

WHAT WE WANT: A CONSULTATION ON THE PRIORITIES FOR YOUTH

Executive Summary

Introduction

This is Northern Ireland Youth Forum's (NIYF) report from the What We Want young people's consultation. The consultation was part of the wider Priorities for Youth consultation undertaken by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland.

This consultation was distinguishable from other parts of the Priorities for Youth consultation as NIYF specifically sought the views of young people that were not involved in youth services and young people that may be considered marginally or socially excluded.

An advisory group of young people were recruited to advise on the consultation, they were involved in branding the consultation 'What We Want' and designing the youth friendly questionnaire; the focus group template; the street based consultation; the on line engagement tools and the promotional materials.

Three different methodologies were employed to consult with the target group. Two main methods were used to target young people not involved in the youth service. A street based consultation using a youth friendly questionnaire and an online youth friendly questionnaire, two focus groups were also conducted with young people in participation projects.

Focus groups were used to consult with young people that may be considered marginalised or socially excluded. These young people also completed the What We Want questionnaire.

A **total of 939 young people** responded to the What We Want consultation.

Findings

Improvements to local area and young people's life experiences

Young people identified 'places to go' and 'things to do' as the most important things that would improve their life experience. It was important to young people that these places and activities were available in the evenings and at weekends and were affordable. They should also give the young people the opportunity to 'hang out' and meet other young people. The majority of young people were not aware of local projects and groups they could get involved in.

Like the rest of the young people in the consultation, the young at risk of offending expressed a concern that they had no place in their communities in which they could go to feel safe; many simply wanted a place to go where they could hang out with their mates. In addition to this, there was a strong feeling that 'having nothing to do' made them vulnerable to experimenting with criminal activity.

Young people from disadvantaged communities were of the view that there was a lack of facilities in their areas. They felt that alcohol use was inevitable because there was nowhere to go and nothing to do.

Young peoples' perceptions of themselves and their future

Young people generally have a very positive view of themselves as happy, sociable and outgoing. However, a very small minority described themselves as sad or alone. While the majority of the young people had high aspirations for the future, in the street based consultations 14% of the young people see their future as going on benefits.

In the focus groups some rural communities and urban areas of disadvantage, young people also had more limited aspirations with regards to their education and future job prospects.

Issues that are important and impact on their lives personally and their family and friends

The issues that were consistent across all parts of the consultation include:

- Creating and maintaining positive networks of friends and family (relationships).
- Health, both physical and mental health.
- Alcohol use and misuse.
- The availability of finances both for themselves and their families.
- Access to reliable and affordable transport.

Young people expressed a desire to be healthy and live healthy lives. For many the main reason they desired to be physically healthy was so that they could participate in the things that they consider important, for example, sporting activities. The young people were also concerned with their mental health and raised issues such as self-esteem, positive body image, and self-confidence as important issues to them.

Alcohol use and misuse was both viewed as an inevitable cultural phenomenon and as an inevitable consequence of a lack of facilities where they can go and a lack of activities for them to take part in. Problems such as violence, anti-social behaviour and experiences of crime, associated with alcohol misuse featured more prominently for young people from disadvantaged communities.

Access to reliable and affordable transport was an issue that the young people viewed as having a major impact on their lives. Young people made the point that they require transport in the evenings and at weekends. The issue of free transport for young people regularly featured in discussions and responses from young people. While this issue was a priority for all young people, it was highlighted in the focus groups as a particularly important issue for young people in rural communities.

The availability and nature of information and support

The internet was the most prevalent source of information for young people, school or college was the second most prevalent source of information. However, the majority of young people thought there was little or no information or support available to them.

Young people also commented that information and support should be free from stigma, is non-judgmental and is confidential. It should also be accessible locally, of good quality and relevant. Young people raised concerns that information and support provided through schools did not always meet these important criteria.

Interestingly, a sizable minority of the respondents felt they had no one to confide in; this was a more common response for young males.

Some notable differences in the focus group discussions were as follows. The young people with dependents, commented that they had particular concerns about receiving non judgemental and confidential support. They also expressed concern that specialist support services were only available in big cities.

