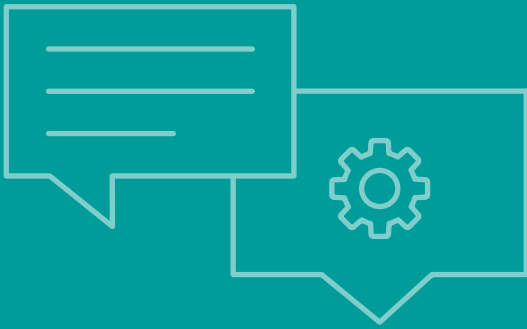


Youth solutions for building better communities in Northern Ireland



PIVOTAL

PUBLIC POLICY
FORUM NI

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This report is a platform for young people in Northern Ireland to tell us their experiences of living, studying and working in areas experiencing ongoing community division and high levels of deprivation. It presents young people's visions for how these challenges can be addressed to help bring about a better future for their communities.

What follows details findings from 12 focus groups with 92 young people, which were held during April – June 2023. Overall they point to a widespread appetite for greater integration of divided communities and better economic opportunities. But as with older generations, these youth voices and experiences are diverse. Sometimes the attitudes expressed clash or are nuanced, and there are not always clear answers to the complex questions raised.

Young people in this research give broad support for reducing segregation between different communities, and for greater investment in local areas. They also point to the lack of respect many feel is given to them as individuals, both in school and on the streets, and the lack of respect often given to their wider communities.

Significantly, many of those who participated in this research believe more needs to be done to make sure young people feel safe in their local areas. Experiences and perceptions of paramilitary influence remain significant for some of this generation. The damaging impact of drugs is another recurring theme of concern.

This report also provides insights into how the cost-of-living crisis is hitting young people, including through the cost of transport. It sets out young people's anger at the lack of facilities and support available in their local areas, including the impact of recent spending cuts. Concern regarding mental



health, and a demand for better support services is a clear headline issue for many. Despite all of these challenges, the value many young people put on youth services and community groups is very clear.

The project

The focus groups mark the final stage of Pivotal's Youth Solutions project, which has provided a platform for young voices through an online survey and focus groups. The project was developed to explore young people's experiences of living in Northern Ireland, with the purpose of identifying solutions to improve communities, education, training and employment opportunities for young people.

The project began with a [first report](#) consisting of a literature and policy review along with 15 new in-depth research interviews with leading practitioners and academics, exploring how to address the twin challenges of promoting reconciliation and tackling deprivation in Northern Ireland.

Building on this evidence, Pivotal developed a mixed methods study to learn from the experiences of young people. Starting in February 2023, an online questionnaire was launched to survey young people's views about community, study, work and the future. A total of 259 responses were captured from young people aged 14–25 years old living in each county of Northern Ireland, with the results published in our report [Youth Voices](#).

The focus groups explored and further developed the themes arising from the survey. Results drawn from the qualitative data collected during the focus groups are presented in two papers (see also [Youth solutions: improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#)), and the project will conclude with a policy solutions and recommendations paper.

The research was ably supported by a Research Advisory Group (RAG) made up of young people who represented the same age group as those participating in the research. The RAG provided valuable insights into the lives of young people and played a significant role in the development of survey questions and activities for the focus groups.

Focus group methodology

Focus groups provided young people with the opportunity to discuss in depth the themes emerging from the Youth Voices survey.

Young people were recruited through community youth work groups in seven areas across Northern Ireland which face ongoing challenges of division and deprivation. Participants typically attended the focus groups in a familiar setting and so were comfortable talking with other young people they already knew.

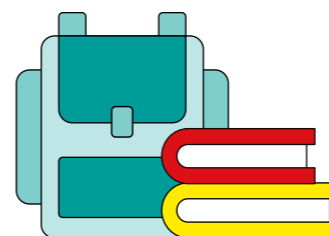
In the final activity in each focus group, participants were asked to write on post-it notes what Northern Ireland needs less or more of to make it a better place for young people. This exercise was used to summarise the points raised in each focus group which participants felt were important, and provided a way to identify the collective priorities of young people across the groups. It also gave an alternative opportunity for quieter young people to contribute.

All focus groups were recorded with permission from participants and transcribed. Qualitative data analysis software (QDA) was used to assist with the systematic identification and organisation of common themes. In addition, post-it notes collected during the 'Less/More' exercise were thematically analysed. The number of young people taking part, their geographic spread, and the methods used to encourage participation from all those present produced a rich and diverse range of perspectives and experiences. Please note that all extracts from the focus groups have been quoted verbatim to capture the authentic expressions of the participants.

