



Belonging Strategy

Focus Groups with Young People

Consultation report - December 2020

Bristol City Council



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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

'The Belonging Strategy was conceived from a desire to improve inclusion generally in the city and its schools, to support children and young people to look beyond their concept of community and place and 'own' the whole city, to support families to care for their children within their family and to give children the best start in life' (Jacqui Jensen, Executive Director, People Directorate).

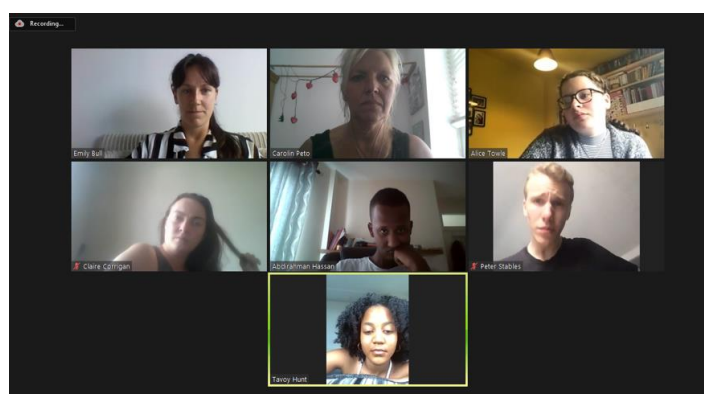
The Belonging Strategy contains four pillars, from the Beginning (pre-Birth), Families, Education and Community. Each strand focusses on how to create an inclusive, safe and inspiring environment for children and young people to grow up in and to experience a sense of belonging.

Article 12 of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights established the right of every child to freely express their views in all matters affecting them and the right for those views to be given due weight, according to the child's age and maturity. It was therefore decided to co-produce the engagement element of this strategy in partnership with young people.

This enabled us to apply appropriate communications tools to engage with young people from across the city. Our aim was to listen to their experiences and their opinions on matters related to belonging and to use that insight to influence the Belonging Strategy and with-it future service developments for children, young people and their families in our city.

1.2 Methodology

A survey was coproduced with a team of young people and the findings were presented in a separate consultation report (Dec 2020). However, to gain a deeper insight of how children and young people are experiencing their different environments and to complement the survey we conducted seven focus groups exploring if young people feel they belong, what works well and what could be improved.



One session was facilitated in person with social distancing rules observed (Listening Partnership focus group) whilst the other six sessions were facilitated via Zoom. Hosting groups on this platform offered a positive opportunity to engage young people from diverse backgrounds. Sessions had to be limited to 1 – 1.5 hrs to retain young people's interest and attention. Conducting focus groups in non covid times and in person would allow for different youth work engagement techniques and more time to explore individual sections.

In total 33 young people participated including five young parents and all participants (with the exception of the Youth Consultation team) received a Love to Shop voucher for £10.

Four focus groups were co-facilitated by Youth Consultation team members enabling honest and dynamic discussions.

All participants consented to take part and to have their quotes and contributions published, although as identified in the text below not all want their individual names recorded.

Participants were recruited via existing children and young people’s services within Bristol and the focus groups were conducted between 5/10/2020 and 26/11/2020.

Focus groups and participants

Group	Participants
Youth Consultation Team 26/11/2020	Tavoy 21, Peter 19, Abdi 16, Alice 16
LGBTQ+ 8/10/2020	Ben 19, Alex 18
Listening Partnership (LP) 12/10/2020	6 yp all with SEND, 3 male, 3 females, aged 15 to 19
Unity (BAME yp) 27/10/2020	Mohamed 16, Rahma 16, Kajol 14, Neisha 14, Lia 16, Abdirahman 16
Young Parents 5/10/2020	Montanna 22, Kiera 19, Amelia 21, Charlie 20, Tavoy 19, Zoe 18
Young People with care experience / care leavers 10/09/20	Stacey 24, Dan 25, Josh 22, Sami 21, Ed 25
Young people with care experience/ children in care council (CiCC) 11/09/20	Seven young people, aged 10 – 15

1.3 Reporting

All focus groups explored ‘belonging’ and related topics. Facilitators would allow further exploration guided by the participants and therefore not all groups discussed the same questions. This report highlights how these young people experience belonging in different settings – such as their communities, school / education and family. We are mindful that young people self-selected and there will be others across Bristol with different experiences. Therefore, it will be paramount for led officers to familiarise themselves with additional related consultation data that has been collated over the past six months.

