2026 - 2029

Regional Assessment of Need



Education Authority | Youth Service

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Introduction & Background

to the Regional Assessment of Need

The Department of Education (DE) invests approximately £36m annually into youth work in Northern Ireland to implement its key priorities outlined in the DE youth work policy document Priorities for Youth (2013). DE's vision is to ensure that 'every child and young person is happy, learning and succeeding' and contained within that vision is the action that the Education Authority should:

> *'Co-design regional and local youth development plans with statutory and voluntary youth work organisations* ***to meet assessed needs of children and young people*** *and develop their personal and social skills'.*

The Priorities for Youth Policy also contains significant references to assessing needs including:

- 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 assessed need for a youth work intervention.

Priorities for Youth also identified a key requirement under its actions to support the raising of standards for all but ensuring that:

- 4.6.1 – Planning, funding and the delivery of youth work will be based on the EA composite (local and regional) assessment of need.

This document is the direct response to that action and ensures that a foundation is created for the subsequent planning actions also required by the policy. The Education Authority has undertaken significant activities to ensure that this document has been co-designed with a focus on our service users, namely children and young people.

This 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.

The key objective of this 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. It brings together data, evidence and local insight to help identify the needs and barriers children and young people in Northern Ireland face. It identifies where the greatest inequalities exist which will in turn help develop local plans, strategies and identify where future research is needed. Listening to, and understanding, the voices and opinions of children and young people is an important part of this process.

Assessment of Need Context



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Assessing Need

The Policy & Strategic Context

The new Northern Ireland **Programme for Government 2024-2027** has identified nine key priorities to address the inequalities that exist and to make Northern Ireland a better place to live, work and visit.

Two of these priorities: *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls* and *Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs* will directly affect the work of DE supported youth provision and the Education Authority should ensure that youth providers can work, both independently and collaboratively, to support these key priorities of Government. Youth provision will also feel an indirect impact through the work of several other priorities including Safer Communities and Reform and Transformation of Public Services.

The Education Authority recognises that all children and young people can be considered vulnerable, often reliant on adults to support them, however, there are many children and young people in Northern Ireland who have complex and challenging needs who require additional support.

The Education Authority also recognises the continuing pressure on public sector budgets and the assessment of need has been identified as the process for identifying needs, determining priorities, allocating resources and making improvements within the youth work sector and within allocated budgets. Understanding the assessed needs of our children and young people should also promote better collaborative working and innovation in service delivery.

The Department of Education holds the responsibility for the delivery of the Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030. This strategy has developed eight high level outcomes to improve the lives of children and young people. Youth provision has a key place in the lives of the children and young people who engage with it and the work of youth organisations can assist them achieve progress against these outcomes:

- Children and young people are 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 which respects their rights. **(Your rights).**
- Children and young people live in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted. **(Equality).**

Priorities for Youth (2013) sets out the positive contribution that youth services can play in achieving the Department of Education's vision which is "every young person achieving to his or her full potential at each stage of his or her development" The strategic aims of youth work in support of the Department's vision are:

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

The policy sets out how this should be achieved through the delivery of 32 key actions related to the Department's priorities at the time of publication. It outlines the different settings within the youth sector, voluntary, uniformed, faith-based and statutory as well as ensuring the needs of children and young people from the Irish-medium sector are considered fully in line with Recommendation 18 of the Review of Irish-medium Education.

The policy identifies clearly those groups and communities of children and young people who may be at greater risk of social exclusion, marginalisation or isolation because they experience a combination of barriers to learning. These groups have been considered and consulted with to ensure their needs have been assessed effectively and appropriately.

Purpose of Youth Work

in the context of assessing need

The National Youth Agency states, youth work offers children and young people safe spaces to explore their identity, experience decision-making, increase their confidence, develop inter-personal skills, and think through the consequences of their actions. This leads to better informed choices, changes in activity and improved outcomes for children and young people.

Youth work provides safe environments and positive support through practical and social non-formal education. It removes barriers, giving socially excluded children and young people a safe place to go, someone to talk to who can quietly understand and assess their needs and help them to become active and positive participants in their society for both their own gain and public benefit.

Volunteers play an integral role in helping to facilitate and support youth work practice and sessions. Volunteer youth workers provide a high percentage of direct work with children and young people through youth clubs and youth projects, and the role of the volunteer is central to youth work provision in Northern Ireland.



Purpose of the Youth Service

in addressing need

The Education Authority holds the statutory responsibility for the provision of adequate youth activities and has recently undertaken a review of its position as to how it discharges its duty. The Education Authority has determined that:

Through the voluntary participation of children and young people (4-25 years) the youth service will seek to support the personal and social development of young people, enabling them to transition into adulthood as confident and resilient citizens of Northern Ireland.

This will be achieved through the provision of safe informal environments where children and young people can:

a) participate fully in the design, delivery and evaluation of all services;
b) test and explore their values and beliefs;
c) share experiences with others and embrace difference; and
d) have their educational attainment supported, including the provision of accredited outcomes when appropriate.

Children and young people have identified many needs, challenges and barriers that they face in their lives, this document seeks to establish those that youth provision can impact on directly, through the distinct role Department of Education supported youth provision provides. Therefore, this document has been developed through this lens.

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Our Process

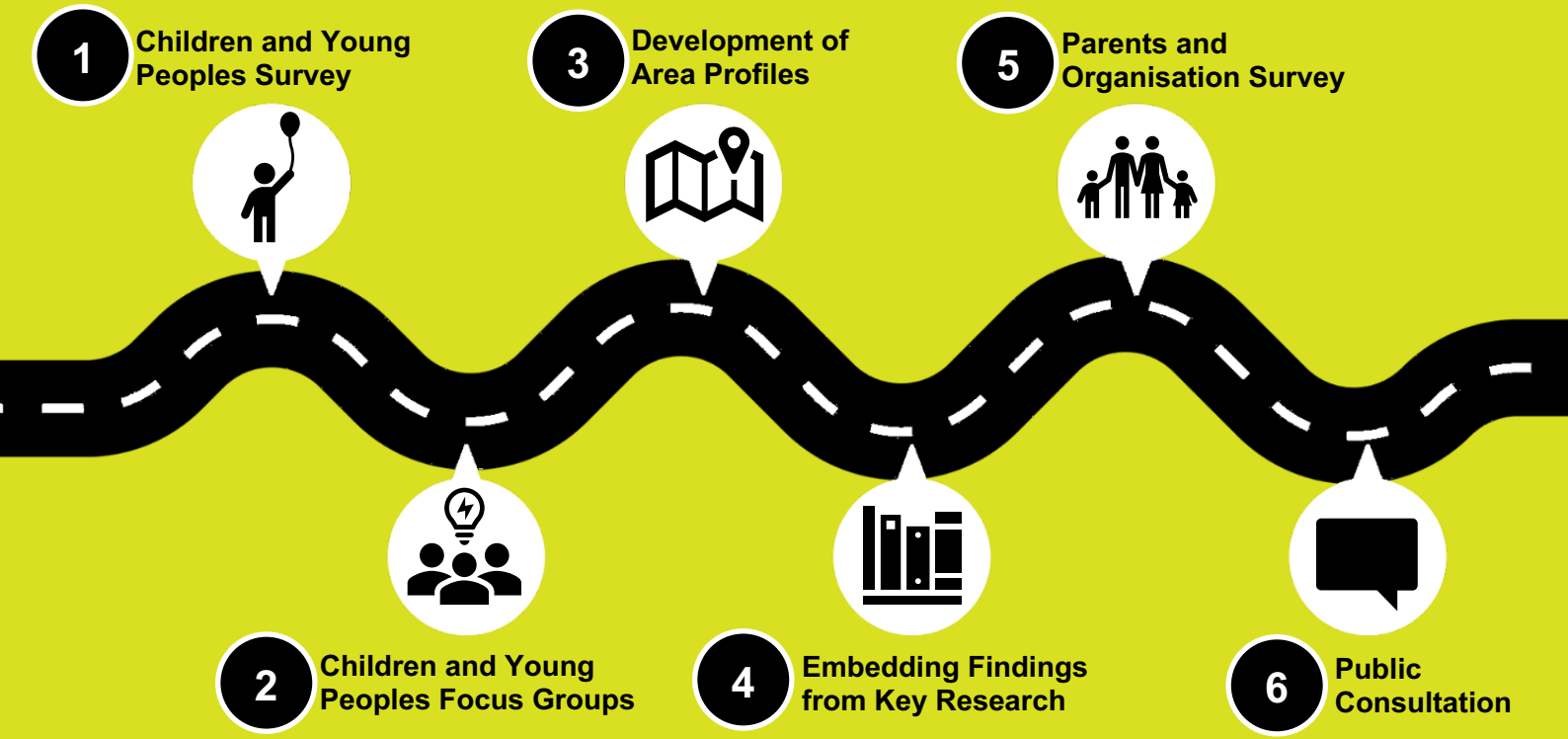
for assessing need

Models of existing assessments of need for youth provision were reviewed to identify best practice and inform the process that has been developed. These were based on locations throughout the United Kingdom, including Cardiff, South Gloucestershire Council, West Lothian, Oxford and Tower Hamlets.

These models provided a holistic understanding of the social, economic and environmental factors associated with children and young people facing inequalities and negative outcomes. They used demographic information and data supported by wider social determinants that affected vulnerable and marginalised groups, and they reviewed recent literature and studies into the challenges and barriers facing children and young people and examined how these were reflected in their own areas.

A key principle of each was the importance of the voice of children and young people in the assessment of need. This allowed them to understand children and young peoples lived experiences and to hear their views and circumstances. Surveys formed the initial part of this process and focus groups followed for more in-depth discussion about attitudes, feelings and experiences. Meaningful engagement offered opportunities for children and young people to reflect on their needs and ensured that interventions were responsive to these needs.

As a result, the Education Authority developed a process that would ensure that best practice examples informed how the Regional Assessment of Need would be developed.



Children and Young Peoples Survey

Part one

A survey for all children and young people aged 4-25 years was designed and developed by a project team set up within the Education Authority Youth Service based on the eight strategic outcomes of the Children and Young Peoples' Strategy 2020-2030. A key element of this approach was to identify and utilise existing evidence-based survey materials, available across government and specialist organisations across those eight key outcomes. These surveys were then reviewed and adapted by a panel of young people to ensure that they were utilising child friendly language to support better and more effective responses. The survey used technology contained within the Microsoft Forms suite of tools, such as the immersive reader tool to assist any children and young people with any accessibility issues.

Logic branching was incorporated into the survey to tailor questions based on previous responses and made the survey more relevant to different age bands and groups. Likert scales were used so that the data could be analysed to measure attitudes. The survey was made available through the medium of Irish, and other languages could be supported when requested. A dashboard was also created which allowed for the interrogation of responses based on the eight strategic outcomes.

The survey was launched on the Education Authority Youth Service funding website, on all EA social media channels, through a series of emails to all registered youth groups (over 1500) and via the C2K network to all schools. This was then supported by a social media campaign to encourage young people to complete the survey. A total of 5,451 children and young people responded to the survey when it closed for reporting.



Click here to access survey data report

Children and Young Peoples Focus Groups

Part two

The Education Authority Youth Service Participation team, working with young people from the Small Grants panel, designed a resource allowing facilitators to manage and record the focus group sessions. This information was distributed to all registered youth groups, and organisations receiving Regional Strategic Funding were supported to encourage their member organisations to deliver focus group sessions and report their findings through the online portal.

