

OUR

VOICES:

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SPEAKING

TRUTH

to

POWER

**NI YOUTH
FORUM**

**November
2020**



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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.

Context

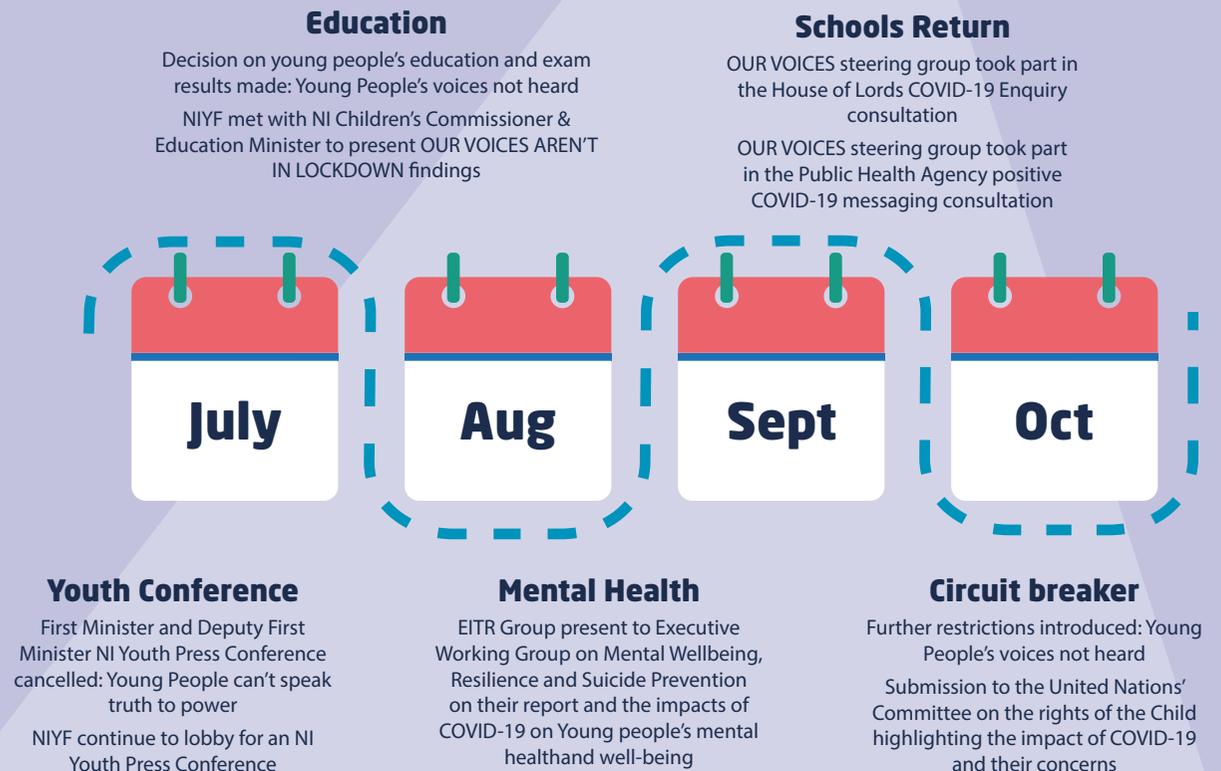
In April and July 2020 NIYF conducted two major pieces of youth led research to find out the views of young people as we went into Lock Down and subsequently came out of it. 1,065 young people responded and a wide range of political engagements followed.

That time young people highlighted that the main issues facing them were:

- Mental Health
- Boredom
- Education & Learning
- Isolation & Loneliness
- Fear & Uncertainty

Overwhelmingly young people highlighted huge concern that they had no say on issues related to the pandemic.

