

Wigan Child Health Engagement

Creative Listening Exercise

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Contents

Introduction	3
Listening to Children and Young People in Wigan	3
Executive Summary	4
Methodology	4
Methods	5
Discussion of findings	6
Opportunities and aspirations	7
Identity of place	7
Safety and wellbeing	8
Community and belonging	8
Green and public spaces	8
Transport and Connectivity	9
Conclusion	10



Figure 1 Everything Human Rights consultation

Introduction

Listening to Children and Young People in Wigan

In a commission by health and social care consultancy, Consortium 24, between 11 August and 11 September 2025 Curious Minds undertook a creative consultation exercise with groups of young people in Wigan.

The creative exercise complemented a larger deep-listening exercise to sit alongside the Director of Public Health for Wigan Council's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA).

The JSNA brings together data and evidence about children's health, education, care and social circumstances. It identifies key needs and challenges affecting young people in the area and it highlights inequalities such as differences in health outcomes between different communities and groups. The JSNA informs strategic planning, helping services decide where to focus resources and how to design support that meets local needs.

In this case Wigan Council has already collected quantitative data through the children's JSNA. The creative listening aimed to provide rich, qualitative insights from children and young people themselves, giving voice to their real experiences and helping decision-makers understand the 'why' behind the numbers.

There were eight key areas available for exploration, and sessions focused on broad questions to elicit responses against any of these themes.

- Your neighbourhood
- Food and feeling well
- Getting around
- Learning and education
- Support and wellbeing
- Family and home life
- Friendship and safety
- Fairness and respect

Executive Summary

This consultation engaged 264 young people across Wigan and Leigh through 10 summer holiday sessions, 6 school-based sessions, and 4 one-to-one interviews. Of these participants, at least 68% were in receipt of free school meals, at least 31% had special educational needs, and 16% were of global majority or mixed ethnic backgrounds.

The findings highlight a complex picture: while young people valued friendships, green spaces, community groups, and sports as positive anchors in their lives, many also described their environment as dirty, chaotic, and unsafe, with pigeons becoming a recurring negative symbol. They expressed feelings of frustration, limitation, and inequality between towns, particularly with Leigh perceived as underfunded compared to Wigan.

At the same time, creative sessions provided a safe, engaging platform for self-expression and helped reframe perspectives, giving young people opportunities to voice concerns and generate hopeful, affirming reflections about themselves and their communities. These insights point to the need for investment in community assets, youth-led spaces, and creative opportunities that stimulate pride, wellbeing and a stronger sense of place.

Methodology

The process-based approach of Community Arts is widely recognised as an effective method for engaging young people in consultation, particularly when the aim is to elicit authentic thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. Traditional research tools such as surveys or structured interviews can feel restrictive, hierarchical, or intimidating, especially for young people who may lack confidence, have additional needs, or feel disengaged from formal contexts.

Creative methods, by contrast, shift the balance of power and are an effective way to provide space for young people to use their voice, two of the four elements of Professor Laura Lundy's widely adopted model for youth voice. The community arts provide:

- i. **accessibility and inclusion**, enabling young people to communicate in ways that suit their strengths and preferences (especially valuable when working with diverse groups, including those with special educational needs)ⁱ
- ii. **voice and agency**, creating space for young people to shape the agenda, co-create meaning, and represent their experiences in their own terms. Evidence shows that when young people are given tools for creative expression, they feel more ownership of the process and are more willing to give honest reflectionsⁱⁱ.

iii. **emotional safety and engagement**, allowing sensitive topics to be explored indirectly. Metaphor, imagery and performance enable young people to articulate feelings about issues like place, identity, or safety without the pressure of the 'right answers'ⁱⁱⁱ.

iv. **depth and richness**, generating arts based outputs that are both expressive and analytic: poems, drawings or performances carry effective and symbolic dimensions that reveal how young people experience the world^{iv}. This richness helps evaluators and decision-makers understand not only *what* young people think, but also *how* they feel.

