

Youth solutions: Improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland



PIVOTAL

PUBLIC POLICY
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This report details how young people from communities facing division and deprivation experience education, training and employment in Northern Ireland. Through focus group discussions, young people have described firsthand experiences of school, further and higher education, vocational training, and entering the workforce.

The diversity of voices within these focus groups offered valuable insights into the barriers many young people face and their hopes for the future.

What follows details findings from 12 focus groups with 92 young people, which were held during April – June 2023. This is the second Pivotal report produced from these focus groups. The first report examined the young participants' perspectives on the theme of 'Community' – issues of segregation and integration, local facilities and services, and the cost-of-living crisis. *Youth Solutions for Building Better Communities in Northern Ireland* included a fuller explanation of the methodology and vision behind the project, [which can be found here](#).

A significant finding from this report is widespread discontent at how schools and Further Education colleges are preparing young people for the world of work. Concern at the amount and quality of careers advice on offer, and frustration at the lack of guidance and pathways into good apprenticeships and jobs raises serious questions for policymakers. The report also highlights widespread dissatisfaction about the school curriculum, and the subjects on offer. Some taking part saw a large gap between school and "the real world" of jobs, necessary life skills, and the opportunities they will face after school. These findings reinforced messages in Pivotal's earlier research paper [Transforming the 14-19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland - youth voices and solutions](#).

In a theme echoed throughout this Pivotal project, the cost of transport and the availability of timely public transport were particular concerns for a significant number of focus group participants. Those in part-time employment often commented on the lower-level minimum wage for young people and difficulties making ends meet. The importance of Educational Maintenance Awards and other financial support were underlined.

A common frustration for many taking part was the struggle to gain work experience, and a lack of belief that good job opportunities will be available for them near to home. Young people who were active in their community through youth organisations thought that the non-academic skills and experiences they have gained were undervalued by the system.

In terms of experiences of school, many young people related stories of exam pressure and stress, and argued that the number of exams should be reduced, with better use made of coursework and other assessment. Some participants also spoke of their perceptions of negative school environments created by poor treatment from teachers, especially regarding school uniform policy and other disciplinary matters. Not feeling respected in school by those in authority was a major issue for a significant number of participants.

The youth voices in this report highlight a broad support for integrated education as a goal, and hopes that this could help transform broader community relations. But there were concerns raised about the practicalities of integration, and issues raised about safety, as well as concerns expressed by some about the impact of integrated education on aspects of their culture and identity.

Another theme of discussion was concern about negative stereotypes others have of young people, due to community background, area, cultural identity, and age – and how these negative, and discriminatory, stereotypes could harm their future opportunities.

This report presents young people's views on how to make education, training and employment better in Northern Ireland.

This report is presented in two sections:

Section One focuses on young people's views on integrated education, their experiences in school, views on the curriculum, and what ideas they have to make education better.

Section Two explores young people's experiences of training and employment, any barriers they have encountered and what actions need to be taken to make training and employment better for young people

The project

The focus groups mark the final stage of Pivotal's Youth Solutions project. The project began with [a literature and policy review](#), which included 15 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, starting in February 2023 Pivotal launched an online questionnaire 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](#).

This report along with [Youth solutions for building better communities in Northern Ireland](#) further develops the themes arising from the survey. The project will conclude with a forthcoming policy solutions and recommendations paper.



Methodology

The focus groups were devised, planned and organised using the following approach.

A Research Advisory Group (RAG) of five young people from the same age group supported the focus groups by refining the questions and devising ways to engage the young people. Three focus groups were co-facilitated with members of the RAG with many of their ideas being used by the researcher in the rest of the focus groups.

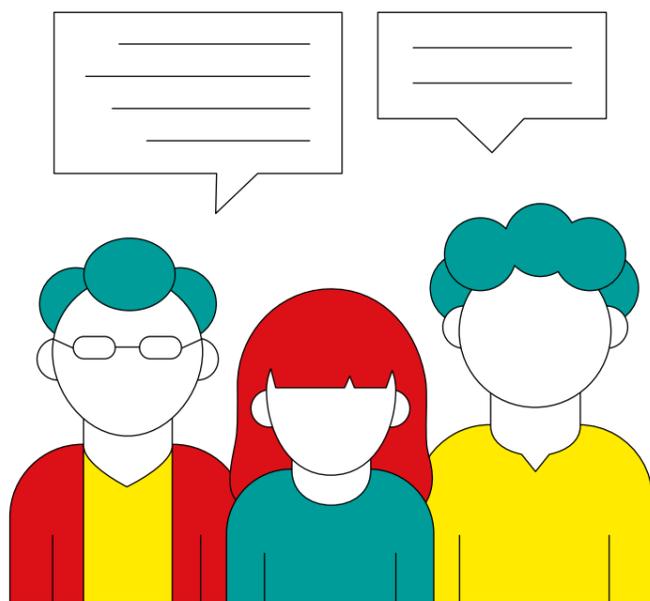
A total of 12 focus groups were held with 92 young people during April – June 2023. Young people were recruited through community youth work organisations in seven areas from across Northern Ireland. Focus groups were used to explore the results from the Youth Solutions survey in greater depth.

