

Nothing About Us *Without Us*

Giving Britain's youth agency in
combating the wellbeing crisis

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About Us

Global Future is a think tank dedicated to using psychology to provide fearless and original insight into the challenges facing our times. We aim to guide leaders – from businesses to politics, arts and civil society – to ask bigger, deeper questions about how we can best serve our communities.

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Foreword

On World Mental Health Day, *Nothing About Us Without Us* highlights a critical truth: young people in Britain are facing a wellbeing crisis. As a mental health campaigner, who knows that poor mental health in adolescence is a strong predictor for poor mental health later in life, this report clearly makes the case that we need to act now.

To tackle this wellbeing crisis, we first need to understand what is driving it. Young people are struggling with loneliness because our communities are fragmenting, and because social media, though intended to connect us, is deepening feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction. Our mission should be to address these underlying issues, to give young people the tools they need to thrive.

The challenge is that young people, who need care and guidance, are instead feeling unsupported and unprepared for the future. Our education system is falling short, and many young people are leaving school feeling ill-equipped for the working world. This lack of support is feeding into a harmful cycle— young people's biggest concerns revolve around their economic and employment prospects, yet these very anxieties may be making it harder for them to succeed. With 9.2 million working-age Britons now out of the labour force—and mental health

Richard Hawkes
CEO British Asian Trust

issues being a leading cause among those in their early 20s—it's crucial that leaders take this report seriously. The sooner we act to support young people, the better we can address these interconnected challenges.

Far too many young people feel like they are fighting these battles alone, they feel like their leaders are not considering their needs. Drawing from a background in psychology, this research explains why it is so important that young people feel they have the agency to determine their own futures— autonomy is the key to wellbeing. For too long, decisions have been made about young people's lives without their input.

This World Mental Health Day, let's commit to amplifying youth voices, addressing the root causes of this crisis, and ensuring that young people are central to the solutions. Their futures—and our collective future—depend on it.

Executive Summary

Britain's young people are experiencing a crisis of wellbeing. Our GB-wide survey of young people aged 16-24 conducted by YouGov revealed that 34% in that age bracket feel dissatisfied with their lives and 59% report experiencing periods of bad emotional wellbeing 'sometimes', 'often' or 'all of the time'.

Asking young people what lies behind these problems and what would help them is key. While the wellbeing crisis is well recognised, leaders have been quick to prescribe solutions without pausing to ask young people what lies behind the issues and whether they would support their proposed policies.

Our data reveals that poor wellbeing in young people is driven by deep economic concern. Over half of young people in Britain believe the most important issue facing them and their family is the cost of living crisis (62%), and one in three say it is the economy in general (32%).

Young people feel that life chances open to previous generations are not available to them – they are pessimistic about the future. The vast majority of young people now feel like it is harder than it was for their parents, to get a good job (74%), to buy a home (94%) and to enjoy a reasonable standard of living (85%).

The 'epidemic of loneliness' is hitting young people hard. While much of the policy focus on loneliness has been on older generations, most young people do not feel part of their local community (65%) and almost a third report feeling lonely 'often' or 'all of the time' (29%).

Social media is exacerbating their problems. Of those in the sample who use social media, 64% want to spend less time on it and a higher proportion believe it is having a negative impact on their personal wellbeing (35%), than a positive impact (28%).

Young people feel like these issues aren't recognised by those in power. 81% of young people believe that political leaders don't reflect the views of people like them.

Imbuing a sense of agency in young people must be central to the Government's response. Psychological and economic theory teaches us that ownership and agency is an important part of successful policy concerning wellbeing. Rather than paternalistically imposing solutions to young people's wellbeing, the new Labour government must recognise that it is impossible to make progress on issues without listening to the experiences and suggestions of those affected by them.

Young people believe the school system must do more to equip them with the tools to thrive, with only 20% feeling they've been prepared for the real world. Young people believe they are getting either too little or no education at all in financial literacy (88%), practical skills (74%), job market preparations (69%), coping with mental health struggles (68%) and navigating social media (58%).

They are aware of the negative impacts of social media, but believe there are benefits that would be lost in an imposed ban. They would support policies that build their agency, like algorithm transparency (88%) and digital literacy training (84%). However, 71% and 73% of young people reject bans on smartphones for under 16s and under 18s respectively.

There is a clear consensus that social media companies should be held responsible for the harms their platforms give rise to (74%). The majority of young people do not just see that the onus is solely on themselves, educators or politicians – but rather, the culprits. 78% of young people also believe that social media companies should be doing more to remove harmful content from their platforms.

