

Embargoed until 00.01am on Monday, 19 June

Northern Ireland's young people want greater integration, better job opportunities - and politicians who represent the issues that matter to them

A major new survey from think tank Pivotal finds young people in Northern Ireland want a more integrated society, better job opportunities, more support for mental health, and greater efforts made to tackle paramilitary influence and drugs. Most still care about the constitutional question.

Northern Ireland's young people believe they are more comfortable with community mixing than older generations and want to see more integration in both education and housing, according to new research.

Young people's biggest concern for the next five years is the rising cost of living – and the thing they want help with, more than anything else, is good careers advice.

A new report from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, found that young people believe their opportunities for employment in Northern Ireland are limited – with many planning to leave as a result.

Youth Voices: life, work and study in Northern Ireland [published today, Monday 19 June] found that:

Barely half of local young people (54.8%) see a good future for themselves in Northern Ireland - and 41.8% say they plan to leave to find work or for further study elsewhere. Nearly sixty percent (58.8%) of those young people who identified as Other say they plan to move, compared with 46.7% of Catholics and 37.1% of Protestants.

A majority of respondents say they want day-to-day politics to move away from “green versus orange”. Despite this, most young people care about the constitutional question. Over 60% say the question of whether Northern Ireland should remain in the UK or be part of a united Ireland is important to them.

Most young people continue to live in segregated areas and are educated separately from those with a different community background. The education and

housing systems continue to be structural barriers to building a more united community across all of Northern Ireland.

Young people support desegregating society. Support for both shared and integrated education is high - 66.9% said a new, integrated school system would move Northern Ireland forward, while 62.8% said their experience of Shared Education was good for learning about others from a different background.

Paramilitaries continue to have an impact on the lives of local young people. Over forty percent of young people (42.1%) reported that there is paramilitary influence over young people in their area. This proportion was higher among young people from an Other (50.0%) or Protestant (43.9%) community background, compared with those from a Catholic background (37.2%).

Only 10.5% of young people agreed that politicians in Northern Ireland do a good job of representing the issues that matter to them. A huge majority – 92.4% - said that politicians should focus on building a positive future for everyone living in Northern Ireland.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “These findings show the breadth of local young people’s concerns. They are very worried about the rising cost of living, and the limited job opportunities available to them here, as well as other issues affecting day-to-day life like mental health, the ongoing influence of paramilitary organisations and the availability of drugs locally.

“The fact that their number one desire is to have better careers advice shows that the ability to build a better future for themselves is a massive priority for local young people. They raised concerns about whether their education had given them the skills they need for the job they want.

“Only one in ten young people felt that Northern Ireland’s politicians represented the issues that mattered to them. There was a real desire amongst young people to have a greater influence on decision-making.

“The findings in this report point to several key issues that, if addressed, could help build a Northern Ireland where more of our young people believe they could thrive. These issues include ongoing segregation in society, how safe young people feel within their communities, and the disconnection they perceive between what they learn in school and what they need to build a career.”

Results from this survey make clear the diversity of experiences and perspectives of young people.

This report is the second in a three-part series from Pivotal looking at how Northern Ireland can become a better place to live and work, for young people in particular.

The findings are based on results from 259 participants aged 14-25 from across Northern Ireland. The survey was completed online during February and March 2023 and covered four themes (community, study, work, and the future). Further information on methodology is available in the Notes to Editors below this press release.

Pivotal's analysis of its survey data also looked at certain groups within the overall results, based on age cohort (those aged 14-18 and those aged 19-25), gender (male or female), and community background (Protestant, Catholic, Other).

COMMUNITY

All of the participants in this survey were born after the Good Friday Agreement. Despite this, 66.5% said they still feel the impact of the Troubles today.

Most say they live in segregated areas. Asked to describe their neighbourhoods as mixed, Protestant or Catholic:

- 82.6% of respondents from a Protestant background said they lived in a Protestant area (15.5% said their area was mixed, and 1.9% said Catholic).
- 59.3% of those from a Catholic background said they lived in a Catholic area (31.4% said mixed, and 9.3% said Protestant).
- 35.7% of 'Others' said they lived in a mixed area, compared with 57.1% who said their neighbourhood was Protestant and 7.1% who said Catholic.

