Education Authority

2026 - 2029



ARDS & NORTH DOWN

LOCAL ASSESSMENT OF NEED

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Introduction

The Education Authority (EA) Youth Service Local Assessment of Need is a key document outlined in the Department of Education's (DE) Youth Work Policy *Priorities for Youth (2013)* as it requires the Education Authority to ensure *'Planning, funding and the delivery of youth work will be based on the EA composite (local and regional) assessment of need.'*

The wider requirements and purpose of undertaking the assessment of need process is outlined in detail within the Regional Assessment of Need 2026-2029. This regional document provides further detail on the EA's statutory duty, other policy requirements and links to Northern Ireland Government strategies. It also sets the context within which these documents are being completed as well as the key purpose and functions the effective youth provision provides for children and young people. The regional document can be found here.

This document should be read in conjunction with the Regional Assessment of Need. Its key objective is to establish the level of need for Youth Service provision for children and young people aged 4-25 years in Ards North Down. It brings together data, evidence and local insight to help identify the needs and barriers children and young people in Ards North Down face. Listening to, and understanding, the voices and opinions of children and young people is an important part of this process.

Methodology

Following on from the methodology of the Regional Assessment of Need process, there were six parts to developing the Local Assessment of Need for in Ards North Down Area. The tools used to gather essential information and data for the regional document had the ability to be filtered at a local level and this supplied EA with an excellent resource to listen to and understand the direct voices of children and young people. Details of how this was achieved are laid out in the regional document.

Part One – Children and Young People's Survey

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 total of 5,451 children and young people responded to the survey. From those figures 263 reported living in Ards North Down Area.

Part Two – Children and Young People's Focus Groups

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. Focus groups with children and young people were facilitated by youth workers. These were based on the policy age group bands and including 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. A total of 138 focus groups, involving 1,630 participants, were facilitated throughout Northern Ireland. 7 focus groups, involving 140 participants were completed in Ards North Down.

Part Three – The Development of Area Profiles

Area Profiles using all available statistical data and information about the needs of children and young people have 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 profile Report for Ards North Down Area can be found here.

Part Four – Embedding Findings from Key Research

The Education Authority Youth Service's 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.

Part Five – Parents and Organisation Survey

A survey for parents and other 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.

Part Six – Wider Stakeholder Engagement

The Education Authority Youth Service has engaged with a wide range of key stakeholders across the area to ensure the Local Assessment of Need reflects local priorities and perspectives. This includes collaboration with statutory agencies and voluntary sector partners such as the Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP), local councils, community and voluntary youth organisations, and representatives from education, health, and good relations sectors. Their insight and feedback have been vital in identifying emerging needs, shaping priorities, and ensuring Youth Service planning is informed by those working directly with children and young people in the community.

Council in Numbers

The population of Ards and North Down Local Government area is 164,223 people.

45,724 children and young people are aged 0-25 years live in Ards and North Down.

39,450 children and young people are aged 4-25 years live in Ards and North Down.

Age bands population

- 6,279 aged 0 – 3 years
- 9,380 aged 4 – 8 years
- 10,153 aged 9 – 13 years
- 9,369 aged 14 – 18 years
- 10,554 aged 19 – 25 years

In Ards and North Down 3,294 children and young people aged 0-25 years (7.2%) live in deprivation.

8,047 children and young people (17.6%) live in a rural community in Ards and North Down.

23% of children and young people aged 0-24 years old in Ards and North Down come from a lone parent family (census21).

600 Newcomers attend schools in Ards and North Down (4.2%) – NI Average 5%.

7 Irish Traveller children and young people.

5,170 (29.5%) of all pupils in Ards and North Down are eligible for Free School Meals. 2023/24 (NI average 28%).

4,448 pupils (16.8%) who attend school in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 have a Special Education Need or Disability Stage 1-3. (NI average 19%).

The percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C (incl. equivalent qualifications) including GCSE English and Math in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 is 79.1% compared to the NI average of 76.1%.

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed and/or unknown in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 is 4.8% (NI average 4.7%).

4.2% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification. (NI average 4.9%).

The proportion of Primary 1 pupils identified as obese or overweight in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 is 18%. (NI average 20.4%) This represents 27.7% of girls (NI 24.3%) and 17.9% of boys (NI 16.5%).

The proportion of Primary 8 pupils identified as obese or overweight in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 is 25.9%. (NI average 26%) This represents 25.5% of girls (NI 26.2%) and 22.6% of boys (NI 25.8%).

Suicide rates in Ards and North Down has increased by 40% from 2019, 10 suicides to 2023, 14 suicides. The suicide rate has risen this past 2 years in Ards and North Down from 12 in 2022 to 14 in 2023.

There were 40 incidents with a sectarian motivation in Ards and North Down in 2023/24.

There were 81 incidents with a racist motivation in Ards and North Down in 2023/24. This is a 2% increase from the previous year of 79 racial motivated incidents.

Between 2022/23 and 2023/24 there has of 10.8% (1,353) rise in incidents with a racist motivation in Northern Ireland.

There was a total of 1,319 domestic abuse crimes in Ards and North Down in 2023/24. This is a 10% drop from the previous year. The average rate for domestic abuse crimes in Ards and North Down DEAs is 189 (NI average 250).

There was a total of 3,433 anti-social behaviour incidents in Ards and North Down in 2023/24. This is a -1.5% drop from the previous year. The average rate for anti-social behaviour incidents in Ards and North Down DEAs is 491 (NI average 567).

Key trends

- Emotional health concerns are prominent, with stress and isolation commonly reported.
    - The suicide rate in Ards and North Down has risen by 40% since 2019, with 14 deaths recorded in 2023, reflecting growing mental health needs among young people.
- Access to leisure is limited by rurality, cost, and lack of inclusive options.
    - Over 17% of young people live in rural areas, where transport barriers and high costs restrict participation in physical and social activities.
- Academic pressure and achievement gaps affect wellbeing and opportunity.
    - While 79.1% of school leavers achieved five GCSEs including English and Maths, above the NI average, young people still reported high stress levels and a need for more educational and emotional support.
- Young people want to be more involved in shaping the services that affect them.
    - Feedback from focus groups indicated a clear desire for meaningful involvement in decision-making, with many feeling their voices are overlooked.
- Disadvantage is more widespread than deprivation figures suggest.
    - Although only 7.2% of young people live in officially defined deprivation, 29.5% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals, indicating broader socio-economic pressures affecting access to support.

Based on the responses from young people the ranking of priority areas are:

- Play, Hobbies and Interests
- Your Future
- Safety
- Health and Wellbeing
- Your Rights
- Education
- Equality
- Citizenship

The Findings

Emotional Health and Wellbeing

Key facts

4,448 pupils (16.8%) who attend school in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 have a Special Education Need or Disability Stage 1-3. (NI average 19%).

Approximately 9,145 children and young people aged 0-25 years have a mental health need.

2,143 children and young people aged 0-24 years have autism.

The proportion of Primary 1 pupils identified as obese or overweight in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 is 18%. (NI average 20.4%) This represents 27.7% of girls (NI 24.3%) and 17.9% of boys (NI 16.5%).

The proportion of Primary 8 pupils identified as obese or overweight in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 is 25.9%. (NI average 26%) This represents 25.5% of girls (NI 26.2%) and 22.6% of boys (NI 25.8%).

20% of children and young people aged 0-24 years have a long-term health condition (NI 19.8%).

There was 5.81 births per 1,000 births to young mothers aged under 20 years. (NI average 5.83%).

There was 0.79 births per 1,000 births to young mothers aged under 17 years. (NI average 0.75%).

According to the most recent census, 724 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

Suicide rates in Ards and North Down has increased by 40% from 2019, 10 suicides to 2023, 14 suicides. The suicide rate has risen this past 2 years in Ards and North Down from 12 in 2022 to 14 in 2023.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Ards and North Down, the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people emerges as a pressing and multifaceted need, underpinned by a combination of structural, social, and personal factors. Evidence from survey responses, focus groups, and area-level data points to a council-wide concern where anxiety, stress, and emotional distress are common features of young people's lived experiences. These issues are compounded in certain geographies and subgroups by rural isolation, cost-of-living pressures, and limited access to tailored mental health support.

Anxiety is the most consistently reported emotional health issue across age groups. Young people in the council area particularly those aged 14 to 18frequently referred to feeling overwhelmed by school pressures, social media comparisons, and the unpredictability of their wider environment. For some, stress linked to academic performance and exam readiness was a daily challenge, while others cited concerns over family breakdown, loneliness, or body image. Although many young people acknowledged that services such as school counsellors or the EA Youth Service exist, there was a shared perception that access is inconsistent, and in some areas, notably rural Ards, simply absent. This gap is particularly acute given the rising concern around mental ill-health. Suicide rates in Ards and North Down have increased significantly, with a 40% rise between 2019 and 2023, climbing from 10 to 14 recorded suicides, underscoring the urgency of preventative and supportive mental health interventions.

The role of rurality emerged as a key contextual factor influencing emotional wellbeing. In more isolated parts of the council, particularly the Ards Peninsula, young people described how the lack of public transport and limited local amenities left them feeling cut off. Long travel times from school to home meant they often arrived back late in the evening, exhausted and with little opportunity to access any extracurricular or support services. Participants stressed that mental health services in these areas were virtually non-existent, highlighting the absence particularly in rural Ards as a tangible example. This isolation not only heightened feelings of disconnection but also exacerbated existing emotional health challenges tied to poverty and the increasing cost of living. The rural premium on basic goods and transport was seen as placing additional strain on families, further contributing to anxiety and emotional stress among young people.

Across the wider council area, young people's ability to manage emotional health was closely tied to relationships with family, peers, and trusted adults. While schools were mentioned as a primary source of support, the quality of these interactions was variable. Some young people noted that their teachers or classroom assistants were approachable and helpful, while others described difficulties in speaking to staff, feeling judged, or not taken seriously. Youth workers, by contrast, were consistently valued as approachable, empathetic, and supportive. Many participants in focus groups described youth settings as "safe spaces" where they could be themselves, talk openly, and receive help without fear of stigma. The presence of supportive youth workers, opportunities for open conversation, and a relaxed environment were all cited as positive contributors to emotional wellbeing.

Young people also discussed the intersection between physical and emotional health. Several comments highlighted how poor physical health linked to inactivity, poor nutrition, or lack of access to outdoor space could negatively affect mental wellbeing. This was especially relevant in areas lacking well-lit facilities for evening use or inclusive spaces that encouraged different forms of engagement beyond traditional sports. Participants expressed a desire for more varied activities such as hiking,

water-based outdoor learning, and accredited personal development courses that could contribute to both physical and emotional resilience. For many, structured physical engagement offered a constructive outlet for stress and a means of building self-esteem.

From a service delivery perspective, gaps were most keenly felt in the availability of age-appropriate, ongoing emotional wellbeing support. Young people across Ards and North Down consistently asked for more group sessions focused on mental health, peer support opportunities, and confidential one-on-one conversations. Critically, they wanted this support to be built into their regular Youth Service experience, not offered as one-off interventions. The desire for continuity and trust-building was evident, particularly among those who had encountered formal mental health services in crisis situations but felt unsupported in the longer term.

Access to information was another recurring theme. Many young people said they were unsure where to find reliable information about mental health or were unaware of the support services available to them. Suggestions included developing more accessible and youth-friendly online platforms, better promotion of services through social media, and youth club-based information hubs where young people could receive guidance or be referred to appropriate services.

Notably, some specific vulnerabilities emerged for certain subgroups. Lone parent households make up 23% of family structures in Ards and North Down, and while not all these families face hardship, young people from these settings were more likely to mention stress related to home life, caregiving responsibilities, and food insecurity. Similarly, while the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (29.5%) and those with special educational needs (16.8%) is slightly below the regional average, these children reported experiencing additional challenges in managing emotional wellbeing. For example, young people with SEND spoke about the importance of having trusted adults who could help them interpret and regulate their emotions, a need that was not consistently met across school or community settings.

Social media's influence on mental health was another widely shared concern. Young people frequently cited the pressure to appear perfect, the experience of online bullying, and the addictive nature of digital platforms as significant sources of stress and anxiety. There was a strong appetite for youth work to play a more active role in this space by educating young people about online safety, facilitating peer-led discussions about digital wellbeing, and helping them develop strategies for managing their social media use.

The feedback from younger children particularly those aged 9 to 13highlighted simpler but no less significant emotional health needs. These included wanting to be listened to, needing reassurance when friendships went wrong, and coping with sadness or loss. At this stage, youth workers were often identified as key figures who could provide emotional regulation tools and act as a bridge between the child and more formal services or adults at home. Their role in early intervention and relationship-building was especially valued by this age group.

The data from Ards and North Down reveals a picture in which emotional health and wellbeing is shaped by a complex interplay of personal, social, and structural forces. Young people across the council are calling for sustained, locally accessible, and responsive emotional support that reflects their lived experiences and provides practical strategies for managing stress, anxiety, and broader life challenges. Youth Services are uniquely positioned to meet this need, offering relational, community-based support that complements but does not replace clinical intervention. Ensuring that every young person

regardless of where they live or what they are experiencing can access this support consistently across the council is critical to addressing the emotional health and wellbeing needs that have been so clearly articulated.