In the final activity in each focus group, participants were asked to write on post-it notes what Northern Ireland needs less/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 all focus groups. It also provided 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) has been used to assist with the systematic identification and organisation of themes. In addition, post-it notes collected during the Less/More exercise have also been

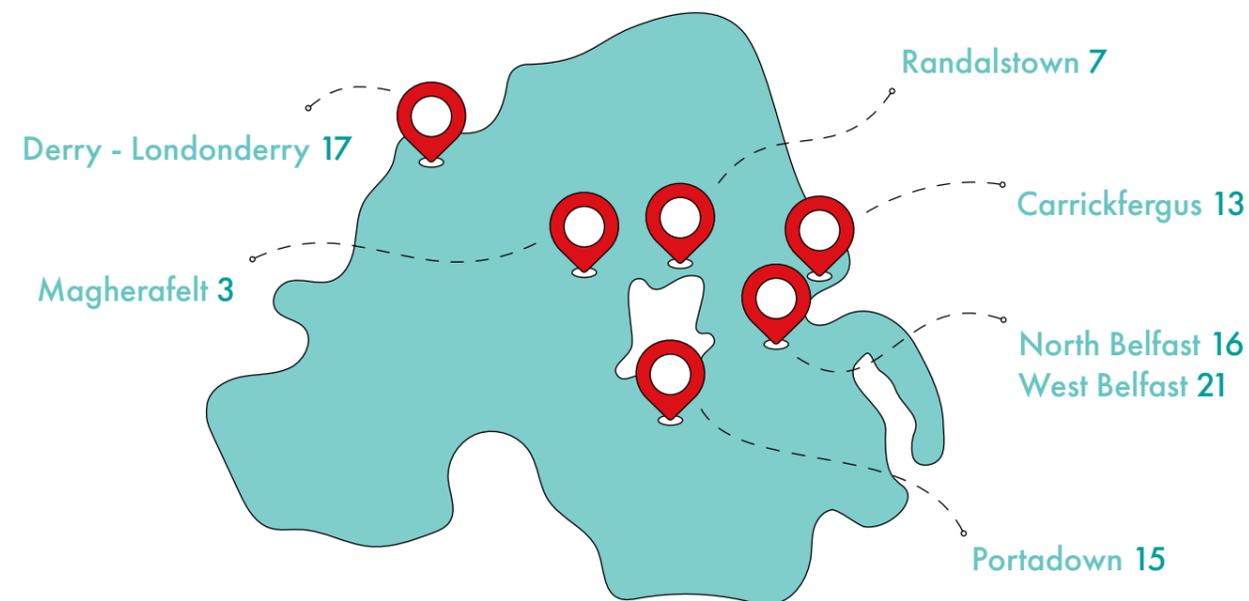
thematically analysed. Please note that all extracts from the focus groups have been quoted verbatim to capture the authentic expressions of the participants.

Additional details regarding the methodology employed can be found in [Youth Solutions for Building Better Communities in Northern Ireland](#).



Demographics

Fig. 01 Map of participants



Youth organisations in communities which face ongoing challenges with reconciliation and deprivation were asked to recruit young people for the focus groups. Focus groups were typically attended by groups of young people who already knew each other and attended the youth organisation. Please note that while some groups were predominately 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.

Gender: The majority of participants were male (62.0%) with 38.0% female.

Age: The target age range for focus group participants was young people aged between 14 – 25 years. While most participants were within this age group, we did not exclude any young person from taking part in a focus group on this basis. As a result, the sample also includes nine 13 years old and two participants in their later twenties.

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 |

Section one: Improving education

What did the groups have to say about integrated education, exams, the school environment and the curriculum?

A key theme for this research is reconciliation. Evidence suggests that young people in Northern Ireland live in a highly segregated community. This extends to education with an estimated 93% of children in Northern Ireland educated in separate school systems (Milliken, 2021). Results from the Pivotal Youth Voices survey of 14–25 year olds indicated that young people were positive towards the idea of a more integrated education system:

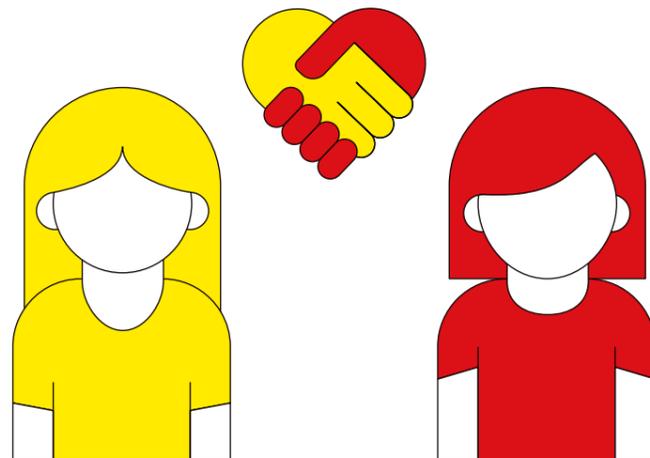
- **77.0% reported more integration in schools would help increase understanding between young people of different backgrounds**
- **75.0% felt that schools provided a good place for young people from different backgrounds to meet**
- **63.5% of young people agreed that they would prefer young people from different backgrounds to be educated together.**

