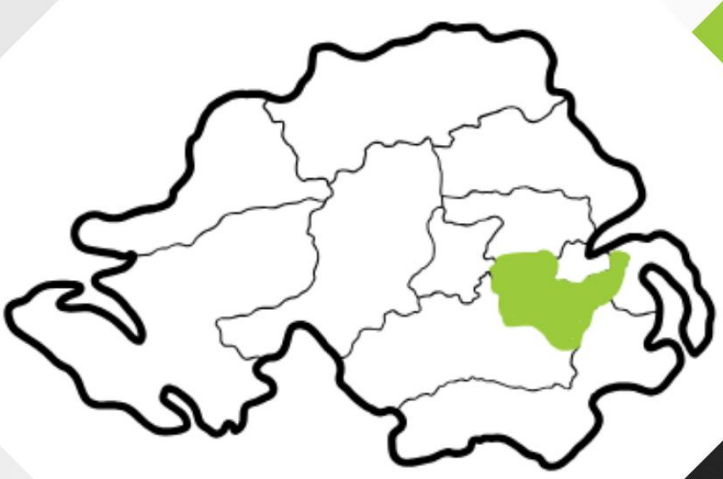
Education Authority

2026 - 2029



LISBURN & CASTLEREAGH

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 Lisburn Castlereagh. It brings together data, evidence and local insight to help identify the needs and barriers children and young people in Lisburn Castlereagh 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 Lisburn Castlereagh 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 216 reported living within Lisburn Castlereagh.

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. 8 focus groups, involving 160 participants were completed in Lisburn Castlereagh Area.

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 Lisburn Castlereagh 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 Lisburn and Castlereagh to ensure the Local Assessment of Need accurately reflects local priorities and experiences. Engagement included collaboration with statutory partners and voluntary sector organisations such as the Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP), Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, community and voluntary youth providers, and representatives from education, health, and good relations sectors. The valuable insight and feedback from these partners have helped identify emerging needs, inform local priorities, and ensure that Youth Service planning is responsive to the realities faced by children and young people across the Lisburn and Castlereagh area.

Council in Numbers

The population of Lisburn and Castlereagh local government district is 149,915 people.

45,064 children and young people are aged 0-25 years live in Lisburn and Castlereagh

37,903 children and young people are aged 4-25 years live in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

Age bands population:

- 7,160 aged 0 – 3 years
- 9,538 aged 4 – 8 years
- 9,913 aged 9 – 13 years
- 8,431 aged 14 – 18 years
- 10,021 aged 19 – 25 years

In Lisburn and Castlereagh 1,940 children and young people aged 0-25 years (4.3%) live in deprivation.

13,384 children and young people (29.7%) live in a rural community in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

20.7% of children and young people aged 0-24 years old in Lisburn and Castlereagh come from a lone parent family (census21).

1,136 Newcomers attend schools in Lisburn and Castlereagh (4.8%) – NI Average 5%.

19 Irish Traveller children and young people.

4,984 (31.9%) of all pupils in Lisburn and Castlereagh are eligible for Free School Meals. 2023/24 (NI average 28%).

4,403 pupils (16.4%) who attend school in Lisburn and Castlereagh 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 maths in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2022/23 is 71.6% compared to the NI average of 76.1%.

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed and/or unknown in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2022/23 is 2.5% (NI average 4.7%).

3.5% 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 Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2022/23 is 18.9% (NI average 20.4%). This represents 23% of girls (NI 24%) and 15% of boys (NI 17%).

The proportion of Year 8 pupils identified as obese or overweight in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2022/23 is 21.7% (NI average 26%) This represents 20% of girls (NI 26.2%) and 23% of boys (NI 25.8%).

Suicide rates in Lisburn and Castlereagh recorded 18 suicides in 2023. This is an 80% increase from 10 suicides in 2021.

There were 71 incidents with a sectarian motivation in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2023/24.

There were 73 incidents with a racist motivation in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2023/24. This is a 19.7% increase from the previous year of 61 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 1,039 domestic abuse crimes in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2023/24. This is a 13% decrease from the previous year. The average rate for domestic abuse crimes in Lisburn and Castlereagh DEAs is 149 (NI average 250).

There was a total of 3,018 anti-social behaviour incidents in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2023/24. This is a 3% increase from the previous year. The average rate for anti-social behaviour incidents in Lisburn and Castlereagh DEAs is 432 (NI average 567).

Key trends

- Emotional health concerns are rising, with anxiety and stress widely reported.
    - An 80% increase in suicides between 2021 and 2023 highlights escalating mental health pressures among young people in the area.
- Leisure access is limited by transport and rural isolation.
    - With 29.7% of young people living in rural areas, many report that poor transport prevents them from accessing sports, recreation and Youth Services.
- School stress and lower academic attainment remain concerns.
    - Only 71.6% of school leavers achieve five GCSEs including English and Maths, below the Northern Ireland average of 76.1%, contributing to reported stress and low confidence.
- Many young people feel unheard and excluded from decision-making.
    - Focus group participants repeatedly called for greater involvement in shaping services, describing current opportunities as limited or tokenistic.
- Vulnerable groups face persistent access and inclusion gaps.
    - Although deprivation affects just 4.3% of young people, 31.9% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals, suggesting hidden disadvantage not reflected in headline deprivation rates.

Findings from Children and Young People

This section combines the results from the Regional Assessment of Need survey conducted with children and young people across the Lisburn and Castlereagh Area, NISRA statistical data, feedback from focus groups and engagement from wider key stakeholders.

When asked what the most important theme of provision was for children and young people across Lisburn and Castlereagh Area, through the Regional Assessment of Need survey, children and young people ranked the themes by importance to them as follows:

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

Emotional Health and Wellbeing

Key facts

4,403 pupils (16.4%) who attend school in Lisburn and Castlereagh 2022/23 have a Special Education Need or Disability Stage 1-3 (NI average 19%).

Approximately 9,000 children and young people aged 0-25 years have a mental health need.

2,210 children and young people aged 0-24 years have autism.

The proportion of Primary 1 pupils identified as obese or overweight in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2022/23 is 18.9% (NI average 20.4%). This represents 23% of girls (NI 24%) and 15% of boys (NI 17%).

The proportion of Year 8 pupils identified as obese or overweight in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2022/23 is 21.7% (NI average 26%) This represents 20% of girls (NI 26.2%) and 23% of boys (NI 25.8%).

17.9% of children and young people aged 0-24 years have a long-term health condition (NI 19.8%).

There was 4.88 births per 1,000 births to young mothers aged under 20 years (NI average 5.83%).

There was 0.67 births per 1,000 births to young mothers aged under 17 years (NI average 0.75%).

According to the most recent census, 585 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

Suicide rates in Lisburn and Castlereagh recorded 18 suicides in 2023. This is an 80% increase from 10 suicides in 2021.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Lisburn and Castlereagh, the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people has emerged as a significant concern, marked by increasing levels of anxiety, stress, and emotional isolation across different age groups and communities. While many young people report access to supportive adults and positive relationships within their families, schools, or Youth Services, others describe ongoing struggles with mental health that are exacerbated by academic pressure, social media, peer conflict, and a perceived lack of safe spaces to talk openly about their feelings. The role of Youth Services in addressing these needs is consistently highlighted, particularly in providing preventative support, trusted relationships, and spaces where emotional wellbeing is prioritised and normalised.

Available data suggests that emotional wellbeing challenges are widespread and, in some instances, intensifying. Suicide rates in Lisburn and Castlereagh increased by 80% between 2021 and 2023, rising from 10 to 18 deaths a deeply concerning trend. While the numbers alone do not tell the full story, they reflect a broader pattern of distress among young people, many of whom are contending with complex emotional and environmental pressures. Focus group feedback reveals that young people across the council area are increasingly aware of mental health issues and are seeking ways to better understand and manage their emotions. However, this awareness is often not matched by timely access to support, particularly in school settings where mental health resources may be limited or inconsistently applied.

A common theme among young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh is the experience of anxiety, particularly related to school performance, peer relationships, and future uncertainty. The pressure to achieve academically was cited by many as a source of chronic stress, with some reporting that they felt overwhelmed by expectations or unsupported during key transition periods such as exams or moving schools. For those with Special Educational Needs or other additional challenges, these pressures are often magnified. While some young people can access school counsellors or pastoral support, others feel that such services are overstretched, difficult to access, or not well suited to their individual needs.

In this context, Youth Services are viewed as critical safe havens. Young people consistently describe youth workers as approachable, non-judgmental, and willing to listen qualities that are sometimes lacking in other areas of their lives. For some, youth clubs represent the only environment in which they feel comfortable expressing their emotions without fear of being stigmatised or misunderstood. They value the informal, relational nature of youth work, which enables them to talk about mental health in a more personal and accessible way. Several participants also expressed that simply having a space to relax, engage in enjoyable activities, and connect with peers played a vital role in supporting their emotional wellbeing.

Young people are also calling for Youth Services to take a more proactive role in promoting mental health education and resilience-building. There was strong support for workshops on stress management, mindfulness, emotional literacy, and coping strategies. Participants also wanted to learn more about how to support their friends who may be struggling, with some suggesting the development of peer mentoring programmes or mental health ambassador roles within youth settings. Importantly, they emphasised that these initiatives should not be limited to reactive support but should be embedded in the regular offer of Youth Services as part of a broader approach to health and wellbeing.

Across Lisburn and Castlereagh, digital life was also identified as a major contributor to emotional stress, particularly among teenagers. Social media platforms, while offering connection and entertainment, were frequently linked to feelings of inadequacy, cyberbullying, and pressure to conform. Young people spoke about the constant comparison to curated online images, the fear of missing out, and the impact of negative comments or exclusion from group chats. Some also described difficulty in switching off or setting healthy boundaries with their devices. There is a clear opportunity for Youth Services to support digital wellbeing through education, awareness campaigns, and the creation of alternative offline spaces where young people can reconnect with themselves and others in healthier ways.

Children and young people with specific vulnerabilities such as those with caring responsibilities, those from low-income households, and those from minority groups also reported unique challenges in relation to emotional wellbeing. For these individuals, stressors are often layered and cumulative, and traditional forms of support may feel inaccessible or unresponsive to their needs. For example, rural isolation in parts of the council area can exacerbate loneliness and limit access to mental health services, particularly for those without access to private transport.

The stigma associated with mental health remains a persistent barrier. While awareness has improved, many young people still feel reluctant to seek help for fear of being judged, labelled, or misunderstood. This is particularly true among boys and young men, who described pressure to appear strong or unemotional. In this regard, the relational approach of Youth Services built on trust, empathy, and consistency can be instrumental in breaking down stigma and creating cultures of openness. Some young people suggested that youth centres could have designated quiet rooms or wellbeing corners, where they can decompress or talk privately with a trusted adult.

The link between physical and emotional health was also emphasised by many young people, who recognised that exercise, nutrition, and sleep all play a role in managing their mental wellbeing. However, access to these supports is not always equitable. Cost, transport, and availability can all be barriers to regular participation in sport or physical activity, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Youth Services are well-positioned to address these inequalities by offering free or low-cost programmes that integrate physical activity with social connection and emotional support.

In conclusion, emotional health and wellbeing is a central concern for children and young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh, cutting across socio-economic boundaries and age groups. The pressures they face academic, social, digital, and personal are complex and evolving, and they require a coordinated, responsive approach that places wellbeing at the heart of youth engagement. Youth Services are already playing a vital role in this space, providing safe, inclusive, and relational environments where young people can begin to understand and manage their mental health. Moving forward, there is a clear need to expand this support through targeted programmes, improved access, and a continued commitment to placing the voice of young people at the centre of emotional wellbeing planning. In doing so, Youth Services can help to ensure that every young person in Lisburn and Castlereagh has the support they need not only to cope, but to thrive.

Access to play and Leisure

Key facts

- 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.
- There are more than 700 council registered playparks in Northern Ireland.
- There are 67 council-managed leisure and recreational centres in Northern Ireland.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Lisburn and Castlereagh, access to play and leisure represents both a vital opportunity and a significant challenge for children and young people. While the council area offers a range of formal recreational and sporting facilities, young people consistently report that access to meaningful, inclusive, and age-appropriate leisure activities is uneven across the area. Barriers such as transport, cost, lack of variety, and a sense of exclusion persist, particularly for those living in rural communities, from lower-income families, or with additional needs. For many children and young people, play and leisure are not just about recreation they are essential for social connection, mental wellbeing, and personal development. Youth Services have a critical role in addressing these gaps, by offering welcoming, responsive environments that reflect the diverse interests and realities of young people's lives.

Across focus groups and survey responses, young people from Lisburn and Castlereagh expressed a clear desire for more accessible and inclusive leisure opportunities. Many described their existing options as limited, repetitive, or overly focused on traditional team sports. While football and GAA remain popular for some, others felt excluded from the mainstream offer due to lack of interest, skill level, or personal identity. Young people asked for a wider range of activities, including boxing, basketball, dance, drama, gaming, and creative arts. There was strong interest in having access to informal, unstructured spaces where they could relax, hang out with friends, or pursue hobbies at their own pace. They emphasised that leisure should be fun, not pressured, and should allow for freedom of expression and choice.

