Cultivating an Interest in Politics and Social Action

Youth Consultation

EA Youth Service

Information and Data Team

Education Authority Youth Service

Cultivating an Interest in politics and Social Action

Youth Consultation

Report provided by the Education Authority Youth Service Information and Data Team

Author
Education Authority Youth Service Information and Data Team
Produced by
Education Authority Youth Service
40 Academy Street
Belfast
BT1 2NQ

Contents

Executive Summary

Introduction

Politics

Young Peoples Perspective on Politics

- Political Disillusionment and Political Expression amongst young people
- Political Awareness, Education and Empowerment
- Voting Reform
- Impact on the Brexit Vote if 16- and 17-year-olds
- Political Ethos and Ideology

Young people's view on politics (Research)

Political Parties engagement with young people in NI

Restored Institutions at Stormont Survey Response from young people

Social Action

What is Social Action

Benefits of Social Action

Young Peoples view on Social Action

- Importance of Sustainability, Longevity and Funding
- Empowerment, Growth and Happiness
- Reaching out and Educating
- Social Action and Politics Awareness

Social Action can help young people to achieve the following outcomes

Why do young people get involved in Social Action?

Youth workers can support young people to engage in social action by:

Recommendations

Conclusion

Appendix

Case Study TBUC (Social Action)

Horizons Case Study (Social Action)

Recommendations Action Plan

Executive Summary

Northern Ireland has long been divided by segregation, however the generation born after the Good Friday Agreement have different priorities as many are too young to remember the troubles and have no interest in legacy issues.

Politics in Northern Ireland is a contentious issue and has only recently returned to normal. For many young people, the previous two years of stagnation have left them feeling frustrated, overlooked and resentful.

Young people are fed up with the traditional politics of orange and green and aspire for a society that moves away from the past and is forward thinking representing the views of all regardless of religion, ethnicity or sexual identity.

Despite feeling frustrated and overlooked they are still impacted by political issues and decisions and would their like voices heard in decisions that are made that affect them.

Young people believe that their lack of political engagement in terms of voting disqualifies them from being part of the democratic process and ensures that their voices are silent on issues that will impact them.

Social action is a vehicle allowing young people to participate and become active citizens. Social action provides an opportunity for young people to be leaders in society and gives them a sense of belonging, whilst also building on several key skills for the future workforce including team building, planning, communication and most importantly leadership.

Social action projects empower young people to think locally, nationally and globally providing them with opportunities to challenge societal norms and think independently and become engaged in proactive and sustainable democratic processes.

Young people indicated that politics did not always mean to them what it did to adults and were concerned that they were being ignored at a political level. In a practical sense some argued that they expressed their views better through social action.

Young people indicated that politics did not always mean to them what it did to adults but were concerned that their voices were not always heard or were ignored. In a practical sense they expressed their views through social action.

Introduction

The study's objective is to analyse and gauge opinions of how young people cultivate an interest in politics and social action. One of the key aims is to establish the level of active citizenship of young people in Northern Ireland and to determine their level of political understanding and engagement.

Another aim is to analyse the impact of social action initiatives and what they mean to young people, with the objective of identifying the functionality and feasibility of the current models and whether they are fit for purpose.

Importantly, as a Youth Service we explored how young people perceive politics and social action programmes, looking at the impact they have on their lives and determining if there is a crossover between the two and if so at what level.

It should be noted that in Northern Ireland not all young people have the same access or opportunities in achieving good education and learning outcomes as others. The legacy of the past in Northern Ireland still has an adverse effect on some children and young people and particularly those who come from a certain socio-economic demographic and cultural background.

Northern Ireland has long been divided by segregation, however the generation born after the Good Friday Agreement have different priorities as many are too young to remember the troubles and have no interest in legacy issues.

The lack of a functioning government here in the past 2 years, has meant that the appetite for politics and political engagement has been suppressed, especially among young people.

Research from the British Youth Council reveals that young people want to be better politically educated and be able to vote at 16 years old, with more relaxed voter ID rules. Presently there are approximately over 1.5 million 16-and-17-year-olds in the UK who do not have a say in the decisions that will define their futures.

They are denied the vote and excluded from broader political conversations. 71% of young people do not feel that in the run-up to elections, political parties and candidates engage with them.[1]

Throughout this study, the voice of the young people has been captured to support future delivery of Youth Services in themes around political engagement and social action. We have ensured that all recommendations and feedback are implemented into the body of this report.

Social action provides an opportunity for young people to be leaders in society and gives them a sense of belonging, whilst also building on several key skills for the future workforce including team building, planning, communication and most importantly leadership.

Social action allows young people to make their own stamp on issues that are relevant to them and gives them a chance to understand the sustainable development goals. Social action can be as small or as big as the young person wants it to be and even though it is seen as something positive it gives young people the opportunity to grow to understand that failure is ok and that it is important to give something a chance, because impact creates real change.[2]

[1] https://www.byc.org.uk/news/2023/young-people-want-better-political-education-votes-at-16-and-relaxed-voter-id-rules-to-improve-political-engagement

[2] https://sdgs.un.org/goals

There are 2 case studies included in the appendices highlighting good practice from youth work organisations in the delivery of social action projects. The Social Impact Officer for Youth Services in the Education Authority highlighted the transferable skills gained by young people who take part in social action projects and the impact this can have on them both personally and professionally.

A total of 157 young people a from a range of geographical and educational settings in Northern Ireland engaged with our research through focus group discussions and online surveys. 25 youth workers participated in surveys and discussions. 8 teachers and 6 Board of Governor representatives from primary and post-primary schools were also engaged. We also consulted 14 parents of young people attending schools in Northern Ireland.

Given the sensitivity of the research topic it was agreed that respondents would remain anonymous. Participants had mixed views on the topics relating to Politics and Social Action and as to how and where it would be most effectively delivered.

Young People's Perspective on Politics

Political Disillusionment and Political Expression amongst Young People

At the beginning of this study there was no functioning government in Northern Ireland which may have influenced feelings of disengagement and disillusionment.

Our initial consultations with young people indicated strong feelings of frustration and resentment with political instability and the political vacuum that had existed for almost 2 years. Many young people expressed their dislike and anger towards politics and politicians. One young person described the current political leaders as *uninspiring, unreliable and lacking leadership***.**

When they were asked *"what does politics mean to you"*, comments included: *apathy, boredom, orange and green*. One contributor explained that: *the lack of a functioning government in Northern Ireland contributed to the sentiments in relation to apathy.*

Another young person noted: *Politicians enjoy ridiculous perks, they vote on their own salary, just look at Stormont, despite not functioning the politicians still get paid, as a young person it infuriates me when people say young people aren't engaged.*

The following statements indicate the levels of frustration among young people.

I think young people are disengaged because of the Stormont walk out, people can't be bothered with it, it brings the whole country to standstill.

The political class are so far removed from society that real politics happens on a grassroots level.

Young people indicated that politics did not always mean to them what it did to adults but were concerned that their voices were not always heard or were ignored. In a practical sense some argued that they expressed their views through social action. One young person stated: *I think young people are political but not necessarily in a traditional sense. They might be involved in making political statements through art like graffiti. The challenge is how we bring that to mainstream attention.*

A youth worker noted: *I don't think we should generalise about young people. Some young people are very engaged and passionate, some aren't, but there are lots of young people who are active around issues such as LGBT rights, climate change and welfare reform.*

This point was confirmed by a teacher who noted that young people were not always aware of local and national politics but did understand issues that concerned them. However, they did not always have a platform to highlight these issues. He also noted that their disengagement may come about form not being listened to.