Access to Play and Leisure

Key facts

- Based on the NI schools census a range of data supports the theme of accessing play and leisure;
    - 97% of teachers agree that outdoor play is critical for a child to reach his/her potential.
    - 88% of teachers agree that children are happier after playing outdoors.
    - 86% of teachers agree that playing outdoors gives children a better understanding of the environment.
- There were 22,715 pre-school placements in Northern Ireland in 2022/2023.
- 36,556 children aged 0-3 were registered with Sure Start projects in 2023-2024.
- Approximately 20,000 residents participate in around 150 community sports clubs and groups.
- Ards North Down Borough Council have invested a significant amount of money in both younger ages play areas as well as significant investment in Older/Teen play areas such as skateparks.
- 25.3% of the population report a disability or long-term health condition.
- Ards North Down Borough Council Community Development services provide play clubs and discos for children with additional needs.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Ards and North Down, access to play and leisure emerges as a significant area of unmet need for children and young people, with clear implications for their wellbeing, inclusion, and social development. Across the council area, barriers to meaningful engagement in recreational and creative activities were identified in both quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group insights, with rurality, affordability, and limited-service variety appearing as key constraints. Children and young people consistently described the importance of play and leisure in their lives, not only as a means of enjoyment, but as a critical outlet for emotional expression, physical activity, peer interaction, and personal growth.

One of the most prominent concerns raised, particularly in rural areas such as the Ards Peninsula, was the challenge of accessibility. Many children and young people living in more isolated parts of the council area reported significant difficulty in travelling to local leisure centres, youth hubs, or organised activities due to limited or costly public transport. With some young people returning home from school as late as 6:30pm, opportunities to take part in after-school or evening programmes were curtailed by both travel time and the lack of available services nearby. These geographical inequalities in access to leisure were compounded by a wider recognition that rural communities tend to have fewer tailored or inclusive options beyond traditional sports. While football and GAA clubs were often available, they did not meet the interests of all young people, especially those who preferred arts-based, social, or non-competitive activities.

Linked to this, there was a strong expressed need for Youth Services to provide a more diverse and engaging offer in relation to play and leisure. Children and young people across all age groups advocated for a wider variety of activities, both indoors and outdoors, that would allow them to explore different interests, develop new skills, and connect with others in a safe environment. For younger age groups, this included more access to creative programmes such as arts and crafts, music, and baking, while older age groups requested more outdoor adventure experiences, life skills sessions, and cultural or arts-based workshops. Suggestions such as kayaking, hiking, tie-dye projects, and cooking classes were framed as enjoyable and opportunities for emotional regulation, confidence-building and improved wellbeing.

In urban DEAs such as Bangor West and Newtownards, while transport was less frequently cited as a barrier, affordability and the availability of safe, welcoming spaces were key issues. The cost associated with leisure whether entry fees, equipment, or travel was highlighted as a barrier to participation, particularly for families already experiencing financial pressures. This was reflected in local data indicating that almost 30% of pupils in Ards and North Down are eligible for Free School Meals, and over 7% of children and young people live in deprivation. Young people called for youth clubs to provide free or low-cost activities, especially in the evenings and during holidays, and for more funding to be allocated toward transport to regional events, camps, or inter-club activities.

Equally notable was the demand for play and leisure opportunities that support mental and emotional wellbeing. Focus group feedback suggested that young people saw leisure not only as physical activity or entertainment, but as a vital outlet for stress relief, social connection, and mental health support. Participants described safe, informal spaces as a critical need, places where they could spend time with friends, talk to trusted adults, or simply unwind. The absence of these kinds of spaces was felt particularly strongly by those experiencing social anxiety, isolation, or other challenges. Some young

people suggested ‘quiet hours’ or clubs specifically for those with additional needs, noting that existing services often did not cater to neurodiverse participants or those who struggled in mainstream settings.

There was also a strong theme of wanting leisure opportunities to feel more inclusive and reflective of the diversity within the community. While Ards and North Down has low newcomer and minority ethnic populations compared to some other areas, focus group responses still highlighted a desire for cultural events, inclusive programming, and a sense of representation. Children and young people asked for activities that recognised their identities and promoted understanding between different communities. This included requests for more inclusive sports options, arts activities exploring different cultures, and opportunities to meet and mix with peers from across the council.

The overall perception among children and young people was that play and leisure are undervalued in planning and provision, especially for those who fall outside of traditional sports or structured activity settings. They expressed a need for more spontaneous and informal leisure experiences such as drop-in nights, creative projects, and social spaces within youth clubs as well as greater involvement in shaping what is offered. Their responses reflected a desire to have a say in how leisure services are designed, not only to ensure they reflect real interests and needs, but also to feel valued and respected as active participants in their communities.

Underpinning all these insights is a broader recognition that play and leisure are not optional extras but essential components of wellbeing and development. Children and young people in Ards and North Down are clear about the role that leisure plays in their lives: it supports mental health, strengthens relationships, builds resilience, and enables them to feel connected and confident. However, significant gaps remain in the consistency, accessibility, and responsiveness of available services. Addressing these issues particularly around rural access, affordability, diversity of provision, and inclusion represents a core need that sits firmly within the remit of Youth Services.

In summary, the needs of children and young people in Ards and North Down in relation to play and leisure are multi-layered. They involve structural barriers such as transport and cost, as well as deeper questions about belonging, inclusion, and agency. Youth Services have a critical role to play in bridging these gaps offering not just activities, but safe, affirming environments where young people can thrive. As articulated by the young people themselves, the most effective provision will be that which listens, adapts, and actively includes them in both design and delivery.

Learning and achieving

Key facts

The percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C (incl. equivalent qualifications) including GCSE English and maths in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 is 79.1% compared to the NI average of 76.1%.

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed and/or unknown in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 is 4.8%. (NI average 4.7%).

4.2% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification. (NI average 4.9%).

600 Newcomers attend schools in Ards and North Down (4.2%) – NI Average 5%.

7 Irish Traveller children and young people.

5,170 (29.5%) of all pupils in Ards and North Down are eligible for Free School Meals. 2023/24 (NI average 28%).

4,448 pupils (16.8%) who attend school in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 have a Special Education Need or Disability Stage 1-3. (NI average 19%).

223 children and young people were suspended from school in Ards and North Down.

The attendance rate for post-primary schools was 92.4%. (NI average 96%).

According to the most recent census, 724 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Ards and North Down, the theme of learning and achieving reveals a nuanced portrait of educational opportunity and attainment, underscored by disparities that reflect both structural and socio-economic influences. While the council area performs strongly in formal educational outcomes when compared to regional averages, data and lived experiences shared by children and young people point to enduring challenges that inhibit equitable access to achievement, particularly among marginalised groups. These issues are particularly relevant for Youth Services, which are seen as playing a vital role in supporting non-formal learning, fostering engagement, and addressing gaps in confidence, motivation, and inclusion.

Statistically, Ards and North Down shows high academic attainment, with 79.1% of school leavers in 2022/23 achieving at least five GCSEs including English and Maths, outperforming the Northern Ireland average of 76.1%. This headline success, however, conceals more complex underlying trends. Almost 30% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals, a key indicator of socio-economic disadvantage, while 16.8% of pupils are registered with a Special Educational Need or Disability (Stage 1–3), reflecting a significant cohort who may face additional barriers to learning. These figures suggest that while many young people are excelling within the formal education system, others continue to experience significant challenges that require broader, more flexible forms of support precisely the domain where Youth Services can intervene.

Young people in focus groups consistently highlighted stress related to academic performance, particularly around examinations and school transitions. The pressure to succeed in formal education was frequently cited as a source of anxiety, with some expressing fear of failure and a sense of being overwhelmed. This was particularly true for those with additional learning needs, or those who did not feel well-supported in traditional classroom environments. Several respondents noted that Youth Services needed to support young people in preparation for adult life including exam preparation, stress management skills that can be transferred into life after formal education.

Another recurring theme was the value placed on practical and vocational learning areas which many young people felt were underrepresented in school settings. These forms of non-academic achievement were described as vital to building self-esteem and motivation, particularly for those who did not view themselves as "academic." In this context, Youth Services were seen as uniquely placed to offer a complementary space for learning one where success is measured not only by grades, but by growth in confidence, self-expression, and life readiness.

The need for accessible and tailored learning support was especially pronounced among those living in rural areas. In communities such as the Ards Peninsula, long travel times, lack of public transport, and fewer local amenities created logistical challenges that limited participation in both formal and non-formal learning opportunities. Young people from rural backgrounds expressed frustration that their interests and ambitions were often overlooked, with limited access to diverse programmes or youth-led projects. There were repeated calls for more locally delivered learning opportunities through Youth Services, including accredited courses, digital literacy support, and collaborative projects that connect rural and urban peers.

Newcomer young people and those from ethnic minority backgrounds also raised concerns about their experiences in educational settings. While the proportion of newcomer pupils in Ards and North Down (4.2%) is slightly below the Northern Ireland average, these young people often reported feeling isolated

or under-supported, particularly around language barriers and integration. Several expressed a need for peer support groups, inclusive learning spaces, and opportunities to celebrate their cultural identities. Youth Services were seen as a potential bridge capable of fostering belonging, offering language support, and providing culturally relevant learning experiences that affirm rather than erase difference.

For young people with disabilities or special educational needs, there was a strong emphasis on the importance of accessible learning environments. Some focus group participants shared that they did not feel fully included in mainstream educational activities and often faced low expectations from peers or adults. In contrast, they described positive experiences within youth settings that adapted to their pace, interests, and communication needs. Here, learning was framed as enjoyable, empowering, and self-directed. The implication for Youth Services is clear: there is a vital need for programmes that are inclusive by design, capable of supporting diverse learning styles, and respectful of the abilities and ambitions of every young person.

Another notable area of concern was the disconnect between educational success and readiness for adult life. Despite high levels of academic attainment, many young people expressed uncertainty about their futures, particularly around employment pathways. They felt unprepared for the world of work and unsure how to navigate further education, job applications, or financial independence. This was especially true among those not pursuing traditional academic routes. There was a clear appetite for Youth Services to support this transition and link young people with positive role models in their communities.

Youth voice and participation also featured prominently within the broader learning and achievement theme. Many young people felt that their educational experiences were done “to them” rather than “with them,” and welcomed the opportunity for more participative learning within youth settings. They asked for spaces where they could lead projects, make decisions, and shape what and how they learn. This desire for agency was seen as central not only to their engagement, but to their personal development and confidence as learners. Youth-led initiatives, peer mentoring, and project-based learning were frequently suggested as ways to deepen participation and foster a sense of ownership.

While Ards and North Down is a high-achieving council area in terms of educational metrics, the lived experience of its children and young people tells a more layered story. The need for inclusive, flexible, and empowering learning opportunities beyond the classroom is evident, particularly for those facing socio-economic, geographic, or personal barriers. Youth Services have a role to play in addressing these needs not by duplicating the work of schools, but by offering a complementary space where learning is experiential, holistic, and inclusive.

In conclusion, learning and achieving in Ards and North Down must be understood as more than exam results. It encompasses the development of skills, confidence, and aspiration in all young people, including those who struggle in traditional educational settings. There is a clear need for Youth Services to continue and expand their role in this space offering tailored, locally accessible programmes that support emotional wellbeing, build life skills, and promote educational equity. In doing so, Youth Services can help ensure that every young person, regardless of background or ability, is given the chance not only to achieve, but to thrive.

Living in Safety and Stability

Key facts

In Ards and North Down 3,294 children and young people aged 0-25 years (7.2%) live in deprivation.

8,047 children and young people (17.6%) live in a rural community in Ards and North Down.

According to the most recent census, 724 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

23% of children and young people aged 0-24 years old in Ards and North Down come from a lone parent family (Census 2021).

There were 40 incidents with a sectarian motivation in Ards and North Down in 2023/24.

There were 81 incidents with a racist motivation in Ards and North Down in 2023/24. This is 2% increase from the previous year of 79 racial motivated incidents.

There has been a 10.8% (1,353) rise in incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24 to year 2022/23 (1,221) in Northern Ireland.

There was a total of 1,319 domestic abuse crimes in Ards and North Down in 2023/24. This is a 10% drop from the previous year. The average rate for domestic abuse crimes in Ards and North Down DEAs is 189. (NI average 250).

There was a total of 3,433 anti-social behaviour incidents in Ards and North Down in 2023/24. This is a -1.5% drop from the previous year. The average rate for anti-social behaviour incidents in Ards and North Down DEAs is 491. (NI average 567).

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Ards and North Down, the theme of living in safety and stability reflects a multifaceted landscape where children and young people navigate a broad spectrum of environmental, emotional, and social risks that influence their sense of security. While the area is often perceived as relatively safe compared to some other council areas in Northern Ireland, data and direct feedback from children and young people reveal that safety cannot be assumed. Concerns around domestic abuse, anti-social behaviour, peer conflict, and emotional instability all contribute to an environment where safety is unevenly experienced particularly among more vulnerable groups. Youth Services are seen as a trusted space to counteract many of these pressures, offering both protection and the tools for personal resilience.