Methods

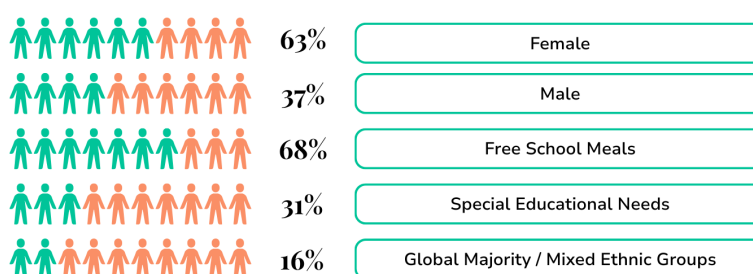
Between 11 August and 11 September 2025 Curious Minds undertook a creative consultation exercise with groups of young people in Wigan.

The work was delivered by Teaching Artists skilled in creative community engagement, who were selected via responses to a public call-out which was open online from 1st – 10th August 2025. Artists used a range of creative approaches including poetry, drama games, and large-scale physical mapping activities. The work was complemented by four in-depth interviews and was recorded in film and audio for the production of a short creative reel to be presented at Wigan's Youth Summit on September 29th.

Interviews were transcribed and combed for themes and categories, then triangulated with the consultation findings produced by the poetry and cross-artform workshops in the community and in schools.



Demographics



Discussion of findings

Across interviews and workshops, young people describe a tension: they value friendships, sport, nature and moments of community pride, but experience barriers in the form of safety concerns, limited activities for teenagers, inequality between towns, and a sense of needing to leave for better opportunities. Their words repeatedly ground these experiences in every day sensory symbols: Greggs; pigeons; rugby chants; parks and canals; and buses, especially the Bee Network.