Timeline



As a result of this work, and as NI entered a new phase of 'Circuit Breaker' lockdown restrictions (October 2020) NIYF sought to re-engage with young people to assess the ongoing effects of the coronavirus on their lives. Therefore this 3rd piece of youth led research sought to:

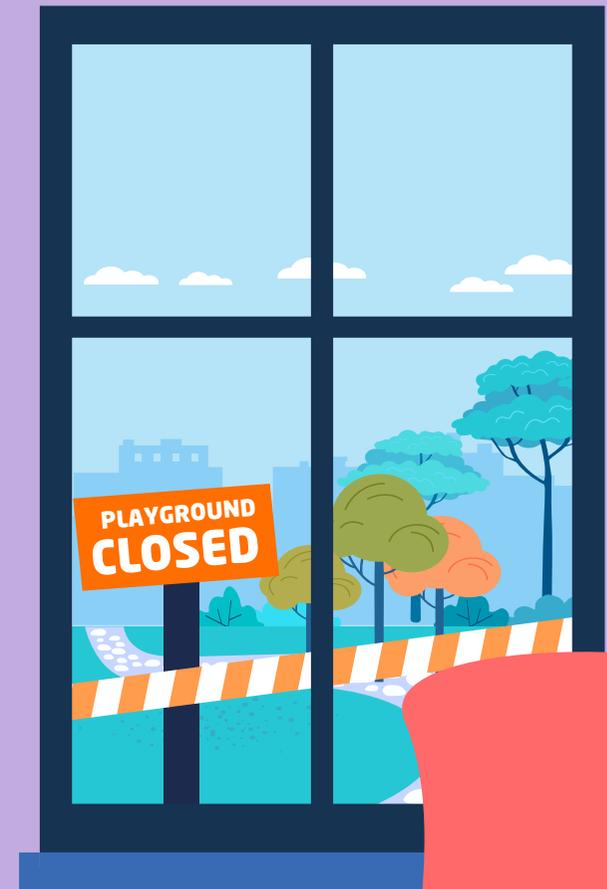
- Identify issues that young people are facing due to the impact of COVID-19;
- Support young people to make recommendations to decision makers in relation to COVID-19;
- Enable young people to 'Speak Truth to Power'.

The timing of our report comes just days after the new interim Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland recognised that the pandemic is having a long term effect on the issue of mental health.

A landmark study from the Ulster University indicated that;

'12.6% of children and young people in Northern Ireland experience common mood disorders such as anxiety and depression - around 25% higher than in other UK nations, reflecting a similar trend in adults here, according to the Northern Ireland Youth Wellbeing Survey.'¹

<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/news/2020/october/first-ever-survey-of-the-mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-northern-ireland-supports-the-need-for-prevention-and-early-intervention>



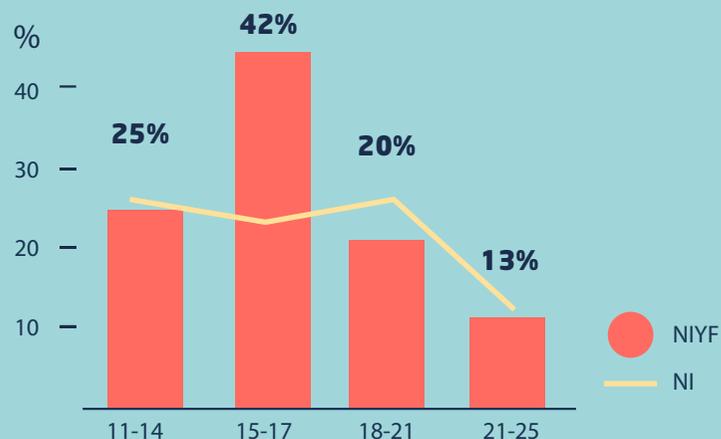
How NIYF research was conducted

As a result of key concerns regarding mental health and newly announced lockdown restriction a series of questions were included to identify the opinions of young people towards restrictions and COVID-19 guidelines and also to identify how mental health has been affected.

Our questions were gathered through engagement with young people within the 'Our Voices Steering Group' and were reflective of the key issues expressed in our two earlier surveys during the spring and summer.

Our voices

We sought to seek the view of young people aged between 11 and 25 from across Northern Ireland. Whilst there was an inclusive response rate across all ages there was a strong representation from 15-17-year olds (42% of all responses) relative to the size of the same group in the total population (20%). Responses were received from a representative urban and rural spread with just over 29% coming from Belfast.



Respondents age

What did we find out?

One word

When asked to describe how they were feeling in one word the responses from young people were concerning with significant signs of distress and concern raised by young people. The three most common words chosen by young people were; anxious, annoyed and frustrated. This is further reflected in the feedback regarding mental health later in the survey.



Moreover, continuing the trend from earlier surveys from NIYF young people also expressed a level of boredom with almost 5% of respondents commenting as such.

