

**Our Voices:
Looking Beyond Borders**

**NI Youth Forum
February 2022**

Foreword

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum is a youth led organisation that exists to inspire, motivate, empower, and support young people to have a voice and effect positive change on personal; peer; community and societal levels. The Forum is an independent regional movement of young activists that promotes the voice and positive influence of young people locally, nationally and internationally.

Our primary focus is to promote the voice of young people and their ability to make positive decisions. Much of our work focuses on effecting positive changes at a policy level.

During 2021 we worked with young people to deliver an ambitious, all Ireland piece of youth led research to hear more about their views in relation to key contemporary issues including COVID-19, as well as hear about their views with regards to legacy related matters a potential border poll and their hopes for the future.

It would be remiss not to acknowledge the significant barriers that COVID-19 presented us with in carrying out this research – however I fully commend staff and the young people who drove this research as it offers a very useful insight into the key issues for young people across the Island of Ireland.

Over 600 young people responded to the online surveys with further focus groups carried out in Counties Louth, Galway and Leitrim to further explore issues highlighted and build upon our findings.

I would like to thank both the Department for Foreign Affairs and the Community Relations Council for supporting this work through funding as well as from a strategic perspective.

We have recently launched a North South Youth Forum which whilst in it's fledgling year has gained significant momentum has gained support locally, nationally and internationally.

This research acts as a springboard for the North South Youth Forum to play a role in representing the views of young people directly to governments in Stormont, the Dáil and Westminster on key issues including Brexit and the Protocol.

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1. Introduction

In January 2021 the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) were awarded funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), under their Reconciliation Fund. The purpose of the award was to support the NIYF to develop a new youth-led programme to capture the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of young people on either side of the border on a range of social, political, and economic issues. The Community Relations Council further supported this work through funding and an online presentation during community relations week, September 2021.

Underpinning this work, was the assurance from the NIYF to provide a bespoke, youth led, engaging and high impact programme designed around the three pillars of Rights, Research and Social Justice. NIYF are also committed to utilising the NIYF Leadership Studio and other 'safe spaces' through partner agencies in Northern Ireland and Ireland, to build capacity and confidence amongst young people to become leaders, challenge the status quo and lead others to challenge economic, social, and cultural inequalities. To deliver this vision the NIYF proposed the following activities:

Proposed programme activities

1. Recruit a group of Emerging Young Leaders from North and South of the Border.
2. Engage a core group of young people in group work process (blended approach and in line with COVID-19 restrictions) with a focus on the development and production of youth-led research.
3. Support young people to engage in discourse with regards to the legacy of the past; the impact of COVID-19, key issues of common concern and issues about Border-polls and Brexit.
4. Production of a comprehensive research report.
5. Support young people to present the views of young people to the North South Ministerial Council and other relevant committees on this island.
6. Ensure young people have opportunities to utilise Social Media to make 'vlogs'; YouTube videos; Tik-Toc and relevant platforms to reach a broad range of young people and civic society.
7. Hold face to face and 'zoom' conferences; and 'Facebook Live' events with key decision makers 'speaking truth to power' and bringing young people's voices to the centre of the decision-making process.
8. Take seats on key groups such as the Equality Coalition, Human Rights Consortium.

The remainder of this report sets out the approach taken by the NIYF to meet the objectives of the programme, in relation to creating opportunities for young people to engage in critical discussion and debate with each other, policymakers and others on range of issues which they have identified as impacting upon their lives.

2. Survey and engagement

There were several elements to this aspect of the project, which began with the establishment of a young person's working group, consisting of representatives from both sides of the border. This section will outline the remaining activities and outcomes associated with the project.

