

MISSING IN ACTION?

WHY YOUTH PROVISION NEEDS
RETHINKING - BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE



brap

making equality work for everyone

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THIS IS A CALL TO ACTION

We work with young people.

Over the last few years, we've noticed a number of trends and issues that increasingly worry us. We set these out on the following pages.

At the end, we suggest some things you can do if you're concerned about these issues too.

WHO WE ARE

2001 Voluntary Youth Sector Network

For six years, the Birmingham Voluntary Youth Sector Network engaged young people and youth workers in activities that supported developmental needs and aspirations.

2003 Urban Myths, Street Realities

A large-scale conference with over 200 young people exploring the relationship between gangs, guns, and hip hop.

2005 Gangs and girls

Series of events and projects that raised awareness of the then under discussed issue of young women's participation in gang crime.

2007 One Birmingham: Your Future

Delivered participative development sessions to over 850 young people on topics including racism, combating religious and cultural intolerance, and conflict resolution.

2011 Back on Track

An innovative mentoring programme that reached about 100 young people involved with, or at risk of becoming involved with, gang crime.

2012 A Line in the Sand

A consultation with over 450 young Black and minority ethnic young people in Birmingham that explored feelings about life, society, and the future.

2013 TradeUp

A snappy little project that promoted apprenticeship places to local Black and minority ethnic young people and also encouraged more businesses to offer places.

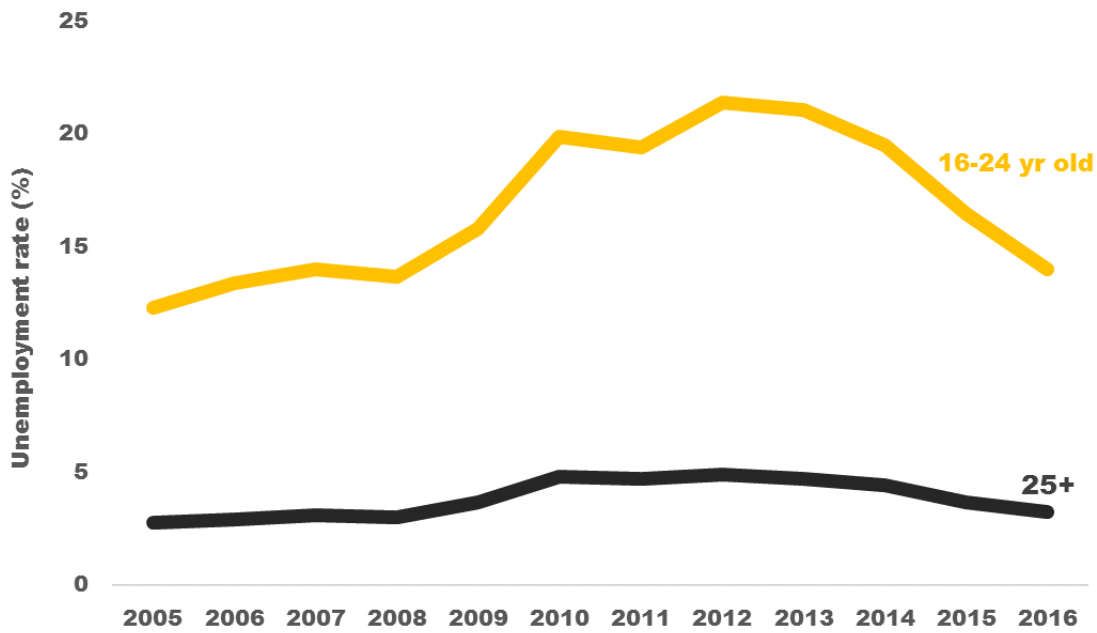
2016 Lifeline

Over two years, provided business support to over 100 young entrepreneurs and helped 30 of them set up an online business.

