

# WHAT'S STOPPING US?

**FRESH THINKING**  
on young people  
and society

Reflection 4 of a series of 4:

## THOUGHTS ON ENGAGEMENT

Research findings, data, and case studies from 10 countries which shed light on the issues and make recommendations for change.



# ENGAGEMENT

## Celebrating involvement and achievement

Innovative, unexpected, and imaginative participation - this was what our researchers discovered during our far-reaching, three-year research project. While we identified barriers that prevent or reduce youth engagement, we also uncovered positive actions that can create opportunities and change lives. Our project gathered 22 case studies

from 10 countries, telling stories of difficulty but also of success; of inspirational projects and young people who are taking charge of their lives and making a difference in their communities.

By analysing the latest research and data, interviewing young people, and seeking out thought-provoking, real-world examples, we know there is great potential to turn distrust and negativity into powerful, positive change.

Across Europe and beyond, by having a better understanding of young people's lives and what motivates and frustrates them, we can build stronger, more cohesive communities for the future.

Under the theme of engagement, read on, for some:

- examples of powerful youth engagement, often in difficult circumstances
- top-line reflections and findings
- what young people had to tell us
- what we can do about it (recommendations for change)

You may also wish to read our other three reflections from this project on the following themes: **Systems**, **Labels** and **Inequality**.



This is just a very short reflection from a major three-year project. If it inspires you to find out more (and there is much more information available), we tell you where and how on page 14.

“ They give me the strength to go forward, and to me, that raises my self-esteem, doesn't it? And it makes me see myself in a better light. You are getting there, you have people who care about you, you already have something to hold on to and move forward ”

José, male, 19, Portugal.  
(about his experience of a Second  
Chance Education project).



# THE PROMISE PROJECT



## An introduction

PROMISE (Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement) is a major EU-funded research project exploring young people's role in shaping society: past, present, and future.



Young people are often at the forefront of social, cultural, and political change, driven by their energy and creativity, but also by their frustration at the challenges they face. PROMISE has been investigating their responses to these challenges, focusing particularly on those who encounter conflicts and are often seen as 'troubled' or 'challenging'.

Through a better understanding of the experiences, values and attitudes of European youth and those young people least heard by decision-makers, PROMISE got to the heart of the barriers and opportunities for social engagement and stronger societies.

# THE PROMISE PROJECT

## Fact and figures



**12**

### PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

including universities, NGOs  
(non-governmental organisations),  
research and educational institutes  
from across Europe

**10**

### COUNTRIES INVOLVED

Croatia, Estonia, Finland,  
Germany, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia,  
the Russian Federation, Spain,  
and the UK

**3**

### YEARS OF IN-DEPTH RESEARCH

beginning in 2016 and concluding in 2019

**22**

### REAL-LIFE PROJECT CASE STUDIES GATHERED

**12,666**

### SURVEY RESPONSES

comparing social and political  
engagement across the  
generations



### A MIXED METHODS APPROACH

quantitative data to explore differences in youth attitudes and behaviour across Europe; ethnographic and participatory research methods to look more closely at youth engagement and innovation



### POWERFUL TESTIMONIES

gathered from hundreds of young people aged 13-32, with older respondents looking back on their younger years



