

Note from a private informal meeting between the Welsh Affairs Committee and young people as part of the Impact of population change in Wales inquiry

6 March 2024

During a discussion with four young people from across Wales, the following themes emerged:

Attendees would like to stay in Wales

"I love Wales and where I live".

Attendees described how other young people in their friendship groups had moved away to universities in larger cities in England that are near to Wales's border, including Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Bristol. The attendees said that many friends had not returned to Wales after they finished their degrees.

Attendees expressed a desire to remain in Wales and said the greatest barriers to this revolved around access to employment, such as the availability of public transport links and appropriate employment. An attendee noted the importance of family and family links when deciding where to live.

Barriers to achieving in Wales

"That is one of the biggest difficulties, is transport"

During the discussion, **a lack of public transport** was highlighted several times as a difficulty facing young people. Two attendees said journeys were much longer when using public transport, which made it difficult to access voluntary opportunities and travel to urban hubs. Another attendee said the cost of public transport can make work unfeasible, citing that he was unable to accept a 16-hour contract because of the cost of travelling to work. An attendee said a local flexible booking service for a bus was a "lifesaver" but added it only operated for a period of time in the morning and evening, and was often fully booked.

Attendees also highlighted their **confidence and social skills** as barriers to achieving their ambitions in Wales. All attendees had been supported by a charitable organisation and said this had been very valuable to help them build their confidence and soft skills, to support them into work, training or enterprise. Attendees also cited poor **mental health**, describing the relationship between difficulty finding work, experiencing mental health challenges and having the confidence to pursue opportunities.

Attendees referred to **career advice in school**, which they said focused on traditional routes and provided little support for options outside university. Attendees described being unsure what to do after school and said that the advice available did not direct them towards a career. An attendee noted they had been academically successful at university, but his university had not provided work skills or helped him to build his confidence. Two of the attendees had either **started their own business** or expressed a wish to start their own business. An attendee said he had always wanted to start his own business but that he did not know where to start. The help received from The Prince's Trust, which included a one-to-one mentor, was praised.

“I always wanted to work and do well, I just needed that extra support, which the Prince’s Trust has now given me over the last two years.”

The benefits system was seen by some of the attendees as disincentivising young people from finding work. One of the young people had experienced depression following a long period of unemployment and the job rejections he had received during that time. He described a “vicious cycle”, in that he had a strong work ethic but the Jobcentre had wanted him to sign off from work sick, something he was reluctant to do. The attendee said he was placed on a six-month work placement, but there was no support when this concluded and he fell into unemployment again.

Attendees referred to **the choice of jobs available**, with most attendees saying the type of work available locally was primarily in factories or social care. One attendee said that due to a visual impairment this type of work was not suitable for him. Attendees also expressed an interest in working in the media or creative sector. However, an attendee said “there’s pretty much nothing” within those sectors nearby (in North Wales). She added that someone would need to travel to “the bigger cities” to find jobs in those sectors.

“most jobs in Wrexham are in care or factory work, for me that’s not the sort of work I am interested in”

During the discussion, one attendee said **lockdown** had prevented a cohort of young people from transitioning from education into employment. She said some young people may wish to remain on Universal Credit because the jobs available, in factories for example, are not attractive to them. An attendee from North Wales suggested that **not being fluent in Welsh** was a barrier in some jobs, although this was not a universal experience as another attendee from North Wales did not recognise this from her own experience of looking for jobs.

An attendee also described the pressures on young people to pursue a particular life course, such as going to college, then university and marriage. She spoke about how difficult it can be if someone does not follow this route and said she felt like a “failure” when this was not the path for her.

Positive experiences

Attendees referred to **volunteering, support to build confidence** and soft skills, and **work placements** among the positive experiences that had helped them to find work, training or start their own business. The attendees referenced programmes provided by The Prince’s Trust and WeMindTheGap, as all attendees had received support from one of those organisations.

Summary of recommendations

At the end of the discussion, the attendees were asked what politicians in government could do to encourage young people to stay in Wales. They said:

- There should be **greater mental health support for young people**. An attendee said external programmes are valuable, but of limited use if people are not in the headspace to reach out for employment or training support.
- It should be easier for young people **to find suitable housing**. An attendee noted that housing being built near them was primarily designed for older people and was not appropriate for young people’s needs.
- There should be **targeted support for young people with disabilities and neurodiversity** who want to work but are labelled as “too sick” to work and are only signposted to Universal

Credit. Politicians should support and ensure greater visibility to organisations which help young people, such as The Prince's Trust and WeMindTheGap.

- During the discussion, attendees also highlighted the importance of **support for enterprise**, to help young people who want to start their own business.