Paramilitaries

Over forty percent of young people (42.1%) reported that there is paramilitary influence over young people in their area. This proportion was higher among young people from an Other (50.0%) or Protestant (43.9%) community background, compared with Catholic community background (37.2%).

Young people aged 19 – 25 years were more likely to say there is paramilitary influence in their area (47.6%) compared with those aged 14 -18 years old (38.7%).

Division, politics and the future

Overall, 68.5% of respondents agreed that too much focus is placed on traditional 'orange and green' issues in Northern Ireland. This included 77.8% of Others, 70.4% of Protestants and 63.1% of Catholics.

Only 10.5% of young people agreed that local politicians do well in representing the issues that matter to them. A huge majority (92.4%) said elected representatives need to concentrate on creating a positive future for everyone who lives here. The three community issues that matter most to the young people were:

1. **Better Transport** – 79.1% of respondents said this was one of their top priorities.
2. **Desegregated communities** – over two thirds (67.2%) of respondents said people of their age have a more positive attitude to living in mixed areas than older generations – including 66.3% of Catholics and 65.8% of Protestants.
3. **Drugs** – a majority of young people (65.4%) said there are too many drugs available to young people in their area.

STUDY

Young people were asked to identify their three biggest barriers to learning. The most common response was exam pressure (58.6% overall - including 38.1% of males and 67.3% of females). This was followed by having a poor relationship with teachers (36.5% overall, including 28.9% of males and 38.9% of females) and bullying (32.5% overall, including 28.9% of males and 32.7% of females).

Segregation

Most young people from a Catholic background (85.7%) attended a post-primary school mainly with other Catholics. Most from a Protestant background (76.0%) attended a post-primary school that was largely Protestant. Those who identify as Other were more likely to attend an integrated school (50.0%) than a school that was largely Protestant (27.8%) or largely Catholic (11.1%).

Integrated education

Three quarters (75.0%) of respondents said that schools can be a good place to meet people from a different background and 77.0% said that more integration would help increased understanding between young people from different backgrounds.

However, almost a quarter of respondents (23.0%) said that it is important for young people to be educated only with others from their own community background. This was the same for young people from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds. A smaller number of Others (16.7%) also agreed with this.

Over two thirds of the young people (66.9%) said a new, integrated school system would move Northern Ireland forward. Almost a quarter (23.6%) were neutral on this issue, while 9.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Shared Education

Those aged 14-18 were more likely to have participated in a Shared Education Programme (63.1%) than the 19-25 cohort (56.4%).

Those that attended an integrated post-primary school reported higher levels of participation in Shared Education Programmes (70.2%) than those at predominantly Catholic (56.0%) or Protestant schools (56.0%).

Of those who took part in some shared education schemes:

- 62.8% rated Shared Education as excellent or good for learning about others from a different background.
- 60.1% rated Shared Education as excellent or good for making friends from different backgrounds.
- However, 45.2% of young people rated the Shared Education Programme they experienced as poor or very poor for keeping in touch with friends from a different background after the programme ends.

WORK

Most young people (61.5%) already have some experience of work. Unsurprisingly, this was much more common among those aged 19-25 (94.9%) than those aged 14-18 (39.3%).

Opportunities

Most respondents (62.1%) said there are limited job opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland – and those with experience of work were more likely to agree with this (66.2%) than those yet to ever have a job (55.2%).

Females (66.2%) and those from a Catholic background (69.3%) were more likely to agree with this statement than males (55.2%), or than Protestants (58.6%) and Others (58.8%).

Skills

A small majority of young people (59.3%) said their education had given them the skills they needed to get the job they want, but there were marked differences between the proportion of Catholics (69.3%), Protestants (58.6%) and Others (38.9%) who agreed with this.

Careers advice

Although 45.3% agreed that they had received good careers advice, 30.0% remained neutral with around a quarter (24.5%) of young people disagreeing.

Females (31.1%) were over twice as likely to disagree that they had received good careers advice, compared with males (13.8%). Protestants were more likely to disagree that they had received good careers advice (27.1%) compared with Catholics (20.0%) or Others (23.5%).

Leaving Northern Ireland

A significant number of young people said they plan to move away from Northern Ireland for work or further study (41.8%).

Those with experience of work were more likely to say they plan to leave (45.5%) than those who were yet to have a job (35.6%).

Nearly three in every five (58.8%) of young people who identified as Other said they intend to move away, compared with 46.7% of Catholics and 37.1% of Protestants.

