



# What Matters Most

A report setting out young people's views about today's key public policy issues

March 2016



# Methodology

The fieldwork for this research was conducted by the specialist youth research agency - YouthSight - between 29th January and 5th of February 2016. The sample consisted of 2,005 interviews with young people between 16 to 24-year-olds from across England or Wales.

YMCA was established in 1844 and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping more than 58 million people in 119 countries.

Here in England and Wales, 133 YMCAs work to transform more than 660 different communities, impacting on the lives of nearly 600,000 people every year.

YMCA enables people to develop to their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

YMCA stand up for young people, speak out on issues that affect their lives, and help them find confidence in their own voice.

# Introduction

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There are many reasons to believe that young people do not care about the public policy issues currently facing the country.

Young people are now less likely to be members of a political party<sup>1</sup> or union, less likely to register and less likely to vote than in any other time in modern history.

Fewer than 2% of young people are members of a political party and just 9% of those in employment are part of a trade union<sup>2</sup> – both lower than any other age group.

At the last general election in 2015, it is estimated that voter turnout amongst young people was just 44%, nearly half that of over 65s.<sup>3</sup>

For these reasons, the voices and opinions of young people are often overlooked by decision makers and the issues that matter most to them get ignored.

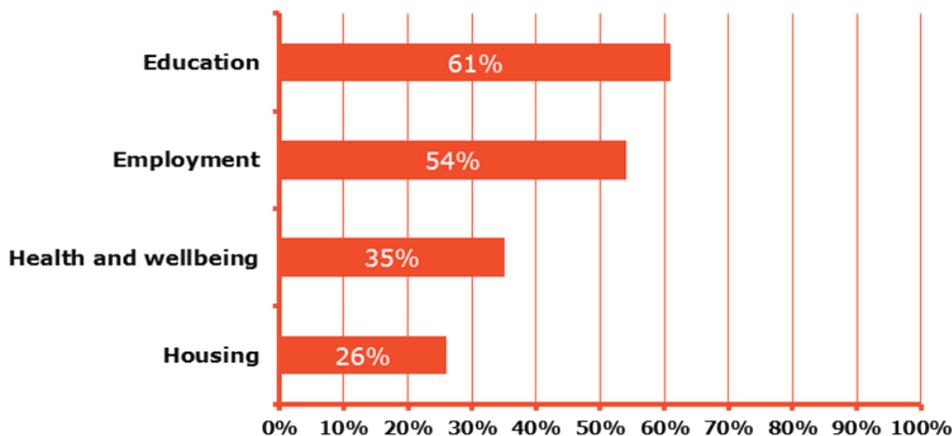
But at a time where difficult spending decisions are continuing to be necessary, YMCA wants to challenge this status quo.

YMCA wants to make sure the key public policy issues that matter to young people are heard by decision makers and are at the forefront of the forthcoming budget and at the heart of this Government's programme up to 2020 and beyond.

# Summary of findings

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To understand **'what matters most'** to this generation of young people, we asked over 2,000 16 to 24-year-olds across England and Wales what they think are the most important issues that need to be tackled.



The area where most young people's concerns are focussed is with **education**, with three in five (61%) of the issues raised relating to this topic.

Within the area of education, there were two prominent concerns raised: the quality and cost of education, with 36% and 24% of the 2,000 respondents questioned raising these as important issues that need tackling.

Among young people's concerns education is closely followed by **employment**, with more than half (54%) of issues raised as needing to be tackled for this generation of young people to succeed being focussed on this topic.

However, it is within this area that when asked what they think are the most important issues that need to be tackled, the biggest single concern for young people emerged. Four in ten (40%) of the young people questioned raised the availability of jobs as been an issue in need of address.

The third area where young people's concerns are concentrated is **health and wellbeing**. More than a third (35%) of the issues young people feel need to be tackled fall within this broad category.

The final key area where young people's concerns are currently focussed is **housing**, with 20% of the issues raised relating to this topic.

