexit could make worse in the future – but still said that Brexit itself was not a particularly concerning issue. As a result, few seemed to feel that changes to their plans was necessary at this stage. This was primarily because they were still uncertain about whether Brexit would happen at all, let alone the specifics of how it might affect their options.

In contrast, a small study of students in England found that some were already choosing to pursue different careers in light of Brexit, hoping to heal the divisions they saw it as causing<sup>(10)</sup>. This indicates a level of agency and political engagement that contrasts with the apathy and lack of political understanding that came across in our discussions with young people in Wales. Indeed, a UK survey found that 38% of young people say that their political beliefs are the most important factor in defining their identity, the most common response<sup>(6)</sup>. The findings from this small study suggest that we may not see this same strength of political identity if this question was put solely to young people in Wales.

As many young people we spoke to pointed out, their lack of interest in politics may be due to the subject not being taught in schools, and called on this to change. As the Welsh Government finalises its updated school curriculum, it is timely to consider how this could be implemented<sup>(11)</sup>, particularly in light of the National Assembly for Wales having passed legislation allowing 16 and 17 year olds to vote in local elections as well as the 2021 Welsh General Election<sup>(12)</sup>. A number of the young people we spoke to were supportive of lowering the voting age, but if it is to be successful in galvanising young people to engage in politics and democratic processes, this study suggests it will need to be supported by a significant programme of political education.

## Areas for action

While this is a small-scale study reflecting a single snapshot in time during ongoing Brexit uncertainty, and can therefore only be considered indicative of the sentiments of young people in Wales, it does raise important issues that warrant further consideration.

In line with what young people told us was important to them or needed to change, we have identified three areas for action:

1. Mental health is an ongoing and significant concern for young people in Wales. There is a strong feeling among young people that **more needs to be done to help them understand and manage their mental health and well-being.** Young people talked about the need for schools to not only teach more about mental health, from coping tips to practical life skills, but also provide more support services. They were also keen that youth groups and NHS mental health services received sufficient funding, especially after Brexit, as they were seen as vital sources of help and support.
2. A number of the issues young people identified as being important to their health and well-being were the same as those that they thought could be made worse by Brexit, such as reduced employment opportunities, pressure on the NHS and loss of community facilities. Although the young people we interviewed expressed apathy about Brexit, seeing it as a worry for the future rather than today, **decision-makers need to urgently engage with and take preventative action on these issues in order to safeguard young people's future health and well-being.**
3. Young people feel that having a **greater understanding of politics and political systems would make it easier and more likely that they would engage in political issues** like Brexit. Consideration needs to be given to how this can be done. There are lessons to be learned from the way young people have been galvanised by climate change, as well as from how young people are taught about politics and political systems in other countries.



# Annex

## Research methodology

### Research objectives

- What young people perceive to be the key opportunities and challenges for them due to Brexit; and whether they saw these as purely Brexit related;
- Whether young people agreed with the impacts of Brexit others had identified as being the most important to young people;
- Whether and how Brexit may have affected their:
  - Short or longer-term life plans and aspirations (career, travel etc.);
  - View of/ sense of belonging to their local community and/or Wales/ the UK;
  - Feelings about what their future might hold (optimism, pessimism, anxiety, hope);
  - Physical and mental health (directly through the health and social care system as well as wider determinants of health);
- What action young people think needs to be taken and by whom/ how young people could be better supported to take opportunities and overcome any challenges.

### The fieldwork process

ORS undertook a series of four focus groups across Wales as well as telephone in-depth interviews in order to capture the views of a wide range of young people between July and August 2019. The focus groups were held in Swansea, Deeside, Machynlleth and Pontypridd. The research was undertaken by experienced facilitators and interviewers.

A total of 64 people aged 16-24 from across Wales were engaged in the research, 25 through focus groups and 39 through telephone interviews. All those who took part in the research were assured of complete confidentiality, and that they were free to be as open and as honest as they wished. Permission was obtained from participants for their anonymised, verbatim comments to be used in this report.

### Focus group and interview structure

The focus groups and interviews were structured to explore young people's views on Brexit in the context of what they saw as important to health and well-being. Therefore, in both formats, Brexit was introduced after an initial conversation about what health and well-being meant to those involved, and left it open for them to explore any positive or negative impacts of Brexit, as they perceived them.

