OUR VOICES AREN'T IN LOCKDOWN

NI YOUTH FORUM
SUMMER 2020

#ActForChange
Northern Ireland Youth Forum

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) is a youth led organisation that lobbies, advocates, promotes and fights for the rights of young people. NIYF was set up in 1979 by the Department of Education to represent the views of young people to government and other decision makers.

Our primary aim is to build the confidence and awareness of all young people so that they can assert their rights as listed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We celebrated our 40th anniversary last year and were the very first winners of the MTV voices award in 2011.

We believe that all young people have ideas and opinions worth listening to and we want to help you get involved in changing things in your school, community, and in society.

Why did we undertake this research?

On the 23rd March, at the early stages of the Covid19 pandemic, the government enforced an unprecedented series of lockdown measures limiting movement, giving powers to police, and closing most shops and businesses.

Just four days later the NIYF launched the first of two surveys to reach out to young people across NI to gather their feelings, views and hopes as they entered lockdown.

With a subsequent survey at the end of May focusing on coming out of lockdown a total of 1,065 responses were received.

As a representative body for young people and an advocate for ‘speaking truth to power’, NIYF sought to ensure that the voices of young people were not lost during the COVID-19 pandemic and in lockdown. They sought to:

- Support young people to be heard during a new and unprecedented time
- Create a platform for young people to voice their views, opinions and express how they are feeling
- Speak truth to power

Facts & Context

With much of the focus during the pandemic on the elderly and vulnerable or at-risk, addresses from government here and in the UK were targeted at adults. Children and young people were deemed less at risk; whilst the pandemic cause huge disruption to their lives with enormous pressure on those around them including youth services, schools, and those at home.

A wealth of published research has identified that young people’s mental health was being particularly affected by the isolation and anxiety of lockdown. With little to no NI engagement the Youth Forum set out to provide young people with a platform to share their fears, hopes and opinions whilst simultaneously seeking questions that they would pose to decision makers.

Children and young people are experiencing and feeling the impact of COVID-19 in a number of different ways - from changes to their education to staying home with families, changes to the way health services support them as well as changes to their emotional health and wellbeing.

- Royal College of Paediatrics and Children’s Health
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research source</th>
<th>Key issues</th>
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<tr>
<td>YouGov &amp; L’Oréal Paris</td>
<td>32% say they are overwhelmed by feelings of panic and anxiety on a daily basis.</td>
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<td>Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH)</td>
<td>70% of 18 to 24-year-olds are experiencing more anxiety than usual, compared with 47 per cent of over-75s. Overall, young people are experiencing worse mental health outcomes from life during the pandemic their older counterparts, according to the survey, with those aged 18 to 24 reporting “amplified” feelings of low mood and poor wellbeing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>YouCope</td>
<td>Almost half of 16- to 24-year-olds without previous mental health problems reported high levels of depressive symptoms, with one in three saying they experienced moderate to severe levels of anxiety during lockdown. 28% of the 1,507 young people in the survey with no previous mental health problems said the quality of their relationships had worsened during the pandemic. Almost half said they had used overeating to cope with their moods; for young people with depression and/or anxiety, it was six in 10.</td>
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<td>YoungMinds</td>
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<td>Co-SPACE &amp; University of Oxford</td>
<td>80% of teenagers and young adults believe the pandemic had made their mental health worse. The survey of 2,036 young people aged 13 to 25 showed that 87% felt lonely or isolated, even though many had been able to stay in touch with friends. Parents saw increases in their child’s emotional difficulties, such as feeling unhappy, worried, being clingy and experiencing physical symptoms associated with worry.</td>
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Moreover, the NIYF survey formed the only NI representation within the UK wide RCPCH (Royal College of Paediatrics & Child Health) research on children’s and young people’s views, experiences and insights of COVID-19 and lockdown.