Quantitative data highlights a mixed picture. In 2023/24, there were 1,319 recorded domestic abuse crimes in Ards and North Down. While this represents a 10% decrease from the previous year, the figure remains significant, and the average rate of domestic abuse across District Electoral Areas (DEAs) remains 189 incidents lower than the Northern Ireland average of 250, but still a prominent concern. Whilst this decrease can be seen as a positive step, the concern is due to under reporting of abuse as well as an increased acceptance of negative behaviours in relationships. Similarly, 3,433 incidents of anti-social behaviour were recorded in the same period, suggesting persistent issues with public safety and community cohesion. While such figures may not rank among the highest regionally, they nonetheless point to experiences that are deeply felt at the individual level, particularly by young people who may witness or be directly affected by these harms.

Children and young people participating in focus groups consistently identified safety at home and in their local communities as a priority concern. Many described experiences of domestic conflict or instability, including parental separation, substance misuse, and emotional neglect. These experiences were frequently linked to feelings of anxiety, poor mental health, and difficulties concentrating at school. Some young people referenced the impact of witnessing violence or arguments at home, noting that it left them feeling unsafe even in spaces that should offer comfort and predictability. There was a clear need expressed for confidential and trusted support from adults outside the family particularly youth workers, who were often described as approachable, non-judgmental, and reliable sources of guidance.

In public spaces, safety concerns were often linked to anti-social behaviour, peer conflict, and bullying. Young people in both urban and rural DEAs reported feeling uneasy in parks, town centres, and on public transport particularly during evening hours. While physical violence was less commonly described, there was a recurring theme of verbal harassment, intimidation, and the use of social media as a vehicle for bullying and exclusion. Cyberbullying was viewed as a growing concern, with some young people describing the pressure to constantly monitor online platforms for fear of being targeted. The impact of these experiences was often emotional rather than physical manifesting as stress, isolation, or reluctance to engage with peers or attend school.

Rural isolation added a unique dimension to the safety narrative in parts of Ards and North Down. In areas such as the Ards Peninsula, young people described feeling "cut off" not only from services, but from emergency support or intervention when needed. With limited public transport and few nearby safe spaces, young people in these communities were more likely to remain in unstable home environments or avoid social interaction altogether. The connection between rural poverty, limited transport, and safety was also made explicit, with young people stating that the lack of affordable and

accessible activities left them vulnerable to boredom, risk-taking behaviours, or negative peer influences.

The role of Youth Services in promoting stability was repeatedly affirmed by young people themselves. Participants spoke of the importance of having a regular place to gone that was predictable, welcoming, and free from judgement. For many, the youth club or project space offered a reprieve from chaotic or unstable home environments, and a structure that helped establish routine and trust. These environments were often described not simply as safe, but as "reliable," creating an emotional sense of stability through the presence of consistent adult figures and peer support. Some young people said their involvement in Youth Services helped them avoid getting involved in anti-social behaviour, providing constructive outlets for energy, frustration, or curiosity.

In more targeted discussions, young people with additional vulnerabilities such as those with Special Educational Needs, those living in care, or those identifying as LGBTQIA+ expressed additional barriers to feeling safe. For example, some LGBTQIA+ participants described feeling unsafe in school or local settings due to fear of discrimination or lack of understanding. Others referenced being "outed" or targeted online, reinforcing the need for youth spaces that actively promote inclusion and provide specific supports for identity-based challenges. Likewise, young people with disabilities noted that some local spaces were physically inaccessible or lacked sensory-friendly environments, reducing their ability to engage safely or fully.

A particularly striking insight came from young people who had been involved in restorative or diversionary programmes. Several referenced the importance of being given a second chance through youth interventions, whether linked to offending behaviour, substance use, or truancy. These young people highlighted how a positive relationship with a youth worker one that focused on listening and support rather than punishment had helped them make different choices and rebuild stability in their lives. Their testimonies reinforced the value of early intervention and the potential for Youth Services to act as a preventative buffer against longer-term involvement with the justice system.

Overall, children and young people in Ards and North Down present a clear picture: while many feel generally safe, others live in conditions of instability that compromise their development and wellbeing. Safety is not only about the absence of harm, but the presence of care, consistency, and trusted adults. The Youth Service is consistently recognised as a key factor in this landscape offering both emotional and physical safety through safe spaces, supportive relationships, and the provision of positive alternatives to risk.

In conclusion, the need for greater safety and stability among children and young people in Ards and North Down is evident, with particular attention needed for those in rural areas, marginalised groups, and households marked by adversity. Youth Services have a vital role to play in this domain not as crisis responders, but as proactive providers of stability, connection, and protective environments. Inclusive practice, and trauma-informed programming will be critical to ensuring that all young people, regardless of background, feel safe, supported, and able to thrive.

Economic and Environmental Stability

Key facts

In Ards and North Down 3,294 children and young people aged 0-25 years (7.2%) live in deprivation.

8,047 children and young people (17.6%) live in a rural community in Ards and North Down.

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed and/or unknown in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 is 4.8% (NI average 4.7%).

4.2% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification. (NI average 4.9%).

5,170 (29.5%) of all pupils in Ards and North Down are eligible for Free School Meals. 2023/24 (NI average 28%).

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Ards and North Down, the theme of economic and environmental stability reveals a complex interplay of local economic disparities, financial pressures, and concerns about sustainability that significantly shape the lives of children and young people. While the council area is often perceived as relatively affluent, this perception can mask the economic strain experienced by many young people and their families, particularly those living in rural communities, lone-parent households, or areas affected by hidden deprivation. The voices of children and young people highlight a pressing need for Youth Services to support economic resilience through life skills development, access to opportunities, and greater environmental awareness.

Local data confirms that economic hardship is a reality for many. Over 29% of pupils in Ards and North Down are eligible for Free School Meals, which exceeds the Northern Ireland average, and 7.2% of children and young people aged 0–25 live in deprivation. Additionally, 23% of children and young people come from lone-parent families a demographic often associated with higher vulnerability to economic stress. These figures point to a significant cohort for whom cost remains a barrier to participation in activities, further education, and employment readiness. Young people themselves articulated these challenges clearly in both survey and focus group engagements, describing economic instability as a daily concern that affects access to food, transport, leisure, and even basic school resources.

One of the most prevalent concerns expressed by children and young people was the rising cost of living and its impact on their ability to participate fully in society. Participants from rural DEAs such as the Ards Peninsula noted that local food prices are often higher due to fewer shops and limited competition. Families without access to private transport face additional costs and constraints, often relying on limited and expensive public transport options. This lack of accessibility not only isolates young people from services and amenities but exacerbates a sense of inequality when compared to their peers in more urban areas. The consequence is that opportunities whether educational, recreational, or social are experienced unequally across the council area.

Young people frequently called for more practical support and learning opportunities that could help them and their families manage financial pressures. Young people through their engagement in focus groups and feedback forums articulated a lack of confidence in knowing how or where to get support around life skills such as budgeting, cooking even support to access training and employment after compulsory education finishes. These requests were grounded in a desire not just for personal advancement but for intergenerational support many spoke of wanting to help their parents or caregivers by gaining skills that would ease household burdens.

Closely tied to economic concerns was the theme of employment readiness. While academic attainment in Ards and North Down is high, with 79.1% of school leavers achieving five or more GCSEs including English and Maths, many young people expressed anxiety about the transition from school to work. There was particular concern about the availability of part-time jobs, apprenticeships, and local employment routes for those not pursuing university. Several noted the importance of gaining work experience and interview skills early and described Youth Services as an ideal setting for such preparation. Young people wanted to have real world experience of interviews and careers support, with most focus groups identifying the need to practical support rather than theoretical guidance. These interventions were viewed as essential to building economic independence and long-term resilience.

Environmental concerns also featured prominently in the feedback from children and young people. Many spoke with clarity and conviction about the urgency of addressing climate change, pollution, and environmental degradation. They described a desire to play an active role in creating more sustainable communities but expressed frustration at the lack of visible opportunities to get involved. Young people requested more projects that combined environmental education with direct action such as community clean-ups, tree planting, upcycling workshops, and local food growing initiatives. There was also interest in Youth Services adopting more sustainable practices themselves, such as reducing plastic use, promoting recycling, and using their spaces as models for green behaviour.

The intersection of environmental and economic issues was especially evident in discussions around energy use, food waste, and transport. Some young people described living in households that could not always afford to heat the home adequately during winter, linking this to both physical and emotional discomfort. Others discussed how environmental choices, like choosing to walk or cycle, were often not feasible due to safety concerns or distances in rural areas. Youth Services were viewed as potential changemakers offering safe transport options, raising awareness of environmental justice, and equipping young people with the tools to live more sustainably and advocate for wider change.

Young people also articulated a broader vision of what environmental stability means: it is not only about preserving natural resources but about living in communities that feel clean, cared for, and safe. Litter, vandalism, and lack of investment in local spaces were all cited as indicators of neglect, contributing to feelings of disconnection or frustration. Several participants expressed pride in their area and wanted to see more community ownership of shared spaces, suggesting that youth groups could take the lead in revitalising parks, public gardens, or disused buildings. In doing so, young people saw themselves not just as beneficiaries of environmental work, but as active contributors to a more stable and hopeful future.

There was also a notable awareness of inequalities in access to green space. While Ards and North Down is rich in natural beauty, including coastal areas and countryside, access to these spaces is not universal. Transport limitations, lack of accessible paths, or concerns about personal safety can deter some young people from engaging with the environment around them. Youth Service programmes that promote outdoor exploration and confidence in nature particularly for those with disabilities or limited mobility were viewed as vital to overcoming these barriers.

The concept of stability for children and young people in Ards and North Down extends far beyond household income. It encompasses the security of knowing one's basic needs are met, the confidence to look forward to the future, and the capacity to influence the world around them. Youth Services are uniquely placed to foster this stability supporting children and young people to acquire the skills, knowledge, and networks they need to thrive in an increasingly uncertain economic and environmental landscape.

In conclusion, while Ards and North Down may exhibit relative affluence at a macro level, the lived experiences of many children and young people reveal pressing needs that fall squarely within the remit of Youth Services. These include support with life skills, access to employment pathways, responses to cost-of-living pressures, and meaningful involvement in environmental action. To promote true economic and environmental stability, Youth Services must be resourced and empowered to deliver inclusive, community-rooted programmes that respond to these intersecting challenges. In doing so,

they can help ensure that all young people not just the most advantaged are supported to live with security, purpose, and sustainability.

Making a positive contribution

Key facts

The attendance rate for post-primary schools was 92.4%. (NI average 96%).

600 Newcomers attend schools in Ards and North Down (4.2%) – NI Average 5%.

7 Irish Traveller children and young people.

223 children and young people were suspended from school in Ards and North Down.

In Ards and North Down 3,294 children and young people aged 0-25 years (7.2%) live in deprivation.

8,047 children and young people (17.6%) live in a rural community in Ards and North Down.

According to the most recent census, 724 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Ards and North Down, the theme of making a positive contribution reflects a strong willingness among children and young people to be involved in their communities, influence decision-making, and participate in meaningful, value-driven activity. Throughout the council area, there is clear evidence that young people are eager to volunteer, share their views, help others, and improve the places they live in. However, this enthusiasm is often tempered by frustration at the lack of consistent, structured, and inclusive opportunities to engage. Many feel their contributions are undervalued or overlooked by decision-makers, and they frequently report feeling disconnected from civic processes. Within this context, Youth Services have a key role to play not only as facilitators of local engagement and personal development but as advocates for recognising and amplifying young people's voices in community life.

Feedback from focus groups and surveys indicates that children and young people in Ards and North Down are keen to have an impact, whether through environmental action, peer support, cultural activities, or participation in local youth forums. Many already contribute informally helping at home, supporting younger siblings, or taking part in school-based initiatives. However, they expressed a strong desire to expand their involvement beyond these settings and to engage with their wider communities in ways that feel meaningful and valued. There was particular interest in volunteering, fundraising, and community improvement projects, especially when young people could see a direct benefit to others or when the activity aligned with their values.

Young people frequently highlighted the importance of having a voice in decisions that affect them. Yet across the council area, many feel that opportunities to do so are sporadic or tokenistic. While some had been involved in youth councils, school-based pupil voice initiatives, or ad hoc consultations, others felt they had never been asked for their views in a serious or sustained way. Even where participation structures do exist, young people described barriers such as lack of awareness, limited access to transport, or a perception that their input would not be effective. In this context, Youth Services were seen as essential in creating more inclusive pathways for participation offering training, mentoring, and facilitation that empowers young people to speak confidently and be heard.

For many children and young people, the desire to make a positive contribution is deeply linked to their sense of identity and belonging. Some spoke about wanting to challenge negative stereotypes associated with young people particularly around anti-social behaviour and instead be recognised as capable, responsible, and constructive members of society. Others were motivated by personal experience, such as growing up in challenging circumstances or facing discrimination, and wanted to use their stories to help others or advocate for change. There was a clear recognition that being given the chance to contribute builds confidence, strengthens social connections, and creates a sense of purpose all key aspects of wellbeing and development.