Focus groups with children and young people were facilitated by youth workers. The resources were available to all groups and the Education Authority encouraged organisations to support the inclusion of specific groups of young people, within the Section 75 grouping, or those who may be at greater risk of social exclusion, marginalisation or isolation because they experience a combination of barriers to learning. They were also encouraged to include all the age bands outlined within the policy.

Responses from the focus groups were uploaded onto an internal site and a dashboard created allowing for the interrogation and analysis of responses. This made it possible to uncover ideas, issues and themes which had not previously been considered and allowed participants to express their views on future decision-making processes. These were used to identify key issues not identified in the survey and helped inform the findings of the Regional Assessment of Need.

The focus groups allowed for the clarification and testing of the survey findings. They provided children and young people an opportunity to articulate their views and experiences based on the outcomes listed above.

A total of 138 focus groups, involving 1,630 participants, were facilitated throughout Northern Ireland.



Click here to access focus group data report

Development of Area Profiles

Part three



The development of Area Profiles using all available statistical data and information about the needs of children and young people has been produced using a range of data and information from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. These reports focused on demographic information and reflected wider social, economic and environmental determinants which negatively impacted children and young people.

The area profiles include information on population, deprivation, health and wellbeing, education and crime and disorder.

Click here to access the statistical data used to inform this assessment of need

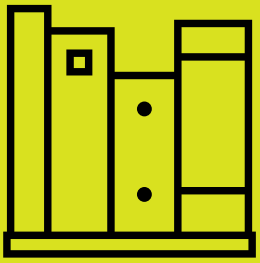
Information from the Department of Education highlighted school enrolments, free school meal numbers, SEND numbers, attendance and expulsion and school exam performance.

Information from the Police Service of Northern Ireland included all recorded crime, domestic abuse incidences, anti-social behaviour incidences and hate motivated crimes.

Information was also sourced from other government departments, statutory agencies and internal Education Authority services. These included the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Youth Justice Agency and Health Trusts.

Embedding Findings from Key Research

Part four

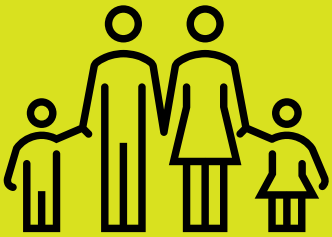


The Education Authority Youth Service Information and Planning Team conducted a significant literature review under the key outcome areas used in the survey and focus group materials. They also had access to all research and stakeholder engagement event reports conducted by the Youth Service as well as other research completed by academics and youth organisations relevant to the assessment of need.

The findings from the research and stakeholder engagement allowed the Education Authority to identify good practice and place it in a Northern Ireland context. This was used to explore and understand better the challenges and barriers facing children and young people nationally and review interventions that have been used to tackle these issues.

Parents and Organisation Survey

Part five



A survey for parents and relevant organisations was designed and developed by a project team set up within the EA Youth Service based on the eight strategic outcomes of the Children and Young Peoples' Strategy 2020-2030. Logic branching was incorporated into the survey to tailor questions based on previous responses and made the survey more relevant to different age bands and groups. Likert scales were used so that the data could be analysed to measure attitudes. There were 180 responses to this survey.

Public Consultation

Part six



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 conclusions contained within the Regional Assessment of Need
- The proposed recommendations for planning for youth services

The Education Authority received 118 individual submissions, 44 organisations submissions and two formal written responses the consultation. From the responses the Youth Service determined that:

81% **Agreed with the findings identified by children and young people**

86% **Agreed with the summary of conclusions**

89% **agreed with the proposed recommendations form planning**

Most responses were supportive of the findings outlined in the Regional Assessment of Need and agreed with the direction of travel for planning that the Education Authority were proposing. The

responses reiterated the importance of addressing online safety, vaping, drug and alcohol misuse, and poverty; including food poverty, and the harm they were causing to children and young people.

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 these were addressed within the document.

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 however beyond the control of the Education Authority.

Whilst some individuals/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 was also noted by several organisations that they did not recognise some of the findings outlined in the report, particularly around environment and climate and mental health. However, the report is based on how children and young people responded in surveys and focus groups.

Other organisations used the consultation to express their displeasure that they had limited opportunity 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 this process. It should also be noted that feedback on local issues will be addressed in Local Assessment of Need.

The Education Authority appreciates the time and commitment that individuals and groups took to respond to the Regional Assessment of Need document and the feedback provided. A formal report based on the feedback will be produced and shared on the Education Authority website.




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Voice of Children and Young People



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Introduction to the Findings

from children and young people

This section combines the results from the survey conducted with children and young people, feedback from the focus groups, and outlining how these are supported by the findings from research.

Shown opposite is the result of when asked what the most important theme was for them. Children and young people identified their future as being most important to them, followed by access to play and leisure, and then emotional health and wellbeing ranked third. It is however important to note, that whilst most individuals responded selected the areas noted above, it should not diminish the importance of the others to the young people who selected those.

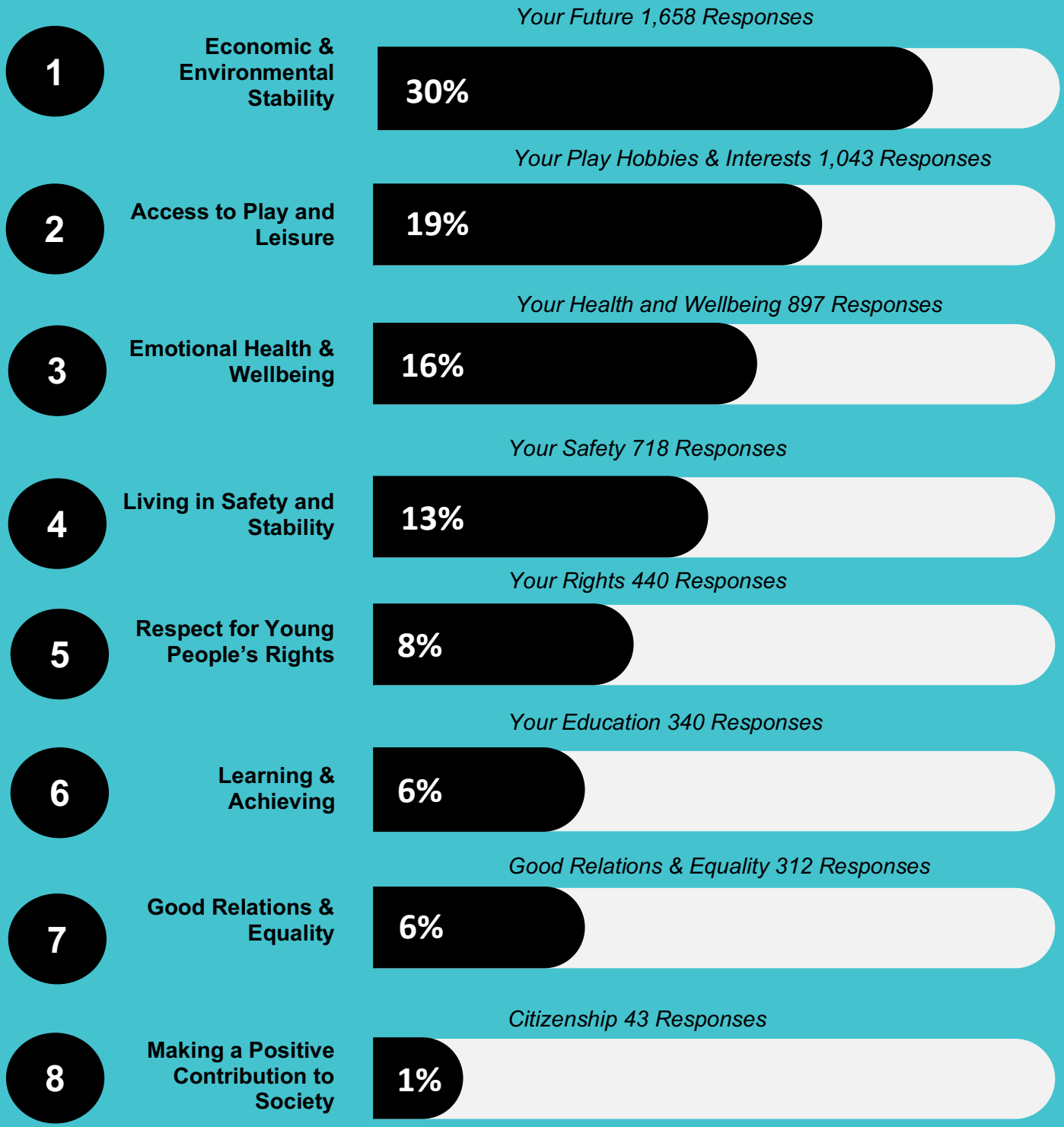
In addition, through the survey and focus group feedback, it has been highlighted by children and young people the interplay between these themes, such as the negative impact poor good relations and equality can have on emotional wellbeing, or how economic stability impacts wellbeing and access to play.

Therefore, as Youth Service determines its priorities for planning and delivery, consideration should be given to the importance of universal services and its role in supporting all these themes with children and young people.

The following sections provide an overview of the regional findings from both the surveys and focus groups, it should be noted that certain groups, such as Irish Medium, non-binary and minority ethnic children and young people reflected a different priority order of the themes.



The order of themes for children and young people



Economic and Environmental Stability

Your Future Findings

Economic wellbeing refers to the overall standard of living and quality of life of individuals and households within an economy. It comprises many dimensions, including income, wealth, employment opportunities, access to basic goods and services, social support and overall satisfaction with life. There is a direct link between how much parents earn and the educational, health and social outcomes that their children achieve.

Less well-off children and young people have worse cognitive, social-behavioural and health outcomes because they are poorer, and longer-term poverty affects their outcomes more severely than short-term poverty. The cost-of-living crisis has had a damaging impact on the lives of children and young people from economically insecure households. Many families are facing greater financial hardships. In recent years, the cost of essentials like food, fuel and energy has increased dramatically.

Children and young people from the lowest-income families are four times more likely to face mental health difficulties than those from the highest incomes. These inequalities in outcomes are likely to worsen as the cost-of-living crisis escalates.

Health and wellbeing is affected by the quality of the environment around us. Children and young people are susceptible to harm from environmental hazards because their bodies are still growing and developing, and any harm can last into adulthood. Environmental improvements that protect health or encourage more healthy lifestyles have long lasting benefits.

