

## Written evidence submitted by Fixers (BYC038)

### Introduction

- 1) In 2015, the youth campaigning charity Fixers embarked upon a project to bring together evidence of young people's experiences with negative body image and the mental and physical impact this has on their lives. As with all Fixers' projects, young people feature at the forefront of what we do and it is their voices that lead our research and form the basis for the policy recommendations that featured in our *Young People Fixing Eating Disorders: A Cultural Shift is Required*.
- 2) In March 2015 Fixers held a Feel Happy Fix Live event, supported by the Wellcome Trust, Simplyhealth, the British Film Institute (BFI) and ITV, which gave young people with lived experiences of negative body image and eating disorders the opportunity to get their voices heard by professionals, health practitioners and policy makers. This conference was the culmination of the work of 265 Fixers taking part in 16 regional workshops and UK-wide survey which resulted in concrete policy recommendations for positive change in the areas of media, health and education. The following submission of evidence comes directly from young people who participated in the *Feel Happy Eating Fix* project and the recommendations are based upon their lived experiences.

### Executive Summary

- 3) Negative body image and the impact this has on young people's mental and physical health has rapidly become a major public health concern facing policy makers but, more importantly, the young people themselves. The 2012 *Reflections on Body Image* report, by YMCA Central and the APPG on Body Image, stated that children and young people were vulnerable to pressures to conform to 'unrealistic beauty ideals'<sup>1</sup>; and while it is true there is no singular cause for eating disorders, the Royal College of Psychiatrists has identified the proliferation of online images of 'perfect bodies' as causing undue stress on young people<sup>2</sup>.
- 4) The concerns raised by these reports echo the voices of the Fixers who spoke about issues relating to the impact body image has upon the exacerbation of eating disorders and the creations of unhealthy expectations of one's own body. The following evidence submission to the Youth Select Committee shall focus on the committee's terms of reference relating to 'groups affected by body image issues', 'internet, social media and messaging', 'education' and 'health implications'. Using the voices of young people with lived experience of issues relating to body image, this submission shall provide an insight into young people's views on the issues raised within the terms of reference and aim to broaden the discussion on body image beyond its current professionalised parameters.

### A Cultural Shift is Required

- 5) In the social media age, body image occupies a significant place in the cultural landscape of young people. By 2013 two-thirds of teenagers had joined the Facebook app<sup>3</sup>, this demonstrates the central role image now plays in the lives of young people. With smartphone usage now embedded throughout younger age cohorts' behavioural norms,

the importance of image in young people's lives has increased considerable – with Instagram, Snap Chat, YouTube and Facebook being the most visible – and with this the importance of image has grown among younger generations. As Linda Papadopoulos has stated, 'the world is saturated by more images today than at any other time in our modern history'<sup>4</sup>. Instagram and Snap Chat especially rely almost entirely on visual image to facilitate communication between users and represent the continued diversification of communications away from the traditional platforms centred on voice or written word, to one where imagery is increasingly an integral part of how young people communicate.

- 6) **Groups affected by body image issues:** For many young people, negative body image can have a debilitating impact upon how they establish the crucial 'soft skills' necessary to succeed and achieve human flourishing in life. As research has shown with eating disorders, which are strongly linked with the issue of negative body image, the often secretive behaviour of young people with such illnesses can be left feeling isolated both physically and psychologically<sup>5</sup>. Further to this, many young people felt lack of understanding of their condition exacerbated this isolation.
- 7) Throughout the *Feel Happy Eating Fix* workshops, young people spoke of their sense of isolation due to the lack of understanding from peers, family and society at large. A significant factor in young people with eating disorders and negative body image not seeking or being given help/support was the sense of social isolation they experienced. As Toni said during one of our workshops: 'for me it was the isolation. In our culture a lot of socialisation revolves around food. It is really hard because you don't know what to do with your friends and it adds to the isolation'. This speaks to the crippling impact negative body image and associated eating disorders can have on young people's lives, particularly when it comes to their social lives.
- 8) For many Fixers, these trends begin with the influence media (both social and broadcast) and how this exacerbated their disorders. While the Fixers did not attribute the cause of their eating disorders and body image issues to the media directly, they nonetheless expressed concerns about the role the media plays in promoting unrealistic body image and unattainable body aesthetics. The media plays a significant part in young people's lives, with advertisements, newspapers, billboards, fashion designers, television and social media bombarding them with images from the moment they wake in the morning.
- 9) **The internet, social media and messaging:** As stated previously, the growth of internet usage and social media participation amongst younger age cohorts, especially millennials and 'Generation Zs', means that its impact on young people's expectations of body image is greatly magnified in comparison to older generations. As one Fixer, Tabitha said: "We all seem to want to put ourselves on a platform on social media. If you get more likes on your social media feed then you think it must be good. We need to educate children about the dangers of this at an early age".
- 10) The role of internet providers and social media providers, in helping to promote more positive body image to young people, was highlighted by Fixers as an area where social media platforms could do more than they presently do. For instance, Fixers strongly urged social media companies to do more to identify and remove images that promote unrealistic expectations of body image and, in the case providers like Facebook, for photo-