How research was conducted
Due to the nature of the lockdown with strict restrictions on movement coupled with safeguarding and privacy concerns of ‘zooming’ into the homes of children and young people the team decided upon an anonymous survey to engage a significant group of young people in the research.

A survey was developed and disseminated via social media channels - Facebook, Twitter & Instagram. Stakeholders and partners in the youth sector were supportive in sharing the survey to their own networks. A follow up survey was then e-mailed to respondents of first survey.

For both surveys an incentive was awarded to a randomly selected participant for £100 of vouchers.

The research was concluded with a small and targeted focus group of four NIYF members to review the themes of the survey, discuss questions to be raised to decision makers and potential next steps.

Figure 1: ‘Voices’ focus group
Across both surveys 1,065 responses were received from a highly representative group of young people. Whilst there was an inclusive response rate form all ages there was a strong representation from 15-17-year olds (36% of all responses) and 21-25s (25%) relative to the size of the NI population. The majority of responses (almost 42%) were from Belfast but with NI wide coverage.

A higher proportion of responses came from Belfast and Antrim & Newtownabbey, relative to the NI population spread with fewer from Causeway Coast & Glens and Derry & Strabane council areas.
What did we find out?
At the start of the pandemic young people expressed a high level of confidence in their understanding of Covid19 and in the trustworthiness of the information they were accessing. However, with much of the information being sourced from social media it is important to reflect on the trustworthiness of posts.

Green Party MLA for North Down, Rachel Woods took part in the Political Youth Champions discussion pinpointing concerns about ‘fake news’. Organisations such as NIYF play a key role in ensuring that young people remain engaged in discussions by keeping them informed through sharing validated data and providing access to stakeholders and influencers in Northern Ireland.

The significance of clear and accessible information is reflected in the fact that a further 25% expressed a clear desire for more appropriate and factual information. Moreover, many questions were raised in the second survey around the lack of clear information & guidance from government.

Figure 5: Facebook post from MLA

Figure 6: Survey results on information and understanding
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Changing nature of concerns
From the first to the second survey the nature of questions asked reflected the concerns of young people. At the start of the pandemic 74% believed that there is not enough testing happening but the issue of testing was not prevalent at all in the subsequent survey with a focus on the nature of the lockdown and education as the key themes.

Representation
A critical issue for respondents to the surveys was the perceived lack of engagement with young people. 72.5% of respondents feel that their voice has not been considered as important.

Likewise, some 80% feel that decision makers are not listening and 88% felt that it is important that young people are part of the decision-making process.

Figure 7: Nature of questions posed by young people

Figure 8: Survey results on representation
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Key Concerns

Young people expressed that the main issues facing them were Mental Health, Boredom, Education & Learning, Isolation & Loneliness and Fear & Uncertainty.

This reflects findings from published research from a range of other sources across the UK that pinpointed mental health concerns as a key issue arising from the pandemic. For example, a YouCope survey identified that almost half of 16- to 24-year-olds without previous mental health problems reported high levels of depressive symptoms, with one in three saying they experienced moderate to severe levels of anxiety during lockdown.

Post lockdown the main things that young people were worried about were Socialising & Fun, Education, Adjusting to New Measures and Health & Wellbeing.

How young people are feeling

A statement that was common across both surveys was ‘bored’. 22% of respondents chose ‘bored’ as the one word to describe how they felt (5 times more than any other word!)

Anxious, Lonely & Depressed were also prominent. As were Good & Fine suggesting that whilst anxiety is high there is positivity among many young people.

Hopes

This positivity was reflected in the hopes that young people expressed for the future, post lockdown.

From looking forward to holidays and seeing family again to getting back to education and having good job opportunities almost 300 ‘hopes’ were articulated.

“That we won’t return to normal - that we will be kinder and more generous people. Especially to those who really NEED it.”