- A cross-border group of young people (consisting of fifteen young people, nine females and six males, aged 14-25 years of age) were formally recruited in May 2021. The young person's working group (henceforth the group) discussed and agreed the aims and objectives of the project, with an emphasis on developing a research project and engagement strategy. A timeline around tasks and future sessions/meetings were also agreed in the programme's infancy.
- The group met on a weekly basis (both online and when appropriate in person) to consider opportunities for engaging policy makers and politicians on issues impacting on young people across the island. A series of themed vlogs and TikTok videos were developed, in addition to podcasts which featured the NI Children's Commissioner and the Ombudsman for Children and Young people, who were interviewed by young people based on issues raised on a cross border basis.
- Simultaneously, the young persons' working group also engaged with an independent researcher in June 2021, to discuss the merits of conducting research into a range of issues impacting upon the lives of young people from across Ireland (North and South). The researcher discussed the various positives and limitations of focus groups and surveys, along with the processes required to analyse the data.
- A second research workshop involving young people and the researcher was held in July 2021. During this workshop, young people explored and discussed potential focus group and survey questions. This allowed for five key themes to be identified and agreed as the focus for the survey questions, including:
 1. Politics and social issues
 2. Covid-19
 3. Regional political issues
 4. Culture and identity
 5. Contemporary issues

- Several follow-up meetings were conducted online with the young people, youth leaders and the researcher. Given the continued impact of the pandemic and the restrictions on movement, it was agreed that an online survey should be conducted.
- A Pilot survey was then developed and were shared with key community representatives and individuals experienced in cultural issues and local politics. Following constructive feedback, changes were made to the survey and preparations were made for its dissemination.
- The survey was administered on the SurveyMonkey Platform and remained open for several months (August 16th, 2021 - January 30th, 2022). The link was widely promoted and disseminated through the existing networks of the young people involved, as well as several social media forums. At this stage it is important to acknowledge some of the challenges the group faced in administering the survey. Initially, the aim was to close the survey after four weeks, yet it became clear that the response rate was insufficient and significantly less than what was anticipated. After extensive consultation with youth groups, it emerged that there was an element of 'research fatigue' insofar as young people stated that they felt 'over consulted.' As a result, the decision was taken to extend the completion date to January 2022, which would allow for the survey to be promoted more widely, within social media platforms, schools, and community youth settings.
- On September 28th, 2021, the young people presented the interim findings from the survey at an event hosted as part of Community Relations Week. The findings were widely received, and several new networks were established.
- From September to December 2021 the young people, with the support of the NIYF, participated in a series of engagement and information events/meetings in which they discussed the interim findings. This included a presentation to the Good Friday Agreement Committee at the Oireachtas; TD Colm Burke; Cllr Eileen Lynch; SF TD Donnchadh O Laoghaire; SF TD Mairead Farrell; Independent Cllr Mick Finn; NI Junior Ministers; NIO officials; The Executive Office NI, and NIYF Political Champions group made up of representatives from Alliance, Sinn Fein, SDLP, UUP, PBP, Green Party.
- 4 locally organised focus groups were organised in January 2022 to further capture young people's views. These were Louth, Galway and Leitrim and have added further qualitative data to our research.
- When the survey closed in late January 2022, the group, representatives from the NIYF and the researcher participated in a workshop to reflect on programme;

including the findings, the methodology and the overall research process, in order to develop a draft report.

- A final session with the young people, focused on outlining key recommendations and a dissemination plan workshop. This session focused primarily on the launch of the report and the main policy recommendations to emerge from the findings.

3. Survey analysis

A total of 620 young people, aged between 11 and 25 years, responded to the survey (Figure 1). Of that figure the largest age categories were 16 (14%) and 17 (12%), the smallest age group were those aged 11 (2%).

Figure 1: Total age of Respondents

Age of respondents	% of respondents	Number of respondents
11	2%	10
12	3%	20
13	3%	18
14	7%	45
15	8%	54
16	14%	92
17	12%	74
18	9%	59
19	6%	41
20	5%	32
21	4%	29
22	4%	30
23	7%	45
24	5%	31
25	6%	40
Total	100%	620

In terms of gender, the initial analysis revealed that more females (55%) than males (36%) completed the survey as detailed on Figure 2 below. Moreover, 2% of respondents noted that they are Trans Male, with 2% of respondents' preferring not to say.

