Regional Assessment of Need 2026 - 2029

# Public Consultation Report

Education Authority | Youth Service

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# Executive Summary

The Regional Assessment of Need report was subject to a public consultation which opened on 10 March 2025 and closed on 6 May 2025. The public consultation provided individuals and groups with an opportunity to give a comprehensive and organised response, addressing specific concerns, highlighting areas of agreement and determining or proposing changes that they thought were relevant. It focused specifically on:

- The findings as identified by children and young people.
- The summary of conclusion contained within the Regional Assessment of Need.
- The proposed recommendations for planning for Youth Services.

From the responses the Youth Service determined that:

- 118 individual responses.
- 44 submissions from organisations including two formal written responses.
- 81% of responses agreed with the findings identified by children and young people.
- 86% agreed with the summary of conclusions.
- 89% agreed with the proposed recommendations for planning.

Most responses were supportive of the findings outlined in the Regional Assessment of Need and agreed with the direction of planning that the Education Authority were proposing. The responses reiterated the importance of online safety, vaping, drug and alcohol misuse, and poverty, including food poverty and the harm this was having on children and young people and their families.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing were also raised as concerns and how they were linked across all strategic themes within the document, although respondents recognised that these had been addressed in the report.

Issues around rurality and the challenges faced by rural children and young people were also highlighted. Many of the issues raised in the feedback, such as transport and poor broadband, are beyond the control of the Education Authority.

Whilst some individuals and organisations disagreed with or criticised certain aspects of the Regional Assessment of Need and its processes their feedback tended to focus on personal or organisational opinions or localised issues and lacked detail on the issues, needs or challenges facing children and young people or how these could be meaningfully addressed. It should be noted that feedback on local issues will be addressed in Local Assessments of Need.

It was also noted by several organisations that they did not recognise some of the findings contained in the report, particularly around Environment and Climate and mental health. However, the report is based on how children and young people responded to the survey and what they told us in focus groups.

Other organisations used the consultation to express their displeasure that they had limited opportunities to participate in the Regional Assessment of Need process. The Education Authority promoted both surveys and focus groups widely using social media and emailing organisations directly and made a range of materials available to support and facilitate the process.

The Education Authority appreciates the time and commitment that individuals and organisations took to respond to the Public Consultation and the feedback that they have provided.

# 1. Introduction & Background

1.1 The Regional Assessment of Need is the process by which the Education Authority identify the priority needs of children and young people by listening to their voice and considering facts about their lived experiences.

1.2 This allows us to prioritise key actions to support children and young people and allocate resources for youth work delivery throughout Northern Ireland.

1.3 Priorities for Youth 2013 notes:

- 2.19 – Strategic planning of Youth Services…. Will be in response to the assessed need for a youth work intervention.
- 4.2 – Youth work has an important role to play in raising standards in education. To achieve this, youth work should be planned and delivered in response to the addressed need of a youth work intervention.
- 4.6 – Planning, funding and the delivery of youth work will be based on the EA composite (local and regional) assessment of need and will support requirements linked to the DE key priorities at local, sub-regional and regional level.

1.4 The report will help determine the delivery of youth work in line with the Education Authority's statutory duty and the Department of Education's Youth Work Policy by considering the direct voice of children and young people, relevant research, an analysis of key statistical data and trends and wider inputs from other key stakeholders, such as youth work organisations and parents.

1.5 The key objective of the assessment of need is to establish the level of need for youth service provision for all children and young people aged 4-25 years in Northern Ireland.

1.6 The Department of Education holds the responsibility for the delivery of the Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030. The Education Authority used the eight high level outcomes to improve the lives of children and young people from this strategy as the basis of the Regional Assessment of Need. These include:

- Children and young people and physically and mentally healthy. (Health and Wellbeing).
- Children and young people enjoy play and leisure. (Play, Hobbies and Interests).
- Children and young people learn and achieve. (Education).
- Children and young people live in safety and stability. (Safety).
- Children and young people experience (a) economic and (b) environmental wellbeing. (Your Future).
- Children and young people make a positive contribution to society. (Citizenship).
- Children and young people live in a society that respects their rights. (Your Rights).
- Children and young people live in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted. (Equality).

# 2. Methodology

2.1 A key action following completion of the report was to provide individuals and groups with an opportunity to give a comprehensive and organised response, addressing specific concerns, highlighting areas of agreement and determining or proposing changes that they thought were relevant to the report.

2.2 The Education Authority Youth Service created a Microsoft form which was promoted on social media encouraging individuals and organisations to respond.

2.3 The Education Authority Communications team promoted it on social media and posted it on the Education Authority website.

2.4 An email was also sent to 1,800 registered Voluntary youth organisations encouraging them to contribute.

2.5 The Public Consultation was subject to an equality screening process before it was distributed for completion.

2.6 The Public Consultation asked respondents to consider three key areas: Findings, summary of conclusions and recommendations for planning. The following questions were asked:

- Do you agree with the findings identified by children and young people in the document?
- Are there specific considerations you think we should be aware of in relation to this?
- Do you agree with the identified summary of conclusions?
- Are there specific considerations you think we should be aware of in relation to this?
- Do you agree with our proposed recommendations for planning?
- Are there specific considerations you think we should be aware of in relation to this?