Topic guides for the focus groups and interview questions were similarly structured into three parts:

- 1) **Young people's views on health and well-being in general.** This included exploring what they thought was important to good health and well-being and what was detrimental, both in their own lives and for young people more broadly. It also asked young people about their satisfaction with living in Wales and their local communities, and their plans for the future.
- 2) **Young people's views on how Brexit might affect health and well-being.** This gave young people the opportunity to identify what they thought the potential impacts of Brexit might be on factors relevant to health and well-being, both positive and negative. They were also asked whether Brexit had affected their own health and well-being, or that of their peers, or if they thought it might in the future. This included specific questions about whether Brexit had caused them to change their future plans or how they felt about their local communities.
- 3) **Young people's views on what might need to be done to maximise young people's health and well-being in future.** This invited young people to explore some of the impacts they raised in relation to Brexit and young people's health and well-being and share what, if any, action they thought should be taken to mitigate or take advantage of them. They were asked who should be responsible for taking that action.

Complete topic guides for the focus groups and interview questions are available on request.

### Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited by ORS either through contact with 'gatekeeper organisations', such as youth groups and local charities, or through ORS directly recruiting young people through their in-house call centre.

The organisations engaged with for recruitment, especially for the focus groups, included:

- Swansea: EYST, YMCA, Interplay, Swansea University
- Deeside: Coleg Cambria, Flintshire Youth Service (youth and community centre), Deeside Soccer School, Flintshire Brownies and Guides, Deeside Air training Corps, Connah's Quay Youth and Community Centre, Connah's Quay Nomads FC, Connah's Quay Labour Club, TATA sports & social club



- Machynlleth: Powys Youth Service, Montgomery YFC, Menter Iaith Maldwyn, Ysgol Bro Hyddgen, Machynlleth Rugby Club, CAMAD, Machynlleth Communities first (ecodyfi)
- Pontypridd: Valleys Kids, University of South Wales, Youth Cymru, Pontypridd RFC youth team, Pontypridd High School, Hawthorn High School, Cardinal Newman RC school.

### Participant demographics

Quotas were set for different demographic groups, to ensure participation by young people from all quintiles of deprivation<sup>2</sup>; those in employment, education and neither; rural communities; BME communities and non-UK EU citizens (or children of non-UK EU citizens); and individuals living with a disability.

A summary of the demographics of the research participants involved in the focus groups and telephone interviews are summarised below:

Category	Focus groups (25 participants in total)	Interviews (39 participants in total)
<b>Age</b>		
16-18	13	17
19-21	5	9
22-24	8	13
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	12	19
Female	13	20
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
BME	<5	<5
Non-UK EU citizen	<5	<5
<b>Working status</b>		
In employment	8	17
In education	13	20
Not in education, training or employment	5	<5
<b>Location</b>		
Rural postcode	<5	6
WIMD Most Deprived Area	<5	7
<b>Disability</b>		
Living with a disability	0	<5

<sup>2</sup> Using Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) data as a guide.

## Analysis

All focus groups and telephone interviews were transcribed. Analysis of the transcripts was undertaken using Quirkos software<sup>(13)</sup>, allowing the text to be coded and key themes identified visually. The report has been structured around the key themes identified by a combination of the software and discussions by the authors, to ensure no one method of analysis took precedence over the other.

Researchers involved in the project met and discussed interim key findings on an ongoing basis. Summaries of interim findings were produced following the completion of the focus groups and at the end of the telephone interviews. These were fed back to Public Health Wales as appropriate.

## Study limitations

This was a small-scale study, taken as a snapshot at one point in time. The political context for Brexit was changeable during the time the research was undertaken and remains uncertain at the time of reporting; the findings must be taken in this context.

Young people can be a challenging group to engage in any type of research. Coupled with the fact that the fieldwork was undertaken during the summer months, when young people may be busy with exams or away during the holiday period, may have contributed to some of the recruitment challenges we experienced, particularly amongst groups that are typically harder to reach.

Whilst quotas were set to ensure a wide range of individuals participated in the research and there were regular reviews of progress towards meeting these quotas, the sample of participants cannot be considered statistically representative of the population.

There is likely to be an element of self-selection bias present in many research projects, particularly where 'gatekeeper organisations' are used to identify suitable participants. This may have resulted in an over-representation of young people who were politically engaged and held strong views on Brexit.

A decision was made at the half way point to change the focus of questioning in the telephone interviews. This was in response to early findings that young people tended to talk about Brexit in an impersonal way, rather than relating it to their own lives. The changes aimed to ensure that young people were given every opportunity to talk more about themselves and their health and well-being in the context of Brexit, rather than speaking generally. It is inevitable that a project of this nature evolves as initial findings begin to emerge and we have tried to consider the findings as a whole as opposed to pre and post changes to the interview questions.

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GIG  
CYMRU  
NHS  
WALES

Iechyd Cyhoeddus  
Cymru  
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