Transport emerged as a major barrier to participation, especially for young people in rural parts of the council such as Killultagh or Downshire. In these areas, public transport is often infrequent, expensive, or unavailable in the evenings and at weekends making it difficult for young people to travel to youth centres, sports facilities, or community events. This contributes to a sense of isolation and exclusion, where young people feel cut off from opportunities that are readily available in urban parts of the district like Lisburn city centre. Some participants described having to rely on lifts from parents or friends, which is not always possible, particularly for those from low-income or single-parent households. Others noted that even when they could get to leisure facilities, the cost of entry, equipment, or food could act as a deterrent.

Cost was also highlighted more broadly as a limiting factor. With around 32% of school pupils in Lisburn and Castlereagh eligible for Free School Meals, affordability is a pressing concern for many families. Young people described missing out on school trips, youth residentials, and local events simply because their families could not cover the associated costs. Even small expenses such as entry fees, snacks, or transport fares could add up and act as a barrier to participation. This economic exclusion often went unnoticed by service providers, leading to a sense of invisibility and frustration among young people who feel that their needs are not being considered. Youth Services were consistently seen as a trusted and reliable source of free or low-cost provision, and young people called for greater investment in programmes that reduce financial barriers.

In terms of facilities, young people recognised that Lisburn and Castlereagh has several leisure centres, parks, and sports grounds. However, they frequently commented that these spaces were not always welcoming or suitable for their age group. Some described feeling "too old" for traditional playgrounds but "too young" to access gyms or adult-focused venues. Others spoke about safety concerns in local

parks or public spaces, particularly in the evenings, where anti-social behaviour or poor lighting discouraged use. There was a strong call for more dedicated youth spaces indoors and outdoors that are designed with young people in mind and offer a sense of ownership, safety, and community. Ideas included drop-in centres, multi-use games areas, youth cafés, and well-lit social areas that remain open in the evenings and at weekends.

Young people with disabilities or special educational needs raised additional concerns about accessibility. Some described feeling excluded from mainstream leisure activities due to a lack of inclusive design, untrained staff, or environments that did not cater to sensory or mobility needs. They expressed a clear desire to participate fully but often found that activities were either not adapted or that they were not made to feel welcome. Youth Services that offered smaller groups, quieter settings, or one-to-one support were viewed positively and seen as important pathways to inclusion. There is a clear need for more intentional planning around inclusion in leisure, ensuring that every young person regardless of ability can access and enjoy play and leisure in ways that are meaningful to them.

Another important dimension of play and leisure in Lisburn and Castlereagh relates to mental health and emotional wellbeing. Many young people described leisure time as a critical outlet for managing stress, anxiety, or low mood particularly when school or home environments felt overwhelming. For them, youth clubs, creative workshops, or simply spending time with friends in a safe space provided much-needed respite and emotional support. Some called for more integration between leisure and wellbeing programmes, such as combining physical activities with mindfulness sessions, or offering arts-based therapy in youth settings. They viewed leisure not as separate from emotional health, but as a key part of the same support system.

Peer-led and youth-led activities were also highly valued. Young people wanted more say in the design and delivery of leisure opportunities, noting that they are more likely to engage with programmes that reflect their interests and allow them to take the lead. This could include running their own events, co-designing sessions, or participating in youth panels that influence local services. When young people are given genuine responsibility and trust, they described feeling more invested, more confident, and more likely to contribute positively to their communities. Youth Services were seen as one of the few environments where this kind of leadership is actively encouraged.

In conclusion, access to play and leisure in Lisburn and Castlereagh is characterised by significant inequalities in availability, affordability, and inclusivity. While many young people can engage in enriching recreational activities, others face barriers that limit their participation and erode their sense of belonging. Youth Services are central to addressing these disparities by providing free or low-cost programmes, creating safe and inclusive spaces, offering transport support where needed, and ensuring that leisure opportunities are shaped by the voices of young people themselves. Expanding this work is essential, not only to support individual wellbeing, but to foster connection, creativity, and community cohesion across the council area. Play and leisure are not luxuries they are fundamental rights, and every child and young person in Lisburn and Castlereagh deserves the opportunity to enjoy them fully and without restriction.

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 Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2022/23 is 71.6% compared to the NI average of 76.1%.

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed and/or unknown in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2022/23 is 2.5% (NI average 4.7%).

3.5% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification. (NI average 4.9%).

1,136 Newcomers attend schools in Lisburn and Castlereagh (4.8%) – NI Average 5%.

19 Irish Traveller children and young people.

4,984 (31.9%) of all pupils in Lisburn and Castlereagh are eligible for Free School Meals. 2023/24 (NI average 28%).

4,403 pupils (16.4%) who attend school in Lisburn and Castlereagh 2022/23 have a Special Education Need or Disability Stage 1-3 (NI average 19%).

255 children and young people were suspended from school in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

The attendance rate for post-primary schools was 93.1%. (NI average 96%).

According to the most recent census, 585 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Lisburn and Castlereagh, the theme of learning and achieving reveals a dual narrative one of academic strength and high performance on the one hand, and persistent barriers to educational equity on the other. While many children and young people in the area succeed in formal educational settings, significant numbers continue to face challenges that undermine their confidence, engagement, and long-term outcomes. These challenges are shaped by socio-economic background, learning needs, access to support, and the emotional pressures of academic life. Youth Services have a crucial role to play in this space not as substitutes for formal education, but as complementary environments where learning is broadened, achievements are celebrated in all forms, and young people are supported to realise their full potential.

Lisburn and Castlereagh performs well in key educational indicators. In 2022/23, 71.6% of school leavers achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and Maths slightly below the Northern Ireland average of 76.1%, but still reflective of a strong academic culture. The proportion of young people leaving education without qualifications or employment is also relatively low, with only 2.5% of leavers recorded as unemployed or unknown in the most recent figures. However, these positive headline statistics can obscure the lived experiences of young people who face barriers not captured by academic attainment alone.

One of the most significant challenges reported by young people is the emotional toll of academic pressure. Across focus groups and survey responses, many described school as a source of stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem particularly around examinations, deadlines, and the expectation to meet certain performance standards. Some felt overwhelmed by the intensity of the curriculum, especially in the lead-up to GCSEs and A-levels, and described experiencing panic attacks, sleep disruption, or burnout. Others spoke of a fear of failure and a sense of falling behind, which was especially acute for those who had missed school due to illness, caring responsibilities, or emotional distress. In this context, Youth Services are seen as vital safe spaces where learning can take place at a different pace, and where young people can access support without judgment or pressure.

Young people also expressed frustration at a narrow definition of achievement within schools, which often prioritises academic grades over personal development, creativity, or vocational skill. Many participants said they would like to explore more practical, hands-on learning experiences such as construction, hospitality, IT, or creative arts but felt that these options were either not available or not valued as highly as academic subjects. For those who struggled in traditional classroom environments, this lack of alternative pathways contributed to disengagement and a sense of not belonging within the education system. Youth Services were identified as a key site for offering these broader learning opportunities, like accredited opportunities, life skills, or interest-based clubs that affirm different ways of learning and succeeding.

The importance of life skills emerged as a particularly strong theme. Young people spoke about leaving school without feeling fully prepared for adult life, and identified gaps in areas such as financial literacy, cooking, communication, and decision-making. These skills were seen as essential to independence yet often overlooked within formal education. Young people were clear that they wanted more opportunities to learn these practical competencies in supportive, interactive environments. Youth Services were widely recognised as being well-placed to deliver this learning in ways that are relevant, engaging, and tailored to individual needs.

Equity in learning was another area of concern. While Lisburn and Castlereagh has lower levels of child poverty than some other council areas, 31.9% of school pupils are eligible for Free School Meals indicating that a significant number of families experience economic hardship. Young people from lower-income backgrounds described being disadvantaged not just in terms of access to resources, but also in terms of expectations and support. Some spoke of not having a quiet place to study at home, or of lacking access to digital devices or tutoring. Others described the stigma of being seen as a "Free School Meals kid" and the impact this had on their confidence and engagement. Youth Services can help address these inequities by providing homework clubs, digital access, quiet study spaces, and one-to-one mentoring ensuring that every young person has the tools they need to succeed, regardless of family income.

Children and young people with Special Educational Needs or disabilities also shared concerns about the support available to them. While some reported positive experiences of specialist teaching or classroom assistance, others felt that their needs were not fully understood or accommodated in mainstream settings. In some cases, young people described being withdrawn from lessons or activities without adequate explanation, which led to feelings of exclusion or shame. There was a strong desire for more inclusive approaches to learning that recognise individual strengths, allow for flexibility, and prioritise communication and respect. Youth Services were again highlighted as important spaces where young people with additional needs can learn in ways that feel empowering, accessible, and person-centred.

For newcomer children and young people, language and integration remain key challenges. Although the percentage of newcomer pupils in Lisburn and Castlereagh (4.8%) is in line with the regional average, those affected often report feeling isolated or unsupported, especially when joining schools mid-year or during transition stages. Some spoke about struggling to understand lessons or complete homework due to language barriers, while others described being bullied or excluded by peers. These experiences highlight the need for targeted support, including English language programmes, peer mentoring, and cultural awareness initiatives. Youth Services can play an instrumental role here not only by providing safe, welcoming environments, but by offering structured opportunities to build language skills, friendships, and a sense of belonging.

Confidence and motivation were consistently identified as key drivers of achievement or, conversely, as areas where young people needed more support. For some, past failures or negative school experiences had left lasting scars, making it difficult to re-engage with learning or to believe in their own abilities. Others described lacking role models or encouragement at home, which made it harder to stay focused on long-term goals. In these cases, the consistent presence of a trusted youth worker, the opportunity to set and achieve small goals, or the chance to take part in projects that showcase talents can be transformational. Young people repeatedly emphasised the importance of being "seen" and supported as individuals not as data points or problems to be fixed.

Finally, young people expressed a strong desire to have a say in how learning opportunities are shaped. They wanted more control over their own educational journeys and more say in the types of programmes and activities offered by Youth Services. Whether through co-designing workshops, running peer-led sessions, or feeding back on their experiences, young people were clear that participation in decision-making is not only empowering but educational. It builds confidence, leadership, and a sense of ownership over learning.

In conclusion, learning and achieving in Lisburn and Castlereagh must be understood in holistic terms not only as academic attainment, but as a process of personal growth, skill-building, and empowerment. While many children and young people in the area thrive within formal education, others continue to face barriers related to stress, accessibility, equity, and identity. Youth Services are central to addressing these challenges by providing alternative pathways, celebrating diverse forms of success, and offering supportive, youth-centred environments where every young person can learn, grow, and believe in their potential. In doing so, Youth Services contribute not just to individual achievement, but to a more inclusive and equitable learning culture across the council area.

Living in safety and stability

Key facts

In Lisburn and Castlereagh 1,940 children and young people aged 0-25 years (4.3%) live in an area of deprivation.

13,384 children and young people (29.7%) live in a rural community in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

According to the most recent census, 585 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

19.7% of children and young people aged 0-24 years old in Lisburn and Castlereagh come from a lone parent family.

There were 71 incidents with a sectarian motivation in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2023/24.

There were 73 incidents with a racist motivation in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2023/24. This is a 19.7% increase from the previous year of 61 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 1,039 domestic abuse crimes in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2023/24. This is a 13% decrease from the previous year. The average rate for domestic abuse crimes in Lisburn and Castlereagh DEAs is 149 (NI average 250).

There was a total of 3,018 anti-social behaviour incidents in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2023/24. This is a 3% increase from the previous year. The average rate for anti-social behaviour incidents in Lisburn and Castlereagh DEAs is 432 (NI average 567).

Suicide rates in Lisburn and Castlereagh recorded 18 suicides in 2023. This is an 80% increase from 10 suicides in 2021.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Lisburn and Castlereagh, the theme of living in safety and stability reveals a layered reality for children and young people one in which many feel broadly secure in their daily lives, yet continue to face significant challenges within the home, their communities, and their peer relationships. While the council area records relatively low levels of some types of harm compared to other regions, the voices of young people highlight persistent issues such as domestic abuse, bullying, anti-social behaviour, and emotional instability. These experiences can have a profound impact on their sense of safety and overall wellbeing. Within this context, Youth Services play an essential role in offering a stabilising presence providing safe spaces, trusted relationships, and preventative interventions that help to mitigate risk and promote resilience.

Official statistics point to a complex picture. In 2023/24, there were 1,039 domestic abuse crimes recorded in Lisburn and Castlereagh, representing a 13% decrease from the previous year. While this downward trend is positive, it is important to recognise that many instances of domestic abuse go unreported, and that for those affected, the emotional and psychological impact can be long-lasting. Similarly, the area recorded 3,018 incidents of anti-social behaviour in the same period an increase of 3% suggesting that public safety and community cohesion remain ongoing concerns for local young people.

Focus group feedback reinforces these findings, with children and young people describing a range of situations that impact their sense of safety and stability. For some, the home environment is a key source of distress. They spoke about family breakdown, financial stress, substance misuse, and violence either experienced directly or witnessed within the household. These challenges often lead to feelings of anxiety, powerlessness, and isolation. In such circumstances, Youth Services were identified as a vital outlet: a place to escape the pressures of home, access consistent support from trusted adults, and develop strategies for coping. Youth workers were frequently described as being among the few adults that young people felt they could confide in without fear of judgement or escalation.