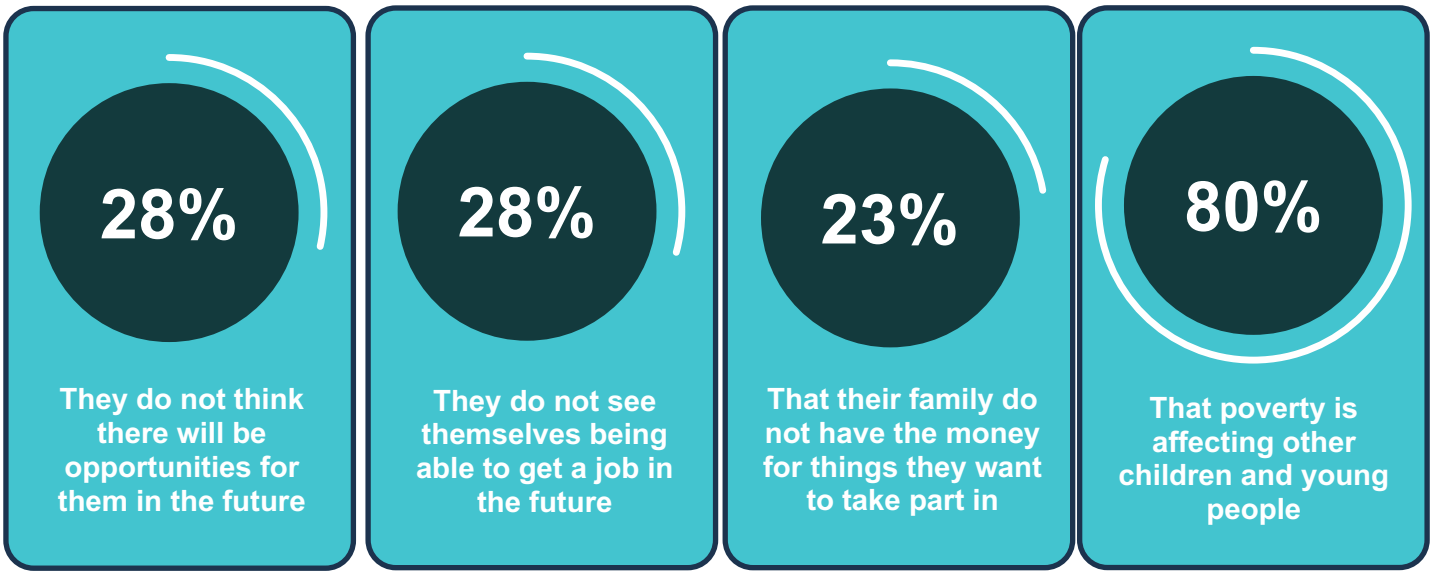
Climate change has important implications for the health and futures of children and young people, yet they have little power to limit its harm, making them more vulnerable to climate anxiety.

In Focus Groups:

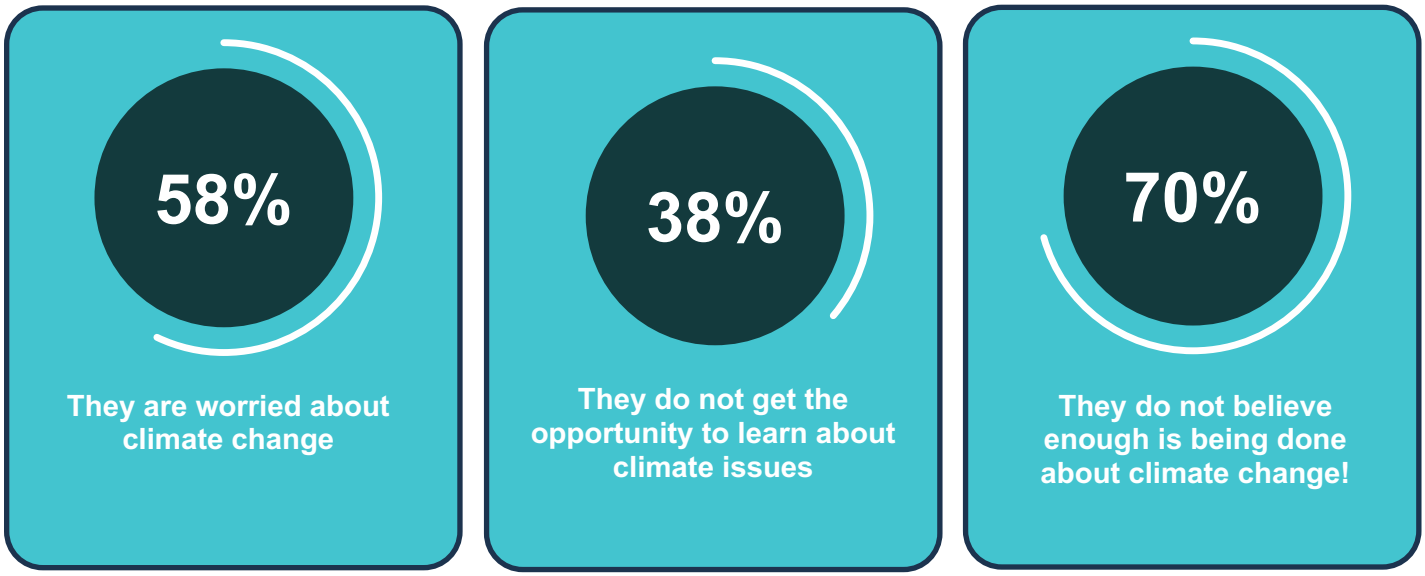
The children and young people voiced their concerns regarding their future, employability, climate change and the environment and the impact of poverty on them, their families and communities. Young people wanted access to vocational programmes, apprenticeships and environmental programmes and support for those struggling with formal education.

They appreciated the relaxed, supportive learning environments offered by Youth Services. Young people were increasingly concerned about climate change and its impact on their future, calling for more action and education on environmental issues. They recognised how poverty affects children and young people by limiting their access to clothes, hygiene products and food, leading to bullying and health complications. It was also suggested that poverty drove some young people towards drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms

Through the survey considering their future children and young people said….



Through the survey considering the environment children and young people said….



Analysis of Responses

- Many respondents (71%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would have plenty of career options. Less than two-thirds of SEND and non-binary or other respondents (60%) and a minority of Irish Medium young people (10%) agreed or strongly agreed.
- Almost three-quarters (72%), felt equipped to apply for and get a job in the future. However, only half of non-binary or others and for SEND 61%. A minority of Irish Medium young people (10%) agreed or strongly agreed.
- More than three-quarters of children and young people believed their family were able to pay for them to do the things they want, however just over half of Irish Medium young people (58%) and non-binary or other (50%) believed this.
- Most respondents (81%) believed poverty is having an impact on children and young people.
- Just under half, (49%) noted that they were worried about climate change. For Irish Medium young people this was just over half (58%) and nearly two-thirds of non-binary or others (64%) believed this.
- However, almost two-thirds (63%) believed that had the chance to learn about climate change and 29% believed that enough was being done to prevent climate change. Interesting boys (36%) were more likely to think this than girls (27%).

Access to Play and Leisure

Play, Hobbies and Interests Findings

Play and leisure is an important part of a child or young person's development and allows them to make sense of the world around them and gain life skills by taking part in all forms of play and leisure. Play and leisure enhances a child or young person's language, social and emotional stability. All children and young people have a right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

Play and leisure are natural and enjoyable ways for children and young people to keep active, stay well and be happy. This allows them to maintain good physical and mental health and to learn life skills. The benefits of play and leisure include brain development, enhanced creativity, intellectual development, physical development and social and emotional development.

New research has revealed that enjoyment is the single biggest factor in motivating children and young people to be active. Play and leisure supports children and young people to develop their social skills with others. Through listening, paying attention and sharing experiences, this helps them explore their feelings, develop self-discipline and resilience and learn how to express themselves.

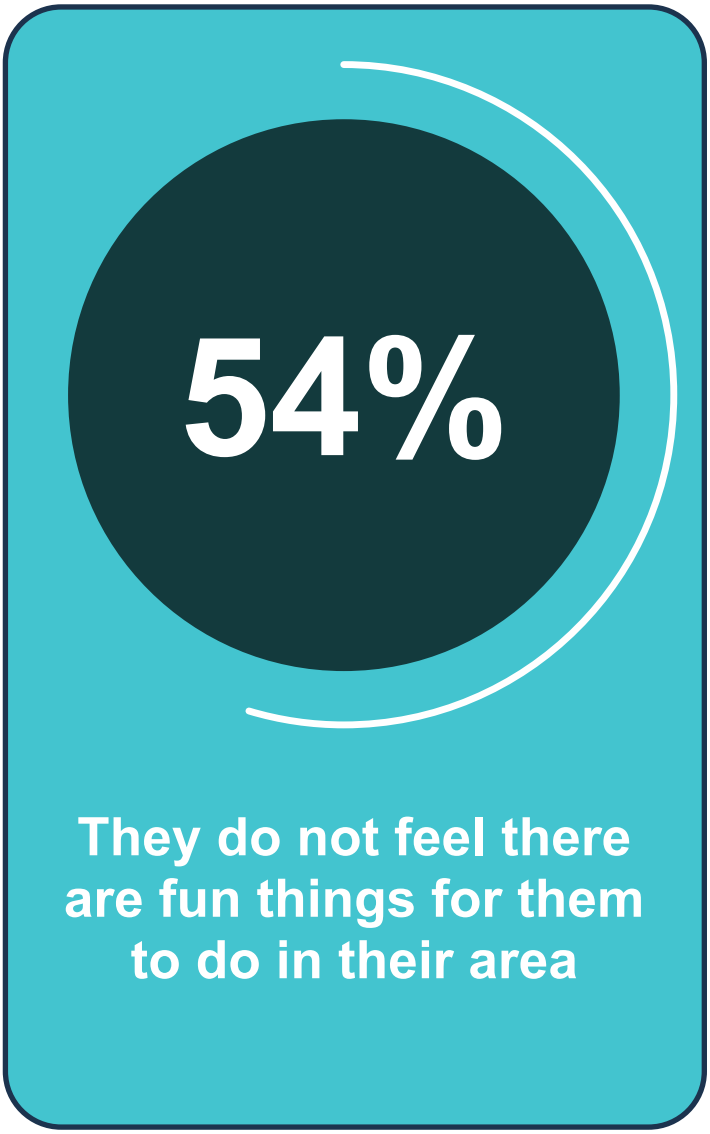
Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children and young people have the right to have fun in the way they want to, whether by playing sports, watching films, or doing something else entirely. They also have the right to rest.

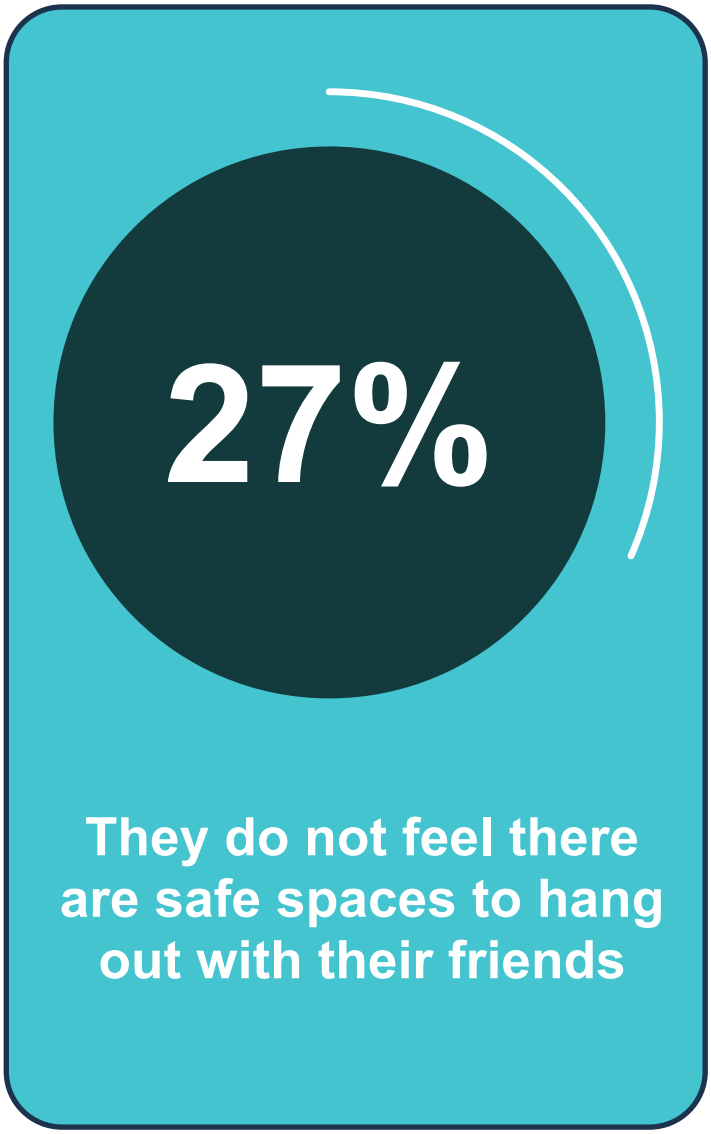
In Focus Groups:

Young people reflected that there is a need for comprehensive support from youth services to enhance play and leisure opportunities, ensure safety and promote the wellbeing of children and young people in their communities. They noted that play and leisure activities are crucial for physical and mental health, helping to reduce stress, improve mood and foster social connections. Young people value activities that keep them active, engaged, and provide opportunities to meet with friends, socialise and have fun.

