REPORT

Youth Service Research
Needs of Rural Young People



Education Authority

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1 INTRODUCTION

In March 2017, the Education Authority Northern Ireland published its three year Regional Assessment on Need. The purpose of the needs assessment was to identify the key issues affecting young people in Northern Ireland, especially those most marginalised and disadvantaged and to give an indication of where resources may be best focussed to meet their needs.

The report noted that whilst young people growing up in rural communities faced many issues and challenges, the findings were limited and incomplete and the extent of the challenges facing these young people was not fully explored. Therefore, it was proposed that further research should be undertaken, to identify the needs of young people living in rural areas.

More than one third of young people from Northern Ireland live in communities that have been defined as rural. For many children and young people, living in a rural community presents many challenges, including boredom and isolation. There are a lack of facilities, such as cinemas or clubs, which their peers in urban areas take for granted. This isolation from services is often exacerbated by a lack of transport options and hidden poverty.

Rural deprivation is scattered and can be masked by living alongside relative affluence. Young people in rural communities face differing levels of social exclusion and marginalisation. Rural isolation also presents challenges for the provision of adequate public transport and the viability and accessibility of public services, including Youth Services.

A Department of Agriculture and Rural Development report noted that whilst poverty and social isolation exist in both urban and rural settings, it should be recognised that: 'Those living in rural areas often experience poverty and social isolation differently due to issues relating to geographical isolation, lower population density and the dispersed nature of many rural settlements'.[1]

Rural isolation has been described as the: 'Feelings of powerlessness and disconnection by individuals or groups as a consequence of living in a rural area'.[2] Children and young people without access to transport and living in households with low disposable income can also become socially isolated in the more remote areas, particularly those areas without a school, youth services or other recreational amenities within walking or cycling distance from where they live.

It has also been suggested that young people living in rural areas face a number of uniquely rural barriers, particularly concerning access to transport, careers advice, employment and training support and youth services. The Commission for Rural Communities noted that increasingly the Voluntary and Community

[1] Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2016, Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation – A New Framework, DARD, Belfast.

[2] Leisure Future Ltd., 2011, Impact on Reducing Rural Isolation, The Big Lottery Fund, London.

sector are the main providers of services in addressing rural isolation. However, in recent years these groups have struggled to continue to fund services in remote areas.[3]

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) recently published the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Inclusion (TRPSI) Framework. This initiative aims to tackle poverty and social inclusion in rural areas by encouraging organisations to work in partnership to design and implement actions which target the needs of vulnerable people but also ensure that the needs of rural communities are being addressed.[4]

The purpose of this research is to inform future strategies for the Education Authority Youth Service and its partners from the voluntary sector in reducing rural isolation through programmes and services. The research will identify the following:

- Where the populations of young people by age group reside.
- Where Youth Service provision currently exists in rural areas, including outreach services.
- The needs of young people living in rural areas in relation to Youth Service provision.

The research will also consider:

- The extent of Youth Provision currently being delivered by:
- The Controlled Youth Work sector. o Registered Voluntary and Community Youth Work sector.
- Non-EA funded groups.
- Is current provision consistent across the region.
- The issues/challenges facing young people living in rural areas.
- The challenges around the capacity of rural communities to deliver indigenous services and grow leadership capacity.
- The challenges facing Voluntary organisations in providing Youth Services in rural areas.
- The challenges facing EA in providing Youth Services in rural areas.
- The future needs of young people in rural areas in relation to Youth Service provision.

[3] Commission for Rural Communities, 2012, Barriers to Education, Employment and Training for Young People in Rural Areas, Commission for Rural Communities, Gloucester.

[4] Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2016, Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation – A New Framework, DARD, Belfast.

2 POLICY CONTEXT

2.1 Introduction

On April 1st 2015 the existing educational structures in Northern Ireland were replaced with a single regional body, the Education Authority (EA), coinciding with the implementation of new local government structures. The new Education Authority took over all of the roles and responsibilities of the former Education and Library Boards and the Staff Commission.

Established as a non-departmental public body in 1990, the Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI) continues to advise the Department of Education, the Education Authority and other bodies on the development of the Youth Service; to encourage cross-community activity by the Youth Service; to encourage the provision of facilities for the Youth Service and facilities which are especially beneficial to young persons, and encourage and assist the co-ordination and efficient use of the resources of the Youth Service. In 2016 YCNI was conferred with an additional statutory function to encourage and facilitate Shared Education.

The policy landscape also changed following the 2016 Assembly elections. Northern Ireland had a new Minister for Education, a new Programme for Government and a series of high-level strategies set for implementation from early 2017 which may have potential ramifications for Youth Services. There is also the impending UK exit from the European Union which may influence the focus and direction of Youth Services in the future.

Strategic planning within Youth Services must take account of this high-level policy context alongside wider DE policies. The following sections are a brief outline of some of the key policy areas. It should however be remembered that the policy context is constantly evolving and subject to change.

2.2 Draft Programme for Government 2016-2021

The Programme for Government is the highest level strategic document of the Northern Ireland Executive, setting out the priorities that will be pursued by the Assembly and identifying the most significant actions it will take to address them.

The draft Framework contains 14 strategic outcomes which touch on every aspect of Government, including the attainment of good health and education, economic success and establishing confident and peaceful communities. The 14 outcomes are supported by 42 indicators which are clear statements for change and each indicator is accompanied by a measure largely derived from existing statistics.

The draft Programme for Government will require a significant change in approach from that used by previous administrations and a key feature is its dependence on collaborative working between organisations and groups, whether in the public, voluntary or private sectors. Delivery of the Programme will encourage working across boundaries and focusing on the outcomes rather than traditional departmental lines.

The Department of Education will take the lead role on one of the Programme for Government outcomes, we give our children and young people the best start in life. There may be implications for DE funded Youth Provision to support this outcome. The greater impetus for collaborative working and the adoption of outcomes-based accountability, both of which are central features of the draft Programme for Government, may also have repercussions for the scope and approach of Youth Provision in future.

2.3 A Fresh Start

The Fresh Start Agreement (November 2015) provides a set of inter-related and high-level proposals which seek to overcome some of the most challenging and intractable issues within Northern Ireland. One of the key issues addressed within A Fresh Start is that of legacy and the impact of paramilitary activity. Among the strategic actions to end paramilitarism, is a commitment to a cross-departmental programme to prevent vulnerable young people becoming involved in paramilitary activity. In 2016 the NI Executive published its Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, criminality and organised crime. The Action Plan states that the NI Executive should commission appropriate initiatives aimed at promoting lawfulness in schools and through Youth Work in communities.

The Department of Education developed initiatives to ensure that those schools and youth groups dealing with the effects of paramilitary activity on young people are appropriately trained to identify risk factors and to adopt a whole school or group approach to help deal with those challenges.

The Department of Education and the Executive Office will deliver Youth Intervention Programmes specifically targeted at vulnerable young people, including those most at risk of becoming involved in or affected by paramilitary activity, so that they can make a positive contribution to their communities. The expertise within the Youth Service, particularly its strong track record in transformative and developmental work with young people who have been exposed to paramilitary threat, interface violence and sectarianism, ensures that the Service can make a positive contribution in supporting these initiatives.

2.4 Department of Education

Although the work of the Department of Education extends across many of the 14 Outcomes in the draft Programme for Government, its key area of focus lies within Outcome 14, which states that : We give our children and young people the best start in life. DE will lead on the development of Delivery Plans for the following 4 indicators in the draft Programme for Government:

- Indicator 11: Improve Educational Outcomes
- Indicator 12: Reduce Educational Inequality
- Indicator 13: Improve the Quality of Education
- Indicator 15: Improve Child Development

The DE Corporate Plan for Education will outline the strategic direction for DE and the wider education service and set out the key priorities and objectives during the period that it covers. The Corporate Plan is developed from the draft Programme for Government and will follow once the draft Programme for Government has been agreed and published. Each year DE will develop an annual business plan setting out its commitments to delivering the corporate goals and strategic objectives contained in the Corporate Plan.