Outside the home, young people raised concerns about safety in public spaces. Some reported feeling unsafe in parks, town centres, or on public transport, particularly after dark. Fear of being approached by strangers, witnessing fights, or being targeted by peers contributed to a reluctance to spend time in the community, which in turn limited social interaction and leisure opportunities. This was especially true for younger participants or those living in more isolated parts of the council, such as Killultagh or Downshire. Girls and young women also shared gender-specific concerns around harassment and unwanted attention, describing how their freedom to move through public spaces was shaped by safety considerations that were not always acknowledged by adults.

Bullying both online and offline was another prominent issue affecting young people's sense of safety. While some had positive school experiences, others spoke about being targeted for their appearance, identity, or circumstances, often with little confidence that adults would intervene effectively. Cyberbullying was highlighted as a growing concern, with young people feeling vulnerable to persistent and often anonymous attacks through social media platforms. The emotional toll of such experiences was evident, with some participants describing a loss of self-esteem, reluctance to attend school, or even self-harming behaviours. In this context, Youth Services offer an alternative space where young people feel protected, respected, and supported both emotionally and practically.

Children and young people with additional vulnerabilities such as those with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ identities, or those from minority ethnic backgrounds faced risks to their sense of stability. Some spoke of being excluded from peer groups, misunderstood by adults, or subjected to discriminatory attitudes. They emphasised the importance of spaces where their identities are affirmed and where they can connect with others who share similar experiences. Youth Services that actively promote inclusion and equality were seen as vital in counteracting the marginalisation some young people experience in other parts of their lives. Safe and inclusive youth settings provide not only emotional security but also the foundation for belonging and personal growth.

Rural isolation emerged as a recurring theme in relation to stability. Young people in rural parts of Lisburn and Castlereagh described feeling physically and socially cut off from services and opportunities. Limited public transport and a lack of nearby facilities meant they often had to rely on family members for travel, which was not always possible or practical. This sense of disconnection could lead to boredom, frustration, and, in some cases, risky behaviours. Youth Services that operate on an outreach basis or provide mobile provision were seen as essential to bridging this gap, ensuring that safety and support are not confined to urban areas.

In addition to addressing risks, young people spoke about the importance of emotional stability having consistent routines, supportive relationships, and a sense of predictability in their lives. For many, the presence of a familiar youth worker, the regularity of youth club sessions, or the opportunity to take part in structured programmes offered a grounding force amid wider instability. Youth Services were valued for their ability to build trust over time, respond flexibly to individual needs, and provide continuity where other services may be more fragmented or reactive.

Another key aspect of safety and stability raised by young people was the importance of having a voice. Many described feeling excluded from decisions that affect them, whether in school, at home, or in their communities. They expressed a desire to be heard and involved in shaping the services and environments that impact their lives. When young people feel listened to and respected, they are more likely to feel safe and to engage positively. Youth Services that promote participation, co-design, and youth-led initiatives were seen as contributing not only to individual confidence but to a broader culture of safety and respect.

Preventative work was also strongly supported. Young people called for more education around relationships, consent, substance misuse, and emotional health all of which are key to understanding risk and building resilience. They wanted this learning to take place in settings where they feel comfortable and where the information is delivered in a relatable, non-judgemental way. Youth Services, with their informal approach and strong relational ethos, were seen as ideally suited to this kind of preventative education.

In conclusion, living in safety and stability in Lisburn and Castlereagh cannot be understood solely through the absence of crime or harm. It must also encompass emotional security, trusted relationships, and the ability to participate in everyday life without fear. For many children and young people, these elements are not consistently present. Youth Services play a central role in filling this gap by creating environments where young people feel seen, supported, and safe. By continuing to invest in inclusive provision, outreach to rural areas, and preventative programming, Youth Services can help ensure that all young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh are able to live not only free from harm, but with the confidence and connection that underpin true stability.

Economic and environmental stability

Key facts

In Lisburn and Castlereagh 1,940 children and young people aged 0-25 years (4.3%) live in an area of deprivation.

13,384 children and young people (29.7%) live in a rural community in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

The percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C (incl. equivalent qualifications) including GCSE English and maths in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2022/23 is 71.6% compared to the NI average of 76.1%.

The percentage of school leavers who are unemployed and/or unknown in Lisburn and Castlereagh in 2022/23 is 2.5% (NI average 4.7%).

3.5% of young people 20-24 years old are not in employment and do not have a qualification (NI average 4.9%).

4,984 (31.9%) of all pupils in Lisburn and Castlereagh are eligible for Free School Meals. 2023/24 (NI average 28%).

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Lisburn and Castlereagh, the theme of economic and environmental stability offers insight into the challenges and aspirations of children and young people navigating a landscape shaped by cost-of-living pressures, uneven access to resources, and increasing concern for the environment. While the area is often characterised by relatively low levels of deprivation in comparison to other council areas, a closer examination of lived experiences reveals that financial insecurity, rural isolation, and environmental neglect still impact the stability of many young people's lives. These issues are particularly pronounced for those from lower-income families, lone-parent households, rural communities, or those with caring responsibilities. Youth Services are well placed to respond supporting young people to build economic resilience and take a meaningful role in protecting their local environment.

Despite the perception of affluence, 31.9% of pupils in Lisburn and Castlereagh are eligible for Free School Meals above the Northern Ireland average and indicative of significant socio-economic pressure affecting many families. The reality of financial stress was brought into sharp focus by young people who spoke candidly about the daily impacts of poverty. Some described going without essentials, missing out on school trips, or avoiding social activities due to cost. Young people from lone-parent households and those with younger siblings were particularly aware of the financial strain placed on their families, and many expressed a strong desire to help alleviate that pressure whether by gaining part-time work, learning to cook affordable meals, or contributing more at home.

One of the most consistent messages from young people was a desire for more practical support and education to help them navigate economic challenges. Young people recognised that these skills are essential not only for individual success but for family wellbeing and community resilience. Some participants also expressed concern about their future job prospects, particularly those not pursuing academic routes. They wanted Youth Services to provide access to alternative pathways, including vocational training, enterprise programmes, and local employer engagement to help them build confidence and enter the workforce.

Access to employment and training opportunities is often further limited by geographic and transport-related barriers. In rural DEAs such as Killultagh and parts of Downshire, young people described feeling "cut off" from the services, shops, and networks that could support their economic development. The lack of reliable public transport was repeatedly cited as a major constraint, making it harder to attend interviews, training, or even casual work. For those without access to a car in the household, choices around employment and education can be severely restricted. Youth Services that operate mobile provision or offer support with transport were identified as vital in overcoming these limitations and levelling the playing field for rural young people.

The theme of environmental stability was also of significant interest to young people, many of whom expressed deep concern about climate change, pollution, and the lack of visible sustainability efforts in their local communities. While some acknowledged that Lisburn and Castlereagh benefits from natural beauty and green spaces, others highlighted issues such as littering, poor maintenance of parks, and a lack of recycling facilities. There was a clear sense of frustration that environmental issues were not taken seriously enough, and a desire to be more involved in driving change.

Young people wanted to be part of the solution. They asked for more opportunities to participate in environmental projects through Youth Services, including litter picks, tree planting, gardening, and climate education initiatives. They saw these activities not only as important for the environment but to contribute to their communities, meet others, and learn new skills. Some proposed youth-led sustainability groups, where they could plan and lead local campaigns around recycling, energy use, or food waste. Others wanted to see youth centres themselves become role models for green living using sustainable materials, growing their own food, or switching to renewable energy sources. For these young people, the environment was not a peripheral issue, but a core concern linked to their identity, values, and future.

There was also recognition that environmental and economic concerns are interlinked. Young people talked about how rising energy bills, fuel costs, and food prices all placed strain on their households. They noted that many environmentally friendly choices such as buying local, organic produce or using green transport options were not always affordable or accessible. Youth Services were seen as having a role in bridging this gap, by offering practical and realistic solutions that benefit both the planet and people.

Young people also expressed a desire to be part of the wider conversation about sustainability, and to have their voices heard in decisions that affect their future. They called for more engagement with local government and community planning processes, where they could contribute ideas and advocate for environmentally and economically sustainable initiatives. Youth Services were identified as potential facilitators of this engagement, helping to equip young people with the language, knowledge, and confidence to participate in civic life and influence policy.

Importantly, the notion of stability extended beyond finances and the environment to include emotional and relational dimensions. Some young people described how financial hardship or environmental uncertainty contributed to feelings of anxiety and instability. They worried about how their families would cope with rising costs, and how their futures might be shaped by climate crisis. These concerns were not abstract they were rooted in daily life and emotional experience. Youth Services were valued for offering consistency, support, and reassurance during uncertain times. The presence of a trusted youth worker, a warm meal, or a welcoming space to talk about worries was seen as central to feeling safe and supported.

In conclusion, while Lisburn and Castlereagh may benefit from a relatively strong economic baseline, the lived experience of many children and young people tells a more nuanced story one in which financial stress, limited access, and environmental concern shape their sense of security and opportunity. Youth Services have a vital role to play in responding to these issues by promoting economic resilience, expanding access to practical learning and employment pathways, and empowering young people to become active stewards of their environment. In doing so, they contribute not only to individual stability, but to the creation of a more equitable and sustainable future for all children and young people in the council area.

Making a positive contribution

Key facts

The attendance rate for post-primary schools was 93.1%. (NI average 96%).

1,136 Newcomers attend schools in Lisburn and Castlereagh (4.8%) – NI Average 5%.

19 Irish Traveller children and young people.

255 children and young people were suspended from school in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

In Lisburn and Castlereagh 1,940 children and young people aged 0-25 years (4.3%) live in deprivation.

13,384 children and young people (29.7%) live in a rural community in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

According to the most recent census, 585 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Lisburn and Castlereagh, the theme of making a positive contribution is strongly resonant among children and young people, many of whom express a clear and consistent desire to play an active role in their communities. Across different age groups and backgrounds, young people demonstrate a willingness to help others, share their talents, and improve the world around them yet they frequently describe a lack of meaningful, accessible opportunities to do so. Their aspirations often go unrecognised, and their voices are not always reflected in local planning or decision-making. Within this context, Youth Services are well-positioned to harness and support the enthusiasm of young people, enabling them to build confidence, develop leadership skills, and make valued contributions to their communities.

Focus group insights reveal that many young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh are already making positive contributions in informal ways caring for siblings, helping at home, supporting friends, or participating in school initiatives. These efforts, while often unseen, are foundational to their sense of identity and belonging. However, young people repeatedly expressed that they want to do more: to be involved in community events, take part in volunteering, and have a say in how local services are run. Many were motivated not only by the desire to give back, but by the belief that their generation has ideas, energy, and experiences that can bring about real change.

Despite this appetite for engagement, young people described several barriers to participation. These included a lack of information about available opportunities, perceived inaccessibility of formal volunteering programmes, and limited platforms for having their voices heard in decision-making. Some felt that young people were not taken seriously by adults in positions of authority and that their input was often tokenistic or overlooked. This sense of exclusion led some to disengage altogether, reinforcing a cycle where young people feel disconnected from community life. There was strong agreement that Youth Services could provide a bridge by acting as advocates, facilitators, and conveners who ensure young people are included, supported, and valued in local processes.

Children and young people were especially interested in having opportunities to contribute in ways that align with their skills and passions. Creative expression was frequently mentioned to engage others and influence their community. Young people wanted more chances to lead or take part in arts projects, performances, murals, podcasts, and digital campaigns that address issues important to them ranging from mental health awareness to climate change and equality. These projects were seen not just as outlets for creativity, but as platforms for activism and personal growth. However, young people felt that such opportunities were often sporadic and concentrated in urban areas, with rural communities missing out due to transport barriers or lack of targeted programming.

Peer leadership and mentoring were also highly valued by young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh. Many expressed a desire to support others, particularly younger peers or those facing similar challenges. They spoke positively about experiences of being involved in peer mentoring programmes or youth-led initiatives and wanted to see more structured pathways to take on leadership roles within Youth Services. These roles were seen as empowering and transformative building confidence, communication skills, and a sense of purpose. Young people felt that being entrusted with responsibility by youth workers demonstrated respect, and this recognition, in turn, inspired them to act with maturity and empathy.

The importance of being recognised and celebrated for contributions was a recurring theme. Young people described how informal acts of kindness or leadership often go unnoticed, and that this can be discouraging. They called for more visible and consistent acknowledgement of their efforts through awards, public recognition, certificates, or showcases that highlight their positive impact. Such recognition was not sought out of ego, but out of a desire to feel seen and appreciated. Youth Services were viewed as ideally placed to lead this recognition culture, ensuring that all contributions big or small are valued and that young people from all backgrounds can shine.

Social action and volunteering were also identified as areas of interest, particularly among older teenagers. Young people wanted to engage with causes that matter to them, such as environmental sustainability, mental health, or poverty. However, they stressed that these opportunities need to be accessible, flexible, and youth friendly. Traditional volunteering schemes were sometimes seen as overly formal or difficult to access, especially for those balancing school, work, or caring responsibilities. Youth Services can play a key role in removing these barriers by offering volunteering opportunities that are integrated into regular programmes, co-designed with young people, and tailored to their interests and capacities.