Many young people believed that there are insufficient leisure facilities, especially in rural areas. They reported that there is a need for more varied sports, arts and cultural activities and that transport and cost are significant barriers to accessing existing facilities. Youth services can support by providing safe environments, organising events and partnering with local stakeholders. They can also address barriers to participation, ensuring activities are accessible to all children and young people. This point was also raised specifically within the public consultation process with a significant lobby from children and young people for the provision of safe spaces to socialise with their friends being extremely important to them.

Through the survey considering their play hobbies and interests children and young people said….





Analysis of Responses

- Just over two-thirds of all respondents (67%) agreed or strongly agreed that there were fun things to do in their area.
- However, less than half of those with a Special Educational Need or Disability (42%) and of those identifying as non-binary or other (43%) agreed.
- A small number of Irish Medium respondents (14%) agreed or strongly agreed that there were fun things to do in their area.
- When asked if there are safe spaces to hang out with friends, almost three-quarters (73%) agreed or strongly agreed. Just over half, (53%) of those identifying as non-binary or other agreed.
- Less than one-fifth of Irish Medium respondents (19%) agreed or strongly agreed that there are safe spaces to hang out with friends.

Emotional Health and Wellbeing

Health and Wellbeing Findings

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is not just about being physically fit, it also about being mentally and emotionally fit. Research has shown that enjoying a healthy lifestyle can improve one's physical appearance, increase one's lifespan, boost one's immunity against diseases and improve one's quality of life and mental and emotional health and wellbeing. Poor mental and emotional health can affect children and young people's education and their ability to form positive relationships, increase isolation, their sense of happiness and their future opportunities. Good health is an integral part of a child and young person's emotional, mental, social and environmental development and wellbeing.

Having and maintaining good health and wellbeing is central to a child and young person's effective learning and preparation for adult life and successful transition to adult life and independent living. Good health cannot be taken for granted. There are certain things which are essential to ensure that good health is achieved and maintained. Health experts have highlighted that a balanced and nutritious diet, along with regular exercise and adequate rest and sleep are key factors that can contribute to children and young people having good health and mental and emotional wellbeing.

The promotion of health and wellbeing and maintaining a healthy population is a basic goal. Enjoying better health is central to human happiness and wellbeing and contributes to economic progress, as healthy populations live longer, are more productive and enjoy a better standard of living.

In Focus Groups:

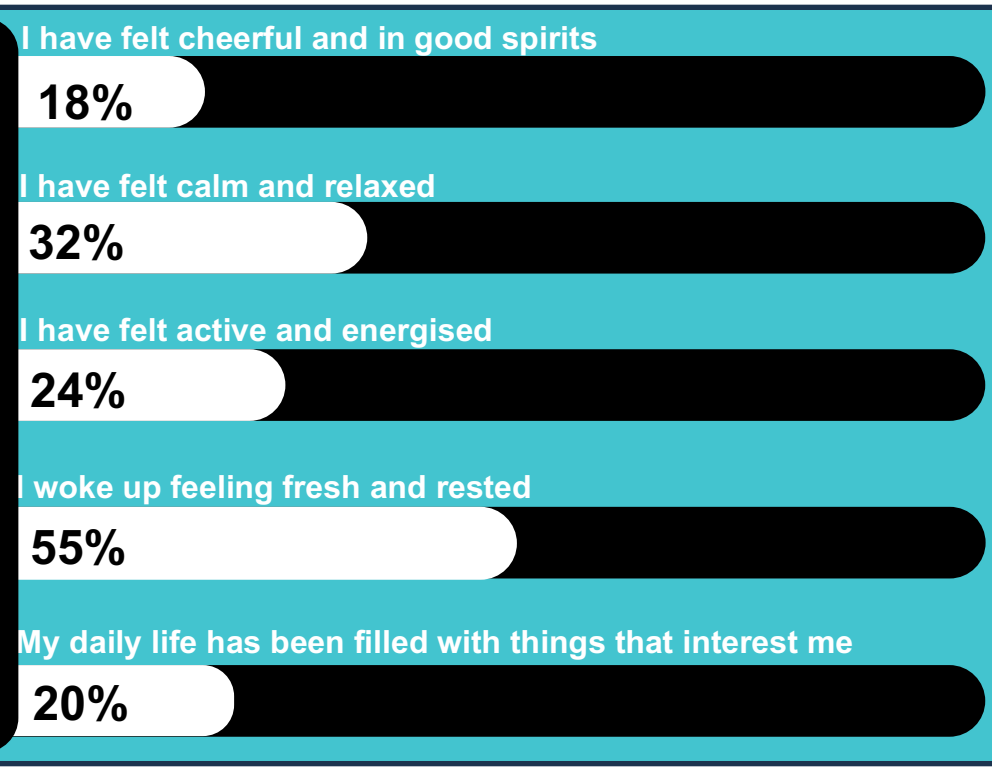
Children and young people emphasised the need for comprehensive support from youth services to address mental and physical health issues, ensure safe and accessible facilities, and promote the health and wellbeing of children and young people in their communities. In terms of their mental health, young people noted that they face issues like anxiety, stress, bullying, and body image concerns. They want more mental health support, including counselling, peer support groups and workshops on stress management and emotional resilience. They also suggested access to safe spaces to talk and relax and mindfulness and relaxation activities.

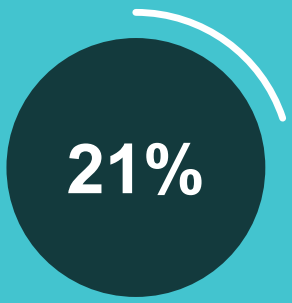
The young people were concerned about vaping, substance misuse, lack of exercise facilities and poor diet. Suggestions to meet their needs included more varied sports programmes, outdoor activities and healthy eating education. Access to gyms, fitness classes and sports competitions were also suggested. This was further evidenced with a significant number of responses in the public consolation recognising this as an issue for children and young people. They wanted youth services to provide safe, inclusive environments and listen to and support their health needs. Youth services should offer practical support like transport, healthy meals, educational programmes and provide additional funding for mental health and physical health initiatives.

Through the survey considering their health and wellbeing children and young people said….

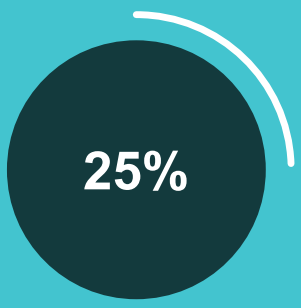
They feel the following way

- some of the time
- less than half the time
- or at no time at all





They do not feel there are opportunities for them to do physical activities



They do not feel there is anywhere for them to get support for their emotional wellbeing

Analysis of Responses

- Most of the children and young people (82.4%) reported that they felt cheerful and in good spirits more than half of the time, most of the time or all the time. A significant number of those identifying as non-binary or other (45%) did not.
- Two-thirds of respondents believed that they felt calm and relaxed more than half of the time, most of the time or all of the time. However, just over half (53%) of those identifying as non-binary and other were not and less than half of SEND children and young people (43%) did not.
- More than three quarters of all respondents (76%) reported that they were active and vigorous more than half of the time, most of time or all the time. Boys were more likely to be more active and vigorous than girls. However, more than half of those identifying as non-binary or other were not.
- Interestingly, less than half of all respondents (45%) noted that they wake up feeling fresh and rested more than half of the time, most of time or all the time.
- Most children and young people (80%) reported that their lives have things that interest them.
- Most respondents, (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that there were opportunities to take part in physical activities. Boys were more likely than girls to agree. Less than half (44%) of those identifying as non-binary and other did not agree.
- Three quarters of respondents stated that they were able to get help for their emotional health need. However, less than half (40%) of those identifying as non-binary were not.

Living in Safety and Stability

Your Safety Findings

Children and young people experience their developmental years through the relationships they have with their parents or guardians and other trusted adult role models who support them. If these relationships provide safe, stable and nurturing environments then children and young people are more likely to develop both physically and emotionally.

However, if these relationships are unstable or abusive then this can have a negative impact on a child or young person's physical and emotional wellbeing.
It has been suggested that children and young people thrive in stable and nurturing homes and environments where they know what to expect, have routines and feel that their relationships, health, and safety are secure.

Research has identified that to develop to their full potential, children and young people require safe and secure housing, a balanced diet, access to medical care, secure relationships with parents and guardians, including nurturing and responsive parenting and high-quality learning opportunities at home, school, youth centres and in their communities. Children and young people have a right to live their lives without the fear of abuse, discrimination or prejudice.

Adverse childhood experiences include issues around emotional and physical neglect and abuse, sexual and domestic violence, bullying, discrimination, racism, economic hardship and community tension.–There are several risk factors linked to these, including socio-economic, demographic, environmental and cultural influences. These all impact on a child or young person's ability to live safely and securely.