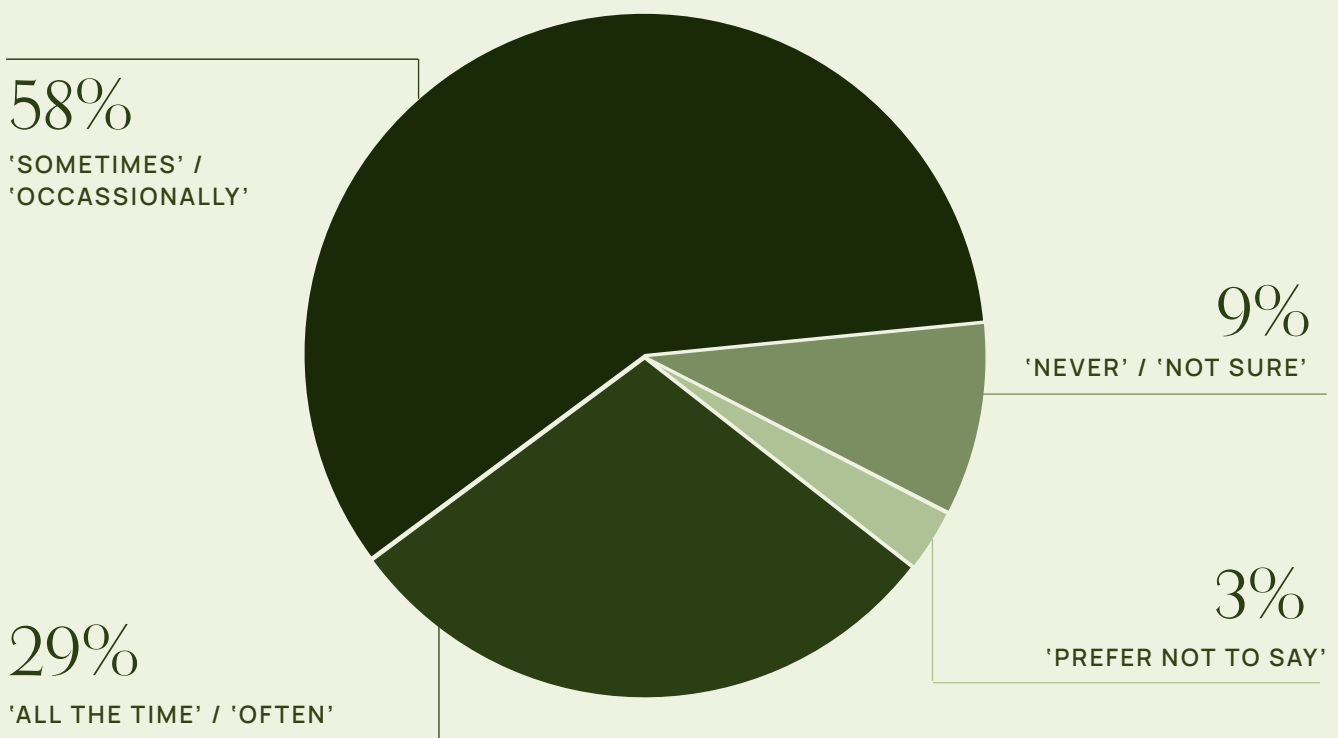
The main report starts here. The following polling research was conducted by YouGov on 6th-18th June 2024. It used a weighted sample of 1110 respondents from across Great Britain, between the ages of 16-24. All surveys were conducted online. All quotes are included from interviews conducted by Global Future Foundation with young people aged 17, 19 and 24.

Introduction: The Wellbeing Crisis

Global reports such as the annually published World Happiness Report have shown that young people have the most steadily declining wellbeing of any group¹. This problem is particularly pertinent in Britain. A recent report by Children's Society revealed that more 15 year olds are experiencing low life satisfaction in Britain than anywhere in Europe.²

We are witnessing a crisis of wellbeing. Our polling shows that 34% of young people in Britain feel dissatisfied with their lives. In addition, the majority of young people (59%) report experiencing periods of bad emotional wellbeing 'sometimes', 'often', or 'all the time'.

Graph 01. Young people's reporting of how often they experience bad emotional wellbeing



1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/mar/20/world-happiness-report-sounds-alarm-about-the-welfare-of-britains-young-people>
2. <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/Good%20Childhood%20Report-Main-Report.pdf>

Since poor wellbeing in adolescence is a strong indicator of poor wellbeing later in life³, the new Labour government must address this crisis as a matter of urgency. Our research finds that the key aspects driving this crisis are economic anxiety and loneliness, which is likely to have been exacerbated by social media.

With regards to solutions to the youth wellbeing crisis, our approach has been to listen to and take direction from young people themselves. There are three reasons we feel this is the only appropriate way to make progress: Firstly, the most effective solutions to problems are often informed by the people they implicate. Secondly, people are far more likely to engage with and to action solutions that they have generated themselves and feel a sense of ownership over. Thirdly, self determination theory pinpoints agency as a key characteristic in being able to thrive.

The solutions we investigate in this report fall into two categories: The first concerns changes to the education system. Broadly, young people feel that schools are not preparing them for the challenges in the real world and believe that education in practical skills building to respond to these challenges is not sufficient. The second concerns social media: Here, young people are against outright age-specific bans and generally any solution which is restrictively imposed on them. Instead, they want more of an effort to educate them about the risks of online social media use and to empower them with algorithm transparency and digital literacy skills. They also believe that solutions should focus on culpability of the social media companies themselves.

3. <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2024/02/Weve-only-just-begun.pdf>

Section 01: The Crisis Explored

Our data indicates that there are three core areas driving the wellbeing crisis; loneliness, social media (which is also exacerbating loneliness) and economic anxiety.

Loneliness

The US General Surgeon and the World Health Organisation have declared an 'epidemic of loneliness'.⁴ Tragically, our data shows that almost one in three young people report feeling lonely 'often' or 'all of the time' (29%), and this number is fairly consistent across demographic groups.

Communities are not thriving in the way they once did. When asked whether young people feel part of their local community, 65% said that they do not, and people in London and those between the ages of 20-24 felt the weakest sense of community.

There is also a powerful perception that the lack of connection has gotten worse over time. When comparing their relationships to those of their parents, 49% of young people say they are weaker compared to only 19% who believe they are stronger. Additionally, 52% of young people feel that it has become harder to meet a romantic partner, whilst only 23% believe it has become easier.