Crucially, young people also expressed a desire to influence decisions that affect them whether within Youth Services, schools, or wider community structures. They wanted their opinions to be sought early and acted upon meaningfully. While some had experience of youth councils or consultation events, others felt that these processes lacked follow-through and transparency. They called for more participatory approaches, such as youth advisory panels, project co-design, and decision-making roles within services. These opportunities were seen as essential to fostering a sense of agency, citizenship, and respect. Youth workers who encouraged young people to lead, question, and shape services were described as particularly impactful in nurturing this sense of contribution.

Diversity and inclusion were important to the young people consulted. They emphasised that everyone should have the opportunity to contribute, regardless of background, ability, or identity. Some young people with additional needs, or from minority ethnic or LGBTQIA+ communities, reported feeling excluded or marginalised in mainstream programmes. They called for more inclusive, accessible youth spaces and leadership models that reflect the diversity of the community. Representation was highlighted as particularly important young people want to see themselves in the adults who support them and in the peers who lead alongside them.

In conclusion, making a positive contribution is not a peripheral concern for young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh it is central to their sense of identity, belonging, and purpose. While many are already contributing in meaningful ways, they need more consistent, inclusive, and empowering opportunities to do so. Youth Services have a pivotal role to play by creating platforms for leadership, facilitating volunteering and creative expression, and embedding participation into the fabric of their work. By supporting young people to take initiative, use their voices, and build stronger communities, Youth Services not only help individuals to flourish, but also foster a generation of active, engaged citizens equipped to lead their communities into the future.

Respect for young people's rights

Key facts

According to the most recent census, 585 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

Approximately 9,000 children and young people aged 0-25 years have a mental health need.

In Lisburn and Castlereagh 1,940 children and young people aged 0-25 years (4.3%) live in an area of deprivation.

13,384 children and young people (29.7%) live in a rural community in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

1,136 Newcomers attend schools in Lisburn and Castlereagh (4.8%) – NI Average 5%.

19 Irish Traveller children and young people.

4,984 (31.9%) of all pupils in Lisburn and Castlereagh are eligible for Free School Meals. 2023/24 (NI average 28%).

4,403 pupils (16.4%) who attend school in Lisburn and Castlereagh 2022/23 have a Special Education Need or Disability Stage 1-3 (NI average 19%).

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Lisburn and Castlereagh, the theme of respect for the rights of children and young people reflects both growing awareness and a continued gap between principle and practice. Young people across the council area demonstrate a strong understanding of their rights particularly the right to be heard, to feel safe, to access education, and to be treated fairly. However, many feel that these rights are not always upheld in the environments where they live, learn, and socialise. While some experience respect and inclusion through supportive relationships with family, educators, or youth workers, others report being overlooked, dismissed, or subject to discrimination. Youth Services are viewed as critical in bridging this gap, not only by modelling rights-based practice, but by educating, empowering, and advocating for young people's rights in a tangible, everyday context.

A consistent message from young people is that being listened to is central to feeling respected. While many participants in focus groups shared positive experiences of being heard in youth settings especially where strong relationships with youth workers existed others felt that their voices were marginalised in school or community decision-making processes. Some described situations where they were asked for their views but felt that those views were not taken seriously or resulted in no visible action. This tokenistic approach left them feeling disillusioned and excluded from systems that claimed to support their participation. Youth Services that foster ongoing dialogue, provide meaningful follow-up, and involve young people in co-design processes were seen as examples of good practice in respecting their right to have a say in matters affecting them.

Young people also spoke about respect in terms of how they are treated by adults. Some described being dismissed or underestimated based on their age, with their ideas or concerns met with scepticism or condescension. This dynamic was especially evident in interactions with institutions, where young people often felt that their perspectives were not given equal weight. The cumulative impact of such experiences can erode confidence and reinforce the perception that adult systems are not designed with their rights in mind. In contrast, when adults including youth workers take time to build relationships, explain decisions, and demonstrate trust, young people are more likely to engage, share, and develop a stronger sense of agency.

For children and young people from minority or marginalised backgrounds, the experience of rights not being fully respected is often compounded by issues of representation, accessibility, and identity-based discrimination. LGBTQIA+ young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh described challenges in feeling accepted within school and community settings. Some had experienced misgendering, homophobic language, or exclusion from group activities. Others felt that their identities were not reflected in the services they accessed. In response, they called for more inclusive youth provision, LGBTQIA+-affirming spaces, and visible support from staff trained in inclusive practice. When these conditions are in place, Youth Services can become vital sites of affirmation and safety, where young people feel their rights and identities are not just tolerated but respected.

Similarly, young people with disabilities or additional needs emphasised the importance of respect through accessibility and inclusion. They spoke about being denied opportunities to fully participate in learning, leisure, or leadership due to physical barriers, lack of adaptations, or low expectations. This undermined their right to equal access and dignity and left them feeling undervalued. Participants suggested that Youth Services should model inclusive design by default, ensuring all programmes are

accessible and that staff are trained in supporting a wide range of needs. For these young people, respect is not only about being heard it is about being accommodated and understood.

Respect for rights also involves feeling safe and protected another key theme raised by young people. Several participants shared concerns about bullying, harassment, or family conflict, and emphasised their right to live free from harm. While some had access to school counsellors or pastoral care, others found these services hard to access or limited in capacity. In contrast, Youth Services were frequently described as spaces where young people felt emotionally safe, supported, and able to disclose concerns without fear of judgment. The role of trusted youth workers in upholding safeguarding, advocating for young people, and acting as a consistent adult presence was central to many young people's experience of having their rights respected.

Education on rights was identified as an area of both strength and need. Some young people had encountered rights education through school citizenship lessons or Youth Service sessions, but others felt that their knowledge of rights especially how to exercise or defend them was limited. There was strong interest in learning more about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly through interactive and youth-led formats. Young people wanted to understand not just what their rights are, but how to recognise when they are being breached and what support is available. They also expressed a desire to be part of educating others through campaigns, workshops, or peer-to-peer initiatives that promote a culture of respect, equity, and accountability.

Recognition was another important aspect of rights, particularly the right to be valued and acknowledged. Young people described how their achievements, opinions, and identities are sometimes overlooked particularly if they do not align with conventional measures of success or visibility. For example, a young carer helping at home or a newcomer supporting a peer with translation may not be recognised in formal settings, but their contribution is meaningful and deserving of respect. Youth Services that celebrate diverse forms of success whether through events, awards, or simply taking time to acknowledge individual strengths can play a powerful role in affirming the dignity and worth of every young person.

Finally, young people expressed a strong sense of collective responsibility for rights. They wanted to live in communities where everyone is treated fairly, where prejudice is challenged, and where mutual respect is the foundation of everyday life. Many saw Youth Services as a space where these values are already being lived out and wanted more opportunities to take this ethos into schools, families, and public discourse. They called for youth-led campaigns on equality, awareness events around mental health or inclusion, and more engagement with local decision-makers to influence change. This civic engagement is itself an expression of rights in action young people not only claiming their own space but advocating for a more just and inclusive society.

In conclusion, while many young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh feel respected and supported in some aspects of their lives, the right to be heard, included, and treated fairly is not yet a consistent reality. Disparities in experience particularly among marginalised groups underscore the need for ongoing, intentional rights-based practice across all services. Youth Services are well positioned to lead in this work creating inclusive spaces, building trusting relationships, educating about rights, and modelling what genuine respect looks like in action. By embedding these principles into every aspect of provision, Youth Services not only uphold the rights of individual young people but help to cultivate a wider culture where respect is not earned or conditional, but universal and enduring.

Good Relations and equality

Key facts

13,384 children and young people (29.7%) live in a rural community in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

1,136 Newcomers attend schools in Lisburn and Castlereagh (4.8%) – NI Average 5%.

19 Irish Traveller children and young people.

4,984 (31.9%) of all pupils in Lisburn and Castlereagh are eligible for Free School Meals. 2023/24 (NI average 28%).

4,403 pupils (16.4%) who attend school in Lisburn and Castlereagh 2022/23 have a Special Education Need or Disability Stage 1-3 (NI average 19%).

In Lisburn and Castlereagh 1,940 children and young people aged 0-25 years (4.3%) live in deprivation.

According to the most recent census, 585 young people aged 16-24 years old identify as LGBTQIA+.

Stakeholder input/feedback

In Lisburn and Castlereagh, the theme of good relations and equality reveals a complex and evolving picture of how children and young people experience identity, inclusion, and community. While many young people describe their local area as generally safe and welcoming, they also identify ongoing challenges linked to prejudice, unequal access, and underrepresentation. For some, these issues manifest subtly through feelings of invisibility or exclusion while for others, they take the form of overt discrimination or cultural isolation. Despite this, there is a strong appetite among children and young people to foster greater understanding across communities, challenge stereotypes, and create environments where everyone is treated with fairness and respect. Youth Services are widely recognised as essential actors in supporting this work, both through inclusive programming and by amplifying young people's voices in conversations about equality and belonging.

Young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh express a clear belief in equality as a core value. Many speak of their desire to live in communities where differences in background, culture, belief, or identity are not just tolerated, but respected. However, they are equally aware that such ideals are not always realised in practice. For some, this awareness comes from direct experience being treated differently because of their ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or family circumstances. Others describe witnessing the exclusion of peers or recognising the subtle ways in which inequality is embedded in social systems, from the classroom to public spaces.

Participants from newcomer and ethnic minority backgrounds often described the challenges of integrating into school or local youth environments. While some reported positive experiences of welcome and support, others highlighted language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, or being treated as outsiders. A small but significant number shared experiences of racism ranging from inappropriate comments to feeling stereotyped or targeted. These incidents, while not always reported, contribute to a broader sense of insecurity or social distance. Youth Services were identified as spaces where these young people could feel more accepted and where cultural identity could be shared rather than hidden. There was a strong call for more intercultural activities, opportunities for peer learning, and youth-led events that celebrate diversity and promote inclusion.

Similarly, LGBTQIA+ young people in the area spoke of mixed experiences. While some found supportive peers and adults, others described facing stigma, a lack of visibility, or concerns about disclosing their identity. Some said they felt unsafe expressing themselves in certain environments, particularly school or public transport. They expressed a need for visible allyship, dedicated safe spaces, and access to staff who understand the specific challenges they face. Within Youth Services, LGBTQIA+-affirming practice was highly valued, and many asked for this to be extended further through inclusive language, diverse role models, and opportunities to lead or co-deliver equality-focused initiatives.

Young people with disabilities or additional needs also emphasised the importance of being included and having their rights respected. For some, inequality was experienced through lack of access such as venues that are not wheelchair-friendly, or programmes that do not accommodate different learning needs. Others spoke about being left out of decision-making, not because of hostility, but because of assumptions about what they could or couldn't do. Youth Services that proactively remove barriers, adapt provision, and offer individualised support were seen as enabling environments where everyone could take part and contribute on equal terms.

Issues of socio-economic inequality also shaped young people's experiences of fairness and inclusion. Those from lower-income backgrounds often felt that opportunities particularly in areas like sport, education, or leisure were skewed toward those who could afford them. This led to a sense of disconnection and, in some cases, resentment when peers had access to resources or recognition that felt out of reach. There was a strong appetite for Youth Services to play a levelling role by offering free or low-cost activities, removing financial barriers to participation, and ensuring that every young person, regardless of background, could access support and enrichment opportunities.

Sectarianism and division along community lines were not always explicitly referenced by young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh, but there were still indications of separation and caution in some areas. Some described how friendships or youth group participation tended to fall along familiar social or religious lines, not because of active hostility, but because of lack of opportunity or encouragement to mix. Others said they had never been in a shared space with young people from different traditions, or that when they had, it felt awkward or tokenistic. These insights suggest that good relations work remains essential not just to address overt conflict, but to build trust, understanding, and empathy where silence or separation currently exists.

Many young people expressed a desire to lead this work themselves. They wanted to be involved in designing and delivering projects that promote inclusion, tackle prejudice, and build bridges between different communities. This included creating social action campaigns, hosting intercultural festivals, developing peer education programmes, or producing digital content that explores identity and belonging. They emphasised that young people should not only be the focus of good relations work but also the drivers of it. Youth Services that support youth-led initiatives, provide platforms for expression, and equip young people with the tools to lead change were seen as making the most meaningful impact.

Recognition was also a recurring theme young people wanted their contributions, experiences, and identities to be recognised and valued. They called for more representation of diverse backgrounds in leadership roles, more inclusive imagery in service spaces, and more consistent celebration of achievements by young people from all walks of life. This sense of visibility was not about tokenism but about creating environments where all young people feel they belong and are seen as equals.

Digital inclusion and online behaviour were highlighted as both opportunities and risks to good relations. While social media platforms were seen as important tools for connecting across communities and exploring identity, they were also described as sources of exclusion, bullying, and misinformation. Young people expressed a need for guidance on navigating digital spaces safely and respectfully, and for Youth Services to engage more directly in helping them build positive digital cultures.