When prompted to consider the idea that politicians could do more to engage young people in politics one young person noted: *Many young people feel politicians don't care what they think, it might be because a lot of young people don't vote. If you are a politician perhaps, they are thinking their time canvassing for votes from young people isn't a worthwhile exercise.*

A teacher pointed out that politicians were regularly asked to talk to young people studying politics. She noted that the young people engaged well and asked pertinent questions, however this only took place with pupils who had a genuine interest in politics. Other students were invited to attend these sessions, but turnout was low among non-politics students.

Young people recognised that despite feeling overlooked many are impacted by political issues perhaps without even realising their significance: One young person noted: *The way we fix this problem is not to talk about politics along party lines but rather focus on impactful issues that affect people's daily lives.*

Another young person reflected: *They [politicians] aren't going to listen to you when you can't vote… They might not care about us, but we need to make them care. The only way to do that is educating yourself on a range of issues and then whenever they come to your door you can hold them to account.*

One young person described how early engagement was key to politics, stating: *Once young people are involved in a youth wing of a political party they are already divided in their politics, young people need the basis of their political ideas to be explored before they get to that point.*

Another young person remarked: *There are some people I know who don't vote, who have never voted, out of my friends I'm the only one who votes. I'm passionate about women's rights so I was able to say to my friends did you know women died in the past to gain the right the vote.*

It was evident from the discussions that many barriers to political engagement among young people in Northern Ireland exist. Feelings of apathy and disillusionment towards politics were attributed to factors such as the perceived ineffectiveness of the government and dissatisfaction with political leaders. This suggested a disconnect between young people and the political establishment, which may hinder their willingness to engage in civic activities.

One young person stated: *Politics is very important but also very frustrating due to the current situation. No wonder young people are disempowered and not engaged and are leaving NI.*

Another young person explained: *Politics forms the basis of our society which is complex, often confusing and misunderstood.*

In response to these challenges, young people suggested alternative forms of political expression, such as art and the spoken word, to engage with political issues outside of traditional channels. They also stressed the importance of early education on political matters, including voting processes and the role of government to empower young people with the knowledge and skills needed to participate effectively in civic life.

Another young person studying Government and Politics explained: *Politics is inevitably controversial. I think it should revolve around common grounds such as human rights and planetarian rights. Youth are becoming more engaged, despite generational trauma.*

Additionally, concerns were raised about the perceived lack of responsiveness from politicians to the concerns of young people. Participants highlighted the need for politicians to focus on issues that directly impact the lives of young people and to engage with them in meaningful ways to build trust and accountability.

With many of the young people feeling negative and disengaged towards politics one young person stated: *No one ever hears anything positive about politics. How can we engage if at all ages, houses and environments everything we hear is negative. How can we highlight what's going on that's positive.*

Young people believed that the political system in Northern Ireland is divided and stagnant and that their voices are not heard or represented by the existing parties and institutions. Many were also frustrated by the lack of progress on key issues such as health, education and the economy.

Young people suggested that some of their peers had a low level of political knowledge or interest and did not see the relevance or importance of politics in their lives. They agreed that more opportunities should be made available to inform and educate them on political matters.

Some young people it was reported prefer to engage in alternative forms of political participation, such as social media, activism, volunteering or community work. They may feel that these forms of participation are more effective, meaningful or enjoyable than formal politics. A youth worker agreed noting: *This provides young people to engage in and be part of their local communities*.

The young people recognised that others may be influenced by the legacy of the Troubles. They may have inherited the trauma, fear or mistrust from older family members, who experienced the violence and suffering first-hand. They may also have a strong sense of identity or loyalty to their community or religion, which may prevent them from engaging with other groups or perspectives.

Overall, the sessions with young people highlighted the complexity of political engagement for young people in Northern Ireland, identifying the need for inclusive platforms, comprehensive education, and responsive political leadership to foster a culture of active citizenship and participation.

Political Awareness, Education and Empowerment

Despite there being no government at the time of the focus group, there was a consensus amongst the young people that they cared about politics in Northern Ireland and the impact it can have on their daily lives.

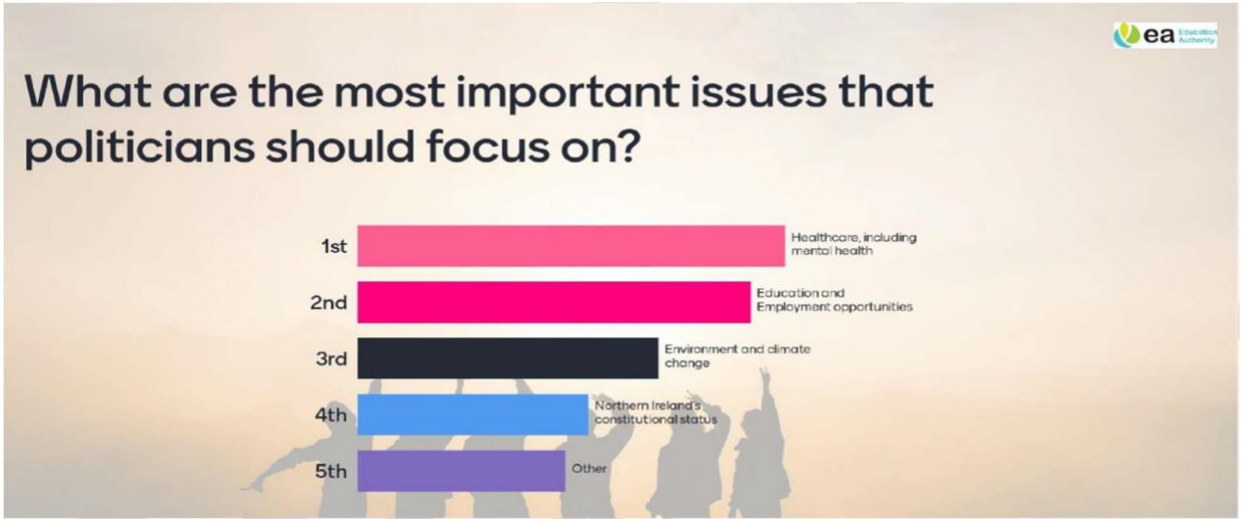
However, it was apparent that many of them had disengaged from politics primarily due to the lack of political stability and functioning government. It was evident from discussions that young people want to be more empowered, informed and educated about politics.

Young people wanted more education and information about local, national and international politics so that they can make informed decisions which will improve their lives and the lives of others.

It was noted by a parent and a teacher that Citizenship classes, which focused on community relations, equality and diversity were largely tokenistic and not taken seriously. The parent argued that these were ideal opportunities to educate young people on political and social issues, but this generally did not happen.

The young people expressed the view that they should be empowered by politicians and have a voice that will be heard. One young person stated: *Politics covers every aspect of our lives even if we think so or not. I think everyone is involved in politics in some way or another, however people and young people are not empowered enough.*

During one consultation with young people, they were asked to vote through the Mentimeter: *"W*hat are the most important issues that politicians should focus on?" Not surprisingly healthcare, including mental health was the most important followed by education and employment opportunities.



The constitutional status on Northern Ireland ranked second bottom on the list of important issues.

In terms of young people's interest in studying Politics in school only 9% of 16–18 years old in 2022-2023 opted to study Government and Politics AS and A2 level.

In total 94 (49%) of all post-primary schools offered Government and Politics AS and A2 Level out of 192 schools. However, only 5 (24%) Integrated schools offered Government and Politics AS and A2 Level in 2022/23.

One young person stated: *Politics impacts young people day in day out and they need educated and informed in a youth friendly way and that it is only through this empowerment that they will buy into the process and change can start to be made.*

Although it was somewhat difficult to ascertain the level of disengagement as some of the young people were engaged and understood the concept of politics, many more were involved in social action, climate change and community projects. Arguably, this may have been the point where social action and politics meet, although many young people were not politically minded but involved in social action programmes.