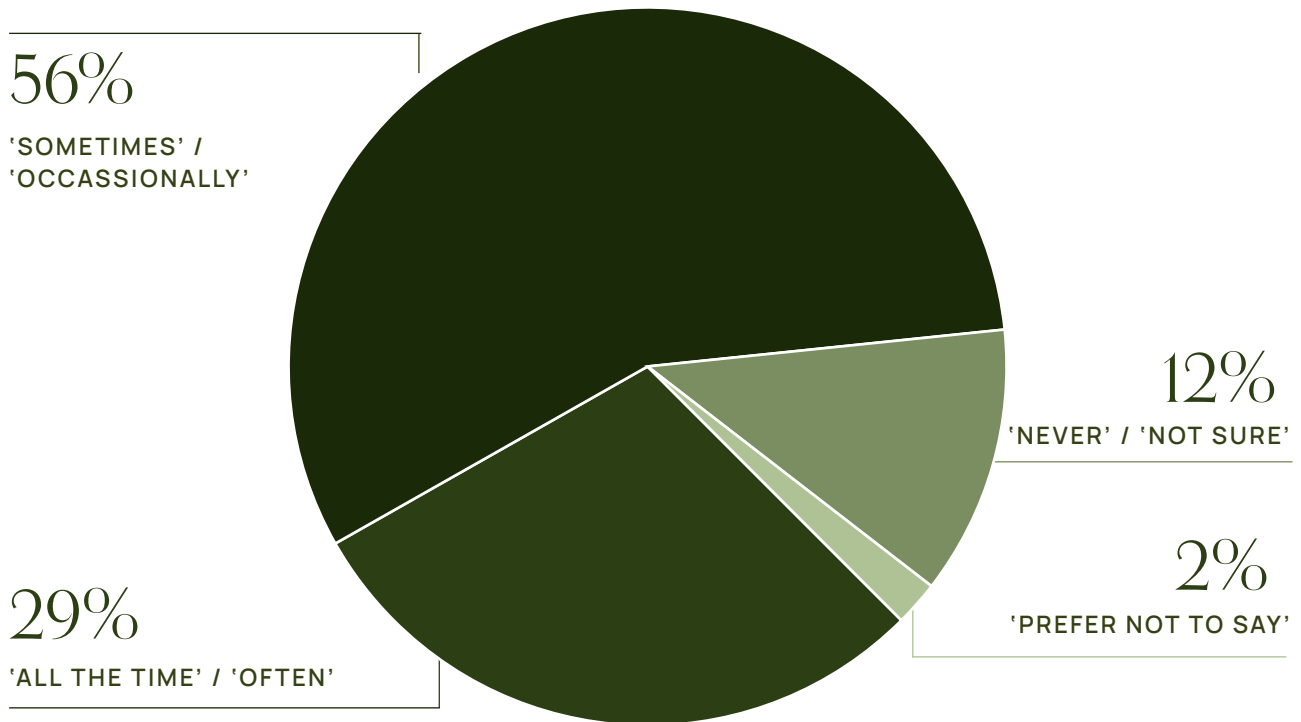
Aside from it being a disturbing experience in itself, loneliness must be a policy priority for young people given that research shows loneliness has the equivalent health impact of smoking 15 cigarettes per day.⁵

'A big part of the problem is the loss of community. People don't place enough importance on, or spend enough time with, community or family. That's going to be bad for people's mental health, because you feel lonely and isolated. You don't feel like you belong.'

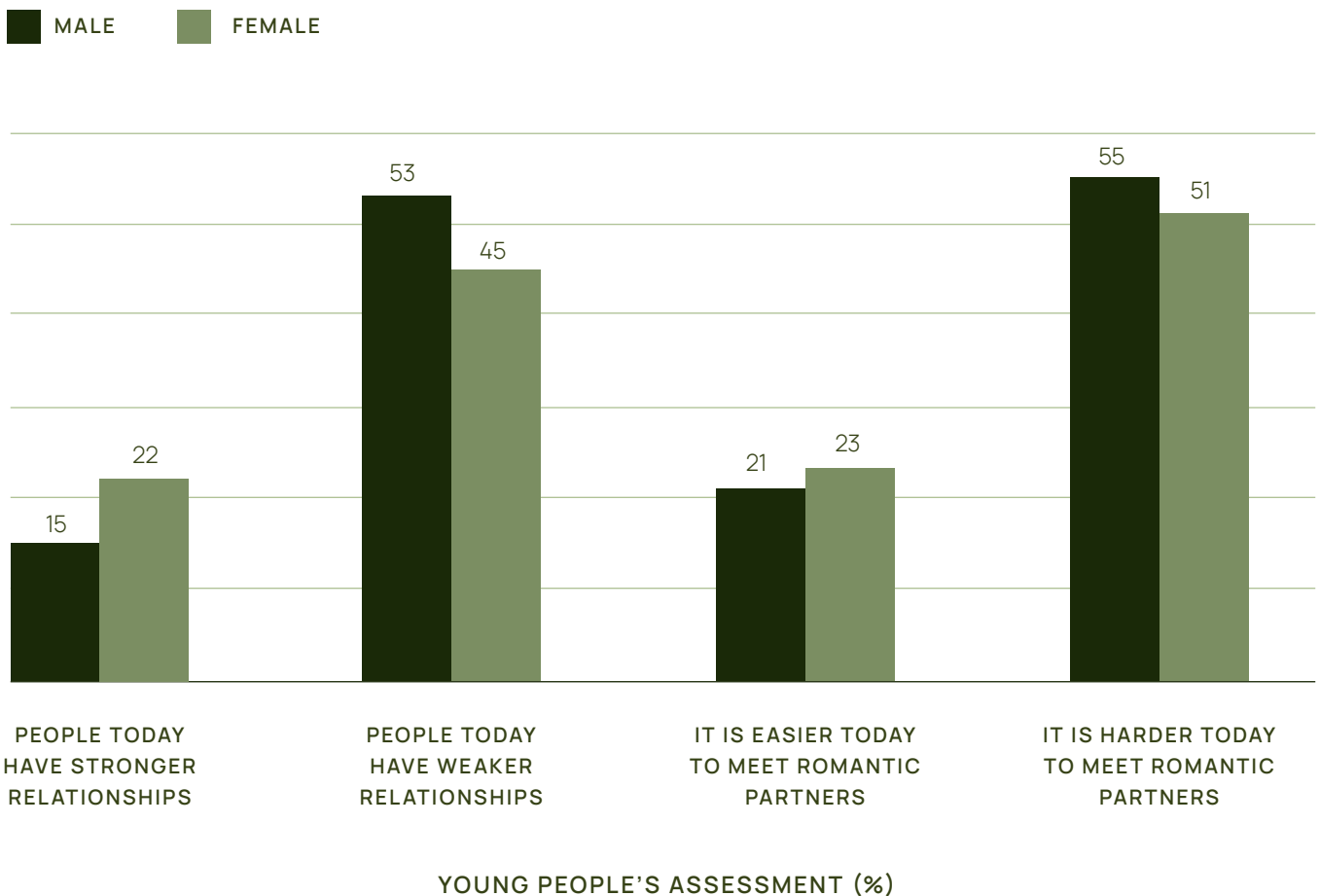
ADAM, 24

4. <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2024/02/Weve-only-just-begun.pdf>
5. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