In conclusion, the aspiration for good relations and equality is alive and well among children and young people in Lisburn and Castlereagh. They want to live in communities that embrace diversity, treat everyone fairly, and offer equal opportunities for participation and success. However, the barriers they face whether social, economic, cultural, or systemic are real and require sustained attention. Youth Services are uniquely positioned to lead this work by creating inclusive, youth-led spaces that celebrate diversity, challenge discrimination, and empower young people to shape a more equal and connected society. By investing in this vision, Lisburn and Castlereagh can build a generation of young people not only equipped to live with difference but inspired to lead with empathy and inclusion.

Summary Conclusion of Needs across Strategic Themes

Emotional Health & Wellbeing

- A greater sense of emotional security and trust among children and young people
- Increased ability to express emotions and manage feelings such as anxiety and stress
- More opportunities to build self-esteem and confidence through positive peer relationships
- Improved awareness and understanding of mental wellbeing among children and young people
- Reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation, particularly in rural and marginalised communities

Access to Play and Leisure

- Broader access to enjoyable, age-appropriate recreation beyond school or home
- Increased opportunities for children and young people to connect socially in informal settings
- Greater variety in leisure experiences that reflect a wide range of interests and identities
- More inclusive access to leisure for those with disabilities or additional needs
- Better reach to leisure opportunities for children and young people in rural parts of the council

Learning & Achieving

- Improved recognition of personal strengths and non-academic forms of achievement
- Increased access to informal learning that supports personal growth and decision making
- Greater ability to manage academic pressures and develop resilience in the face of setbacks
- Enhanced awareness of practical life knowledge relevant to independence and adulthood
- Stronger sense of motivation and purpose among those not thriving in formal education

Living in Safety & Stability

- A stronger sense of physical and emotional safety in everyday environments
- Reduced exposure to bullying and peer related harm, including online
- Greater confidence among children and young people to seek help when feeling unsafe
- Increased emotional stability for those living with family conflict or instability
- Clearer understanding of personal boundaries and safe relationships

Economic & Environmental Stability

- Reduced impact of financial hardship on participation in community life
- Improved access to meaningful roles that build readiness for adulthood and employment
- Fewer barriers caused by transport inequality, especially in rural areas
- Greater awareness of environmental issues and how they affect local communities
- A more even playing field for children and young people experiencing economic disadvantage

Making a Positive Contribution to Society

- More opportunities for children and young people to feel valued within their communities
- Stronger belief among young people that their opinions and ideas matter
- Greater connection to local identity and pride in making a difference
- Increased sense of belonging through collective, youth led experiences
- Improved understanding of responsibility, leadership, and cooperation

Respect for Young People's Rights

- A stronger perception among children and young people that they are treated fairly and with respect
- Better understanding of rights, entitlements, and how to seek help or redress
- Greater trust in adults and services to uphold and protect their rights
- Reduced experiences of exclusion, particularly among minority or vulnerable groups
- Increased visibility and consideration of children and young people's voices in decision making

Good Relations & Equality

- Stronger relationships across community, ethnic, and cultural boundaries
- Reduced experiences of discrimination, including racism, sectarianism, and gender bias
- Greater understanding and respect for different cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs
- A deeper sense of inclusion among children and young people who often feel marginalised
- More balanced representation of identities and experiences across social and educational settings

The findings – Identification of priorities/DEA profiles

Castlereagh East

Key facts

There is 6,319 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Castlereagh East DEA.

2,440 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

3.3% 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 4.3% 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 80.4% (NI average 76.1%).

221 newcomer pupils in Castlereagh East DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 12 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 20% increase from the previous year of 10 racial motivated incidents.

Castlereagh East Stakeholder input/feedback

In Castlereagh East, a nuanced picture of the needs of children and young people emerges, shaped by the intersection of emotional wellbeing, educational attainment, access to leisure, and wider socio-economic challenges. Drawing from survey data, focus group feedback, and demographic profiles, there are several critical themes that can inform future youth work strategies.

Emotional health and wellbeing is a consistent priority for children and young people in Castlereagh East. While the overall district has relatively low levels of deprivation compared to other areas, this does not diminish the pressing nature of mental health challenges. Anxiety, stress, and the impact of social media were frequently mentioned by participants, with older young people expressing the need for more open discussions and support mechanisms around mental wellbeing. A notable insight was the desire for one-to-one emotional support, including counselling, and better signposting to mental health services. Some participants described feeling that existing support structures were fragmented or hard to access, and emphasised the value of trusted adult relationships, particularly through community-based provision. Feedback also highlighted a concern with self-image and body confidence, particularly among girls, and the pressures associated with school and future planning. These findings suggest a clear need for continued investment in safe, supportive environments where emotional health is taken seriously and addressed proactively.

The theme of access to play and leisure highlights both a demand for diverse activities and concern about barriers to participation. Young people across the age spectrum voiced a strong interest in having more opportunities for physical activity particularly non-traditional sports like boxing, basketball, and fitness classes. Some expressed frustration at the lack of local leisure provision or youth-specific programmes, particularly in the evenings and weekends. Transportation emerged as a recurrent barrier, with limited public transport options cited as restricting access to existing facilities. Additionally, the cost of participation in leisure and cultural activities, including club memberships and equipment, was a concern for some families, especially those with multiple children. These challenges underscore the need to create more inclusive and accessible local provision that reflects the interests of young people and recognises the practical constraints they face.

In terms of learning and achievement, while Castlereagh East performs relatively well at a headline level educational attainment and school leaver outcomes are above the Northern Ireland average this masks underlying issues for some groups. The 2025 area profile notes that nearly one in three pupils in Castlereagh East are eligible for free school meals, and 19% have a registered special educational need or disability. These figures highlight the presence of educational inequality and suggest that some young people face significant barriers to achieving their full potential. Focus group responses support this, with young people noting exam-related stress, inconsistent support for those with additional learning needs, and a lack of access to informal learning opportunities that support personal development and confidence. Several suggested that more tailored support, including mentoring and life skills programmes, would help them manage academic pressure and prepare for life beyond school.

Safety and stability also featured as a concern for some children and young people in Castlereagh East. While recorded rates of domestic abuse crimes and anti-social behaviour incidents are below the Northern Ireland average, qualitative feedback from young people pointed to experiences of bullying, both online and in-person, and a need for more structured spaces that promote positive peer interaction. The influence of social media was described as a double-edged sword providing

connection, but also fuelling anxiety, peer pressure, and in some cases, cyberbullying. Young people expressed a desire for greater education on digital resilience and healthy relationships, and a space where they could talk openly about these issues without judgment. There is also evidence that young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ or who are from newcomer backgrounds may be more vulnerable to social exclusion or harassment, although the survey and focus group data for Castlereagh East did not disaggregate experiences by community of interest.

Economic stability, while not a dominant theme in terms of direct youth feedback, intersects with many of the issues raised above. The cost-of-living crisis and rising transport and activity costs were noted by some young people and professionals as shaping access to opportunities. Additionally, there was recognition of the need to build skills and confidence to support future employability particularly for those not planning to pursue traditional academic pathways. Apprenticeships, vocational training, and pathways into employment were identified as areas where further support would be valuable, particularly for young people from lower-income households or those not currently in education or training.

Young people in Castlereagh East also expressed a strong desire to feel included and heard in the decisions that affect their lives. A common theme across focus groups was the need for greater respect for their voices and experiences. Some participants reported feeling that their contributions were not taken seriously, particularly when raising concerns in school or local services. Others highlighted the importance of having platforms where they could express their views, engage in local decision-making, or contribute to community initiatives. This sense of agency was linked to feelings of self-worth and belonging and reinforces the importance of youth voice as a cornerstone of positive development.

Finally, the theme of equality and inclusion surfaced in several conversations, with participants calling for more inclusive spaces where everyone feels welcome, regardless of background or ability. While the population of Castlereagh East is relatively homogenous in comparison to other areas, the presence of newcomer children, pupils with disabilities, and children from lone parent households points to the need for services to be responsive to a diverse range of needs and experiences. Participants emphasised the importance of programmes that celebrate difference, challenge discrimination, and actively promote a culture of respect and kindness.

Collectively, these findings point to several broad thematic areas for future youth work strategy in Castlereagh East. These include Emotional Health Support, Access to Leisure and Safe Social Spaces, Educational Support and Skills Development, Youth Voice and Empowerment, and Inclusion and Equality. Each reflects the articulated needs and lived experiences of children and young people in the area and highlights the ongoing importance of youth work in providing relational, responsive, and rights-based support.

Castlereagh East Summary

Castlereagh East is home to 6,319 children and young people. The area includes both suburban neighbourhoods and rural fringes, with a proportion of young people facing multiple deprivation indicators. Educational attainment is below the council average, with only 66.2% of school leavers achieving 5+ GCSEs including English and Maths. There is also a notable presence of special educational needs, with high levels of suspension and non-attendance suggesting engagement challenges. Anti-social behaviour is a persistent concern, coupled with limited access to leisure opportunities for young people.

- Emotional and mental health challenges are present, particularly among young people aged 16–24, with rates of emotional or psychological conditions significantly exceeding the NI average.
- Rates of learning difficulty and autism among 0–24-year-olds are above the district average, indicating a strong need for accessible and tailored support for neurodivergent young people.
- Educational performance is mixed, with 80.4% of school leavers achieving 5 GCSEs including English and maths, above the NI average but still lower than neighbouring DEAs like Castlereagh South.
- 3.3% of young people aged 20–24 are not in employment or training, suggesting a continuing need for early intervention and career pathway support.
- A high level of school suspension (34 pupils in 2022/23) and a notable rate of unauthorised school absences point to engagement and behavioural challenges within formal education settings.
- 221 newcomer pupils are enrolled in local schools, showing the importance of maintaining inclusive and culturally sensitive support in education and community settings.
- Incidents of racially motivated behaviour rose by 20% in the past year, signalling underlying community tensions and a need for youth-focused anti-racism and good relations initiatives.
- Nearly 42% of households in the DEA report deprivation in at least one health dimension, highlighting the broader socio-economic and health-related barriers that may impact the wellbeing of children and young people.

Castlereagh South

Key facts

There is 6,867 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Castlereagh South DEA.

2,811 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

2.4% 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 2.1% 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 92.8% (NI average 76.1%).

261 newcomer pupils in Castlereagh South DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 11 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 57% increase from the previous year of 7 racial motivated incidents.

Castlereagh South Stakeholder input/feedback

In Castlereagh South, the voices of children and young people reveal a compelling set of needs shaped by the area's socio-economic landscape, educational dynamics, and community infrastructure. Although deprivation rates in this part of Lisburn and Castlereagh are relatively low when compared to regional figures, qualitative and quantitative insights underscore a range of challenges affecting the wellbeing and development of children and young people. Central to these is a shared desire for stronger emotional support networks, enhanced access to safe leisure opportunities, and meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Emotional health and wellbeing featured prominently in survey and focus group feedback, with many young people identifying stress, anxiety, and low self-confidence as central challenges. School pressure, social media comparisons, and strained relationships with peers and family members were frequently cited as contributing factors. Young people acknowledged that mental health is increasingly talked about but felt that available support remains inconsistent and, in some cases, inaccessible. While school-based provision was valued, several participants described long waiting times for counselling and noted that trust in pastoral staff varied considerably. For others, the lack of confidential spaces to discuss personal concerns was a barrier. The presence of supportive, approachable adults outside of formal education settings such as youth workers was highlighted as a vital lifeline. The desire for one-to-one conversations, peer support spaces, and workshops that explore self-esteem and emotional resilience was particularly strong among those aged 14–18. Some expressed a need for more awareness and education on mental health from an earlier age, advocating for this to be embedded into both formal and informal learning environments.

Access to play and leisure also emerged as a vital concern. While Castlereagh South benefits from a relatively high standard of living, this does not always translate into inclusive, accessible, or youth-specific facilities. Young people in focus groups reported that many activities in their area are expensive, adult-focused, or require travel to neighbouring areas, placing pressure on those without access to independent transport. Public transport, while available, was not always timed well for evening or weekend activities, and affordability was cited as a constraint. There was a clear appetite for more structured and informal opportunities to take part in sports, creative arts, and outdoor recreation, particularly those tailored to different age ranges and interests. Notably, some participants expressed frustration with the narrow focus of available programmes such as repeated emphasis on football suggesting a broader offer that includes dance, fitness, cultural activities, and non-competitive play would better meet the needs of a diverse group of young people. Safety was another important consideration, with some younger participants noting that local parks or community spaces were not always perceived as welcoming or secure.

Education and achievement, while an area of relative strength in Castlereagh South overall, presented specific challenges for some groups. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs or disabilities remains significant, and stakeholders flagged the need for more tailored and responsive support within mainstream schools. Young people described experiences of academic stress, particularly around GCSEs and post-primary transitions. They valued practical help such as revision support but also wanted more guidance in areas like managing exam anxiety, setting goals, and understanding future career options. Several participants noted that the traditional academic path does not suit everyone and felt that alternative routes such as vocational qualifications or work

experience were under-emphasised in their school environment. There were also calls for life skills programmes that prepare young people for adulthood, covering areas such as budgeting, communication, and emotional regulation. This reflects a wider theme around readiness and resilience, with young people keen to gain the confidence and tools to manage life beyond the classroom.

