



Hidden Somerset

Unseen Youth



Hidden Realities

In January 2019, 13.4% or 9,534 children and young people in Somerset were eligible for Free School Meals

In 2017 West Somerset was the worst performing area for social mobility in the whole of England

More than 15% of young people in Somerset have special educational needs or a disability

In December 2019, 44% of the 361 care leavers living in Somerset were not in education, employment or training

There are currently 44 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people, aged 16–20, cared for by Somerset County Council

Just one in five of people with disabilities who are from low-income backgrounds enter professional occupations

The GCSE results of low-income pupils from Somerset are 30% lower than their peers

Nearly 25% of the adult prison population has previously been in care



Introduction

Hidden Somerset is a series of short reports looking at aspects of life in Somerset that are often hidden from view. By lifting a lid on the experience and insights of frontline grassroots charities that work at the heart of our communities, we aim to stimulate debate and understanding across a wider audience, helping to inspire new and more impactful philanthropy.

In this report we shine a light on groups of young people in Somerset who face significant barriers to fulfilling their potential in life. They are among the most vulnerable in our community and are often unable to access opportunities that others take for granted; in reality this means that they are less 'socially mobile'.

Often the biggest barrier faced by our most vulnerable young people is a lack of regular pastoral and emotional support to build the skills and confidence that are vital to helping realise their potential. Young people who have grown up in care are often affected by trauma, instability and a lack of consistent role models – all of which can have serious consequences that affect their future lives. Young people with caring responsibilities for family members often miss out on the opportunities available to their peers, meaning they are far less likely to move on to further or higher education.

This is where grassroots community action can be so important for the groups of 'unseen' youth highlighted in this report: groups that may be challenging for schools or mainstream services to engage with. Being at the heart of our communities, these organisations are best-placed to reach young people who are in danger of being left behind.

We are very grateful to the organisations that gave their time taking part in our survey and interviews, which led to this report. They play an invaluable and unique 'at the coalface' role and are helping young people to build resilience and skills, bringing hope and fulfilment where it is needed most.

Justin Sargent

Chief Executive, Somerset Community Foundation

An uneven playing field

Facing disadvantage: Poverty and disability

Almost half the voluntary groups we surveyed told us that poverty is one of the main barriers facing the young people they support.

In Somerset 9,534 children and young people were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) in 2019. This equates to 13.4% of those on the school roll. Free School Meals are used nationally as an indicator of families on a low income, and whose children are growing up with disadvantage.

Nationally, only a third of pupils from low-income backgrounds achieve five good GCSEs at 16, compared to two thirds of their peers. However, some schools and colleges make a real difference to the future outcomes of young people in their care.

Research by the thinktank LKMco suggests that the correlation between the background and attainment of pupils is strongest in rural areas, leaving schools struggling to break the link between deprivation and achievement.¹

The lack of access and connection to a local university also limits young people's higher education choices and aspirations.

West Somerset had the highest percentage of children living in poverty in 2016 at 16% and was the worst performing area for social mobility in the whole of England in 2017.²



What is social mobility?

"Improving social mobility is about helping children who through no fault of their own have grown up with little chance of fulfilling their potential to make their own informed choices as to what they want to achieve. It is then down to their individual talents, hard work – and luck – to progress in the direction they have chosen."

Professor Lee Elliot Major, author of *Social Mobility and Its Enemies* and *What Works?*



For parents there is also the added challenge of combining work with transporting children to access extra-curricular activities after school, especially in a rural county with poor or non-existent public transport. This means many children miss out on crucial opportunities to expand their horizons and develop soft skills such as communication and resilience that are so important for the world of work.

Data from 2015 showed that just 12% of low-income pupils in Somerset went on to university, compared to 32% of other young people in Somerset, and over 50% of their peers nationally³. Almost 90% of young people not in education, employment or training in 2019 were from low-income backgrounds.⁴

Many young people in Somerset face additional barriers, such as caring for a parent or sibling or having special educational needs which can make accessing opportunities for education and employment even more challenging. A report from 2016 shows that 52% of Somerset's young carers and 47% of pupils with special educational needs intended to continue in full-time education after Year 11, which is 10–15% lower than their peers.⁵

"The power and impact of social, emotional and mental health intervention is overlooked and undervalued as it doesn't tick the needs and priorities of mainstream schools. They are under extreme pressure to satisfy the many, and not focus on the few who are struggling." Survey respondent

The appropriate infrastructure, financial and emotional support needs to be in place before young people can take advantage of education and opportunities and develop the resilience and skills they need.