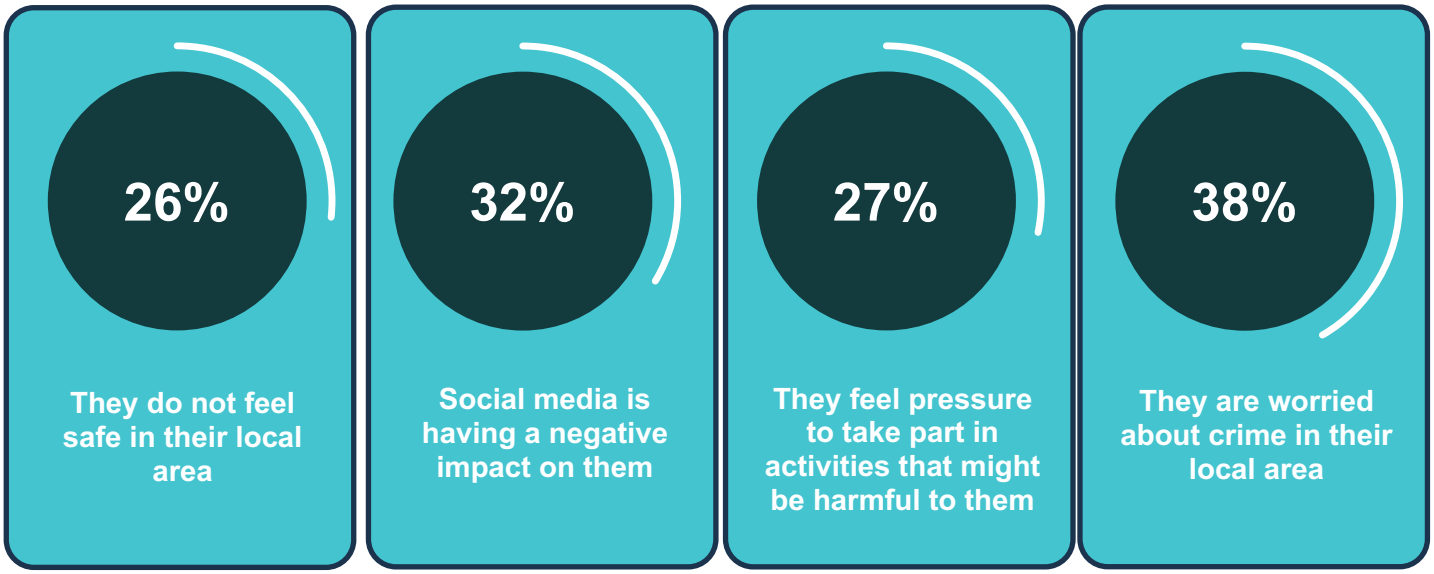
In Focus Groups:

Children and young people recognised the importance of creating safe, supportive, and inclusive environments for them through inclusive youth services and by promoting collaboration with community stakeholders. Youth services could also do more to promote community engagement and positive engagement through awareness campaigns and peer support.

Children and young people wanted access to more programmes on self-defence, safety and respect. They wanted to access safe, inclusive spaces where they felt welcomed and valued. It was also suggested that boys and young men should have greater access to respect and healthy relationships support programmes.

Young people outlined various concerns regarding their safety and wellbeing in different environments, including home, school and their local communities. Key concerns included domestic violence, violence against women and young girls, substance abuse and anti-social behaviour.

Through the survey considering their safety children and young people said….





Over two thirds of girls and over half of boys who responded to the survey are worried about the safety of women and girls in their local community. Overall based on all responses 63% are worried about the safety of women and girls

Analysis of Response

- Three-quarters of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe in their local area. There was no real difference between boys and girls, however, only 60% of Irish Medium young people, 55% of those identifying as non-binary or other and two thirds of SEND children and young people agreed. More rural children and young people agreed than those from an urban setting.
- Less than a third of all respondents believed that social media had a negative impact on them. More than 40% of Irish Medium young people believed that it did.
- More than one-third of respondents, (38%) were worried about crime in their area. This figure was 43% for those living in an urban area and 27% for those in a rural area.
- Just under two-thirds of respondents agreed that they were worried about the safety of women and girls. Girls were more concerned (71%) than boys (55%).
- Less than one-third (31%) felt pressure to get involved in activities that might be dangerous.

Respect for Young People's Rights

Your Rights Findings

All children and young people have rights. Article 4 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that: parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognised in the present Convention. Regarding economic, social and cultural rights, parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources and, where needed, within the framework of international co-operation.

This means that all children and young people regardless of their religion, race, sexual or gender identity or disability have rights which should be valued and respected. Children and young people must be made aware of their rights and have the knowledge and confidence to proclaim and defend these rights.

Although human rights apply to everyone, certain groups of children and young people face barriers in accessing and enjoying their rights. The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to individuals under the age of 18, however, children and young people moving between childhood and adulthood, can be particularly vulnerable to discrimination in various forms. They often encounter difficulties in accessing education, quality employment, social protection and full access to civil and political rights, limiting their potential and opportunities. Given the barriers children and young people face by virtue of their age there is a need for specific protection to tackle discrimination against them and to remove the barriers that are stopping them from accessing their rights.

A recent study recognised that marginalised and vulnerable children and young people are less likely to have their rights respected. These groups are also more prone to physical and sexual violence, to be known to the justice system, to be discriminated against and have poorer educational, health and social outcomes.

In Focus Groups:

The children and young people valued youth services in respecting, educating, and advocating for their rights, while also indicating areas for improvement and the need for more accessible information and guidance. Young people agreed that youth services can support and advocate for children and young people's rights by listening, organising events, creating effective policy changes, providing educational opportunities and teaching young people.

Many young people believed that their rights are not fully respected in society, and they face discrimination and stereotyping from adults, teachers and other authority figures. Suggestions for improvement included better education on children and young people's rights, more freedom for young people to express themselves and take on responsibilities and leadership roles and more support in recognising the rights of vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Through the survey considering their rights children and young people said….

50%

They do not feel that young people are listened to

71%

They know what their rights are

82%

They feel their rights are respected in youth work programmes

73%

They feel confident in fighting for their rights

Analysis of Responses

- Just over half (51%), of all children and young people believed that they were listened to, valued and respected. A small number of Irish Medium young people (7%) agreed.
- Almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) stated that they knew what their rights were and most (82%) believed their rights were respected in youth work programmes. However, a small number of Irish Medium young people (6%) believed their rights were respected in youth work programmes.
- Three-quarters of all respondents felt confident in fighting for their rights if they had to. Most Irish Medium respondents (96%) believed they were confident in fighting for their rights.



Learning and Achieving

Your Education Findings

Education is a basic human right under Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Education is the process were children and young people acquire knowledge, allowing them to develop skills for life and the future, learn social norms and understand right from wrong. The goal of education is to help children and young people reach their potential and contribute to society as they get older.

Education allows children and young people to achieve positive life outcomes, including having a good career, social status, financial independence and heightens aspirations. Education creates stability and routine during childhood, promotes independence and resilience and teaches children and young people how to integrate and contribute to society.

As well as supporting the development of literacy and numeracy, education plays a key role in developing life skills such as communication, critical thinking, teamwork and emotional intelligence. Educational disadvantage is a reality faced by many children and young people and there remains a tail of underachievement which is considerably higher among vulnerable groups of children and young people, including SEND, Looked After, Newcomers, Young Carers or being from a Section 75 group. Many of these marginalised children and young people face barriers and challenges adapting to school and the formal curriculum and developing relationships which makes them more isolated and excluded.

In Focus Groups:

Young people understood the importance of education as it allowed them to develop a range of skills and discern right from wrong and empowers them to contribute to and understand their place in their local community and society. They did recognise that for some vulnerable groups school was not always a positive or enjoyable experience.

These young people faced barriers with their learning and were not always supported at school. Children and young people highlighted the positive impact of youth services on skill development and the need for more comprehensive and inclusive programmes to support children and young people's education and personal growth for those facing barriers accessing education or the curriculum.

Youth services, they reported, help develop teamwork, communication, leadership, listening, cooking, sports, emotional management and relationship-building skills. Youth services also helped children and young people understand identity, manage their emotions and make better decisions. The young people valued the accredited qualifications offered through youth work which provided alternative learning opportunities outside of school. These help those who struggle in traditional school settings by offering practical and enjoyable learning experiences.

Through the survey considering their education children and young people said….

74%

They learn a lot through their youth work programme

69%

They get qualifications through youth work programmes

35%

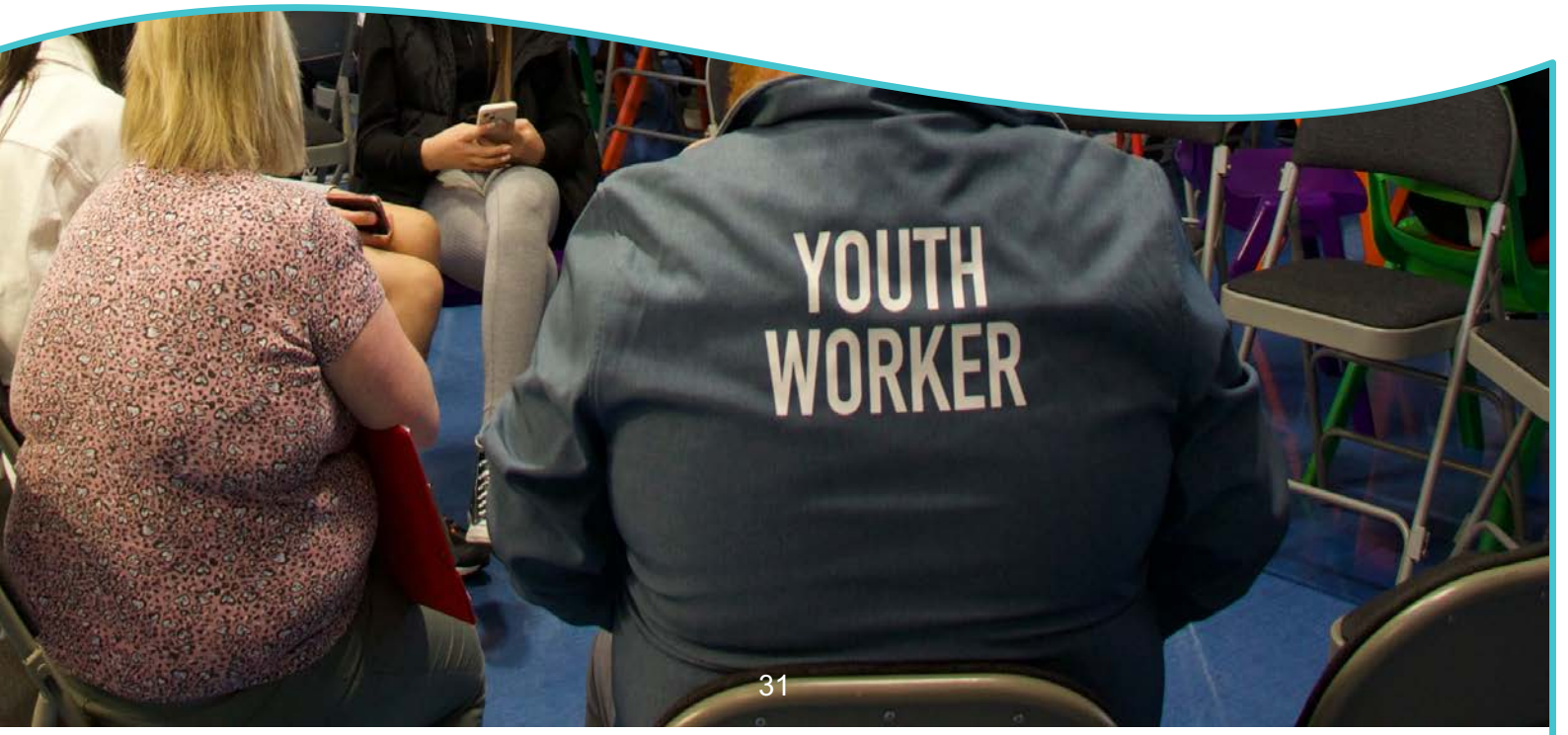
They have barriers that hold them back from succeeding

33%

They do not feel supported through big changes in their education

Analysis of Responses

- More than three-quarters of all respondents, (76%), agreed or strongly agreed that they learnt a lot through their youth work programmes. However, less than one-tenth of Irish Medium respondents agreed or strongly agreed.
- Many young people (71%) suggested that they able to gain qualifications through their youth work programmes. However, less than two-thirds of SEND young people (63%) and half of Irish Medium young people agreed.
- Just over a third of young people (36%) agreed or strongly agreed that they faced barriers that held them back from succeeding. Just over half of SEND young people (51%) and those identifying as non-binary or other (55%) agreed. Most Irish Medium young people (92%) noted that they faced barriers to succeeding.
- Two thirds of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were supported in moving school. This figure was 59% for SEND young people and 55% for those identifying as non-binary or other. Less than one-fifth of Irish Medium young people felt supported.