2.7 Comments from the individuals were analysed. Whilst some key themes emerged the focus tended to be on how the Regional Assessment of Need would impact on local issues and concerns.

2.8 The final report has been amended to include some of the recommendations that were provided through the public consultation.

# 3. Individual Responses

3.1 There were 118 responses from individuals to the public consultation. Eighty-two (70%) of which were from children and young people. Of these, forty-three were girls, thirty-six were boys, one non-binary and two preferred not to say.

3.2 Thirty-six adults responded as individuals. Of these, twenty-one were female, ten were male and five preferred not to say.

3.3 The responses from individuals were supportive of the findings outlined in the Regional Assessment of Need and agreed with the direction of planning that the Education Authority were proposing. Ninety-three of all respondents (79%) agreed with the children and young people's findings, 101 (86%) agreed with the summary of conclusions and 103 (87%) agreed with the recommendations for planning.

3.4 In relation to the children and young people's findings, some specific considerations were raised as concerns and how they were multifaceted and linked across all strategic themes. These included rurality, Special Educational Needs and a Disability, mental health and how children and young people prioritised each strategic theme as important to them.

3.5 Comments relating to rural issues noted that rural areas were underrepresented and that young people from rural communities did not have opportunities to participate and felt socially isolated. Comments included:

- The rural areas are extremely underrepresented.
- How many rural young people or rural clubs outside of city limits were asked to participate?
- Rural young people and young people facing social and economic deprivation.

3.6 The Education Authority note that the survey and focus groups were open for all children and young people to participate, however, it should be recognised that participation was voluntary. The Education Authority encouraged all children and young people to participate and 30% of all survey respondents identified that they lived in rural communities. Other local issues identified will be considered in the local assessments of need and future delivery plans.

3.7 Comments relating to disability and mental health suggested that their needs were complex and not always recognised and supported. It was noted that they did not always feel included and wanted more opportunities to participate and feel included. Others suggested that bespoke arrangements should be made to support those with disabilities. Comments included:

- Usually, people mention their mental health or health and wellbeing. I think that's the main issue amongst young people.

- Although Mental Health and Wellbeing isn't considered directly as high as other outcomes they do inextricably link and impact the ability to be able to function and reach the other aspirations.

3.8 The Education Authority recognise that the challenges facing children and young people are complex, multifaceted and often inter-linked, especially in terms of physical and mental health. It would contend that planning to meet the needs of all vulnerable children and young people are included in the document.

3.9 Some individuals disagreed with how the children and young people had prioritised the strategic themes. Individuals ranked them in the order that they thought was most important and this was based on their opinion. Comments included:

- I'm not worried about climate change; I think health and wellbeing is the most important.
- I think Health and wellbeing is the most important.
- As a young person mental health and wellbeing but also our rights should be worried about more.

3.10 The Education Authority note that the strategic themes were prioritised, and the report is based on what children and young people told us through surveys, focus groups and other engagements.

3.11 In relation to the summary of conclusions, most of the comments were supportive of the Regional Assessment of Need and the summary of conclusions. Some respondents wanted to acknowledge the importance of rural youth provision and having a greater Youth Service involvement in schools. Others welcomed the conclusions and made comments that were specific to local areas or centres.

3.12 The Education Authority welcome these comments and note that these issues will be identified in the Local Assessments of Need and addressed in Local Youth Development Plans.

3.13 In terms of the proposed recommendations for planning, most respondents were supportive of this and there were very few specific comments for consideration. The comments generally focused on local issues including online safety, vaping, and drug and alcohol misuse, whilst recognising that these issues were already included in the document.

3.14 The Education Authority welcomes these responses and note that local issues will be identified in the Local Assessments of Need and addressed in Local Youth Development Plans

# 4. Organisation Responses

4.1 There were forty-four submissions from organisations including two formal written responses. A list of all organisations that responded can be found in Appendix 1.

4.2 The responses from organisations were supportive of the findings outlined in the Regional Assessment of Need and agreed with the direction of planning that the Education Authority was proposing. Thirty-seven of all respondents (84%) agreed with the children and young people's findings, thirty-nine (89%) agreed with the summary of conclusions and forty-one (93%) agreed with the recommendations for planning.

4.3 Organisations were generally supportive of the findings from the children and young people contained in the document.

4.4 Several groups noted that the information gathered from focus groups was largely derived from the statutory sector, although all Community and Voluntary Organisations and other interested organisations were encouraged to respond.

4.5 The Education Authority would contend that the Community and Voluntary sector were therefore afforded every opportunity and provided with materials to facilitate focus groups with young people. Whilst the Education Authority agree that broader representation may have provided richer data and information, if the Community and Voluntary sector chose not to engage then the voices of the children and young people they represent will not be heard or included in this document.

4.6 One organisation noted that the questions in the survey were skewed towards obtaining certain answers and prompted young people with specific answers. It was also suggested that some questions were inherently shame-based.

4.7 The Education Authority does not recognise that the questions were skewed, and the survey was piloted with young people before distribution.