As 66.9% of participants agreed that a new integrated school system would move Northern Ireland forward, young people's views on integrated education were explored further in all the focus groups. Thematic analysis revealed twice as many positive comments around integrated education compared to negative comments. This was corroborated

through the Less/More exercise as more integrated education was the top priority for young people in terms of making education better. Most young people recognised integrated education having a dual role in reducing sectarianism and promoting understanding of others. Support was given by many young people for integration within education to start as early as possible such as in nursery or primary school:

"It would be easier. It would be so much better. Like it wouldn't be all fighting and all because they would all just learn to grow up together."
Female, 14, North Belfast

"From nursery you're not going to like know about any of that stuff and you're going to become mates with people who's from different areas and then by the time you grow up and realise you'll still be mates with them probably. Like you're not born sectarian."
Male, 15, North Belfast



// Thematic analysis revealed twice as many positive comments around integrated education compared to negative comments. //

"I feel if we start moving in that direction then slowly but surely we'll get there but yeah especially in primary schools as well if they start that earlier for them it's not going to be such a big change for these young people going into secondary school."
Male, 22, West Belfast

While positivity was high around the idea of integrated education, some young people were ambivalent, and others were negative and anticipated that this could be problematic in practice.

Three key areas of concern were identified:



Residential segregation: Segregation in housing was reported as a problem for young people travelling to a school outside their own area. As identified in the focus groups' discussions regarding communities, young people often felt unsafe in areas they identified as being of a different community background.

This was particularly acute for young people living in interface areas and was felt to be a barrier to educating children and young people together.



Sectarian bullying: Young people felt that there could be an increased risk of sectarian bullying within an integrated education system. Some young people reported that they had already experienced bullying due to their community background in school while others felt it would be a source of conflict which could lead to physical or verbal abuse.

"I used to get the shit kicked out of me because I was a Catholic at a mostly Protestant school."
Male, 18, Derry-Londonderry

"You're going to start to see more cross-community fights and like different sides can pick whether you're Catholic or Protestant, like you're going to get abuse in it."
Male, 18, Portadown



School subjects: History was most commonly identified as an area of potential contention within an integrated school system. There was general consensus that there should be more teaching about Northern Ireland's history including the partition of Ireland, the Troubles and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. However, young people spoke about a sharp division between 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' narratives and their desire to learn their 'own' version of history:

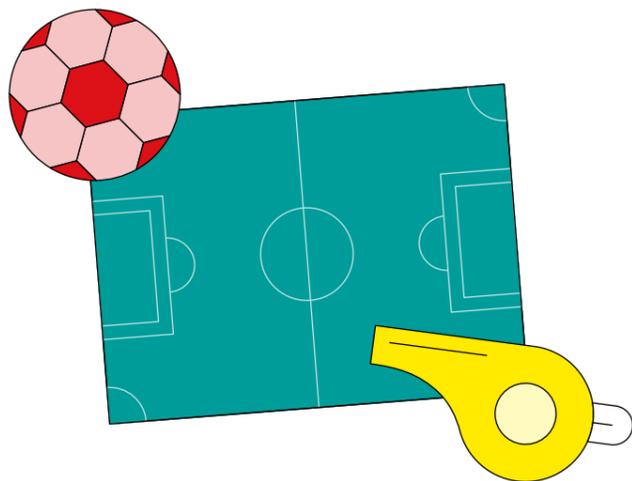
"I think when you're in school, in history class and like The Troubles and stuff are brought up and it's like your teachers

tell you like 'Protestants did this', and 'Protestants did that' and stuff like. That's why I don't think schools should mix because I want to learn about my history, not theirs."
Female, 15, West Belfast

Similarly, young people expressed concern about subjects such as physical education and languages which they felt would have to be compromised within an integrated system. Specifically, young males who identified as Protestants voiced a strong aversion to playing Gaelic games in school:

"I just think it's a very bitter sport to be honest because they've got pitches and halls named after ex-IRA men. So that's one thing I'd say. I just think it's very bitter the whole way they go about it."
Male, 19, Magherafelt

"When I was in primary school we had to do like shared education and stuff like that and it was meant to be like shared and equal but I felt like it really wasn't because we had to do things like shared sports and stuff like that but we would be playing Gaelic and to me that wouldn't really be shared sport, to me either the likes of football or rugby or any other sport, stuff like that, would be more shared and equal for people to come together."
Male, 16, Portadown



Young people being educated within the Irish Medium sector reported concerns that increased numbers of Protestants within their school would lessen opportunities to further develop the Irish Language in education:

"It was already lost but their school is bringing it back into the primary school and trying to bring it back, and it's working obviously but if Protestants started going there it would just be died down again."
Male, 16, West Belfast

A small minority were firmly opposed to an integrated education system. The main reason for opposition towards system change was that state schools were open to all so change was unnecessary.