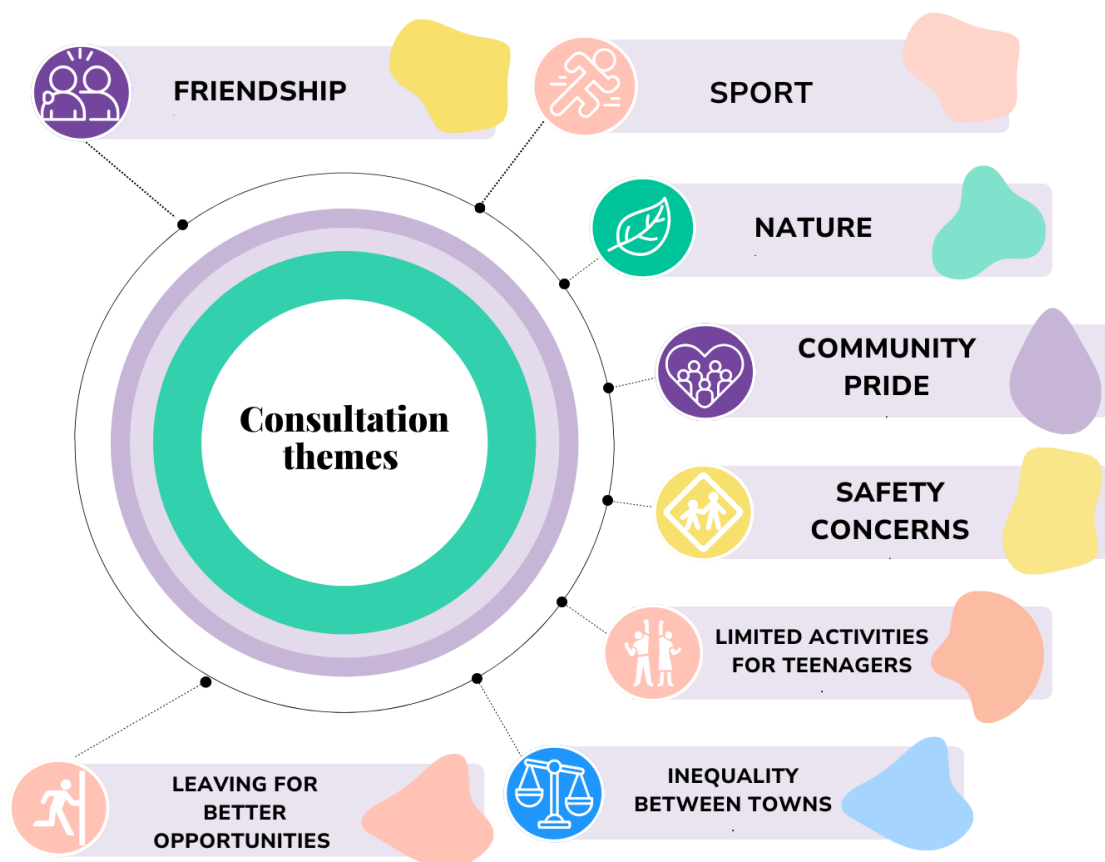


Figure 2 Key themes emerging from the workshops

Opportunities and aspirations

Many young people value arts, sport and hobbies, but see limited opportunities locally. Some link aspirations (e.g. performing arts) with leaving the borough. Opportunities within school are important; extra curricular provision outside school is more patchy.

"Personally I think ... if you want to to into like musical theatre and stuff... you can really find that up in Salford."

"I do piano... violin, and a bit of singing. So hobbies like that really help."

"I do karate personally, but that's not like particularly considered a sport... I'm not sporty but my friends who are really enjoy it."

Identity of place

The area is often described in negative terms: dirty, small, chaotic, unsafe. Pigeons, Greggs, drunkenness, and crime are recurring symbols. At the same time, strong identities emerge around rugby, canals, retail and independent businesses.

"Even though it's not, it's kind of difficult to find the independent businesses... once you find them, it's very nice."

“

Leigh is a town where mining took place,
Bird they took down, a canary its name,
Daffodils, Confusion, Blue,
I see infrastructure,
I hear cars, dogs,
I smell pollution, weed,
I taste fish and chips, Greggs, Sunday roast,
I feel confused,
I hate the smell,
I love swimming, TK Max, retail.

Safety and wellbeing

Safety concerns are strong, especially at night and for girls. Young people adapt behaviours (avoiding certain areas, travelling in groups, keeping phones charged) to feel safe.

"I don't tend to go out on my own... I always like to let people know where I am, have a fully charged phone at all times."

"Unless it's dark... if I see someone in the same side of the road as me, I'll cross over, because you just never know."

"When me and my friends go out... there is always like groups of people that will kind of ruin it."

"There's quite a lot of rough areas... people drinking on park benches.... It feels intimidating to leave the house initially."

Community and belonging

Community groups, events and sports clubs offer important spaces of belonging. Rugby and parades are seen as building community spirit. Friendships and family activities in green spaces are protective for wellbeing.

"The Christmas parade... we saw a few familiar faces from primary school... it felt like a sense of community."

"Rugby brings a lot of people close together... you meet people you wouldn't otherwise."

"Fishing... just quiet and peaceful... good for my mental health."

Green and public spaces

Young people place high value on parks, canals, Pennington Flash, and walking routes. Nature is linked to relaxation, mental health, and time with family/friends. Concerns remain about maintenance, litter, and anti-social behaviour in these spaces.

"I like to go to the park and chill... it's a bit of a break from schoolwork"

"Pennington Flash is one of my favourite places to go... so much nature hidden.."

"The Flash is brilliant for fishing... "

Transport and Connectivity

Transport is a mixed experience: buses and the Bee Network make travel affordable and open up new places, but delays and infrequency are frustrations. Some aspire for trams or better connections.

"It's okay because... I've always walked everywhere and buses to get on are fine."

"It's easy... hop on any bus for an hour with a ticket and go anywhere pretty much."

"I travel a lot more now... the Bee Network made it feel less daunting."

"Maybe a tram network... like Manchester has..."