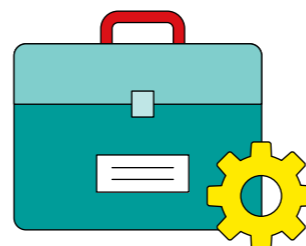
All focus groups lasted around one hour and covered the following key themes:



Community: Participants were asked to consider what impact living in a divided society has on young people and what actions should be taken to make their community a better place to live.



Education: This theme explored young people's experiences of school and focused on what would improve the education system. This theme included specific reference to views on integrated education.



Training and employment: Participants discussed their perceptions and experiences of working in Northern Ireland and any barriers they have experienced in obtaining training or employment.

Demographics


Before presenting what the young participants had to say, here is more detail on who they are in terms of age, gender and community.

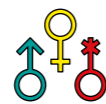
Youth organisations in communities which face ongoing challenges with reconciliation and deprivation (See [Reconciliation and deprivation: twin challenges for Northern Ireland](#)) were asked to recruit young people for the focus groups. These discussions are not therefore representative of youth experiences across all communities in Northern Ireland, but they enable us to focus on areas where the challenges of promoting reconciliation and tackling deprivation are most urgent, and where solutions are most needed.

Care was taken to listen to voices of young people of different ages, genders and community backgrounds. Specifically, effort was made to engage with young people right across Northern Ireland, particularly outside Belfast. This resulted in a total of 92 young people participating in 12 focus groups from seven areas as displayed in Table 1. Some young people travelled to attend a focus group so may not live in the area where the focus group was held.

While qualitative research provides valuable data about the lived experiences of the participants that take part, no claim can be made that results represent the general population.

Key demographics of this sample are:

 **Age:** The target age range for focus group participants was young people aged between 14 – 25 years old. The majority of participants were under 18 years old (69.6%) with 30.4% aged 18 years old and over. As we did not exclude any young person from taking part in a focus group on the basis of age, the sample also includes nine 13 year olds and two participants in their later twenties.



Gender: The majority of focus group participants were male (62.0%) with 38.0% female. This reflected the success these community youth organisations have with working with young males.



Community background: Please note that while some groups were predominantly or all from the same community background, some were mixed. Although no young person was explicitly asked to identify their community background, this often came up during the conversation. We recruited youth organisations from across the community to host focus groups.

Table 01 Focus group participants by area

Focus group area	Participants
Carrickfergus	13
Derry-Londonderry	17
Magherafelt	3
North Belfast	16
Portadown	15
Randalstown	7
West Belfast	21
Total number of participants	92

Fig. 01 Map of participants



News and major events during focus groups

Focus group discussions are influenced by news reports and current affairs of the time. Since data collection started on this project in February 2023, several significant incidents have served as a reminder of the ongoing impact of the conflict in Northern Ireland and the absence of reconciliation:

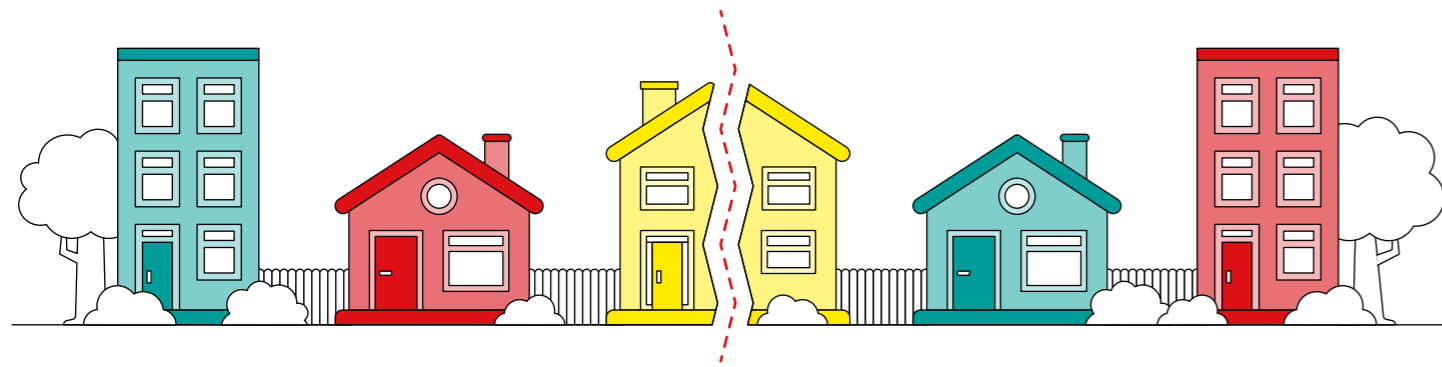
- **On 22th February 2023, DCI John Caldwell was shot in front of young people at a leisure centre in Omagh in an attack linked to dissident republicans.**
- **On 28th March 2023, the threat level from domestic terror was raised from “substantial” to “severe” in Northern Ireland.**
- **During March - May 2023, over 120 incidents such as petrol bomb attacks, a pipe bomb attack, a shooting, damage caused and intimidation have been linked to a feud amongst loyalist paramilitaries in the North Down area.** (See [Belfast Telegraph, 9 Jul 2023](#))