2.5 Department of Education Business Plan

The overarching DE vision is that all children and young people receive the best start in life to enable them to achieve their full potential at each stage of their development. The DE business plan reflects the key priorities and objectives during the 2016/17 financial year in support of the draft Programme for Government (PfG) framework (2016-2021). The Plan will be updated as and when the draft PfG (2016-2021) has been agreed and finalised. Currently DE's plan is set out under seven corporate goals:

- Improving the well-being of children and young people: Supporting the draft PfG Indicator 15: Improve child development.
- Raising standards for all which supports the draft PfG Indicator 11: Improving educational outcomes.
- Closing the performance gap, increasing access and equality: Supporting the draft PfG Indicator 12: Reduce educational inequality.
- Developing the education workforce which supports the draft PfG Indicator 13: Improving the quality of education.
- Improving the learning environment which supports the draft PfG Indicator 13: Improving the quality of education.
- Transforming the governance and management of education.

- Discharging our corporate responsibilities effectively.

Specific references to Youth Services in the 2016-2017 business plan include progression of the implementation of Priorities for Youth and development of the Network for Youth model.

2.6 Priorities for Youth

Priorities for Youth, published in October 2013, clearly sets out the positive contribution that Youth Services can play in achieving the Department of Education's vision that every young person can achieve to his or her full potential at each stage of his and her development.

The policy affirms that Youth Work can, through various methodologies and in various settings, provide additional opportunities to support young people's learning and development and improve employability by re-engaging disadvantaged young people with education.

The policy also recognises that Youth Work has a major role to play as we continue to deal with the legacy of conflict, moving towards a shared and inclusive society, by equipping young people with the skills, attitudes and behaviours to recognise, understand and respect difference.

Priorities for Youth revised the overarching aims of Youth Work to reflect a closer alignment between Youth Work and education priorities, and presented the strategic aims of Youth Work as:

- To contribute to raising standards for all and closing the performance gap between the highest and lowest achieving young people by providing access to enjoyable, non-formal learning opportunities that help them to develop enhanced social and cognitive skills and overcome barriers to learning; and
- To continue to improve the non-formal learning environment by creating inclusive, participative settings in which the voice and influence of young people are championed, supported and evident in the design, delivery and evaluation of programmes.

The policy identified the following principles underpinning all aspects of Youth Work supported by DE:

- Participation in Youth Services is voluntary and should enable young people to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to tackle the issues that are important to them.
- The active participation of young people should be fostered, supported and evident across all youth settings.
- Equality and inclusion should be fundamental to planning and implementation and the values of equality, diversity and interdependence should be at the heart of Youth Work.
- Young people, their families and the wider community should be involved in Youth Work in a meaningful way, with expectations managed within the resources available.

- Young people should expect high quality services, which follow best practice including the highest standards of child protection.
- Collaborative working between the voluntary, uniformed, faith-based and statutory sectors should play an important part in securing improved outcomes for young people and the continued commitment from the youth workforce, including volunteers.
- The contribution of the volunteer workforce within the youth sector is invaluable and should be acknowledged, supported and celebrated;
- Resources should be used to achieve priority outcomes for young people in the most cost-effective way, according to best practice principles (public value).
- The needs of the young person should be the key focus at each stage of development.
- Activities should be engaging, enjoyable and planned to deliver improved outcomes.

Priorities for Youth directs that Youth Work must be planned in response to the assessed need, prioritised age ranges and other identified groups. It emphasises that strategic planning within Youth Services must reflect wider DE policy and that future Youth Provision will be consistent, transparent and allocated proportionate to the level of disadvantage experienced by young people.

Whilst the needs of specific groups of young people are prioritised, the policy is clear that general Youth Provision will also continue to be supported in line with the assessment of need.

Although the policy strives for closer alignment between DE funded Youth Work and the DE agenda, it also affirms that Youth Work can assist in the delivery of a range of other strategic outcomes such as the:

- Programme for Government.
- Children and Young People's 10 Year Plan.
- Play and Leisure Policy.
- Child Poverty Policy.
- Pathways to Success.
- Delivering Social Change.
- Together: Building a United Community.

The policy acknowledges initiatives and funding opportunities available at European level, along with the need to build on co-operation between youth sectors on a north/south and east/west basis.

The policy also recognises and supports the shared values and principles in the 2011 Concordat between the voluntary and community sector and the NI Executive and notes that DE is committed to working with partners in line with the Concordat. In turn, DE requires the Education Authority

and other arms-length-bodies to adhere to the values and principles of the Concordat when carrying out activities on its behalf.

In planning for youth provision, Priorities for Youth asserts that managers must take account of a range of high-level education policies and services, such as CRED, Extended Schools, Full Service Schools, Education Other Than At School (EOTAS), Irish Medium Education, Special Education, Area Learning Communities and the Entitlement Framework.

2.7 Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) and CRED Addendum

The Department of Education launched the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) policy for Youth Services and schools in March 2011. The aim of the CRED Policy was to contribute to improving relations between communities by educating children and young people to develop self-respect and respect for others by providing them, in formal and nonformal education settings, with opportunities to build relationships with those from different backgrounds and traditions within the resources available.

To assist the implementation of the CRED policy, earmarked funding was provided to support capacity building for teachers and Youth Workers. This was designed to provide opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful activities, to develop resources and to establish a dedicated website to display and disseminate effective good practice. However, this funding was withdrawn in March 2015.

In 2014/2015 DE undertook a formal review of the CRED policy to ensure that the policy was meeting its aims and objectives and to inform further development of the policy. The review findings confirmed that the policy was fit for purpose and largely effective in improving attitudes of children and young people towards those they perceived to be different, helping prepare them to take their place in an increasingly diverse society.

In September 2016 DE published the CRED Addendum. While the core CRED policy remains unchanged, the Addendum provides an updated set of commitments to be read in conjunction with the policy. The Addendum recognises the close relationship between the CRED, Shared Education, and Priorities for Youth policies. DE states that its arms-length bodies will assist educational partners in reflecting the aims, objectives and core values of the CRED policy within plans to progress Shared Education and Priorities for Youth in a holistic way.

The Addendum identifies a range of key issues and actions for DE and education partners. In terms of resourcing CRED work in the youth sector, it notes that the Regional Youth Development Plan will articulate how CRED related issues will be addressed. It also highlights that the Education Authority and other delivery organisations will take account of the particular needs of those of differing sexual orientation, racial groups and disability.

The Education Authority will identify priority areas for professional learning for practitioners and ensure voluntary youth organisations have the knowledge and skills to embed CRED through dissemination of good practice, training and mentor support.

2.8 Shared Education

The Shared Education Act (NI) 2016 received Royal Assent in May 2016, and the purpose of the Act is to make legislative provision in relation to Shared Education. It provides a definition of Shared Education and confers a duty on DE to encourage, facilitate and promote Shared Education. The Act also confers a power on relevant arms-length bodies, including the Education Authority and the Youth Council for Northern Ireland to encourage and facilitate Shared Education.

The Shared Education Act (NI) 2016 defines Shared Education as the education together of those of different religious belief, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons and those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not. This form of education is secured by the working together and co-operation of two or more relevant providers. A relevant provider means a person providing education at a grant-aided school or services of any kind, including youth services, which provide educational benefit to children or young persons.

Shared Education means that the organisation and delivery of education must align to the following three principles:

- Meets the needs of and provides for the education together of learners from all Section 75 categories and socio-economic status.
- Involves schools and other education providers of differing ownership, sectoral identity and ethos, management type or governance arrangements.
- Delivers educational benefits to learners, promotes the efficient and effective use of resources, and promotes equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion.

The vision for Shared Education, articulated in the DE policy 'Sharing Works' (September 2015) is for: Vibrant, self-improving Shared Education partnerships delivering educational benefits to learners, encouraging the efficient and effective use of resources, and promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion.

The policy reflects that equality and inclusion are key features of high performing education systems, and states that all children and young people should have the opportunity to be involved in Shared Education. The policy is therefore aimed at:

- Both statutory and voluntary early-years educational settings.
- Primary, post-primary and special schools.
- Non-formal educational environments, such as statutory and voluntary Youth Work settings.