Graph 02. Young people's reporting of how often they experience loneliness



Graph 03. Young people's views on relationships in comparison to their parents generation



Social Media

While young people broadly value social media for facilitating connection, it fails to replace the depth of real-world interactions and can breed dissatisfaction due to heightened experiences of social comparison. Similarly, although social media may bring us closer to those far away, it can disconnect us from those around us and render us 'forever elsewhere'.⁶

In this context, we find that there is an appetite amongst young people to reduce their reliance on social media. Of those polled, 64% say that they would like to use social media less, and more people believe that social media has a negative impact (35%), than a positive impact (28%), on their personal wellbeing. Insofar as they want to reduce their usage and believe it is negatively impacting their mental wellbeing, social media has the typical characteristics of a drug addiction.

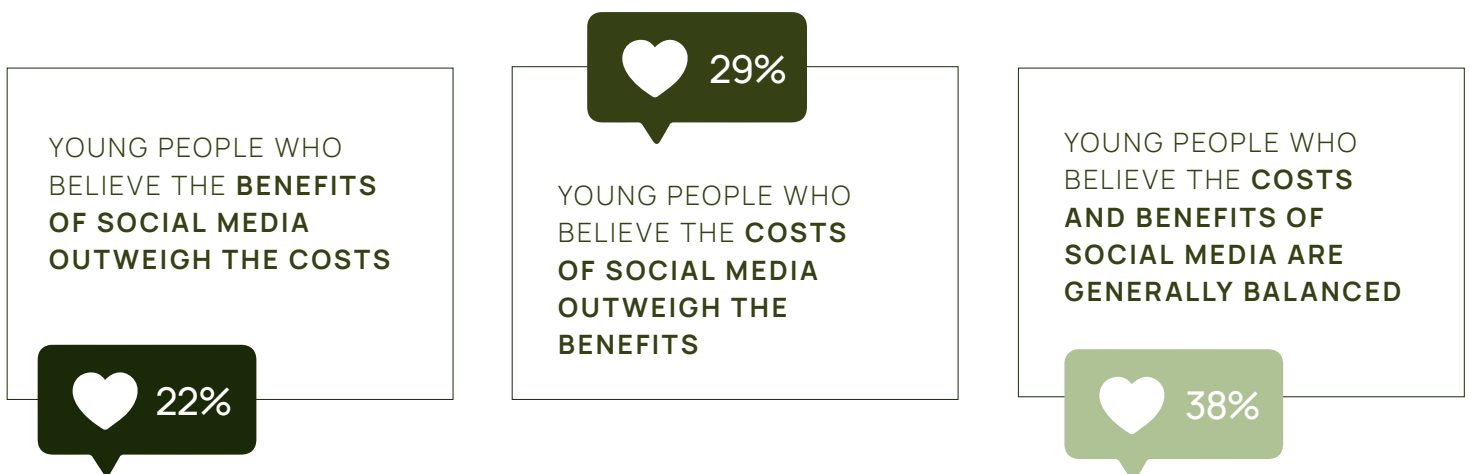
'Social media has increased people's expectations of what they think you need to have a good life, so it's much easier to feel dissatisfied now.'

ADAM, 24

'I see the benefits of social media, it helps me stay connected to my friends, which has been especially important since moving away from home. But I see how it also negatively impacts our social relationships. I have seen friends become isolated, because they substitute proper interactions with online messaging. They struggle because that doesn't enrich you in the same way.'

FELIX, 19

Diagram 01. Opinions on the costs and benefits of social media



'It's literally designed to get you hooked. In that way, it's akin to people getting addicted to cigarettes or nicotine, it exploits people's addictive tendencies to increase the spread of content.' FELIX, 19

6. <https://cassybayarea.org/jonathan-haidts-the-anxious-generation-an-urgent-and-essential-read-to-protect-childhood-from-smartphones/>