One of the strongest themes to emerge from local engagement was the importance of peer leadership. Many young people wanted to take on roles that allowed them to support others, whether as mentors, peer educators, or activity leaders. These roles were seen not only to contribute positively, but as a means of developing valuable life and employability skills. Young people suggested that Youth Services could do more to provide structured opportunities for peer-led programmes, where older young people support younger participants or those with additional needs. This type of intergenerational contribution was particularly valued in communities where young people may lack adult role models or where traditional family support is limited.

Environmental action also featured prominently as a domain in which young people wished to contribute. In both rural and urban areas, participants expressed concern about climate change, pollution, and local littering. There was strong interest in being part of clean-up days, recycling initiatives, and awareness campaigns. However, many were unsure how to get involved, or felt that environmental issues were treated as an "adult" concern. Youth services were seen as ideally placed to bridge this gap offering youth-led environmental groups, green projects, and practical ways for young people to act in their communities. These initiatives were valued not only for their ecological impact but for the sense of ownership and pride they generated among participants.

Another area where young people in Ards and North Down wished to contribute was through creativity and cultural engagement. Many described the desire to express themselves through music, drama, art, or digital media, and to share their work with wider audiences. They emphasised that creative expression can be a powerful tool for social change, as well as a form of personal development. In some DEAs, young people had been involved in mural projects, short films, or performances that tackled issues such as mental health or identity. However, these opportunities were not universally available, and participants noted the need for more inclusive, accessible, and well-supported creative platforms. They wanted spaces where their talents could be recognised and where they could collaborate with peers to make a collective impact.

Social inclusion and advocacy also emerged as key dimensions of making a positive contribution. Newcomer children and young people, those with disabilities, and members of minority communities expressed a desire to be part of shaping a more welcoming and equitable society. They wanted to educate others about their cultures, challenge prejudice, and create spaces where everyone feels they belong. However, they also reported experiencing exclusion or invisibility within mainstream settings. Youth Services can play a critical role in supporting these young people to lead inclusion initiatives whether through intercultural events, anti-bullying campaigns, or advisory roles that inform local service design.

The need for recognition was also a recurring theme. Many young people felt that their contributions however meaningful were not always acknowledged. They called for Youth Services, schools, and local authorities to provide more visible celebration of young people’s achievements. This might take the form of awards, showcases, certificates, or public thank-you, but the core message was clear: young people want their efforts to be seen, validated, and encouraged. This recognition was especially important for those who may not achieve academically or be publicly rewarded through more traditional routes.

In conclusion, children and young people in Ards and North Down are ready and willing to make a positive contribution but too often, they lack the opportunities, support, and recognition needed to do so. Their aspirations are not limited to charity or volunteering; rather, they want to shape the environments around them, advocate for social change, and grow into active, valued members of their communities. Youth Services are uniquely positioned to nurture this potentially creating inclusive, youth-led spaces; developing leadership and advocacy skills; and ensuring that all young people have the chance to be seen, heard, and involved. Investing in these pathways is not only a matter of individual development but a vital step toward stronger, more connected communities across the council area.

Respect for young people's rights

Key facts

According to the most recent census, 724 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

Approximately 9,145 children and young people aged 0-25 years have a mental health need.

In Ards and North Down 3,294 children and young people aged 0-25 years (7.2%) live in deprivation.

8,047 children and young people (17.6%) live in a rural community in Ards and North Down.

600 Newcomers attend schools in Ards and North Down (4.2%) – NI Average 5%.

7 Irish Traveller children and young people.

5,170 (29.5%) of all pupils in Ards and North Down are eligible for Free School Meals. 2023/24 (NI average 28%).

4,448 pupils (16.8%) who attend school in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 have a Special Education Need or Disability Stage 1-3. (NI average 19%).

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Ards and North Down, the theme of respect for the rights of children and young people reveals a complex picture of awareness, aspiration, and persistent gaps in practice. While many children and young people demonstrate a growing understanding of their rights particularly the right to be heard, to feel safe, and to access education and services there remains a significant disconnect between the principles of children's rights and their consistent realisation in everyday life. Across the council area, young people express a desire to be treated with fairness, dignity, and inclusion, but many feel that their rights are not fully understood or respected by adults, institutions, or wider society. Youth Services are seen as crucial actors in closing this gap both as advocates for children's rights and as environments that model respect, participation, and equality.

Focus group feedback and survey responses highlight a clear consensus among young people that respect is one of the most important values in their interactions with adults. They consistently noted that being listened to, treated fairly, and included in decision-making processes contributes to their sense of worth and wellbeing. However, they also reported frequent experiences of being dismissed, overlooked, or not taken seriously, particularly in formal or adult-dominated environments such as schools, public services, or local decision-making forums. This was particularly evident in relation to the right to express their views and have those views given due weight, a core principle of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Young people felt that their contributions were too often perceived as irrelevant or immature, rather than as valid and necessary perspectives.

In rural areas such as the Ards Peninsula, young people described a particular frustration with the lack of consultation on local issues that affect them directly. These included transport provision, access to leisure and educational facilities, and the design of public spaces. While some young people had been invited to participate in consultations, they questioned whether their feedback was genuinely considered. There was a strong call for more transparent feedback loops where young people can see the outcome of their involvement and how their views have shaped decisions. In this context, Youth Services were seen as uniquely placed to empower children and young people to understand their rights, articulate their needs, and engage meaningfully with civic processes.

Respect for identity and individuality also emerged as a key concern. Young people from minority groups, including those with disabilities, newcomer children, and LGBTQIA+ young people, described both subtle and overt forms of exclusion. These ranged from misgendering and lack of inclusive language to cultural insensitivity and inaccessible facilities. Such experiences contributed to feelings of invisibility or, in some cases, direct discrimination. Some young people expressed a sense that their rights were only conditionally respected depending on how well they conformed to adult expectations or mainstream norms. There was a clear need for more proactive, rights-based inclusion practices that celebrate diversity and challenge discriminatory attitudes.

For children and young people with additional needs, respect for rights was often linked to dignity and accessibility. Participants shared experiences of being excluded from mainstream activities or not having their support needs adequately met. Some young people with special educational needs described feeling as though they were treated as burdens rather than equals. Others spoke about a lack of choice and autonomy in decisions about their learning, care, or participation in programmes. They

called for Youth Services to continue building inclusive environments where their abilities are recognised and where adaptations are made as standard practice not as exceptions or afterthoughts.

Young people were also acutely aware of the broader social attitudes that can undermine their rights. Many expressed frustrations at being stereotyped as “troublemakers” or being talked down to by adults in their communities. This lack of respect was not only seen as unfair, but also as damaging to their confidence and willingness to engage. Several young people noted that feeling respected by adults particularly youth workers had a transformative effect on their self-esteem and their belief in their ability to contribute. In contrast, experiences of being ignored or dismissed led to disengagement and apathy. These insights reinforce the importance of relational approaches in Youth Services that are grounded in mutual respect, active listening, and shared power.

Some young people discussed the importance of knowing about their rights as a foundation for asserting them. However, many felt that rights education was inconsistent or superficial. They recalled occasional lessons in school or references in youth sessions, but few could identify practical ways in which they had been supported to understand and claim their rights. There was support for more engaging, age-appropriate rights education within Youth Services, including creative workshops, discussions, and peer-led sessions. Young people wanted to explore not only the content of their rights, but how to navigate situations where their rights might be at risk, such as in accessing services, experiencing discrimination, or managing conflict.

Moreover, young people were not only concerned about their own rights, but also about the rights of others. Many expressed solidarity with those who faced additional barriers or disadvantages and wanted to play a role in creating a more respectful and equitable society.

In discussions about digital life, young people raised additional concerns about privacy, safety, and the right to be free from harassment. Many felt that their online experiences were not well understood by adults, and that their rights in digital spaces were not adequately protected. They called for more support in navigating online risks, clearer education on consent and data protection, and better mechanisms for reporting harmful content. Youth Services were seen as potential allies, able to provide both guidance and advocacy in an area where many young people felt vulnerable and unsupported.

In conclusion, children and young people in Ards and North Down are clear in their expectations: they want to live in a society where their rights are recognised, respected, and realised. While many experience respect in their interactions with youth workers and peers, this is not yet a universal reality. Structural barriers, social attitudes, and inconsistent practice continue to limit the extent to which young people can fully enjoy their rights. Youth Services have a role in addressing these challenges by modelling rights-based practice, educating young people about their rights, and ensuring that all children and young people are supported to participate meaningfully in shaping their lives and communities. Respect for rights is not a luxury or an ideal; it is a necessity for the full inclusion and flourishing of every young person in Ards and North Down.

Good Relations and equality

Key facts

8,047 children and young people (17.6%) live in a rural community in Ards and North Down.

600 Newcomers attend schools in Ards and North Down (4.2%) – NI Average 5%.

7 Irish Traveller children and young people.

5,170 (29.5%) of all pupils in Ards and North Down are eligible for Free School Meals. 2023/24 (NI average 28%).

4,448 pupils (16.8%) who attend school in Ards and North Down in 2022/23 have a Special Education Need or Disability Stage 1-3. (NI average 19%).

In Ards and North Down 3,294 children and young people aged 0-25 years (7.2%) live in deprivation.

According to the most recent census, 724 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Ards and North Down, the theme of good relations and equality underscores the aspirations of children and young people to live in a community where difference is respected, inclusion is the norm, and all individuals are treated fairly, regardless of background or identity. While many young people in the area describe their communities as welcoming and supportive, there is also widespread recognition that inequality, exclusion, and prejudice continue to affect the everyday experiences of some groups. These challenges are often subtle and systemic, but their impact is significant particularly for newcomer young people, those with disabilities, ethnic minority communities, and LGBTQIA+ children and young people. Youth Services are uniquely placed to address these inequalities, promote inclusion, and support young people to become active participants in shaping a more cohesive and equitable society.

Young people who participated in focus groups and surveys shared a strong belief in fairness and equality as core values. They expressed a desire to live in communities where people are accepted for who they are and treated with kindness and dignity. Many also demonstrated a growing awareness of structural inequalities, such as differences in access to education, leisure, and healthcare, which can disproportionately affect certain groups. Despite this, young people noted that opportunities to learn about or actively promote good relations were often limited, sporadic, or underdeveloped. While school-based initiatives were sometimes referenced, these were not always inclusive or sufficiently engaging. Youth Services were consistently identified as spaces with the potential to lead in this area, offering safe, informal, and participatory environments in which sensitive topics can be explored meaningfully.

Experiences of inequality were most acutely expressed by young people from minority and marginalised backgrounds. Newcomer children and young people in Ards and North Down, though proportionally a small cohort, spoke about feeling isolated or excluded due to language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, or a lack of appropriate support. Some shared that they had encountered racism or xenophobia in schools or public spaces, and that they often felt pressure to assimilate rather than being encouraged to express their identities. These experiences point to a wider need for Youth Services to provide culturally responsive programmes, support peer integration, and create platforms for intercultural exchange.

Similarly, children and young people with disabilities raised concerns about inclusion. Some described feeling sidelined in mainstream activities, not because of overt discrimination, but because of physical inaccessibility, lack of staff training, or assumptions about their capabilities. These young people expressed a desire to be seen and treated as equals and asked for more inclusive planning and programming that takes account of diverse needs from the outset. Youth Services have a clear opportunity here to lead by example through inclusive design, staff development, and by creating accessible, affirming spaces that promote participation for all.

LGBTQIA+ young people also shared experiences of exclusion, ranging from the absence of representation in local services to being the target of homophobic or transphobic language. Some young people described feeling unsafe in school or in public, and several spoke about the importance of having dedicated safe spaces where they could connect with others, access information, and receive support. Youth Services were identified as one of the few environments where they could be their full selves without fear of judgment. The availability of inclusive youth work where identity is affirmed, and

diversity celebrated was seen as not only beneficial but essential. Young people called for greater visibility of LGBTQIA+ issues within Youth Services, and for staff to be trained in supporting those exploring or affirming their sexual orientation or gender identity.

More broadly, young people reflected on the importance of building bridges between different communities and creating opportunities for shared experience. In some areas of Ards and North Down, divisions along religious, socio-economic, or cultural lines continue to influence how young people interactor avoid interaction with others. While overt sectarianism was rarely cited as a major issue by younger participants, subtle patterns of separation were noted, particularly in leisure, sport, and education. Some young people said they did not know anyone from a different background, and that they had few chances to mix beyond their immediate peer groups. This segregation, even when unintentional, limits opportunities to develop empathy, challenge prejudice, and build shared understanding.

To address this, children and young people advocated for more cross-community and intercultural initiatives especially those that are youth-led and rooted in shared interests such as art, music, sport, or outdoor learning. They wanted to meet peers from different backgrounds in informal, low-pressure environments, where relationships could develop naturally. They also wanted to be involved in shaping these opportunities, helping to design programmes that reflect their own perspectives and priorities. Youth Services were seen as having a vital convening role in this space, bringing young people together and equipping them with the skills and confidence to lead conversations about identity, difference, and belonging.

Digital spaces were also identified as an emerging frontier for promoting good relations or, conversely, for entrenching division. While social media can offer a platform for connection and solidarity, young people noted that it can also be a source of misinformation, stereotyping, and hate speech. Some described witnessing or experiencing online bullying and prejudice and said they were unsure how to respond or where to seek help. They asked for more guidance from Youth Services on digital citizenship, online safety, and how to challenge discrimination in digital spaces. There was a clear appetite for education that extends beyond awareness-raising to include critical thinking, advocacy skills, and digital resilience.