To investigate these areas further and uncover young people's most pressing concerns, as well as asking for their overall priorities, the interviews undertaken as part of this research sought to identify their biggest issues under the following key policy themes: -

▶ **Education and employment**

▶ **Health and wellbeing**

▶ **Housing**

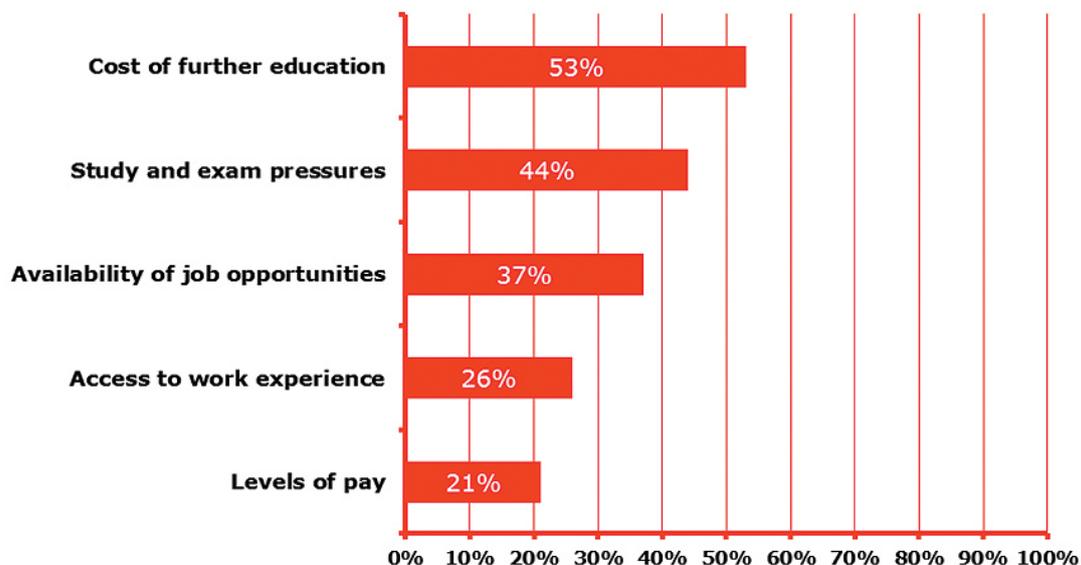
▶ **Children and Families**

The issues raised under each of these themes are set out over the subsequent sections of this report.

# Education and employment

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Leaving education without relevant qualifications and skills can severely damage a young person's long-term employment prospects.



The uppermost concern of young people when it comes to education and employment is the **cost of further education**, with more than half (53%) of those surveyed identifying this as one of their biggest concerns.

The concerns felt centre around the average student debt now being accrued by this generation of young people being in excess of £20,000 for those in England and £17,000 in Wales.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the level of concern expressed and the growing debt young people are amassing going into further education, this has yet to be reflected in the numbers applying for university.

The second biggest concern of young people in this area is the **study and exam pressures** they now face when going through the education system.

While this concern is shared across more than four in ten (44%) young people, the issue is most prominent amongst the younger age groups.

With 62% of 16 to 18-year-olds identifying this as one of their biggest concerns, the research demonstrates the level of pressure this generation of young people feel when undertaking their studies, particularly around Key Stage 5 (A-Levels). The findings from this research are reinforced by the findings of other charities currently working with young people, last year alone ChildLine received more than 34,000 approaches from young people citing school and education problems.<sup>5</sup>

For those leaving education to start their careers, despite the economy showing signs of growth, the findings from the research also draws attention to the difficulties this generation of young people feel they face when looking to find work.

The **availability of jobs** remains an issue for 37% of those surveyed as part of this research, a concern which is borne out by more than 585,000 young people still finding themselves out of work and struggling to gain sustained employment.<sup>6</sup>

It is those aged 22 to 24-years-old for whom the issue is most acute, with nearly half (47%) of this age group identifying the availability of work as being a one of their biggest concerns.

Contributing to this challenge young people now face finding work is their lack of **access to work experience**, leaving them ill-equipped and lacking the practical skills now so often required by employers when they are applying for jobs.

While uptake of pre-16 work experience is widespread across England and Wales, a quarter (26%) of young people felt a lack of work experience is still holding them back when it came to finding employment.

For those young people who are fortunate enough to find employment once they leave education, the situation is still not ideal, with the issue of the **levels of pay** raised as a key concern.