2.9 Rural Needs Act Northern Ireland 2016

Rural proofing is the process by which policies, strategies and plans are assessed to determine whether they have a differential impact on rural areas and, where appropriate, adjustments are made to take account of particular rural circumstances. Rural Proofing has been a requirement for all Government Departments in Northern Ireland since 2002 and has been an integral part of the policy development process. In 2016, this commitment to rural proofing was strengthened with the introduction of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

The Act aims to help deliver fairer and more equitable treatment for people in rural areas by requiring public authorities to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or reviewing policies, strategies and plans and when designing and delivering public services. It is important to be clear what a 'rural need' is and to be able to distinguish between a 'need' and something that is desirable. In general terms, a 'need' can be considered to be something that is essential to achieve a standard of living for people in rural areas comparable with that of the population in general. In having due regard to rural needs, a public authority should consider all relevant information and ensure that the policy, strategy, plan or public service is influenced appropriately.

There are three main areas of responsibility for public authorities under the Act and these relate to the consideration of rural needs; monitoring and reporting on how the public authority has complied with this requirement; and co-operation and sharing of information with other public authorities.

3 Methodology

3.1 Desktop Research

The research process used a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Desktop research was used to both understand where populations of young people reside and to ascertain what provision exists for them.

Information gathered from the NISRA census data was analysed to discover where the populations of young people aged 0-25 years lived in rural areas (rural being defined by NISRA as towns or villages with a population of less than 5,000 people) and how this breaks down across age bands from each Local District Council Area.

A desktop exercise was also conducted to map out where current provision exists and to identify gaps in provision. This process involved gathering and analysing information from a range of sources.

A review of the existing relevant literature was also undertaken, and evidence gathered from these documents and reports were used to support the original findings and the production of a final report and recommendations.

The research team used a focus group methodology to ascertain information on the needs, issues and challenges facing young people in rural areas. The findings from existing online surveys undertaken by EA in September 2017 was also used to generate a topic guide for use in the group discussions and enable more in-depth exploration of the key issues and challenges.

The lead researcher also attended a Rural Isolation event organised by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and hosted by the Young Farmers Clubs' of Ulster at Finvoy, Ballymoney. A total of 17 young people participated along with adult volunteers and members of the management team. The themes for the event were Transport and Access, Mental Health, Social Interaction and Education and Training. A further event hosted by the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster at Collone, Armagh was also attended by the lead researcher with 50 young people and three volunteers in attendance.

Research undertaken by the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster has also been considered and incorporated into the findings. This involved 298 young people aged between 11 and 25.

Face to face and telephone interviews were also conducted with 18 youth workers from the Education Authority who are currently delivering programmes and providing youth services to young people from rural communities. A number of Youth workers and volunteers from the Voluntary sector were also consulted.

Representatives and young people from a GAA club in a rural part of County Down were also consulted.

The research team also participated in the TBUC Rural event, hosted by the Executive Office and held in Enniskillen. The team were able to consult with a range of stakeholders, including those from statutory and voluntary bodies involved in planning and delivering services in rural communities and got a better understanding of the issues and challenges they face.

The research team also attended and participated at two stakeholder engagement events organised by EA looking at the needs of rural young people. These events were held in St. Kevin's College, Lisnaskea and The Glens Youth Centre, Cushendall. 80 young people attended both events along with representatives from the community and voluntary sector, local councils and youth workers from rural areas.

3.2 Focus Groups

The focus groups were held in 5 different locations throughout Northern Ireland. The exact locations were determined in consultation with the EA staff and were informed by the areas with the greatest numbers of young people living in rural areas and the data emanating the desktop research.

Each focus group lasted for approximately 1.5 hours and between 2 and 23 young people participated in each of these groups. Participants were recruited via key stakeholders from the statutory, voluntary and community organisations mentioned above. The usual consent forms will be required from young people's parents/carers before they can participate in the focus group discussions. The Focus Groups were held in the following locations:

- Newry Youth and Resource Centre.
- Cheers Youth Club, Ballymoney.
- Cookstown Youth and Resource Centre.
- Magherafelt Youth Club.
- St. Patrick's Youth Club, Keady.

Each of the focus groups was facilitated by the Education Authority Youth Service staff member and an accurate record of each meeting was recorded.

3.3 Heading 3

In Northern Ireland, as with the rest of the United Kingdom, there is a growing interest and concern around issues affecting people living in rural communities. However, there is no agreed UK wide definition as to what constitutes rural, the only consistent theme being that rural is a non-urban space characterised by sparse populations and the long distances that people have to travel to

access services.[5] Living in a remote area therefore can be a contributing factor to social and economic disadvantage and in some case lead to young people engaging in risk taking or anti-social behaviour. The issues associated with rural disadvantage therefore are complex and inter-linked.

The Rural Development Council (RDC) noted that the default definition of what constitutes a rural area in Northern Ireland includes open countryside as well as all settlements with populations under 5,000 persons. This is the standard definition which is assumed to be used when considering rural needs, although the guidance does permit for the use of alternatives, where a strong rationale can be made for doing so.

The Rural Needs Act highlighted that all public authorities must pay due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans or when designing and delivering services.

The underlying factors that cause deprivation and disadvantage, including poverty, unemployment, poor education and skills, limited youth opportunities and inadequate housing occur and are the same anywhere. However, some issues can disproportionately impact on people living in rural areas. These include resource deprivation, opportunity deprivation and mobility deprivation.[6] It has also been argued that rural areas are more deprived based on the location of the deprived people rather than on the location of the deprived area.[7] Deprivation in a rural setting is therefore worsened by having poor access to services and having limited or no access to transportation.

The European Commission stated that rural areas are diverse and include many important regions. However, some rural areas, and in particular those which are the most remote, depopulated or dependent on agriculture, face particular challenges for those that live there, including: growth, jobs and sustainability. These include:

- Lower levels of income.
- Lower employment rates and higher unemployment rates.
- Weaknesses in skills and human capital.
- A lack of opportunities, particularly, for women and young people.[8]

It has also been suggested that people living in rural areas face three specific forms of deprivation, namely, households, opportunities and mobility. Household deprivation relates to constraints caused by low income and poor housing which frequently co-exist in rural areas. Opportunity deprivation is linked to lack of jobs and limited access to services. In turn, people's inability to find employment or to access services leads to mobility deprivation. The accumulation of different forms

[5] Farmer, J.C., Baird, A.G., & Iversen, L., 2001, Rural Deprivation: Reflecting Reality, British Journal of General Practice, London.

[6] Shaw, J.M. (ed.), 1979, Rural Deprivation and Planning, Geobooks, Norwich.

[7] Action with Communities in Rural England, 2011, The Rural Share of Deprivation in Bedfordshire, ACRE, Cirencester.

[8] http://ec.europa.eu/

of deprivation can lead to the isolation and marginalisation of particular groups in rural areas, particularly young people.[9]

A review of the relevant literature suggests that, internationally, rural deprivation wherever it occurs, shares similar traits and young people from whatever country they live in, face similar challenges and experiences. Compared with people living in urban areas, residents of rural areas have limited opportunities in relation to their social mobility and economic choices. They endure many problems such as low income, unemployment, poor access to social services, including education and healthcare. In effect the challenges facing children and young people are multi-faceted. They have to travel greater distances to school, to access leisure or entertainment and meet friends and they also have limited options or opportunities within their local area.

A further characteristic of these regions is their remoteness from major urban centres, highlighting the need for well-developed transport links and infrastructure to support their social and economic development.[10] A recent study noted that geographic and social isolation, along with limited access to services can have a negative impact on a young person's mental health.[11]

Whilst the prevalence of mental illness is similar in rural and urban areas, the services available are very different. It has been argued that the mental healthcare needs of rural communities are not being met because adequate services and professionals are not available and that providing mental health services in rural areas can be more challenging to detect and more expensive to deliver.[12]

Experts also claim that poor access to mental health care can overlap with other health crises like drug and alcohol misuse and suicide. People in rural communities have limited access to specialist care in this area and will also have to travel greater distances to reach these services.[13]

A recent Scottish report revealed that young people living in rural areas are consistently affected by social exclusion. This is manifested in many ways, from exclusion and marginalisation to a lack of reliable public services. Another study reported that whilst urban poverty is visible and well documented, rural deprivation is magnified through a range of factors which are not always evident in an urban setting. The majority of the research in this area concluded that the main issues facing residents of rural areas, including young people, are social isolation, marginalisation and a lack of access to services.