This report is presented to the four pillar leads for the Belonging Strategy to inform their writing and to ensure young people’s voices are influencing this new strategy. Full focus group transcripts are available to those lead officers if of interest.

2. Belonging

2.1 What does Belonging mean to you?

Tavoy: *'I feel comfortable enough to be myself, feel like having been accepted and feel like I don't have to be a certain way to be accepted, because I want to feel loved.'*

Peter: *'Free to be emotionally whatever state I'm currently in. Belonging is within an environment and the environment requires people. Otherwise there's no resonance.'* For Peter this meant more than just being accepted or tolerated. *'Working with what you have rather than trying to alter you to be something you're not.'*

Alice: *'It means feeling a sense of safety and value within a group.'*

Ben: *'I'd say with belonging it's like having something or like somewhere or someone where you feel safe - where you can be yourself without having to worry about rejection or denial.'*

Alex: *'I think for me belonging is just having a place where you don't have to change yourself or hide something about yourself to feel accepted or anything. Or you can just be a very genuine version of yourself and still feel that you're loved and you've still got a place in that space.'*

LP group: *'A place where you fit in and you know people.'*

Unity (P1): *'You can't show your quirks when you are in a group that doesn't feel like a safe space for you. I feel like you do have to belong, to actually be quirky.'*

Unity (P6): *'Belonging to your family and friends.'*

Montanna: *Belonging 'is not so much feel accepted but know that it's OK to be whoever you are, what you want, and then everybody would just kind of get on with it and everybody is OK to be happy however they want to be happy.'*

Tavoy: *'Belonging as a parent to me means being able to be the parent that I need to be and want to be as well and having the support to do so.'*

Kiera: *'I think belonging means to me a sense of security. I'm comfortable in my surroundings. I don't get judged. I can just be me and not feel any different or have to hide who I actually am.'*

Amelia: *'Belonging to me means that I have been blessed to be a parent. I belong in motherhood. Belonging means to me that I am able to be myself around others and not feel fearful of being judged, feeling like I deserve to be a member of a group like the Children Centre and not walking in, feeling like all eyes are on me. Being valued as a mother despite being young.'*

Charlie: *'When I was 17 and 18 I was trying to figure out what my purpose was in belonging and obviously the day that I had my little one and he was just placed on my chest like all moms will know that feeling that I'm talking about right now is just like that forever feeling and that was my belonging and then I knew I had purpose.'*

Stacey: *'Feeling wanted, feeling listen to, feeling like everyone is being honest with you, feeling respected, feeling that you can be open with your emotions and there are no consequences if being open with your emotions.'*

Josh: *'You actually mean something to people you are not just there because people want you to do chores etc they just want you for their professional something [context].'*

Dan: *'I don't really feel a sense of belonging anywhere outside of work ... I always have a sort of sense I don't know a weird feeling that I don't belong just anywhere, I don't know but I feel that would be due to my past [being a yp in care].'*

2.2 What helps you feel a sense of belonging?

Young people said that knowing other people and knowing that they won't judge them is important.

Abdi: *'You feel a sense of belonging when you are with family and friends and people around you accept you for who you are.'*

A sense of unity, commonality between people, shared values and beliefs create a bond that make people feel they are part of something.

Peter: *'A particular kind of commonality significant to our identity something you are passionate about.'*

Young people said that **being listened to and being able to influence things** does give a sense of belonging.

Alex: *'I've definitely been listened to [in the support group] more - I can voice my opinion even if that's just in the group. But they also give more chances to go out into other areas and have my voice heard. '*

Montanna: *'Being listened to plays a big role. Because if you don't feel like you can talk to anybody, then you're going to stay in your shell. So you're not going to be who you really want to be, so you're not going to go or be where you should belong.'*

Dan shared that despite him having difficulties to feel a sense of belonging now he had experienced a sense of belonging to a foster family when they started listening to him.