These incidents were set against the backdrop of having no functioning Northern Ireland Executive for over a year, alongside cuts to public services which disproportionately impact on young people, in particular through reductions in budgets for education and youth services.

Unsurprisingly some of the young people participating in this report had at the forefront of their minds these news reports of individual incidents of violence, clear examples of ongoing paramilitarism, along with the now long-term absence of functioning government.

The results in this paper relate to young people’s views about their community and are presented in two sections. Section One focuses on the impact living in a divided society has had on young people in Northern Ireland and what additional social challenges they may face. Section Two presents young people’s solutions to make Northern Ireland a better place.

Section one: Living within a divided society



Pivotal's Youth Voices report of 14–25 year olds found 66.5% of respondents reported that young people still feel the impact of the Troubles today.

One of the main ways young people experience the impact of the Troubles was feeling unsafe in their local area. Safety in communities could be undermined by community violence or the ongoing influence of paramilitary groups. There was a high level of consensus that Northern Ireland would be a better place with fewer paramilitary groups as captured by the 'Less/More' exercise.

Exploring the ongoing effects of living within a divided society was the first theme in each focus group. The three most

common issues young people identified were living in a segregated community, personal experiences of sectarianism, and stereotypes. These three overlapping and interrelated community issues are explored below.

Segregated communities

Young people reported that segregation between Catholic and Protestant areas continues to impact their everyday lives. Most young people lived in single community residential areas. In some areas this also meant using separate community centres, shops or schools. As a result, it could be difficult for young people from different community backgrounds to make social contact. Young people often reported that segregation between Catholics and Protestants was reinforced by their parents or family out of a fear that trouble could arise:

"Even like the streets, like one side of the street is Protestant, and one street's Catholics. And like, my mummy and daddy would be like really on edge if I was close to a Protestant area because just in case something happens and it'd be the

// There was a high level of consensus that Northern Ireland would be a better place with fewer paramilitary groups //

same the other way about, if a Protestant would come up to Andy Town their mummies and daddies would be a wee bit on edge." Female, 15, West Belfast

Young people recognised dividing lines amongst communities were drawn up through the use of symbols relating to the Troubles - murals, memorials, flags and barriers such as 'peace' walls. These symbols served to remind and maintain division:

"Murals and memorials are everywhere like of the past. It brings it back in this day and age for older people. It's still affecting us as well, because we've to look at it." Male, 19, Derry-Londonderry

"All these symbols and all they reinforce all these streets, and they all say to you, "Oh this is my place and I'm in charge." - Male, 15, North Belfast

Participants from Belfast and Derry-Londonderry specifically cited rioting with other groups or the police. Young people from these areas provided examples of heightened tensions and damage to property between Catholics and Protestants when commemorating different historical events such as the Easter Rising or the Battle of the Boyne.

"And then there's rioting all the time and like smashing people's windows in and all and people have got knee-capped." Female, 18, Derry-Londonderry

"It's like you go down Oldpark, it's riots. Carlisle Circus, riots. Lanark Way, riots. Where I live, riots mate." Male, 15, North Belfast

Clothing, sporting and cultural events were further ways young people encountered segregation within the community which was often exacerbated through comments made on social media.

Sectarianism in communities

Closely related to segregated communities was the theme of sectarianism. Examples of the many ways young people experienced sectarianism were recounted in every focus group, indicating that this remains a significant issue for young people today.