### ANALYSIS

of existing data involving around 8,500 young people



### RECOMMENDATIONS

practical, take-home recommendations for policy makers and stakeholders

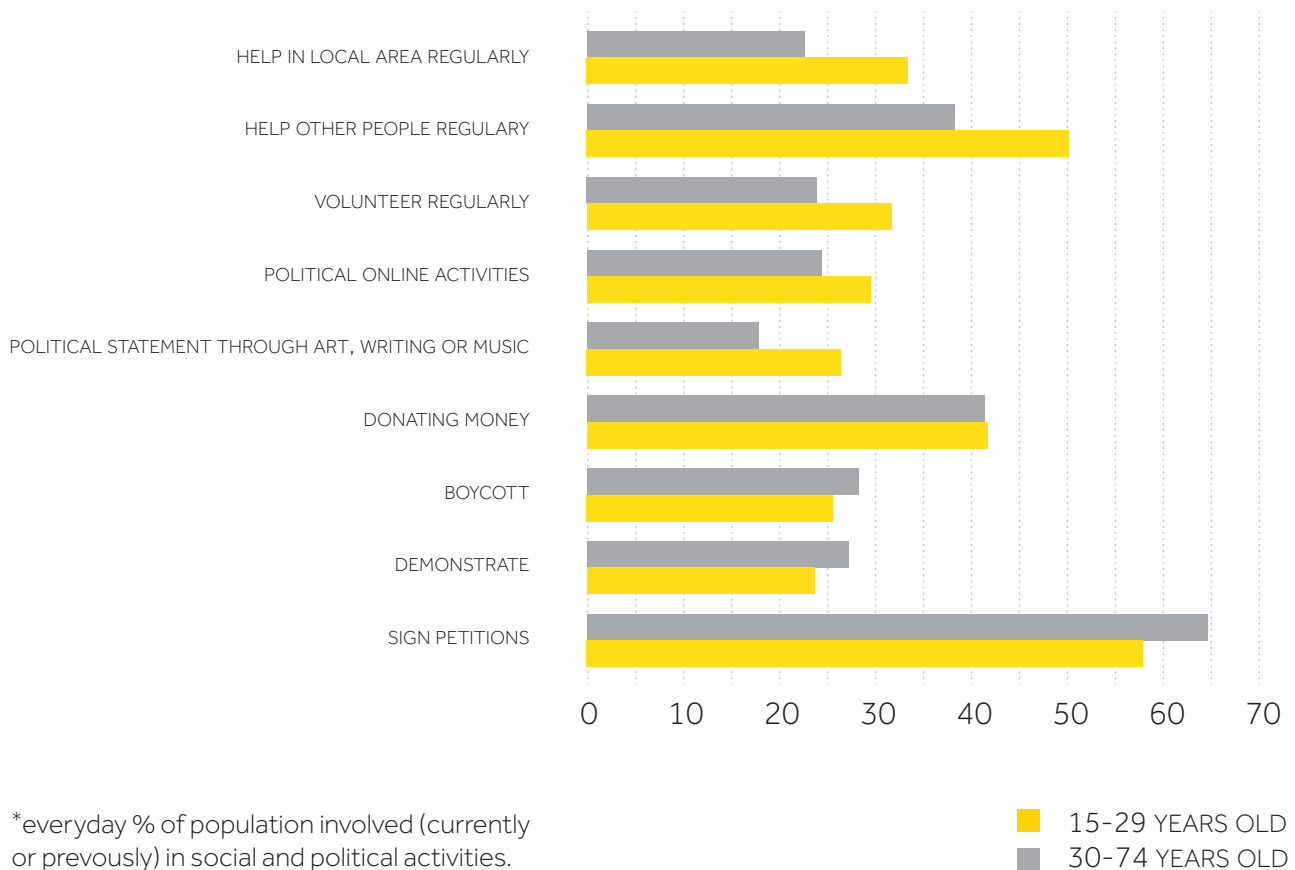
“I went on hangout (a local LGBT social network) and that was a moment that changed everything for me, really everything. Those people were really interested in things I wanted to say, about what I am, who I am, and they have never forced me to behave in a certain way, they never put me in boxes...”

Lotrius, non-binary, 19, Croatia.

# HOW ENGAGED ARE OUR YOUNG PEOPLE?

From our survey we were able to compare social and political engagement by young people with that of older generations. We found that young people are as active as older people and importantly, that they are more active in areas of social engagement not typically recorded, such as helping others, or making a political statement through art or music (see graph below).

## Social and political engagement by age group



## Engagement in action: learning from example

The young people we interviewed and the projects we profiled took place in 10 countries with very different histories, economies, population features and political, cultural, and social systems. These differences affect the kinds of issues young people face, the opportunities available and the solutions that they come up with.

Despite the differences, however, many clear themes and findings emerged which show we have much in common and a great deal to learn from each other:

### New, youth-led solutions.

Some young people, frustrated by current systems, are finding new ways to meet their needs, outside traditional education and labour markets. This kind of grassroots, youth-led activity can lead to conflict with mainstream society, but it also shows young people's capacity for drive, innovation, and engagement.

*Young Spaniards in one case study pursued alternative ways to build homes and gain access to public spaces and even clothing and food. They formed collectives, using existing skills, and learning new ones, achieving positive outcomes despite very scarce resources. Ideas of empowerment, peer-learning and an inclusive, informal approach featured strongly. Their action was in response to their deep dissatisfaction with mainstream forms of employment, education, politics, and consumerism.*

### Conflict as a driver for positive change.

Many of the young people interviewed in our research grew up in difficult and disadvantaged circumstances and some had been labelled by society as 'troubled' or 'risky'. In our research, however, we found examples where young people had taken positives from their negative experiences. With support and encouragement, disadvantaged young people can identify skills and use them to find self-esteem and a more positive future.