Young person spoke about how political systems are very complex, citing the terminology used in the media when discussing political issues may not be relatable for young people. One young person raised specific concerns as to the lack of education being offered to young people to help them understand political terms and beliefs.

It was suggested that many young people were ill prepared to answer questions on Northern Ireland's history and politics. It was suggested that understanding the past helps avoiding making mistakes in the future.

It was suggested that politics may be a taboo subject for some young people given the history of Northern Ireland and the tribal nature of politics here. One teacher noted: *We tend to teach about our own history and don't explore issues from the other community.*

Young people recognised the role that schools, and Youth Services can play in promoting politics in a more holistic way and encourage young people to learn about historical and political issues like the Troubles from both standpoints. However, some young people noted that they have limited opportunities to study Government and Politics at school.

A teacher noted that this subject was offered at most schools but was dependent on numbers taking up the offer. Slime young people felt disadvantaged with one young person noting: *Politics was an A-Level subject at my school but very few of us wanted to take it so it wasn't offered.*

Some young people were frustrated at the lack of learning opportunities in this area. They also suggested that it was dangerous that many young people can be ill informed about political issues but then be expected to vote. Young people, it was suggested, without knowledge may be influenced to vote along family lines rather than arrive at an informed decision.

One young person stated: *Politics needs to be talked about more in schools, because not all kids go to youth centres, but everyone has gone to school.*

Another young person picked up on this theme and suggested that extra consideration should be given to more vulnerable young people, including those with special educational needs, so that all young people can be informed about politics and how it impacts on their lives.

Young people suggested that they needed support to participate in the democratic processes. They need to have role models and mentors who can inspire and support them. They also believed that they require effective education and employment opportunities that can enable them to fulfil their potential and contribute to society.

Voting Reform

The young people were keen for the for the voting age in Northern Ireland to be lowered to 16. There was an overwhelming feeling that the current voting age of 18 years old was too old and outdated.

Young people it was noted were the future and that they are sometimes best placed to see what is happening and are agents for change in terms of decision making going forward.

One young person stated: *Young people are not interested because manifestos aren't addressing young people's issues because they can't vote.*

Many felt that there was a need for more awareness around political engagement in Northern Ireland at an earlier age, so that when it comes to voting age, young people understand the political process

and determine for themselves who they want to vote for. One young person reflected: *Issues like learning how to vote and what voting means are so important for young people, yet they can be difficult areas to understand.*

A teacher highlighted that young people should be taught the processes involved in voting and registering to vote and how important it was that young people exercised this democratic right at the earliest opportunity. In 2022 more than 40,000 young people in Northern Ireland were eligible to vote for the first time many of whom had little knowledge or understanding of the process.

Young people studying Government and Politics highlighted that in Scotland the voting age was reduced to 16 for their Assembly elections. One young person noted: *This is a devolved issue, and we should be lobbying our politicians to introduce it here.*

With the legal age of voting in Northern Ireland at 18 years old many young people feel strongly that the voting age should be changed to 16 years old. The NI Youth Forum have advocated for this change and recently launched their *Votes at 16 Campaign* to mark World Democracy Day.

Research suggests that there is a feeling amongst young people generally that the voting age should be lowered to 16 years. This is reflected with 57% of 16-year-olds surveyed in the NI Young Life and Times Survey feeling this way, which comprised of 62% of female and 49% of males.[3]

Hundreds of young people were joined by politicians and the Children's Commissioner at a packed event at NICVA in North Belfast, to show their support and put pressure on the government to change the way democracy works here.

It was stated that there was a strong appetite for reform and that young people can join a political party at 16 but cannot vote for it, they can get married, pay taxes and have a job but still cannot vote.[4]

Research from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum *Young People of the Peace Process Report* highlights that 71% of young people surveyed felt that they should be allowed to vote at 16, and 87% felt that young people can affect change by getting involved in campaigns and activism.[5]

Political Ethos and Ideology

Interestingly, several of the young people felt that the ethos and ideology of some schools can lead to young people becoming one sided and biased in their political beliefs which can subconsciously influence how they vote for depending on which side of the community they came from.

Some young people noted that politics in Northern Ireland for older people was defined by the Troubles. Several young people noted that as they had grown up in the post-Good Friday Agreement era that their political beliefs were not based on religion rather on wider social issues and concerns.

It was noted that young people were more internationalist and inclusive in their views and were worried about environmental and climate issues, child poverty and the wars in Ukraine and Palestine. One young person stated: *Most of us don't care about what religion we are. It is more what we can do to support everyone in society.*

---

[3] https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2020/Political_Attitudes/ of

[4] https://niyf.org/northern-ireland-youth-forum/votes-at-16-2/

[5] https://www.niyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Young-People-of-the-Peace-Process-Summary-Report.pdf

It was highlighted by a few of the contributors that young people vote in line with their family and community tradition, which in turn can potentially lead to ill informed decisions when voting. Young people noted that if schools and youth centres engaged with young people at an earlier age politically and provided an unbiassed understanding of how and the importance of what it means to vote, then young people may be more likely to vote on who they think is best candidate, not who they are told to vote for. One young person stated: *Politics is about ideology not getting stuck in party beliefs.*

Many of the participants believed that this needed to change and that the Youth Service may in a position to reach out and educate young people on politics. One group noted that: *Schools tend to teach one way and be one sided towards politics.*

A teacher however noted that Government and Policy curriculum explored a range of political ideals and believed that young people's nascent political beliefs came from their family or community background.

Some participants expressed concern that early engagement in youth wings of political parties could deprive them of independent thought and lead to polarisation and division as it would not allow them to explore political ideas in a nuanced and critical manner.

Young people it was suggested have high hopes and aspirations for the future, particularly in relation to seeing Northern Ireland move forward to create a more positive and inclusive society for all. Many young people agreed that wanted a more inclusive society where they could share and respect other cultural identities and values.

Young people in Northern Ireland can shape the future in the context of political engagement, but they need to overcome the obstacles and challenges that they face. They need to be empowered and supported society and to be recognised and valued to act as active and positive agents of change.

Young People's Views on Politics (Research)

Research from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2020 shows that 49% of young people aged 18-24 define themselves as neither Unionist nor Nationalist. This suggests that young people are more progressive in their thinking and political identity.

They are also far less likely to identify as *British* than older generations, with 14% doing so compared to 46% of over-65s. Meanwhile, around a third of young people described themselves as *Northern Irish* and a third as *Irish*.[6]

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum report on the peace process revealed that in terms of issues surrounding religion, culture and identity, there was an overwhelming number of young people (82%) indicating that an individual's religious background had no impact on how they would feel about others.[7]

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report into young people's political engagement and interests revealed that limited number of opportunities are available for young people to participate in the political process.

[6] https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2020/

[7] https://www.niyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Young-People-of-the-Peace-Process-Summary-Report.pdf

The report found that in some cases young people could not see any conceivable way for them to take part in politics until they reached 18. Young people feel somewhat powerlessness and frustrated at the lack of political opportunities open to them.[8]

A report commissioned by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum revealed that 62% of 388 young people surveyed aged 16-22 years old who were born after the Good Friday Agreement, agreed and strongly agreed with the view that politicians did not value their views or opinions. 47% of this cohort agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that politics in Northern Ireland has not changed in twenty years.[9]

Key findings from the report found that 76% of young people agreed and strongly agreed that politics in Northern Ireland is defined by the Troubles. Almost half of young people surveyed felt that politicians talk about the past more than the present and the future.