PARK CLOSED





Representation

A critical issue for respondents to the surveys was the perceived lack of engagement with young people. 89% of respondents felt that the voice of young people has not been heard during COVID-19.

This feeling is experienced equally across all age groups with the younger (11-14) most confident that they are being heard with 16% feeling that it is.

Unsurprisingly, all of the young people questioned believed it to be important to involve young people in making decisions about life during COVID-19 with an average rating of 8.4/10 in terms of importance.

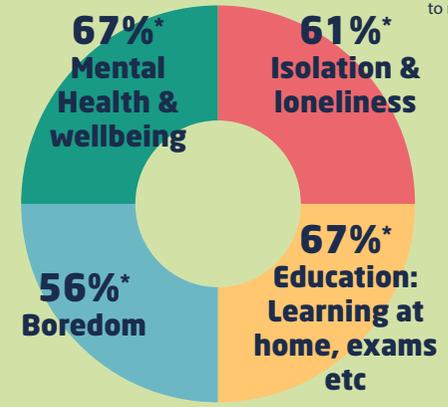
The relevance of this feedback becomes clear considering recent statements from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)². The committee warned of the grave physical, emotional and psychological effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and calls on States to protect the rights of children. In particular, calling on states to provide opportunities for children's views to be heard and taken into account in decision-making processes on the pandemic. Children should understand what is happening and feel that they are taking part in the decisions that are being made in response to the pandemic. Notably a Youth Press Conference, organised as a result of the previous surveys, to include young people with the First and Deputy First Ministers was cancelled in July 2020 and at this point has not been rescheduled.

² https://www.unicef.nl/files/INT_CRC_STA_9095_E.pdf
³ Respondents were asked to choose up to five issues

Key Concerns

Young people expressed that the main issues facing them were:³

*Young people were asked to rank their top 5 issues



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.

These four key issues make up over half of the total responses (56%) with the remaining 16 themes making up the rest. Other significant responses were for 'physical health', 'money worries' and 'future prospects'.

When we consider each of the four age categories these themes remain among the top four issues but the priority for each changing each time.

It is important to note that whilst the majority of respondents are not affected by issues of access to services, transport, food, feeling safe in their homes or housing and homelessness issues, there are those young people at the margins of society that are adversely affected.

10% of young people reported that their issues are food, feeling unsafe in their homes, housing rights and homelessness issues right now!

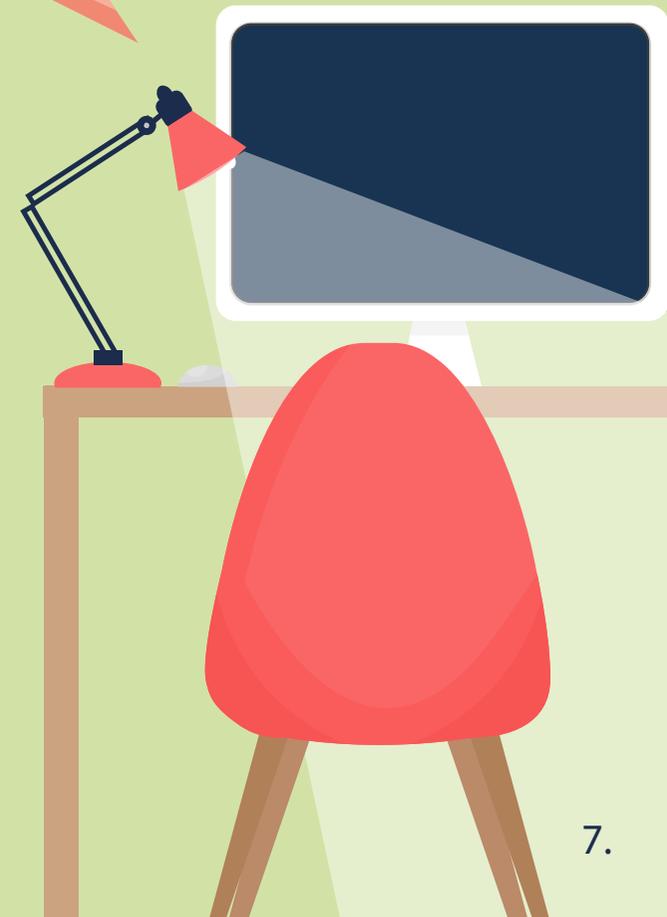
Young people experiencing facets of deprivation must not be excluded and it is critical to NIYF that these issues are also put to the fore with people in power.