The most common way young people explained how sectarianism affected them was through feeling unsafe. Young people reported feeling fear when in areas seen as a different community background from themselves. This was particularly acute for young people living in interface areas. Young people reported feeling at risk of being 'jumped' or physically assaulted when outside of their own area and were also afraid of being verbally abused by other young people from a different community:

"There's still bad things happen, you hear of people going about getting beat up because other people know that they're not the same religion." Female, 15, Carrickfergus

"Like you can't walk, like you can't speak to certain people, you can't go to certain areas, you've to like, whenever you're in mixed areas, you've to worry about something happening." Male, 15, North Belfast

"I hear people in our school talking about sometimes when they're going home, they have to go through town and stuff cos our uniform is green, white and orange, and they were worried sometimes walking home from school and getting buses into town." Female, 15, West Belfast

Social media was also reported as a way young people could receive sectarian abuse. This could be especially

difficult for young people to deal with as potentially large numbers of people could be involved, with many unknown to them. Abuse tended to be particularly concentrated around sporting or community events celebrated by either community, and could take the form of either public or private messages or negative comments under photos on a range of social media platforms.

Stereotypes of communities

A combination of these environmental factors, family influences and personal experiences of sectarianism seem to have influenced young people's attitudes in two main ways. Firstly, some young people feel that others hold negative stereotypes about them because of where they come from, their age or their community background. This attitude tended to be expressed as being looked down upon, and as a result young people felt marginalised and misunderstood:

"They see us all as wasters, that's why. They look at us and they're like 'scumbags'."
Male, 18, Derry-Londonderry

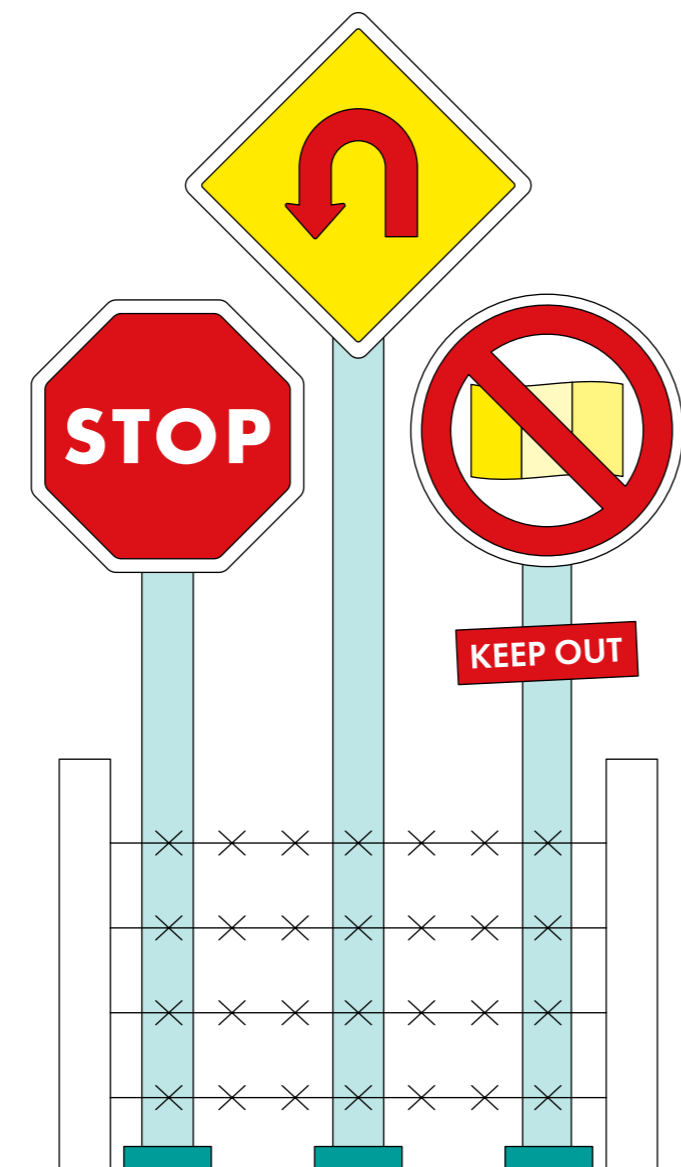
"It's just they tar all young Protestants if you're in a band you're a thug, you're a bigot, but they don't talk about what those people bring to the community."
Male, 28, Portadown

"For example like, because we're from Divis everyone thinks we're scumbags and all."
Female, 15, West Belfast

Secondly, some young people voiced negative, or prejudicial attitudes towards others outside of their community group. This was expressed mainly through comments about what other groups were perceived to have which they did not, such as better treatment, more investment or better facilities. It is also worth noting that in a small number of focus groups this attitude also extended towards those from an ethnic minority background. This was potentially influenced by the concentration of ethnic minorities placed in hotel accommodation in Belfast and Carrickfergus:

"I also don't agree on it. Like our own people sleeping on the streets with no food or nothing, and they're sitting there living a life of luxury." Female, 14, Carrickfergus

"In our school they get treated better than a white person. Whenever a white person does something like to one of them uns it comes down to racism, it's racist, but whenever they do something oh it's not racist." Male, 16, West Belfast



Social, economic and public service issues

Experiences of living in a divided society, sectarianism and feeling unsafe have been identified by some young people as factors in deciding to move away from Northern Ireland in the future. Aside from issues related to segregation and sectarianism, young people raised a number of other areas in which they felt their community needs to improve.