Exams

Reducing exams and exam pressure was young people's top priority when asked what education needs less of during the Less/More exercise in the focus groups. This corroborated the findings in the Youth Voices survey which found that 58.6% of the sample reported there was too much exam pressure. Many young people expressed feeling overwhelmed and demoralised by the amount of revision, coursework and exams they had to do. Specifically, young people reported it was difficult to manage the number of exams scheduled during their final months of compulsory education in Year 12. Stress caused by exams was experienced by young people both mentally and physically:

"Yeah, you panic, and you just spiral into, first you doubt yourself, you doubt I'm probably not going to get an A. So what's the point you know? And then you go into the thoughts of why even bother?"
Male, 15, North Belfast

"I feel like it affects both factors because if it's going mentally then it can get tiring and you can get a sore head and you can stay up all night thinking about it and it affects you physically then, so I think it just builds up."
Male, 16, Randalstown

// Many young people expressed feeling overwhelmed and demoralised by the amount of revision, coursework and exams they had to do. //

"You're put under a lot of anxiety. Like you go into school it's a Halloween test, you come back from Halloween it's Christmas test, you come back from Christmas it's Easter test, when you come back from Easter test it's your summer test, you don't have like an hour's breathing. And there's a St Patrick's day test as well. And then you've your GCSE's and mocks on top of it."
Female, 15, West Belfast

Teachers were predominately viewed by participants as the source of pressure related to exams. Young people proposed that the exam system should be changed in three main ways. Firstly, young people felt they should have more choice in selecting their subjects for GCSE and A Levels. This was important as participants reported difficulty in motivating themselves to work for subjects which they did not choose and were not interested in. Secondly, young people suggested that a higher proportion of their grades should be based on coursework which could be carried out throughout the year. Thirdly, young people felt it would be less stressful if exams were scheduled better at points across the year:

"I'm doing my GCSEs at the minute; I've twenty two exams in a month and they should be more spread out."
Male, 15, Portadown

"The way that you do the GCSEs just in general, I think it's more like they should just look at scores that you got, like do it throughout the year instead of just doing the one exam at the end, they should give you part of the actual GCSE and then say right work on for this part."
Male, 15, North Belfast

Young people also reported that they needed more support to revise, including resources and strategies to improve how they revise for exams.



School environment

Young people held strong opinions about how their school environment needed to improve. Positive relationships with teachers were viewed as central to being able to learn. Young people often reported that teachers did not recognise other challenges they were facing and they could feel there was a lack of respect in how teachers treated them. As a result of poor relationships with teachers, participants described feeling unmotivated or discouraged to work for a certain subject. In some cases, young people left school early or decided not to stay on in school past GCSEs due to negative relationships with teachers:

"Teachers look to be respected but don't show any respect towards you. Like you can't respect someone who's not going to respect you and especially like in lessons like see if I get a nice teacher I want to work for them and I want to respect them cos I don't want to like be rude to them if they're not going to be rude to me but if I get like a mean teacher that's constantly on my back then I don't want to do the work because they're not respecting me so I'm not gonna want to respect them."

Female, 15, West Belfast

"Yeah, but the problem with most teachers, they view their role as power over students and nothing you say goes. Do as I told, do as I say."

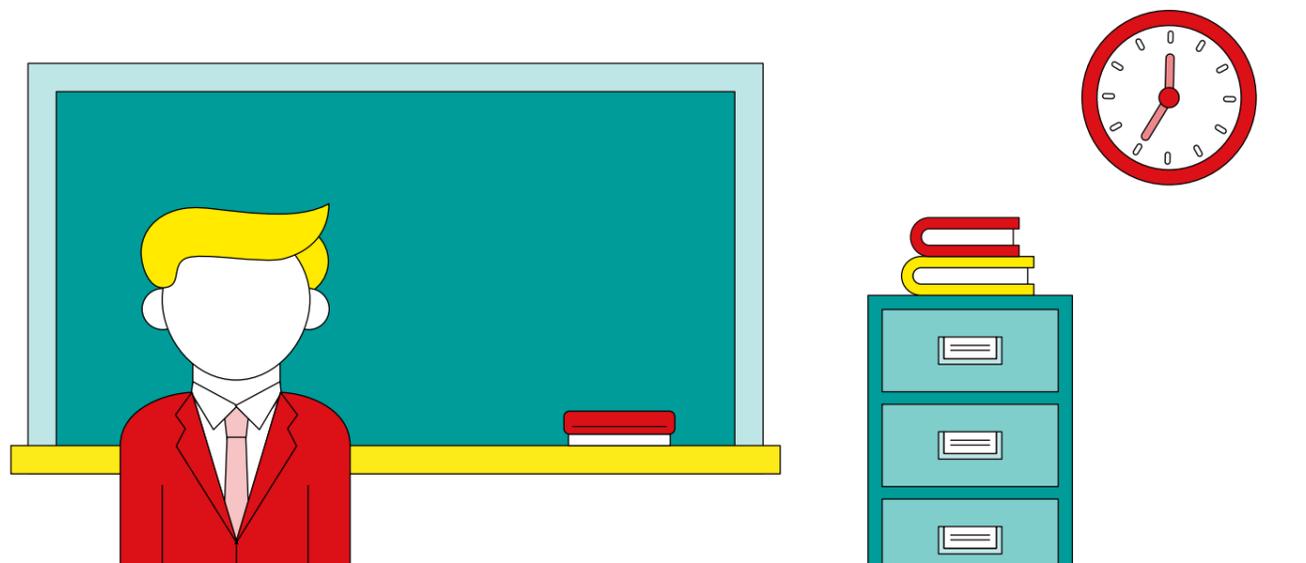
Male, 18, Derry-Londonderry

Young people felt that teachers did not always provide them with extra support when they needed it. While not all young people had the confidence to ask for additional help, participants reported that extra support such as further explanations in class, more time or more one to one work to explore an area of work would be beneficial. This was a source of frustration for young people, particularly those with additional needs:

"They learn you something and then you don't understand it they tell you to ask a question but when you ask a question, they shout at you for not knowing."