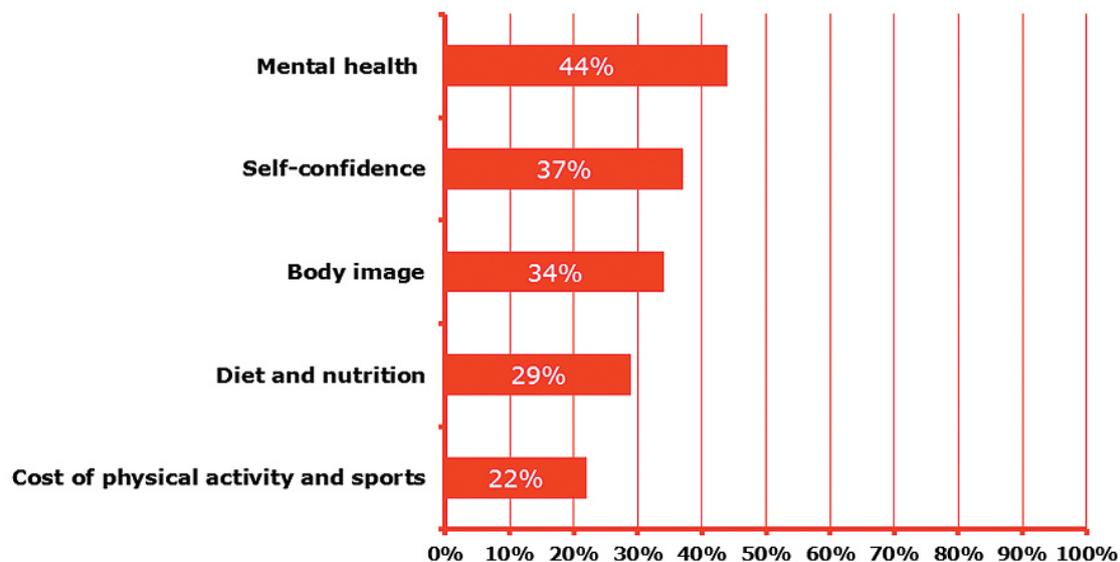
One in five (21%) of those young people taking part in this research raised current levels of pay as being an issue, with numbers much higher among the older age range surveyed (31% of 22 to 24-year-olds).

With 16 to 24-year-olds earning around 42% less than older age groups, many stuck in a no-pay low-pay cycle, and this age group due to miss out on the benefits of the new living wage with the cut off set at 25, the concerns felt by young people in this area are understandable.<sup>7</sup>

# Health and wellbeing

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Having a positive physical, social and mental state is key to young people achieving their personal goals and participating fully in society.



However, topping young people's health and wellbeing concerns is **mental health**; with 44% of the more than 2,000 young people surveyed identifying this as being one of the biggest issues they are currently facing.

Issues raised with mental health were most prominent amongst women, with more than half (52%) of those participating in the research identifying this as a concern, compared to 35% of men.

Given the prominence of this issue and the impact that poor mental health can have on young people's life prospects, the recent Government announcements around extra investment in these services should have come as welcome news.

The concerns felt around mental health, were closely followed by issues young people face around **self-confidence** and **body image**.

Across those surveyed, 37% of young people raised self-confidence as being one of their biggest health and wellbeing concerns, while 34% raised body image.

As with mental health, issues around self-confidence and body image were both more prominent amongst women than men, however for both sexes these are still seen to be significant concerns.

With three in five adults now reporting they feel ashamed of the way they look and many of these problems first emerging during childhood, the prominence of body image amongst the issues most affecting young people comes as little surprise but reinforces the need for action in this area.<sup>8</sup>

The research also highlights the importance of the issue of **diet and nutrition** to young people, with 29% of those participating in the research raising this as a big concern.

With less than a third of 16 to 24-year-olds in both England<sup>9</sup> and Wales<sup>10</sup> meeting the recommended five-a-day portions of fruit and vegetables and a third of this age group being overweight or obese, the concerns revealed by young people through this research are borne out in the national trends.

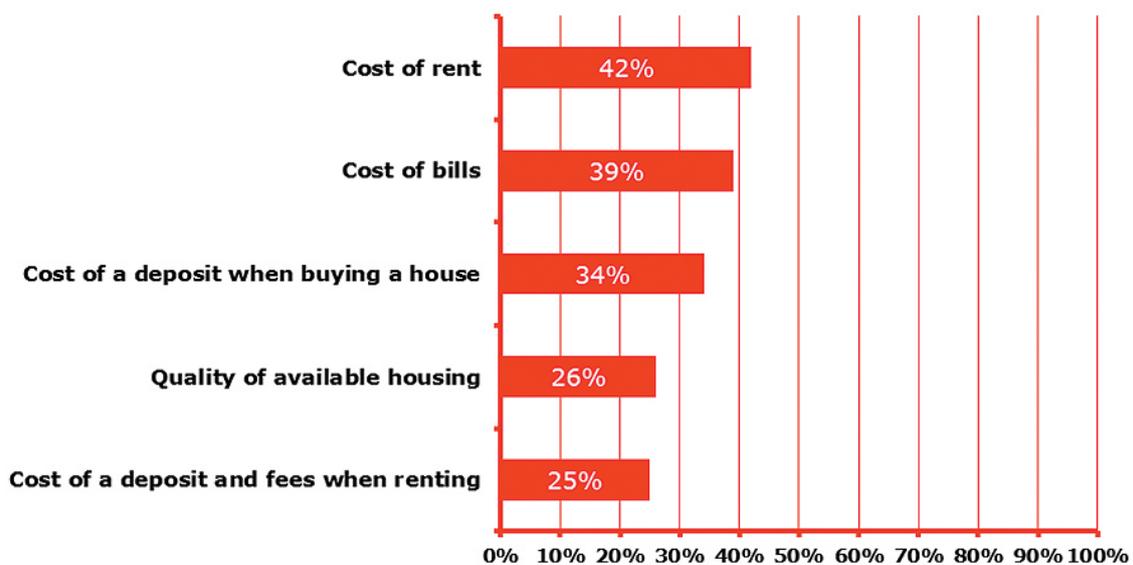
The final significant concern raised by young people regarding their health and wellbeing is the **cost of participating in physical activity and sport**.