Dan: *'I'd feel like I was appreciated when I started speaking and people actually took time to listen and hear what I was saying rather jumping to conclusions about what they think I am about to say.'*

2.3 What can have a negative effect on your sense of belonging?

Young people in general said that being judged by society or others has a negative effect on their feeling of belonging and their mental health.

Ben: *'Feeling like there's expectations being put on you that you know you can't achieve because they go against who you are or what you want in life.'*

Alex: *'Being LGBT - just existing as you are as an LGBT person - a lot of the time you feel very isolated from your peers because it's not a societal norm. Even just things like the way you dress - the way you present yourself - the people you love - your gender identity - if it goes against kind of the general societal norm - what everyone else around you does - you can feel very different, especially when people start like judging you for that, voicing that you're different.'*

Some young people experienced being asked about their opinions but then **not being listened** to and this had a real negative impact on them till today, feeling disillusioned about their voice.

Peter: *'If they [cooperative school] had actually listened to us and were taking aboard what we were trying to say, then there is at least this idea of change and to me that can bring a sense of belonging, even if it's not immediate. ... because I think spending those four years in Coop, I was full of hope, but it was when nothing happened then ...'*

Alex: *'The expectancy for who would listen to me was in school when I was part of like the Coop and like you know when it was saying that our voices were going to be listened to and when they asked us then none of it ever got listened to, so I don't really know. Now having finished school, I don't know. I don't know who would listen to me because you know school let us down in that sense.'*

The LP group also felt that *'young people's voices are not heard enough by decision makers.'*

3. Belonging in the community

3.1 How would you describe community?

Young people defined 'community' as a physical place and the surrounding in which they live. They also felt 'community' meant the people around them including their peers, other people such as neighbours as well as interest, activity or support groups.

Abdi: *'Community is the place where you live and the places around there. Community is important and will affects you and your decisions in life.'*

Interestingly this young person felt a closer connection and sense of belonging to his last place of home (2 years ago) where he took part in different weekly activities with other young people. This clearly indicates that the relationships and the connections to others create a quality that is important for Belonging and feeling part of a community. He said: *'The people and group who works at the [Barton Hill] settlement give a sense of community.'*

LP group member: *'Even though I am a part of a smaller community where I live, I don't mix with my community.'*

LP group member: *'I don't really get involved in my community there isn't much to do.'*

Some other **LP group members** told us, that *'events like lantern parades and art trails bring the community together'* and that Community Centres can make them feel as they belong as they know a lot of people there and *'having that space in the community helps us feel a sense of togetherness.'*

Some young people experienced a sense of community during COVID – 19 as neighbours came together to clap for the NHS and got to know each other and *'helped each other out by getting shopping.'*

Young people from the **LP group** jointly created a list of places where they feel able to form positive relationships and ultimately it is those friends that give individuals a sense of belonging:

- Wecil groups e.g. the Listening Partnership
- Out and About (positive activity clubs)
- Drama club
- Explorers
- Scouts
- Dance clubs
- Choir
- Art Group
- School

The **LP members** also highlighted that they connect to 'online' friends and use gaming to spend time with people they know based on a common interest – an online community.

Alice shared that she defines community as *'a sense of comradeship and spirit within a group of people.'*

Young people described local support groups as part of their community offering opportunities to connect with people, feeling safe and to express themselves. Those groups seemed vital for some. Alex and Ben argued that support group should be local to be truly accessible.

Alex: *'Having the local groups is definitely very important. It's easier for some people to get to them; when I first started going to the CYN group I was in the closet; my mom did not know I was going to a LGBT group. I could tell her I was just going to a youth group. She didn't have to know. If it had been Freedom, it's a little bit less to hide that because you just Google it and you know. So, having that CYN group, especially for kids who may not be able to get to the centre who may not be able to tell their parents that they're in LGBT group. Also, because Freedom - I've been a few times - it's a lot bigger group. Having the smaller groups is a lot more personal.'*

Ben: *Going to a local group 'it's kind of dipping your toes in the water like you can't just go straight into something big. Back when I first went for the first time, it seemed daunting enough, despite it being a small group. I had been recommended Freedom - like countless*

times - and I just could not do it. It just seemed like too much at the time - too big of a commitment. So, having smaller local groups is very important for just getting started.'