Worryingly under half of the young people surveyed knew how to contact their local politician for help and assistance. More than half of young people (51%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement that they would contact their local politician for help and assistance if needed.[10]

The NIYF 2020 report revealed that 42% of young people would relocate to another country if given the opportunity, and by 31% stating that they would maybe relocate with another 20% stating that they would not move to another country.

One of the most predominant concerns that arise from the report was that 87% of young people were concerned about their futures in Northern Ireland.[11] The young people revealed that mental health was the main social and political issue that interested them, followed by education and the Troubles.

In a survey from the Young Life and Times in 2021, young people were asked what they thought was important for politicians to focus on in Northern Ireland. It revealed that equality and human rights was the top priority at 32%, followed by healthcare including mental health (31%) and then the economy at 16%.[12]

Young people in Northern Ireland have the power to shape the future of their society and to challenge the status quo and the sectarian divisions that still exist. However, they also face many challenges and barriers, such as political disillusionment, lack of representation, and social and economic problems.

According to a report by the British Council, young people in Northern Ireland have little faith in political institutions and are more pessimistic about their country's future than their counterparts in Ireland.[13]

They are also more likely to reject the traditional binary labels of Unionist and Nationalist, and opt for more nuanced and inclusive identities, such as Northern Irish or Irish. They have different priorities and concerns than the current political class, which is still dominated by the legacy of the Troubles and

[8] https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/1859353096.pdf
[9] https://www.niyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Young-People-of-the-Peace-Process-Summary-Report.pdf
[10] https://www.niyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Young-People-of-the-Peace-Process-Summary-Report.pdf
[11] https://www.niyf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Young-People-of-the-Peace-Process-Summary-Report.pdf
[12] https://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/2020_21/Politics/POLPRIO.html
[13] https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/what-do-young-people-in-ireland-and-northern-ireland-expect-for-their-future

the impact of Brexit. The most pressing issues for young people are climate change, mental health, education and human rights.[14]

Young people in Northern Ireland are also more open to cultural diversity and inter-community relations, and engage in activities that transcend sectarian boundaries, such as sports, arts and music.

Research has shown that young people who take part in youth work programmes increased their participation in politics by 12%. This identified political engagement that included petition signing, petition organising, directly contacting politicians, protest and voting, the report states.[15] This instils confidence, allows them to become more empowered and contributes to increased political engagement.

Political Parties engagement with young people in Northern Ireland

As part of this research piece into examining how young people engage and cultivate an interest in politics, we reached out to the main political parties in Norther Ireland to gauge the level of political engagement that exists amongst young people. The Information and Data Team contacted the 6 main Political Parties in Northern Ireland, which included the DUP, UUP, TUV, Sinn Fein, SDLP and the Alliance Party.

Not all political parties responded to our request to meet, with only half the parties responding and 2 of these parties agreeing to meet the team for an informal discussion.

Throughout the discussions there was an overwhelming consensus from the political parties that they all could do more to engage and connect with young people and reach out to non-traditional young voters. It was evident that there was a mixed level of engagement and strategy within the political parties which they applied to encourage young people into politics, with some parties more strategically placed than others.

The parties echoed the importance of young people being involved in politics and see them as key for the future and prosperity of Northern Ireland as well as the future and the voice of their parties, enabling them to play a pivotal role in society in terms of political and social activism.

Many of the political parties see their core age group of young people as being in the 16–25-year-old range with some feeling that the core age group of engagement was 19-20 years old. One of the main barriers they faced in reaching out to children and young people was the issue of safeguarding and child protection issues for under 16 years old, with many of the parties focusing predominantly on the 16–25-year-old.

During the discussions, it was apparent that different levels of engagement existed amongst them, with some parties more advanced than others in reaching out and engaging with young people. Some of the political parties had an informal and formal mentoring programme to help young people become active political members and become members of their mainstream party.

These parties allow young people to attend their political parties' annual conventions and encouraged them to be a part of the decision-making process within the party. This was described as a stepping

[14] https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/northern-ireland-elections-youth-vote/
[15] https://wearencs.com/our-insights

stone into mainstream politics even though the status of formal and informal mentoring varied amongst the parties.

One of the larger Parties explained that they currently had no formalised youth wing to the party while others had well established youth factions. One of the parties clarified that there was no official mentoring process within the political party for young people, however this has been currently explored and developed. They advised that more needed to be done with involving and engaging with young people into the party.

Throughout the interviews, it was apparent that all the political parties were keen to reach out to non-traditional voters and young people, who have no links to the parties, so that parties should not be reliant on family tradition and connections for young people to become involved. In doing so the parties believed that their policies and hard work on the ground would encourage young people to become engaged in their political parties.

There was a strong consensus from all the respondents that they could do more to engage and involve young people in politics. All the parties have had to review their strategies into recruiting and engaging young people, primarily in how they reach out and communicate with them.

Many of the political parties admitted that they can do more to communicate effectively with young people and that they are having to adapt and keep to date with ever changing world of social media. One party in particular spoke about how they have had to utilise social media channels and reach out to young people using Tik Tok.

The parties recognised that were multiple ways in which young people can become involved and engaged in political parties. One of the key entrance points into the parties was by becoming a member of the political parties' youth wing, even though some parties had no formalised youth wing.

Another way political parties engage young people is through university societies. All political parties felt that this one of the most important routes into politics for young people and seen it as a great opportunity to reach out to young people, particularly non-traditional voters.

Another key entry into politics which was mentioned by 2 parties was through young people acquiring a job at a local constituency office, which can lead to further opportunities and open doors for them. The political parties were open to new ideas and approaches to help encourage new young members to join and vote for them.

From the discussions with the parties, it was evident that they have had to adjust and change policy to align and reach out to potential new members. Throughout there was a sense that all the political parties were competing against each other to capture young people into their ranks and policy beliefs. Some parties have had to adapt policy to emerging needs globally and nationally to ensure that they have the maximum reach of young people possible.

Interestingly, there was a mixed response when the political parties were asked about engaging with young people in schools. Several of the parties explained that they have had difficulty in gaining access to schools as they believed that there was a somewhat *cultural overhang in schools*. One of the main political parties explained that they have no problem in engaging with schools and have been invited on a few occasions to do talks and presentations.

Restored Institutions Survey Response from Young People

Our initial discussions with young people took place when the political institutions were in a 2-year hiatus. It was apparent that many of the young people were disengaged and disillusioned regarding politics in Northern Ireland.

The evidence suggested that young people were interested in politics and what happens locally, although many of them were angry and dismayed at the political turmoil and political instability that has existed almost 2 years.

With the reinstatement of the Stormont Institutions in March 2024 the Youth Service Information and Data team decided to get young people's views. An online survey was created, which focused on their views and opinions on political stability and what really matters to them. The online survey sought to gauge their views and opinions on the level of political interest, the stability of the power sharing institutions in NI and importantly what is the most important issues facing young people.

The findings reveal that although young people are interested and care about politics and the political future of Northern Ireland, many of them remain disillusioned and disengaged. The survey results reveal that 54% are interested or very interested in political affairs in NI, with only 7% not at all interested.

It is apparent that although young people have a curiosity and interest in politics the lack of political stability has contributed significantly to the high level of political disengagement and disillusionment amongst young people. One young person stated: *Young People are not taken seriously enough and when engaged it is in a tokenistic way when it comes to politics in NI. Young people are disengaged from politics because their voices are not taken seriously and their ideas and suggestions that are consulted upon by politicians and political organisations are not acted upon.*

When asked how confident the young people were in the stability and sustainability of the power sharing institutions in NI, it revealed that 50% were not at all confident or confident in its future. Only 15% of the young people were very confident (4%) and confident (11%) in the future stability of Stormont.