The economy

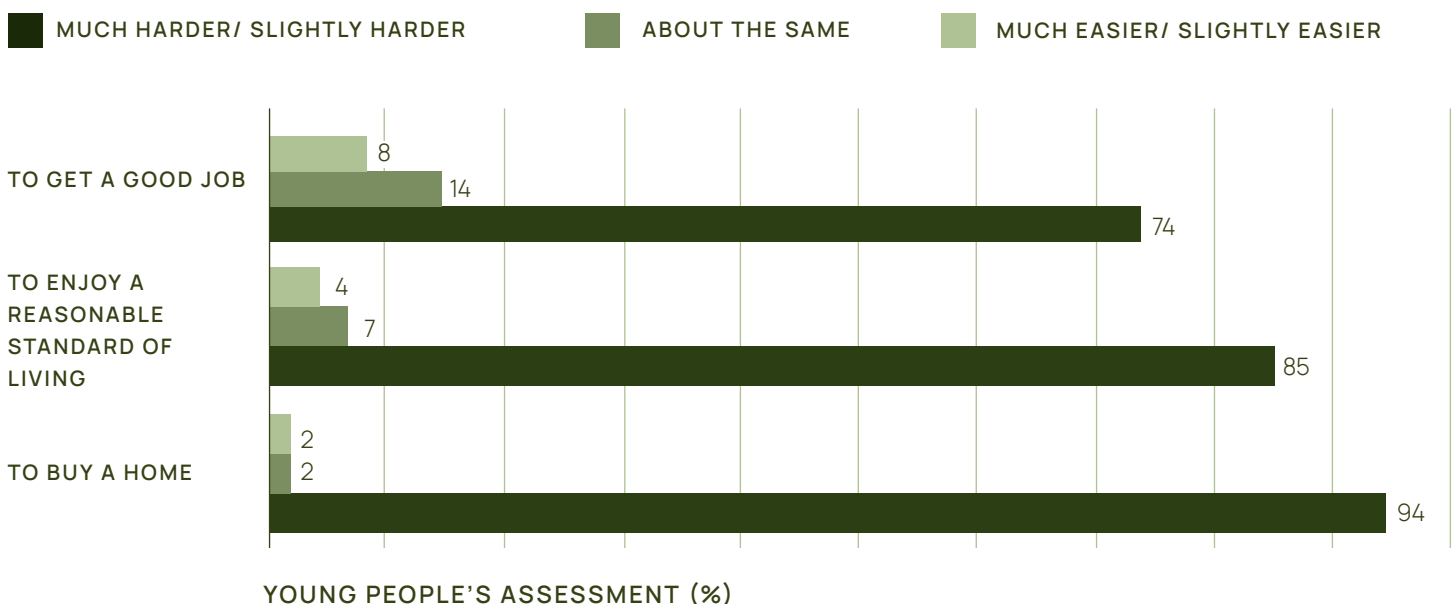
Given Britain's sluggish economic performance in recent years, it is unsurprising that when asked about the three most important issues facing them and their family, 62% of young people included the cost of living crisis, and one in three included 'the economy in general'. 77% of the surveyed sample also said that the economy was having a negative impact on their mental health.

This apparent economic despair has led to an extremely pessimistic attitude amongst young people when they compare their lives to previous generations. The vast majority feel it is harder now than it was for their parents' generation to get a good job (74%), to buy a home (94%) and to enjoy a reasonable standard of living (85%). These statistics are remarkably similar across age brackets, gender, social grade and region, indicating that this is a universal sentiment. Put simply, young people across the country are struggling to feel hopeful about their future financial security.

"I think it's a tough time to be young, economically. It feels unlikely that we'll be able to do all the things our parents were able to do. I don't feel like the government is thinking about what is best for young people."

ADAM, 24

Graph 04. Young people's views on how much harder it will be for them than their parents' generation to get a good job, enjoy a reasonable standard of living and buy a home



Section 02. Young People's Response

In responding to challenges that young people are facing, recent British governments have been too quick to propose restrictive, top-down policies that young people simply do not want. An example of this was Sunak's recent national service proposal, which 74% of our respondents said they were against.

We believe it is vital for the people facing a challenge to be involved in developing the solution, and we outline three arguments to support this.

01. THOSE INVOLVED KNOW BEST

Firstly, and often told to developmental economists, the following illustrative story highlights the risks of not simply asking people what they want:

A charity installed a well to provide a rural community with easier access to water, which women were previously walking very far each day to fetch. Shortly after its installation the charity had to step in to fix a problem with the well, but after breaking again quite quickly the charity decided to investigate the issues more deeply.

They found that the women themselves were damaging the well. They had been doing this because the walk to the water source was not perceived as a burden, but was in fact valued time for the women to socialise and bond, away from their husbands and other duties. This

reminds us that we can only properly understand the nature of certain issues by engaging those who are directly affected by them.

02. OWNERSHIP ENCOURAGES 'BUY IN'

Secondly, people are also far more likely to 'buy in' to ideas that they have had a role in developing. In a study by Ellen Langer, subjects were able to buy a lottery ticket (at \$1 each).⁷ However, using random allocation some were able to select their numbers while others were given generated ones. Both types of ticket had the same chance of winning and thus were objectively worth the same amount of money prior to the draw.

Interestingly, when asked how much they would be willing to sell their ticket back for, people who had chosen their own numbers asked for significantly more money than those who had been given tickets with generated numbers (\$8.67 in comparison to \$1.96). In a similar pattern to Kahneman and Tversky's endowment effect, this illustrates how people assign far higher value to things that they feel ownership over, or have had control in designing. It can also be reasonably assumed that this response would apply to the creation of ideas or policies.

7. https://nuovoetile.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Langer1975_IllusionofControl.pdf

Diagram 02. Self Determination Theory



02. AUTONOMY IS KEY TO WELLBEING

Finally, and despite the fact that we are all innately driven to thrive, self-determination theory explains that there are three basic human needs that must be fulfilled in order to spark that motivation for growth and wellbeing: These are competence, relatedness and autonomy. Therefore, it isn't enough for the government to simply foster competence and relatedness through education and social policy – it must be purposefully built in a way that simultaneously develops young people's autonomy, by bringing them into the conversation.

With all this in mind, and while it becomes clear that agency, autonomy and ownership over the solutions are key to combating the youth wellbeing crisis, young people in Britain do not feel listened to. Our polling shows that more than 81% of those aged 16-24 believe that politicians don't reflect their views 'very much' or 'at all', with the same proportion of young people (82%) feeling like political leaders don't prioritise the interests of people like them.

As such, two areas of recommendation are advocated in this section to tackle the Crisis: a fresh approach to education and to social media. Most importantly however, the recommendations conveyed here were taken from our survey and reflect what young people themselves believe should be done.

‘When politicians propose policies for young people, it’s like they haven’t considered what we actually want. They haven’t put themselves in our shoes.’