Unity members described community as: *'Togetherness, Integration, Comfort, Cooperation and Communication.'*

Unity (P6) shared: *'For me the Somalian community is a family, like you know people in it, you help people out.'*

Young people from the children in care council told us it is important for them to access opportunities in the community to build good relationships with others.

Yp (CiCC): *'I think a good relationship can help us to have a good life – for examples good friends won't leave you or won't fall out with you.'*

Several young people made convincing points of how important drop in community settings are to them and the wider youth population. These opportunities can offer inspiration, learning, uncover talents and offer chances to form positive relationships.

Peter attended a community acting class outside school when he was 16. He didn't know anyone and just dropped in.

Peter: *'I didn't have to sign up or register anywhere or anything; this teacher did bring me into the fold of this acting class and that was really amazing work. I've loved that acting style ever since.'*

Peter is currently training as an actor and assured the group that he would struggle in his education and in his career if he *'had not found that specific style / technique.'*

Abdi: *'I'll say my coach; due to him I know more people. I didn't know how to interact because I used to stay home like a lot until I joined football. My coach showed me what it was like to belong to a team.'*

The young parents also emphasised that meeting peers in similar circumstances helps them.

We asked: **Do you ever feel judged as a young parent? Are there any extra pressures?**

Montanna said *'all the time. I suppose that's why it's nice that there are groups, because there are a lot of young mums that feel the same way and to be able to be together and have friends that feel the same way is quite nice.'*

She told the focus group that meeting with other young mums has helped her a lot as it was easier to do activities together especially as she *'wasn't very confident going to play groups and blending in with the moms because I always found that they'd just be a lot older than me so I wouldn't really get them and they wouldn't get me.'*

Kiera also agreed: *'I'm definitely getting judged. I do get some looks and especially as having two babies at 19. Yeah it's not very nice, but you have just got to put your head up and get on with it. You've got two babies to worry about.'*

Naturally young people shared **what was missing from their communities** and what wasn't so great.

Charlie described Bristol as *'thankfully very multicultural. I am mixed race my mums' side is English and my dad's side Jamaican – we don't have any problems with race and things in Bristol and everybody in Bristol is quite open to sexualities and expressing who they are and how they are.'*

However, Charlie seemed quite upset about the recent toppling of the Edward Colston statue and *'all of the arguments that have been caused over at it. It has reached people in America... it's hurt so many people and I think it should be sorted out quite soon ... there's so many people putting up silly statues up there. It gets into my head. Every time I walk past there's something silly on there and it's just ridiculous and it really does upset a lot of young people, let alone the older generations. We need to represent a new era because it's almost 2021 and that statue was put there God knows how long ago.'*

Charlie and all the other young parents agreed that *'a multicultural statue for all races, all ethnicities like holding hands to shows the unity in Bristol and not that we're all fighting over race'* would be best.

The group of young parents also shared their experiences in relation to **housing** and how this negatively affected their sense of belonging and the upbringing of their children.

Charlie explained that when she left home young (15) she sofa surfed and then was accommodated by both Bristol Hostels which she calls *'ridiculous, terrible. The Foyer with the sewage and the rats and just dirty and Saint George House, the drugs and like everything that gets brought in there and goes on in there is terrible and that's from first-hand experience whilst being pregnant. Even before I was pregnant, I was trying to get housing and it is impossible. I was waiting 4 1/2 years to get my own flat. And that was going through the housing register and then waiting on Home Choice and then waiting for something to come up. And depending on your priority I mean it could take up to 6, 7 years maybe 10. It's crazy, there's not enough housing.'*

The long wait was confirmed by Tavoy who has been registered on the home choice list for two years. Several other young parents agreed, that when they had received an offer for accommodation it was in areas, they didn't want to live in. This was due to feeling of being disconnected from their family and friends and they didn't feel safe in the areas offered such as Hartcliffe and Sea Mills.