SIX CHARTS THAT SHOULD SCARE US

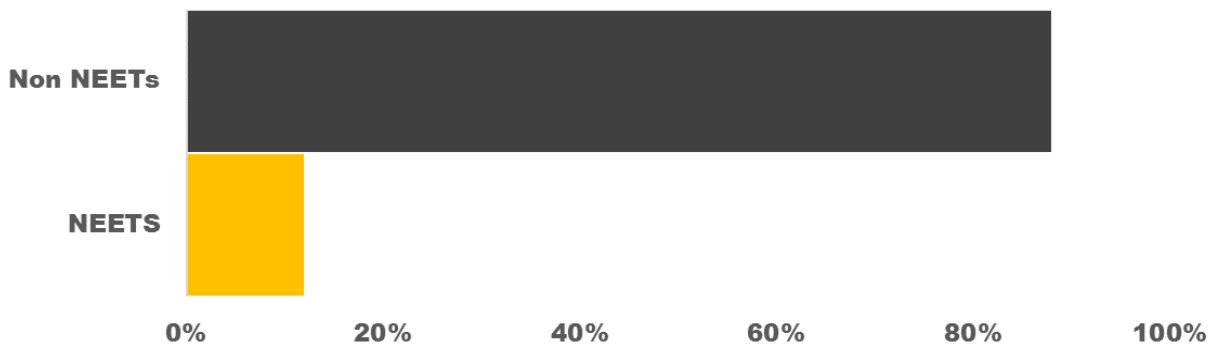
1. UNEMPLOYMENT

Youth unemployment has averaged over 15% for the past 33 years. 16-24s have the lowest employment levels in over 20 years and are three times likelier to be unemployed than the rest of the adult population. Unemployment amongst BME 16-24 year olds is even worse – 27.5%, more than double that of young White British people.



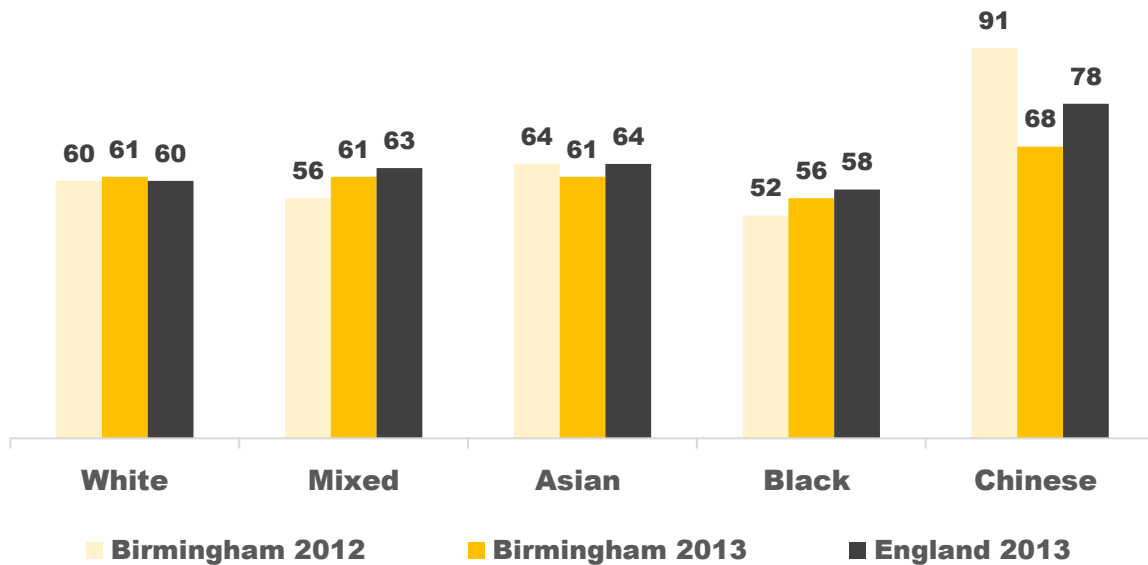
2. NEETs

There are still 865,000 young people classified as not in education, employment, or training (NEET), equivalent to 12% of the 16-24 population.