Importantly, children and young people emphasised the need not just for initiatives that promote tolerance, but for deeper cultural change that affirms equality as a lived experience. They wanted to see diversity reflected in leadership, in the staff who support them, and in the spaces they attend. They asked for greater transparency and accountability in how decisions are made about local services, and for youth voice to be embedded in equality planning processes. Many saw Youth Services as places where this kind of change could begin where their ideas and identities are respected, and where they are supported to lead by example in their schools, families, and wider communities.

In conclusion, good relations and equality in Ards and North Down remain aspirational goals for many children and young people. While there are positive foundations such as inclusive values, a willingness to engage, and strong relationships within youth settings barriers remain in the form of social division, lack of representation, and everyday experiences of exclusion. Youth Services have a critical role to play in bridging these gaps. By creating inclusive, youth-led programmes; facilitating intercultural and cross-community dialogue; and empowering young people to challenge inequality in all its forms, they can help build a more connected and equitable future for everyone in the council area. The challenge now

is to ensure that every young person not just the most confident or visible can play a part in that transformation.

Summary Conclusion of Needs across Strategic Themes

Emotional Health & Wellbeing

- Greater ability among children and young people to understand and express their emotions
- Increased confidence in managing feelings of anxiety, low mood, and stress
- Stronger peer relationships that contribute to emotional resilience
- Improved awareness of where to turn when experiencing emotional difficulties
- Reduced stigma associated with mental health challenges among young people

Access to Play and Leisure

- Broader access to varied leisure experiences that reflect a wide range of interests
- Increased social connection through informal, enjoyable interaction with peers
- Greater inclusion in recreational opportunities for those with additional needs or disabilities
- Fewer economic and transport related barriers to participation in leisure

Learning & Achieving

- More recognition of strengths and achievements beyond formal academic measures
- Increased opportunities for personal growth through informal and experiential learning
- Greater ability to cope with educational pressures and manage school related stress
- Improved access to learning that prepares young people for independence and adult life
- More positive engagement with learning among those struggling in traditional settings

Living in Safety & Stability

- Stronger sense of personal safety in peer groups and public spaces
- Lower incidence and impact of bullying, including online harm
- Greater confidence in identifying unsafe situations and knowing how to respond
- Improved emotional security for young people affected by family conflict or instability
- Clearer understanding of healthy relationships and personal boundaries

Economic & Environmental Stability

- Reduced impact of financial insecurity on social inclusion and wellbeing
- More equal access to social, educational, and personal development opportunities
- Improved awareness of environmental issues and the role of young people in addressing them
- Greater sense of stability among those affected by cost-of-living pressures
- Fewer limitations caused by lack of affordable transport, particularly in rural areas

Making a Positive Contribution to Society

- Stronger sense of purpose and motivation to contribute to local communities

- Increased belief among young people that their ideas and actions can make a difference
- Greater opportunity for young people to develop and demonstrate leadership qualities
- More awareness of local issues and how young people can engage with them
- Enhanced sense of belonging and ownership of place and identity

Respect for Young People's Rights

- More consistent experiences of being listened to and treated with respect
- Improved understanding among young people of their rights and entitlements
- Greater fairness and equity in how young people are treated by institutions and adults
- Increased sense that their voices influence local decisions that affect them
- Stronger confidence in challenging unfair treatment or exclusion

Good Relations & Equality

- More positive contact and relationships across cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds
- Greater inclusion of newcomer, minority ethnic, and Traveller children in peer settings
- Reduced experiences of sectarianism, racism, and identity-based exclusion
- Increased awareness and appreciation of diversity and difference
- Stronger sense of equality among children and young people regardless of background

The Findings – Identification of Priorities/DEA profiles

Ards Peninsula

Key facts

There is 7,118 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Ards Peninsula DEA.

3,090 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

4.6% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification (NI average 4.9%).

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed or are unknown in 2022/23 is 5.2% compared to the NI average of 4.7%.

The percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including GCSE English and maths in 2022/23 is 77.5% (NI average 76.1%).

36 newcomer pupils in Ards Peninsula DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 6 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is the same as the previous year.

Ards Peninsula Stakeholder input/feedback

In Ards Peninsula, the experiences of children and young people point to a distinctive set of needs, shaped by the area's rural geography, transport limitations, and relative isolation from larger urban centres. While the Peninsula is rich in natural beauty and community spirit, the lived reality for many young people reflects restricted access to essential services, emotional health support, and inclusive spaces for development. Their voices highlight a pressing desire for improved connectivity both social and physical and for opportunities that match those available to peers in more central or urbanised areas of Ards and North Down.

A dominant theme emerging from the data is emotional health and wellbeing. Young people across the Peninsula consistently expressed concern about anxiety, stress, and low mood, particularly among those aged 14 to 18. These emotional challenges were closely linked to issues such as academic pressure, family difficulties, and feelings of isolation. The rural context intensified these issues, with some young people reporting that they returned home from school or college as late as 6:30pm due to transport constraints, leaving little time or energy to access social or support services. Mental health services were described as limited and difficult to access in the area. Young people identified the lack of local support as a significant barrier to maintaining good mental health and called for more youth-focused wellbeing initiatives that are accessible in rural contexts. They spoke of a need for spaces where they could be heard without judgment, with youth workers playing a central role in providing this safe, non-clinical support.

Access to leisure and recreational activities is another central concern in Ards Peninsula. Young people described a marked disparity in the availability and quality of leisure provision compared to urban counterparts. For many, structured opportunities are restricted to traditional sports clubs such as football or GAA, which do not appeal to all. The absence of accessible, varied, and affordable leisure activities contributes to social isolation, particularly during evenings and weekends. The lack of infrastructure such as floodlit outdoor spaces further limits opportunities for year-round physical activity. Young people also highlighted the high cost of food and basic items in rural areas, linked to limited local retail options, which in turn impacts their ability to engage in social and extracurricular life. These cost pressures are compounded by rising transport expenses, underscoring the material barriers to participation that many young people face daily.

Education and achievement present a more mixed picture. While educational attainment in Ards Peninsula is strong overall, the area still includes a significant number of pupils eligible for free school meals and with special educational needs. These indicators suggest that there are distinct pockets of educational vulnerability. Focus group feedback from young people underscored a need for more tailored educational support, particularly for those who do not thrive in academically focused environments. Several participants expressed interest in more practical learning experiences and access to life skills education ranging from financial literacy to managing stress and emotional wellbeing. Additionally, the time pressures linked to long school commutes impact young people’s ability to engage in homework support or after-school programmes, reducing their capacity to excel or feel connected to their education outside of formal classroom time.

Safety and stability also emerged as relevant themes. Although the area does not report particularly high rates of anti-social behaviour or domestic incidents, young people expressed a need for safer and more inclusive public spaces. Some felt unsafe walking in their communities at night due to poor

lighting or a lack of visible adult supervision. The absence of neutral, welcoming environments where young people can spend time together without pressure or surveillance was noted as a gap. These issues were particularly acute for younger teens and those without access to private transport. There were also mentions of bullying and peer pressure, often linked to the close-knit nature of rural life, where social dynamics can be more intense due to smaller peer groups and limited opportunities to build new connections.

The theme of inclusion and equality resonated strongly throughout the feedback. Although the Peninsula has lower ethnic diversity than some other parts of the council area, young people from newcomer and minority backgrounds expressed concerns about feeling different or excluded. Similarly, young people with disabilities or additional support needs described limited opportunities to participate fully in community activities. The call for inclusive, adaptable programming was repeated across responses, as was the importance of staff and volunteers being trained to recognise and respond to a range of abilities, identities, and communication needs. The desire to feel seen, respected, and accepted was echoed by young people from a range of backgrounds, including those who identify as LGBTQIA+ or who experience mental health challenges.

Another cross-cutting theme is the impact of rurality on young people's ability to participate and contribute. The lack of affordable, regular public transport is the most frequently mentioned barrier, limiting access to school, employment, health services, and social spaces. This isolation affects not just mobility but also confidence, as some young people reported feeling disconnected from the wider community or under-represented in decision-making structures. Despite this, there was a strong appetite for engagement and a clear desire to have their voices heard. Young people expressed an interest in contributing to the design of programmes, taking on leadership roles, and being actively involved in shaping the future of their communities. However, there was also scepticism about whether their contributions would be taken seriously. This sense of being overlooked reinforces the importance of meaningful and sustained youth participation, particularly in rural areas where young people often feel less visible.

Throughout all feedback, there was a recurring emphasis on relationships particularly the role of youth workers and trusted adults. In the absence of formal mental health services or easily accessible youth centres, the informal, consistent support provided by Youth Services was seen as critical. Young people valued being listened to, having fun, and being supported without judgement. This underscores the ongoing importance of relational, community-based youth work in bridging gaps left by statutory services and addressing the complex needs of rural young people.

Together, these insights highlight several priority areas for youth work development in Ards Peninsula: Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Support, Transport and Access Equity, Inclusive and Varied Leisure Provision, Education and Life Skills Support, and Rural Youth Voice and Representation. These themes reflect both the practical challenges and the aspirations of children and young people in the area, pointing to the need for sustained, locally responsive youth work that acknowledges the realities of rural life while championing inclusion, equity, and empowerment.

Ards Peninsula Summary

The Ards Peninsula is home to 7,118 children and young people. This DEA is largely rural, with 44% of its youth population residing in the most deprived areas. Transport barriers and limited access to services significantly shape the experience of young people here. While some educational indicators are above average, emotional wellbeing and inclusion remain persistent concerns.

- Elevated emotional and mental health needs are evident, with Ards Peninsula recording the highest rate of young people (aged 0–24) with self-reported emotional, psychological, or mental health conditions across the borough.
- A high prevalence of learning difficulties and autism has been identified, with the DEA showing some of the highest rates for both conditions among all DEAs in Ards and North Down.
- Educational progression challenges persist, with a notable decline over the past five years in the percentage of school leavers progressing to further or higher education.
- Youth unemployment and lack of qualifications among 20–24-year-olds remains slightly above the borough average, affecting pathways into training or employment.
- Limited cultural diversity and newcomer integration may contribute to feelings of isolation, with relatively low numbers of newcomer pupils and incidents of racially motivated behaviour.
- Restricted access to services and opportunities due to rurality continues to be a barrier for many young people, limiting their participation in social, recreational, and developmental activities.
- Underrepresentation in youth voice and decision-making has been highlighted, suggesting the need to increase platforms for young people to contribute to local planning and services.
- Persistent inequality in wellbeing and service accessibility, especially for young people with disabilities or from financially struggling households.

Bangor Central

Key facts

There is 7,678 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Bangor Central DEA.

3,246 fall within the key Youth Rervice priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

4.7% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification (NI average 4.9%).

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed or are unknown in 2022/23 is 4.7% compared to the NI average of 4.7%.

The percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including GCSE English and maths in 2022/23 is 75% (NI average 76.1%).

130 newcomer pupils in Bangor Central DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 33 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 22.2% increase from the previous year of 27 racial motivated incidents.

Bangor Central Stakeholder input/feedback

In Bangor Central, the views and experiences of children and young people reflect a rich but complex urban context where high visibility, pockets of deprivation, and shifting community dynamics intersect to shape a distinct set of needs. While the area benefits from centralised services and proximity to amenities, young people consistently expressed concerns around emotional wellbeing, the pressure to achieve, social exclusion, and limited access to youth-friendly, inclusive spaces. Their feedback reveals a strong desire for safe environments where they feel seen, supported, and empowered to participate in shaping their community.

Emotional health and wellbeing emerged as a central concern. Across age groups, young people spoke of heightened stress and anxiety, often linked to academic demands, peer pressure, and exposure to social media. Some described struggling with low self-esteem or feeling isolated, even while living in a populated area. For many, this was compounded by inconsistent access to support. While some schools and youth projects provided valued opportunities for mental health conversations, others were described as overstretched or impersonal. The need for safe, informal spaces to talk about emotions was consistently raised, with youth workers highlighted as trusted adults who provided essential relational support. These spaces were seen as particularly vital for those who may not be comfortable accessing clinical mental health services or disclosing difficulties at home or in school. Several young people noted that having someone who simply listens without judgement made a significant difference to their wellbeing.

Access to play and leisure was another key theme. Despite Bangor Central's urban location and physical proximity to leisure services, many young people reported that existing provision does not meet their needs. Cost was a major barrier, particularly for families with multiple children or those affected by economic stress. Several participants described a sense of exclusion from structured leisure activities due to financial constraints or the perceived exclusivity of certain clubs. For others, the existing offer felt limited in variety, focusing too heavily on mainstream sports or activities that did not reflect their interests. There was a strong appetite for more diverse, youth-led programmes including creative arts, digital media, and cultural expressions well as spaces simply to gather safely with friends. Notably, young people also raised concerns about the lack of neutral, accessible social spaces where they could spend time without being moved on or judged by adults. The desire for a youth-specific venue, designed with their input, was expressed clearly and repeatedly.