Good Relations and Equality

Equality Findings

An equal society recognises people's different needs, situations and goals and removes the barriers that limit what people can do and can be. Good relations exists where there is a high level of dignity, respect and mutual understanding and an absence of prejudice, hatred, hostility or harassment. Good relations acknowledge the religious, social, political and racial context of a society and seeks to promote respect, equity and trust whilst embracing diversity in all its forms.

Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that: all children and young people should be treated equally without discrimination, irrespective of their ethnicity, gender, language, religion, political opinion, family background, abilities or other status. It is important that we challenge discrimination and promote equality at an early age, to support the most vulnerable in society including disadvantaged, marginalised and minority ethnic groups.

In Northern Ireland, Good Relations is about promoting better relationships between people from different political, religious and racial backgrounds, tackling sectarianism and racism and promoting cultural diversity and inclusion. Good Relations seeks to promote mutual understanding, positive cross-community relations and respect for cultural traditions. Despite this, there are still factors which ensure that community tensions, sectarianism, racism and segregation remain here.

There are certain areas in Northern Ireland where children and young people and their communities still experience forms of exclusion or social isolation. There are still many interface and single identity communities in Northern Ireland. These areas generally have social housing and communities which suffer from poverty and deprivation, economic uncertainty and lack political leadership and community infrastructure. This can lead to children and young people being intolerant of others and engaging in crime or anti-social behaviour.

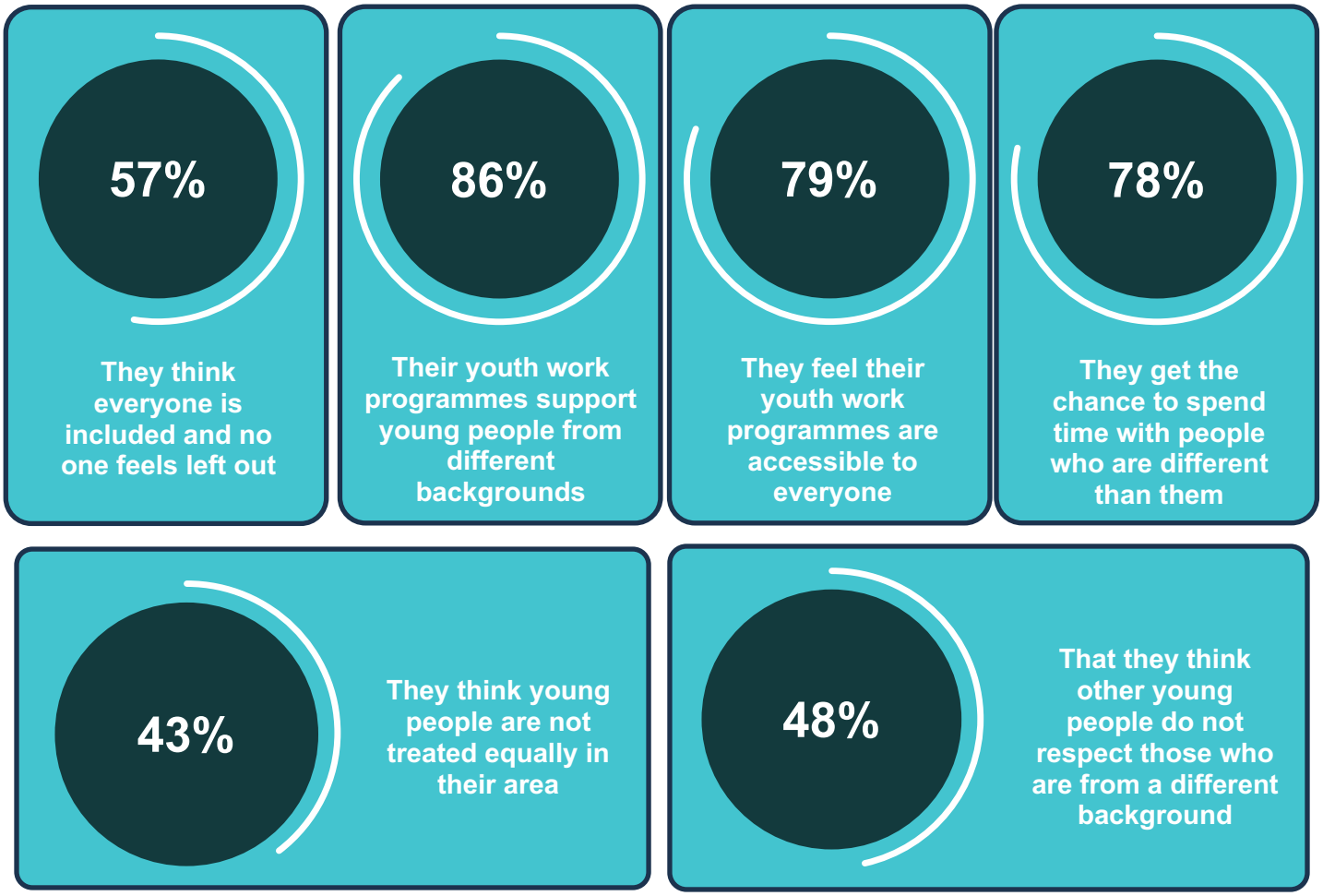
In Focus Groups:

Children and young people highlighted how youth services can promote inclusion and diversity, address discrimination, and provide equal opportunities for all children and young people to foster better relationships and improve their wellbeing. Discrimination and lack of inclusivity they reported lead to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem and mental health issues.

Young people reported experiencing or witnessing bullying, prejudice and discrimination based on socio-economic status, religion, race or disability. They wanted more support and information on equal opportunities for marginalised and vulnerable groups, including LGBTQIA+ young people and those with disabilities.

Youth services should develop policies and programmes that celebrate cultural diversity and promote equality and provide targeted support for marginalised groups, ensuring all activities are accessible and open to all.

Through the survey considering equality children and young people said….



Analysis of Responses

- More than half (57%) believed that children and young people were treated equally in their local area. Less than 5% of Irish Medium respondents did.
- Just over half (51%) believed that everyone is included. Although just over one-third (35%) of non-binary or other and less than one-tenth (8%) of Irish Medium young people believed this.
- Just over half (51%) also believed that children and young people respected others who were different.
- Most respondents (80%) agreed that youth work programmes in their area were accessible. Less than half of Irish Medium young people (49%) agreed.
- Most respondents (87%) also agreed that youth work programmes in their area supported children and young people from other backgrounds.
- More than three-quarters of all respondents (79%) believed that they get chances to spend time with others who are different from them. Half of Irish Medium young people agreed.

Making a Positive Contribution to Society

Citizenship Findings

Children and young people who are socially active and participate in activities beyond school develop a positive outlook in life, which allows them to grow as a person and become confident, independent and resilient. To function well in communities and society, children and young people need to feel that they belong.

They need to believe that their contribution is listened to, valued and respected and that they can freely express their views in school, at a youth centre, at home and within the wider community. By encouraging and promoting active citizenship, children and young people are more likely to feel confident to engage in discussions about issues that affect them, to participate in activities in school, youth centres or within the community, making a positive contribution to their communities.

Engaging in active citizenship helps children and young people develop socially and emotionally, it helps build self-confidence and resilience and develops skills which enable them to deal effectively with significant life changes and challenges.

Children and young people's participation in decision-making on issues that affect them has been recognised and valued as a right. Engaging children and young people and building their capacity as active citizens is a positive factor in their development as individuals, enhances their career prospects and life chances and supports their positive contribution to their communities.

Participation is the process whereby children and young people can influence decisions about their lives and directly contribute to decisions that affect them. Participation enhances children and young people's personal, social and political development and provides practical experiences and teaches them how to behave responsibly.

Economic, geographical or social contexts can be barriers to a child or young person's active participation. These can include poverty, disabilities, gender and social conventions. Children and young people with physical or learning disabilities often lack opportunities to participate actively or take on roles due to stereotypes about their skills and abilities.

In Focus Groups:

Children and young people appreciated youth services for providing safe, inclusive spaces and opportunities for leadership and social action. They wanted more diverse programmes, better funding and more workshops on various skills and cultural education. Many young people however feel excluded from community decisions and wanted more opportunities to be involved. Suggestions included creating youth councils, offering civic engagement training and involving young people in planning events. Young people indicated that they wanted to be more involved in decision-making processes, the importance of youth services in their personal and social development and the need for more inclusive and supportive environments. Young people believed they make a difference by helping others, participating in school and youth councils and engaging in community projects. They valued making positive contributions as it made them feel heard, valued and respected.

Through the survey considering citizenship children and young people said….

39%

They do not have opportunities to make a difference in their school or community

71%

They have the opportunity to tell others what they think

42%

They do not feel listened to and taken seriously

81%

They believe young people can change things for the better

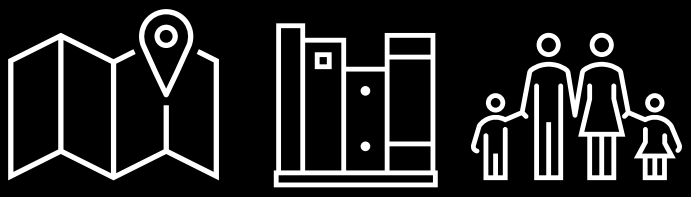
Analysis of Responses

- Almost two-thirds of respondents (61%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had opportunities to make a difference in their school or community. Just over half SEND children and young people (54%) and Irish Medium young people (53%) agreed.
- However, many respondents (71%) agreed that they had opportunities to tell others what they think. However, this was less than one-tenth for Irish Medium young people and half of non-binary or others.
- More than one half of children and young people (59%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were listened to and taken seriously. Less than one tenth of Irish Medium young people and one-third of non-binary or other believed this.
- Most children and young people, (82%), agreed or strongly agreed that young people can change things for the better.





Findings from Other Sources

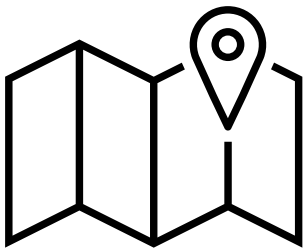


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Findings from Statistical Data



Summary Analysis

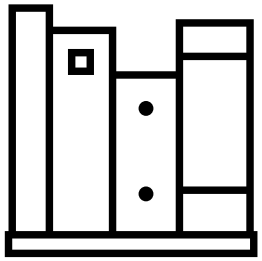
Data was collected from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and a range of government sources and other statutory bodies.

Area profiles and a Northern Ireland profile based on this data and information have been produced and will be made available of EA website.