3. EDUCATION

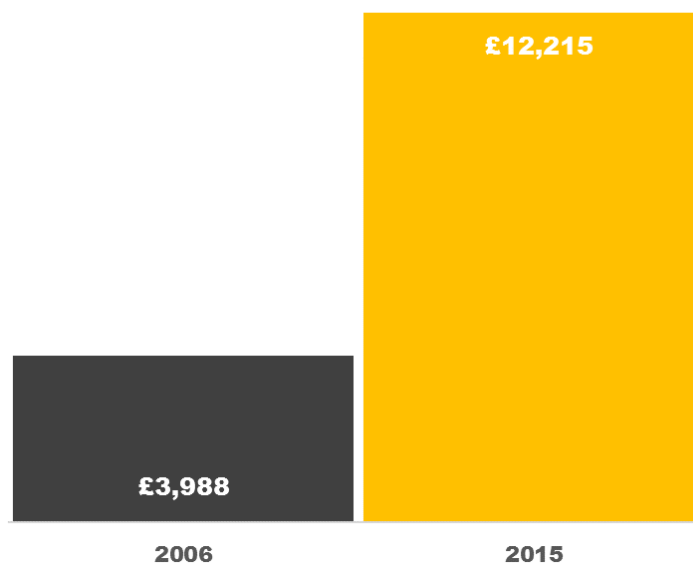
Ethnic inequalities in educational attainment remain important but the profile of these inequalities has changed dramatically. Over 85% of Chinese pupils get five good GCSEs, but only around 59% of Black Caribbean pupils do. White British children from the poorest households are now the lowest performing group at age 16. The chart below shows the percentage of pupils attaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE by ethnicity in Birmingham (which is where we live).



4. DEBT

Average total debts of young people have grown by more than 200% between 2006 and 2012. Young people now have an average unsecured debt of £12,215.

Average unsecured debt



5. MENTAL HEALTH

Almost 340,000 5-10 year-olds have a mental health issue, with young people in the poorest households three times more likely to experience mental health problems. The peak onset period for mental ill-health is 8-15 years old and more than half of all mental ill-health starts before the age of 14. Common disorders such as self-harming and eating disorders are increasing but mental health charities report that there is inadequate data to identify specific levels of prevalence. The transition from children’s or adolescents’ services to adult mental health provision has been likened by some MPs to ‘falling off a cliff edge’ and yet funding for young people’s mental health provision is still being cut.

3 OUT OF THE TOP 5 REASONS FOR CHILDREN CALLING CHILDLINE RELATE TO MENTAL HEALTH



6. YOUTH PROVISION

Youth services are in crisis. Between April 2010 and April 2016 funding for youth services provided by councils and others were cut by £387m. Over 3,650 public sector youth work posts were lost. 600 youth centres closed. Almost 139,000 youth service places for young people disappeared. These trends are forecast to continue in 2016/17.

YEAR	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
TOTAL CUTS IN YOUTH SERVICE SPENDING, UK	£62M	£137M	£41M	£24M	£85M	£38M

Source: UNISON

SEVEN THINGS THAT WORRY US

What is our work with young people telling us about how they feel, their aspirations, their ambitions – their frustrations? We thought we would share some of the lessons emerging from our own practical work.

1. LIFE SKILLS (AND THE ARGH! FACTOR)

Sky-high rents and inadequate housing mean many young people are unable to leave home and get on the housing ladder.

In 2015 alone, 1 in 5 20-34 year-olds was forced to move back in with parents or grandparents. Amongst graduates aged 22-24 the proportion is even higher, according to research by the LSE: around half of all graduates in this age group are now back living in the family home.

This is a huge source of tension for both parents and offspring. Parents wonder how long it will go on, while young people – saddled with educational debt, unable to make a proper start in life, and struggling to find both employment and independent accommodation – feel they have not gained the improved prospects and social mobility they were told to expect from higher education.

It amounts to a kind of deskilling – a betrayal, some might say. Anyone who's worked with young people will have noticed two common outcomes:

- there's a lot of people out there who have to endure some pretty disruptive – and damaging – family relationships simply because they've got nowhere else to go
- there's a big impact on some people's personal growth. Some of the lessons they most need to learn are being shunted ever further back.

(Having said all this, it's important to note that a lot of people are forced to grow up far too quickly. More about this below.)

2. ENTERPRISE, INITIATIVE, AND HOW REALITY BITES

In recent years we've worked especially hard to give people the skills they need to set up a business.

We've found that many young people struggled with personal confidence and motivation – even some who were best equipped to succeed in starting a new enterprise. We provided mentors for them to work with and this was an enormous help – many said it was the first supportive relationship they had had with an adult. But even so, many found it hard to maintain motivation.