Knowing of **groups and opportunities to meet young parents in** similar circumstances felt vital to the young parents. They described meeting likeminded people as being positive for parent's well-being. At the same time their children benefit from the opportunity to play with other kids and to have fun. All mums confirmed they didn't learn about those opportunities until later when they already felt isolated and then only by coincidence. We discussed that ideally midwives should inform parents of available groups and places. The group explored how best to inform new parents of opportunities for them, their babies and children and

decided that a 'Parents Bristolian App' would be ideal. This App could offer useful information and links to positive activities, support organisations, including for mental health, and general information and advice relevant for parents and their children e.g. playgroups, charities and children centres.

Charlie: *'I think that alone would impact so many parents' lives. Don't matter how old.'*

A few mums volunteered to help developing such an App if this Social Media idea is taken up.

4. Belonging in Family

4.1 Why is Family important to you?

Most young people said 'Family' when asked where they felt they belonged.

Yp (CiCC): *'Relationships with my family and friends are important. I think they are good because I feel if you don't have a strong bond with your family you won't get very far in life.'*

Tavoy: *'I feel I belong when I'm with my friends, my family, at home. Because I know the people I am around and that allows me to feel a sense of comfort. I guess because I know that they're not gonna judge me.'*

Abdi: *'You feel a sense of belonging when you are with family and friends and people around you accept you for who you are.'*

Alice: *'Family needs to offer children and young people a sense that their opinion is valued and that a family's love is not conditional.'*

In contrast young people with care experience, in particular care leavers, shared that they lacked this sense of belonging to their foster families.

Stacey: *'I never really felt a sense of belonging with any foster placements to be honest but then I moved around a bit and when I did start getting comfortable they kept moving me again and then I ended up in a care home so I never really had that. ... carers didn't really care when I got into trouble or I had to make my own food, had to make my own way to school and I never wanted to go to school because I had to make my own way.'*

From the discussions it was clear that different young people in care needed different support and approaches. Building trust in foster placements was complicated for these young people and even if there were situations that could be described as positive, they didn't seem to last.

Dan: *'I did kind a feel that I belong when I was with my last foster family and then there is always a point when everyone leaves there has always been that point in my life when people are just leaving fading away I don't speak to people and I don't understand that and that leads me on to that feeling that I don't really belong.'*

Stacey shared she felt happier and more cared for as a care leaver and this was echoed by others in the focus group.



Stacey: *'I had a good connection with one of my key workers after I left care when I was 16. I guess she made me feel wanted and belonged and because she generally took time out of her day to see how I was. She used to get up early and wake me up, knocked on my flat and take me to college and she generally cared about how I was doing. She just made me feel wanted.'*

Ed: *'Maybe I am feeling more a sense of belonging as a care leaver because I am seeing the same lot of people and knowing them – that make you feel as you belong.'*

This struck a chord with other young people who said relationships for young people in care constantly change due to professionals leaving. Care leavers felt they had more control over their own situations, including a choice of who they wanted to work with.

Stacey: *'When you are in care many of your workers change – when you are a care leaver you have more of a voice. In care once your worker goes your worker goes and you don't hear about them anymore. They don't tell you about them. They just go and then there is the next worker. There is no consistent relationship and you can't have a sense of belonging with an unstable relationship.'*

One of the care leavers made a poignant comment

Stacey: *'You chose your own friends, so you chose your own circles, whereas you don't really chose your own worker or you don't chose the government to be your parents. For me it's easier to have a sense of belonging with friends because I chose to be around them.'*

Young people from Unity clearly linked belonging to their families and described it vividly.

Unity (P5): *'... my family living room, it's always warm, sometimes even if our house is cold that room is always warm and the lighting is really nice – we have a sofa that's been there since I was born and we all sit there. I really like sitting there with my family.'*

Unity (P4): *... my grandfather's old house during EID when all my family are all dressed up and we are sharing food and it's just really happy and we are all celebrating and that's where I feel like I belong the most.'*

Unity (P6): *'... my grandmas living room that is where if my family gather my grandma scolds my parents when they are trying to tell me off.'*



5. Belonging in School

5.1 Do you feel a sense of belonging in your school, college?

Alex: *'When I was in school, I didn't really have that same sense of belonging as now in college. That was for multiple reasons actually. I didn't have a very good friend group at the time; there was an LGBT group, it was kind of very cliquey, so it wasn't like a very comfortable group for me to be in. I didn't really enjoy being there, so I didn't go very often; and issues with bullying. They weren't really dealt with properly and that was really hard.'*

Alex is now in college and has a completely different and positive experience.