Figure 2: Gender of the Respondents

Gender of Respondents	% Of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Male	36%	222
Female	55%	337
Trans (Male)	2%	12
Trans (Female)	-%	3
Non-binary	4%	24
Prefer not to say	2%	15
Total	100%	613

As for the location of respondents' (figure 3), it was apparent that the majority of young people (72%) were from Northern Ireland, with 27% stating that they were from the Republic of Ireland.

Figure 3: Location of participants

Location of Respondents	% of respondents	Number of Respondents
Northern Ireland	72%	444
Republic of Ireland	27%	166
Did not say	1%	10
Total	100%	620

In relation to the religious beliefs of the respondents', Figure 4 below highlights that the majority of young people (46%) are from a Catholic background, whereas only 19% stated that they were from a Protestant background. It is also worth noting that just under a third of all respondents (29%) do not consider themselves to be non-religious.

Figure 4: Religious beliefs of participants

Location of participants	% of participants	Number of participants
Catholic	46%	286
Protestant	19%	122
Hindu	1%	3
Jewish	-	1
Islam/Muslim	1%	4
Sikh	-	1
Buddhist	1%	5
Non-Religious	29%	179
Other	3%	19
Total	100%	620

Young people were also asked to consider how they may identify themselves. Figure 5 below therefore illustrates that a majority of respondents (56%), consider themselves to be White Irish, whereas 26% identified as being White Northern Irish. It is also worth noting that 14% of young people noted that they were White British.

Figure 5: Identity of Respondents

Identity of Respondents	% of Respondents	Number of Respondents
White Irish	56%	342
White British	14%	84
White Northern Irish	26%	153
White Other European	1%	8
Asian or Asian British/Irish/Indian	1%	8
Black or Black British/Irish/African	1%	4
Chinese	-	1
Irish Traveller	-	1
Other Asian Background	-	1
Other Ethnic Background	-	1
Other Mixed Background	-	9
Other	-	2
Prefer Not to say	1%	6
Total	100%	620

Finally, the young people were asked to provide some detail about their current status. The results, presented in Figure 6 below, shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents were in education (73%), followed by part-time employment (17%). As respondents could select more than one answer, it is worth noting that many were employed and in education simultaneously.

Figure 6: Current status of Respondents

Current status	% Of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Education	73%	453
Full-time employment	17%	105
Part-time employment	20%	123
Training	6%	35
I am not in any of the above	5%	34
Total	-	620