Why is this? The answer is complex, but part of the reason is that a lot of young people don't have access to strong, diverse social networks. This means they don't see, on a day-to-day basis, people like them who have been through a difficult time but succeeded. This isn't

about ethnicity, but social background: it's about what's expected of you and the expectation that you can – and will – succeed.

The other consequence of a smaller social network is that some young people haven't been exposed to ideas and opportunities that will help their businesses thrive. For example, we mentored a talented young fashion designer who had never been able to go to a fashion show. She had never been able to go to any of the places where fashion happens. How was she supposed to make connections with people who could help? How was she supposed to learn from people who had been there, made mistakes, and now wanted to support the next generation?

Too many young people rarely meet people who are not like themselves. We won't sugarcoat this – for some, this is because they find it hard to step outside their comfort zones. They have limited horizons but don't know that they don't know, so don't feel the need to seek out new perspectives. But others – others are hungry for this. In fact, with some of the programmes we've run, we've found one of the most useful things we can do is encourage young people to go to different places, tell them about different kinds of venues, challenge them to talk to people they wouldn't dream are interested in listening to them. In short, to take a risk.

3. BARRIERS TO OPPORTUNITY

Still on the topic of businesses, it must also be said that if you are young and interested in starting a business, now is not a good time to try and find help and support. During the time brap has been working on youth enterprise we've seen business support for start-ups – and especially access to any form of grants – dry up more or less completely. Many Local Enterprise Partnerships have little interest in new-starts and even less in youth enterprise, being far more interested in what they regard as the economic big-hitters such as bio-tech and the auto industry. And given how much business support has previously been EU-funded, the situation following the Referendum vote is even more uncertain.

On top of that, though, a lot of the provision that used to be available to help young people get skills and get work have gone. We've quoted figures on page 8 that show the cuts in youth services over the last few years. A lot of that support, even if it didn't directly train young people with business and employment skills, nevertheless made a world of difference developing their confidence, self-esteem, and belief that someone was looking out for them.

At least, that's what we always try to do with our programmes.

4. EFFORT AND THE BLOODY APPRENTICE

If you've ever spent five minutes talking to someone who works with young people, you'll know what we're going to say next: all too often, young people with a business idea think they'll be the next Amazon or Facebook. And who knows – perhaps they will. But the current emphasis of reality TV and social media and celebrity culture constantly dramatise success but downplay the importance of long-term effort and dedication. *The Apprentice* isn't real life.

Success is not inevitable. Some people really need a reality-check. Some people need support to develop achievable expectations.

We know this isn't a unique observation. Many organizations have noticed it, including the RSA, who have been critical of the glorification of what they call 'celebreneurs' (if only we could come up with catchy terms like that). Their *Manifesto for Youth Enterprise* is absolutely spot on in calling for a light to be shone on 'ordinary, everyday entrepreneurs' that young people can relate to more readily and be inspired by.

5. THE AUDACITY OF HOPE

If setting up your own business isn't all it's cracked up to be, why do so many young people still want to become entrepreneurs?

The answer is that, contrary to what the media would have you believe, most young people want to work. In part, they're forced to. They're in debt and without the money for a house deposit: they need to earn. More than that, though, they want to. Most the young people we've worked with want to learn new skills, do something productive, start setting themselves up for life with a house, family, and some kind of security.

They want to work, then, but there's one problem. There aren't the jobs available. And when they are available, employers want experience – the old catch 22. (And don't get us started on discrimination in the labour market: applicants with white British-sounding names are still 29 percentage points more likely to be successful in recruitment than those with names associated with other ethnic groups.) So in many ways setting up your own business is a natural step for someone who hopes for a better future but for whom the opportunities just aren't there. In fact, this is why we're often quite pleased if someone drops out of one of our business development programmes because they've found full-time work. For some, being an entrepreneur is the dream; but for many others it's an alternative to having secure, paid employment. (Incidentally, this is also why we, like many other organisations, have to two sets of project goals: what participants want and what funders have paid for. Sorry, funders, but you know it's true.)

6. WHY SERVICES DON'T REACH THE RIGHT PEOPLE

The shorthand of 'hard-to-reach' has become a bit of a cliché but there is some truth in it.