Living in safety and stability was another area of concern. Although recorded incidents of anti-social behaviour and domestic abuse are lower than the Northern Ireland average, these statistics do not fully capture the nuances of young people's lived experiences. Some described feeling unsafe in public areas due to anti-social behaviour by older peers, while others spoke about tensions at home that impact their mental wellbeing. Experiences of bullying both online and offline remained a persistent issue, and many felt more could be done to provide early intervention and support for those affected. The emotional toll of bullying, especially cyberbullying, was expressed clearly, with young people calling for better education on digital safety and stronger enforcement of respectful behaviour in both school and community settings. A few participants also highlighted the importance of restorative approaches and safe spaces where conflicts can be talked through constructively.

Economic and environmental stability was not a dominant theme in youth responses but emerged indirectly through discussions of transport, cost of participation, and stress linked to financial insecurity. Even in a relatively affluent DEA, young people were conscious of the impact that income levels had on access to extracurricular opportunities. Some noted that families with more than one child often struggled to afford multiple activity fees, uniforms, or transport costs. In turn, this could leave some young people feeling excluded or isolated. There was also a clear appreciation for affordable or free programmes that allowed them to socialise, be active, and develop skills without adding financial strain at home. The rising cost of living was acknowledged by older participants, particularly those aged 16–18, who were beginning to navigate part-time work, study, and family responsibilities.

Young people in Castlereagh South also consistently expressed a desire to be listened to and involved in shaping their communities. This was not simply a request for occasional consultation, but a call for ongoing dialogue and genuine influence over the spaces and services that affect them. Some spoke positively about experiences where their ideas had been taken seriously and turned into action, while others shared frustration about being overlooked or tokenised. There was a particular emphasis on wanting to feel respected and treated as equals in conversations with adults, especially those in positions of authority. This aspiration to contribute meaningfully to their communities reflects a broader theme of empowerment, where participation is tied not only to civic engagement but also to personal growth and confidence.

Lastly, inclusion and equality remain important cross-cutting issues. While Castlereagh South is not among the most ethnically diverse DEAs in the region, there are children and young people from newcomer backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ identities, and those living with disabilities or neurodivergence who reported feeling marginalised or misunderstood. Participants called for more visible efforts to promote acceptance and kindness, including inclusive messaging in schools and community settings, as well as programming that celebrates difference. The need for staff training to better support diverse needs particularly in relation to mental health, neurodivergence, and cultural sensitivity was raised repeatedly.

Drawing together these insights, the experiences of children and young people in Castlereagh South point to several key thematic areas for future youth work focus. These include Emotional Health and Resilience, Inclusive Play and Leisure Access, Educational Equity and Life Skills Development, Safety and Digital Wellbeing, and Youth Voice and Participation. These priorities are rooted in the lived realities of young people in the area and provide a foundation for responsive, rights-based youth work that amplifies their voices and supports their holistic development.

Castlereagh South Summary

With 6,503 children and young people, Castlereagh South shows contrasting trends of affluence and disadvantage. The area has a strong school attendance record, but mental health issues, loneliness, and academic stress are reported across focus groups. There is a clear need for peer support mechanisms and more informal learning environments to help bridge emotional and educational gaps.

- Exceptionally high academic attainment is a strength in the area, with 92.8% of school leavers achieving 5 GCSEs including English and maths well above the NI average of 76.1%.
- A relatively low proportion of young people are NEET, with just 2.4% of 20-24-year-olds not in employment, education, or training, suggesting strong post-school engagement overall.
- Household deprivation remains an issue, particularly in the education dimension, with 22.6% of households in the area experiencing educational deprivation, near the highest among the DEAs in the borough.
- High rates of autism and learning difficulties are present, with Castlereagh South reporting the second-highest rate of autism (147.7 per 1,000) and a substantial prevalence of learning difficulties among young people.
- Mental health concerns are pronounced, with 199 young people aged 0-24 self-reporting emotional or psychological conditions, requiring greater support in emotional wellbeing.
- There has been a sharp rise in racially motivated incidents, increasing by 57% in one year, indicating a need for enhanced community relations and anti-racism work with young people.
- Suspension rates and SEN representation are moderate but still call for continued focus on behavioural and inclusion support within schools.
- Access to inclusive spaces and youth voice platforms is identified as important, especially for neurodivergent, newcomer, and minority ethnic young people navigating integration and belonging.

Downshire East

Key facts

There is 5,040 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Downshire East DEA.

2,172 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

2.2% 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 4.3% 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 87.1% (NI average 76.1%).

38 newcomer pupils in Downshire East DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There was 1 incident with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 50% increase from the previous year of 2 racial motivated incidents.

Downshire East Stakeholder input/feedback

In Downshire East, the landscape of need for children and young people reflects a mix of high-level educational outcomes and pockets of social vulnerability that may be masked by overall affluence. While the district benefits from relatively strong economic and health indicators, engagement through survey responses and focus groups indicates that significant emotional, social, and practical needs exist beneath the surface particularly relating to mental health, inclusivity, and access to meaningful recreational and developmental opportunities.

Emotional health and wellbeing emerged as a dominant concern across multiple age groups. Young people consistently referenced anxiety, exam stress, and the pressures of maintaining a certain image particularly through social media as key contributors to low mood and a sense of isolation. This was reinforced by the observation that while mental health is increasingly part of the public conversation, practical support often falls short, particularly in terms of timely access to one-to-one counselling or spaces where they feel genuinely heard. Peer relationships were cited both as a protective factor and a stressor, with friendship breakdowns, bullying, and a fear of being judged often impacting mental health. Several young people described wanting more informal spaces where they could openly discuss how they feel without stigma or adult judgment. Trusted relationships with youth workers and other community-based adults were identified as a vital support mechanism, particularly when school environments were perceived as impersonal or overly focused on academic achievement.

Access to leisure and recreational activities represents another key theme. Although Downshire East has physical infrastructure in place including sports clubs and leisure centres young people highlighted limitations in affordability, transport, and programme variety. Transport was a barrier for younger age groups and for those living in more rural or dispersed parts of the DEA. While some young people were highly engaged in structured sport, others felt excluded due to either a lack of interest in traditional activities or because of issues with confidence and body image. There was a clear demand for broader, more inclusive offerings that cater to a wider range of interests such as creative arts, drama, and non-competitive fitness activities. Several young people also pointed out that leisure facilities are not always perceived as youth-friendly, particularly for younger teens, and that designated safe social spaces outside of school are limited.

Despite high educational attainment at DEA level reflected in some of the best school leaver outcomes across the district young people raised concerns about exam pressure, limited flexibility in school curricula, and uneven access to additional academic support. Focus group responses captured a growing desire for support that extends beyond academic content and into broader life skills such as managing stress, public speaking, budgeting, and preparing for independent living. Participants noted that current careers advice can feel generic and focused on narrow pathways, often failing to reflect the diverse ambitions and circumstances of learners. This is particularly relevant for those who do not plan to follow a university route or who may require additional support due to learning differences. Some participants also highlighted the importance of learning in a way that feels meaningful and relevant, suggesting that more experiential, peer-led, and discussion-based approaches would be helpful in bridging the gap between school and life outside it.

Safety, both in terms of physical environments and emotional wellbeing, was another recurring topic. While Downshire East does not have high levels of recorded anti-social behaviour, young people described experiences of subtle exclusion, peer conflict, and occasional intimidation in public spaces. Some mentioned feeling unsafe in certain parks or public areas after dark, while others pointed to the emotional toll of digital spaces where bullying or harmful comparisons could take place unchecked. There was a strong desire for better education around digital safety, respectful online behaviour, and how to navigate difficult peer dynamics alongside more visible adult support in both physical and virtual environments.

Social inclusion and belonging emerged as complex and nuanced issues. Although Downshire East does not record high levels of ethnic diversity or deprivation, there are important minority groups within its population including newcomer families, LGBTQIA+ young people, and those with additional learning needs who may feel overlooked or unsupported. Young people in these groups spoke about the need for more inclusive programming, greater visibility of diverse identities, and staff who are trained to recognise and respond to the full spectrum of needs. Some reported that stereotypes and assumptions about who lives in Downshire East contribute to a lack of targeted support or flexible approaches in schools and services. This highlights the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach and ensuring that services are attuned to the quieter, less visible experiences of marginalisation or difference.

Economic issues, while less pronounced in this DEA relative to others, were still present in the narratives of young people. Some participants highlighted the impact of cost on access to food, transport, and extracurricular activities, particularly in households with multiple children or where employment is insecure. Others, particularly those aged 16–18, expressed a need for support in managing part-time jobs alongside school commitments, or voiced uncertainty about their future financial independence. While the area does not show significant deprivation at a statistical level, these individual stories suggest the importance of ensuring that youth support systems remain universally accessible, rather than being limited to targeted interventions alone.

Young people also clearly expressed a desire to have more say in the development of local services. There was a strong appetite for participatory approaches such as youth panels, idea boards in clubs or schools, and structured forums for feeding back on services. Several participants noted that when they had been involved in co-design or consultation processes, the outcomes often felt tokenistic or slow to materialise. This contributed to a sense that their views were not truly valued. By contrast, where they had been given genuine influence, young people reported increased confidence, pride, and motivation to contribute to their communities.

Across all these themes, the value of trusted relationships came through consistently. Whether in the context of emotional support, recreational engagement, or educational encouragement, young people repeatedly highlighted the importance of being known, understood, and supported by adults who treat them with respect and listen without judgment. These relationships are the foundation upon which all other support structures must be built.

Based on these insights, key thematic areas for youth work development in Downshire East include Emotional Health and Peer Support, Inclusive and Accessible Leisure, Life Skills and Academic Confidence, Digital Wellbeing and Safety, and Youth Voice and Belonging. These themes are rooted in

the lived experiences of young people in the area and highlight the importance of creating flexible, inclusive spaces where all young people can feel supported, valued, and empowered.

Downshire East Summary

This DEA comprises 5,040 children and young people and features rural landscapes alongside growing suburban areas. While education levels are relatively high, access to youth-focused services is uneven. Young people in focus groups reported feeling isolated, particularly those living in more remote areas.

- Mental and emotional health challenges are notable, with 118 young people (age 0–24) reporting emotional or psychological conditions. Rates among the 16–24 age group (77.8 per 1,000) exceed the NI average, suggesting a need for accessible wellbeing services.
- A significant number of young people report learning difficulties and autism, with 293 and 348 individuals respectively affected, both above the borough average, necessitating tailored educational and social support.
- Despite strong GCSE outcomes, with 87.1% of school leavers achieving 5+ GCSEs including English and maths, 4.3% were unemployed or had unknown destinations in 2022/23, indicating a gap in progression support.
- Youth not in employment or training (NEET) stands at 2.2% for 20–24-year-olds, below the NI average but highlighting a group in need of engagement pathways.
- Education deprivation affects 25.5% of households, the highest in the borough, suggesting systemic issues that may impact young people's learning environment and attainment.
- Rates of long-term health conditions and deprivation in health dimension (39.2%) also indicate broader wellbeing challenges in many households, affecting children's development and daily functioning.
- Only 38 newcomer pupils are registered, and just one racist incident was reported, suggesting a relatively homogenous population. Still, proactive work on inclusion and diversity remains important.
- School absence and suspension rates are moderate, but early engagement and behavioural support are recommended to maintain educational continuity and reduce risks of exclusion.

Downshire West

Key facts

There is 4,671 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Downshire West DEA.

1,971 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

2.5% 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 0% 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 90.3% (NI average 76.1%).

50 newcomer pupils in Downshire West DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 5 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 25% increase from the previous year of 4 racial motivated incidents.

Downshire West Stakeholder input/feedback

In Downshire West, the perspectives of children and young people reflect a blend of opportunity and quiet concern, shaped by the area's suburban-rural character and its pockets of emerging need. While statistically the DEA performs strongly across several indicators such as educational attainment and low levels of recorded deprivation consultation findings and demographic insights reveal that many young people still face challenges related to emotional health, social connectivity, and the accessibility of meaningful activities and support. These needs are often nuanced, shaped by feelings of being overlooked or isolated, particularly among those whose experiences do not fit dominant narratives of success and stability.

Emotional health and wellbeing was consistently highlighted as a pressing area of concern. Young people in Downshire West described feelings of stress and anxiety linked to school demands, peer pressures, and the pervasive influence of social media. This was particularly acute among those aged 14 to 18, who spoke about a lack of balance in their lives and a sense that emotional challenges were not always taken seriously by adults in their lives. While some participants reported positive experiences of accessing counselling in school, others found these services to be inconsistent, limited by waiting lists, or lacking in continuity. The need for trusted, consistent relationships with adults was repeatedly emphasised, with youth workers named as particularly important figures in helping young people feel safe, valued, and understood. For many, the desire was not only for structured mental health programmes but for more informal, ongoing conversations about emotional wellbeing spaces where they could talk openly without fear of judgment or dismissal.