Key headline findings from the statistical data reveal:

- There are 612,769 children and young people living in Northern Ireland.
- 24% of children and young people live in relative poverty (147,065).
- 19% of children and young people live in absolute poverty (116,426).
- 211,405 children and young people live in a rural community.
- One in five children and young people in Northern Ireland have a mental health need (122,554).
- 15,212 school–aged children have been diagnosed with autism, a prevalence rate of 5% of the school population.
- 10,436 young people aged 16-25 years identify as LGBTQIA+.
- There are currently over 17,500 unpaid carers aged under 25 in Northern Ireland.
    - This figure makes up 8% of Northern Ireland's carer population and includes more than 2,500 carers aged under 15, and 550 carers under the age of 10 years old.
- 5,378 children and young people aged up to 17 years old are homeless or living in temporary accommodation.
- There are 14,000 young people aged 16-24 years Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).
- Almost 4,000 children and young people are recorded as being in care.
- 22,500 children and young people are known to Social Services as a child in need.
- 96,319 (28%) of all pupils in Northern Ireland are eligible for free school meals.
- 66,404 (19%) of all pupils in Northern Ireland have a special educational need or disability.
- 19,470 newcomers attend schools in Northern Ireland.
- 1,055 traveller children and young people attend schools in Northern Ireland.
- 995 Roma children and young people attend schools in Northern Ireland.
- There were 1,493 Youth Justice Agency referrals. 61% of these referrals were for males.

Findings from Research



Summary Analysis

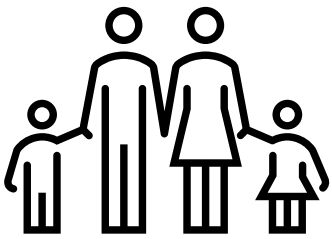
The initial stages of the Regional Assessment of Need involved a review of the relevant local, national and international literature looking into the challenges facing children and young people. It considered and explored some of the wider social determinants affecting them including education, deprivation, health, crime and local environment.

Key findings from the literature review revealed that:

- Adverse childhood experiences and socio-economic disadvantage can have negative long-term impacts on a child or young person's health, education and social outcomes.
- The numbers of children and young people experiencing poverty is increasing and is likely to continue because of the cost-of living-crisis. This can have significant negative impacts on a child or young person's physical and mental health, feelings of isolation and shame and a sense of unfairness.
- Many children and young people experience housing insecurity leading them to be cold and hungry.
- There are an increasing number of children and young people who are witnesses of or victims of domestic abuse. This leads to many of them becoming withdrawn and socially isolated.
- Children and young people and their families with additional learning needs are more likely to face barriers accessing the right educational support.
- Some vulnerable groups are hidden from the data and are hard to reach. These include young carers, those in care, young LGBTQIA+ young people and newcomers who will miss out on school or other social opportunities.
- Inequalities in health are caused by inequalities in society and vulnerable and marginalised groups are more likely to experience bullying, endure stress and have poor mental health.
- Children and young people are concerned about mental health issues and a lack of relevant support.
- Almost one-third of all children and young people in the UK currently live in poverty and are at risk of experiencing poorer health outcomes.
- Young people are anxious about their future career prospects and are facing economic uncertainty. Many are anxious about their transition to employment and independent living.
- Good emotional health and resilience is linked to economic security and environmental wellbeing.
- The increase in mental health issues among children and young people has highlighted the need for more mental health support services. Youth workers can provide early intervention and ongoing support.
- Vulnerable and marginalised children and young people face economic, social, cultural and environmental barriers that can lead to inequalities.
- Irish Medium youth providers wanted more support to meet increasing demand.

Findings from Stakeholders

Summary Analysis



The parents and youth workers noted that the most important issues facing children and young people today were health and wellbeing, play and leisure, their future and their safety. The findings from parents, youth workers and other key stakeholders reveal that poverty and deprivation remain a major issue and have negative impacts on the outcomes of children and young people from low-income families.

Young people from these communities will face barriers accessing education and will have poorer health outcomes and are more likely to engage in risk-taking or anti-social behaviours. Growing numbers of children and young people are living in poor housing conditions and it was suggested that they are more likely to have physical and mental health problems and social outcomes.

It was also noted that safety was a key concern for parents and youth workers. They were worried about the safety of young people in their own communities and the negative impact that social media has in terms of cyber-bullying and body image. There was a growing concern about the safety of women and young girls and how they could be best supported in the future.

Many parents, youth workers and stakeholders were concerned about the career options for vulnerable groups and noted that they lacked skills or training. They noted that inequalities in education were linked to where a child or young person lived or their social circumstances. Children and young people from ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+, young carers and looked after and SEND faced barriers accessing formal education were less likely to achieve at school.

The respondents recognised that those living in areas of deprivation were more likely to have poorer health outcomes. Youth workers noted how a balanced diet was linked to health. Parents agreed but explained that food insecurity was a problem for increasing numbers of families.

Physical activity was viewed as an important part of being physically healthy. However, it was noted that children and young people did not always have access to play or leisure facilities and that sometimes costs could prevent young people using them. The parents and youth workers did not believe that children and young people were always treated equally or included. They also did not believe that their voices were listened to and respected.

It was noted that the challenges faced by disadvantaged children and young people, including those with additional needs, from marginalised backgrounds, newcomers, LGBTQI+, and those experiencing challenges such as adverse childhood experiences, poverty, unemployment and homelessness, remain major issues. The parents and youth workers noted that these groups required support and interventions to break this cycle of hardship.

Conclusions

Summary Conclusion

of needs

Children and young people told us that they wanted:

- Greater access through youth work settings to information and guidance and resources to support their needs.
- Embed within universal youth work programmes the opportunity to discuss and explore themes relevant to their needs.
- Ensure that youth services provide a welcoming, safe, warm and nurturing environment which is provided consistently.
- Ensure youth services are provided at the right times and in the right places for children and young people, which should include longer opening hours, availability on weekends and during holiday periods.
- Develop more targeted approaches to support those who are disproportionately impacted or have barriers in accessing youth service support.
- Materials and information should be made available in formats that are accessible to those whose first language is not English or who are visually impaired.
- Develop innovative and creative curriculum resources and training for paid and volunteer youth workers in response to the needs articulated by children and young people.
- Continue to use and promote the use of trauma informed practice.
- Support young people to access various services, such as mental health support, educational opportunities and employment resources.
- Provide additional educational support and help bridge learning gaps.
- Access to Social Action programmes to support and empower them to make positive changes in their communities.
- Increased access to support their transition to employment and independence.
- Early intervention and prevention youth work programmes on more pressing concerns highlighted by children and young people through the survey and focus groups which include:
  - Support to address ending violence against women and girls
  - Community relations and equality beyond traditional Northern Ireland community backgrounds
  - Political education, citizenship and civic engagement
  - Understand and exercising their rights
  - A youth work response to address poverty and food hunger
  - Increasing access to those section 75 groups
  - Managing their emotional wellbeing in particular sleep and rest
  - Addressing risk taking behaviours
  - Supporting young people for employment and further or higher education.
  - Environment and Climate

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The Strategic Needs

of children and young people

The outcomes of the Children and Young People's Strategy (2020-2030) were used as themes to explore the needs of children and young people. Therefore, as part of the survey for the Regional Assessment of Need, we asked children and young people to select the theme that was most important to them and their personal development.

As highlighted in the findings from the children and young people's survey, they identified their future (economic and environmental stability) as being most important to them; followed by their hobbies and interests (access to play and leisure), and then their health and wellbeing (physically and mentally healthy) was ranked third. It is however important to note it should not diminish the importance of the other themes and priorities to the children and young people who selected these. This is a significant change compared to previous Regional Assessment of Need reports completed between 2017 and 2023, where emotional health and wellbeing was the most important theme for children and young people.

In addition, through the survey and focus group feedback, it has been highlighted by children and young people the interplay between these themes, namely that they are not mutually exclusive. For example, the negative impact of poor good relations and equality can have on emotional wellbeing, or how economic stability impacts wellbeing and access to play.

Universal youth services ensure that there is open access to children and young people who want to engage with youth service as voluntary participants. The quality of youth work provided through universal services is very important and it can address many of the themes identified by children and young people. Through focus groups, children and young people have identified that having access to local youth services is critically important to them. Therefore, as the youth service determines its priorities for planning and delivery, consideration should be given to the importance of quality universal service delivery and its role in supporting all these themes with children and young people.



Setting Priorities

the context

The Department of Education Policy, Priorities for Youth (2013), requires the Education Authority to consider youth work delivery under the areas of Raising Standards, Closing the Gap Increasing Access & Equality, Developing the Non-Formal Education Workforce, Improving the Non-Formal Learning Environment, and Transforming Governance and the Management of Non-Formal Education. Therefore, the needs of children and young people will be prioritised within these key areas of action to clearly articulate youth work's contribution to the education of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Raising Standards:

The youth service should ensure robust quality assurance and monitoring arrangements are in place. This process should not only provide assurances that delivery in response to the need is effective but also nurture a culture of continuous improvement. This process should also seek out new ways, including international best practice, to approach addressing young people's needs leading to innovation.

Key to effective strategic planning is the need to articulate the strategic intent of the youth service with specific goals set to ensure the change and outcomes required are achieved, therefore the Regional Youth Development Plan will articulate the aspirational vision and the intended direction of service delivery. In addition, it is recognised that children and young people's needs often change based on their social context at any given time, therefore the planning process for 2026-2029 needs to be dynamic in responding to their needs in the moment.

Developing the Non-Formal Education Workforce:

The workforce for youth service in Northern Ireland comprises of 94% volunteers and 6% paid staff. Compared to other nations in the UK, this is unique to Northern Ireland and is considered a strength of our youth service. It is important to note that three quarters of those who do volunteer within youth services are from the Uniformed, Faith-based and Irish Medium sectors.

Training and capacity building of the workforce, based on the ongoing assessed needs of children and young people, is critical to the success of quality youth work delivery. It is important when considering the design and delivery of training, that a bespoke approach is taken for part-time, full-time and volunteer staff across the sector.

Improving the Non-Formal Learning Environment:

The relevance and quality of the curriculum offer is also critical to meeting the needs of children and young people through youth work. It is important that curriculum resources, guidance and materials are developed based on the ongoing needs of children and young people. In addition, curriculum and training are interlinked, therefore, when training is considered, the development of curriculum resources should also happen at the same time.

Furthermore, Priorities for Youth outlines the importance of participation of children and young people, and that they should remain core to the design and delivery of training and curriculum.

Good Governance through Partnership & Collaboration:

In an environment of constrained resources and funding within the public sector in Northern Ireland and based on best practice, partnership and collaboration will be key to successfully meet the diverse needs of children and young people.

In addition, when goals and vision are aligned through partnership, this offers a greater opportunity to reach children and young people who need support from youth services, whilst also sharing skills and resources to effectively meet their needs.

Enshrined in youth policy is the expectation that the Education Authority work in partnership and collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders including the voluntary and community youth work sector. The Funding Scheme for Regional and Local Voluntary Youth Organisations should empower opportunities for this to happen when it benefits children and young people.

Considering this, the Education Authority will continue to explore the delivery of prioritised youth services on its own, and with others through partnership and collaboration within a public health approach.



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Raising Standards

Recommendations Moving Forward

Dynamically Assess the Needs of Children and Young People

Youth work needs to consistently and constantly seek the views of children and young people through the planning period to ensure the plan for delivery is meeting their needs. The approach that was deployed in this Regional Assessment of Need should be used, reviewed and continuously developed.

In addition, a robust quality assurance process should be in place to test and evaluate the effectiveness of delivery in addressing those needs identified by children and young people.