Moreover, whilst we sought to provide a comprehensive range of options for responses 168 young people chose the 'other' option and listed concerns ranging from parental health and rights as a worker to the stress of hearing bad things on the news and not being able to play sports. Among the many provided two pertinent comments, opposite, reflect the mood of many of the young people from the survey.

"I am a teacher and facing the stress and pressure of a normal school life and supporting the young people to then have no release to socialise with friends and family is quite detrimental to mental health."
Respondent aged 22-25

"My dad stressing over our mental health and me hiding it so he doesn't blame himself like usual."
Respondent aged 22-25

AGE GROUP	TOP FOUR THEMES			
11 – 14	Boredom	Education - Learning at home, Exams, etc.	Isolation & Loneliness (Not seeing friends)	Mental Health & Well-being
15 - 17	Education - Learning at home, Exams, etc.	Mental Health & Well-being	Isolation & Loneliness (Not seeing friends)	Boredom
18 - 21	Mental Health & Well-being	Education - Learning at home, Exams, etc.	Isolation & Loneliness (Not seeing friends)	Boredom
22 - 25	Mental Health & Well-being	Isolation & Loneliness (Not seeing friends)	Money Worries	Boredom



Speaking Truth to Power

Young People have many questions (2324 to be exact) to ask of key influencers from the Prime Minister and local leaders to Donald Trump.

With a focus on education, lockdown and related restrictions, youth views and information, young people sought out the Education and Economy Minister as well as the First & Deputy First Ministers to seek answers.

Questions ranged in nature from educational outcomes, the nature of the COVID-19 response and the lockdown but also touched on the uncertainty of information and the divisive nature of NI politics. Considerable focus was given to mental health, coming up in some shape in 125 questions.

"Do you ever really think of the impact of your decisions that you make have on young people? I would ask this because as a young person it feels as if politicians do not take into consideration that they might be affecting young people."

Question posed by respondent aged 15-17

"What are you going to do to improve the treatment of children with mental health conditions in Northern Ireland when the CAMHS system can't even afford to take everyone who needs their help when they need it?"