Male, 15, North Belfast

*"I'll go an entire class not having a f***in' clue what I'm doing. I've really bad eyesight and sit at the back of the room, but you're not allowed to change seats at all. She's writing in size twelve font, I can't see shit. Won't come over, I'm saying 'Miss, can you come over and help me here?', She says she'll be over in a minute, and doesn't come and help me for like the first hour*



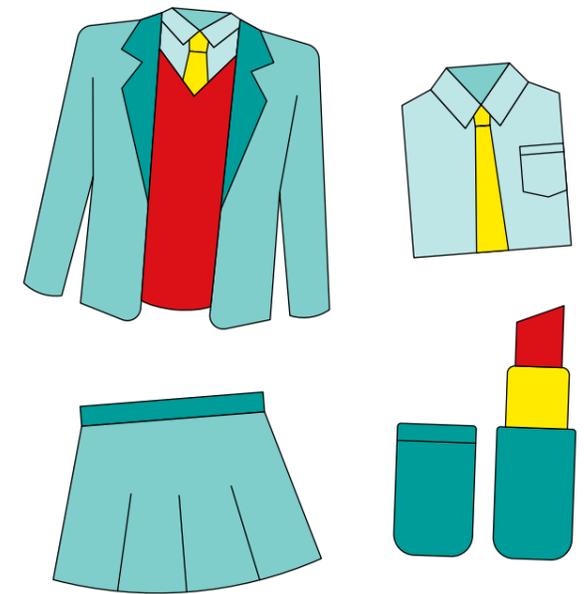
of the class and then she'll be like 'You've nothing done' but she hasn't told me what to do. I don't know what I'm supposed to do and then she'll be getting on as if it's like my fault."

Male, 15, North Belfast

A key issue which strained relationships between young people, teachers and other school staff were rules related to uniform and appearance and the sanctions around this. While most participants were generally supportive of having a uniform, young people did question how suitable school uniforms are:

"I agree with the uniform, just not the way they're made. Like it should be a hoodie with a logo on it, tracksuit bottoms, not them stupid blazers, pure uncomfortable shirts that make you, you can't even move."

Male, 18, Derry-Londonderry



Young people, particularly those still attending school, spoke at length about how their appearance in school was monitored and struggled to understand how these rules supported their education. Examples of this included inflexibility to adapt uniform related to temperature/weather, limitations around haircuts and colours, and prohibition around makeup, fake tan, nail polish or jewellery. Young people reported that punishments for breaking rules around appearance such as detention, internal suspension (isolated within school) and suspension were disproportionate and unfair:

"We had a couple of cards in our school. Every time you wear a jumper you get signed and three signatures was a detention for wearing a jumper."

Male, 16, Randalstown

"See if we come in with like a ring on your finger you are in a detention for it, you have to stay till half one Friday if you wear a ring, if you have tan, you have eyelashes on, they care more about that."

Female, 14, West Belfast

"It's not even just like suspensions as well. Like before I got fully suspended twice I was internally suspended for three days

at a time and it was like you've to sit in a room but they don't give you any work, they give you like one period of work, and then they just come back."

Male, 16, Carrickfergus

Adding to the difficult environment for young people was the widespread use of limiting bathroom breaks to set times during break and lunch. This was a major source of resentment and was described as creating additional anxiety for some young people, whereas others felt infantilised:

"It's where they treat you like children. They expect you to act as a young adult, but they treat you like you're children. Like they control if you go to the toilet and they give, if you come in, in your clothes, you get detention."

Female, 16, West Belfast

"It makes you not want to go to school."

Female, 15, Carrickfergus

// Young people highlighted the need to have access to more practical subjects with more opportunities to try different types of jobs while still at school. //

Curriculum content

Results from the focus groups show that many young people struggled to understand how much of the content they were taught could be useful to them in the future. Young people highlighted the need to have access to more practical subjects with more opportunities to try different types of jobs while still at school.