- Respondent aged 21-25

“I would hope that this situation has put life into perspective for some people and that it’s important not just in time like this but all the time to rally together as a whole community to support one another and to celebrate amazing/positive things rather than focus on the negatives”

- Respondent aged 21-25
Many young people also expressed a desire to help during the lockdown recognising that whilst they were healthy that they could help others in their community.

Speaking Truth to Power
Young People have many questions (891 to be exact) to ask of key influencers from the Prime Minister and local leaders to Donald Trump.

With a focus on education and the future, young people sought out the local ministers for education and the economy as well as the First & Deputy First Ministers to seek answers.

Questions ranged in nature from educational outcomes, the nature of the COVID19 response and the lockdown but also on testing and PPE queries and considered questions around healthcare provision with a focus on mental health.

“After the Covid-19 Crisis comes to an end, will you take the views of young people more seriously after the sacrifices and contributions we have made throughout it?”
- Question posed by respondent aged 18-21
What now?
Overwhelmingly young people felt that their voices were not being heard. Based on the feedback from both surveys and a further focus group with a team of young people we are seeking the following actions.

Youth Press Conference
Inspired by events like that held by Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg, Minister of Children and Families and Minister of Education and Integration.

At the very beginning of the pandemic, before UK had even entered lockdown, Norway’s leadership hosted a press conference for children, ensuring them that “it’s OK to be scared” during a global pandemic and answering questions submitted by children and young people. Similarly, Prime Ministers of Denmark and the Netherlands answered children’s questions.

To ask a question at the government’s daily Covid-19 press conference you must be 18. A dedicated youth session would allow young people to directly address decision makers.

NI Youth Assembly
As NI seeks to #BuildBackBetter it is critical that young people can help shape future policy responses and interventions. Such an assembly was proffered back in 2011 but has yet to be fulfilled.

Clarity of information
In order to reduce the impact of #fakenews a single point of contact for information, targeted at and for young people, updated as events and restrictions change, would provide trusted and accessible information. There are myriad sources of approved information and a simple, accessible format covering key issues from lockdown to medical advice could improve awareness and reduce the spread of salacious fake news.

“Not many people, let alone a young person will read a 12-page document on any given issue!”
- Focus group attendee
Beat the boredom

A critical issue raised within the surveys was that of boredom in lockdown. Yet, it is recognised that there is a lot of good work happening and projects available for young people. So, there is a need to improve visibility of existing projects and services particularly for older young people. The Education Authority ‘Youth Online’ tool offers some centralised source and a map of services could complement this with a searchable list of activities and services available.

Adequate funding for young people in education

Young people were highly aware of the potential impact on children, families, and schools without adequate resources to deal with the ‘new normal’ in education of blended or online learning and mental health support services.

A centralised hub for online resources for school children is proposed that would help ensure equality of access to trusted and approved sources that complement the curriculum. Moreover, a pool of resources (laptops, iPads etc) would allow families and schools to access resources in a timely manner.

Focus on Mental Health

The isolation and anxiety resulting from the lockdown is clearly impacting on young people. It is essential that youth services reflect this continual need. Giving young people a say on how services are delivered will help to ensure effective and impactful services reach those in need.

Echoing our ‘Elephant in the Room’ report we seek:

- The creation of a compulsory curriculum programme for all schools and colleges on mental health & wellbeing that helps to raise awareness and challenge stigma and that allows young people to access consistent mental health information.
- Mental health & well-being training for all teachers, school support workers & youth workers so that this programme can be delivered effectively.

“Education is important for all, not just years 12 and 14!”
- Focus group attendee
Acknowledgements

We want to say a big thank you to the 1,065 young people who took part in our research; for sharing your stories about how you feel about Covid-19.

Our thanks also to our partners throughout the sector who have shared and supported the surveys.

We would particularly like to thank our funder, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for supporting this piece of research through our Act For Change Project.

We continue to #SpeakTruthToPower and to help make the voices of young people heard. To continue the conversation and keep up to date with the campaigns follow our social media channels.

Figure 16: View our video compilation of the surveys (click or scan)