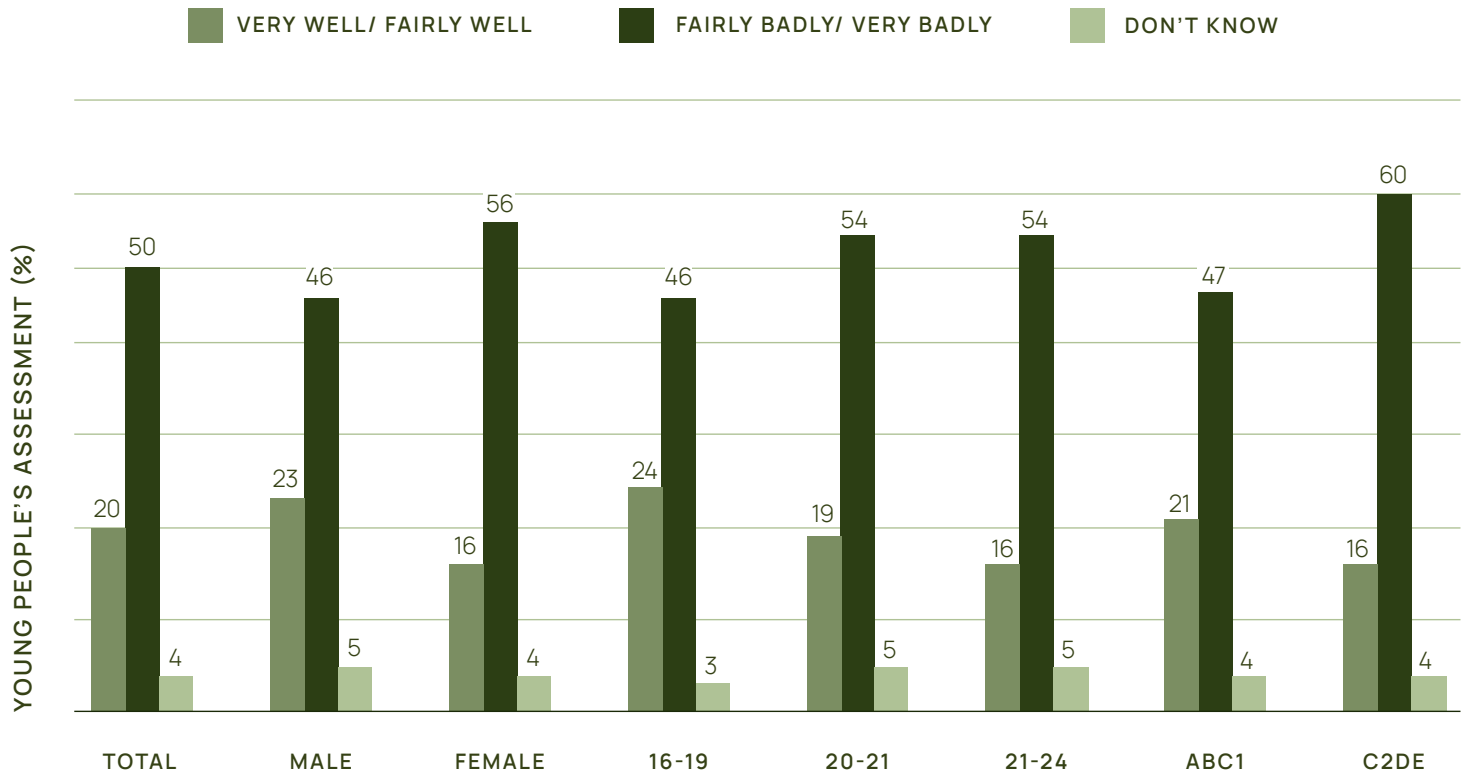
FELIX, 19

“Young people feel disenfranchised, because it doesn’t feel like the government is thinking about what is best for them.”

ADAM, 24

Education

Graph 05. Young people's views on how well or badly school equipped them for the real world



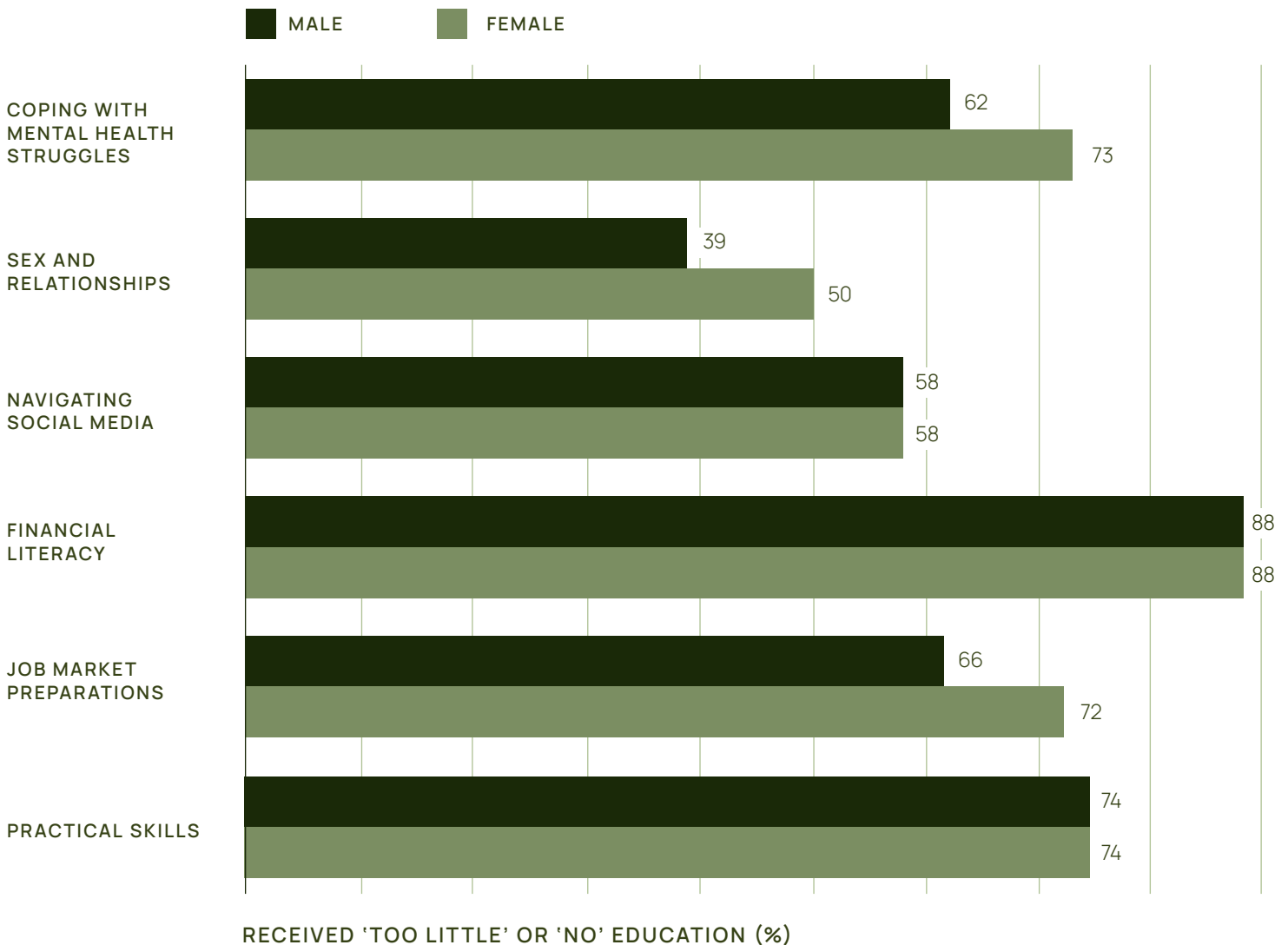
Young people in Britain feel let down by the education system and are calling for reform. Education is supposed to prepare young people for the future, but our polling shows that only one in five young people agree that their school equipped them well for the real world. A staggering 50% also claim that their schools prepared them 'fairly badly' or 'very badly'.