Social exclusion has been defined as 'the lack of access to, or denial of, a range of citizen rights, such as adequate healthcare or educational success, and also a lack of societal integration through limited

[9] Shaw, J.M. (ed.), 1979, Rural Deprivation and Planning, Geobooks, Norwich.
[10] Surchev, P., 2009, Rural Areas – Problems and Opportunities for Development, Trakia Journal of Sciences, Zagora.
[11] Collins,A., Bronte-Tinkew, J., & Logan, C., 2007, Strategies for Improving Out of School Programs in Rural Communities, https://www.childtrends.org
[12] https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/mental-health
[13] https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/20/health/mental-health-rural-areas-issues-trnd/index.html

power or the ability to participate in political decision making'.[14] Remoteness can therefore be seen as a contributing factor to social and economic disadvantage. As has already been stated, distance from essential services places those from rural communities at a significant disadvantage.

People without their own transport in rural communities rely on public transport and are disproportionately affected by inadequate or reduced services and therefore accessing services and facilities can be very challenging.[15] This is especially true for young people in rural areas who often experience particular difficulties with transport in order to access education, work or even maintain a social life. For school going children, their public transport is usually limited to the school bus. A lack of public transport and high costs also negatively impacts on those wishing to enter employment, training or continue with fulltime education.[16]

A recent study from the Institute of Civil Engineers reported that the poorest in rural communities tend to be the least mobile. They suffer from a lack of both public and private transport and therefore have most difficulty in accessing services.[17] It has also been suggested that when an area has a small population that is widely dispersed it can create difficulties for people to travel to access services, but also for service providers to access customers.[18]

A recent survey by the Commission for Rural Communities reported that public transport was seen as the highest priority for improving the quality of life of people in rural areas, especially those too young to drive.[19] Large distances between services and population centres in rural areas means it is difficult for people without access to private transport. However, recent research has noted that all rural areas are different and have different needs, therefore strategies devised to overcome these problems need to take into account local need. It has also been suggested that policy makers need to be innovative and flexible in their plans to address rural transport needs.[19]

Although the digital divide between urban and rural is decreasing there is still a considerable way to go before equality is reached. Analysis published by county councils in England revealed that broadband speeds in rural areas are up to three times slower than in cities.[20] A recent study noted that

[14] Shortall, S 2008, 'Are rural development programmes socially inclusive? Social inclusion, civic engagement, participation, and social capital: Exploring the differences', Journal of Rural Studies, v.24, n.4, pp.450- 57.

[15] House of Commons Transport Committee, 2014, Passenger Transport in Isolated Communities, The Stationery Office, London.

[16] Storey, P. & Brannen, J., 2000, Young People and Transport in Rural Areas, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York

[17] Lucas, K., Mattioli, G., Verlinghieri, E. & Guzman, A., 2016, Transport Poverty and Its Social Consequences, http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

[18] Commission for Integrated Transport, 2008, A New Approach to Rural Public Transport, Commission for Integrated Transport, London.

[19] IPSOS/MORI, 2009, Rural Insights Survey, Commission for Rural Communities, London.

[20] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/06/rural-counties-suffer-broadband-speeds-three-times-slower-nearby/

barriers to digital participations stem from the lack of suitable infrastructure and that large numbers of people are unable to exploit the potential of ICT because of where they live and work.[21]

Mobile communication is an integral part of a young person's social life, therefore as we have become increasingly dependent on the internet and other digital technologies, those living in rural communities run the risk of becoming even more isolated.

Access to broadband and digital technology brings many benefits to rural communities; however, those living in these areas remain frustrated by the lack of speed and reliability. Many people living in rural communities rely on the internet for banking, shopping, education, business development, communication as well as recreational activities; however, inadequate broadband and poor mobile telephone coverage restricts many users in rural communities from accessing these services which people in town and cities take for granted.[22] Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) noted that having access to the same speed of service is essential if rural dwellers are not to be at a disadvantage to those in urban areas.[23]

Whilst there has been much research undertaken into young people living in rural areas and the challenges they face, relatively little has been written about youth service delivery in rural locations. Within the UK and Ireland, most of the research into this has been undertaken by statutory services, local authorities or the Community and Voluntary sector working in the area. A recent Welsh study noted that enabling high quality youth services can be challenging as it is difficult to meet the needs of diverse and isolated populations, where transport costs may be prohibitive and family poverty an overriding factor.[24]

Another study noted that youth workers in rural areas also encounter substantial challenges which made achieving their objectives for their diverse and disperse population more difficult. The findings suggest that these difficulties include issues around the recruitment and retention of young people, difficulties attracting qualified youth workers and volunteers, poor job security and career progression and limited opportunities for professional development.[25]

Throughout England, Scotland and Wales the role of public services has changed dramatically in the last ten years. Local Government have moved away from the direct delivery of services to a commissioning model. This is especially true in terms of the delivery of youth services, particularly

[21] Philip, L., et al, 2017, The Digital Divide: Patterns, Policy and Scenarios for Connecting the 'Final Few' in Rural Communities Across Great Britain, Journal of Rural Studies, 54, (2017), pp. 386-398.
[22] Commission for Rural Communities, 2009, Mind the Gap: Digital England – A Rural Perspective, Commission for Rural Communities, Cheltenham.
[23] Action with Communities in Rural England, 2014, Digital Inclusion Policy Position Paper, ACRE, Cirencester.
[24] Wylie, T, 2016, Developing Youth Work in Wales, http://www.cwvys.org.uk
[25] Geldens, P., & Bourke, L., 1994, The Perspectives of Youth Workers in Rural Victoria, Youth Studies Australia, Canberra.

in rural areas. It has also been suggested that there may be differences between the views of young people and those delivering services and programmes.[26]

A recent Welsh report noted that there has been a decline in the traditional open access youth provision along with community and street-based youth work. The report suggested that the Voluntary sector and charities have replaced Local Authorities as the main providers of youth work.[27] Rural youth work tends to be vulnerable when services are being rationalised as they are difficult to administer and are more expensive to plan, resource and deliver.

In England, from April 2011, all central funding for Youth Services was amalgamated into a new Early Intervention Grant. Local Authorities were now free to choose, based on priorities and needs assessments, the proportion of funding they allocated to Youth Services. This was in line with the Government's vision of opening up services to the wider market and providing greater commissioning opportunities.

According to the Commission for Rural Communities, Early Intervention Grant allocations, especially for Youth Services, are higher in urban areas than in rural areas.[28] Recent research from Unison noted that since the introduction of Early Intervention Grants, 350 youth centres have closed and 35,000 hours of outreach work have been removed.[29]

In Scotland, in order to challenge the disparity in funding between urban and rural youth service provision, Youth Scotland, recently announced the Youth Scotland Rural Action Fund. Financed by The Robertson Trust, this new fund aimed to support and develop community-based youth work in Scotland's rural communities. The fund has been created in response to the challenges which rural youth groups are facing to support funding the delivery of community based universal youth work.

As with other areas of the UK, Youth Work policy and practice in Northern Ireland has tended to focus on urban settings. Youth Action Northern Ireland (YANI) noted that young people living in rural communities do not get the same opportunities or experiences as their urban peers. YANI argued that rural interventions do not necessarily take account of young people's needs, nor does it involve young people in the development of local plans and strategies.[30]

[26] Davie, A., 2015, Engaging Young People in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia, Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Services, Tasmania.
[27] Estyn, 2018, Youth Support Services in Wales, The Value of Youth Work, Estyn, Cardiff.
[28] Commission for Rural Communities, 2012, Barriers to Education, Employment and Training for Young People in Rural Areas, Commission for Rural Communities, Gloucester.
[29] Unison, 2016. A Future at Risk. Cuts in Youth Services, Unison, London.
[30] Youth Action Northern Ireland, http://www.youthaction.org/rural/why_Rural.aspx

4 Youth Work in Northern Ireland

Youth Provision in Northern Ireland is made up of a range of diverse groups and organisations, including Controlled, Voluntary, Uniformed and Church Based. These range from rural groups with small memberships to larger urban organisations with bigger memberships.