4.8 Several groups suggested that they did not recognise the prioritisation of the strategic themes.

4.9 However, the Education Authority would contend that this is a regional report based on what children and young people told us through surveys, focus groups and other engagements and the prioritisation directly links to the feedback. Local issues will be identified through Local Assessments of Need and addressed in Local Youth Development Plans.

4.10 It was also suggested that some issues, including community tension, paramilitarism, interface communities and criminal gangs were not addressed in the report.

4.11 The Education Authority note that the needs identified were based on what the children

and young people told us. The Education Authority recognises the influence and control of paramilitaries, criminal gangs and challenges facing young people living at interface areas and has programmes of support in place to address these issues through resources provided from external sources. Local needs and issues will be identified through Local Assessments of Need and addressed in Local Youth Development Plans.

4.12 Organisations did highlight other key issues that continue to affect children and young people, including poverty, mental health and the importance of early intervention. They did however recognise that these issues had been highlighted within the document.

4.13 The Education Authority Youth Service recognise that the challenges facing children and young are complex, multifaceted and often inter-linked, especially in terms of the eight strategic themes linked to the Children and Young People Strategy Outcomes Framework.

4.14 Organisations were generally supportive with the identified summary of conclusions contained in the document.

4.15 Most groups recognised the importance of creating safe and inclusive spaces identified in the report and the importance of providing greater access to Youth Services where and when they are needed most.

4.16 Poverty and food hunger were also highlighted as key areas for concern and identified issues that were specific to local areas and require a wider government response than that of youth services.

4.17 The Education Authority note that local issues will be identified in the Local Assessments of Need and addressed in Local Youth Development Plans.

4.18 Five groups disagreed with the conclusions. One group was dismayed that only the Education Authority Assessment of Need was used to determine service provision. One group had issues with the use of language and how themes were prioritised. One group noted that if themes were prioritised in order, then they should be given greater prominence in the conclusion.

4.19 The Education Authority welcomes these comments and will reflect on them. It is also worth noting that Priorities for Youth states:

4.20 Planning, funding and the delivery of youth work will be based on the EA composite (local and regional) assessment of need and will support requirements linked to the DE key priorities at local, sub-regional and regional level.

4.21 Organisations supported the proposed recommendations for planning contained in the document.

4.22 Their comments referred generally to local issues and funding concerns and having

greater access to alternative learning environments to improve the outcomes of children and young people.

4.23 4.22 Groups noted that consideration should be given to vulnerable groups including SEND, LGBTQIA+ and Newcomer children and young people, but recognised that they were mentioned in the report. One group commented: All of these recommendations are positive and represent the views highlighted through the document. There needs to be future evidence showing that the recommendations have been acted on and this fed back to young people.

4.24 The Education Authority note that the challenges facing children and young people are complex and local issues will be considered in the local assessments of need.

4.25 Some groups wanted to see a more consistent and collaborative approach to planning that embraces a multi-agency approach and engages children and young people in the process. However, several groups challenged the partnership recommendation as they thought it would be an Education Authority imposed plan.

4.26 The Education Authority would contend that it supports partnership and collaborative working practices to achieve positive outcomes for our children and young people.

4.27 Others wanted access to inclusive training opportunities for the whole sector including part-time staff and volunteers.

4.28 Most of the responses focused on local issues which will be considered in the local assessments of need and future delivery plans.

4.29 Some comments centred on funding, staffing and resourcing. They tended to be negative and opinionated and did not provide any meaningful or constructive solutions to address the issues they had suggested were not included in the report.

# Appendices

# Appendix 1 – List of Organisations

- Mayobridge Youth Club
- St. Peters Immaculata Youth Centre
- OCN Level2 Personally Success and Wellbeing
- OCN LEVEL 2
- Crumlin Youth Club
- Crumlin Youth Projects
- Crumlin Youth Centre
- Deanby Youth Club
- Girlguiding Ulster
- Bytes
- Rowallane Area Project
- Causeway Coast and Glens EA Youth Service
- Education Authority
- Mid Ulster Youth Voice
- Kids Together Belfast
- PHA
- BOB Young Women's Group Dungannon
- EA Youth Service, Go Lead Armagh
- EA Youth Service - SEN Young People 8 In Total
- EA Youth Service Rural - 12
- Tullygally Youth Centre
- Banbridge Youth Resource Centre
- Education Authority Youth Service - Charter and Taughmonagh Youth Centres
- West Belfast Area Project
- Lakeland Youth Centre - Senior Youth Club & Fermanagh Youth Voice
- St Agnes Youth Centre
- EA Newry City Area Project-Young Women’s Group
- EA Youth Service - NMD Youth Voice
- Lurgan Youth Annexe
- Rosemount Youth Centre
- St Eithne's Youth Centre
- Foyleside Area Project
- EA Youth Service
- Portrush Youth Centre
- Crotlieve Youth Forum
- ABC EA Staff Team
- EA Youth Group
- EA Youth Service - Newry Mourne & Down Staff Team
- Eco Ambassadors Youth Group, Limavady
- Education Authority Youth Service - Newry Mourne & Down - Crotlieve Area Youth Project

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