* Participants could tick more than one

Politics and Social Issues

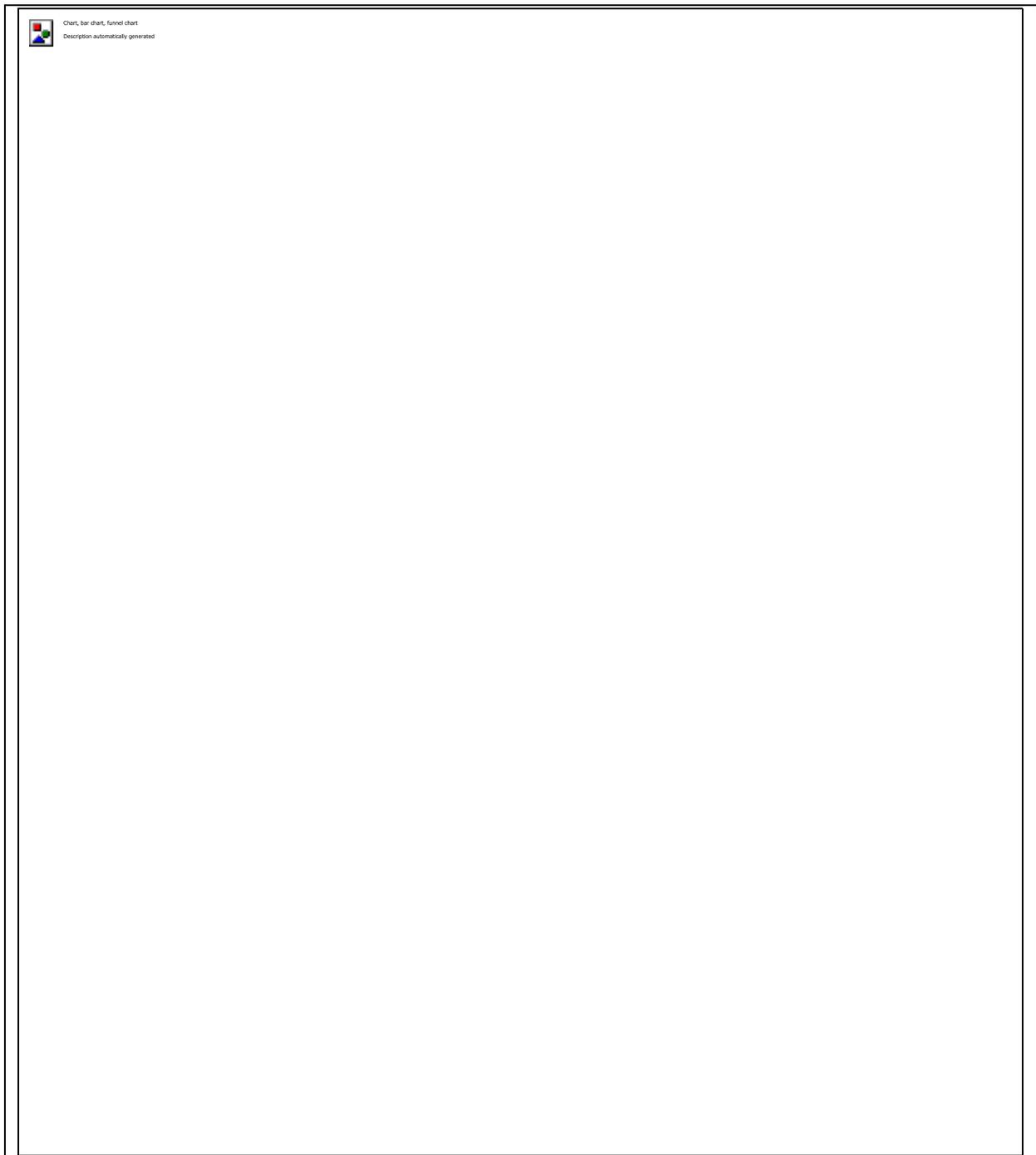
The following section provides an overview of the respondents' views on local politics, elected representatives, and activism. According to the findings, 48% of young people have 'some interest in local politics,' with a further 32% stating that they are 'extremely interested in local politics and follow it closely'. The findings also highlight that 16% of respondents 'had no interest in local politics,' whereas 4% 'were not sure' (see Figure 7). Finally, it should be noted that age, gender, or religious background were not variables in determining the level of interest in local politics.

Figure 7: How would you describe your level of interest in what is going on in local politics?



In addition, respondents were asked to reflect on a number of social and political issues which interest them the most, as detailed in Figure 8. The results reveal that mental health was the most popular response with over half (54%), of respondents listing this, followed by human rights (41%). The third most frequent response was the environment and climate (35%), followed by education (31%) and discrimination (24%). The three least popular responses were legacy of the conflict (7%), Brexit (7%) and financial security (5%). Again, age, gender, or religious background were not variables in determining the social and political issues of interest to respondents.

Figure 8: What three social and political issues interest you most?



The young people were also asked to consider how much they agreed and/or disagreed with a series of statements about politics and politicians (see Figure 9). What emerged was that 65% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that ‘taking part in political activities was worth their time’. Interestingly, around a third (31%), suggested that ‘there were no politicians or political parties which represented their views’. In a similar vein, the overwhelming majority (79%), agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that ‘there was a

trust issue between politicians and the police’. That said, 62% of young people agreed/strongly agreed that ‘young people have no opportunities to influence decision-making’.