Access to leisure, creative, and recreational spaces emerged as a central issue, particularly around the lack of diverse and inclusive options. While some young people were involved in structured sports or clubs, others described feeling excluded due to cost, ability, or simply a mismatch between available activities and their personal interests. Several participants noted that provision tends to be concentrated on traditional team sports, and called for more variety, such as non-competitive fitness, creative workshops, and outdoor adventure activities. Accessibility was also a key theme young people who lived further from town centres or main transport routes reported difficulties in getting to leisure facilities, particularly outside school hours. Transport and cost were recurring barriers, even among those from households not formally identified as deprived. These challenges led some young people to spend more time alone or online, contributing to a sense of isolation and disconnection from their peers.

Within education, Downshire West performs well on academic indicators, yet young people themselves highlighted important areas of need. Focus group participants shared concerns about academic pressure, the emotional toll of exams, and limited support for alternative pathways. There was a strong appetite for more flexible and person-centred education approaches, including vocational options and life skills development. Some young people described feeling boxed in by rigid expectations or experiencing a lack of understanding around individual learning needs, especially for those with neurodiverse conditions. These concerns were compounded by a feeling that success was narrowly defined, and that more practical or creative ambitions were not always encouraged. In response, participants voiced a need for more opportunities to explore future pathways in a way that felt empowering rather than overwhelming.

Safety and stability were themes expressed in more subtle terms. While Downshire West is not an area with high levels of recorded anti-social behaviour or crime, young people did report feeling unsafe in certain public spaces at night, and some alluded to social tensions within peer groups. Bullying particularly online was a recurring concern, and participants called for more education on digital safety, respectful relationships, and managing conflict. Young people also highlighted that access to safe, welcoming places to gather outside of structured sessions was limited, particularly in rural parts of the DEA. These "in-between" spaces where young people could relax, connect, and feel a sense of belonging were identified as essential but lacking in availability or consistency.

Issues of inclusion and representation were also brought to the fore, especially by young people who identified as LGBTQIA+ or who had additional support needs. While Downshire West may not have high levels of ethnic or cultural diversity, there was a clear recognition among young people that some of their peers did not feel seen or supported in mainstream services. Participants called for more visible inclusion through diverse role models, inclusive messaging, and programmes that reflect a broader range of experiences. This extended to the desire for staff in schools, clubs, and community settings to receive better training in supporting mental health, neurodiversity, and issues of identity. For those who already felt isolated whether due to geography, identity, or personal circumstances these changes were viewed as vital steps toward creating a culture of acceptance and connection.

Youth voice and participation stood out as a cross-cutting theme. Young people expressed a strong interest in having more influence over the design and delivery of services that affect them. While some had experienced opportunities to share their views, there was also a sense that feedback often failed to lead to meaningful change. Several participants voiced frustration at being asked for opinions only to see little follow-up, reinforcing feelings of tokenism. Conversely, where young people had been given real leadership roles or involvement in decision-making, they reported increased confidence and a greater sense of ownership over their communities. There was a desire for these participatory opportunities to be embedded across schools, youth settings, and local government structures not only for those already engaged, but especially for those who are harder to reach or less confident in formal spaces.

Although Downshire West is not an area traditionally associated with acute deprivation, economic factors still influenced access to services and experiences for some families. Young people spoke about the cost-of-living pressures impacting their ability to participate fully in leisure, education, and social life. This included not only direct costs such as transport, equipment, or entry fees but also the indirect impacts of household stress, limited parental time due to work, and reduced opportunities for enrichment. These concerns were often expressed quietly but pointed to an underlying need for support systems that are sensitive to hidden disadvantage and inclusive of all young people, regardless of background.

The collective insights from Downshire West point toward several thematic priorities for youth work. These include Emotional Wellbeing and Resilience, Inclusive and Varied Leisure Opportunities, Educational Flexibility and Life Preparation, Digital Safety and Social Relationships, and Meaningful Youth Participation. Each theme is grounded in the lived experience of children and young people in the area and offers a foundation for youth work approaches that are both locally responsive and rooted in the values of equality, connection, and empowerment.

Downshire West Summary

With 4,671 children and young people, Downshire West is largely rural with pockets of deprivation. The area exhibits above-average educational attainment but focus groups have highlighted a disconnect between academic success and emotional readiness. Young people expressed a need for community-based wellbeing and social inclusion programmes.

- Mental health remains an area for attention, particularly among the 16–24 age group, with rates of self-reported emotional or psychological conditions (50.4 per 1,000) close to the borough average.
- Learning difficulties and autism affect a substantial number of young people, with rates of 36.2 and 45.7 per 1,000 respectively, reinforcing the importance of inclusive education and targeted support.
- 2.5% of 20–24-year-olds are NEET, which, although below the NI average, still signals a need for vocational pathways and outreach to those disengaged from employment or education.
- Household deprivation in the health dimension affects 36.9% of households, which could impact access to healthcare, stability, and day-to-day functioning for many families.
- School absence and suspension rates are notably low, with just 3 suspensions recorded in 2022/23, the lowest across the borough, indicating strong engagement or effective early intervention strategies.
- Racist incidents, while relatively low, increased to 5 in 2023/24, showing that good relations work remains relevant for fostering inclusion and safety in the community.

Killultagh

Key facts

There is 7,324 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Killultagh DEA.

2,998 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

3.2% 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 88.4% (NI average 76.1%).

10 newcomer pupils in Killultagh DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 0 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 100% increase from the previous year of 5 racial motivated incidents.

Killultagh Stakeholder input/feedback

In Killultagh, the lived experiences of children and young people point to a complex interplay of rural isolation, emerging mental health pressures, and limited access to inclusive opportunities that support social, emotional, and personal development. While the DEA encompasses areas with relatively strong community ties and lower-than-average deprivation, youth insight from regional surveys, focus groups, and area profiles reveals that these advantages do not necessarily translate into equitable outcomes for all. The rural character of the area presents specific challenges, particularly in relation to transport, service accessibility, and youth visibility in decision-making structures.

Emotional health and wellbeing featured as a recurrent concern among young people in Killultagh, across all age groups. Anxiety, exam-related stress, and the pressures of social media were among the most cited influences on emotional wellbeing. Younger respondents often discussed challenges related to friendships, family tension, and bullying both in-person and online while older participants focused on school workload, future uncertainty, and body image. Many described feeling overwhelmed at times, with limited outlets to talk openly about these experiences. Though schools and youth settings do offer some emotional health support, young people consistently called for greater access to one-to-one services, drop-in mental health spaces, and peer-led discussions that reduce stigma. Crucially, youth workers were recognised as trusted adults who could provide a safe environment for these conversations, especially for those who didn't feel comfortable approaching school staff. The importance of continuity and trust in these relationships was emphasised repeatedly.

Access to leisure, recreation, and informal social spaces was identified as a key gap, especially by young people living in more remote parts of Killultagh. Transport limitations were a major theme. Participants explained that the lack of reliable, affordable public transport significantly restricted their ability to participate in activities outside school, especially in the evenings or at weekends. Even where facilities exist, such as sports centres or community hubs, reaching them is often difficult without adult support. Young people called for more localised and low-cost provision that responds to their interests highlighting a lack of diversity in current programmes. Many expressed frustration that opportunities tend to revolve around a narrow range of activities, such as football or generic youth drop-ins, with little provision for creative, cultural, or outdoor experiences. Additionally, young people wanted spaces simply to socialise and relax places that feel safe, age-appropriate, and not overly policed by adults.

Educationally, Killultagh's school leaver attainment is above the Northern Ireland average, yet survey and focus group feedback show that not all children and young people feel supported in achieving their potential. Some spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the pressure to perform, particularly around key stages and exams. While some participants described positive relationships with teachers and mentors, others felt there was little flexibility in how success was defined or measured. This was especially true for those interested in vocational or non-academic pathways. There was a strong call for schools and support services to recognise a wider spectrum of ability and aspiration offering life skills education, practical learning opportunities, and clearer guidance around alternative routes to employment or further training. The importance of confidence-building and emotional literacy was also noted, with participants suggesting that these skills are as critical to success as exam results yet often overlooked in formal education settings.

Safety and emotional security, particularly in public spaces, was another notable theme. Though Killultagh does not record high levels of anti-social behaviour or youth-related crime, some young

people reported feeling unsafe in certain community areas, especially after dark. This was attributed not only to the physical environment poor lighting, lack of visibility, and minimal presence of responsible adults but also to occasional peer conflict or experiences of verbal harassment. There were calls for better youth-informed design of public spaces, where lighting, visibility, and layout support feelings of safety. In addition, some young people reported that digital spaces especially social media can feel equally unsafe. The impact of cyberbullying and online comparison culture was strongly felt, with participants asking for more education and support on navigating online relationships and managing digital wellbeing.

Despite the strong community fabric often associated with rural areas, young people in Killultagh expressed a real sense of invisibility in local decision-making. Many felt that their voices were not heard by adults in positions of power, particularly at council level. While some had engaged with youth participation structures in school or clubs, others were unaware of any forums where their views could be shared. Where consultation had taken place, it was often described as tokenistic, with limited feedback or visible outcomes. This lack of follow-through was demotivating for many. There was a clear appetite for meaningful engagement, including opportunities to co-design programmes, give feedback on services, and contribute to local planning processes. For some, especially those aged 16 and older, this extended to interest in volunteering, leadership roles, and civic participation suggesting a latent desire to make a positive impact if given the right platform.

Inclusion, diversity, and equality were also significant concerns, particularly for those who identified as LGBTQIA+ or had additional learning needs. Several participants reported feeling that services and school environments were not always responsive to difference, either due to lack of training among staff or limited awareness of inclusive practices. For young people from these groups, this resulted in a sense of marginalisation and, in some cases, reluctance to access support or participate in mainstream provision. There were calls for more visible inclusion, through staff training, diverse representation, and explicitly safe spaces where everyone could feel welcome. While ethnic diversity in Killultagh remains low, there were newcomer families and young people with varying cultural backgrounds who similarly highlighted a need for increased awareness and understanding of their experiences.

Economic pressures, though not widespread across the DEA, were still relevant for some families. Young people described feeling aware of household financial constraints, particularly around the cost of extracurricular activities, transport, and digital access. For older participants, part-time work was seen as both a financial necessity and a source of stress when balanced with school or training. These insights point to the importance of maintaining universal provision and avoiding assumptions based on postcode-level affluence. Hidden need was a recurring undercurrent throughout discussions, particularly in relation to mental health, access, and emotional safety.

Based on these insights, the experiences of children and young people in Killultagh point toward several core thematic areas for future youth work development. These include Emotional Wellbeing and Safe Relationships, Rural Access and Transport Equity, Inclusive and Creative Leisure Opportunities, Alternative Education and Life Skills, and Youth Participation and Visibility. These themes reflect the distinct realities of young people in a rural context where connection, visibility, and belonging are as vital as physical provision and underline the importance of responsive, locally grounded youth work that meets young people where they are.

Killultagh Summary

Killultagh, with 7,324 children and young people, is a mostly rural DEA where deprivation is relatively low, yet access to services and facilities can be limited. Young people have highlighted the need for greater representation, mental health support, and better leisure access, especially outside of school.

- Mental and emotional health concerns are evident, with 215 young people aged 0–24 self-reporting emotional or psychological conditions, including anxiety and depression.
- Learning difficulties and autism are notably prevalent, with 384 young people reporting learning difficulties and 311 reporting autism or Asperger syndrome both among the highest rates in the borough.
- School leavers perform well academically, with 88.4% achieving 5 GCSEs including English and maths, though 2.9% still leave school unemployed or with unknown destinations.
- A higher-than-average proportion (3.2%) of 20–24-year-olds are not in employment or do not have qualifications, indicating a need for alternative progression pathways and vocational opportunities.
- Very low newcomer presence, with only 10 newcomer pupils reported in 2023/24, may contribute to limited exposure to diversity and the risk of social isolation for minority groups.
- A complete absence of racially motivated incidents in the most recent year, while positive, contrasts with five such incidents the previous year, suggesting a need to monitor changes in community dynamics.
- Household deprivation in the health dimension remains significant, affecting 35.5% of households impacting family wellbeing and possibly limiting access to health resources.
- A substantial rural youth population may face barriers to accessing services, transport, and recreational opportunities, given the large geographic area and relatively low service density.

Lisburn North

Key facts

There is 6,914 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Lisburn North DEA.

2,635 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

3.8% 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 0% 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 81.9% (NI average 76.1%).

221 newcomer pupils in Lisburn North DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 28 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 75% increase from the previous year of 16 racial motivated incidents.

Lisburn North Stakeholder input/feedback

In Lisburn North, children and young people express a clear set of needs shaped by the area's urban complexity, socio-economic contrasts, and a growing awareness of emotional and social pressures. While Lisburn North benefits from accessible public services and educational infrastructure, it also encompasses areas with higher levels of disadvantage and vulnerability, contributing to significant variation in experience among young people. The feedback gathered through surveys and focus groups reveals a strong desire for consistent emotional support, safer spaces to socialise, and more inclusive and youth-led opportunities that reflect the diversity of backgrounds and needs within the DEA.