“See like whenever in English I’m having to analyse why this person said this and in which context and everything in like ‘Of Mice and Men’. Why am I ever going to need to know why this fifty year old dude said what and in which context? When is that ever going to help you?”
Male, 15, North Belfast

“You need to learn about the real world. Like stuff that we’re going to actually use when we’re old.”
Male, 15, Carrickfergus

Participants also reported that there was not enough practical content to prepare them for what they described as the ‘real world’. This included the need to learn about managing money and budgets, mortgages, tax and other areas that would be useful such as basic first aid, driving, cooking and parenting. Reflecting results of the [Youth Voices](#) survey, participants in the focus groups highlighted that good careers advice was often lacking in school and expressed confusion

about what options they had for the future. Specifically, a key theme identified as missing from the curriculum was the lack of education about how to start their own business or become an entrepreneur. Some participants had plans to become self-employed through learning a trade, developing a brand or expanding an existing family business:

“All the school does is teach you to go out and work for somebody else basically. That’s never going to happen to me.”
Male, 18, Derry-Londonderry

“That’s what I mean as a joiner, whenever I say joiner, I mean like go be a joiner, get your f***in’ apprenticeship and all that and then start doing, start your own joiner business up and then from there you just get f***in’ people to work for you mate, make people your teaboy.”
Male, 15, North Belfast

“I want to build my own business in beauty, but not over here, like in England or somewhere.”
Female, 14, Carrickfergus

Young people questioned if teachers were best placed to provide this advice, as the incentive behind the aspiration to become self-employed was often to make money or have the freedom to work for themselves.

During the focus group discussions and the [Less/More](#) exercise, young people developed ideas and solutions for improving their experiences in training and work. These are outlined in the table below:

| Youth solutions | |
|--|---|
| Education | |
| More integrated education from a younger age | New approach to uniform rules and sanctions |
| Exam system to include more choice in subjects | End limitations on using toilets during school time |
| More grades-based coursework and better scheduling systems | Revise curriculum to ensure content is relevant and useful for the future |
| More understanding from teachers about the lives of young people | Better careers advice including support and information on self employment |
| Extra support for subjects and topics young people don’t understand them, particularly for those with additional needs | More focus on teaching skills for life and work (managing budgets, driving and being prepared for the future) |

Section two: Improving training and employment

Nearly 40% of focus group participants were older than sixteen years old and past the stage of compulsory education. This group of participants were able to provide insight into their transition from school to further education, training providers or employment.

The route most young people in the sample took after leaving school was to take vocational courses in Further Education Colleges or with local independent training providers. Popular vocational courses to take included Levels 2 and 3 in Hairdressing, Barbering, Joinery and subjects related to Hospitality. A smaller number of participants found employment directly after leaving school or were not currently in education, employment or training.

Three themes emerged relative to experiences of accessing training courses:

Lack of preparation in school: Reflecting themes outlined in Section One above, the general consensus was young people felt they needed more support in school to navigate their next steps into training and employment. They felt they needed more time and direction during their school years to explore the options for their future career. This included information about suitable progression routes, likely wages and advice from others working in relevant sectors:

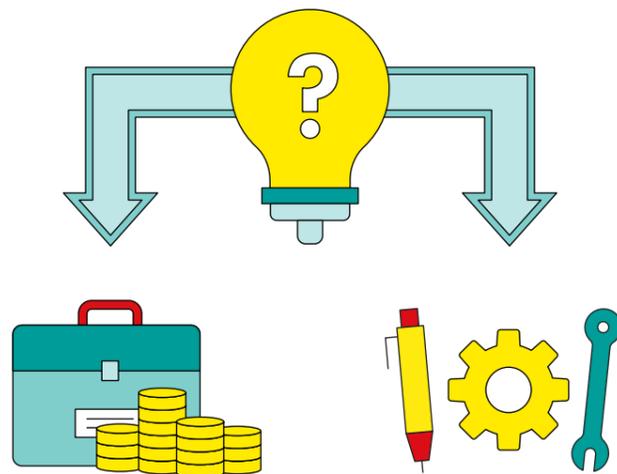
"We get like one lesson a fortnight and I don't really think that's enough. It doesn't really cover, you don't really get much support, like I'm at the stage now where it's coming to,

do you stay in school, do you move school and do 'A' levels, do you go to Tech? Like I've told them I'm not really sure where I want to go but there's like they tell you a few things but they don't really give you advice on it, you know, they just suggest it and it's really you go and do it yourself. There's not much support."

Female, 16, Carrickfergus

"They didn't prepare me at all for it, I had to find my own way."

Male, 22, Randalstown



"You don't really get much at all, even from school, you just, maybe your Careers Advisors you get a wee bit of support from them but most of the time it's just up to you, you're on your own so you are."

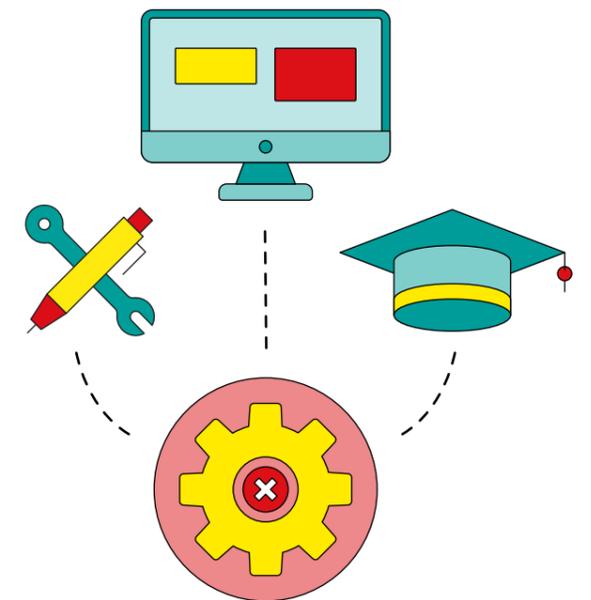
Male, 16, Portadown

Central to having choices about their future employment was good educational attainment. It is striking that many of this age group had not achieved A* – C grades in Maths and/or English GCSE or equivalents during their time in school. The lack of these qualifications was reported by participants as a barrier to accessing some training courses or employment, with young people, in some cases, repeating exams multiple times to achieve the qualifications they needed to progress.