Drugs

Drugs were a major concern for young people. Fewer drugs in communities were identified in the Less/More exercise as the number one issue that would make Northern Ireland a better place to live. Interestingly, the three groups which did not report this were drawn from North and West Belfast. Participants in these areas who did raise the issue of drugs were, however, concerned with the impact that drugs had on young people's mental health. Young people also highlighted that they were concerned for their safety when others were on drugs in the community, describing fear and frustration that the police did not seem to take action against drug dealers.

"It would make you worry about your own safety too at times like walking down the street. That's the problem too, when them boys are high in their head, they don't care who you are or what you are, they wouldn't think twice about sticking a knife into you." Male, 16, Randalstown

"There's an awful lot of young ones doing drugs, drinking down in the woodlands and nobody really feels safe to go down anymore." Male, 18, Portadown

"It's getting worse. The police don't really give a shit. From my view the police would stop you for the likes of, I'm trying to think of an example, going two miles over the speed limit and drug dealers are ignored, well-known drug dealers. They don't do nothing about it cos they're protected and they're a feared of them. That's my view."
Male, 19, Magherafelt

Many young people associated paramilitary groups with drug dealing. This included a sense of intimidation used to control areas for the purpose of making money through activities such as drug dealing:

"I think drugs and money is all they really think about. They don't care. They don't care if they're giving drugs to a fourteen year old, they're still making money off it." Female, 16, Carrickfergus

"They're just in it for drugs, money and basically everything and they are just running about shooting people for doing the same things. It's not fair really." Male, 18, Derry-Londonderry

A high level of consensus suggested Northern Ireland would be a better place with fewer paramilitary groups. Young people felt this role was no longer needed, with some confused as to why these groups continued to exist. However, there was an alternative, conflicted view held by a smaller number of young people, who tended to be male and live in Belfast, that these groups could control drugs, deter anti-social behaviour, and offer protection for their communities through the methods they used:

*"I'm not saying get rid of them, I'm saying f*** them mate, they're just rats like. I'm saying like you don't need them but like I'm not saying get rid of them because obviously like if something was to happen again it would be good to have like have people by your side that are protecting in your community."*
Male, 15, North Belfast

"I'd say it's like both. I say it's like both cos it stops people from doing stuff, but sometimes they take it too seriously. An abuse of power." Male 15, North Belfast

Lack of local services

The lack of services and facilities in local communities was described in a number of ways. More spaces and activities available for young people was identified by the most participants as the number one issue which would improve living in Northern Ireland. This result may be influenced by the sample being recruited through community youth organisations, as noted in the methodology. Concern was raised in some groups

about the recent cuts to youth services which had resulted in youth clubs reducing their hours. As indicated above, young people felt high levels of drug use and anti-social behaviour was in part a consequence of a lack of facilities and alternatives for young people to socialise in safe spaces.

"Like there's no clubs on Saturdays so a lot of people just go out drinking and stuff instead underage and get involved in things that they shouldn't."
Female, 14, West Belfast

"More places like this need to be available to give them something to do that doesn't make them, cos nine times out of ten, a young person goes to drugs and all because there's nothing else to do. If there was places like this that are just generally something cheap and affordable for them to do other than do that."
Male, 18, Derry-Londonderry

Young people suggested that community youth work provided several benefits including making friends, opportunities to participate in a range of activities, developing trusting relationships with adults and providing a sense of belonging.

Mental health

Increased awareness and support for mental health was the second most identified area which would improve living in Northern Ireland for young people. Discussions during the focus groups suggest that accessing mental health support across Northern Ireland is inconsistent. Some young people were able to access counselling in schools or in the community, with others able to be supported by youth workers in their local clubs. Some have very little access to support:

"I think there's a lack of help for people our age. Some people don't see it and some people are scared to talk."
Male, 16, Randalstown

"More support systems you know people are embarrassed to phone Childline and say how they feel. There should be like certain youth centres and stuff that people can go and talk to someone they trust and not just some randomer on the phone." Female, 16, Carrickfergus

"There's very little out there for kids, like you look at your drugs pandemic around local towns you've people in your circle going out doing drugs, it affects your mental health and there's nobody there to help them so that basically the only thing they can do is join in rather than speak to someone and say this is happening. No one wants to listen."