Being able to enjoy the benefits of physical exercise is key to improving young health and life chances, but previously when cost would not have been a factor in them doing this, the reduction in community spaces in which people can play sports and be active has resulted in only the options with a financial cost associated with them being available.

Across all those questioned, 22% of young people regarded the cost of participating in physical activity and sport as being an issue, however, the issue of cost is felt most amongst the older age range – with more than three in ten (31%) of 22 to 24-year-olds identifying it as a big concern.

# Housing

Not being able to access quality housing can have a huge impact on the life of a young person, increasing the risk of them suffering from poor health, educational under-attainment, unemployment and poverty.



Topping young people's concerns when it comes to finding somewhere to live is the **cost of rent** – with 42% of young people ranking this as one of their biggest issues.

With average rent for a one bedroom property in England and Wales setting back young people in excess of £640<sup>11</sup> and £420<sup>12</sup> a month respectively, and increases in rent of around 12% in the last five years,<sup>13</sup> the concerns reflected in the findings from the research are understandable.

This is especially the case when you consider that these increases come on top of already inflated houses prices caused by the bubble which gripped Britain throughout the nineties and noughties, and average wages failing to keep pace.<sup>14</sup>

While London offers a unique housing challenge for anyone looking to rent or buy, the importance of this issue is shared right across the country, with more than a third of young people in every region identifying the cost of rent as a significant issue they face growing up in Britain today.

Closely following the cost of rent in young people's concerns relating to housing, is the **cost of day-to-day bills** such as energy, water and council tax.

The reason for the concerns felt by young people are again understandable in the context of average household energy costs having increased by more than 73% over the past ten years, eight times quicker than earnings.<sup>15</sup>

For those young people looking to make that next step and buy a place of their own, the biggest issue they face is the **cost of a deposit**, with more than a third of young people (34%) identifying this as a significant concern.

Understandably this concern was felt most by those in older age range surveyed, with 48% of 22 to 24-year-olds raising the cost of a deposit as a key issue for them.

While there has been a slight fall (£2,500) in the last five years in the average deposit required when buying a house, aided by schemes such as 'Help to Buy' this has done little to arrest the longer-term trends. Over the past decade the cost has risen by 89% (£15,000), with the median deposit now setting back first-time buyers more than £25,000.<sup>16</sup>

The impact of this can be seen in the numbers of young people now owning their own home. When you go back just 10 years, a quarter of 16 to 24-year-olds owned their own home. This figure now stands at 8%, demonstrating the changing housing landscape this generation of young people now face.<sup>17</sup>

The extent to which this truly has become 'generation rent' is demonstrated that over the same period of time, the percentage of 16 to 24-year-olds privately renting has increased from 43% to 71%.<sup>18</sup>

Upfront costs is not only seen as an issue for those young people looking to buy, finding the **cost of a deposit and fees** is also highlighted by a quarter (25%) of young people as a significant challenge for those looking to rent.

In addition to having to find one month's rent in advance together with a deposit usually between one month and six weeks rent, letting agents are increasingly placing a range of additional upfront costs on tenants.

When you add letting fees to the average rent and deposit now paid in England and Wales, many young people could be looking to find in excess of £2,000 before they are able to move into a private rented sector property.<sup>19</sup>

The final significant concern raised by young people is **quality of housing** available to them, with just more than a quarter (26%) of those surveyed highlighting this as a key concern facing this generation.