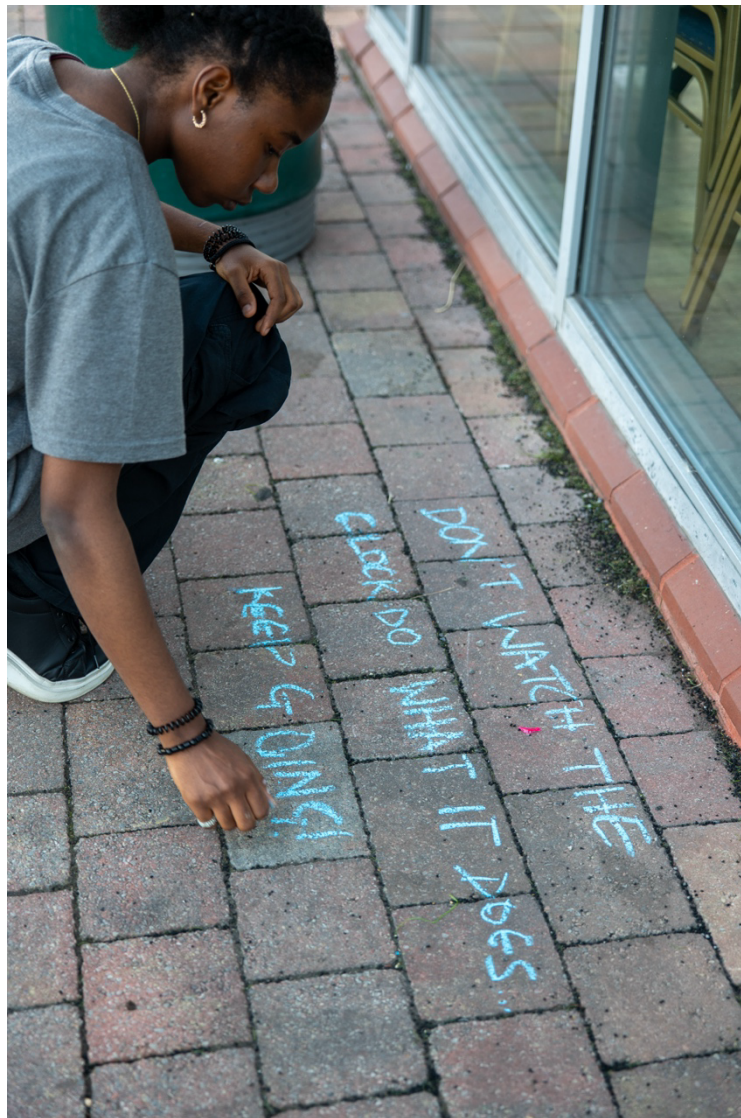


Figure 3 Consultation at Wigan Youth Zone

Conclusion

The creative listening exercise has provided a vital window into the lived experiences of children and young people across Wigan and Leigh. It has shown how daily life is shaped by a complex interplay of assets and barriers: strong attachments to friendships, sport, green spaces and community events, sit alongside concerns about safety, limited opportunities, inequalities between towns, and a persistent sense that ambitions may only be achieved elsewhere. The voices of young people were consistently grounded in vivid everyday symbols, from pigeons and Greggs to rugby chants and buses, reflecting both pride and frustration with their local environment.

Importantly, the use of community arts methods enabled these perspectives to emerge in ways that felt safe, creative and empowering. Poetry, mapping and performance helped young people articulate not only what they think, but how they feel, surfacing both critical challenges and glimpses of hope. Their reflections point to a clear set of priorities for future action: investment in accessible youth provision, greater opportunities for creative and cultural participation, protection and celebration of green spaces, and more reliable, affordable transport.

Taken together, these insights offer a powerful reminder that young people are not passive recipients of services, but active interpreters of their own environment. By continuing to create space for them to be heard, and by acting on what they say, Wigan Council and its partners can strengthen pride in place, improve wellbeing, and ensure that young people are central to shaping the borough's future.

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Leigh is a leopard, rose, red, calm,

I see pigeons,

I hear rugby chants,

I smell Greggs' sausage rolls,

I taste Green Lane chippy.

I feel at home. ”

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- ⁱ Thomson, P. (2008). *Doing Visual Research with Children and Young People*. Routledge and Gauntlett, D., & Holzwarth, P. (2006). Creative and visual methods for exploring identities. *Visual Studies*, 21(1), 82–91
- ⁱⁱ Lynch, H., & Woolgar, M. (2019). Participation through the arts: Young people's perspectives. *Children & Society*, 33(5), 421–435.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Leavy, P. (2015). *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- ^{iv} Barone, T., & Eisner, E. (2012). *Arts Based Research*. SAGE.