Education and achievement in Bangor Central present a mixed picture. While school leaver outcomes in the wider council area are above average, there are evident challenges for groups within this DEA. Free school meal entitlement and rates of special educational need are notably high in some schools, signalling underlying disadvantage. Young people spoke of academic stress, a lack of confidence, and pressure to perform in exams without sufficient personalised support. For those who struggled in traditional learning environments, opportunities to explore vocational pathways or life skills were described as limited. These needs suggest a strong appetite for informal education and practical development opportunities that sit alongside or outside the school system.

Safety and inclusion, both physical and emotional, were discussed with urgency by many young people. Some described feeling unsafe in certain public spaces due to anti-social behaviour, conflict with peers, or lack of supervision. Others highlighted bullying particularly online as a significant stressor, often with little resolution or adult intervention. A recurring theme was the perceived lack of adult allies

in public spaces and the feeling that young people are too often viewed with suspicion rather than as valued members of the community. In this context, the need for safe, youth-positive environments was clear. Additionally, some young people described home environments that lacked emotional safety, underscoring the importance of having external places to turn to for support and a sense of belonging.

Social inclusion was another critical issue, particularly for those from marginalised or minority groups. Young people who identified as LGBTQIA+, newcomers, or living with a disability often described experiences of exclusion or misunderstanding within both school and community settings. Several participants reported feeling overlooked in local programming and expressed a desire for more visibly inclusive services and staff who are trained to understand diverse needs. Young people from these groups emphasised that inclusion goes beyond accessit's about feeling safe, respected, and represented in the spaces they occupy. The importance of inclusive language, representation, and zero tolerance for discriminatory behaviour was strongly articulated.

Despite these challenges, there was a palpable sense of hope and a desire for meaningful participation. Young people in Bangor Central expressed a strong interest in being involved in decision-making and programme design. Some had experienced youth forums or consultation processes, but many were sceptical about whether their input was genuinely valued or acted upon. They called for sustained involvement not just one-off surveys or tokenistic events and clear feedback on how their contributions shape outcomes. This speaks to a broader theme of empowerment: a desire to be taken seriously, to lead, and to contribute to the improvement of their own communities. Those who had been given opportunities to lead projects or influence services reported increased confidence, purpose, and a stronger connection to their community.

Finally, cost-of-living pressures and hidden deprivation, though not always visible in Bangor Central's urban environment, were clearly impacting young people's access to food, clothing, and essential items. Several participants described going without basic needs or relying on school or community spaces for meals and warmth. This economic strain, while not always openly discussed, contributed to social isolation and limited participation in wider opportunities. It also intensified emotional strain, especially for those acting as carers or managing complex home responsibilities.

Taken together, the insights from Bangor Central reflect a multi-layered picture of need. While the area benefits from proximity to services and a strong civic identity, young people still experience barriers that limit their emotional wellbeing, access to opportunity, and sense of inclusion. The key thematic priorities emerging include Emotional Health and Supportive Relationships, Affordable and Inclusive Leisure, Flexible Learning and Life Skills, Safe Social Spaces, and Youth Voice and Participation. These themes speak to the resilience and ambition of Bangor Central's young people, who are not only asking for support but are eager to shape a community where they can thrive.

Bangor Central Summary

Bangor Central, with 7,678 children and young people, is one of the most densely populated areas in the borough. It includes some of the most deprived urban neighbourhoods in Ards and North Down. While educational achievement is mixed, school suspensions and non-attendance rates are notable, and young people have voiced concerns around safety and mental wellbeing.

- Mental and emotional health concerns remain significant, with Bangor Central showing a higher-than-average rate of young people reporting long-term emotional or psychological difficulties.
- Racial tension and inclusion challenges are evident, as Bangor Central recorded the highest number of racially motivated incidents in the borough, with a 22.2% rise over the past year.
- Educational attainment at GCSE level is slightly below the Northern Ireland average, indicating a potential need for increased academic support or engagement initiatives.
- A notable proportion of young people aged 20–24 are not in employment or education, with a NEET rate comparable to the NI average, but persistent, nonetheless.
- Rates of long-term learning difficulties and autism diagnoses are high, affecting a significant number of young people in Bangor Central.
- Bangor Central has some of the highest levels of anti-social behaviour across the borough, with sustained incident levels over recent years.
- Social exclusion linked to economic disadvantage continues to affect participation, with many young people reliant on free school meals or needing additional educational support.
- Young people express a need for increased safety, respect, and representation, with stakeholder feedback emphasizing concerns about belonging, equality, and opportunities to shape their environment.

Bangor East and Donaghadee

Key facts

There is 5,955 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Bangor East and Donaghadee DEA.

2,603 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

2% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification (NI average 4.9%).

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed or are unknown in 2022/23 is 4.4% compared to the NI average of 4.7%.

The percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including GCSE English and maths in 2022/23 is 82.7% (NI average 76.1%).

35 newcomer pupils in Bangor East and Donaghadee primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 3 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 50% decrease from the previous year of 6 racial motivated incidents.

Bangor East and Donaghadee Stakeholder input/feedback

In Bangor East and Donaghadee, the perspectives of children and young people reveal a nuanced portrait of life shaped by geographic spread, rural-urban contrasts, and uneven access to essential services and opportunities. The area is home to a high number of families and children living in more rural settings, where transport and social isolation can significantly affect daily experiences. While some parts of the DEA benefit from affluence and access to established amenities, young people across the area consistently raised issues around emotional wellbeing, limited access to leisure and support services, and the need for greater inclusion and youth-led engagement.

Emotional health and wellbeing are a dominant and recurring theme. Young people in Bangor East and Donaghadee described feeling overwhelmed by school-related pressures, peer dynamics, and the negative influence of social media. Anxiety and low mood were common experiences, particularly among teenagers, with many describing a need for more consistent, localised support. Despite the area's relative affluence, access to emotional wellbeing services was described as inconsistent or overly formal, especially for those living outside Bangor town. Youth workers were repeatedly cited as trusted adults who provide a valuable and less stigmatised source of emotional support, but young people expressed concern that such provision is uneven or under-resourced across the DEA. There was a strong desire for more safe spaces both physical and emotional where young people can explore their feelings without judgement and build confidence and resilience.

Access to leisure and social opportunities was another key concern, particularly for those living in the more rural or coastal parts of Donaghadee and the outer edges of Bangor East. Young people reported a lack of nearby activities that cater to their age and interests, with long travel times, poor transport links, and cost acting as significant barriers to participation. While Bangor may offer facilities, these are not always accessible to young people living further afield. Some described feeling excluded from social life because they could not afford transport or were dependent on adult availability to get to and from activities. Even where provision exists, the range of options was often seen as narrow focused primarily on sport and not reflective of more diverse interests such as art, music, outdoor pursuits, or cultural experiences. The absence of youth-specific venues that feel welcoming and inclusive was noted, especially by those who do not identify with the dominant sporting or social groups. This lack of choice and access often led to disengagement and a sense of being overlooked in wider Youth Service planning.

In education, Bangor East and Donaghadee demonstrate strong attainment at a headline level, but feedback from young people highlights disparities in experience, particularly for those with additional support needs or non-academic aspirations. Several participants described feeling under pressure to succeed in a narrow academic pathway, with limited acknowledgement of alternative strengths or career paths. This was particularly true for young people interested in vocational learning, creative industries, or self-employment, who felt poorly supported in navigating their future options. In addition, while some praised the support received from teachers or mentors, others described feeling lost in larger school environments where individual needs were overlooked. Life skills such as budgeting, interview preparation, and emotional literacy were also identified as gaps in their current education experience. There was a strong appetite for more practical learning opportunities that help prepare young people for real-world challenges beyond formal qualifications.

Safety, both in public spaces and online, was another theme raised across age groups. While serious crime was not a major concern, some young people reported feeling uneasy in local parks or town centres, particularly in the evenings, due to the presence of older peer groups or a lack of lighting and oversight. For many, feeling safe meant having access to places where they could be themselves without fear of conflict, judgement, or harassment. This sense of safety also extended to digital spaces, where online bullying and social comparison were highlighted as significant stressors. Young people requested better education on digital safety, respectful relationships, and how to manage online pressure. These concerns were particularly prevalent among girls and those identifying as LGBTQIA+, who often felt less safe or accepted in mainstream social environments.

Social inclusion and representation were discussed both explicitly and indirectly. While Bangor East and Donaghadee are not among the most ethnically diverse areas, young people from newcomer backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ identities, or with disabilities reported feeling marginalised or misunderstood. Several noted that activities and services often assume a one-size-fits-all model, without considering varied needs or lived experiences. There were calls for more inclusive practices, including staff training, diverse representation, and visible support for minority groups. For many, inclusion was about more than accessit was about feeling that their identity and voice mattered in the spaces they occupy.

Youth voice and participation was a cross-cutting theme throughout the feedback. While some young people had engaged in school councils or youth forums, many felt that their contributions had little impact. There was a shared desire to be involved in shaping local provision and decision-making not through tokenistic consultation, but through meaningful and sustained participation. Young people expressed an interest in co-designing programmes, taking part in youth-led projects, and having clear feedback loops to see how their ideas influence change. Where such opportunities had been provided, they reported increased confidence, purpose, and connection to their community. However, many felt that their voices were still too easily dismissed or ignored in adult-led spaces.

Despite the challenges outlined, the young people of Bangor East and Donaghadee demonstrated a strong sense of community and aspiration. They showed a willingness to engage, to contribute positively, and to support one another when given the chance. However, the recurring message was that more investment is needed particularly in rural access, emotional wellbeing support, and inclusive, youth-driven programming to ensure all young people in the area can thrive regardless of postcode, identity, or background.

From these insights, several clear thematic priorities emerge for youth work in Bangor East and Donaghadee: Emotional Wellbeing and Accessible Support, Transport and Rural Inclusion, Varied and Inclusive Leisure Provision, Educational Confidence and Life Skills, and Youth Empowerment and Representation. These themes reflect both the constraints and the potential that define the experiences of children and young people in this DEA and point to the importance of a youth work approach that is responsive, relational, and rooted in place.

Bangor East and Donaghadee Summary

This coastal DEA is home to 6,706 children and young people. It encompasses a mix of suburban and rural zones. While educational attainment is strong, gaps exist for disadvantaged groups. Emotional wellbeing, access to services, and youth inclusion are recurring concerns, particularly in Donaghadee.

- High levels of educational attainment mask pockets of hidden need, with 82.7% of school leavers achieving 5 GCSEs including English and maths, well above the NI average, yet some still leave education without clear destinations or qualifications.
- Mental and emotional health challenges persist, with a considerable number of young people self-reporting conditions such as anxiety, depression, or stress-related issues.
- Learning difficulties and autism affect a significant cohort, highlighting the need for ongoing support for neurodivergent young people and those with additional learning needs.
- Low levels of newcomer population and limited ethnic diversity may lead to reduced awareness of cultural differences and the risk of social isolation for minority young people, despite low levels of racist incidents.
- Some families face economic hardship, with up to 50% of children in certain schools eligible for free school meals, indicating disparities within the DEA that may impact children's development and wellbeing.
- A drop in reported domestic abuse and antisocial behaviour incidents is welcome, but vigilance is still needed, especially in supporting young people who may be affected by hidden harms in the home.
- Youth justice referrals remain one of the lowest across the borough, but prevention and early intervention remain key to sustaining this positive trend.
- Access to inclusive and supportive environments, such as youth clubs or mental health-friendly spaces, is needed to ensure all young people feel safe, connected, and valued in their communities.

Bangor West

Key facts

There is 5,367 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Bangor West DEA.

2,261 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

5.2% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification (NI average 4.9%).

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed or are unknown in 2022/23 is 6.3% compared to the NI average of 4.7%.

The percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including GCSE English and maths in 2022/23 is 74.4% (NI average 76.1%).

103 newcomer pupils in Bangor West DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 6 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 33.3% decrease from the previous year of 9 racial motivated incidents.

Bangor West Stakeholder input/feedback

In Bangor West, the perspectives of children and young people present a layered and locally grounded view of their experiences, aspirations, and unmet needs. While the DEA benefits from established infrastructure, green spaces, and proximity to education and health services, these advantages do not always translate into equitable or meaningful access for all young people. Through focus group engagement and survey feedback, clear themes emerge around emotional wellbeing, limited social opportunities, and a sense of disconnection for those whose needs fall outside mainstream provision. These insights point to the importance of nuanced, youth-centred approaches that take account of both individual identity and the broader social context.

Emotional health and wellbeing is a prominent theme throughout feedback from Bangor West. Young people across age ranges described heightened feelings of stress, anxiety, and social pressure, with older participants referencing concerns about future uncertainty, exam stress, and mental health challenges exacerbated by digital life. For younger participants, worries often centred around peer conflict and family tensions, with a sense that these issues were difficult to talk about in school or at home. Many young people expressed a need for safe, informal spaces to talk openly about their feelings, especially with adults they could trust outside of the family or school setting. Youth workers and community mentors were described as invaluable sources of support accessible, non-judgemental, and embedded in their lives in ways that statutory services are often not. However, there were concerns that such support was not consistently available across the DEA, particularly for those who do not already engage in youth clubs or organised activities.