Figure 9: How much do you agree/disagree with the following statements

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Taking part in political activities is worth my time	26%	39%	23%	8%	4%
There are no politicians or parties that represent my views	7%	24%	33%	29%	5%
There is a trust issue between politicians and the public	41%	38%	12%	5%	4%
It is difficult to understand what politicians are saying	20%	44%	19%	15%	2%
There are limited opportunities for young people to get involved in politics	22%	47%	16%	13%	2%
Young people have no opportunities to influence decision-making	27%	35%	15%	19%	4%

Covid 19

The survey also explored respondents’ views and experiences of Covid-19, particularly in relation to the health regulations. Figure 10 below indicates that for the majority of young people (74%), the greatest challenge was the impact on their mental health. Moreover, 68% of young people stated that meeting friends was the greatest challenge, with a further 66% noting that it has been the loss of social life. The issue of boredom was regarded as a challenge or problem for 61% of respondents, with a similar number pointing to issues associated with schooling. The issues that appeared to have the least impact included the cancelling of summer holidays (34%), social distancing (30%) and work/money problems (24%).

Whilst mental health was noted as the main difficulty and challenge for a significant number of young people, it is imperative to highlight that 43% also felt that their mental health had

become worse, with a further 27% claiming that it had become much worse. For some young people, (10%) their mental health was described as becoming a little or much better during the course of Covid-19 (see Figure 11 below).

Figure 10: What young people found hard and/or challenging to deal with during Covid-19