Male, 20, Portadown

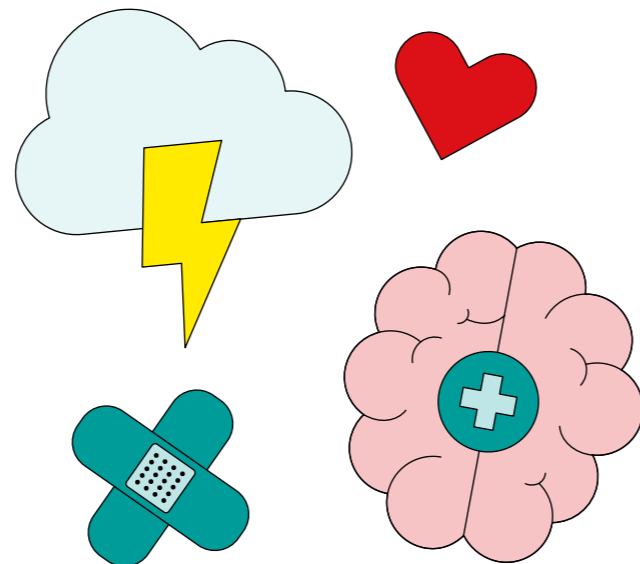
Young people's sources of stress included exam pressure, bullying and a sense of hopelessness that things can change. For some young people, their families or living situation could also be a source of stress which negatively impacted their mental health. Examples provided by young people suggest that they often do not receive help until they are in a crisis situation:

"I find as well social workers could do better too because they leave the cases till the last minute until something actually happens and they don't try hard to get, to try and get something sorted they wait until the last minute."

Male, 17, Derry-Londonderry

"They put me in a B and B full of old men and all. I felt so unsafe. I was in there for a year and a half."

Female, 20, Derry-Londonderry



Cost of living

Young people have been affected by the rising cost of living. The most common ways young people reported experiencing this was through price rises in food and transport. For those that could drive a car, petrol was expensive and for those that did not drive, the use of public transport could be costly if they were not eligible for a bus pass as part of studying or training. As a result, some young people had to rely on lifts from family members or taxis. Taxis were particularly expensive for young people living in more rural areas, which was one aspect of a wider concern for transport costs in rural areas. The cost of transport impacted on what job or training opportunities they could take and could restrict their abilities to socialise with others.

"It hurts me to put petrol in the car sometimes like. Driving around trying to find a good price as well."

Male, 17, Randalstown

Participants suggested that there should be more awareness about discounts available to young people such as Translink's yLink Smart Card which could reduce their travel

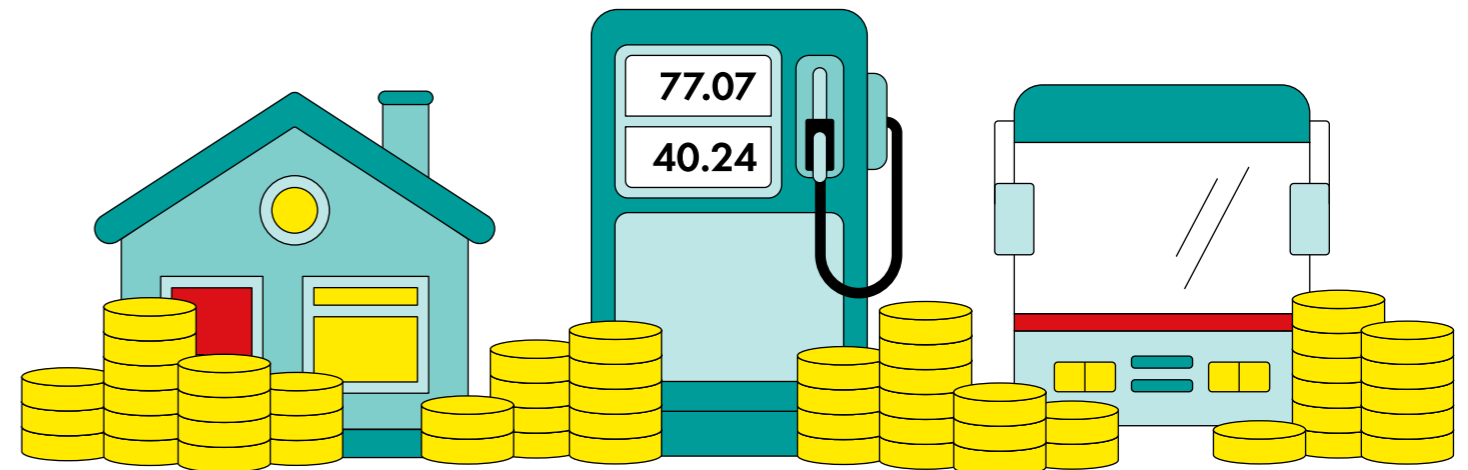
costs. Young people were often limited in how they could increase their income due to the minimum wage for their age group, or other commitments such as school or training. From April 2023, the UK Minimum Wage hourly rate for 16-17 year olds is £5.28, £7.49 for 18-20 year olds and £10.18 for 21-22 year olds. Those over 22 years old receive a minimum hourly rate of £10.42.

