

Shall I Go or Shall I Stay?

Young people's attitudes towards Swansea



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This short report summarises the findings from analysing the responses of 65 students aged 16–19 from ‘Shall I Go or Shall I Stay?’, a data-gathering exercise held in the Liberty Stadium, Swansea on 4 October 2017.

Key points

- Almost half of respondents felt they would leave Swansea and although the city’s strength in education was identified many also identified a lack of opportunities.
- However, respondents were articulate and thoughtful as to how Swansea and Wales could be improved; there is a clear desire to see the region do well.
- Young people in Swansea clearly lack information with which to make informed decisions. They are unsure as to what Swansea offers, what professional support is available and how best to be involved in their community.
- Civic bodies and positive influencers, in cooperation with educational establishments, need to engage much more strongly with young people in order to facilitate their access to that information.

Event summary

‘Shall I Go or Shall I Stay?’ was a half-day event organised by the Institute of Welsh Affairs’ Swansea network in cooperation with Swansea Bay Futures, sponsored by Family Housing Association. Over 65 students aged 16 to 19 from Gower College, a Further Education college in Swansea, attended, watching a video about planned developments in the Swansea Bay area and then discussing a set of questions in groups with a facilitator asking them to think about future career prospects, university, and whether they will stay in Swansea in adulthood.

Data was recorded in self-completed questionnaires, which asked a series of yes/no questions followed up with qualifying questions. This process was guided by discussion in groups of 10 with a facilitator who also made mind maps. 65 responses were received; however, responses to individual questions ranged from 2 to 64, with questions asking why students do not think it worthwhile to go to university receiving consistently the fewest responses, even from the 12 respondents who claimed they did not think it worthwhile to go to university. Where data is too limited to indicate reliable trends, this will be noted.

Staying in Swansea

Respondents were almost evenly split on whether they saw themselves still living in Swansea in 5 to 10 years' time, with 30 out of 62 respondents saying they would thought they would stay, 29 saying they would leave and 3 saying they don't know. The vast majority responded to the follow-up question of what they saw themselves doing at this time with some variation upon working, with only a few responding otherwise. Some respondents differentiated between 5 and 10 years (wanting to stay for 5 but be gone by 10 years' time). Notably, only one respondent listed an intention not concerned totally with employment, describing a desire to be 'living with family' as well as 'working an ideal job'.

Of those desiring to leave, 8 suggested they'd like to live in England (or, more specifically, London in some cases) with others saying they will live where work is, for example on a navy ship or army camp. Some expressed more concrete desires, for instance to move to San Francisco, but responses to this question were often sufficiently vague to ascertain that the main impulse was to simply move away. Indeed, some respondents simply listed 'somewhere else'. Most listed some variation upon 'better opportunities' as the reason for their desiring to leave – perhaps one of the important observations from the responses.

Respondents were articulate in suggesting how Swansea could be improved, and questions on the topic provoked a high level of engagement (37 respondents). Answers would suggest that the students see Swansea as a cultural and economic backwater, wanting to see more jobs, more opportunities and a more modern feeling to the city. Concerns were also raised about levels of homelessness. In discussion, some participants were not confident that proposed developments in the city would happen, although many thought they would return to Swansea when they had families. Some wondered if more power to the Welsh Government, or even independence, would help recognise Swansea's potential as Wales's second city.

Primarily, it appears the students were uncertain as to what Swansea offered them. Presented with five statements of which they could pick any number to agree with, 72% of respondents agreed that they didn't know what Swansea has to offer them; a much smaller number, 17%, asserted that Swansea has nothing to offer them. Respect for the University of Swansea and Swansea campus of University of Wales Trinity Saint David appears to be high, with 42% of respondents agreeing that Higher Education in Swansea provides a lot of opportunities. Few respondents identified Swansea as a hub of tech start-ups when prompted, despite significant interest being exhibited in this area elsewhere in the questionnaire.

Employment

Overall, respondents were pessimistic about the possibility of working in their ideal job in 5 years' time, with only 41% of respondents believing this will be the case. There was a notable number of respondents who expressed an intention to work in either prisons, police or the armed forces; informally grouping responses to the question of how respondents thought they would be earning a living in 5 years (which most took as an opportunity to express career intentions) this was the largest sector. A number of the students were enrolled in public service courses, which explains this level of interest.

A slim majority (52%) of respondents regarded self-employment favourably. However, familiar concerns regarding consistency of work, stress and having the skills and resources to run a business were all expressed, alongside a recurrent desire to be one's own boss and control work-life balances.

Most respondents (81%) were familiar with support offered by universities and colleges to start a business; however, it is clear that there is much less awareness of business training and networking opportunities. Equally, 70% of respondents felt there was not enough support for young people wishing to start a business. Many weren't sure what sort of extra support could be offered, although funding and a space to discuss ideas were frequently brought up. When asked to rank the most important aspects of starting a business, funding was cited as the most important by the vast majority of respondents.

Community interest

Two thirds of respondents reported that they were not active in the community; however, 70% said they did have an interest in community issues, suggesting a disparity between attitudes and actions that could perhaps have been better explored. All 18 respondents to the question regarding whether young people *should* do more in the community answered yes.

Many thought that awareness was the main obstacle, with young people unaware of the value of community work and the ways in which they could participate. Several pointed to the role schools could play in encouraging this, in line with elements of the Welsh Baccalaureate, and others said in discussion that they already participated in the community through school activities. Some participants pointed to the bad reputation of young people as an obstacle to feeling willing to engage with the community.

University

A large majority (75%) of respondents thought it worthwhile going to university, citing better job prospects and salary as the main reasons. Of the 21 who responded to the question asking where they would like to go to university, 13 (62%) wanted to stay in Swansea and a further 3 (14%) wanted to stay in Wales. In discussion, many participants raised issues of cost and discussed living at home to minimise expense and debt, despite previously expressed desires to expand their horizons beyond Swansea. Although almost 25% of respondents thought it not worthwhile going to university, very few responded to the follow up questions asking why they thought that.

Conclusion

The majority of participants in the day's activities expressed a genuine desire to see Swansea (and Wales) improve but had little confidence that it would. The quality of higher education offered in Swansea was acknowledged, with most of the students recognising the value of going to University and many expressing a preference to study locally. However, a significant majority were unaware of any other opportunities that the region could offer them.

Consequently, at least half of the respondents saw leaving the area as the best option for a good career and lifestyle.

A small majority of the students favoured self employment but were concerned about the apparent lack of support for young people who would like to start a business. Whilst acknowledging the theoretical information available from college, the perception was that there was little in the way of practical advice, role models or mentorship. Similarly, although support for community activities was high, participation appears low. Again the issue is a lack of awareness of how to get involved and what impact can be had.

A consistent theme emerging from this exercise is that these young people lack the knowledge to make empowered and informed decisions about their futures. It is clear that despite the amount of information in the public domain relevant to decisions about their lives and future prospects, particularly with regard to developments and opportunities in Swansea, much of it is passing them by. Civic bodies and positive influencers, in cooperation with educational establishments, need to engage much more strongly with the young to facilitate their access to that information.