Young people from minority ethnic communities commented that they primarily sought information and support from within their own faith community.

Young peoples' opinion of adults' perception of them as young people

The vast majority of young people considered adults' to have a negative view of them. Young people expressed frustration, resentment and hurt and the view that they felt powerless to change adults' perceptions.

The young people with offending behaviour and at risk of offending highlighted in their focus group the negative perceptions adults have of them and anger that the police were called when more than two of them were 'hanging around' together.

Young peoples' view on their 'voice' in their local area

The vast majority of young people felt that their voice was not being heard. A variety of reasons emerged as to why young people thought this was. These included:

- Young peoples' opinions are not valued because of their age.
- Young peoples' opinions are not valued because they are considered 'troublemakers.'
- Adults are not interested in the views of young people and don't take the time or make the effort to listen.
- There are limited opportunities and mechanisms for young people to have their voice heard.
- Young people do not have confidence that meaningful change will occur.

Young people also gave suggestions as to how their voice could be heard louder. These were setting up youth groups or forums; lowering the age of voting to 16; having a youth representative and changing the public perception of young people.

These issues were also highlighted in the focus groups. Young people in rural areas had concerns that their voice was not being heard; they expressed anxiety that if local rural schools close it would have an impact on their community.

Young people with a risk of academic underachievement expressed strong feelings that they did not have a voice in their community or in relation to the education or services they used, they also expressed the view that their lives were excessively controlled by adults.

Young people with experience of a disability specifically commented in the focus group that they do not feel their voice is being heard.

Conclusion

So what do young people want? They want safe spaces to hang out and meet other young people. Most importantly, they should be open in the evenings and weekends and be affordable.

They want to remain healthy, both physically and mentally. They have concerns about themselves and others being unwell and want to know the support is there if needed. Indeed, some of the young people did not have people to confide in and others indicated they were sad and alone.

They want improved transport links and free or heavily discounted transport for all young people. This was particularly an issue for young people in rural areas.

They want access to information and support that is easy to access, up to date, good quality, local, relevant, non-judgemental and confidential. It should be on a wide range of topics from health issues to educational and youth work opportunities.

They want to change the negative perceptions that some adults have of young people.

They want opportunities to get their voice heard on the things that matter to them and they want adults to listen to what they say. This was a particular concern for the young people that may be considered marginalised or socially excluded.

Most of the young people were positive about themselves and their future and most of the wants are not unachievable and not very different from what many adults want in their lives. In summary, they want to live happy, healthy lives, hang out with their friends in safe spaces, know there is someone they can turn to if they need help and be both respected and listened to by adults.

Recommendations

Safe Spaces

1. All young people should have access to quality youth provision. This kind of entitlement will have an impact on many of the other issues highlighted within this report and will provide opportunities for young people to be signposted towards other opportunities, services and information.
2. The Government should involve young people in community and area based planning.
3. Young people should be further consulted on the content of the current Play and Leisure Policy.
4. The Government should explore options to provide incentives to the entertainment industry, to give young people safe affordable spaces to socialise in the evenings and weekends.

Future Prospects

5. The Government should continue to fund work to inform young people of their future work and education prospects.

Health

6. The Government should ensure young people are provided with the opportunity to be involved in designing the youth work curriculum and the health curriculum in schools.
7. The Government should explore options for providing recreational opportunities aimed at enhancing young people's physical well being.
8. Education aimed at improving physical, mental and sexual health should be available to all young people.

Transport

9. A concessionary rate for transport should be available to all young people under the age of 18.
10. Young people who are issued with bus passes should be entitled to use them outside of school hours.
11. Young people in rural areas should have access to innovate approaches¹ to rural transport.

¹ For example: The Department for Regional Development new Rural Transport Fund Voucher Scheme.

Information and Support

12. The Government should coordinate a systematic innovative approach to the provision of information and support for young people.
13. The Government should invest further in the **www.niyouthinfo.org** website. It should be developed to include up-to-date information on issues such as alcohol misuse, drug misuse, teenage pregnancy, mental health etc; and should provide information on local opportunities and provision for young people. It is further recommended that this website should be informed by the needs and views of young people themselves.
14. Any web based resource should be supported by paper alternatives.
15. Ongoing research with young people needs to be undertaken to find out what specific information and support is needed and to help contribute to the format and distribution of the resources.
16. Any grants to youth projects and support services should include a promotional budget.