For those young people living apart from their family and receiving benefits, it was particularly difficult to buy food and pay bills:

"I get a hundred and twenty pound every two weeks, and it's so hard to try and live on." Female, 20, Derry-Londonderry

"Cost of living is bad at the minute. Even at our age we're feeling it like. Some of us are out working and the money's gone like that." Male, 16, Randalstown

Young people reported that they felt there was a lack of support and advice if they experienced financial difficulties. The general consensus was that young people were not given enough education around money management, budgeting and the different ways people could earn money such as starting their own business.



Section two: Solutions to make Northern Ireland a better place to live

While Section One has set out the key issues which young people report as problematic in their communities today, another purpose of this research was to explore what solutions young people have for making Northern Ireland a better place to live.

United communities

Young people want to reduce segregation between communities. Young people suggested more cross-community work would reduce segregation between different communities through developing friendships and increasing mutual respect for each other. The majority of young people wanted more opportunities to socially interact with other young people from different religious and community backgrounds. In addition to specific cross-community programmes, sport was provided as a good example of how young people from different communities could regularly meet each other and build positive relationships. Young people felt it would be beneficial if cross-community work was started at an early age and supported by education around how to talk to others about difference and how to understand alternative perspectives.

“Yeah, bring the two sides together, have them talk, have them ease the tensions, be friends, and then maybe eventually we can reduce symbolism and bring down the peace walls and all.” Male, 15, North Belfast

“Yeah cos like it helps people understand each other a bit more and then let them come together and like respect each

other more instead of fighting all the time.”
Female, 17, Derry-Londonderry

“It’s basically like just being all together, and just coming all together, being a proper community and not being side-tracked by everything else.” Male, 19, Magherafelt

“Coming together, supporting each other, and respect, and protecting each other. And how can you stop the bad things from happening? Stop using symbols to identify people. Don’t stereotype and don’t be judgemental.”
Female, 14, North Belfast

Reducing the use of flags and symbols to mark territory in the community was seen as a first step towards creating a united community, although it was acknowledged that this could take some time to achieve. It should also be noted that there were mixed views in relation to the extent of community desegregation, particularly around residential integration. While some young people were enthusiastic about increased residential integration, others felt this would be a risk to good relations and may result in people feeling unsafe in their own homes.

“You need less of those single communities. We need to reduce all the Catholic streets, the Protestant streets, you need

to have more mixed kind of people, the same people living in the same area getting to know each other and that would be good. Make it more like an actual community.”
Male, 15, North Belfast

“I think people would feel unsafe, well, or just frightened, scared every night.” Female, 16, Carrickfergus

Investment in the community

Young people want more safe places and activities in the community. Young people reported that having more access to facilities and services in the community was central to improving their lives. Young people proposed that greater investment was made in communities to provide both safe spaces and planned activities. Benefits arising from this type of community investment included making friends, and developing relationships with trusted adults such as youth workers. Opportunities to regularly meet with others whether through

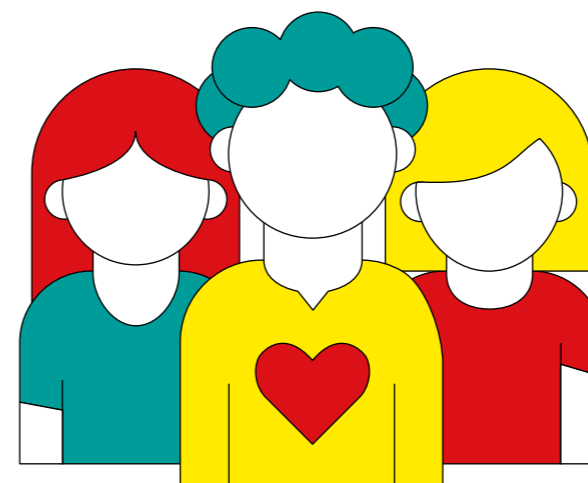
youth groups, sports or cultural pursuits such as playing in a band were described by young people as valuable support structures which gave them a deep sense of belonging.