Alex: *'Due to the pandemic it's kind of weird with College because it's almost detached - it's only the one group and I feel comfortable in that group that we're in. Nobody seems to be very "judgy" or anything, but that's like the group of people I'm in rather than anything else. None of them are - at least openly - "judgy" about anything.'*

'My teachers are equally non-judgmental, very accepting of things like that. 'Alex' isn't my legal name and stuff. It's the name that is on like everything. I haven't had any of the issues that I had in school with getting my name changed - like in school they changed it for a while and then said I couldn't do that and then it was a whole massive faff for a good year.'

'In college I was like, "yeah, I prefer Alex" and they're like "alright then" and now that's on everything. So they're very accepting of those things - I don't know what the word is - but they're very helpful.'

Tavoy also didn't have a great experience in secondary school

Tavoy: *'I felt like I was kind of forced to feel like I belonged to school. My education wasn't great; I didn't really have much support from teachers. I just didn't feel like I belonged. To be honest, I really didn't. School was horrible. I wouldn't go back even if you paid me.'*

'School needs to look at people as individuals. You can't just group them together and expect them all to learn in the same way. I feel this is the reason why I have a strong belief that schools need reforming. You are a fish and you can swim but you can't walk on land; but school wants you to walk on land. So they need different ways to teach and different ways of inclusion.'

'When I needed help in secondary school, I didn't really get much help. That's the issue. I felt like that's my problem. I did have a very hard time in secondary school anyway because I was in care. Maybe this was the reason why I had a difficult time. I just didn't feel like I belonged at all. I just went because I had to go.'

Interestingly, Abdi went to the same secondary school (five years later) and his experience was much more positive.

Abdi: *'Most teachers were nice and certain teachers would make you feel welcome in school, however there were certain teachers that didn't.'*

This highlights that all young people are individuals and do need different ways of engagement and treatment by professionals suited to young people's personality.

Peter: *'I did have a few friends and they were close but at the same time I didn't feel part of the wider school community.'*

Peter shared that due to his dyslexia he had difficulties concentrating in lesson. He found learning in a noisy school environment difficult and felt he was constantly interrupted by other students. However, his teachers didn't seem to be able to control those students and didn't seem to notice what negative impact it had on him. *'It really caused a big source of depression in my life.'*

By coincidence Peter was able to access counselling in school and this was the first time he *felt like I was able to be listened to.*

Unity (P1): *'The whole place is very cliquey, there are particular groups of people that will chill together every break time and lunch time and there's a group of middle-class young people who sit in one spot and everyone else is other places. You think 'oh I thought we were going to the same school'. But we are all doing different subjects – I don't see people who do other subjects.'*

Unity (P5): *'The curriculum is really rough I feel like it is a robotic system. The curriculum does not accommodate the individuals, it's like a factory producing people that can memorise facts.'*

This young person continues saying that there are some teachers who appreciate individual young people and have open conversations with them. It *'makes a big difference if you have a supportive teacher.'*

Unity (P4): *'In my school I feel there is a sense of belonging because in my school I feel we are very diverse there are a lot of different ethnicities in my school. So, in that sense I feel that I do belong in my school.'*

Unity (P5): *'I don't feel that [belonging] in my school. I am one of the only BAME young people in my year. It's very white. Most of my friends my whole life have been white and that's okay but it definitely doesn't give me a sense of belonging because I think diversity is really important, it is your education as well if you are surrounded by diversity I think that is an education that is just as important as what you learn in school.'*

Unity (P1): *'The Sixth form at my school is very diverse but it is still very weirdly segregated. I noticed from induction day the white kids are all the kids that went to that secondary school, the rest came for Sixth form. The white kids sit at a certain part and the rest of the young people are forced to go anywhere else. The teachers have an agenda, they have to integrate which is good, but it's a bit forced.'*

Unity (P5): *'The teachers are white; I barely see a teacher of colour at all. There are a few people of colour, but if you are person of colour its white teachers teaching a whitewashed curriculum at white pupils and you do feel excluded.'*

In comparison to the young people above this young person didn't seem to experience any different behaviour towards them due to their ethnicity.