Anyone who has been active in providing services or programmes for young people, women, BME groups, or other disadvantaged people will understand the difficulties inherent in ensuring that what is provided reaches the right people. Those who are least connected, who are most excluded, whose personal circumstances are the most difficult, are typically the least likely to take advantage of a new project or service that can help them. Often, these groups do not engage because fundamentally they don't believe – perhaps correctly – that anyone really wants to give them an opportunity.

In recent years the government, instead of trying to address this issue, has instead focused on high-profile 'youth initiatives' that in our view been fundamentally misguided.

They have been glitzy, PR-friendly programmes designed more for how well they play on social media than for any lasting, long-term benefit they might offer to the most disadvantaged young people. To be blunt, we're tired of leadership programmes for people who would have succeeded anyway. We're tired of projects where everyone is 'amazing' and does 'life-changing' things.

We don't deny that these things are possible, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Real change generally requires much harder work. Too many of the recent initiatives that we have seen talk up the success of those who were most likely to achieve it in the first place. Whatever happened to *real* youth work, to real support, to community-based, grassroots projects designed to provide opportunities for those who most need them and who are currently most excluded from them?

7. HOW OLD IS OLD?

We need a conversation about what 'youth' means. Our own work has borne this out. The fact is, the problems once associated with those, say, in their twenties now persist into the mid-30s age group and beyond. Young people under 34 now face the worst economic prospects for several generations and their lives have got worse over the past five years. They have suffered the biggest drop in income and employment and now face higher barriers to achieving economic independence and success than five years ago. Why should they be excluded from some of the best projects around?

TEN THINGS WE CAN DO

The crisis in youth provision – although now more pronounced than has been the case for decades – is not new. Services have been failing young people for years – and the appalling thing is, if you were a teenager failed by youth services during, say, the late-90s or early-2000s, you are now excluded from the majority of youth programmes because you are too old!

So let's face it: it isn't *evidence* that's lacking – it's action.

We think the biggest problem is that too much of what passes for 'youth provision' is either mistimed, misjudged, or too lacking in ambition to really make a difference across all of the issues that have an impact on young lives. It takes more than 12 weeks to build a future. Policy and funding have to reflect this.

Equally, though, we can't carry on tinkering with youth provision in the hope we stumble on the right combination of services and activities. For a young person the opportunity cost is too great. At the moment, we too often fire people up, give them a glimpse of something else, suggest there are possibilities out there they haven't considered – and then drop them because the project is over. This doesn't help and wastes everyone's time.

So we have to get this right.

There's another reason too. The *Is Britain Fairer?* Report (written by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)) identifies a number of priorities for action in unequal Britain. And while not talking specifically about young people, it is significant that seven of the eight priorities it identifies can all be said to apply particularly to what we should be trying to achieve for young people:

1. raise standards and close attainment gaps in education
2. encourage fair recruitment, development and reward in employment
3. support improved living conditions in cohesive communities
4. encourage democratic participation and ensure access to justice
5. improve access to mental health services and support for those experiencing (or at risk of experiencing) poor mental health
6. prevent abuse, neglect and ill-treatment in care and detention
7. tackle targeted harassment and abuse of people who share particular protected characteristics

The most important message to take away from this, we believe, is that the evidence now overwhelmingly indicates that inequality in Britain is increasingly a 'youth issue'.

We know that in the current funding climate things are extremely difficult and that many of the third sector providers expected to fill the gaps in youth provision now lack the capacity to

do so. But we offer the following suggestions – some guiding principles, if you like – that can be built into existing services, considered when writing new proposals, or that existing providers can be encouraged to adopt.

FUNDERS

YOUTH PROGRAMMES SHOULD ADDRESS STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES

1

Effective provision is long term. It takes time to identify those who most need help, to develop trust, generate motivation, and overcome cynicism – but this is what is required if programmes are to have a genuine chance of helping people move their lives forward. Programmes should also recognise they don't work in a vacuum: often the problem lies not with young people, but with the way society works. So if we're spending buckets of cash developing young people's skills and giving them mentors, for example, let's also spend some time working with employers to tackle ageism, postcodism, and other forms of discrimination. Joined upness is the way forward.

WE SHOULD BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT WE VALUE (AND THEREFORE WHAT WE WANT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE)

2

There is a pressing need to understand the net worth of programmes. What works? What doesn't? Programmes are happening – and finishing – so quickly that there is little chance to take an overview of what is being achieved. Sometimes we're so caught up in delivering outputs that we fail to notice the other outcomes that are being achieved – sometimes the most powerful thing a programme can do is to simply say to someone, 'you're worth investing in, whatever you might achieve'.