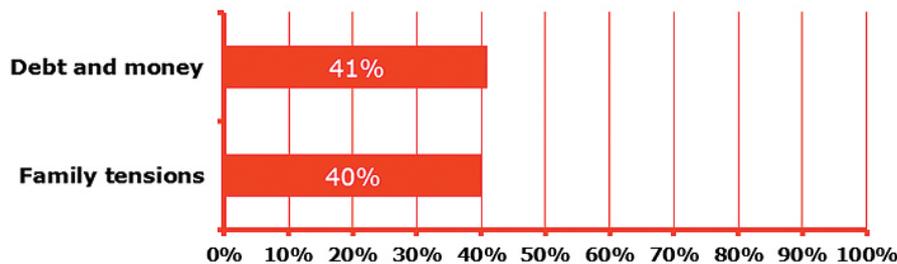
Much has been done over recent years to improve standards in housing; however the reality that many young people face when they begin looking for somewhere to live can be bleak.

As already set out, the housing options open to young people are increasingly limited to private rented sector, where the highest proportion of homes (29%) fail to meet the decent homes standard.<sup>20</sup>

# Children and Families

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The right start in life is crucial for the long-term development of individuals and communities.



The most pressing issues identified by young people in relation to children and families focussed on debt and money concerns as well as family tensions.

More than two in five young people (41%) identified **debt and money** concerns as one of the biggest issues affecting them.

The negative effects of problem debt can be significant, impacting an individual's physical and mental health as well as housing, employment and relationships.

It is estimated that nearly 2.1 million children and young people in England and Wales are currently living in families who are experiencing financial difficulties but, not only that, young people themselves are beginning to accrue significant amounts of debt.<sup>21</sup>

The average debt of 15 to 24-year-olds grew by more than 200% between 2006 and 2012 to more than £12,000, and is now 10 times more than the average debt of the wider population.<sup>22</sup>

While the escalating cost of further education already raised in this research has been a significant factor in the growing amount of debt young people face, it has accounted for less than half this increase, demonstrating that the problem goes much wider.<sup>23</sup>

The second biggest issue raised by young people in this area was **family relationships and tensions**. 40% of the more than 2,000 surveyed felt family tensions were one of the biggest issues facing young people in England and Wales.

Given that nearly half of divorces involve children and young people, collectively we have to ensure that they are supported through the process to help minimise the impact it has on them and their future.<sup>24</sup>

# Conclusions

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It is easy for decision makers to regard young people's lack of engagement in the traditional mechanisms of politics as a sign that they do not care.

However, YMCA believes this disconnection should not be mistaken for not caring or that young people are not facing pressing issues.

There are more than 6.7 million 16 to 24-year-olds currently living in England and Wales, and as this research shows, they are facing some critical issues, which without action, could prevent this generation of young people truly fulfilling their potential.<sup>25</sup>

At a time when so many big decisions affecting the future of the country are to be taken, YMCA is calling on politicians at all levels to join us in amplifying their voices to ensure that **'what matters most'** to young people growing up in modern Britain, become the focus of the Government's programme up to 2020 and beyond.

# Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> The Guardian (2015), Political parties are neglecting young people
- <sup>2</sup> Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (2015), Trade union statistics
- <sup>3</sup> Ipsos Mori (2015), The 2015 election – who voted for whom?
- <sup>4</sup> Student Loans Company (2015), Students Loans in England and Wales
- <sup>5</sup> NSPCC (2015), Under Pressure: ChildLine Review
- <sup>6</sup> ONS (2016), Regional Labour Market Statistics
- <sup>7</sup> ONS (2012), Young People in Work
- <sup>8</sup> Centre for Appearance Research (2012)
- <sup>9</sup> Health and Social Care Information (2015) Health Survey for England
- <sup>10</sup> Stats Wales (2015) Welsh Health Survey
- <sup>11</sup> Valuation Office Agency (2015), Private Rental Market Summary Statistics England
- <sup>12</sup> Rent Officers Wales (2015), Letting Information Database
- <sup>13</sup> ONS (2016), Index of Private Housing Rental Prices
- <sup>14</sup> ONS (2016), Average Weekly Earnings
- <sup>15</sup> Department of Energy & Climate Change (2015), Annual domestic energy bills
- <sup>16</sup> Department of Communities and Local Government (2016) English Housing Survey
- <sup>17</sup> Department of Communities and Local Government (2016) English Housing Survey
- <sup>18</sup> Department of Communities and Local Government (2016) English Housing Survey
- <sup>19</sup> Shelter (2013), Letting Agencies: the price you pay
- <sup>20</sup> Department of Communities and Local Government (2016) English Housing Survey
- <sup>21</sup> The Children's Society and StepChange (2014), The Debt Trap
- <sup>22</sup> Citizens Advice (2015), Unsecured and insecure?
- <sup>23</sup> Citizens Advice (2015), Unsecured and insecure?
- <sup>24</sup> ONS (2015), Divorces in England and Wales
- <sup>25</sup> ONS (2012) 2011 Census, Population and Household Estimates for England and Wales



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