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**“LIFE WAS SO DIFFERENT IN SO  
MANY WAYS. I’M NOT SURE I CAN  
GO BACK TO HOW IT WAS”**

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THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON YOUNG  
PEOPLE’S LIVES IN STRETFORD, GREATER MANCHESTER

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INSIGHT REPORT

## Introduction

This report provides an overview of the key findings that have emerged from a set of stories gathered as part of the CONTINUE Project, reflecting on young people's experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The stories included in the report were gathered from young people who attended Community Reporting sessions at Gorse Hill Studios in Stretford, Greater Manchester. The young people learnt about storytelling techniques and developed digital skills, before working in pairs to record interviews exploring each other's experiences of the pandemic. The stories young people contributed to the project reflect a diverse range of experiences, and whilst the key findings reflect common themes that have emerged from the stories, it is important to note how unique each individual's experience has been. The categories included in the key findings section of the report were chosen by the young people in a series of curation sessions to help make sense of how young people have been affected by the pandemic.

### **“I was terrified to go back to school because I've missed all the work.” – Education**

The transition to and from online and in-person education was challenging for young people to adapt to. Some felt being at home provided a better space for concentration and focus due to fewer distractions, whereas others struggled with finding the self-motivation required when studying from home. Lockdown meant that young people had more free time to spend at home, some used this time to complete homework, whereas others focussed on developing new skills and hobbies. Overall there were mixed feelings about how COVID-19 had impacted the young people's experiences of education, some were less bothered about what they had missed out on, as they didn't enjoy school with some feeling happy about not being there. Others found being away from school stressful as they were concerned about catching up on work and wanted to know when things would go back to what they were used to. When lockdown restrictions were lifted, most young people felt happy to be back in school, particularly when they reunited with friends, although social distancing took some time to adjust to. Wearing masks and remembering the rules was difficult at times and there was a sense of panic around returning to school with restrictions still in place. Young people also reported how

they struggled with behaviour when returning to school, highlighting how they had previously been kicked out of school for bad behaviour. From these findings it is clear that young people would benefit from more support with transitioning in and out of the different learning environments that have been created as a result of COVID. Additional help would minimise stress and ensure young people feel as though they are keeping up with work, particularly those who struggle with self-learning, concentration and behaviour. More awareness and understanding of the potential panic caused by changing restrictions would be beneficial as the situation around COVID continues to evolve.

### **“Life was difficult in so many ways. I’m not sure I can go back to like it was” – Attitudes towards lockdown and restrictions**

Attitudes towards lockdown and restrictions varied in each of the stories and many of the young people felt conflicted in their own attitudes toward the pandemic too. Restrictions continued to impact young people for longer than initially expected, and the continual change was difficult for them to have to adapt to. Some of the storytellers abided by the lockdown rules whereas others struggled to acknowledge restrictions, but regardless of the extent to which the young people decided to follow government guidance, there was a shared feeling of boredom at being stuck at home. Many young people report that restrictions were confusing to follow and some felt like they didn't know what was going on. Watching the news was one way they tried to understand what was happening but the information on offer to them was different everywhere they looked. The relief of restrictions lifting and being able to return to some sense of normalcy was a shared experience. Previously mundane events such as visiting a supermarket to buy food helped them to regain a sense of life before lockdown. Many of the young people report feeling as though lockdown would go on forever, spending lots of time wondering when it would end. Some found resilience in hoping the lockdown and restrictions wouldn't last forever whereas others didn't trust the restrictions to keep them safe. What is clear is that uncertainty was the most common theme in each of the stories in terms of attitudes toward the lockdowns and restrictions. One possible solution to this would be the production of clear, concise and accessible information about newly enforced restrictions relating to COVID-19. Also more informative content created for young people explaining what is happening and what the implications

will be for them would help to build a sense of understanding in younger generations.

### **“After COVID I lost a part of myself, but gradually I’m finding them.” – Mental health and emotional wellbeing**

Young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing was heavily impacted by COVID-19 and the consequential lockdowns and restrictions. There was a significant number of stories which referenced how stress levels were heightened throughout the pandemic, particularly due to fears around restrictions constantly fluctuating. The continual disruption to young people's routines and daily lives, combined with being instructed to stay at home caused stress levels to rise, as did the ongoing news broadcasts and updates and the expectation to continue with school work. Boredom was another common emotion experienced by the young people during the pandemic. Although they had extra free time to spend relaxing and doing hobbies with some appreciating the time to recuperate and understand their emotions, many felt trapped having to stay inside. The lack of interaction with people outside of the home contributed to feelings of depression, isolation and loneliness and whilst social media provided a means of staying in touch, it felt more distant than in-person communication. In one case a young person's social anxiety worsened as they felt they started to forget how to communicate with people. Some storytellers report a rise in confidence levels whilst others felt it was reduced, but what is clear is that the majority struggled with maintaining their mental health and wellbeing. The feeling of being pushed into a new environment without feeling prepared for change causes panic and worry - more support is crucial in order to provide young people with coping strategies for dealing with traumatic experiences such as COVID.