shopped images to be clearly indicated as such. This was highlighted in the workshops where young people stated that the posting of images was driven by a need to 'get likes' from followers on their social media feeds, out of a need for gratification and validation, which encouraged young people with negative body image issues to go to 'extremes with their eating disorder'. More awareness of the dangers of unrealistic body image expectations is something young people want to see more of on social media.

- 11) For many Fixers there was a strong sense that there is an abundance of 'triggering content' on social media platforms such as Tumblr, Instagram and a number of pro-anorexia and bulimia sites. The latter such sites promoting a culture of negative body image that undermines efforts to combat negative body images and messages in society; in particular, young people identified pictures and advice promoting weight loss to be the most at risk of 'triggering' young people with body image issues. Fixers like Claire identified Instagram and Tumblr as 'a real problem' for promoting eating disorders as a desirable lifestyle choice and means to achieving an idealised body image.
- 12) To address these concerns Fixers called for more robust awareness campaigns supported by social media and internet providers, including efforts to work with young people with lived experience of issues relating to negative body image to devise better mechanism for combating negative body image culture online and to better engage with young at-risk social media users.
- 13) **Education:** Young people are under incredible levels of pressure to achieve academically at school and to be popular amongst their peers. This is a critical time in the lives of many young people when how they perform in just a few short but crucial years in the education system can affect the rest of their lives with severe implications for educational attainment and longer-term impacts on employment prospects and future earning potential<sup>6</sup>. In the focus groups and workshops the young people agreed that pressure on young people to achieve high academic standards and pressure upon schools to ensure pupils met target grades – all of which exacerbated, in their view, young people's mental health issues relating to body image and eating disorders. As Claire said in one focus group: "there is too much pressure. There is too much pressure on young people and teachers. This can be because of exams and can lead to mental health issues'.
- 14) Indeed, these concerns about stress levels on pupils were further heightened by the view among young people involved in the focus groups that teachers and school support staff lacked sufficient knowledge to properly integrate positive body image messages into the curriculum. As one Fixer said: "It [school lesson] was all about obesity and getting your five a day. There was no support or focus on... wellness education". Other young people expressed the view that across the curriculum the teaching of healthy body image was largely absent, with the focus being on obesity and dieting – which the young people all agreed served to exacerbate the underlying mental health issues around negative body image and encourage young people to see their bodies through the prism of obesity rather than teaching them to gain self-esteem and have healthy views about body image.
- 15) With regards to the promotion of positive body image by youth organisations outside of school, the work Fixers has done with young people demonstrates that our 'voice as value' approach to engaging young people enables the promotion of healthy body image,

education about positive attitudes to eating and raising awareness of the mental health concerns arising from negative body image. Fixers is a youth social action campaign charity that works with 16-25 year olds, often from the most marginalised groups in society. By helping young people to communicate their voices on the issues they want to talk about, it provides those who make decisions that impact on young people's lives with a unique, unvarnished and authentic insight into what young people are saying; because Fixers' approach is grounded in the belief that the real experts are the people who know most about young people's lives – the young people themselves.