THE FUTURE

Pivotal asked young people if they see a good future for themselves in Northern Ireland. Only just over half (54.8%) said they did, with 15.8% disagreeing and 29.3% not saying either way.

Constitutional status

In total, 60.6% of young people felt that the constitutional question – whether Northern Ireland should remain in the UK or be part of a united Ireland – was important or very important to them.

Those aged 19-25 (69.0%) were more likely to feel this way than those aged 14-18 (55.5%).

A higher proportion of males (67.0%) felt the constitutional question was important, compared with females (56.8%).

There was little difference between Catholics (60.4%) and Protestants (62.6%), although Others were much less likely to agree with this (44.4%).

Future challenges

Respondents were asked to identify the biggest challenges facing young people in Northern Ireland in the next five years.

The rising cost of living was the most common response (82.4%). Indeed, it was the highest response for both males and females, across all community backgrounds, and in both the 14-18 and 19-25 age cohorts.

The second most common was poor mental health (73.1%), with more females (78.3%) citing this compared with males (64.3%).

The third most common issue overall (and second most common among males) was drugs, which was reported as a concern by 64.3% of respondents overall, including 67.9% of males and 62.2% of females.

Cuts to education and youth services was the fourth most-commonly-reported challenge (49.8% overall), but this saw significant variation between groups. A higher proportion of females (55.5%) identified this issue than males (40.5%).

More Catholics (64.0%) and Others (62.5%) reported this as a challenge, compared with Protestants (40.4%). Young people aged 19–25 were more likely to recognise this as a challenge (69.6%) compared to those aged 14–18 (36.6%).

Changes

The survey asked participants to rank a number of possible changes that could make a positive impact on the lives of young people. The top five priorities were:

Better careers advice for young people – 44.4% of all respondents chose this as their first or second priority. This corroborates findings from [Pivotal's research](#) on transforming the 14-19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland which found 79% of young people reported that careers advice could be improved.

More mixed housing – A third of the participants (33.9%) said the creation of more mixed housing areas was their first or second priority for change.

Better job prospects – Greater job opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland was ranked by 29.5% as their first or second priority.

Removal of paramilitary influence – Over a quarter of all young people (28.5%) said the removal of paramilitary influence was their first or second priority. Comments from the participants indicate that young people closely associated paramilitary groups with the availability of drugs in their areas.

The ability to make decisions about issues that affect them – Almost a fifth (18.2%) said young people should be able to make decisions about issues that affect them. Interestingly, females were twice as likely to prioritise this compared to males. Issues young people identified as important to them included mental health, women's rights and access to public services they need.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

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METHODOLOGY: *Youth Solutions Survey Results involved an extensive survey of 259 young people aged 14-25 from across Northern Ireland. The survey was completed online during February and March 2023.*

Most respondents to the survey identified their community background as Protestant (59.8%) with 33.2% from a Catholic background. A total of 6.9% identified their community background as 'Other'.

The majority of participants were female (62.5%) with 37.5% male. 60.0% of participants were aged 14–18 years old while 40.0% were aged between 19 – 25 years old.

While participants were drawn from every county in Northern Ireland, most came from County Antrim (68.3%) mainly due to responses from the wider Belfast area. A total of 13.3% responses represented County Down with 11.2% from County Londonderry. A low response rate was recorded from County Tyrone (3.6%), Armagh (2.4%) and Fermanagh (1.2%).

Other notes

1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland
2. This is the second report in a three-part series looking at ways to make Northern Ireland a better place to live and work, for young people in particular. The first paper - *Reconciliation and deprivation: twin challenges for Northern Ireland* – was published in May and is available [here](#). The final report is expected in September.
3. Pivotal's earlier reports are available [here](#)
4. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are Peter Sheridan (Chair), Chief Executive of Cooperation Ireland; Richard Good, public policy consultant; Sarah Creighton; Jarlath Kearney; Rosalind Skillen; Andrew McCormick, former NICS Permanent Secretary; Seamus McAleavey, former Chief Executive, NICVA; and Alan Whysall, Honorary Senior Research Associate, Constitution Unit, University College London

5. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 20 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (2014-2019)
6. Pivotal has received funding and in-kind support from Belfast Harbour Commissioners, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, NICVA, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University
7. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835
8. Follow Pivotal on Twitter @pivotalppf