### **“I immersed myself into a creative world” – Social media**

In an ever more secluded environment, social media provided a means of keeping in touch with friends and family and staying connected with the outside world. However as time went on, many young people began to feel frustration towards connecting with people online. One young person felt social media provided a valuable means of escape:

"I immersed myself into a creative world and understood others' worlds by withdrawing from social events."

In embracing social media they found a sense of self they hadn't discovered prior to the Pandemic. Nevertheless in their story they highlight how social media can easily become a toxic environment, particularly when the focus shifts to gaining and maintaining a following. Allowing young people to explore their relationship with social media and realise the potential benefits and harmful effects is vital in ensuring they build a healthy connection with it.

### **"Seeing friends over facetime wasn't the same as seeing them in person." – Building Bonds**

Young people report missing having people around during the heightened stages of lockdown during the pandemic. One young person in particular struggled with the lack of visitors when settling into their new independent living situation away from their foster placement. For other young people the extra time spent at home allowed them to build bonds with those living with them. Lockdown gave one young person more time to build bonds with their new foster carers as they had to stay indoors. Whilst usually they would be out spending time with friends, having a new foster placement at the start of lockdown meant there was more time to bond. Some young people felt scared to reintegrate with friends when lockdown restrictions were lifted, but speaking to friends online helped to ease these feelings. Still the legacy of lockdown left them feeling more distant from people both physically and emotionally.

"Seeing friends over FaceTime wasn't the same as seeing them in person."

The lack of socialisation with friends caused one young person to feel weary of being too needy in social situations, something which reflects how support may have been and could still be vital, but they may be hesitant to seek it out for themselves. In order to prioritise young people's safety, organisations and individuals working with young people need to be observant and aware of some people's tendency to avoid looking for help when they might need it most.

## **“I like to be out doing things - it was hard knowing how to entertain yourself.” – Routines and daily life**

The ongoing disruption to young people's daily routines was hugely influenced by the pandemic, increased periods of time spent indoors was a new experience for many young people. It was difficult for them to maintain the same levels of social interaction with peers in a home environment, but the extra time enabled them to develop new hobbies and skills such as dance, ukulele, gaming, drawing and board games. Over time it got more difficult to find activities and hobbies to do and it started to get boring having everything on repeat for a year. Once they had adjusted to life in lockdown and the routine that came with it, restrictions would change and their existing routine would break down, resulting in many young people feeling lost and the repetition of distance contributed to feelings of loneliness. Nevertheless time spent outside, whether it be exercising or catching up with friends, was a positive experience. One young person commented that Lockdown enabled them to explore their personal style, leading them to become more colourful in what they wanted to wear. One final benefit of the COVID-19 pandemic was the increased opportunity for sleep and rest, young people enjoyed having more time in bed and no longer needing to get up early to commute to school or college. Young people report a key takeaway from the pandemic being the fact they learned that they need time for themselves and they can sometimes enjoy being alone.

### **Key findings**

- Education: More flexibility and support for young people when adjusting to new learning environments would minimise the impact on their education and ensure they feel confident in their ability to keep up with work.
- Attitudes toward lockdown and restrictions: The production of clear, concise and accessible information specifically catering to young people with regards to the implications of the pandemic would make it easier for them to abide by restrictions and feel more informed.
- Mental health and emotional wellbeing: Young people need to be equipped with effective coping strategies for dealing with traumatic experiences such as COVID-19 to minimise the risk of poor mental health and emotional wellbeing.

- Social media and connections: Young people should be provided with a supportive learning space to explore their relationship with social media and the potential benefits and harmful effects it can have.
- Building bonds: People working with young people need to be observant and aware of young people's ability and desire to speak out for support to help prioritise their safety and wellbeing
- Routines and daily habits: Young people have demonstrated a huge level of resilience to the constant disruption caused by the pandemic. The breakdown of routine can have a negative impact on young people's mental wellbeing as can the lack of rest - would it be possible to give them more control over their routines and daily habits?

## About CONTINUE

CONTINUE supports young people experiencing social exclusion to tackle the specific challenges of post-COVID times in terms of staying connected and integrated into European communities. The project is being delivered by a consortium of 8 NGOs from different European countries who are experienced in youth education and community based activities. The work involves storytelling, social action projects, policy development, knowledge exchanges, an outreach campaign and the creation of an online platform.

As part of this project, Community Reporting activities are being delivered with young people across Europe to explore their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and what can support them as part of the COVID-19 recovery period. This learning will be used in the CONTINUE project to kick-start social actions led by the young people in their communities. Community Reporting is a digital storytelling movement founded by People's Voice Media and supports people to tell their own stories, in their own ways in order to catalyse change within processes, policy and practice. You can find out more here: <https://peoplesvoicemedia.co.uk>

This insight report has been produced by PEOPLE'S VOICE MEDIA (PVM) and is based on 15 stories gathered from young people living in STRETFORD, GREATER MANCHESTER in the UK. All of the stories from young people that have been gathered on the project can be listened to here: <https://communityreporter.net/continue>



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