Emotional health and wellbeing were consistently identified as a priority issue. Children and young people spoke openly about anxiety, low mood, and feelings of isolation often rooted in exam pressure, peer conflict, and the pervasive influence of social media. The ability to access meaningful support varied across the area. While some young people praised youth workers and pastoral support in schools, others reported long waiting times or uncertainty about where to go when they needed help. The presence of trusted adults, particularly outside of the school setting, was described as crucial to feeling supported. Informal check-ins, drop-in sessions, and spaces to talk about emotional wellbeing without fear of stigma were viewed as highly valuable. Importantly, young people were not only asking for reactive support when problems arise but also proactive spaces that help build emotional resilience, develop coping skills, and foster a positive sense of self.

Alongside this, the importance of peer relationships and safe social environments was a recurring theme. Some participants described difficulties in forming and maintaining friendships, particularly where there were limited opportunities to interact outside of school. This sense of social fragmentation was especially acute for those who felt excluded due to personality differences, neurodiversity, or other identity-based factors. The need for welcoming, inclusive, and non-judgmental spaces where young people could connect was a consistent ask. These spaces were not necessarily described as highly structured or formal; instead, young people called for environments where they could be themselves whether through creative expression, shared interests, or simply being together without adult expectations or pressure.

Access to leisure and recreational activities was another key issue raised, particularly in relation to cost, availability, and diversity of provision. Although Lisburn North benefits from proximity to leisure centres and youth settings, not all young people felt these services met their needs. Some reported that activities were repetitive, focused narrowly on sports, or not promoted in a way that made them feel welcome. Others spoke about barriers such as transport, session times clashing with school or work, or needing to prioritise family responsibilities. There was a strong appetite for creative and expressive opportunities such as music, dance, drama, and art as well as more culturally inclusive programming that reflects the experiences of newcomer communities, LGBTQIA+ young people, and those with disabilities. Several participants called for more opportunities to be outdoors, including nature-based activities, walking groups, or local environmental projects.

In terms of education and achievement, Lisburn North exhibits a mixed profile. While overall academic attainment is comparable to regional averages, there is a notable proportion of young people eligible for free school meals and with special educational needs. Young people themselves expressed concern about being defined solely by grades or test performance. Many described feeling under pressure to achieve academically, often without sufficient time or support to explore alternative skills, vocational

pathways, or personal development. For those not thriving in traditional academic settings, the lack of flexible and practical options felt limiting. Some suggested that confidence and motivation suffered when learning environments were rigid or when achievements outside the academic realm were not recognised. As a result, there was a strong call for programmes that build life skills, offer career exploration, and help young people identify their strengths beyond the classroom.

Safety and stability, both physical and emotional, were also discussed. While recorded crime and anti-social behaviour in Lisburn North is not disproportionately high, the perception of safety varied depending on age, gender, and where young people lived within the DEA. Some participants expressed concerns about bullying especially online and asked for more consistent interventions in both school and community settings. Others highlighted that while public spaces exist, they are not always perceived as safe or welcoming. Lighting, supervision, and the presence of adults who understand how to engage positively with young people were cited as important factors in improving the safety of shared spaces. Mental safety feeling secure enough to be open and express oneself was also repeatedly mentioned as an essential condition for participation in activities and programmes.

A strong undercurrent throughout the feedback was the need for recognition, respect, and agency. Young people in Lisburn North consistently voiced a desire to be part of shaping their environment. Some described positive experiences where they had been involved in programme design, youth forums, or consultation events, but more commonly, there was frustration about being overlooked or ignored. Participants noted that when their feedback was not acted upon or visibly valued, it discouraged further engagement. As one group stated, “We want to help make things better, but only if it actually matters.” Youth voice, therefore, was not only about being heard but about having tangible impact. Many also highlighted that decision-making structures often feel distant, and that more localised, youth-led opportunities to contribute would improve their sense of connection to their community.

Inclusion was another critical theme. While Lisburn North is home to a growing number of newcomer families and children from diverse cultural backgrounds, some young people noted a lack of visible representation in programmes, services, and staff. They called for more inclusive messaging and practice ensuring that clubs and groups are visibly welcoming to all, regardless of ethnicity, gender identity, disability, or socio-economic status. Those with special educational needs also spoke about feeling marginalised in mainstream provision and stressed the importance of adaptations that allow them to participate fully, without being singled out or stigmatised.

Taken together, these insights suggest a youth landscape in Lisburn North that is rich with potential but shaped by varying degrees of access, support, and belonging. The priorities emerging from this narrative point toward key thematic areas for youth work development: Emotional Wellbeing and Trusted Relationships, Inclusive and Creative Social Spaces, Flexible Educational Support and Life Skills, Community Safety and Digital Awareness, and Youth Voice and Local Empowerment. These themes reflect a collective aspiration among children and young people not only to feel supported, but to actively shape the communities in which they live, learn, and grow.

Lisburn North Summary

Lisburn North has 6,914 children and young people and is marked by a mix of urban poverty and suburban stability. There is a higher proportion of children eligible for free school meals, and school suspension rates are also higher than the DEA average. Community safety concerns are prevalent, alongside the need for youth engagement in civic life.

- Racial inclusion and community cohesion are pressing issues, with Lisburn North recording the highest number of racially motivated incidents in the borough (28 in 2023/24) a 75% increase from the previous year.
- Mental and emotional health needs are among the most acute, particularly in the 16–24 age group, which reports a high rate of emotional or psychological conditions at 125.4 per 1,000 well above the NI average.
- The rate of young people (20–24) not in employment or without qualifications is 3.8%, slightly below the NI average but still a concern for transition and employability pathways.
- Academic attainment is relatively strong, with 81.9% of school leavers achieving 5+ GCSEs including English and Math above the NI average.
- Newcomer pupil representation is high, with 221 children attending local schools, emphasizing the importance of inclusive practices and multilingual support.
- Special educational needs (SEN) prevalence is considerable, with 16.9% of pupils having a SEN, nearly matching the NI average, requiring targeted educational resources.
- Suspension rates are high, with 96 pupils suspended in 2022/23, well above the NI average of 65 per DEA, highlighting the need for behaviour and engagement interventions.
- School non-attendance due to unauthorised absence stands at 2.3%, a figure above some neighbouring DEAs and suggesting possible disengagement among some students.

Lisburn South

Key facts

There is 7,924 children and young people aged 0 -25 years old in Lisburn South DEA.

3,311 fall within the key Youth Service priority aged bands of 9-13 years and 14-18 years.

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 3.7% 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 64.9% (NI average 76.1%).

335 newcomer pupils in Lisburn South DEA primary and post primary schools in 2023/24.

There were 16 incidents with a racist motivation in 2023/24. This is a 5.9% decrease from the previous year of 17 racial motivated incidents.

Lisburn South Stakeholder input/feedback

In Lisburn South, the experiences and views of children and young people reveal a community with significant strengths but also underlying challenges that shape their wellbeing, development, and daily lives. The area is characterised by educational attainment that tracks closely with regional averages and relatively low recorded levels of deprivation; however, young people's voices highlight a spectrum of needs that are both visible and hidden. Across emotional wellbeing, access to meaningful activity, and social inclusion, there is a strong desire for greater consistency, flexibility, and support particularly for those whose needs may not be immediately recognised through statistics alone.

Emotional health and wellbeing is a prominent concern for young people in Lisburn South. Stress, anxiety, and low self-confidence were recurring themes across focus group responses and survey data, especially among those aged 14 to 18. While schools provide some pastoral support, young people repeatedly expressed the need for more informal and consistent emotional support outside of formal education settings. They described feeling under pressure to meet expectations academic, social, and personal without adequate space to process those feelings or talk openly. Several young people identified youth workers as essential figures in their lives, offering trusted relationships and a safe, judgement-free environment to talk about personal issues. The emphasis was not solely on professional counselling but on everyday conversations that foster understanding and emotional resilience. This points to a critical need for spaces where young people can speak freely, be heard, and explore their wellbeing on their own terms.

Access to play, leisure, and cultural activities emerged as another major theme. While Lisburn South benefits from proximity to facilities and urban infrastructure, young people noted that actual access remains uneven. Transport barriers, session timings, and activity costs all contributed to a feeling of exclusion, particularly for those without independent mobility or from lower-income households. Some reported that their needs and interests were not reflected in the existing offer, with too much focus placed on traditional sports and limited provision for creative, outdoor, or expressive pursuits. Others called for more social spaces that are youth-led places where they could meet friends, relax safely, and build a sense of community. The lack of quiet, welcoming spaces was particularly raised by young people who identified as neurodivergent or who preferred smaller, less high-energy environments. For these individuals, inclusion was as much about atmosphere and structure as it was about activity content.

In terms of learning and achieving, Lisburn South shows broadly positive academic outcomes, yet young people shared concerns about school-related stress, performance pressure, and the narrow definition of success. Many participants spoke about the expectation to follow academic routes even when these did not align with their interests or strengths. There was a consistent call for more flexible, vocational, and skills-based learning options that would allow for exploration of practical careers or creative industries. Life skills were also highlighted as an area for development, with young people expressing interest in education around budgeting, communication, relationships, and emotional regulation areas they felt were rarely addressed in formal education. These insights reflect a broader need to see education not just as a means of examination success, but as a foundation for independent, confident adulthood.

Safety and personal stability were also present in young people’s feedback. While Lisburn South is not among the DEAs with high levels of recorded anti-social behaviour or youth justice referrals,

perceptions of safety varied among participants. Some spoke about feeling unsafe in public spaces due to peer dynamics, especially in the evenings, while others highlighted the impact of online bullying and social media pressure on their sense of emotional security. Young people called for better education on digital safety, respectful relationships, and the management of conflict both online and offline. They also requested that public spaces, including parks and streets, be made more welcoming and youth-friendly through better lighting, design, and visibility of support staff. For many, safety was not just about physical danger but also about having places where they felt emotionally safe to be themselves.

Youth voice and participation stood out as a cross-cutting theme. While some young people described opportunities to engage in school councils or community events, many felt these opportunities were limited in scope or failed to lead to real change. There was a strong sense that decision-makers often consult without listening, and that young people's ideas are too easily dismissed. Several participants expressed frustration with being stereotyped or spoken down to by adults, noting that this undermined their motivation to get involved. Where they had been involved in genuine co-design or leadership roles, young people reported increased confidence and pride in their contributions. They were clear in their desire not only to be heard but to be part of shaping the activities, spaces, and services they use suggesting a need for deeper, more continuous models of youth participation.

Social inclusion and equality were raised particularly by young people from minority or marginalised groups, including LGBTQIA+ individuals, young carers, and those with additional needs. Participants described feeling invisible in some mainstream services or school environments, particularly when their needs were not visibly recognised or when support relied on self-disclosure. They called for more proactive and inclusive approaches, including staff training, accessible communication, and a more visible commitment to equality and representation. Some also described isolation linked to cultural or family expectations, and the importance of having somewhere outside the home where they could express themselves freely. These insights highlight the importance of youth work not only as a support service, but as a space for identity, empowerment, and community.

While economic hardship is not a defining feature of Lisburn South overall, several young people referenced hidden poverty particularly in relation to access to food, digital devices, and extracurricular costs. Young people from households affected by illness, disability, or caring responsibilities were especially vulnerable to being left out of wider provision. These situations often go unrecognised due to the area's relatively strong socio-economic profile, underscoring the need for services that are both universally accessible and sensitive to quiet forms of disadvantage.

The perspectives of children and young people in Lisburn South reveal a need for youth work strategies that prioritise Emotional Health and Trusted Support, Inclusive Leisure and Creative Expression, Flexible Education and Life Skills, Safe Spaces and Digital Awareness, and Authentic Youth Voice and Leadership. These thematic areas reflect a desire not only for services and opportunities, but for respect, connection, and a sense of purpose elements that, when nurtured, can transform the everyday lives and long-term trajectories of young people in this community.

Lisburn South Summary

Lisburn South has 7,924 children and young people and is relatively affluent compared to other DEAs. However, inequalities persist, especially among groups with special educational needs or from newcomer families. Educational stress, mental health, and inclusion were key themes from both data and youth voices.

- Low academic attainment is a key issue, with only 64.9% of school leavers achieving 5 GCSEs including English and maths the lowest in the borough and well below the NI average of 76.1%.
- A high percentage (7%) of 20–24-year-olds are not in employment or training (NEET), the highest among Lisburn and Castlereagh DEAs indicating a need for greater post-school pathway support.
- Suspension rates from school are the highest in the borough, with 101 recorded in 2022/23, suggesting significant engagement and behavioural challenges.
- Special Educational Needs (SEN) are more common than in other DEAs, with 22.2% of pupils having a SEN statement, significantly higher than the NI average of 7%.
- A substantial proportion of young people report learning difficulties (61.5 per 1,000) and autism (57.9 per 1,000), reflecting a continued need for inclusive education and social support services.
- Household deprivation is highest in Lisburn South across multiple dimensions, particularly in health (46.2%) and education (25.5%), pointing to underlying structural inequalities.
- 335 newcomer pupils are enrolled in schools, indicating the importance of culturally sensitive integration and support for children from diverse backgrounds.
- Racially motivated incidents remain high, with 16 reported in 2023/24, reflecting ongoing tensions and a need for youth-led equality and inclusion initiatives.