Importantly, only 7% of the respondents felt that the views of young people were reflected through politics in Northern Ireland. 63% believed the views of young people were not reflected through politics in Northern Ireland, with 30% not knowing. The results show a considerable degree of disengagement from, and a lack of confidence in the political process in Northern Ireland.

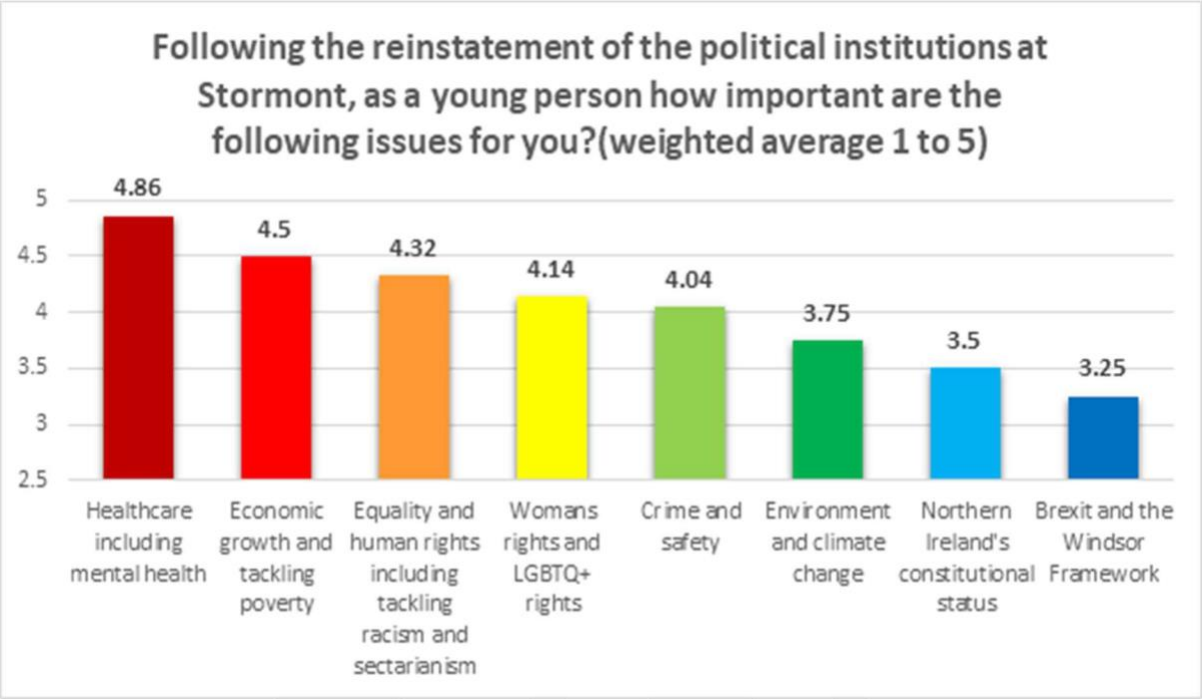
One of the respondents noted*: I believe that young people need to have a more active voice in decisions that directly affect us and the ways which our needs are met for our views to be properly reflected.*

Another young person responded stating: *I don't think we as young people are listened to or taken seriously.*

One young person believed that youth councils were an effective way to express political views, although it is hard to make the government care about what we have to say. Interestingly one young person expressed concerns by stating: *Young people are involved in a lot of consultations about the future of Northern Ireland; however, we feel that when it comes to decision making our points are only taken seriously if it suits the opinions of those making the decisions. We would like to have our opinions heard more and see the outcomes which we felt would be beneficial.*

The young people revealed that the most important issues currently affecting them was healthcare including mental health. This was followed by in order of priority with economic growth and tackling poverty and then equality and human rights.

Notably Brexit and the Windsor Framework and the constitutional status of Northern Ireland were the least important issues to them as the following table reveals.



Politics Recommendations

Voting Reform: Young people should have the right to vote at 16 years old. There is a need for more awareness around political engagement and education in Northern Ireland for children and young people at an earlier age, so that when it comes to voting age, young people understand the political process and can determine for themselves who they want to vote for.

Educated and Informed: Young people need to be educated and informed about politics in an unbiased and youth friendly way. This can be done through the means of the Youth Service developing a youth work curriculum which would include resources, workshops and relatable and engageable content. It is recommended that local MLAs engage with young people in a youth setting to explain their roles and responsibilities, so that young people are aware and understand the impact and roles politicians have in their local communities.

Politician-Youth Interaction: Advocating for increased interaction between politicians and young people, youth workers bridge the gap between decision-makers and the youth. Encouraging politicians to focus on impactful issues that resonate with young people's day-to-day lives fosters a sense of representation and empowerment. Youth workers could organise events and initiatives that facilitate meaningful dialogue and collaboration between politicians and young people.

Alternative Forms of Political Expression: Acknowledging and celebrating alternative forms of political expression, such as art and spoken word, youth workers create platforms for young people to bring non-traditional political expressions into mainstream attention. By fostering a diverse political discourse, they encourage creativity and inclusivity in political engagement.

Voice of young people: It is recommended that the voice of young people is taking seriously and listened by Politicians. The Youth Service can ensure this by informing and educating young people on how to best contact local politicians locally either through their constituency office or suitable means of communication.

Social Action

What is Social Action?

Social action is a term that refers to activities that young people do to make a positive difference to others their community or the environment. [1] It can include volunteering, fundraising, campaigning, or supporting peers. Social action can take place in a range of contexts and can mean formal or informal activities.

Social action is not only beneficial for the communities and causes that young people care about, but also for their own personal, social, and political development. Social action is an important aspect of youth work and demonstrates that youth workers have a key role in supporting young people to engage in social action.[16]

Youth workers can provide spaces for young people to express their views, concerns and aspirations and help young people design and implement their own social action projects.

Whilst social action and social enterprise can be seen to follow similar models, they are different. A social enterprise is a business and just like any other business is there to make a profit. What it does with its profits is what makes it different from the traditional business model, as any surplus is used for social good to benefit society or the environment.[17] Social enterprises are seen to be innovative and self-sustainable that create long lasting impact.

Whereas social action is a collective effort or individuals that come together to address specific issues within society or advocate for change to empower their local communities. This can be done through various means and usually in short-term by raising awareness or giving direct action to address arising and immediate problems.

Social action is generally dependent on external support, including funding or stakeholders with pre-existing knowledge and can be done through various means such as, protests, volunteering, rallies, community events and campaigns.[18]

Setting up and running a social enterprise is another opportunity within Youth Services to give young people the chance to develop their understanding of issues within their local communities and to gain skills and knowledge that they would not normally get in formal education.

Benefits of Social Action

Social action has the potential for young people to improve inter-generational relationships and community bonds. It enables young people to develop as a person and to make a positive difference to others, their communities and the environment. Social Action can translate in many forms in how young people can take practical action to make a positive difference through formal or informal activities, which include volunteering, fundraising, campaigning or supporting peers.

---

[16] https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/youth-social-action-uk-2015

[17] https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/all-about-social-enterprise/

[18] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/centre-for-social-action/centre-for-social-action

Youth Social Action projects bring young people from all backgrounds together to help improve their lives and tackle problems that they and their communities are facing. It allows them to take positive actions to improve their home, school, local community and society which can all make a difference.[19]

Social Action initiatives allow young people to positively contribute to their society and communities in a way that benefits themselves and others within that community. It brings young people from different backgrounds together to make positive change for all and enables them to become leaders and positive role members in society, empowering them to stand up, make a difference and be a part of the decision-making process.