Our local voluntary sector has an important role in identifying and supporting our most vulnerable young people. Often, volunteers and workers from local charities and voluntary groups can provide that trusted figure or role model for young people who are struggling, alongside giving them the specialist support they need to help level the playing field and reach their potential.

More than 15% of young people in Somerset are living with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities – higher than the regional and national average. Between 2016–19 the attainment gap between children and young people with additional needs and their peers had widened by both age 11 and age 16. Disability, seen and unseen, causes additional barriers to individuals as they move into further education or employment.

According to Somerset County Council's Autism Strategy 2015–18, just 15% of people with autism are in full-time employment and 9% are in part-time employment. However, 79% of people with autism who receive out-of-work benefits say they would like to work with the right support. More than a quarter of university graduates with autism are unemployed; around twice the proportion of any other disability group. Nationally, evidence states that people with disabilities from low-income backgrounds face a double disadvantage; only 21% enter professional occupations, compared to 43% of people with disabilities from wealthier families.⁶

“Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) are known as the hidden disability. There is a major mismatch between the known prevalence of SLCN and the numbers of children actually identified and supported. Failing to identify children with SLCN has a profound impact on their life chances.”

Survey respondent

In our survey of organisations and groups in Somerset who work with children and young people with additional needs, one of the biggest barriers they believed their young people faced was lack of support around education, whether that was through specialist intervention, support to understand their diagnosis or vocational courses that would meet their needs. One respondent said the young people were “out of place in mainstream education”. Another that there are “a lack of employers willing to make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities”. How we respond as a community to the needs of young people – and make education and employment opportunities more accessible – will play a vital role in shaping their future prospects.



¹ <https://cfey.org/2019/04/breaking-the-link-attainment-poverty-and-rural-schools/>

² Social Mobility Commission, Social Mobility Index, 2017

³ Free school meals: pupil progression to higher education; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015

⁴ Social Mobility Commission, Social Mobility Index, 2017

⁵ Somerset Children and Young People Survey, 2016

⁶ Social Mobility Commission – State of the Nation 18–19

An uneven playing field continued

Care leavers

Children and young people are taken into care when their home is unsafe or when their parents are unable to look after them. Two thirds have experienced abuse or neglect – the trauma of which can have long-term effects⁶.

“Some of the biggest unmet needs we see relate to the whole family. Families are often on low incomes but may also be socially isolated or struggling with additional needs and overwhelmed with modern life. Local authority services are so stretched that families lack early intervention and basic parenting support – the very support that helps to avoid more serious problems in later life.” Survey respondent

Almost 70% of children in care who are adopted are under the age of five⁷. Those who are taken into care when they are older have often missed large parts of their education due to moving between multiple care placements and have significant emotional and mental health needs. Some find loving foster families, but others struggle to settle.

Young people leave the care system aged between 16–25. At the time of writing there are 361 care leavers in Somerset. By this stage in their life they are likely to already be behind their peers and 44% are not in education, employment or training, compared to just 11.5% young people nationally⁸. Nationally, we also know that nearly 25% of the adult prison population – and almost half of all young men in custody – have previously been in care. These figures are stark and stem from experiences while living at home and, in a minority of cases, while in the care system itself.



These young people are trying to balance the challenges of being a teenager alongside the adult responsibilities of paying rent and bills. Living on a budget of £60 per week, they miss out on many things that their friends take for granted, like socialising, the ability to buy clothes or a laptop, and a home with a well-stocked fridge.

We know that many young care leavers aspire to vocational careers such as construction, mechanics, driving, childcare and beauty therapies. But while they are keen to undertake vocational training in these areas, these courses require them to complete maths and English qualifications as well. This is a frequent barrier for many care leavers which often results in them leaving their course and their chosen career path. Many also find employment opportunities are limited in a rural county as they cannot afford driving lessons or a car.