Changing negative perceptions

17. The Government should immediately start planning and co-ordinating a campaign with children and young people and agencies which support them. This campaign should focus on reducing adults' negative perceptions of young people. The campaign should also focus on providing society, the media and local communities with positive stories which are relevant to young people.
18. Intergenerational practice should form part of the next youth work strategy.

Voice of young people

19. The Government should ensure that the recommendations of the 'Network for Youth' working group are taken on board. The 'Network for Youth' should be adequately resourced and provide clear opportunities for young people to have their voices heard at community, local and regional levels.
20. Young people should be involved in shaping all policies that impact upon their lives.
21. The Government should develop a youth led policy and research unit to support this work.

Advisory Group Feedback on the Findings

As part of the process in putting this report together; and before presenting it to the Department for Education, we felt it appropriate to further consult with the young people's advisory group based on the recommendations we put together.

As documented, our recommendations fall in to 7 key areas:

- Safe Spaces
- Future Prospects
- Health
- Transport
- Information and support
- Changing negative perceptions
- Voice of young people

We felt that this process enabled young people to respond further to specific areas as outlined during the consultation; hence providing possible solutions to some of the issues raised. Below is a synopsis of the feedback we received. This feedback will inform the future work of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. As part of this process we have also begun to facilitate further discussion amongst our members with regards to the issues.

Safe Spaces

Young people provided options such as drop in centres; youth cafes and nightclubs for young people. In addition, young people spoke of opening clubs where local bands play to young people; highlighting that this could be a 'win win' scenario as the bands get to promote their music and young people get to listen to it while hanging out in a safe space.

Young people expressed the desire for access to 'universal youth services' available for all young people in their local areas - similar to the concept in the play policy that all children should have access to appropriate provision.

Young people also referred to the internet as a 'safe space' and linked it to information and support.

Future Prospects

Several young people suggested that the abolition of university fees would assist with this, highlighting that by doing so university would be accessible to more people, and not just a socially elite group.

Most young people discussed the need for a greater emphasis on vocational subjects to be taught in school; and stressed the importance of developing 'soft skills' which are important in later life.

Health

Young people suggested that they should have access to services at times when they need them; not just during certain hours and in certain locations.

In terms of physical health, young people made suggestions such as more midnight soccer programmes; reduced rates and / or free swimming for young people at leisure centres.

It was also suggested that Northern Ireland needs mental health services and centres specifically for young people.

Transport

The fact that young people are charged an adult rate on buses from age 16 was a huge issue; as well as the fact that during school hours rates are different from those when young people are not in school. It was noted that you can currently by a student travel discount card, which will save 25%, but this costs £7 and is only applicable on Ulster Bus – not Metro service.

One young person suggested that the Government should subsidise driving lessons during school and reflected upon a scheme that was once run by the Department for the Environment. Another reflected upon how over 60s get free travel but not young people.

Information and support

Young people agreed that by providing access to youth provision to all young people (linked to entitlement and universal services); young people should be able to access the information and support they require. Furthermore, young people discussed the lack of knowledge of what is already available and suggested better advertising as a solution.

Young people also discussed the importance of campaigns by young people, for young people on issues that they feel are important. This kind of peer interaction was seen as beneficial.

Changing negative perceptions

Young people agreed that there is a need for more publicity about positive things that young people do; and / or perhaps a targeted advertising campaign. Young people highlighted 'intergenerational work' as a means of helping this, but also highlighted that perhaps young people themselves have 'a chip on their shoulder'.

Voice of young people

Young people agreed that there is a need to raise awareness of existing youth forums – young people expressed the desire to have a say; but often did not know what mechanisms are available to do so. Again – this links to the entitlement issue and signposting of young people. Furthermore, young people discussed the need for youth forums at community, local and regional levels.

It is obvious from the above comments that there is a lot more that young people have to say on these issues, this again highlights the need for more consultation work into specific areas of young people's lives.