The Youth Sector in Northern Ireland consists of a statutory sector comprising 84 clubs and a Voluntary sector incorporating almost 1,548 units; collectively engaging 39% of the youth population aged 4-18. The most recent figures reveal that almost 139,426 young people participated in registered Youth Work.

Statutory and Voluntary Youth Services in receipt of grant aid are registered with the Education Authority and are subject to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). The Department of Education's investment in Youth Work aims to support and encourage young people to reach their potential and to improve their educational outcomes. This provision ranges from full-time youth centres, operating both generic and targeted youth work, to one night per week voluntary clubs.

In addition to these youth clubs, Youth Work also operates on an accreditation programme basis or on a detached basis. Examples of these types of provision include Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) programmes, Duke of Edinburgh's Award/Joint Award Initiative programmes, Outdoor Education Centres, statutory funded area based projects such as programmes for rural Youth Work and Outreach, Health programmes, Mental Health initiatives and programmes, Personal and Social Development programmes, Environmental projects, Inclusion schemes and Youth Intervention.

Accredited and non-accredited Youth Work also takes place in schools throughout Northern Ireland. These range from Transition programmes for Key Stage 2 pupils to Learning Together Programmes for Key Stage 3 and 4 pupils. School based programmes involve a range of diverse initiatives including Personal and Social Development projects, Health based projects and specific targeted programmes identified by schools.

These programmes are designed and delivered to break down the barriers that identified young people may face to learning and achieving. Programmes are also delivered in Special Schools to young people with Special Educational Needs or who are disabled.

This non-unit type provision typically accounts for approximately 25% of the total number of young people involved in youth activities, although in a majority of cases, these young people are already counted through their participation in Statutory and Voluntary centre based provision.

There are currently 84 youth facilities controlled and managed by the Education Authority, with a total membership of 13,705 young people. 69 of these centres are located in an urban setting and 11,881 young people are registered with them. 15 of these centres are located in rural areas and have 1,824 registered with them.

There are 1,548 uniformed and voluntary groups, including church based and community organisations, delivering youth work. These groups are supported financially by the Education Authority.

There are 922 uniformed groups supported by EA. 370 of these uniformed groups are in an urban location and have 31,575 young people registered with them and 256 groups based in a rural area with 20,261 registered young people.

There are also 626 voluntary groups receiving financial support from EA. Of these, 370 are located in an urban setting with 51,878 registered young people and 256 are based in a rural area with 22,007 registered young people.

In total there are 1,632 groups supported by the Education Authority. Of these, 997 groups (61.1%) are located in an urban setting with 95,334 (68.4%) registered young people and 635 (38.9%) groups based in a rural area with 44,092 (31.6%) registered young people.

There are also 2,004 Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations providing youth services that receive no EA funding. An estimated 942 of the groups operate in rural areas.

The provision of Youth Work can be categorised broadly into two types, Generic and Targeted. Generic Youth Work ensures that supportive environments are available to significant numbers of young people to help them enhance their personal and social skills, develop their communication skills and improve their levels of motivation and overall resilience.

Targeted provision seeks to address the direct impact of exclusion and marginalisation, tackling key issues such as risk-taking behaviour, health, sectarianism, racism, disaffection and low levels of attainment at school. Resources are also focused on specific groups of young people, such as the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, including those in the Section 75 groupings.

The targeting of provision is designed to meet the current policy guidelines ensuring that Youth Services are positioned to tackle the impact of economic and social deprivation that affects young people and which can make a positive impact on their future aspirations and life chances.

This is reflective of the fact that, regardless of socio-economic or situational context, all children and young people have universal developmental needs which can be effectively supported by age-appropriate Youth Work provision in accordance with the Youth Work curriculum.

More than one third of all children and young people in Northern Ireland live in an area that has been defined as rural. Statistics from NISRA reveal that 267 (30%) of all Super Output Areas in Northern Ireland have been classified as rural.

- 531,929 young people aged between 4 and 25 living in Northern Ireland.
- 183,311, (34.5%) live in an area that has been identified as rural.
- Fermanagh and Omagh 24,978 young people (74.9%).
- Mid Ulster 28,582 young people (66%).
- Newry, Mourne and Down 28,553 young people (54.2). o Causeway Coast and Glens 19,624 young people (47.7%) o Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon 24,766 young people (42.2%).

The table below highlights the numbers of young people living in rural communities. Every council area, therefore, with the exception of Belfast, have significant numbers of young people who endure the associated challenges of living in a rural area.

Table 1 - Number and Percentage of Young People Living in Rural Areas

LGD 2014	Aged 4-8	Aged 9-13	Aged 14-18	Aged 19-25	Total
Antrim & Newtownabbey YP	8892	8810	9239	12887	39828
Antrim & Newtownabbey YP living in Rural Areas	1658	1820	1858	1922	7258
% Antrim & Newtownabbey YP living in Rural Areas	18.6	20.7	20.1	14.9	18.2
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon YP	13445	13092	13804	18325	58666
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon YP living in Rural Areas	5942	5668	5965	7191	24766
% Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon YP living in Rural Areas	44.2	43.3	43.2	39.2	42.2
Belfast YP	18621	19261	22438	42080	102400
Belfast YP living in Rural Areas	0	0	0	0	0
% Belfast YP living in Rural Areas	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Causeway Coast & Glens YP	8533	9228	9860	13552	41173
Causeway Coast & Glens YP living in Rural Areas	4257	4655	4759	5953	19624
% Causeway Coast & Glens YP living in Rural Areas	49.9	50.4	48.3	43.9	47.7
Derry & Strabane YP	9575	10523	11812	14631	46541
Derry & Strabane YP living in Rural Areas	4007	4451	4723	5161	18342
% Derry & Strabane YP living in Rural Areas	41.8	42.3	40.0	35.3	39.4
Fermanagh & Omagh YP	7466	7785	8252	9851	33354
Fermanagh & Omagh YP living in Rural Areas	5654	5885	6240	7199	24978
% Fermanagh & Omagh YP living in Rural Areas	75.7	75.6	75.6	73.1	74.9
Lisburn & Castlereagh YP	8151	8378	9092	11026	36647
Lisburn & Castlereagh YP living in Rural Areas	2588	2658	2740	2915	10901
% Lisburn & Castlereagh YP living in Rural Areas	31.8	31.7	30.1	26.4	29.7
Mid & East Antrim YP	8210	8225	9155	11456	37046
Mid & East Antrim YP living in Rural Areas	3021	3001	3279	3848	13149
% Mid & East Antrim YP living in Rural Areas	36.8	36.5	35.8	33.6	35.5

LGD 2014	Aged 4-8	Aged 9-13	Aged 14-18	Aged 19-25	Total
Mid Ulster YP	9697	9583	10141	13853	43274
Mid Ulster YP living in Rural Areas	6528	6424	6729	8901	28582
% Mid Ulster YP living in Rural Areas	67.3	67.0	66.4	64.3	66.0
Newry, Mourne & Down YP	11689	12056	12852	16096	52693
Newry, Mourne & Down YP living in Rural Areas	6585	6738	6914	8316	28553
% Newry, Mourne & Down YP living in Rural Areas	56.3	55.9	53.8	51.7	54.2
North Down & Ards YP	9147	9138	9611	12411	40307
North Down & Ards YP living in Rural Areas	1686	1688	1726	1995	7095
% North Down & Ards YP living in Rural Areas	18.4	18.5	18.0	16.1	17.6
Northern Ireland YP	113426	116079	126256	176168	531929
Northern Ireland YP living in Rural Areas	41926	42988	44996	53401	183311
% Northern Ireland YP living in Rural Areas	37.0	37.0	35.6	30.3	34.5

6 Findings

5.1 Introduction

Within Northern Ireland there is a lack of information regarding the needs of and challenges facing young people living in rural areas. Stakeholder Engagement undertaken by the Education Authority in 2017 noted that, whilst the issues facing young people were similar for both urban and rural dwellers, the literature review and anecdotal evidence suggested that rural young people had additional challenges and barriers to overcome.