*In Italy, our researchers talked to young people who came from an area of economic and social hardship who had found potential for themselves and their communities, through art, circus, and theatre. These young artists were not denying their troubled pasts or moving away from them but instead using their 'street origin' as an asset, transforming stigma and marginalisation into strengths, and using their experiences to help other young people facing similar challenges.*

### Engagement needs a broader definition.

Consider, for example, parenthood. Becoming a parent at a young age is often viewed as undesirable or even reckless by mainstream societies in developed countries. It can be viewed as 'dropping out', particularly for a teenager, but PROMISE interviews with young mothers in case studies drawn from the UK, and in Finland, told a different story. Our researchers found motherhood to be a significant accomplishment for those young people who were looking after their own children.

*Young people in the UK and Finland saw motherhood as a key part of their identity which made them feel like citizens with an important social role. In the UK, teenage mothers on benefits knew they were socially frowned upon, but while they had many problems, their success as mothers, seemingly against the odds, was a source of great pride.*

*In Finland, the interviewees were a little older and from migrant and ethnic minority communities, but what both groups had in common was a desire to reclaim a more positive image of young motherhood. They wanted to show they cared about their children and to demonstrate they could be mature and competent.*





“As a society, we don't trust young people, we hear very often: you are so young, you can't know anything about that, just wait twenty years or so and then, maybe... This is a very negative feature of our society. Why should a young person wait so long?...if we don't give them a chance, we kill their creativity and other good things in them.”

Marek, male, 32, Slovakia.

## Key ingredients: what encourages engagement?

### Respect and support

Again, and again, young people in conflict with society spoke of the power of relationships built on respect. Many explained that the experience of being listened to and feeling respected was very unusual for them and had been vital to their being able to think and behave differently.

*Young respondents in Spain who were stigmatised and labelled as 'NEET' (not in education, employment, or training) agreed that what helped them was to establish a supportive relationship, but it had not been easy to find someone they could trust. Whoever it was they found (a youth worker, a family member, someone from an NGO), all had qualities in common: they listened without judging, suggested solutions without imposing anything and provided a space where the young people felt valued.*

### Self-determination

A sense of 'free will', of enabling young people to participate in the decisions being made about and for them, is essential to developing their ability and motivation to engage. Where this is encouraged, it is hugely valued by young people, particularly those who have felt marginalised and powerless.

*Researchers in Portugal, for example, interviewed young people viewed as 'at risk' with long histories of conflict, who had experienced difficulties with school, the law and/or family. Many were involved in programmes that they truly believed were their 'last chance'.*

*Their positive experiences of an alternative education programme showed that self-determination was key to their positive social involvement, developing their personal fulfilment and self-esteem. This was particularly relevant to their re-engagement in education, resistance to crime, and the fostering of new life goals.*

### Opportunity and hope

Our research countered the myth that today's younger generations are more politically apathetic, compared to previous ones. Young people are highly motivated, provided they see an opportunity to get involved and have hope that their voices will be heard.

*In St Petersburg, our researchers met LGBTQ young people who have mobilised in the face of a rise in traditional conservative ideology and gender-based discrimination. Many of these young people had personal experience of discrimination caused by their sexual orientation or gender identity. Off and online groups were key to providing opportunities for support to take place and for activism to grow.*

# FIVE WAYS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

**1****Give young people a voice.**

Young people, especially those most 'at risk' in society, need the opportunity to express their identities, points of view, experiences, and positive traits within educational, care and justice institutions. Participation, side-by-side with both peers and adults, can help overcome stereotypes, promote mutual trust, and foster positive expectations.

**2****Support grass roots organisations.**

Many small, grassroots organisations are able to reach young people, where larger, more traditional ones have failed. We must fund and support initiatives that have the power to motivate and support our young people, especially those who are the most mistrusting and disengaged.

**3****Prioritise diversity.**

Minority groups and those who are stigmatised for whatever reason (including age) need to see role models and representation in their communities. Organisations should consider all the ways diversity could be increased.