Social Action initiatives have many benefits for the young people who lead them as well as the beneficiaries of the communities they enhance. Findings by *Ipsos Mori,* which surveyed more than a 1,000 adult beneficiaries of youth social action activities, revealed that three quarters considered the social action projects they experienced to be *very worthwhile*, and 80% noted that they felt prouder of their local area as a result of the social action activities being carried out by young people.[20]

The report highlighted that in most cases, social action led to increased interactions between adult beneficiaries and the young people carrying out these activities and that in most cases improved their opinion of what young people bring to their local communities.

Young People's Views on Social Action

Importance of Sustainability, Longevity and Funding

It was apparent that many young people felt that social action projects do not have the support in terms of longevity and sustainability that it requires to be successful and impactful.

It was recognised by the young people that social action does not have the standing it deserves within the Youth Service, particularly in terms of priority, budget and how it is embedded and delivered through the youth work curriculum. Young people noted that as it is primarily seen as a reactionary measure to keep young people busy.

Interestingly, the young people highlighted the importance of ensuring purposeful planning and development of social action initiatives to ensure a long-lasting sustainable legacy, guaranteeing that the programmes are just not ad hoc initiatives like litter picks just to utilise budgets and keep young people occupied.

There was a consensus from young people that for this to work, they need to be targeted at an earlier age, (12-14 years old), to ensure they are engaged and embedded into social action programmes and beliefs and that they are empowered, educated and included at an early age.

The subject of *litter picking* was also addressed. The young people noted that litter picks have a short-term social impact. The value of a progressive impact was questioned, and it was recognised that staff could implement longer lasting and impactful social action projects for young people. One youth

[19] https://www.iwill.org.uk/bridging-divides-by-showcasing-youth-social-action/#:~:text=When%20young%20people%20take%20part%20in%20high%20quality,Young%20people%20develop%20their%20character%20and%20confidence.%20

[20] https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/youth-social-action-brings-communities-together-study-finds

worker questioned their purpose and how they aligned to youth work values. One young person noted: H*ow do we educate people that social action should have a lasting impact?*

Young people believed that there is a need for a more robust strategic approach in schools and youth centres with regards long term projects and initiatives that support and address issues around the environment and climate change. One young person noted: *We need to take part in social action projects that we have an interest in and help co-design.*

Young people hope that by taking account of their interests, the bigger picture regarding long lasting and sustainable environment and climate change initiatives or other political and community initiatives. A teacher noted: *For positive engagement they need to have an interest and belief that they can make a difference that is long-lasting.*

A young person stated: *Social action should be focused on longevity. A social action that has an impact for weeks, months, or even years can also lead to further improvements in other areas.*

It was also suggested that if time and resources were being dedicated to social action then they should be aimed at initiatives that have the biggest impact over time ensuring therefore efficiency of resource expenditure and maximising impact.

A youth worker outlined how she had worked with a group of young people who had identified sexual harassment of young people as an issue. The group created resources in partnership with Nexus, a sexual abuse charity in Northern Ireland, the group created an animation that was launched with the Minister for Justice. She stated: *This is an example of positive social action where young people can take the initiative and help bring about awareness and influence policy.*

“” Young people recognised that social action projects should be planned, viable and carefully considered with stakeholder support. One young person noted: *Social action needs to be sustainable and must be considered from the viewpoint of the future.*

Another young person welcomed social action initiatives but said that planning should consider: I*s this needed, and will this social action be valuable to making improvements?*

One of the young people recognised that if society is to benefit from long-term interventions and projects that investment in young people was essential. He explained: *We need to educate and train our younger generation to ensure lasting impact and momentum, start with the young children, the base.*

This young person noted it is good to help the vulnerable members of society like the homeless but described how sustained efforts must be in place for purposeful impact. It was noted: *Social action projects that are short-term tick box initiatives are a quick fix and not sustainable and impactful!*

Empowerment, Growth and Happiness

Young people spoke about the importance of social action programmes and the impact they made, not only to their lives but the lives of others. These initiatives allowed them to make a difference and give back to the community, whilst empowering themselves and the people around them.

Young people recognised that social action could lead to meaningful change in communities, be inclusive and address issues that really matter to them. One young person noted: *We learnt about ourselves and our community and helped support our local area.*

The young people recognised how the Youth Service has been at the forefront of many social action initiatives which has helped develop young people's skills, transform their character and grow their sense of well-being.

Some believed that more could be done to develop and improve these social action initiatives so that they are sustainable, economical and impactful for young people and their communities. One young person noted: *We would need extra help and support to get social action projects off the ground.*

A youth worker suggested that participating in social action gave young people a sense of identity, pride and feeling valued in their local communities. She noted: *Young people have made a valuable contribution to our area, and they are respected more now than they had been.*

Reaching Out, Inclusion and Educating

The conversation also touched upon the need for platforms where younger individuals, specifically those aged 14-18, can voice their ideas and concerns. This reflects a desire for greater inclusion and participation in decision-making processes, particularly within educational settings where young people spend most of their time.

One of the young people suggested: *There needs to be conversations for younger young people (14–18-year-olds) about how they can take what they have learned at camps and residentials and turn their learning into action.*

It was reported that some young people feel they cannot get involved in social issues until they are 18 as they may not be taken seriously. However, one young person noted: *They need a platform to express their ideas.* It was explained that if a young person is passionate about a topic, they should be encouraged to pursue this.

One young person with a youth politics background and had an interest in youth participation noted: *In my experience young people don't always equate social action to politics, in fact they say things like 'I'm not interested in politics' or 'politics is boring'.* He continued: *Young people are reluctant to use their voice when politics and social action overlap, our past here means that sometimes politics is a taboo subject.*

Young people advocated for more encouragement to engage and to speak up. One young person noted: *If young people don't know how to use their voice, then they are disenfranchised and won't speak out about social issues.*

It was also noted that schools were a place where young people could be encouraged to take part in social action projects that were meaningful, sustainable and had a long-term impact. One teacher noted that a group of young people in her school initiated a social action project which targeted poverty in the local area. She noted: *This initiative was had a positive impact on local families and the wider community.*

One young person expressed their desire to see social action and awareness to be developed at a systemic level. He stated: *I know lots of young people who are passionate about issues but just don't know how to take part, if this idea of social action was embedded in the curriculum it can be used alongside more traditional measures of educational attainment.*

Young people wanted to see greater opportunities for social action and empowerment within the education system so that young people can feel valued and have the capacity to make a difference.

A youth worker detailed how they would like to see more guidance around the subject. He welcomed the ongoing developments in the Youth Service in relation to social action and social enterprise, but highlighted concerns that some youth workers require more training in this area to help young people realise their goals.

One young person noted that social action isn't necessarily about embarking on a brand-new innovation but rather building on established actions. It was also noted that existing initiatives may lack value and be tokenistic.

Young Peoples response to what Social Action means to them.



Social Action Working Models

Young Social Innovators, Ireland

Young Social Innovators is a non-profit organisation that empowers young people to use their talents, insights, passion and creativity to come up with innovative solutions to social challenges. They support young people through fun and engaging programmes that enable them to create team-based action-projects on issues they care about, putting their innovative ideas into action to bring about positive social change for the benefit of people, communities and the environment.[21]

Young Social Innovators supports 15,000 young people each year to bring about positive change in their communities and to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals https://sdgs.un.org/goals through Young Social Innovators.

[21] About | Young Social Innovators (YSI) - Young Social Innovators Changing the World for Good

The organisation offers training and resources to educators in schools and Youthreach centres and provides them with everything needed to facilitate social innovation projects with young people, and platforms and events provide important mechanisms through which young people's ideas can be shared and their voices heard.[22]

The vision of the organisation is to ensure that young people feel inspired, empowered and equipped to change the world for good. The Mission is to provide social innovation education that empowers young people to take action on social issues.