The challenges facing young people in rural areas should not be dismissed as in many instances they do not have the mobility, resources or social contacts to overcome the barriers they encounter.

The purpose of this report therefore is to highlight the extent of the social, economic and educational obstacles that rural young people endure in their day to day lives.

5.2 Transport

Public transport in rural areas is vital for enabling rural dwellers access to core services and for young people it is vital for them accessing education, training and work or leisure and social activities. Transport, or the lack of access to it, was a major concern for the majority of young people participating in the focus groups. The young people highlighted that transport links were infrequent and there was a general lack of service availability. The majority of young people noted that the lack of transportation was the main barrier to accessing services or recreational activities.

In many cases, young people reported that the only bus they had access to or used was their school bus. It was also noted that they had to get up earlier than their urban peers and, in some instances, walk a considerable distance in order to catch the school bus. It was also noted that not all schools finished at the same time and in some instances young people had to wait up to twenty minutes before the school bus departed. Many also complained about the length of time they spent on the school bus. One boy noted:

> *"I am the first person on my bus every day and last off in the evening. By the time we pick everyone else up and get to school I have spent almost an hour on the bus."*

Public transport was characterised as having high fares and poor services. Many young people complained that the routes and service times did not meet their needs. Transport at weekends and during school holidays was considered inaccessible and provided at inappropriate times. This could be problematic if young people needed to get to work or to socialise with friends. Several also remarked that public transport for over sixteen year olds was expensive. One girl noted:

"There is only one bus to Belfast from here on a Saturday. It leaves at 8.30am and comes back at 1.30pm. I can't go and meet my friends or go shopping unless I get a lift."

Some of the young people from more remote areas pointed out that they were absent from school in winter more frequently than their classmates because school buses were unable to reach them due to snow and ice. It was suggested that they were disadvantaged educationally because of where they lived and this also negatively impacted on them accessing other social or recreational activities.

It was also suggested that those from rural communities were often unable to access after school activities as there was only one bus to get them home and it departed twenty minutes after school finished. Participation in after school activities was therefore restricted as many young people were dependent on getting a lift home from parents, which was not always possible. One boy stated:

"My school runs a computer class after school. I can't attend because we only have one car and my mum needs it for work, so I have no lift home."

The majority of young people stated that they were dependent on their parents for lifts due to the lack of public transport. Many young people reported that they were members of sports clubs, community groups or youth clubs, and participation in these groups was determined by the family having access to a car. Several young people noted that they also had siblings who were active in similar groups and activities, therefore parents spent a considerable amount of time transporting their children to different events and venues. One girl remarked:

"We always joke and call it mum's cabs. I never really thought about how much time she spent driving my brother and me to football and dance classes."

The young people also noted that cycling or walking to events or activities in rural areas was dangerous as roads were narrow and footpaths, where they existed, were not fit for purpose. They were also poorly lit and this ensured that they were particularly dangerous in winter. It was also pointed out that whilst their peers in urban areas could walk or cycle to school or youth club and other social or leisure activities, this was not an option for many rural young people given the distances to travel and condition of the roads.

Many of those who attended training courses in the local regional colleges complained about the high cost of public transport. Unlike their peers who remained at school they were not eligible for a bus pass. Although they were entitled to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) they argued that a considerable proportion of this grant went on paying for public transport.

Others stated that when they reached the age of seventeen they applied for their provisional driving licence and tried to pass the driving test at the earliest opportunity. Those that could drive and had access to a car remarked that it had given them a new found freedom and independence. However,

they did accept that the cost of fuel and insurance was expensive and again they were reliant on their parents to support them financially. One young person noted:

> *"Being able to drive has opened up a whole new world for me. I can now go out with my friends in the local town without worrying about how I am going to get home. I really feel part of the group now."*

In some areas it was noted that both bus and train services had been cut and this made accessing services even more difficult. One girl noted that it was actually cheaper for her to drive to university and pay car parking charges than it was to use public transport.

Youth workers also highlighted that some of the challenges they faced delivering youth work in rural areas could be attributed to a lack of transport. Some noted that they were no longer allowed to drive Education Authority Youth Service buses, which inhibited their work. Some suggested that recruiting and maintaining a group was dependent on whether or not parents could bring the young people to a centre. One youth worker reported:

> *"One of the biggest barriers to delivering effective youth work in rural areas is clearly linked to access to transport."*

Others explained that in winter the roads could be treacherous and impassable and youth services have to be cancelled. One Youth Worker noted that access to transport was essential to make youth work in rural areas viable and also ensure that the most vulnerable young people were being recruited to and supported by the service. Young people, it was suggested, were cut off from experiences and organisations that could enhance their personal and social development and training or employment opportunities, through a lack of engagement with youth services.

Participants at the TBUC Engagement event noted that resolving the transport issue in rural areas was of paramount importance. It was proposed that government departments need to work collectively and challenge Translink and other service providers to explore and deliver a viable transport solution to meet the needs of people living in rural communities.

5.3 Digital Technology

Having access to efficient telecommunication systems can benefit an individual's quality of life. Social media and access to the internet are increasingly important aspects of a young person's life. However, good quality and reliable connectivity is not always guaranteed in rural and remote areas. Many young people reported that they could not engage in online activity considered to be normal and expected among their urban peers.

A common theme from all the focus groups was the lack of infrastructure and access to digital technology, inadequate broadband and mobile telephone coverage. Young people felt socially disadvantaged due to a lack of access to digital technology and the speed of their internet

connection. A common complaint was that they were unable to communicate with friends via social media, play interactive online games and download music or films, activities which their urban friends took for granted. One boy noted:

> *"Our broadband is so slow. We have to move about the house to access the internet and if more than one person is trying to use it, forget about it!"*

It was also suggested that poor broadband hinders a rural young person's education as they are unable to send homework, access coursework or other online educational resources and materials. Several noted that they felt socially excluded because they had limited or no access to digital technology. One year 12 pupil stated that she was very worried about her GCSEs as her school expected most of the coursework and homework to be completed and returned electronically. She noted that she was capable of completing the work but restricted in accessing it. She stated:

> *"I feel like I am being left behind and constantly playing catch up. It is difficult to catch up as I don't get into school early enough to use the computer labs and have to get the bus home straight after school."*

It was also noted that mobile telephone users in rural areas had limited choice as they were restricted to one service provider as this was the only one available in their particular area. Many believed that they were being excluded from taking advantage of offers being promoted by rival companies and were being charged too much for the service being provided.

Young people believed that they were being disadvantaged in terms of accessing digital technology because they lived in a rural community. Several pointed out that they paid a similar amount to their service provider as friends from school, however, in rural areas the coverage was patchy and therefore the service was not the same. Others noted that in some areas coverage was getting better as new masts and infrastructure were being erected, however those in the most remote areas rejected this notion. There was a perception of a digital divide and that nothing was being done about making access in rural areas better. One girl noted:

> *"It's hard to believe. I only live 5 miles outside the town and most of the time I can't get the internet on my phone and sometimes even a signal to call my friends!!"*

Youth workers also noted that limited access to digital technology had an impact on their role. Some suggested that because their work telephones had limited coverage in certain areas and that they did not have access to 4G they were unable to keep lines of communication open with young people. They also complained that their personal mobile telephones generally had full access to these services, however, they were prohibited from using their personal devices for work purposes.

Another problem faced by some was that were not allowed to promote their services on social media however they were aware that in other EA offices this was not precluded. Young people also noted

that they did not always have access to information regarding programmes of support or other services. This was not an issue for youth workers working in the voluntary sector. One youth worker remarked:

> *"Surely we have to accept that young people use social media as a means of communication. I think as a service we should embrace this and make the most of the technology available to promote and support our work."*

5.4 Social Isolation

For the majority of young people, social isolation and social mobility were clearly linked to inadequate public transport, poor digital technology and limited access to social or recreational facilities and activities.