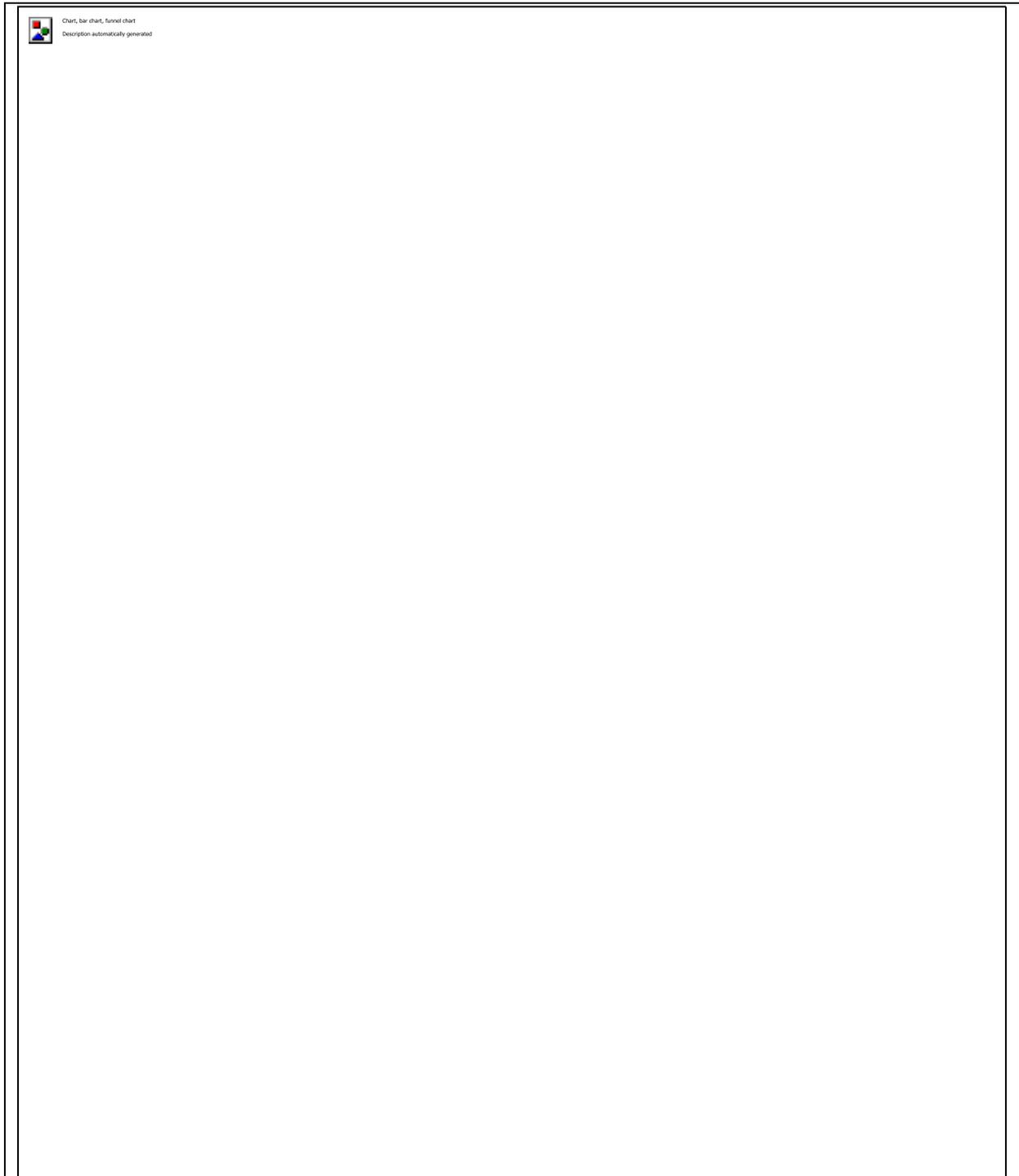


Figure 11: As a result of Covid-19 pandemic, do you feel that your mental health has become...



The young people were also asked about their thoughts and attitudes towards vaccines. Figure 12 shows that 80% of young people would be willing to avail of a vaccine, should it be accessible. Only 9% of respondents indicated that they would not take the vaccine.

Figure 12: If offered and eligible for the Covid-19 vaccines, would you avail of it?

	% Of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Yes	80%	271
No	9%	31
Don't know	11%	37
Total	100%	339

- Only 339 participants had access to the question

Building on the theme of Covid-19 the young people were asked to consider what impacts (if any) they thought the pandemic has had on youth rights. The analysis showed that 46% of young people feel that Covid-19 has had some/lots of negative impact on 'the right to a voice and be heard', while a further 60% stated that there were some/lots of negative impact on 'the right to safe and affordable housing.' Finally, a total of 68% of respondents also indicated that there has been some/lots of negative impact on the 'right to education' as detailed in Figure 13.

Figure 13: What impact do you think that Covid-19 Pandemic has had on youth rights

	Lots of positive impact	Some positive impact	No impact	Some negative impact	Lots of negative impact
The right to a voice and be heard	5%	20%	29%	33%	13%
The right to play	4%	9%	27%	33%	27%
The right to youth-friendly information that you can understand	6%	22%	37%	24%	11%
The right to safe and affordable housing	4%	8%	28%	35%	25%
The right to education	7%	11%	14%	35%	33%
The right to be safe from harm	7%	12%	28%	37%	16%
The right to employment	5%	11%	20%	37%	27%

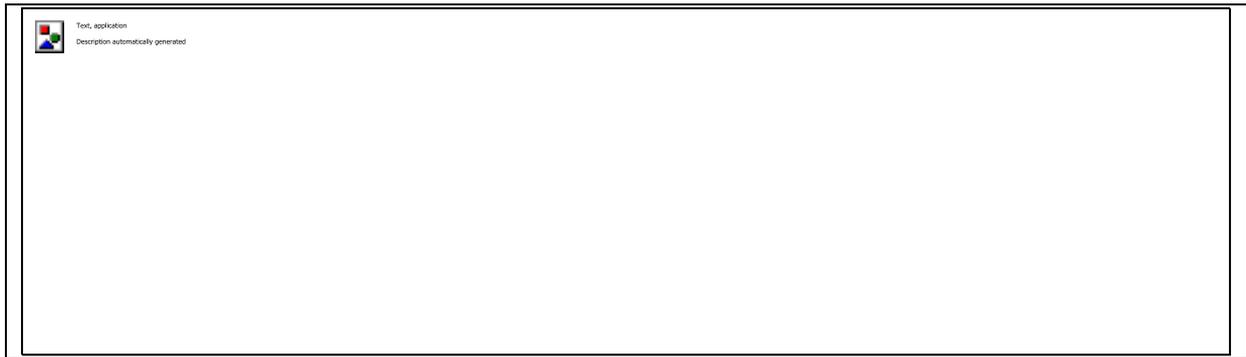
The participants were also provided with an opportunity to think more about the issue of rights and Covid-19, and to expand on what they consider the main impediments on this area. The following quotes presented in Figure 14, are reflective of the sentiments expressed by the young people through an open-ended question.