WE SHOULD BE CREATIVE ABOUT HOW WE PROMOTE INDEPENDENCE

3

Young people don't automatically become independent adults, especially when we ensure their world is complex and challenging. Many young people have told us they wish they'd been given more support with the basics – things like money management, healthy cooking, and time management – and many parents and teachers tell us that they too need more support and don't always have the resources or skills they need to help young people develop their independence.

ARTIFICIAL AND/OR UNNECESSARY AGE RESTRICTIONS ON PROGRAMMES SHOULD BE AVOIDED

4

Programme delivery models need to reflect the changing circumstances we are living in. 'Youth programmes' should routinely extend not just to 30 but even to 35. This is real-world result of the sort of 'delayed independence' mentioned earlier. It also reflects current thinking by EHRC and the practical experience of organisations working in the field. Funders need to catch up.

WE SHOULD BE REALISTIC ABOUT ENTERPRISE

5

Enterprise has a strong role to play in personal development but we should also challenge the view that *everyone* can be an entrepreneur. Sometimes what young people need most is greater exposure to work and the world of work – they don't know what's out there.

PROVIDERS

WE NEED A COALITION OF ORGANISATIONS PREPARED TO WORK BEYOND THEIR CURRENT BOUNDARIES

6

We need a new coalition of organisations committed to working together to address the current crisis for young people. More needs to be done than can be achieved by any single organisation. We need joint working across and between organisations. We need more joined up, collaborative programmes that seek to do things in a more integrated way.

EMPLOYERS

WE NEED TO VALUE WORK FAIRLY

7

We need to do more to address poverty. We have soaring levels of child poverty in Birmingham and the city is rapidly turning into a low wage economy, especially for young people. You can help. The National Living Wage is a start – but it must apply to all ages, not just the 25s and over. You could also follow the city council's lead and become a Living Wage employer.

REFORMING RECRUITMENT PRACTICES IS VITAL

8

Employers need to become aware of bias and how it plays out in the recruitment process. A lot of law firms now apply some form of blind and/or contextual recruitment. If you don't know what these terms mean, commit to finding out. If you do know, commit to finding out if they'd work for your organisation.

INTERNSHIPS SHOULD BE MEANINGFUL

9

Training, work placements, proper, paid internships – all of these measures can play a part, but they must be meaningful, they must offer real exposure in roles that are commensurate with young people's skills, ambitions and aspirations, and they must lead to jobs.

YOUNG PEOPLE

YOUNG PEOPLE MUST EMBRACE THEIR ROLE IN CREATING AN EQUITABLE SOCIETY

10

Young people, you're not off the hook. You've got a massive role to play in combating the negative stereotypes about you in the media (have you *seen* what they're saying?). Many young people also need to examine the prejudices they have about their peers. Being young and growing up in a multicultural city doesn't mean you're automatically comfortable with diversity. It's something that has to be worked on. It's not always easy, but the skills it gives you – hearing people out, being able to resolve conflict, being able to empathise with someone else – these are skills that will set you up for the rest of your life.

We hope this gives you some ideas about what your organisation can do, the areas you can get involved in, the points at which you can exert pressure for change.

Just because successive government appear not to care doesn't mean that no one does. There are funders out there who would be responsive to new bids for fresh, innovative, joined-up programmes. And increasingly private sector companies, philanthropists and independent foundations are stepping in to fund youth programmes that they see have the potential for real success.

We can't change everything overnight, but the time has arrived when we must think bigger and more ambitiously. We must also be more honest about the limitations of what we may currently be doing – our eyes more open to the things our activities are failing to change or have an impact on.

The answers are not simple, but the case for doing more, and better, and working more collaboratively is clear. Are *you* in?

REFERENCES

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October 2016

brap is transforming the way we think and do equality. We support organisations, communities, and cities with meaningful approaches to learning, change, research, and engagement. We are a partner and friend to anyone who believes in the rights and potential of all human beings.

The logo for brap, consisting of the lowercase letters 'brap' in a bold, rounded, yellow sans-serif font.

making equality work for **everyone**

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