Respondent aged 15-17

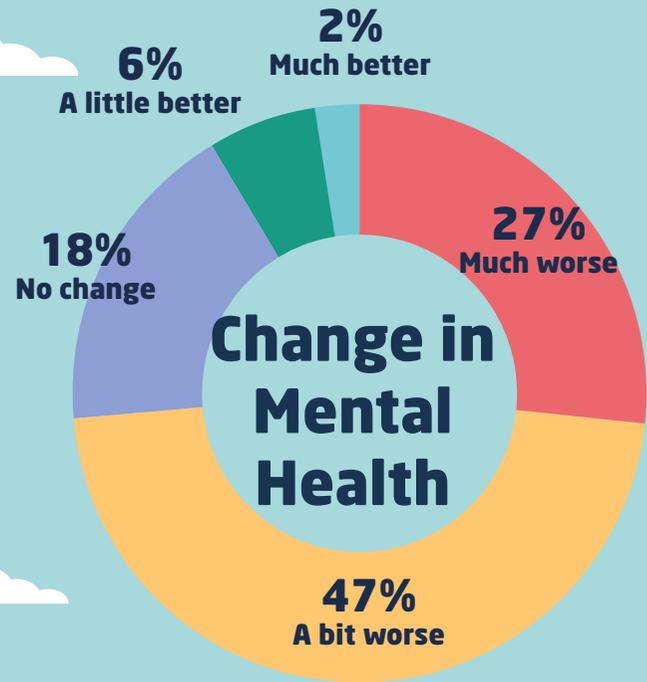
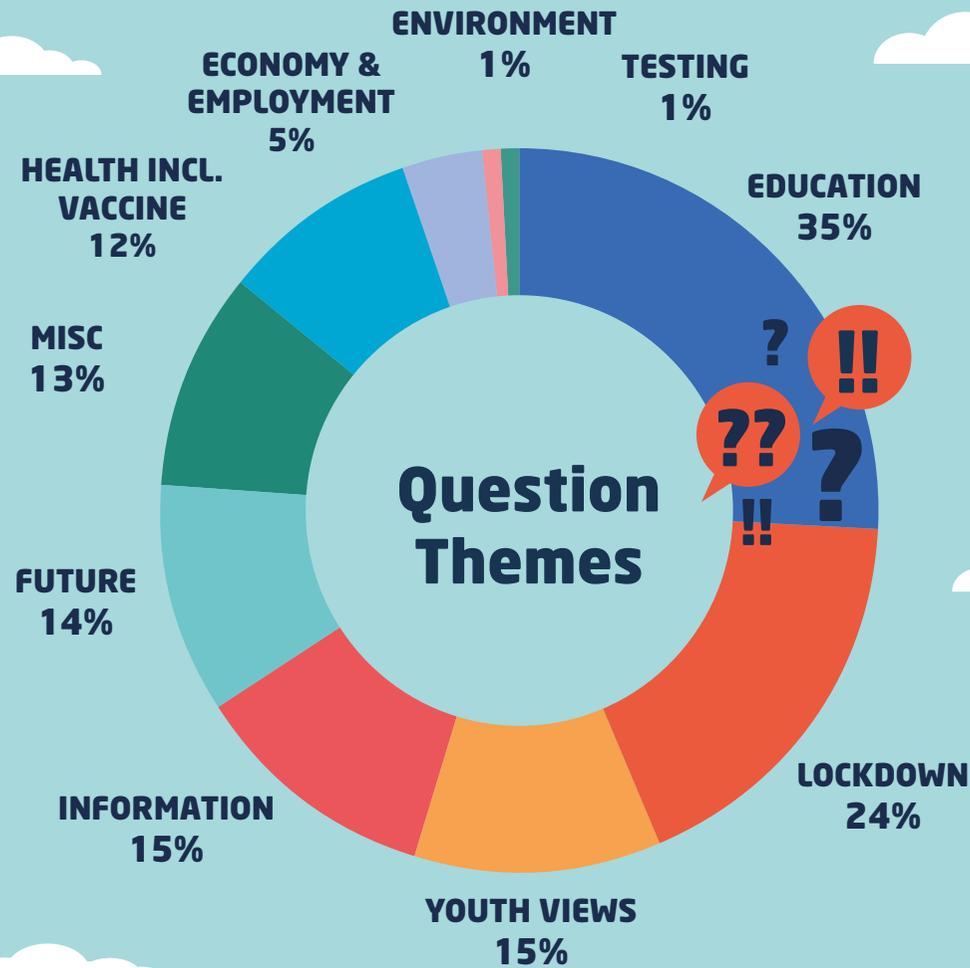
"Why are the summer 2021 a level and GCSE exams not being reconsidered for cancellation during this pandemic?"

Respondent aged 15-17

"Why was more not done to prevent universities from making a cash grab re student accommodation when anyone with a bit of common sense could see that we would not be taught in person?"

Respondent aged 22-25





Mental Health

As a key concern raised in earlier surveys, we chose to ask young people specifically about their mental health to assess the impact that the Coronavirus pandemic and resultant lockdown restrictions have had. The findings are stark with 74% of young people suggesting that their mental health has deteriorated. 8% feel that their mental health has improved.