The graph on the following page shows how young people feel that schools are failing to provide them with important skills, but when young people are currently leaving school feeling like they 'missed an important lesson in life' (Felix, 19), the government must listen and respond. On the particular issue of mental health support, one interviewee described the

mental health programs as feeling "overwhelmed and overstretched" (Felix, 19). Whilst the Labour government has committed to continue these programs, it is crucial that these are not implemented as a box ticking exercise and that proper resource and focus is devoted here.

50% of young people claim that their schools prepared them 'fairly badly' or 'very badly' for the real world.

Graph 06. Young people's opinions on the sufficiency of their education in various subjects at school



It is also important to note that young women indicate a greater longing for mental health support than young men, as well as more sufficient education around sex and relationships.

The quote below indicates that people who have not or do not plan on attending university after school also need much greater support. Here it is important that the Labour government must come good on its manifesto promise of guarantees of training, apprenticeships and support for all young people aged 18-21. Collectively we need to place a greater value on these pathways too, so that these students may feel hopeful and excited after leaving school.

'At school, it didn't feel like they really prepared you for the real world. It was like uni was the only option. When I said I didn't want to go directly to uni, it was very much like, 'Well, what are you going to do then?' They didn't help me find alternative paths. They had one track, and if you didn't fit that, you were made to feel like you'd failed.'