“You look at your football pitches, what football pitch can you walk onto without booking through the council and paying money for? There’s not a single pitch in Portadown. There’s one, the current playing fields hasn’t nets, just goalposts, like there’s not a single football pitch that you have to ring the council, book it, pay for it. How do they expect kids to pay, to play that way like?” Male, 20, Portadown

“I just think they should expand the parks times open more, cos where I live they close it way too early and then the young ones then go round hitting windows.”
Female, 18, Derry-Londonderry

Young people described the need for better community provisions in a number of ways. Things they wanted were:

- 1 Better outside provision such as playparks and sport pitches which were clean, well maintained and free
- 2 Increased access to safe spaces such as community centres and youth clubs
- 3 More youth workers in the community
- 4 Further opportunities to socialise together including regular community-wide events



// I get a hundred and twenty pound every two weeks, and it's so hard to try and live on. //

Female, 20, Derry-Londonderry

"More opportunities to get to know people from different religions better. So, like creating more like different groups like [youth project], through sports and stuff, like integrating, like you know the residential we've done with the football team, with different people from different areas."

Male, 15, North Belfast

Safety in the community

Young people want to feel safe in their community.

Safety in the community was discussed in terms of being able to access the support young people need from others. For some participants this meant accessing timely support from social workers to keep them safe where they were lived, while other young people needed someone to talk to in the community to help improve their mental health.

The need for better policing was strongly linked to feeling safe. Young people perceived that the police often held stereotypical attitudes about their age or community background, and that it would be beneficial to have more positive engagement to increase understanding of young people's concerns.

As discussed in Section One, young people strongly felt that the widespread availability of drugs in the community needed to be tackled more effectively by the police. Young people strongly felt that police should prioritise removing drug dealers, including those associated with paramilitary groups, from their local areas.

"I think that the police should be more vigilant on it [drug dealers], you know to keep them people away from good families, and to stop them putting their influence onto the younger generation within the community."

Male, 16, Randalstown

"I find the police round here they do you for just like maybe going three mile an hour over the speed limit or something and they give you the odd fine or points or whatever and they're letting things like drugs and all that stuff slide by. They let it fall under their nose as if it's not there, but they care about all the minor things. So I think they should maybe focus on the more serious stuff like drugs."

Male, 18, Portadown

Participants suggested that neighbourhood policing should place greater focus on reducing anti-social behaviour such as under-age drinking and rioting, in order to create a safer environment. There was also strong consensus amongst young people about increased sentences for crimes such as drug dealing, rape or child abuse as an effective way to keep young people in the community safe.

Conclusion

Participants expressed solutions and hopes for improving their communities, during the discussions and in writing.

As each focus group concluded, young people were asked to identify on a post-it note:

What do we need to have less of in Northern Ireland?

What do we need to have more of in Northern Ireland to make it a better place?

Asking these questions provided a summary of key solutions young people across all the focus groups felt would improve living in Northern Ireland. As recorded in Fig. 02, the highest priority issue for young people was to reduce drugs and drug dealers. Young people also identified the need to address issues related to community divisions and legacies of the Troubles, such as rioting, paramilitaries and sectarianism.

Young people’s highest priority was to increase mental health awareness and support. As discussed throughout, young people highly valued community facilities and workers associated with youth clubs and community centres for both their roles in supporting young people’s mental health and for providing them with opportunities such as cross-community projects.

This report highlights young voices with concerns regarding mental health, community safety, drugs, and youth facilities that are common across many areas of the UK and Ireland. However, the persistence, and the perception, of sectarian divisions and paramilitarism ensures these challenges often take a unique shape in Northern Ireland. The focus groups highlight a diversity of perspectives, but a widely shared aspiration for stronger communities and fresh approaches to tackling deeply rooted issues is clear to see. These aspirations are also evident when the conversation turned to experiences of education, training and work, as set out in our parallel report [Youth solutions for improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland](#).

Fig. 02 Focus group post-it note results



Pivotal and Stats & Stories wish to thank all the community organisations, youth leaders and others who facilitated the focus groups. Above all we thank the young people who participated in the groups, generously gave of their time, and openly shared their perspectives, experiences and ideas for change.



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