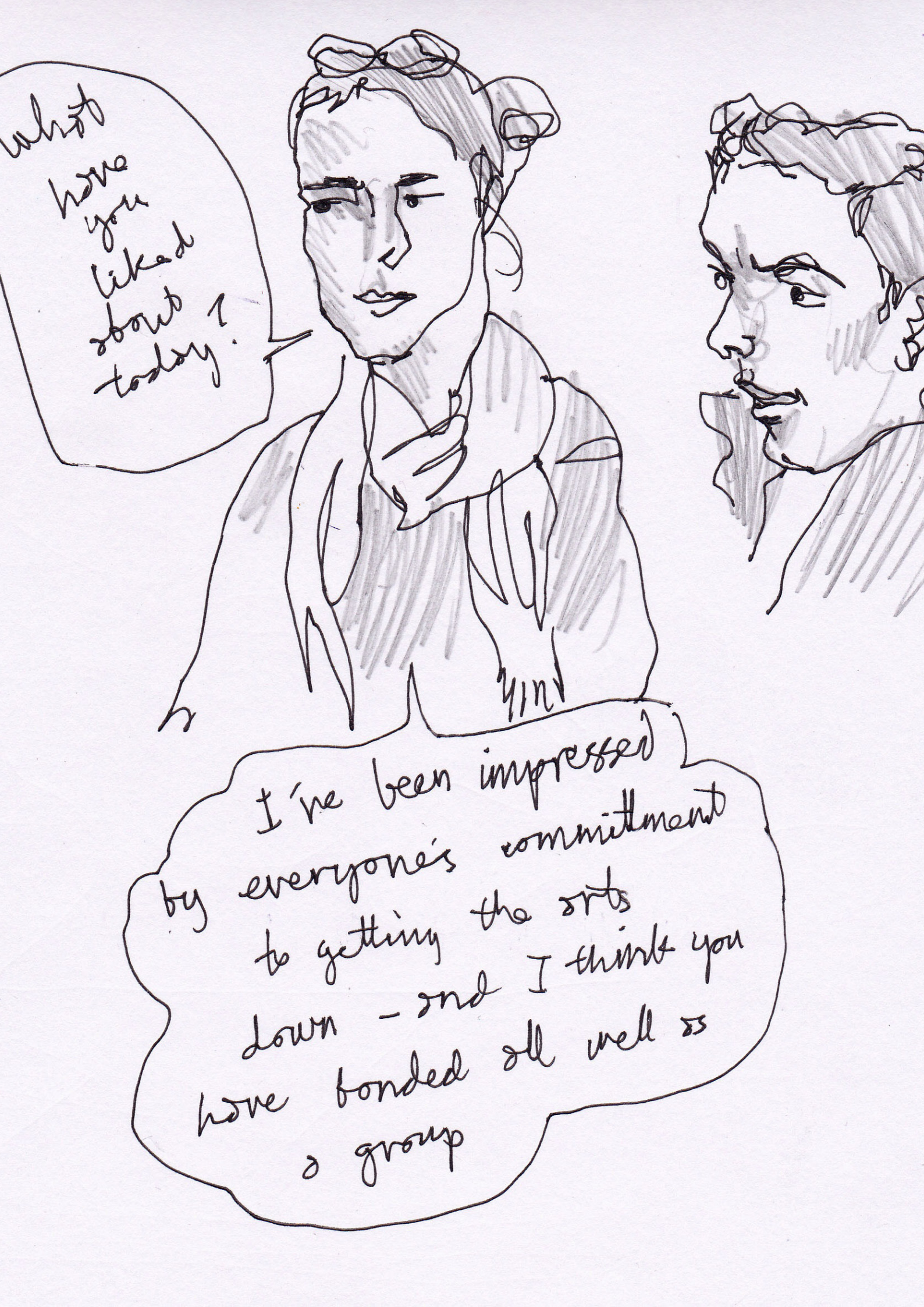
**4****Give young people responsibility.**

Organisations that influence young people's lives need to consider how they can empower them. Giving responsibility to young people, whether by enabling them to speak at an event, stand on a committee or by, for example, giving them the keys to a building, shows trust, which is vital to building social engagement and self-esteem.

**5****Listen, don't assume.**

Many young people, particularly those who have had difficult life experiences, are not used to being listened to. Before deciding what might help, or what should be done, create space and time to listen. The issues and the solutions they come up with might surprise you. If young people feel engaged in the problem, they are more likely to engage with the solution.





what  
have  
you  
liked  
about  
today?

I've been impressed  
by everyone's commitment  
to getting the srt's  
down - and I think you  
have bonded all well as  
a group



# WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Visit the [PROMISE website](#) where you can:

- Read any of the [22 case studies](#), searchable by country.
- View analysis of our case studies by '[Cluster](#)' [theme](#) (Education, Justice and Society; Culture and Politics; Economy, Leisure and space; and Gender and Sexuality).
- Read [policy briefs](#) for each case study, giving clear recommendations for policy change.
- View the [quantitative data](#) the project analysed, looking at European or country-specific facts and figures and [country and European-wide reports](#) on the wider context.

## Connect with us

You can also connect with us on Twitter @H2020PROMISE and via our website [www.promise.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk) to help raise awareness, share, and discuss the issues raised. We welcome your thoughts and insights.

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