Figure 14: Young people’s thoughts on why rights were impacted upon

1. *As education has been moved online for university and more time is spent in the home, potentially around harmful relationships.*
2. *No one talked about youth rights.*
3. *During the period of online learning the right to education was impeded for some and the technological disparities between households of different socioeconomic backgrounds caused a difference in quality of education*
4. *Because everyone is too busy to deal with the youth of today and are not thinking about the outcome it will have on future generations.*
5. *The belief that as the youth are younger, they are therefore more resilient and more likely to bounce back so require less support.*
6. *I feel as though the government have taken every opportunity to condemn the younger population for every action taken regarding the pandemic. The removal of SUSI grants from students availing of the PUP to SURVIVE is a disgrace. The condemning of young people trying to grasp the last bit of their social life in a safe way is even worse. The lack of mental health services available to young people even before the pandemic was disappointing but now is just pathetic. There has been very little effort to try get students back to college throughout the entire year. Some students rely so heavily on school/college etc. to get away from toxic, abusive home environments. We have been ignored. We are fed up*
7. *Young People are considered expendable in the government's quest to achieve short-term gains.*
8. *Unstable working conditions meant young people were the first let off their jobs - or they stayed in low paid jobs holding up society, while being costed out of the housing market*
9. *Cause I think young people’s voices just get left out*

Finally, respondents were asked to provide three words which they would use to describe how they felt about Covid-19 and the health regulations. Evidently, the context was largely negative with words such as hard, difficult, and worrying dominating the text. The most frequently used words have been highlighted in Figure 15, with those in bold being the most popular.

Figure 15: the most common words used by young people to describe how they found Covid-19 and the health regulations



Irish Politics

The online survey then posed a series of questions as listed in Figure 16, which explored respondents understanding and attitude to the political institutions across the island. It became apparent that a majority (69%) were aware of the Northern Ireland centenary, with 28% indicating that they had no knowledge of this (the majority of whom, did not reside in Northern Ireland).

Figure 16: Did you know that Northern Ireland was 100 years old in 2021?

	% Of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Yes	69%	360
No	28%	148
Not sure	3%	12
Total	100%	520

With regards to the potential for a Border Poll over the next two decades, 42% of young people thought that this was very likely, with a further 35% suggesting that it would be quite likely. In stark contrast, only 9% of respondents felt that it was either quite or very unlikely (see Figure 17).

Figure 17: How likely do young people think there will be a Border Poll in the next twenty years?



In addition, the survey also explored the level of understanding across a range of all-island politically related issues which are detailed in Figure 18. What this revealed was that the majority (86%), of respondents have a lot/some understanding of the partition of Ireland. Likewise, a significant majority of 96% noted that they have a lot/some understanding of the Troubles. Interestingly, the findings also reveal that 40% of young people have no understanding of the NI Protocol with a further 40% and 54% indicating that they had no understanding of the NI Assembly and the Dáil respectively.

Figure 18: Young people’s level of understanding about a range of politics related topics

	A lot of understanding	Some understanding	No understanding
The Partition of Ireland	46%	40%	14%
The Troubles	64%	32%	4%
The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement	48%	43%	9%
A potential Border Poll	37%	45%	18%
Brexit	36%	49%	15%
The NI Protocol	21%	39%	40%
How the Stormont Assembly works	30%	30%	40%
How the Dáil works	17%	29%	54%

Culture and identity

A key aspect of this survey was to explore respondents’ views and understanding of issues pertaining to culture and identity. Figure 19 therefore demonstrates that the majority of respondents (81%), agreed with the statement that they ‘understand their own identity and culture,’ with almost all, 96% suggesting that they ‘are accepting of others in their identity and culture.’ What is more, a significant number of respondents (79%), claim that they ‘are happy and feel comfortable to celebrate their own culture’.