Leisure and recreation access, particularly in terms of diversity and affordability, was another consistent concern. While Bangor West is well served in terms of physical facilities, young people noted that cost, scheduling, and perceived exclusivity can act as significant barriers. Structured programmes especially those centred around sport were seen as beneficial for some, but inaccessible or uninviting for others. Young people who do not participate in traditional sport described a lack of alternative options, such as arts, music, or inclusive outdoor activity. Others highlighted the need for less structured, youth-led spaces where they could spend time safely and freely without needing to “sign up” or commit to a programme. This was especially important to those who preferred more casual or low-energy social environments. Some young people reported having nowhere they felt they belonged outside of school or home, and expressed frustration that existing spaces were often geared toward younger children or formal adult supervision. The absence of relaxed, youth-positive venues was described as contributing to boredom, isolation, or increased time spent online sometimes in unhelpful or risky digital spaces.

In education, young people in Bangor West described both achievement and pressure. Many were proud of their academic success but noted that this came at a cost to their emotional wellbeing and overall balance. Some felt that there was too much emphasis on performance, with limited recognition of other forms of growth or success. Those who struggled academically or whose learning style did not align with the traditional classroom reported feeling left behind or unsupported. There was a strong call for more varied educational opportunities. Bangor West has less than the NI average achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including GCSE English and Math in 2022/23 is 74.4%. Young people wanted to be better equipped not only for exams but for adult life managing money, dealing with stress, applying for jobs, and building relationships. These requests reflect a broader desire for education systems and support networks to see them as whole people, not just students or exam candidates.

Safety and security both physical and emotional also featured in discussions. While Bangor West is not an area with high recorded levels of crime or anti-social behaviour, some young people reported feeling unsafe in certain public places, particularly after dark. Others described online spaces as emotionally unsafe, where cyberbullying, peer judgement, or exposure to harmful content contributed to a decline in confidence or trust. In response, young people asked for more education on digital wellbeing and healthy relationships, including how to navigate conflict, set boundaries, and manage social pressure. Additionally, they emphasised the importance of having adults they could turn to when things went wrong both for practical help and emotional reassurance. For some, this sense of safety also related to being free from discrimination or judgement, particularly those who identified as LGBTQIA+, neurodivergent, or from minority backgrounds.

Inclusion and representation were raised as important but under-addressed issues. Young people from marginalised groups spoke about the absence of visible diversity in their schools, clubs, and community services. They noted that inclusion must go beyond passive tolerance to active celebration and support. This includes the use of inclusive language, training for staff, and the development of programmes that reflect a range of identities, cultures, and lived experiences. Participants highlighted that even in areas of relative affluence, experiences of exclusion, misunderstanding, or invisibility can significantly affect wellbeing and engagement. Young people with disabilities or special educational needs called for more tailored and accessible opportunities, and a greater understanding of their specific requirements. Without this, they often felt excluded not just from activities, but from wider social and educational life.

Young people in Bangor West also expressed a strong desire to be involved in shaping local provision. However, many felt that current mechanisms for youth voice were limited in both scope and impact. Some described frustration with being asked for their opinions but seeing no change or follow-up. Others felt that their voices were ignored in school or public settings, particularly when expressing needs that challenged existing systems or assumptions. Where meaningful engagement had occurred such as through co-designed projects or youth leadership roles participants reported increased confidence, motivation, and pride in their contributions. This underlines the importance of moving from consultation to co-production, ensuring that young people are not only heard but empowered to lead change in their communities.

While Bangor West may not present the same statistical levels of deprivation as other DEAs, feedback from young people clearly illustrates hidden need. From those balancing caring responsibilities at home, to others struggling with anxiety or identity, many described experiences that were not visible in headline data. These stories point to the need for services that are responsive, relational, and grounded in the lived realities of young people regardless of postcode or perceived privilege.

The themes emerging from Bangor West point to several clear priorities for youth work in the area: Emotional Wellbeing and Accessible Support, Varied and Inclusive Leisure and Social Spaces, Holistic Education and Life Skills, Safe and Empowering Environments, and Youth Voice and Representation. These priorities reflect the aspirations and needs of a community of young people who are ready to engage, lead, and thrive provided they are given the trust, space, and support to do so.

Bangor West Summary box

Bangor West, with 5,367 children and young people, is primarily suburban, though experiences of young people vary widely across its communities. While educational outcomes are above average, these masks underlying issues such as hidden poverty and mental health concerns, particularly among older teens.

- Rates of youth unemployment and low qualification attainment are among the highest in the borough, with 5.2% of young people aged 20–24 not in education or employment and only 74.4% of school leavers achieving 5 GCSEs including English and maths.
- Mental and emotional health concerns remain pressing, with Bangor West showing elevated levels of young people self-reporting emotional or psychological conditions, particularly in the 16–24 age group.
- Learning difficulties and autism spectrum conditions are highly prevalent, ranking among the top DEAs for self-reported cases of both conditions within the 0–24 population.
- A notable level of long-term health conditions affects the 0–24 age group, suggesting ongoing health-related barriers to participation and wellbeing.
- Absenteeism and disengagement from education are emerging challenges, with Bangor West exhibiting one of the higher rates of unauthorised school absences among post-primary pupils.
- While newcomer integration is active, with over 100 newcomer pupils in local schools.
- Social exclusion and economic disadvantage continue to impact certain areas, influencing access to education, recreational opportunities, and support services.

Comber

Key facts

There is 5,259 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Comber DEA.

2,136 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

3.7% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification (NI average 4.9%).

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed or are unknown in 2022/23 is 2.5% compared to the NI average of 4.7%.

The percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including GCSE English and maths in 2022/23 is 84.2% (NI average 76.1%).

35 newcomer pupils in Comber DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 4 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 400% increase from the previous year of 0 racial motivated incidents.

Comber Stakeholder input/feedback

In Comber, the voices of children and young people reveal a complex balance between the area's sense of close-knit community and the emerging challenges that shape day-to-day life for its younger residents. Although Comber benefits from low levels of deprivation and access to a range of services, this can obscure the more subtle but significant needs articulated by young people. Feedback from surveys, focus groups, and local data consistently highlights concerns around emotional wellbeing, access to activities and support, and a desire for greater inclusion, voice, and connection particularly among those who feel overlooked within traditional youth provision.

Emotional health and wellbeing stands out as a priority across age groups in Comber. Young people described high levels of stress and anxiety, often linked to academic pressure, strained peer relationships, and worries about their future. Older participants particularly noted the emotional impact of exams and post-education uncertainty, while younger groups cited bullying and the social pressure associated with digital life as key stressors. Despite recognising that mental health is more openly discussed than in the past, many felt that support remained limited, overly formal, or too difficult to access without a long wait. Schools were sometimes identified as the only available source of help, but young people also noted a lack of capacity within school systems to offer consistent, one-to-one emotional support. The presence of youth workers and informal community-based adults was highly valued, especially where these relationships offered safe, trusted spaces to talk and be understood. There was a clear appetite for more local, non-clinical wellbeing support tailored to the emotional realities of young people in the area.

Access to play and leisure was another key theme, shaped heavily by issues of variety, availability, and inclusivity. Young people in Comber reported that while some structured activities were available such as sports clubs and youth groups these did not always align with their interests or social needs. Several spoke of a lack of creative, cultural, or outdoor experiences, as well as limited opportunities for informal socialising in safe environments. Girls noted that many available activities skewed toward football or other male-dominated sports, leaving them feeling excluded. Others mentioned that while there were facilities available in the area, they were not always affordable or welcoming, especially for those without prior connections or established peer groups. Transport was also raised as a barrier, with some young people highlighting the difficulty of accessing leisure provision in nearby towns due to limited evening services or the cost of travel. These constraints contributed to feelings of boredom and isolation, especially during weekends and school holidays.

Educationally, Comber performs well, but this masks the challenges faced by groups, including those with additional needs or from lower-income households. Young people described a strong emphasis on academic achievement within schools, sometimes at the expense of emotional development or practical skill-building. This pressure to succeed in exams was frequently linked to mental health concerns and a sense of being unsupported if they did not fit into a high-achieving narrative. Some expressed frustration that there were few opportunities to explore vocational or alternative pathways, and that careers advice lacked relevance or depth. Life skills such as budgeting, emotional literacy, and understanding employment processes were noted as important but often missing from formal education settings. For young people who struggled with traditional learning or who had complex home lives, the school system could feel inflexible or unresponsive, reinforcing a sense of disconnection.

Safety and stability, particularly in social environments, was a quieter but nonetheless important issue raised by participants. While Comber does not experience high levels of recorded crime, young people spoke of feeling uncomfortable or intimidated in certain public spaces due to peer conflict, poor lighting, or lack of adult presence. Online safety was also a significant concern, with bullying, exclusion, and harmful content on social media regularly referenced as sources of anxiety and distress. Some participants reported feeling that adults both parents and professionals did not fully understand the emotional toll of online life and called for more relevant education on how to navigate digital spaces safely. There was a strong demand for clear, relatable guidance around respectful behaviour, consent, and emotional safety in relationships both online and in person.

Inclusion and equality were raised across various dimensions. While Comber is not one of the most diverse DEAs, it is home to children and young people from newcomer backgrounds, with additional needs, or who identify as LGBTQIA+, and these individuals often described feeling marginalised or unsupported in school and community contexts. Several mentioned that programmes and services were not always visibly inclusive, and that differences were sometimes met with misunderstanding or silence rather than active support. There was a strong call for greater visibility and acceptance of diverse identities, as well as staff training to build confidence in responding to a wider range of needs. The importance of having spaces that feel explicitly welcoming and inclusive was repeatedly emphasised, particularly for those who had felt judged or overlooked in other settings.

Youth voice and participation was another central theme. While some young people had taken part in school councils or community consultation events, many felt that their contributions were not taken seriously or followed up in meaningful ways. This lack of feedback left them feeling disempowered and disconnected from decision-making processes. Participants were clear in their desire to shape the services and spaces they use not just in name, but in real and visible ways. They expressed interest in helping design programmes, plan events, and contribute to local youth strategy development, provided that their involvement led to tangible change. This sense of ownership and belonging was seen as crucial to building confidence and fostering pride in their community.

While Comber does not rank highly in terms of economic disadvantage, hidden poverty and quiet need were identified through stakeholder and youth feedback. Some families face financial strain due to the cost of living, transport, and childcare, which in turn limits young people's ability to participate in leisure activities or access enrichment opportunities. These pressures were especially felt in households with multiple children or where a parent was unwell or unemployed. Older participants also spoke of balancing part-time work with school and the stress that came with managing competing demands. These stories underline the importance of maintaining universal youth provision that is open, affordable, and non-stigmatising.

Drawing together these perspectives, the key thematic priorities for youth work in Comber include Emotional Health and Relational Support, Inclusive and Varied Leisure Opportunities, Flexible Education and Life Skills, Digital Safety and Respectful Relationships, and Youth Voice and Local Empowerment. These areas reflect a desire for connection, confidence, and genuine participation and reinforce the need for youth work that recognises the unique dynamics of a community that sits at the intersection of rural, suburban, and urban life.

Comber Summary

Comber is home to 5,259 children and young people and presents a mix of rural and semi-urban communities. It has the lowest population of young people among the DEAs, yet issues such as limited transport, few youth facilities, and rising emotional health concerns are disproportionately felt.

- Mental and emotional health issues remain a key concern, with 222 young people self-reporting emotional or psychological conditions.
- Learning difficulties and autism affect a substantial portion of young people, with Comber reporting higher-than-average rates of both conditions among the 0–24 population.
- Despite strong academic performance, 84.2% of school leavers achieved 5 GCSEs including English and Maths, there is still a cohort not progressing or struggling with post-education pathways.
- Youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET) stands at 3.7% among 20–24-year-olds, suggesting the need for enhanced employability and transition support.
- Social inclusion challenges may exist, with only 35 newcomer pupils in 2023/24 and a significant increase in racially motivated incidents (from 0 to 4), pointing to potential issues with integration and tolerance.
- Special educational needs are prevalent, with 7.5% of pupils having a formal SEN statement, above the NI average.
- Rates of long-term health conditions among young people are high, at 20.6%, reflecting ongoing physical and mental health vulnerabilities.

Holywood and Clandeboye

Key facts

There is 5,688 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Holywood and Clandeboye DEA.

2,587 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

4.2% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification (NI average 4.9%).

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed or are unknown in 2022/23 is 2.9% compared to the NI average of 4.7%.

The percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including GCSE English and maths in 2022/23 is 87.3% (NI average 76.1%).

52 newcomer pupils in Holywood and Clandeboye DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 13 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 13.3% decrease from the previous year of 15 racial motivated incidents.

Holywood and Clandeboye Stakeholder input/feedback

In Holywood and Clandeboye, the voices of children and young people reflect a nuanced and at times contradictory experience one where geographic proximity to urban services sits alongside personal accounts of emotional strain, limited inclusive opportunities, and unmet needs, particularly for those from marginalised backgrounds. While the area is often associated with relative affluence and high educational attainment, these broader indicators can obscure the hidden and personal challenges that many young people face. Through survey data, focus group insight, and demographic profiling, several clear themes emerge that speak to the unique context of this DEA.

