

RECLAIM – Written evidence (HSC0061)

There is no space for us and we are never allowed a say, so give us better places: working class young people’s experiences of their high streets

RECLAIM is a working-class youth campaigns charity based in and around Greater Manchester. We work with working-class young people across the combined authority to build their power and support them to change things that matter to them. The evidence below is drawn from working-class young people aged between 14-21 taking part in our different projects and programmes. These include Young Policy Makers¹, Our Space², and our ongoing Manchester Manifesto³ campaign, each of which have either directly or indirectly worked on issues regarding high streets and built environments.

Our Young Policy Makers groups are 2 groups of working-class young people in Bolton and Leigh, working on developing policy influencing campaigns around issues that matter to them. We spoke with them about the Select Committee’s questions on high streets. Both Bolton Town Centre and parts of Leigh’s town centre are fairly desolate. There are large numbers of unoccupied units in Bolton’s town centre, which we attribute to the local council not dropping business rates for renting the units, and one young person described her local high street as having: ‘Leigh sports village, the stadium, and Whistling Wren, a pub’ (quotation edited only for grammar). None of these are particularly accessible to young people and they offer few job or recreational opportunities for local young working class people.

Our Young Policy Makers also explored green spaces near and adjacent to their high streets. The young people in Leigh discussed the green spaces in their local area and how they tend to be poorly kept, making them less accessible and pleasant for them. Speaking on this and their local streets, a young person stated that ‘things in Bolton aren’t well looked after.’ The young person in question said they would create a project to encourage the people of Bolton to better preserve the area as a response. These discussions reflect how little investment is put into the public spaces and high streets of these working class areas.

The Young Policy Makers young people reported a variety of experiences of their high streets. Some said that they don’t feel safe walking around Bolton town centre, as there are many drug dealers, drug users, and no safe spaces for

¹ <https://www.reclaim.org.uk/ymp>

² <https://www.reclaim.org.uk/our-space>

³ <https://www.reclaim.org.uk/listen-up>

young people. These are common discussion points across all our projects. Another said they felt safe but bored, as there is nothing for young people in the town centre. 'There is no space for us,' they said. Another young person, based in Leigh, said that the only place she goes locally is Leigh Youth Hub, which is like a 'second home' for her. This young person also said she wished there were a Primark on the high street, as it's a 'popular shop [for] teenagers'. Yet another young person in Leigh similarly wants a Starbucks on the local high street, as it's a place to hang out with friends. These comments reflect the issues that our two Young Policy Maker groups have continually returned to over the first year and a half of their project: wanting more spaces for young people in their local areas, wanting more spaces accessible to young people in their local areas, and wanting their high streets to have more available and open spaces on them. Where the young people discuss bringing in national or multinational businesses, like Starbucks and Primark, they tend to focus on these as assets because they are: affordable, accessible to young people, where they know young people (including themselves) go in other areas, and, therefore, popular with young people.

In November 2023 both Bolton and Leigh town centres were awarded millions in Levelling Up funding⁴. However, to date there has been little evidence to our knowledge of how working-class young people within these towns are being involved in the decision making as to how that money will be spent.

The Manchester Manifesto campaign group have called on Greater Manchester's re-elected mayor, Andy Burnham, to pledge to:

- Invest in more youth centres and youth provision, ensuring each borough has what it needs including youth spaces within city and town centres.
- Provide support for a broad range of arts, cultural and entertainment activities accessible for all young people.
- Introduce a 'youth green space quota' ensuring that young people in each borough have an equal right to green space both now and in any future planning.
- Develop a digital resource for young people in Greater Manchester that allows us to see what youth services and activities are available.
- Ensure young people across our communities are supported in the planning, design and delivery of youth provision.