The Core Values of Young Social Innovators Ireland are:

- Social Justice.
- Sustainable Development.
- Fairness and Inclusion.
- Equality and Respect.

Importantly, Young Social Innovators allows young people to explore and understand their role as active local and global citizens working together to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the creation of a fairer more sustainable world. They have been used by thousands of educators to facilitate action-based learning with young people.

Unloc – Developing Young Potential

Unloc is a leading education non-profit organisation that help schools, colleges and organisations inspire and empower young people to be changemakers through bespoke and innovative programmes in entrepreneurship, leadership, career pathways and student voice. They work towards their mission by delivering inspiring educational programmes in our growing network of schools and colleges. The targeted audience is primary, secondary and Further Education.

Their mission is to empower young people to be innovative changemakers who seek to build stronger communities and sustainable businesses. They develop young people's skills, enhance their potential and boost their determination to succeed.[23]

Social Action – Outcomes, Impact and Engagement

Over the last six months, the Education Authority Youth Service's Social Impact Officer has been meeting internally and externally with different groups to gain an understanding of the current outlook of social action within Youth Services and the community and voluntary sector and to highlight the important outcomes for young people participating. Outcomes highlighted were as follows:

- Personal development

Social action enhances young people's confidence and resilience. It improves key skills including communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills. Engaging in social action cultivates a sense of responsibility and belonging and allows young people to effect positive change and take responsibility for shaping the world around them through being proactive in their local communities.

[22] About | Young Social Innovators (YSI) - Young Social Innovators Changing the World for Good
[23] About Us – Unloc

- Social development

Social action develops young people's empathy, compassion and respect by increasing their awareness of social and environmental issues. Social action creates opportunities for young people to interact and collaborate with diverse groups of people, fostering inclusivity, challenging stereotypes and building bridges across divides.

Young people become involved in social action projects for many reasons and the way they engage with them can enhance their:

- **Personal experience:** Young people are more aware of issues that affect them personally or someone they know or care about. Young people can be inspired to act on things to support others.
- **Moral values:** Young people can feel a sense of duty and responsibility to get involved in social action. Young people with a strong moral compass will do what they feel is right, fair and good. Young people who participate from a moral perspective may do so as they wish to see the world in a certain way and want to be part of that becoming a reality. They can also be influenced by family, religion, education, culture and more.
- **Social and political influence:** Young people are heavily influenced by those around them, including family, peers, celebrities and role models. They are more likely to take part in social action if they see others doing it or if they are supported to do so.
- **Personal benefits:** If young people see social action to benefit themselves through skill development, gaining experience or something to add to the cv, they are more likely to engage. They may also seek a reward or recognition for taking part. Personal benefits can be a motivator for young people to start or continue their social action, but also to enjoy and value it.

Youth workers can support young people through social action by:

- **Empowering young people to lead**: Empowering young people to take the lead means giving them the autonomy to drive social action initiatives according to their own needs, interests, and perspectives. One young person noted: S*ocial action is about empowering the community and making a difference.* When young people are educated and informed, they feel more empowered and confident allowing them to make informed decisions that improve their lives.

- **Encouraging impactful actions**: Encouraging young people to make a difference involves helping them understand the potential impact of their actions on the broader community or cause that they are passionate about. The young people spoke of how importance of positive mindsets lead to positive actions. One young person stated that social action: *Is about impacting mindsets.* Another young person noted*: Social action is about identifying an issue and acting.*

- **Challenging young people to dream big**: Challenging young people to dream big means encouraging them to set ambitious goals for their social action projects while also ensuring that the process remains enjoyable and fulfilling. One young person described social action as *being innovative,* while another viewed it as a *passion.*

- **Making action accessible to all**: Making social action accessible to all requires integrating opportunities for involvement into the fabric of young people's lives. Youth workers can create

pathways for engagement that cater to diverse interests, abilities, and backgrounds. During the focus group discussion many of the young people supported the need for social action initiatives to be inclusive and include younger people, so that they are embedded into the social action way of thinking and initiatives. One young person noted: *It is important that we make inclusive decisions for all children and young people.*

- **Supporting progressive involvement**: Supporting young people in their social action journey means helping them see the bigger picture and the long-term impact of their efforts. Youth workers can provide ongoing guidance, mentorship, and opportunities for growth as young people navigate their involvement in social action. One young person stated: S*ocial action is about changing our society.*

- **Promoting reflection and growth**: Celebrating achievements and encouraging growth involves recognising and valuing young people's contributions to social action initiatives while also promoting a culture of continuous learning and improvement. A young person remarked that social action *is about changemaking and developing a community.*

Social action is an increasingly important aspect of youth work, as it supports the personal, social, and political development of young people and their communities.

Youth workers have a key role in supporting young people to engage in social action, and by providing them with an opportunity, support, guidance, information, and advocacy to follow their passions. Fundamentally social action can empower young people to make a positive difference in the world, and to become active and responsible citizens.

Social Action Recommendations

Longevity and Sustainability: The Youth Service should ensure that social action programmes are planned and developed purposefully to ensure they are long lasting, sustainable programmes that are impactful.

Training – The Youth Service should adopt a train the trainer approach to support and enhance the knowledge of youth workers to deliver effective and impactful social action projects in line with the sustainable development goals.

Opportunity – The Youth Service should provide an opportunity for all young people to participate in a social action project. Although many youth workers already promote positive social action in their local areas, it is important to educate young people on the long-term impact their actions can have, for themselves and their local communities. It is recommended that the Youth Service sees the impact of their investment through the return on social investment which can be seen through the skill development of young people and the impact in localities.

Promotion of social action projects – It is recommended that youth workers promote and recognise the impact social action projects that their young people lead and are involved in. Youth workers can do this through promotion on regional pages and highlighting important key milestones and events to the Stakeholder Engagement Officer for promotion on the main Education Authority Youth Service social media accounts and website. Youth workers can also promote the social action projects to local

stakeholders including the local council, whereby young people can be highlighted for creating an impact in their local communities.

Social Action Awards – Youth Service could organise an annual celebration event to highlight impactful social action projects across Northern Ireland.

Collaborative working – Engaging with local external stakeholders to share knowledge, resources and understanding of social action projects. Working with organisations who specialise in social action initiatives to support our youth workers to deliver good quality projects.

Conclusion

Politics in Northern Ireland has only recently returned to normal. For many young people, however the previous two years of stagnation has left them feeling frustrated and resentful.

Young people recognised that despite feeling frustrated and overlooked they are still impacted by political issues and decisions and would like their voices heard in decisions that are made that affect them.

Young people also believe that their lack of political engagement in terms of voting disqualifies them from being part of the democratic process and ensures that their voices are silent on issues that will impact them.

It is also evident that young people want their pollical representatives to engage with them more meaningfully and listen to and respect what they have to say.

Young people also want to see a Northern Irish society that moves away from the past and is forward thinking representing the views of all regardless of religion and ethnicity.

Young people indicated that social action was an important vehicle for them to participate in active citizenship. This they reported enhanced their skills but also gave them opportunities to help their local communities.

Social action projects empowered young people to think locally, nationally and globally providing them with opportunities to challenge societal norms and think independently and also become engaged in proactive democratic processes.

Young people indicated that politics did not always mean to them what it did to adults and were concerned that they were being ignored at a political level. In a practical sense some argued that they expressed their views better through social action.

Appendix 1

Case Study TBUC (Social Action) – Individual Journey

Darragh is an 18-year-old female who has never participated in any youth provision before. Darragh has made fundamental changes, which has been a result of the TBUC (3) Lead Project. This Case Study will focus on Darragh's Personal & Social Development, her attitude and change towards others from different community backgrounds than her own and involvement within her local community.