Emotional health and wellbeing was a recurring concern across all age groups. Young people in Holywood and Clandeboye described high levels of anxiety, low mood, and stress, often linked to academic pressure, perfectionism, and peer dynamics. Several participants noted that while their schools promoted mental health awareness, the actual support available was limited in terms of accessibility, consistency, and confidentiality. Long waiting lists and a lack of one-to-one spaces were highlighted, with young people stressing the need for private, informal conversations with trusted adults. Youth workers and mentors were frequently referenced as valuable supports, offering judgement-free spaces where young people could speak openly about how they were feeling. These informal relationships were described as helping to build emotional resilience in a way that formal services often could not, particularly for those who found school environments stressful or overwhelming.

There was a strong demand for increased mental health education that goes beyond basic awareness and actively teaches coping skills, stress management techniques, and strategies for building self-esteem. Young people also asked for peer-led initiatives, drop-in wellbeing sessions, and more visible mental health support across both school and community spaces. For some, especially those from less visible or marginalised groups, these emotional needs were intensified by feelings of social exclusion, identity-based discrimination, or family-related stress.

Access to play, leisure, and social opportunities was another significant issue, marked by gaps in both availability and inclusivity. While Holywood benefits from access to parks, green space, and some youth provision, young people reported that local activities were often repetitive, narrowly focused, or not designed with their interests in mind. There was a clear desire for more diverse and creative programming activities such as music, drama, art, and digital media, which offer outlets for self-expression and community engagement beyond sport. Some young people described feeling bored or disconnected in their free time, with limited safe and welcoming spaces to gather informally with friends. Affordability was raised as a barrier for some families, especially in households where multiple children were trying to access activities that required travel, equipment, or registration fees.

Transport was another key concern, particularly for those living further from the centre of Holywood or who needed to travel into Bangor or Belfast for activities and services. The cost and availability of public transport were described as limiting participation and contributing to isolation, particularly in the evenings and during school holidays. These challenges were especially acute for young people who relied on adult support to travel or who lived in single-parent households with limited flexibility.

Educational experience and academic pressure were strongly felt by young people in the area. While attainment levels are high across many schools in Holywood and Clandeboye, young people reported a narrow focus on academic success and a lack of holistic educational approaches. The pressure to

achieve top grades, secure university placements, and succeed in a competitive environment was described as intense and unrelenting. Young people asked for more life skills education learning to manage finances, deal with emotional setbacks, and make healthy decisions about relationships and careers. Several called for greater acknowledgement of non-academic pathways, with some expressing interest in apprenticeships, practical training, or creative industries. These options were often perceived as under-promoted or viewed less favourably than traditional academic routes.

Safety and inclusion in community and social spaces was a recurring theme. While serious crime or anti-social behaviour was not commonly reported, emotional safety feeling welcome, respected, and understood was less consistent. Participants shared experiences of feeling judged or misunderstood by adults, particularly in public spaces or community settings not specifically designed for young people. Some young people from minority backgrounds, including LGBTQIA+ and newcomer groups, described a lack of visibility and representation within local services and schools. They called for more proactive inclusion, including staff training, anti-discrimination policies, and visibly inclusive programming. For some, feeling unsafe was not about a physical threat but about not knowing if their identity would be accepted or respected in each environment.

Digital life was described as both a source of connection and emotional strain. Social media, while essential for staying in touch, was also associated with bullying, image pressure, and constant comparison. Young people expressed a need for more education on digital wellbeing, including how to manage online conflict, set boundaries, and protect their mental health in a hyperconnected world. This education, they suggested, should be age-appropriate, delivered by relatable adults, and grounded in the realities of their online lives.

Throughout the feedback, youth voice and empowerment stood out as an area of both frustration and hope. While some young people had participated in school councils or local youth programmes, many felt their input was not taken seriously or resulted in little visible change. They described a desire to be involved in shaping their local community not just consulted after decisions had been made, but actively engaged in design, planning, and delivery of Youth Services and spaces. For several participants, this was tied to a wider call for respect: to be seen as capable contributors with valuable insights into what would make their community safer, more inclusive, and more enjoyable.

Importantly, young people in Holywood and Clandeboye demonstrated strong aspirations and a willingness to engage when given the chance. However, they consistently highlighted that too few opportunities were genuinely shaped around their needs or communicated in a way that invited their participation. Those with quieter voices, complex needs, or non-mainstream identities were especially likely to feel excluded, even in an area often associated with privilege.

From this feedback, clear priorities emerge for youth work in Holywood and Clandeboye: Emotional Health and Relationship-Based Support, Inclusive and Diverse Leisure Provision, Holistic Education and Life Skills, Safe and Affirming Social Spaces, and Youth Voice and Co-Design. These thematic areas reflect not only the challenges young people face, but also the clarity with which they can articulate what they need, a testament to their insight, resilience, and readiness to help shape a more responsive and inclusive community.

Holywood and Clandeboye Summary

With 5,688 children and young people, Holywood and Clandeboye is a compact DEA with high educational performance overall. However, hidden inequality exists and focus group feedback highlights the disconnect some young people feel from services and local decision-making.

- Mental health challenges persist, particularly among the 16–24 age group, where 107.8 per 1,000 self-report an emotional or psychological condition, above the Northern Ireland average.
- Rates of long-term health conditions and learning difficulties, though lower than in some neighbouring DEAs, still affect a substantial number of young people and may contribute to barriers in education or social inclusion.
- High progression to higher education (56.9%) reflects a strong academic culture but may overshadow the support needed for those not pursuing academic routes.
- Rates of NEET young people aged 20–24 (4.2%) remain close to the NI average.
- Racist incidents are high for the DEA's size, with 13 recorded in 2023/24, indicating ongoing challenges around inclusion and community cohesion.
- Special Educational Needs (SEN) identification is lower than average, at 5.3% for statemented pupils, which may suggest either under-identification or fewer supports needed, but still warrants careful monitoring.
- Stakeholder feedback highlights socioeconomic disparities, despite high educational attainment, particularly in access to leisure and developmental opportunities outside academic success.

Newtownards

Key facts

There is 8,664 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Newtownards DEA.

3,602 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

5.4% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification (NI average 4.9%).

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed or are unknown in 2022/23 is 7.4% compared to the NI average of 4.7%.

The percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including GCSE English and maths in 2022/23 is 72.8% (NI average 76.1%).

219 newcomer pupils in Newtownards DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 16 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is the same as the previous year.

There are three SOAs in Newtownards DEA that are within the top 25% of areas deprivation (MDM 2017) – Scrabo 2, Glen 1 and Central. Scrabo 2 is the topmost deprived area in Ards and North Down ranking 71 out of 890 in Northern Ireland. Newtownards DEA has the most SOAs across Ards and North Down.

Newtownards Stakeholder input/feedback

In Newtownards, the experiences of children and young people reflect a complex intersection of community pride, economic pressure, and limited opportunity, particularly for those navigating disadvantage or social exclusion. While the town serves as a central hub within the wider Ards and North Down area, this visibility has not necessarily translated into a sense of inclusion or access for all. Through local data, survey insights, and focus group feedback, young people in Newtownards consistently identify emotional wellbeing, social safety, educational inequality, and access to meaningful activities as key areas of concern pointing to deep-rooted needs that call for greater recognition and sustained attention.

Emotional health and wellbeing stands out as an urgent and recurring issue. Young people in Newtownards frequently reported feelings of anxiety, stress, and low self-worth, shaped by academic pressure, difficult family circumstances, and community-level challenges such as poverty or social conflict. For many, emotional strain is compounded by a lack of visible, accessible support. Mental health services were described as under-resourced and often unavailable at the point of need, with long waiting times and unclear referral pathways. While some young people found school-based pastoral care helpful, others felt unable to disclose personal issues in that setting due to fears around confidentiality or stigma. Youth workers were widely recognised as critical supports particularly those embedded in community provision offering approachable, non-judgemental relationships that allowed young people to open about mental health, identity, and family life. The absence of these relational supports in certain areas of Newtownards was noted with concern, particularly by those living in high-deprivation neighbourhoods.

Linked to emotional wellbeing is a persistent lack of safe, inclusive social spaces. Young people in Newtownards expressed a need for environments where they could relax, connect with peers, and feel a sense of belonging especially outside of school hours. While there are existing youth and community centres, these were sometimes perceived as overstretched, underfunded, or too narrowly focused on younger age groups. Older teenagers described having “nowhere to go” and feeling either invisible or unwelcome in public spaces. For some, this led to disengagement and increased time spent online, which was not always positive. Others spoke of resorting to street-based socialising, which could lead to exposure to peer pressure, anti-social behaviour, or conflict with adults or authorities. These experiences fuelled a desire for more youth-dedicated spaces that were open in the evenings and designed to meet the social and emotional needs of a diverse population.

Educationally, Newtownards presents significant internal variation. While some schools perform well academically, others face persistent challenges related to attainment, attendance, and retention. Young people described stark differences in educational experience depending on school and personal circumstance. Several participants shared feelings of being “written off” or unsupported in school, particularly those with special educational needs, mental health issues, or disruptive home environments. The pressure to succeed academically was widely felt, but many reported a lack of confidence in their ability to meet expectations, especially without access to tutoring or home-based academic support. There was a strong call for more practical, hands-on learning opportunities, including vocational training, employability support, and life skills education. These were seen not only as alternatives to traditional academic success, but as essential for building self-worth, independence, and future resilience.

Poverty and economic exclusion emerged as a significant theme. Newtownards has some of the highest levels of deprivation within Ards and North Down, and young people were acutely aware of how financial constraints shape their opportunities. Cost was repeatedly identified as a barrier to participation in sport, access to mental health support, travel to leisure facilities, and even to basic needs such as food or school materials. Many young people described going without or relying on informal networks of support. Hidden poverty, particularly among families not engaged with formal welfare services, was a quiet but powerful undercurrent. This financial strain intersected with emotional wellbeing, contributing to low self-esteem, reduced aspirations, and limited engagement in community life. Despite this, young people in Newtownards expressed a desire to break cycles of disadvantage and felt that with the right support particularly from trusted adults they could do so.

Safety and community stability were also prominent in young people's reflections. While not all participants reported direct experiences of anti-social behaviour or violence, many shared stories of bullying, community conflict, and general unease in public spaces. Fear of judgement, intimidation, or peer pressure led some to withdraw from social settings or avoid local parks and shared spaces altogether. Others spoke about witnessing substance misuse or being offered drugs themselves, particularly in more deprived areas. These accounts reflect the need for stronger, youth-informed safeguarding within the community not solely through enforcement, but through trusted presence, conflict resolution, and the development of alternative pathways that support young people to thrive.

Inclusion and representation were raised repeatedly, particularly by those who identified as LGBTQIA+, newcomer, neurodivergent, or having additional support needs. Some participants described feeling isolated or misunderstood in both school and community settings. They called for greater awareness, improved staff training, and more visible support systems to help ensure that no one felt left out due to identity, ability, or circumstance. A common thread was the need for inclusive spaces that feel actively welcoming rather than simply open to all places where differences are acknowledged, celebrated, and supported in practice.

Despite the scale of the challenges raised, young people in Newtownards also demonstrated strong community awareness and a clear desire to contribute. Youth voice and agency were important themes, but with a note of frustration: many young people felt their opinions were solicited but not acted on. They wanted to be more than participants they wanted to co-create change. Involvement in local planning, service design, and decision-making processes was seen as not only empowering but necessary to ensure that services reflect the real needs of those they are intended to serve.

Drawing on these experiences, the emerging thematic priorities for youth work in Newtownards include Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Access, Safe and Inclusive Youth Spaces, Educational Support and Alternative Pathways, Poverty-Aware Youth Provision, and Youth Voice and Leadership. These areas reflect a community where the potential of young people is evident, but where structural inequalities, stigma, and disconnection continue to limit opportunity. Responsive, relationship-based youth work delivered consistently and with authenticity has the power to address these needs and support young people in Newtownards to build lives marked by confidence, connection, and hope.

Newtownards Summary

Newtownards is the most populous DEA in Ards and North Down with 8,664 children and young people. It includes areas with significant socio-economic deprivation. The youth population reflects diverse needs, including concerns around safety, mental health, and low educational engagement for some cohorts.

- Educational underachievement is a significant concern, with only 72.8% of school leavers achieving 5 GCSEs including English and maths, below the Northern Ireland average of 76.1%.
- High levels of school leaver unemployment were recorded, with 7.4% of young people either unemployed or their status unknown, well above the NI average of 4.7%.
- Youth aged 20–24 face employment and qualification barriers, with 5.4% not in education, employment, or training (NEET), exceeding the national average.
- A high number of newcomer pupils (219) suggests a growing need for cultural inclusion, language support, and integration opportunities for young people new to the area.
- Incidents of racially motivated behaviour remain among the highest in the borough, with 16 incidents reported in 2023/24, pointing to ongoing concerns around community cohesion and equality.
- Mental and emotional health needs are notable, particularly in the 16–24 age group, with rates above the borough average for emotional or psychological conditions.
- Learning difficulties and autism are prevalent, with rates among the 0–24 population exceeding the Northern Ireland average.
- Suspension and non-attendance rates raise concern, with schools in the DEA reporting high suspension levels and indications of disengagement from mainstream education.