These policy demands were developed by a group of 15-17 year olds who undertook a project exploring the role and responsibilities of the mayor and combined authority, whilst reviewing recurrent themes highlighted by other RECLAIM campaigns groups working on related subjects. The members of Young Policy Makers were unanimous in stating that '[working-class young people] are never allowed a say' in developing ideas of what their future high streets would

⁴ <https://gmbusinessboard.com/news/four-greater-manchester-councils-receive-levelling-up-fund-boost>

be like. When asked by RECLAIM staff, they emphasised that they would 'like to see safe places for young people to hang out,' including 'where [they] can do activities such as wall climbing.' In previous sessions, they have focused on the following demands:

- Free transport needed for working-class young people to access their high streets in the first place, with transport links needed to youth services and other support offers
- Spaces to learn new skills, such as cooking, allotments, music lessons and studios; all of which could happen in the many empty units on many high streets, such as Bolton's
- Learning opportunities for older young people and adults, who may have missed out on GCSEs, such as an Adult Learning Centre
- Arts and culture venues that are open and accessible to working-class young people

In more detail, RECLAIM's Our Space group, who campaigned on making public spaces accessible to working class young people, specified the following things as part of what is needed for public spaces - like high streets - to be truly accessible to working-class young people:

1. WE DESERVE ACCESS

We all have the right to access, use and enjoy public spaces, regardless of our identity or background. Spaces should be managed and maintained in a way that meets the needs of working-class young people.

What this looks like:

- *Prayer spaces are available in libraries so that we can study for long periods of time.*
- *Reduced ticket prices for those with low-income backgrounds i.e. concession tickets.*
- *Support with travel costs.*

2. WE DESERVE REPRESENTATION

We should have the right to have a say in decisions about our local public spaces and what happens within them. We should be consulted and listened to, ensuring our voice is heard and represented as equally as adults.

What this looks like:

- *Work with cohorts of young people to co-create policies to ensure those policies are reflective of their needs.*
- *Proactively engage with young people in youth clubs within the local area during the planning and development stages of any new public space*

3. WE DESERVE TO BE SAFE

We should feel safe at all times, yet our safety is never a priority. Therefore, we deserve extra support in the public spaces that we access.

What this looks like:

- *Public spaces should adopt an 'Ask Angela' style system that supports young people if they feel that they're in danger or at risk, especially in the evenings in busy areas such as transport hubs*
- *There should be designated guardians on public transport to protect young people, instead of punishing them.*
- *In and around public spaces with lots of young people, such as schools, there should be better prevention of speeding and dangerous driving*

4. WE DESERVE TO BE UNDERSTOOD

Public spaces we use should be staffed by people who understand and are trained in the issues we experience. This training should be delivered by people and organisations with lived experience of the matters that working-class young people face.

What this looks like:

- *Training should be provided to organisations that are trusted by working-class young people. These could include organisations such as REIGN which campaign on issues relating to child sexual abuse and exploitation.*

5. WE DESERVE RESPECT

We deserve respect, compassion and trust. We do not deserve to be stereotyped or assumed criminals. We should feel welcomed in all public spaces, not judged.

What this looks like:

- *In spaces with security staff, those staff should receive training on anti-racism so they don't racially profile young people within the space*
- *Organisations managing public spaces should work to create safer and inclusive spaces, rather than rely on targeted and harmful policing practices that further stereotype and criminalise young people. e.*

RECLAIM's young people understand that the barriers to their demands are 'people (in power) not listening [to them], and no funding.' As indicated by these

quotes, all of them tacitly understand the political system is stacked against working-class people, particularly working-class young people, and many intuitively grasp the impact of over a decade of austerity (and many decades more of deindustrialisation) on local economies and built environments, including their high streets. Their overriding experiences are of disinvested local areas and high streets, dominated by issues (drug use, vandalism and other 'anti-social' behaviour) that are directly and indirectly caused by lack of jobs and services, without safe or interesting places for young people to spend time recreationally or educationally. All of them know they deserve much better.

About RECLAIM:

RECLAIM is a registered charity that builds knowledge, power, community and solidarity with working-class young people to campaign on the issues that affect them the most.

They deliver youth campaign programmes across Greater Manchester for working-class young people aged between 11 - 25 to support them to build a fair and just world.

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