How young people are feeling

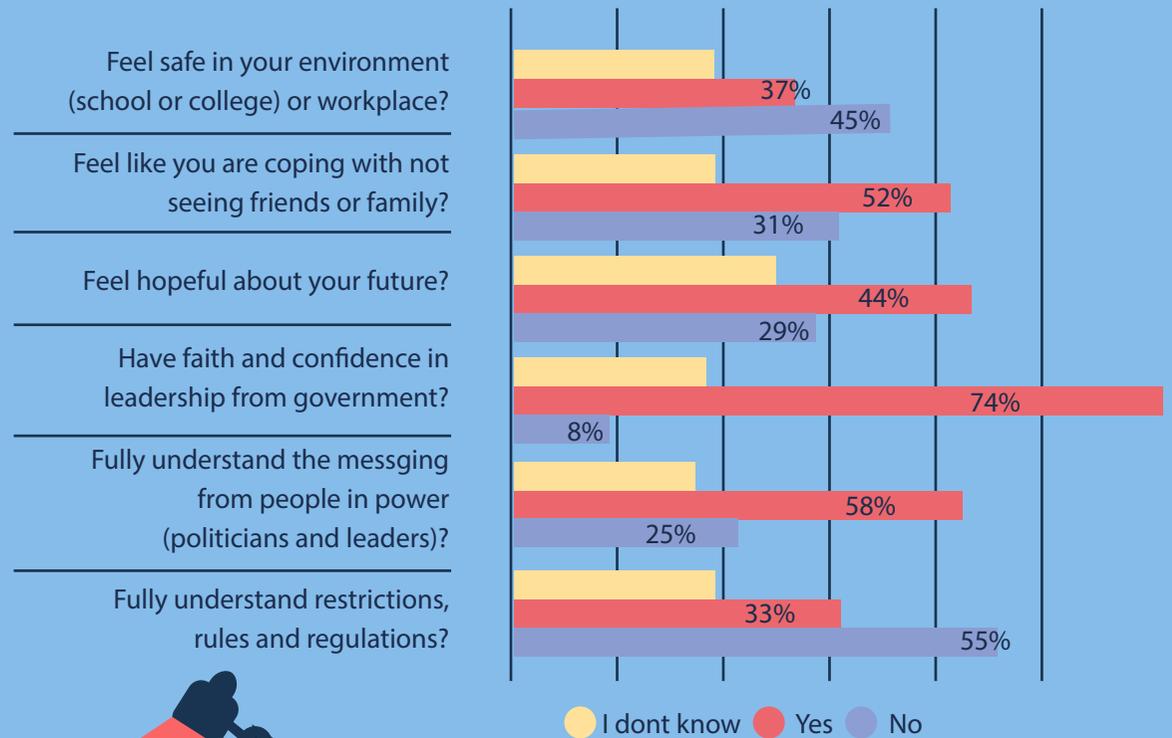
When asked to consider how they felt about a number of key issues the responses from young people were feeling:

- Just 45% felt safe in the workplace or education setting
- Over half (52%) feel that they are not coping well with not seeing friends & family
- Less than 1/3 (just 29%) felt hopeful about the future
- 58% did not fully understand the messages from people in power
- A positive 55% felt that they understand the restrictions, rules and regulations in place

But most stark of all is the 74% of young people that had no faith and confidence in leadership from government.

This was further evidenced in many of the questions posed and in statements on the main thing that people in power (Like politicians and leaders) should do for young people in the coming months.

Thinking about COVID-19



"Stop blaming them (young people) for rising the cases when they were forced back to school and care more about their health"

Respondent aged 11-14

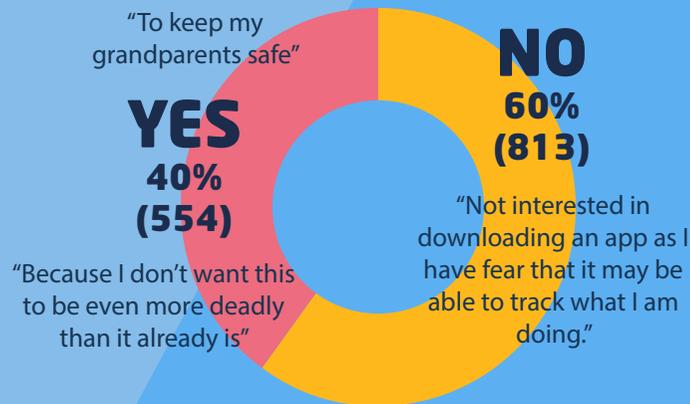
"Let the people in secondary school ask questions to help them understand what is going to happen in school"

Respondent aged 11-14

"Deliver messages to ease worries, paint a realistic but positive image and focus on the mental health of young and old alike during a troubling time"