Unity (P1): *'To be honest when I started [in Sixth form] my biggest fear was that I am going to school in white suburbia. I thought at this point [a term in] I would have experienced some sort of racism, but I think because of covid this hasn't happened. Not even active racial slurs.'*

During the conversation it became apparent that quite a few young people from the Unity had experienced their teacher mixing them up with other BAME students, and that some staff couldn't pronounce their birth names.

Unity (P2): *'I'm in a sociology class and we have a teacher that always mistakes my name with the one of another Somalian girl; we look nothing alike, we don't even wear the hijab in the same way.'*

Another young person had a similar experience

Unity (P1): *'It's a very big micro aggression, I mean in my chemistry class there are three black and Somalian young people; we look nothing alike. There are very physical differences and my teacher kept mistaking us. She would mix me up with anyone who looked Muslim.'*

The young people called this 'weird' and confirmed *'this doesn't happen to white people in the class.'*

Unity (P1): *'Yeah and all their names are very similar, and they never get their names wrong. It's really belittling because our name is what we identify ourselves with, learn it! It's really not difficult, even if it's a name that's difficult to pronounce you can learn it quite easily.'*

The young people confirmed that they felt teachers were not recognising them as who they are when they didn't use their correct names.

Unity (P5): *'When a teacher says your name wrong it feels like they are not seeing you as an individual.'*

Young people told us that many BAME young people would shorten their name or change the pronunciation just to please people because others *'didn't get it.'*

5.2 What do you think is important for students to feel a sense of belonging?

Ben shared that he can see his college is trying to be inclusive, e.g. by forming an LGBTQ+ group but it didn't really take off.

Ben agreed that raising the rainbow flag, displaying positive imagery can at least raise some awareness and give the message that intolerance won't be acceptable.

In Alex's experience school staff didn't follow up bullying incidences which were instead *'swept under the rug.'* Teachers declared they would *'have a talking to them'* but there was no action taken and the bullies continued to assault.

As both Alex and Ben have left secondary school a few years ago they hope that schools have moved on and teacher now receive related training (homophobia / transphobia) to

understand the stories of young people and the impact homophobia can have on them with the hope to become true champions.



LP group member shared that although they attended a mainstream school, they felt excluded from the wider school community. This was because their special education classes were separate from mainstream pupils. Consequently, they did not get to know other young people in the school and didn't have the opportunity to build friendships and social networks with those who lived in their local community. This led to them feeling unsafe in their local community and not a part of it. Young people felt that having some shared school activities would help break down barriers and challenge stereotypes of disability.

5.3 Did you receive any careers advice when you were in school?

Alex: *'I found out which course I wanted to go on through a school trip to a gaming convention where they had University stalls there. I talked to some of the people in the University stalls while we were waiting for everyone to gather up at the end. And I found it really interesting and I started looking into it. And now I'm planning on going to University for it. So, I think having opportunities like that is definitely an important thing when it comes to careers. Not just being like "we're gonna sit you down and give you careers advice". But maybe giving people at a more interactive choice because I don't remember anything I did for careers in year 10 or 11 from sitting in a classroom and doing it.'*

Young people were clear that visiting employers and offering these interactive opportunities would *'be much more useful for pupils deciding what they are interested in than just a career fair or talk.'*

Ben: *'I'd say it was pretty important actually, because what happened with me the first year of college - I was basically pressured by my mother and various expectations to take Sciences which was something I was not passionate about. I had very strong feelings that I wasn't going to pass at all, which were inevitably right. But my tutor told me that there was a careers fair, and to get a better idea of what I want to get into, I should go, which I did. And after seeing all the universities and checking out all of the different things and realizing there are things that I'm passionate in - that focus on it - that build careers off it - I don't have to do something that I don't like. And that was one of the main things that inspired me to actually go into games design instead of chasing up other things that I had no passion for.'*

Tavoy mentioned that she hadn't received any useful careers advice in school and suggested that ideally all children in care should be given additional support to explore future careers options.