But despite these challenges and the odds being stacked against them many care leavers carve out their own path to success. One local care leaver studied a Beauty Therapy qualification and, having worked in a local health spa, now plans to open her own business with funding and support from The Prince's Trust. Tasha Manley's story, which features on page 6 of this report, shows the importance of additional financial support in enabling care leavers to succeed in further education.



⁶ Children Looked After in England (Including Adoption) 2018–19; Department for Education

⁷ Children Looked After in England (Including Adoption) 2018–19; Department for Education

⁸ Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: August 2019; Office for National Statistics



Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people

There are currently 44 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people aged 16–20 in the care of Somerset County Council, supported by local foster carers. Some have leave to remain in the UK while others do not. Some have chosen to remain in Somerset, while others have chosen to live elsewhere in the country in order to be closer to family.

Each has found their own route here, often via people traffickers and in the backs of lorries that either drop them in the county or are stopped by the police. Some have been placed in Somerset by the Government. Most are from Afghanistan, Iran, Eritrea, Sudan, Syria and Albania. All have fled their homes because they feared for their life and many have seen family and friends killed during their journeys. Those from East Africa usually arrive via Libya, where they have been held captive and often tortured until ransoms are paid.

Despite these experiences, all arrive in the UK keen to make the most of the opportunities now available to them and to

make their families proud. Just under 100% are in education, employment or training.

Most of these 44 asylum seekers demonstrate the academic ability and determination to progress to university. However, they can often become disheartened by the frustration of learning a new language and, in many cases, a new alphabet. While progress in maths and spoken English is swift, they remain held back by reading and writing. This means it can take a long time to reach the level of English they need to match their educational ambitions. But there are some great success stories, with one young man from Eritrea studying computer science at Leicester University with plans to continue his education at Oxford or Cambridge next year, showing that with the right support, young people can achieve remarkable things against even the toughest of odds.

Community Solutions

Eagle House Trust Bursary Scheme

A helping hand for a bright future

Tasha Manley, a care leaver and Eagle House bursary recipient, recently achieved a First in her Health and Social Care degree at Cardiff University and is now working as a Victim Care Officer for Devon and Cornwall Police.

"The main benefit of the Eagle House bursary was that it eased the stress of attending university. This meant I could focus properly and as a result my work was a much higher standard than it might otherwise have been.

My leaving care worker told me about the bursary and encouraged me to apply. The application process was straightforward, but unfortunately we were a bit late applying and so I didn't get the full amount in the first year. I applied again for my second and third years and was awarded £1,500 each academic year. I have to say, the larger bursaries were life-changing.

What might seem like such a small amount of money to some people made such a difference to me. Before I was awarded the bursaries my main stress was money: I wasn't able to properly afford food and wasn't socialising with other students due to lack of funds. I had to keep making excuses not to go out. My first year should have been fun: meeting new groups of people and enjoying the freedom that university allows a young person.

All my friends had financial support from their parents; I didn't have that.



The bursaries helped me to budget, because they were paid termly. They also allowed me to pay for additional resources like printing costs, trips, talks and additional lectures without having to worry. I was able to pay for travel to Devon and North Wales for research for my dissertation and could focus on my studies without the stress of money worries. Most importantly, I was having an actual university experience.

Not having a family to fall back on can make you feel very alone and my first year at university was like that. My leaving care worker was always there for me, and was reassuring and supportive, but going to university is not just about your studies: you're there to learn so much more besides. I can honestly say that the Eagle House bursary gave me the financial freedom to do that."

[Somerset Community Foundation manages the Eagle House bursary scheme which awards funding to help young people who have grown up in care.](#)



Ups and Downs Southwest

Living life to the fullest

"Wendy's son, Oliver, has Down Syndrome. Wendy received very little support and advice when he was growing up and was given a very bleak picture of his future. Oliver went on to become a successful photographer, winning the National Diversity Award for UK Positive Role Model for Disability in 2015. He's published two books, featured on television programmes such as The One Show and Countryfile, and in 2019 he attended the USA/UK Media awards in London where he won the Best Photographic Feature Award, beating a photographer from The Sunday Times in the same category.