Respondent aged 18-21

Stop COVID NI Proximity App use



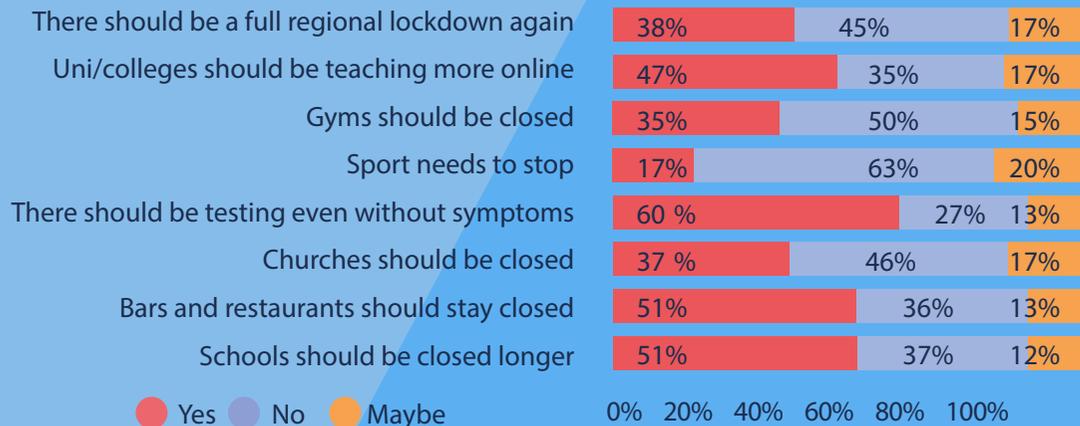
Restrictions

Young people are clearly moved to support the preventative measures proposed with a ranking of 8.2/10 when asked how important is it that all people (where possible) wear a facemask and socially distance.

But respondents were relatively split on their support for potential further restrictions, rules or regulations with 56% voting against it. This represents many households, workplaces and conversations happening in schools and colleges across NI with people, like young people here, at odds with each other about what they feel is right and should be in place to protect us.

This disparity is again evident when young people were asked about specific issues such as sports, churches and indeed a full regional lockdown – splitting the group almost equally with 38% supporting, 45% rejecting and 17% sitting on the fence.

Do you think?



What now?

NIFY will continue to work to establish a mechanism for young people to have a direct and meaningful link to The Executive Office which ensures that their voices are listened to and acted on in relation to COVID-19. We will;

Engage with key organisations to ensure that the rights and best interests of young people are fully considered in relation to COVID-19

Further analyse the data and submit questions to decision makers as suggested by respondents

Support young people to lobby Education, Health and other key policy makers to prioritise young people's mental and physical health and wellbeing in the decisions that they make

Carry out a further piece of research in 2021 to ensure ongoing, up to date evidence is available to our political youth champions and other representatives

Use this research to inform NIFY strategy and practice

Submit findings to key bodies including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

Hold decision makers to account on the basis of young people's asks as identified in this research



Acknowledgements

We want to say a big thank you to the 2,545 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 funders, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for supporting this piece of research through our #ActForChange Project and the Eductaion Authority.

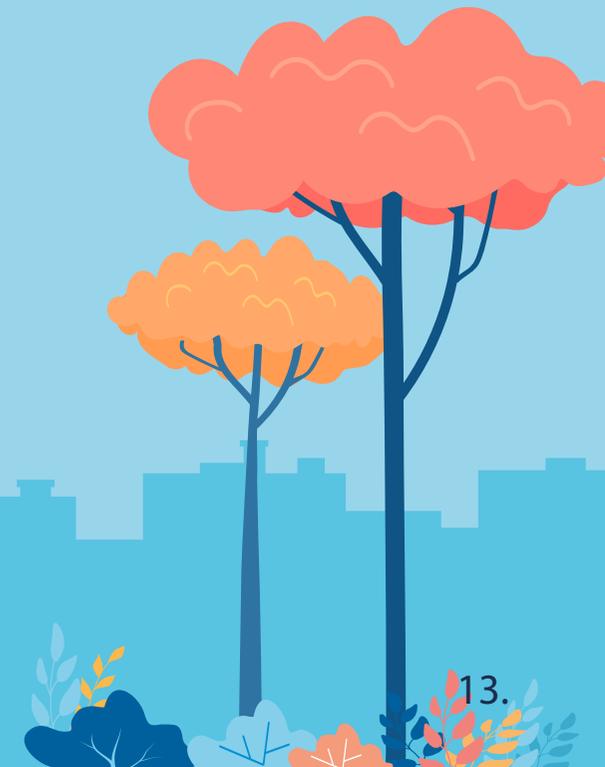
We continue to #SpeakTruthToPower and to help make the voices of young people heard. To continue the conversation and keep up to date with the campaigns follow our social media channels.

www.niyf.org

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