5.4 Other issues

Covid and consequent impact – this was not a standardised question but came up in two focus groups but wasn't discussed in detail.

LP group members felt that during lockdown there was more of an emphasis on communities and a sense of belonging with their neighbours. *People 'came together to clap for the NHS which gave a sense of communities coming together. Neighbours got to know each other' and helped each other out by getting shopping.*

Young people felt that due to covid regulations in school students can feel isolated in on their year group or bubble. This would consequently impact their feeling of belonging.

Social Media -

Young people shared that some young people also feel a sense of belonging in the Social Media community.

Unity (P4): *'I think if you have different interest than people around you then yes' you can find belonging in Social Media.*

Unity (P5): *'I think for a lot of people the social media platforms are just an extension of the circles you already have and some people reach out and find new circles online, and some people just extend their belonging communities online. But sometimes actually social media can give you a sense of belonging as you hear from communities that you wouldn't be able to hear from, especially if you surrounded by people that are not the same ethnicity, as you can go online and feel empowered.'*

However young people also pointed out the pitfalls of Social Media

Unity (P1): *'I think social media often creates this false reality that everyone's life has to be perfect and you have to belong in this life of a perfect box.'*

LP group members listed the Social Media platforms they use as they offered them an opportunity to connect with others and therefore have a sense of belonging. These include: FACEBOOK, INSTAGRAM, SNAPCHAT and TIKTOK

'Online we can talk to friends and family and you can share photos of your interests and share with online friends.'

Young people also mentioned they use many group chats e.g. for homework, where they can share tips with their friends and support each other.

Feeling safe

Young parents talked about the importance of feeling safe where they live or where they go with their children. One mum shared her fears about the Metrobus attacks and not wanting

to use the bus as a consequence. Others talked about unsafe living environments in terms of disrepair of the building or the immediate environment being used by drug dealers etc.

Parents also told us that they no longer feel their children can play outside on the street or in the local play park as other residents don't like children and the noise they make.

Two focus groups discussed what they wanted decision makers to really hear

Unity (P1): *'I think a really key thing that need to be in the whole strategy is acceptance of individuality because people aren't monolithic. You can't categorise them into these big groups. They lose any sense of themselves, accepting their true existence.'*

Unity (P2): *'You shouldn't categorise people into different parts of the city, for example Redland belongs to white people or Easton belongs to black people.'*

Unity (P1): *'There was a teacher that told this group of BAME boys they had to leave and they shouldn't be in a big group and said this isn't Stapleton Road. Stapleton Road has a big BAME community and that's why he said it. That is a micro aggression in my opinion.'*

Unity (P5): *'There should be equality of opportunity. I think that no matter what your background people should be presented with an equal opportunity for their future because at the moment I think that these opportunities are very unequal and it really does depend on your financial background or the area you live in or even the school you go to because even though we learn the same curriculum the opportunities feel completely unequal.'*

LP group members told us:

'There needs to be more accessible transport for disabled young people to get around the city.'

'Young people's voices are not heard enough by decision makers.'

'There aren't enough places for young people to belong.'

6. Summary

It seems that most young people we engaged with feel they belong to someone and somewhere, which is truly reassuring. The concept of belonging is complex but talking about it enabled young people to reflect, formalise their opinions and to share honestly how they experience belonging in different circumstances.

Nevertheless, young people also told us the areas which can be improved to ensure all young people receive the highest quality services they deserve, e.g. in our schools and in our care and in our communities.

It seems that belonging and learning, belonging and feeling cared for, belonging and positive relationships, belonging and being truly heard are all interconnected. It seems that if professionals can create environments where young people feel they belong they will undeniably have the chance to unearth young people's talents and nurture them to reach

their potentials. Therefore, to creating those environments in which young people can feel they belong should be central to all our efforts.

It was a real pleasure to listen to all the young people and it reminded me how important it is to hear young people especially if we want to deliver services that can have a positive impact on their futures.