ADAM, 24

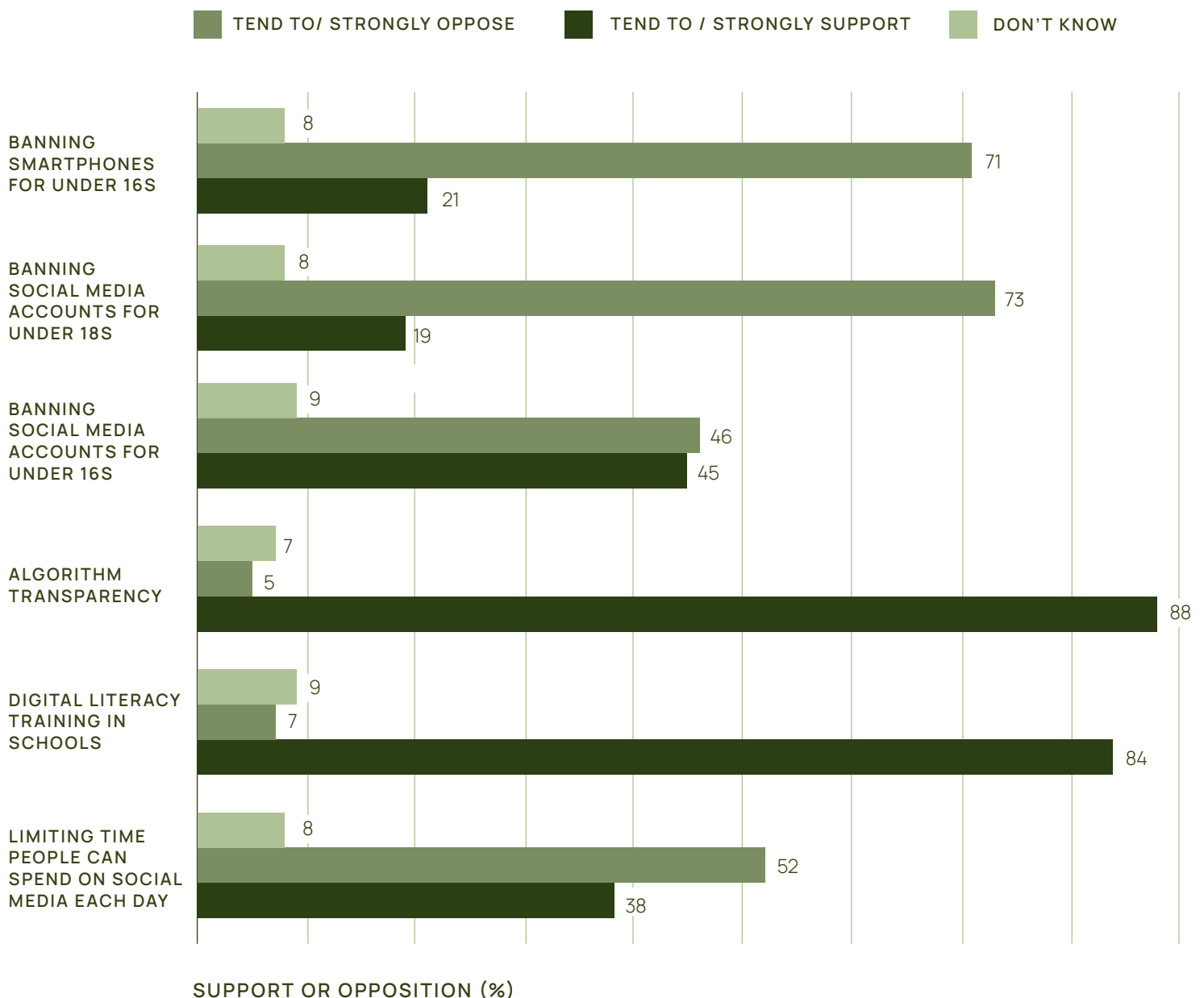
Social Media

The US General Surgeon, Dr Vivek Murthy said that, in its current form, '...social media is the equivalent of having children in cars that have no safety features, and driving on roads with no speed limits'. Our polling finds that young people support the introduction of speed limits, but do not want to be taken off the road.

While banning social media for under 18s is understandably tempting for leaders and

parents, our polling shows that 73% of young people oppose this. Though they are aware of the negative impact that social media has on their wellbeing and want to limit their use, retaining the autonomy to do so themselves is key. As Felix (19) told us, 'it's important to feel like giving up social media is a decision you make yourself'.

Graph 07. Young people's support for various policies concerning social media



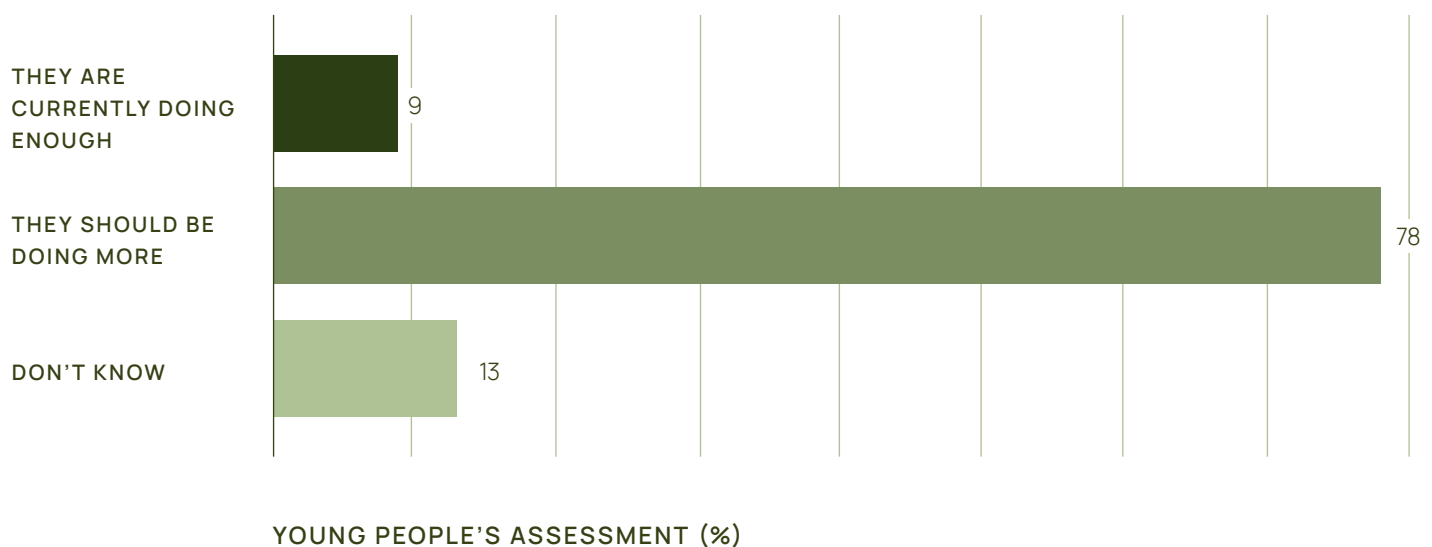
‘Social media is the equivalent of having children in cars that have no safety features, and driving on roads with no limits’

DR VIVEK MURTHY (US GENERAL SURGEON)

Young people want to be equipped with the tools to enjoy social media’s benefits safely, and with their eyes open. While Labour did not specify anything sufficient of this kind in their pre-election manifesto, they would do well to consider taking more action here. An Online Safety Act (as they proposed), is arguably not enough; To proactively address social media harms and show that they are listening to young voices, the Government must consider delivering lessons on social media resilience, requesting transparency from social media companies and incorporating better regulations on social media sites.

Young people are also calling for more of the onus to be placed on the social media platforms themselves. They have designed these platforms to be addictive, and are profiting off them. Nearly four in five young people say that social media companies should be doing more to remove harmful content from their platforms (78%), and 74% want to see social media platforms held responsible for the technologies’ impacts on mental health.

Graph 08. Young people’s responses to the question, *‘Do you think social media companies generally do enough to remove harmful content from their platform, or should they be doing more?’*



Concluding Remarks

Young people want politicians to help them feel more prepared and hopeful for the future. They are looking for more relevant education and for policies which orient towards agency, capacity building and accountability.

The new Labour government must meaningfully engage and listen to the concerns of young people in Britain as it attempts to bring about serious changes in their economic and social landscapes. We know that agency is a crucial element in helping people of any age to thrive, and the endowment effect serves as a necessary reminder that ownership over a policy solution can lead to greater value being placed in it and likely, greater subsequent impact.

By giving young people a seat at the table, policymakers effectively give young people a say in their own life outcomes and wellbeing.

Keir Starmer's government must design policies with young people rather than for them. If they can, they are not only likely to win back the trust of young voters by giving them ownership over their futures, but they should also see greater policy impacts which may even turn the tide on wellbeing.



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