Lack of apprenticeship placements: Participants highlighted a chronic shortage of apprenticeship placements in Northern Ireland. Young people reported receiving limited help from FE Colleges to secure their own apprenticeship placement. For those young people without any connections in the sector they wanted to work in, obtaining an apprenticeship was particularly difficult. Being unable to secure a placement was problematic as young people could not progress on their vocational course without securing an employer to provide them with practical 'on the job' experience. As a result, young people tended to start a different course with the hope of finding an apprentice placement in that area of work, or they left further education:

"I actually was at Tech for like six months doing joinery and I had to look for an employer to employ me and I was looking, I think I asked three or four boys, and they all said no because I didn't have experience but that's the whole point of me being at Tech." Male, 18, Magherafelt



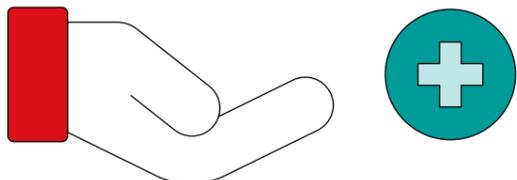
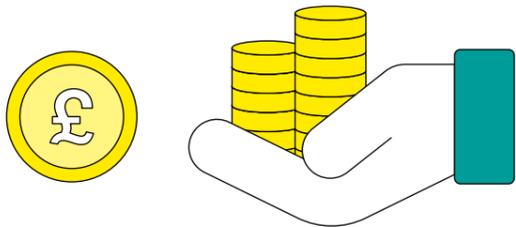
"I only done two years in the [regional college]. You can do an apprenticeship in four or five depending what level you want to get to in your course but I only done two. I stuck it, done a year on one course, couldn't get an apprenticeship so I tried, I had something else. I only lasted to year two because I couldn't get an apprenticeship. I didn't even do the one course over two years. And then I just threw the head up." Male, 22, Portadown

"There's too many apprentices for the actual work being done. Same with a lot of places if you're doing any kind of apprenticeship a lot of people can't take you on because there's that many people applying for it." Male, 19, Magherafelt



Financial support: As discussed in Pivotal’s *Youth Voices report*, young people continue to be impacted by the ongoing cost of living crisis, particularly for food and transport. Young people who were training as part of an apprenticeship could receive an hourly rate as low as **£5.28** which they found difficult to cover costs. The Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) (which is £30 per week to eligible 16–19 year olds in full time education or in further education for a minimum of 15 hours per week) was highlighted by participants as going some way to finance their study or attendance at training courses. Furthermore, some young people could access a bus pass to help with transport costs. Issues around how EMA is administered were raised by young people as problematic, because if they missed a day it could result in them losing payment for a full week. Many young people relied on this payment and could feel discouraged by this process:

“I think a better thing to do is say you’re in three days a week, I think the pay should be split up to how much you would get a day so that if you’re in three days a week it should be like a tenner a day, say you miss a day, fine take a tenner instead of taking thirty off. Cos nine times out of ten, people who get EMA tend to kind of rely on it.”
Male, 18, Derry-Londonderry



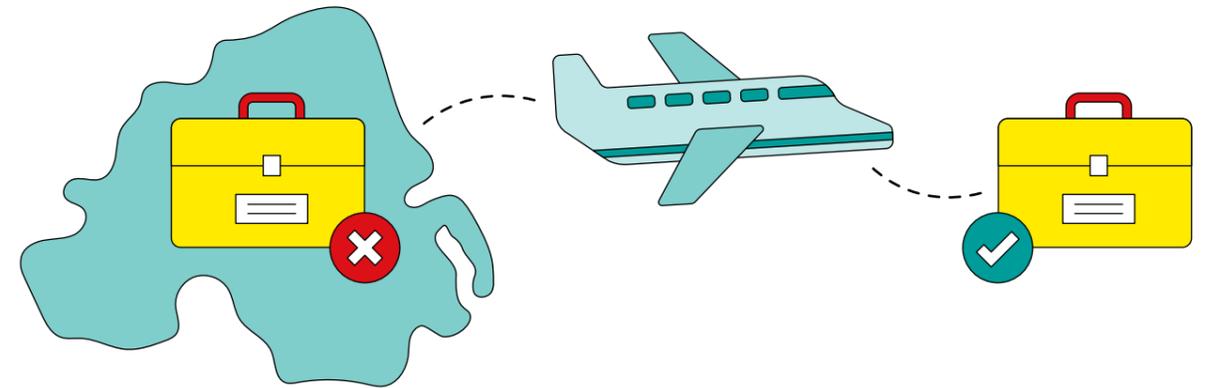
Employment

In our Youth Voices survey, 62.1% of young people agreed that there were limited job opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland. During the focus groups, young people drew unfavourable comparisons between the types and number of jobs available in Northern Ireland and the employment opportunities they perceived to be available in other parts of the UK, Ireland and international destinations such as Australia and America. During the Less/More exercise, young people’s top priority for employment was to have more job opportunities in Northern Ireland.