- 16) Examples of Fixers' work in promoting positive body image messages can be found in the numerous projects we have undertaken with young people on negative body image. Such Fixer projects include that of Megan Lambert, an 18-year-old from Lancashire, who wanted to raise awareness on the effects of eating disorders and how young people can overcome them. As Megan, herself said: "I have experience of how negative body image can affect someone's life in a big way. I know it's hard for people that surround someone with an eating disorder for them to understand and support them... older people, such as parents and guardians, but also teachers and peers need to understand because the level of support you receive impacts on a person's recovery". You can learn more about Megan's Fix [here](#).
- 17) Other such examples include India Gale, a 17-year-old Fixer from Brighton, who is leading a campaign against unrealistic body images presented in the media. As a child India was involved in an accidental fire that led to her with 40% burns on her body; now she has turned her experience into a campaign to affect positive social change by raising awareness of negative body images in the media. As India says: "I think we are surrounded by unrealistic beauty standards and I feel that really affects young people's self-esteem". You can learn more about India's Fixer campaign, *Challenging Beauty Perceptions*, [here](#).
- 18) In each of these projects, and the many other body image campaigns Fixers has worked on, the focus has been on challenging preconceived perceptions of body image in society and giving young people a voice to encourage their peers to have more positive, health conceptions of body image. As our 2015 *Voice as Value* study pointed out, Fixers' approach has positive outcomes for both young people and the audience they are communicating to – the latter gains insight into the lives of young people and often marginalised groups that don't receive a forum for their views and, for the former, young people gain a sense of ownership of their voice, higher levels of self-esteem, a platform to communicate their message free from institutional control and recognition of young people's views and opinions by decision makers<sup>7</sup>. We believe that the evaluation of youth and education programmes promoting positive body image should be judged through the prism of whether the young people themselves measurably benefit from the process in terms of higher levels of self-confidence, recognition of their voices by decision makers and ensuring young people are at the forefront of programmes in a voice-led approach.

## Conclusions

- 19) In areas such as social media and education, young people have expressed a sense of being isolated both by their negative body image issues and by a wider societal lack of understanding of body issues and related eating disorders. With educational settings becoming ever higher pressured and demands on young people to perform to higher

academic standards, young people wanted to see better training of teachers and school support staff on body image issues and for the curriculum to focus less on obesity and more on promoting positive body image across the curriculum. In terms of social media and the wider internet, young people felt that the negative body images promoted through platforms such as Instagram and Snap Chat posed a dual risk for young people – firstly by promoting unhealthy expectations of the ‘ideal’ body and, secondly, by ‘triggering’ relapses in the conditions of those with eating disorders. Young people wanted to see social media companies to do more in promoting healthy body image and cooperating more with regulation in this area.

- 20) Finally, programmes operated by youth organisations aimed at promoting healthy body images should ensure that they are led by young people’s voices and experiences. Our experience of supporting young people campaign against negative body image has been that they are most effective when it is their voices leading the way and helping young people gain confidence and self-esteem through recognition of their lived experiences. It is only through the recognition of young people as the ones who know most about their lives, including body image issues, that programmes promoting a healthy body image culture can succeed.

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<sup>1</sup> *Reflections on Body Image*, APPG on Body Image (2012)

[https://issuu.com/bodyimage/docs/reflections\\_on\\_body\\_image](https://issuu.com/bodyimage/docs/reflections_on_body_image)

<sup>2</sup> Woolf, E. 2015. *How social media is fuelling the worrying rise in eating disorders*. Retrieved June 6, 2015 from Telegraph Online <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-health/11649411/How-social-media-is-fuelling-the-worrying-rise-in-eating-disorders.html>

<sup>3</sup> Does social media impact on body image? *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-29569473> [accessed: 14/06/17]

<sup>4</sup> Papadopoulos, L. 2010. *Sexualisation of Young People Review*, <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/10738/1/sexualisation-young-people.pdf> [accessed: 15/06/17]

<sup>5</sup> Healthtalk.org (2015) *Eating disorders: friends and relationships*. <http://www.healthtalk.org/young-peoples-experiences/eating-disorders/friends-and-relationships> [accessed: 15/06/17]

<sup>6</sup> *The Beat Guide to Understanding Eating Disorders*. BEAT (2015) [https://www.beat.co.uk/assets/000/000/444/Beat\\_Understanding\\_ED\\_Guide\\_WEB\\_original.pdf?1431349325](https://www.beat.co.uk/assets/000/000/444/Beat_Understanding_ED_Guide_WEB_original.pdf?1431349325) [accessed: 15/06/17]

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, L. (2015). *Voice as Value: A Powerful Tool for Transformation Change*. <http://www.fixers.org.uk/UserFiles/Files/Voicereport.pdf>