Despite many rural areas having sporting clubs and many young people reporting that they enjoyed participating in sporting activities, there was a common complaint among young people that there was nothing to do and nowhere to go, this was especially true for young people living in more remote areas. However, even those living in small towns reported being bored, feeling lonely and marginalised. One girl from a small town explained:

> *"There is a group of around ten of us. There is nothing for us to do at the weekends so we all just sit about the square for hours doing nothing. It's really boring."*

Many complained that they were unable to communicate with or meet up with school friends and this compounded the boredom, frustration and isolation they felt. Weekends and summer holidays were particularly stressful for many and it was the only the older ones who could drive or with access to a car that believed they had a sense of independence and freedom. Many young people from voluntary organisations noted that being a member of a youth organisation allowed them not only to engage in a wide variety of activities, but it was also considered to be a vital social outlet, especially during holiday periods.

Despite having friends in school there was a perception that young people from rural areas were missing out on being part of a network of positive social relationships and the benefits accrued from being included in a strong friendship group. However, it was noted that being involved and participating in youth organisations allowed young people to form strong friendships. Members from one group identified a range of opportunities to participate in inter-club activities and this allowed them to develop and maintain friendships with other young people with similar interests.

Many had feelings of boredom and loneliness, however, only a small number mentioned the impact that this may have on their mental health, such as depression or anxiety, and those that did tended to be older teenagers. The younger teenagers conceded that they often felt lonely and had negative feelings but didn't necessarily associate this with having poor mental health. For many young people

loneliness was considered to be a social issue as well as a health issue. However, both young people and youth workers noted that one was more inclined to have an active lifestyle by living in a rural community and this was beneficial for one's physical and mental health. Research conducted by the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster reported that membership of a youth group had a positive impact on a young person's mental health.

However, it was noted by several youth workers that geographical isolation coupled with the lack of opportunities and services offered or available to young people could have a negative impact on their mental health and in some cases drive the more vulnerable young people toward risk taking and anti-social behaviour.

5.5 Services

Accessing services and activities in local towns was not an option for the majority of young people as transport links rendered them inaccessible. There were however a range of sporting and leisure amenities that many of the young people attended. For example, young people spoke of rugby, hockey, soccer and GAA clubs that were available in their communities and noted that these provided a valuable social outlet as well as keeping them fit and active.

These local sporting clubs were seen as a vital community asset which many felt proud to be part off. However, as these clubs depended on volunteers for staffing, they were only available at certain times during the week. In many cases being a member of a local sporting organisation was their only community engagement.

Whilst there was agreement that in general sporting clubs were inclusive many girls noted that they did not enjoy taking part in sporting activities and that if you did not like sport then these clubs were of little or no benefit. Other girls noted that in their areas there always appeared to be more for boys to do than girls. One girl stated:

> *"I live in a small village with a GAA club. There is football for boys and girls and camogie as well. I don't like sport and am not very sporty so there is really nothing else for me to do!"*

Some suggested that the local sporting clubs allowed young people to use their indoor facilities, in some cases for free or at a nominal charge, providing a supervisor was on site. Many girls noted that this tended to be only for sporting activities and suggested that they could be used for cultural activities which would allow more girls to engage in meaningful activities. One GAA club noted that their facility was the only available amenity for young people in the local area. In recent years they have had introduced creative and flexible alternatives to sport to engage young people, particularly

girls. They reported that the club was now open to young people more times during the week, but they were dependant on volunteers to facilitate this.

The issue of cost in accessing other services was also discussed. Cost was viewed as a key consideration of accessibility and high charges as a barrier to inclusion or participation. One group noted that their local school had recently been refurbished and had installed a new gym and 4G football pitch. Despite many of the group being pupils at the school, access to the gym cost £3.50 for a half hour session and the hire of the football pitch was £50 per hour.

Many young people noted that this was prohibitive and did not meet the needs of young people from the local community. It was also suggested that at certain times both the gym and football pitch were vacant and the young people believed that they should have access to it at these times either free of charge or at a concessionary rate. Youth workers agreed, noting that as community resources they should be made available to young people when not in use. Representatives from a range of voluntary and community organisations noted that being creative and innovative through collaboration was the key to securing rural engagement. The development of innovative rural networks could stimulate and support collaboration and partnership working. They also proposed developing multi-purpose hubs to meet the needs of all rural residents.

It was also noted that community facilities such as local schools could be made available to young people outside of school hours, provided adult supervision was in place. One representative from a regional charity noted that EA were in an ideal position to work in partnership with other key stakeholders to open schools for community use. The fact that these facilities remained closed during weekends and school holidays and that high costs for other services impacted on uptake, led to young people hanging around the local area as this was a much less expensive alternative. This in turn led some to participate in risk taking activities. One boy remarked, and his views were echoed by others:

"It's cheaper to buy drink and get drunk than go to the nearest cinema."

Several youth workers commented that outreach work was an important way of taking services, activities and opportunities to young people and a useful means of beginning the process of engaging with them in a meaningful way. However, it was also noted that retaining young people on programmes and sustaining services in rural areas could be problematic.

Representatives from the community and voluntary sector noted that funders did not always understand rural issues and many rural community groups did not have experience of completing application forms for funding. It was also argued that too much emphasis was placed on the number of participants involved in a programme, which rural groups struggle to obtain, rather than on the outcomes that a group may achieve. There was consensus that government departments and funders need to have a greater understanding of rural realities. One local community worker noted:

"Funders need to understand that rural organisations will not always reach the threshold for funding. Therefore we are disadvantaged from the outset."

5.6 Anti-Social Behaviour

The lack of having anything to do or having anywhere to hang out led some young people to become involved in various aspects of anti-social behaviour and risk-taking behaviour. One youth worker commented that the lack of anything to do or anywhere to go caused some young people to become involved in anti-social behaviour.

In some areas, young people reported that the lack of or availability of structured services led most of them to spend the majority of their leisure time on the streets. The perception that they were engaging in anti-social behaviour was due to limited provision of a positive alternative. One girl noted:

"The youth club is only open two nights each week. There is really nothing else for us to do, that's why we meet up in groups in the town."

Whilst anti-social behaviour and becoming involved in risk taking activities was not prevalent everywhere, where it did occur involved some the following: underage drinking, drug misuse, anti-social behaviour and joyriding.

Youth workers noted that there was a perception among adults, especially older adults, that young people hanging around in groups were noisy, menacing and engaging in anti-social behaviour. Young people noted that living in a rural area gave them a sense of identity and pride, however, they also feared being judged and labelled by others. Young people felt powerless to challenge these assumptions and felt increasingly ostracised within their own communities. One boy remarked:

"We get the blame for everything around here. I don't know what they want us to do. We hang about the streets because we have nowhere else to go."

Young people in some areas did admit to drinking alcohol and talked about how easy it was to obtain. When challenged about the dangers of participating in such activity many laughed it off as being an adolescent and part of the process of growing up. They also failed to accept the negative health implications of drinking alcohol at a young age and that they were more vulnerable when they were under the influence of alcohol and could be at risk of unwanted adult attention.

In one area a youth worker explained that underage drinking was seemingly condoned by parents and other locals as the young people all met up in the local pub. This, it was suggested, was considered a safe place for them to meet and socialise and meant they were not hanging around on the streets. The youth worker commented that this raised serious child protection and safeguarding

issues as young people, in some cases were taking lifts from inappropriate adults and could put themselves in other compromising positions.

None of the young people admitted to ever having taken illegal drugs, however in two centres they openly talked about the drug problems in their own area, their school or a town close by. One group noted that in their nearby town young people as young as thirteen were involved in this practice. In another centre they explained that drug dealers from a nearby city were dealing drugs locally and everyone was aware of it. A youth worker confirmed that this was becoming a bigger problem for the more vulnerable young people in the community and was fearful that the problem could escalate. It was also suggested that local young people were being recruited to deal drugs.

A youth worker suggested that although the problem was not as yet widespread, it was getting worse and illegal drugs were now easier to acquire. It was also noted that the dealers prey on the most vulnerable young people and that one centre had to exclude several young people who showed up under the influence of drugs. One youth worker suggested:

> *"The lack of anything to do and boredom can lead some vulnerable young people to experiment with drugs. This has a knock-on effect and has implications for later life."*

Several young people also commented that they had driven their family car without permission. Whilst they accepted that it was illegal and were aware of the consequences of getting caught, their justification for this was that it allowed them to visit friends or even make the journey to the local shop. In most cases they stated that their parents were unaware that they had driven the car.

