

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

Last summer I asked researchers at the University of Suffolk to see what the impact of the pandemic, and particularly the first lockdown and return to school, was having on our young people right here in Suffolk.

This followed on from substantial research on young people's perceptions of both the challenges, and the opportunities they have in Suffolk, commissioned by a group of community leaders including myself and published in July 2019.

The second piece of research is just being published, and while it relates to the first lockdown, the lessons seem to apply to the recent return to school from the third lockdown.

I'm struck by a number of themes in the report. While there may be common themes, we cannot lump all young people together and say their experience is the same.

So for some the prolonged time at home during periods of lockdown has been an opportunity for deepening relationships with their family, while for others it has been a loss of independence and on the peer support upon which they rely.

A sense of belonging is intrinsic to our well-being, so for some being with the family has provided that, and for others it has been the opposite.

And some have found out who their real friends are as they faced disagreements about how to respond to the lockdown rules. You can lose friends if you want to stick by the rules and others don't.

On the other hand, living in relationship on line has meant that for some their friendship group has changed, maybe expanded, as they have connected with peers with whom they had not necessarily engaged prior to lockdown.

Sticking to the Government rules and restrictions, and being concerned about the illness, has brought out another dimension for young people: their care for their families and particularly their older relatives.

This has meant that navigating the risks has been challenging for young people, including when they have returned to school and are concerned to keep their grandparents, for example, safe from the disease.

I have been struck by what the lockdowns have provided for young people, despite the loss of direct contact with friends, and the much reduced sense of school routine, and the clarity that provided.

While they have been missing the informal and out-of-school sources of support like youth groups, scouts, guides, and cadets, for some this has been an opportunity to develop new skills and interests, particularly in areas of creativity like art and music.

With that has come a reassessment of goals, and valuing the slowing down that the lockdowns have imposed.

Our young people were already more politically and culturally literate than previous generations of youngsters, and this time of pandemic has heightened that with engagement online, and with friends on global issues around the pandemic itself, government policies, climate crisis, racism, and US political situation for example.

And then they report the frustration of returning to school where there is little space in the curriculum to engage with these sorts of themes which they are ready to debate and eager to learn more about.

I have no doubt that those who will bear the greatest long-term impact of the pandemic are our young people.

We cannot tell what all the dimensions of that long-term effect will be, nor how deep it will go, or for how long.

We do know it is already affecting young people's mental health, job opportunities, and sense of themselves and the world.

The lockdown period had enabled many young people to step back and reflect on various aspects of their life.

It has been a time for young people to reassess what really matters to them, which for some has meant re-thinking subject choices, what careers they might want to pursue, and even a strengthening of religious faith or clarity about sexual identity.

There is a great deal more in this report, and my appeal as we tentatively begin to think what the future might look like, is to make sure we listen to our young people whose future it is.

It is very easy for some of us, with the best will in the world, to presume we know what young people think and want – or worse, what “is best for them.”

We don't.

We need to listen and work with young people, as we look to the future, to their future and our future.

That is going to be a conversation about values, about what is really important, about the pace of life, about family and friendship, about safe spaces to be ourselves, about education and jobs.

So I appeal to anyone who is in a role or responsibility that effects the lives and futures of young people to make a clear and deliberate effort to engage with and listen to young people, and involve them in design and decision making, even if it derails your most cherished plans.

I'm going to do this myself with young people in and on the fringes of the life of the Church, and ask them what do they want the Church to be like as we look to the future, and then involve them in designing what that might be.

If we all do this, we may be able to turn the pandemic's long term negative impact on young people's lives into a future that is more hopeful for them, and for us.

Internet, link to the report: <https://tinyurl.com/4m248vat>