Wendy wanted to make sure no other family had the same experience as she did in the early days, and Ups and Downs Southwest was born.

Ups and Downs Southwest has been working with families and young people since 1997. We offer holistic support and are there from birth all the way through to age 25, with families and young people using our services at different stages in their lives.

Wendy has since stepped away from charity, but Ups and Downs Southwest continues to go from strength to strength. We're here to reassure parents that their child can live a full life. We understand and celebrate the value of these

young people and work hard to get this message across: not only to families, but also to the wider community, dispelling myths and challenging misconceptions. The biggest barrier that our young people face is a lack of community acceptance and understanding. But things are beginning to change. The Down Syndrome Association's Work Fit programme matches young people with registered employers to provide work experience and a route into employment, and we plan to set up an eco pop-up shop where our young people can sell package-free goods, giving them the opportunity to develop skills whilst working within the wider community.

Looking ahead, there is a significant need for access to early speech and language provision within schools and this is something we urgently need to address. We feel passionately about creating a social enterprise so that we can offer a direct pathway for our young people to gain work experience and life skills. It's really important to us that we show just what children and young people with Down Syndrome can achieve. This is brilliantly illustrated by Wendy's son Oliver, who is an inspiration to us all."

Joanna Thorn
Director
Ups and Downs Southwest



Youth UnLimited CIC

Building bridges for young people

"Youth UnLimited work with young people across Taunton, Bridgwater and the surrounding areas using professional youth work methods, including informal street-based youth work. Our youth workers go to areas where young people, who are often disengaged and at risk, are known to congregate: parks, estates, supermarkets and shops, to engage them in meaningful conversation.

Often these young people choose not to connect with other agencies. They may be struggling with chaotic home lives, or challenges at school or college, and are experiencing social, emotional and welfare difficulties. Many simply fall through the net and are not 'picked up' by statutory services.

Sometimes we engage up to 70 young people during a session, although over time – and as stronger relationships develop – we will prioritise more socially disadvantaged groups. The aim is to support them through informal education, engage them with other agencies or help them access appropriate support with their issues.

Sometimes a positive, confidential discussion with a trusted non-judgemental youth worker is all they need; it can be so valuable.

Where they might often choose not to talk to

someone seen as an 'authority figure' we are seen as non-threatening and a friendly face. We can also offer more focused support sessions with them at their school, college or wherever appropriate.

The need for our services far exceeds what we can currently provide. As more and more statutory organisations struggle to meet demand and hear about what we are doing, we are now asked to focus on specific areas where there are particular concerns. We work closely with the police and local authorities as well as other charities.

Recently, one of our youth workers engaged with a group of three girls who talked freely about hitch-hiking into their local town, carrying knives for their own safety. Over time she was able to build a relationship with the girls and found out more about their chaotic home lives, including possible abuse. Ultimately, she was able to provide a bridge between the girls and other agencies, including their schools. By building that trust we were able to put in place the vital support those girls needed."

Craig Lloyd
Director and Youth Worker
Youth UnLimited

PROMISEworks

Being there for the long term

"We make a simple promise to our young people: to provide a positive and stable relationship with a trained adult mentor who will be with them for at least two years.

Having started our mentoring service in mid-2017, PROMISEworks is now supporting over 70 mentoring relationships with children and young people between the ages of 5–25, with another 50 on our waiting list.

Many of these children have chaotic home lives or have suffered traumatic experiences. Others may be caring for their parents in complex situations or struggling with the effects of bereavement. Several may have left care or be on the edge of the care system.

Our volunteer mentors do simple things. They commit to meeting their young friend for a few hours every week or so, for a coffee or maybe a walk. As trust builds, our volunteers can find themselves supporting their young person in a variety of ways. This can often be with things that many would take for granted, such as attending a parents' evening, helping with college applications or preparing for and attending interviews. They might support the young person to engage positively with local organisations such as a sports club, helping them to feel a

sense of belonging within their community.