5.7 Youth Service

As has been noted there are a wide range of organisations and groups delivering youth services in rural areas. It should however be noted that the Education Authority and the other providers of youth services in rural areas are not transport operators and cannot always convey young people to and from youth services. Therefore, young people are reliant on parents or other family members getting them to and from services. It should also be noted that EA and other youth service providers are not responsible for digital infrastructure in rural areas.

Youth workers reported that delivering youth work in rural areas was challenging and that it required a different approach from the delivery of youth services in urban settings. It was stated that youth workers tried wherever possible to deliver programmes addressing the issues of exclusion, isolation and disadvantage. It was reported that youth work in rural areas perform an invaluable role in supporting young people and enhancing their personal and social development as well as developing and enhancing a range of other life-skills.

There was a general acceptance among youth workers that planning and delivering youth services in rural areas was more expensive. However, there was a growing perception among some outreach

and detached youth workers that there was an unequal funding distribution and reduced resourcing of youth work provision in rural areas. One youth worker noted that whilst young people might live in different areas they shared the same social issues and life challenges. However she claimed, a view shared among others:

> *"I would contend that EA give more support, either financial, resources or staffing, to youth services in towns and cities than rural areas get."*

Some youth workers noted that the reduced availability of youth work in rural areas could have a detrimental impact on the lives of young people, particularly the most vulnerable. It has also been suggested that participation and involvement in youth services not only enhances their personal development but also has a positive impact on a young person's mental health.

Youth Services, where they were available, were praised for the activities and programmes they provided. Young people were keen to participate in structured, positive activities and programmes that developed their skills and enhanced their future career prospects. The informal learning approach was widely welcomed as it offered different opportunities to gain qualifications or accreditations and also allowed young people the opportunity to take part in new purposeful activities that would not otherwise be available. However, both young people and youth workers noted that accessing these programmes was not always easy and attendance could be sporadic.

Youth centres were viewed as safe and welcoming environments which provided support, information and guidance for young people. They were also seen as places for valuable social interaction and participating in worthwhile activities. Young people also noted that they were consulted on the types of programmes that were delivered and these were designed to meet their specific needs.

Many of those organisations delivering youth services in rural areas from the Voluntary and Community sector received minimal funding from EA and relied on financial support from other government departments or from sponsorship and donations. In many cases these organisations were staffed by and relied on volunteers to deliver youth services. Young people were actively encouraged to become volunteers and take on leadership roles within their individual groups. Many of these groups had access to suitable venues in their local communities that were accessible to young people and supported the delivery of youth work.

Those youth workers delivering outreach or detached work reported that recruiting and sustaining groups was becoming increasingly difficult. They also cited issues such as not being able to access suitable bases or venues that were fit for purpose to deliver youth work. Recruiting and maintaining staff and volunteers in rural outreach work was also problematic and the lack of available transport to transfer young people to and from centres was a major concern. It was also suggested that given

the distances involved in transporting young people, a lot of time was lost in the actual delivery of youth work.

Other youth workers suggested that EA youth centres and facilities in some rural areas had been neglected due to budgetary restrictions. There was a perception among some that the majority of the money allocated to rural youth work was spent on transport and venue hire and this impacted negatively on the programmes they could deliver. It was also suggested that in order to maximise rural youth engagement, youth workers needed to be creative and innovative and some youth workers believed this flexibility was denied to them. One youth worker claimed that working conditions were too rigid and did not allow for innovation and flexibility. It was noted:

> *"Our work is different to that in a town or city. We have bigger challenges attracting young people to the service and our working conditions and practices should reflect this."*

Some youth workers noted that there was an increasing problem with recruiting staff and volunteers to work in rural areas, particularly more remote areas. It was suggested that the reduced availability of professional youth work would have a negative impact on young people from rural communities and could lead to the needs of young people from rural areas being overlooked. It was also suggested that those planning and resourcing youth services should have a better understanding of rural issues.

It was also suggested by several youth workers that the service as a whole was not engaging with the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people in rural communities. It was noted that there were several factors associated with this including: poverty, limited or no access to transport in a family, lack of promotion and awareness of youth services and poor digital communication. It was also reported that young people in outlying areas were not always aware of youth service provision in their areas. This in turn, it was reported, exacerbated the exclusion and disadvantage these young people endured.

It was also claimed by some youth workers that getting access to suitable venues to deliver youth work that were fit for purpose was also challenging. Some noted that there were local schools or other community facilities in most areas that were vacant at nights, but they did not have access to them. One outreach worker claimed:

> *"It is really difficult to recruit and maintain groups in areas where we have no fixed base. Those venues that we do use locally are not always accessible for all young people and in some cases are run down and have no wifi access."*

In most instances young people enjoyed participating in youth services. It was viewed as a valuable social outlet as well as allowing young people to participate in programmes and opportunities that otherwise would not be available. Many older young people welcomed the chance to participate in programmes that allowed them to gain accreditations and qualifications which would improve their

career prospects and future life chances. Many of the older young people noted that they had opportunities to volunteer at their centres or become involved in social action projects which have allowed them to develop a different range of skills including leadership, communication, active citizenship and problem solving. It was also suggested that participation in youth services had enhanced their maturity, confidence and self-esteem. Research undertaken by the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster reported that engagement with a youth setting is where young people form and maintain friendship groups more so than at school. It was also suggested that membership of a youth organisation allows young people to make positive contributions to their local communities.

A common complaint among the young people was that youth services in their areas were only available for a limited period of time during the week and never at the weekend. In their absence, it was reported, they had nothing else to do except hang around the streets. In two areas it was noted by several young people that they had outgrown youth services. Some complained that they were boring and simply did not meet their needs anymore. When questioned further it was suggested that the facilities and resources had not changed in five years and they did not want to participate on programmes anymore. The local youth worker suggested that in a number of cases peer pressure had stopped some from returning to the service.

6 Recommendations

- Undertake a comprehensive mapping exercise of existing provision in rural areas (Controlled and Voluntary) in every council area, including opening times, membership numbers and venues. This will allow the Education Authority to assess where the greatest need is and to determine what resources and finances can be allocated to meet this need. Having an understanding of what opportunities, resources and funding are available is just as important as an awareness of particular barriers and challenges.
- Rural areas must have an equal footing in terms of both policy and practice development.
- Policy makers and area and programme planners must be creative and innovative to ensure positive rural engagement.
- Rural youth work needs to be equitably staffed, funded and resourced.
- All future EA initiatives and plans will be rural proofed.
- Develop innovative programmes of support addressing the needs and social isolation of rural young people taking into consideration the local context and involve young people in the planning and design of programmes.
- Develop relationships and build capacity with key stakeholders, including young people, schools, local councils, the voluntary and community sector and local businesses to invest in and deliver better youth provision and positive leisure activities for young people in rural communities.
- Integrated working between services and stakeholders to intervene early and provide positive alternatives for young people living in rural areas.
- EA must ensure that all future funding arrangements are equitable and sustainable and take account of rural disadvantage.
- EA must comply with and meet the requirements of the Rural Needs Act when planning services for rural young people, ensuring that there is a change of attitude and culture and greater awareness of rural disadvantage at a planning level.
- Appoint a Rural Champion within EA to represent the needs and interests of rural young people acting as a catalyst for rural dialogue and advocacy. This person could also be a liaison between EA and its partners from the Voluntary sector promoting collaboration.
- EA to work in partnership with local schools to ensure facilities are available to rural communities, especially at weekends and school holidays.
- EA Youth Services in rural areas must be planned, delivered and resourced differently than in an urban setting.
- EA to link with Translink and its Youth Transport Forum and other local transport providers, making them aware of the needs of rural young people when timetabling services.

- Undertake a scoping exercise to see how youth services are planned and delivered in rural areas in other parts of the UK and Ireland.
- EA to provide support and guidance to smaller voluntary and community groups seeking additional funding.
- EA to ensure that greater use is made of social media to promote and support youth work in rural areas.
- Senior Youth Officers must ensure that the needs of rural young people are reflected in their Area Plans and work with key partners and stakeholders to ensure these needs are being met.

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