Thematic analysis identified a number of barriers that could limit young people’s job opportunities. As discussed above, educational under-achievement and a shortage of training placements to develop skills for employment meant it was difficult for some young people to progress in the sector they wanted. Participants highlighted that the main barrier to employment facing young people was their lack of work experience. This inexperience was reflected in every aspect of securing employment such as searching for jobs, completing application forms, creating a CV and interview technique. Young people described this as being trapped in a vicious cycle as they could not get any work experience without a job. While volunteering to gain experience was an option for some young people, not all could afford to work for free for a prolonged period of time:

“You need to get a job but then whenever you go to get a job they say you need work experience but every time you try to get it to get a job they say you need work experience.”
Female, 20, Derry-Londonderry

“You just have to let people come in and do it. And if they mess up, you have to expect that to happen. You can’t just expect them to be great at everything. It’s the same with the school. Like you’re there to learn stuff, so it’s the same as a job, like you don’t know what you’re doing. You come in and learn the basics and build yourself up.”
Male, 19, Magherafelt



Young people felt there should be greater recognition of skills and experience related to their participation in sport, music or art which could indicate their commitment, teamwork and communication skills for employment.

Discrimination due to age or background

The secondary theme which emerged as a barrier to young people being employed was discrimination. Many of the participants felt employers could be prejudiced against young people due to their age. In addition to making it more difficult to get a job, young people’s terms and conditions were often worse than those of older colleagues. This was reflected through lack of regular contracted hours and lower wages, despite often doing the same work as others in different age groups. Young people reported it was difficult to get a job that paid more than the minimum wage for their age group (as shown in **Table 2**).

Young people found this particularly unfair and emphasised that they were also impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. This lack of money created additional barriers to gaining employment. For example, young people reported that their restricted income made it difficult to learn to drive or run a car which limited how much they could travel to gain work. This was particularly a problem for young people living in rural areas who had to rely on limited public transport:

“There’s a lot of discrimination towards younger ones going into a workplace. I literally had somebody say, ‘Ah your age-group’s all the same, you won’t commit to this shop, get out of my office’.”
Male, 17, Derry-Londonderry

Table 02 Minimum hourly rates by age group

| Age group | Hourly rate (as of April 2023) |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| 23 and over (NLW) | £10.42 |
| 21 to 22 | £10.18 |
| 18 to 20 | £7.49 |
| Under 18 | £5.28 |
| Apprentice | £5.28 |

// Young people perceived that negative assumptions could be made about them based on their community background, religion, class or the area they lived in. //

Young people perceived that negative assumptions could be made about them based on their community background, religion, class or the area they lived in, which may act as a barrier to employment.

“Like a higher pay rise for young people because yeah like we’re young but we still do the same jobs as everybody else. We are at the age now where like cars and stuff come along and £5.31 an hour that’s not going to be sufficient to pay petrol and stuff and then you come to a certain age where you start having to help your parents out cos you’re getting a wee bit older.”
Female, 16, Carrickfergus

Participants also reported that young people could experience discrimination in addition to their age. Young people perceived that negative assumptions could be made about them based on their community background, religion, class or area they lived which may act as a barrier to employment:

“Imagine going for a job and telling them you’re from the [Name of] Housing Estate. They’d be like get out.”
Male, 19, Derry-Londonderry

“You walk into a job interview and the second you say, they ask you what’s your hobbies and you say I’m in a band, right you’re sectarian, you’re this, that and the other. The band it’s not seen as a culture thing, it’s seen as a sectarian thing.”
Male, 20, Portadown

Leaving Northern Ireland

The lack of job opportunities was the most common reason given by participants in the focus groups as a reason to leave Northern Ireland. This reflects the results of the Youth Solutions survey in which 41.8% of young people agreed that they planned to move outside Northern Ireland for work or further study. This was compounded by young people’s perceptions that they would be able to earn higher wages elsewhere.

“Move down there to get a job, and then you make your money down there, and then you might take a plane out of here, cos you’re actually going to make the money that you need to move away down in Dublin.”
Male, 19, Derry-Londonderry

During the focus group discussions and the Less/More exercise, young people developed ideas and solutions for improving their experiences in training and work. These are outlined in the table below:

| Youth solutions | |
|---|---|
| Training and employment | |
| More support for young people to obtain apprenticeships through increasing the number of work apprenticeships available | Create more job opportunities |
| | Increase minimum wages |
| Better support from FE Colleges to match students to employers for apprenticeships | More help to support young people throughout the process of getting a job including job searches, application process and interview technique |
| Increase financial support for young people on training schemes | Less discrimination against young people due to age |

Next steps

This project will conclude with a forthcoming policy recommendations, solutions and conclusions paper, and an event bringing some of the youth voices in this report together with policymakers and others working in the fields of reconciliation, education, training and employment.

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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