Darragh identifies as a nationalist from a catholic community. She holds strong community beliefs and has had little opportunity to meet or engage with individuals from the 'other community'. Darragh has a unique style and expresses this through her fashion.

TBUC has provided Darragh with the opportunity to meet young people from different community backgrounds. Darragh had never explored Good Relations and found this an interesting aspect of the project. Darragh enjoyed learning LBGTQIA+ and especially listening to guest speakers from the Theatre of Witness –their personal experiences through the Troubles.

Throughout the project Darragh was one of the highest attenders and participated fully each week. Darragh has completed her OCN Level 1 in Understanding Equality & Diversity. Through these workshops, Darragh had open conversations with individuals in the group around her views, opinions, and personal experiences with the 'other community' At first it was hard for Darragh to understand others point of view, but as the weeks progressed and her learning and understanding developed, she began to show empathy and respect towards individuals within the group who were from the 'other community'.

Darragh stated 'I enjoyed doing different games and activities when doing my booklet. I was scared the OCN was going to be like school, but it felt nothing like school as it is very relaxed, and it was easier to understand'.

Darragh has excelled and developed her leadership skills. Staff provided Darragh with opportunities she had never had before and offered empowerment. At the beginning of the programme, Darragh was very apprehensive about the Social Action element of the Project. She openly highlighted that she had a few concerns around planning and delivering a Good Relations Conference to other young people, because she lacked in confidence.

Once Social Action came about Darragh surprised herself, her capability and performance throughout was exceptional. Darragh has developed many new skills as a young leader including leadership, organisation, social skills, and communication.

Darragh feels she has learned new skills & qualities, she said 'I have never planned or participated in any leadership things before, I have learnt what skills it takes having been a leader through the Good Relation Conference. I have also developed skills around organisation and time keeping". Darragh's confidence and self-esteem has increased alongside her social and interpersonal skills. Darragh has now become more involved in her local community, she hopes to continue her development as a young leader and looks forward to her future.

Appendix 2

Case Study Horizons (Social Action)

Throughout the Horizons project funded under the Fairstart programme, the young people engaged in a 2-year programme and in year one of it they completed a social action project. Over this project 21 differing groups engaged in running a social action project, led by young people and impacting issues that were important to them in their own local areas. All the groups had differing projects but had a massive impact throughout Northern Ireland.

Over the course of the social action element of the programme, young people delivered 4,200 hours of volunteering, 14 of the 21 projects fundraised for a local project and/or charity and this generated £48,954 on return of social investment. The young people decided what social action projects they wanted to do based on their own experiences and issues in their local community. Throughout the project they looked at issues globally, nationally, regionally and locally.

The groups worked together to organise events, created campaigns, coordinated volunteering and much more. Projects included: transition programmes supporting primary sevens, environmental awareness projects, projects to support local senior citizens and interface art displays. Groups fundraised for several local projects and/or charities, these were all chosen by the group as someone had a connection or there was a local need for donations, some charities included: The Dogs Trust, Air Ambulance NI, Alternative Enterprises Larne (AEL) and Light House.

Recommendations Action Plan

Recommendation	Action Required
Ensuring longevity and sustainability of social action. It is important that the Youth Service plans and develops social action programmes to guarantee their enduring and impactful sustainability.	• Youth Service will plan initiatives, engage stakeholders, provide capacity building for youth workers, evaluation systems, allocate sufficient resources, build partnerships, and recognise and celebrate achievements. These actions will enable the Youth Service to develop innovative programmes that have enduring positive effects on young people and their communities.
Person/ Team Responsible	Progress Indicators
Senior Youth Officers and Regional Team leads. Social Impact Officer.	Number of social action projects developed and delivered. Number of young people involved. Improved relationships with others. Increased self-confidence and worth. Increased feelings of value and empowerment. Increased sense of community.

Recommendation	Action Required
The Youth Service will develop a "Train the Trainer" approach to empower and enhance the skills of youth workers. This training method will equip them with the knowledge and tools necessary to effectively deliver social action projects aligned with the sustainable development goals.	• The Youth Service can implement a train-the-trainer approach by developing comprehensive training programmes, conducting train-the-trainer workshops, providing resources and materials, offering ongoing support and mentorship, and implementing evaluation and feedback mechanisms. This will empower youth workers to effectively deliver social action projects aligned to the sustainable development goals.
Person/ Team Responsible Training team. Social Impact officer.	Progress Indicators Number of training sessions delivered. Number of youth workers and volunteers trained. Improved competencies and skills. Improved skills, knowledge and networks to identify and work towards aspirations and goals. Improved motivation.

Recommendation	Action Required
The Youth Service will ensure that all young people can participate in social action projects. The Youth Service will measure the impact through the return on social investment, evident in the skill development of young people and the positive effects seen in local communities.	• Youth Service will develop inclusive social action programmes and raise awareness among young people about the benefits of social action. • Skill development opportunities will be developed. • Partnerships with local organisations and key stakeholders will be developed and maintained. • Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms will be developed. • The contributions of young people will be recognised and celebrated.
Person/ Team Responsible Senior Youth Officers and Regional Team leads. Social Impact Officer.	Progress Indicators Increased active citizenship. Improved participation. A renewed sense of belonging to local community. Increased confidence about their place in the local community. Increased resilience and independence. Increased partnerships. Evaluation systems are developed and introduced.

Recommendation	Action Required
Youth workers will promote and acknowledge the impact of social action projects led by young people. This will be achieved through promotion on regional platforms, highlighting milestones and events to the Stakeholder Engagement Officer for promotion on official Youth Service social media platforms and website. Youth workers will promote these projects to local stakeholders, including councils and other key stakeholders, highlighting the positive impact young people are making in their communities.	• Actively promoting projects on regional platforms such as community newsletters and local newspapers, as well as engaging with social media groups to raise awareness and garner support. • Identify and highlight important milestones and upcoming events related to these projects to the Stakeholder Engagement Officer for promotion on official Youth Service social media platforms and the website. • Youth workers will actively engage with local stakeholders, including the council and community leaders, to highlight the positive impact young people are making in their communities through these projects. • Collaborate with other youth workers and organisations to promote achievements and increase visibility and support for these initiatives.

Person/ Team Responsible Senior Youth Officers and regional Team leads. Social Impact Officer. Stakeholder Engagement officer.	Progress Indicators Increased communications. Increased collaboration and partnership working. Increased sense of community. Greater awareness of young people's contributions to local communities.
Recommendation	Action Required
Youth Service will organise an annual celebration event identifying impactful social action projects across Northern Ireland through the implementation of Social Action Awards.	• Youth Service will plan a regional event, establish transparent selection criteria and conduct extensive outreach to encourage diverse submissions. • A diverse judging panel will evaluate submissions, and relevant award categories will be defined. • The ceremony will be planned in collaboration with local partners and young people. • Post-event feedback will define future events.
Person/ Team Responsible Youth Workers. Social Impact Officer. Stakeholder Engagement Officer.	Progress Indicators Celebration event planned and delivered. Increased communication. Increased collaboration and partnership working.

Recommendation	Action Required
Raise awareness and understanding of the political processes in Northern Ireland ensuring that young people can make informed decisions.	• Youth Service will increase awareness of political issues and engagement among young people through workshops, facilitating discussions with local politicians and liaising with other key stakeholders. • Youth Services will support young people to understand different political viewpoints and issues creating campaigns, providing accessible resources and fostering supportive environments for dialogue.
Person/ Team Responsible Curriculum Team International Team. Information and Data Team. Senior Youth Officers and regional Team leads.	Progress Indicators Increased active citizenship. Improved relationships with others, including those from a different background. Positive changes in attitude and behaviour. Better understanding of their communities and the challenges they face.