Revise the Structure of the Regional Youth Development Plan

Planning should focus less on a list of outputs but rather outline a strategic intent and direction for the delivery of youth services over the three-year period. In addition to being strategic, the plan should enable the delivery of youth work to respond dynamically to the needs of children and young people at the time.

Reduce Bureaucracy

To ensure effective youth work delivery, the focus is going to be on building meaningful relationships and the delivery of quality youth work with children and young people. To ensure the correct focus and emphasis on quality youth work delivery and to enhance the educational outcomes for children and young people, the Education Authority will reduce bureaucracy ensuring that the reporting will clearly evidence how raising standards are met through DE funded youth work.

This will include a list of key reporting indicators aligned to benefits realisation, which enables the Education Authority to effectively report on the DE Outcomes Based Accountability Framework. The benefits realisation framework will clearly indicate the impact that youth work has made to the lives of children and young people because of their engagement and participation in youth services. The depth of impact will be told through the stories of children and young people, illustrated through case studies, and will highlight the extent to which expected outcomes have been achieved.

Based on best practice, the Education Authority youth service will continue to develop an evidence base of practice through, external and independent research, demonstrating the impact of youth work and effective models of practice.





Closing the Gap, Increasing Access & Equality

Recommendations Moving Forward

Universal Youth Services

Throughout the engagement with children and young people, they have reflected their need to access youth work more regularly at times that suit them including twilight and afterschool, later opening at weekends, and during holiday periods.

Furthermore, across most themes children and young people have reflected the need to have access to information about the issues that concern them, which should be embedded into universal programme delivery. Youth work is built on trusted relationships between the youth worker and the child or young person. This affords youth work settings the opportunity to provide trusted sources of information on key issues in a non-judgemental and supportive environment.

Universal Youth Work (also referred to as Generic or Non-Targeted) is critical to providing access to hobbies and interests (play and leisure) and is a foundational protective factor in the lives of children and young people. A key focus of the youth work curriculum, within universal youth work, is the development of opportunities to support their hobbies and interests.

An important priority is support for children and young people from section 75 groups to access universal youth services. Therefore, greater effort and focus should also be placed on reaching out and building increased opportunities for those who experience barriers to participation.

As the Programme for Government (2024-2027) has highlighted the need for better supports for children and young people with special educational needs the Education Authority Youth Service will prioritise the development of a youth work response to improve their access and participation in youth services. This will include innovative approach to a curriculum offer, development in partnership and collaboration where appropriate with both informal and formal settings.

In response expressed needs from children and young people from the Irish Medium youth work sector, the Education Authority Youth Service will prioritise the development of a youth work response to specifically address their bespoke needs whilst improving their access and participation in youth services.

Overall, there should be a concerted effort to increase the opportunities for children and young people to access universal youth work programmes across the region.

Early Intervention and Prevention

Whilst youth work does provide and will continue to provide group work programmes and projects based on emerging need regionally and locally, young people have identified pressing concerns now through the regional assessment of need. Specifically, there needs to be a focus on:

- support to address ending violence against women and girls
- community relations and equality beyond traditional Northern Ireland community backgrounds
- political education, citizenship and civic engagement
- understand and exercising their rights
- a youth work response to address poverty and food hunger
- increasing access to those section 75 groups
- managing their emotional wellbeing in particular sleep and rest
- addressing risk taking behaviours
- supporting young people for employment and further or higher education
- Environment and Climate

Additional funding sources outside of the DE Youth Service budget should focus on adding value to early intervention and preventative approaches to addressing these needs. Youth services practitioners should ensure effective transition to other enhanced services required to meet the additional needs of children and young people.



Developing the Non-Formal Education Workforce

Recommendations Moving Forward

A Focus on Volunteers

Given the proportion of the workforce that is made up of volunteers and the importance of universal youth work, it is important to recruit more volunteers to increase access to youth services. In addition, retaining volunteers, investing in them to recognising their contribution will be critical to maintain and growing this important part of our workforce. The current Education Authority Youth Service Volunteer strategy (2023-2029) should be evaluated for the 2023-2026 planning period, revised if required and investment made to continue workforce growth in this area.

Developing & Delivering of Effective Training

A programme of training should be developed based on the needs identified within this Regional Assessment of Need to ensure an equipped and confident workforce in their delivery of youth work. A particular focus should be placed on the most pressing needs identified in the early intervention and prevention section noted above.

A quality assurance process should be completed to ensure existing training is fit for purpose, enabling the workforce to meet the assessed needs of children and young people. Training should be bespoke for volunteers, part-time, full-time professionally qualified staff, and will include reasonable adjustments to support language or other barriers to participate in training.

Given the focus children and young people have placed on access to good quality universal youth services, a particular suite of courses and workshops should be developed. Themes should include play, creating welcoming and inclusive spaces and how to present or share information with children and young people on their concerns.

Any training should be supported with a suite of curriculum resources to support delivery and develop the knowledge and skills of the workforce. In addition, the Education Authority should explore the option to create an online learning platform for youth work staff and volunteers for registered voluntary organisations and statutory settings. This should include online self-taught options, a calendar of in-person courses and support resources for the sector.





Improving the Non-Formal Learning Environment

Recommendations Moving Forward

Developing the Curriculum Based on the Needs of Children and Young People

Integral to the delivery of the youth work is the provision of appropriate curriculum materials that support the workforce to deliver programmes based on the needs of children and young people. There should be a focus on the pressing concerns, from children and young people, as part of this Regional Assessment of Need. Any resources shared or published as part of this process, should be checked to ensure they are reflective of the present need. This could include exploring an online platform for training or as part of the same process, these curriculum resources should be made available online.

In addition, considering a strength-based approach, mechanisms to support the sharing of curriculum resources should also be developed for the sector that can be published for wider use within youth work. This should include the establishment of a sectoral curriculum forum for sharing and showcasing of curriculum resources and materials, setting minimum standards for publication, quality assurance of materials and reporting on their effectiveness and use.

Connecting Curriculum Development to Training Development

As noted under developing the non-formal education workforce, the development and sharing of curriculum resources also needs to be supported with training to maximise the outcomes for children and young people and ensure quality youth work delivery.

Ensuring the Voice of Children and Young people is Central to Delivery of Youth Services

Youth services will ensure Youth Voice is embedded in all youth settings at a local, sub-regional and regional level. This will extend to the development of all contemporary models of youth work delivery, including training and curriculum materials. Young people will therefore have direct influence on all aspects of youth work delivery. Considering the needs of section 75 groups, and particularly their barriers to participation, a priority will be the development of thematic youth voice projects, centred on their needs locally and regionally.

Transforming Governance & Management of Non-Formal Education

Recommendations Moving Forward

Defining and Guidance for Partnership and Collaboration

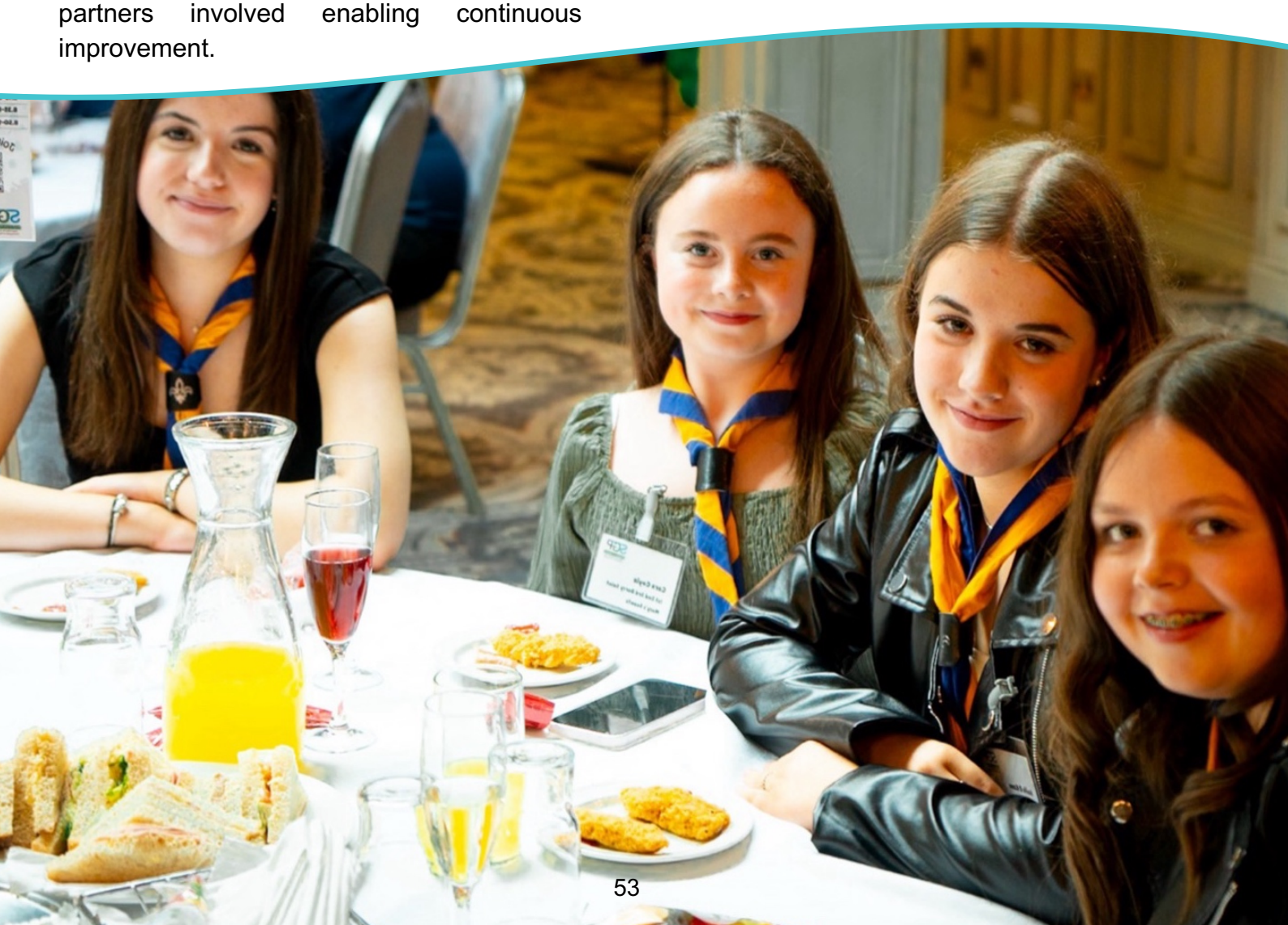
The Education Authority Youth Service will develop a framework for effective partnership and collaboration based on principles and best practice.

Monitoring and Quality Assuring Partnership and Collaborations

The Education Authority Youth Service will assess the quality and impact of partnership and collaborations established. This will include the development of guidance for all partners involved enabling continuous improvement.

Funding and Resourcing Focused to enable Partnership and Collaboration

The existing funding streams for regional and local voluntary youth organisations should consider how each stream can facilitate and support partnership and collaboration to ensure best value approaches which provide enhanced outcomes for children and young people.



List of Acronyms

SEND	Special Educational Need and Disability
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and other identities
RSE	Relationship and Sex Education
EA	Education Authority
DE	Department of Education
CNR	Catholic National Republican
PUL	Protestant Unionist Loyalist
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
T:BUC	Together Building United Communities

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