Each relationship is unique. Our volunteers focus on strengths rather than emphasising weaknesses. Through this long-term, trusting relationship, each one of our children can develop the resilience, self-esteem and emotional well-being that will help them to build their own 'life that works'. This can mean the difference between a young person staying with their family instead of going into care; or remaining in education instead of disengaging.

We work closely with our referring agencies such as Children's Social Care, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, as well as schools and colleges. Our volunteer mentors are carefully recruited, trained and given around the clock support by our experienced staff. Working together, the PROMISEworks team help children to gradually gain the skills and confidence needed to face their own challenges.

Often, we are the only positive influence in their young lives."

Ali Hart
Case Holder
PROMISEworks

Looking Ahead

The challenge of supporting young people to reach their potential, despite a difficult start in life, should not be underestimated. We are indebted to our incredible youth workers, volunteers, mentors, teachers, counsellors and others who go the extra mile every day for our young people. We're also amazed at the grit and determination of young people who turn their own lives around in spite of seemingly insurmountable barriers.

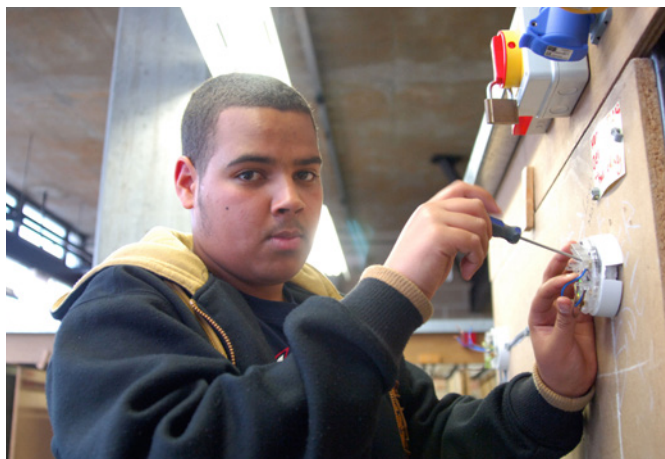
We want to provide funding and support that removes the barriers for our young people and encourage our donors to provide funding to help us do just that.

Supporting talent through different career paths

Somerset Community Foundation already awards a small number of university bursaries to care leavers via our Eagle House Fund (see Tasha Manley's story on page 6 of this report), which was the result of a trust transfer from Somerset County Council.

Demand for these bursaries consistently outstrips supply. Additionally, the landscape for post-16 education, employment and training has shifted noticeably in recent years with the growth of apprenticeships. While many universities have provisions for students in certain circumstances, such as care leavers, much less support is available for those pursuing vocational routes.

Growing our bursary fund so that it can support talented young people on their journey could be a key role for local philanthropists in the coming years. In the future we want our bursaries to continue supporting access to university, but just as vital is providing financial support to those on vocational career paths or who need additional support, such as one-to-one tuition, to meet specific language or numeracy needs that are holding them back.



Supporting young people's mental health

Moving into education, training or employment is often an unattainable goal for a young person experiencing mental health issues. We know that mental health services are stretched and can't always provide the intensive, specialist support needed for young people working through traumatic childhood experiences.

At Somerset Community Foundation, we have a strong track record of funding a range of mental health organisations working with children and young people. These often use the power of play, the great outdoors or working with animals combined with more traditional one-to-one or group support. They also all involve skilled staff who are experienced at building honest and trusting relationships with young people. These services can often act more quickly than many statutory services.

But these services are often under threat due to uncertainty over longer term funding. Sadly, local government funding for youth services has been drastically cut and many can only offer grants for very specific projects or services. Our aim is to engage more local donors in supporting youth projects so we can grow the funding we provide, allowing us to award more multi-year grants.

This type of funding will help build sustainable organisations, enabling them to focus on what they do best – helping our young people build a bright future.

That is what we think...but we are interested in hearing from you. Contact justin.sargent@somersetcf.org.uk with your thoughts and ideas or if you would like to know more about supporting our work.



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Get in touch

Address: Yeoman House, The Royal Bath & West Showground,
Shepton Mallet, Somerset BA4 6QN **Call:** 01749 344949
Email: info@somersetcf.org.uk **Website** www.somersetcf.org.uk

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