Figure 19: Levels of agreement on culture and identity issues

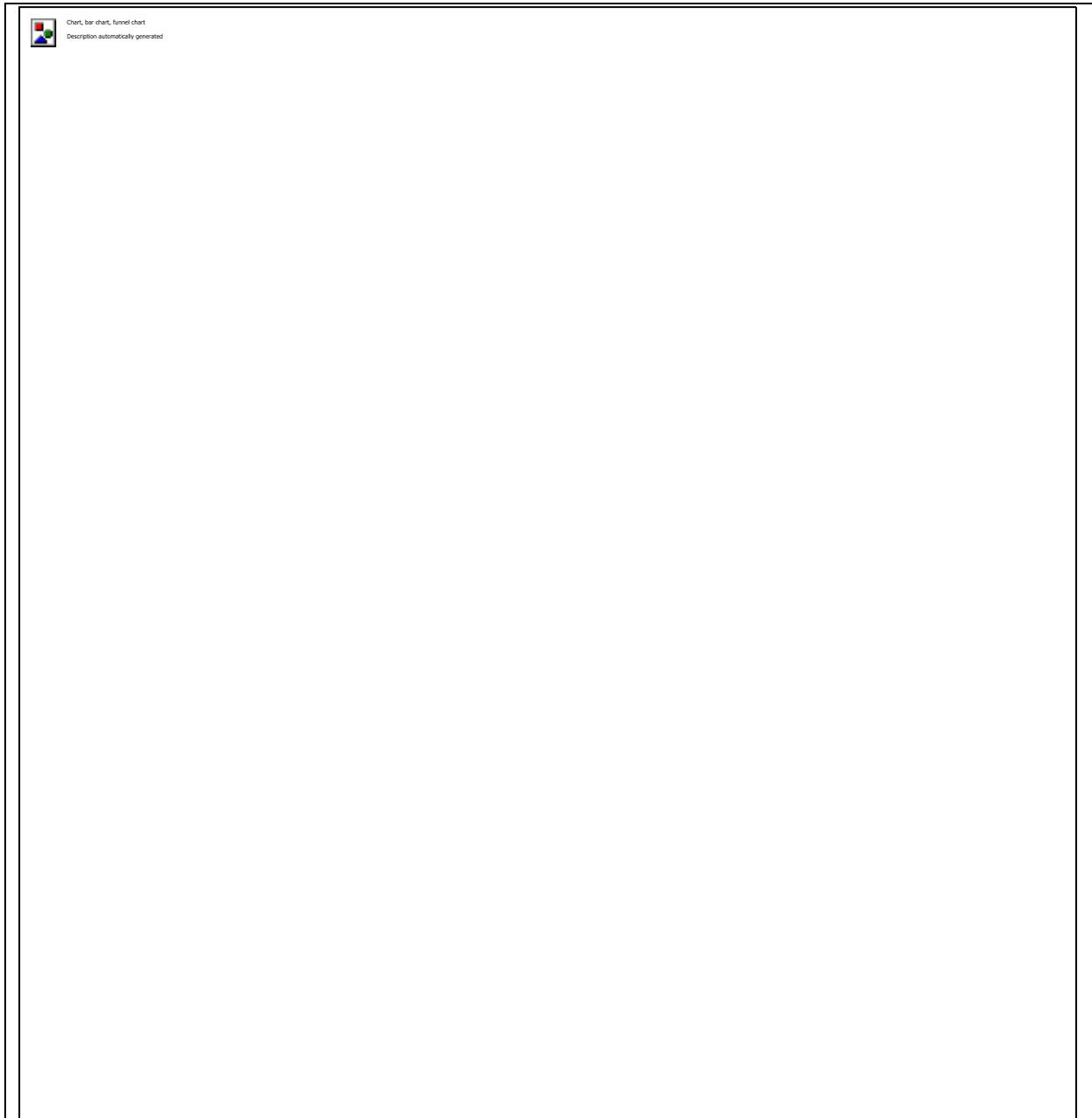
	Agree	Disagree	Don’t know
I feel I understand my own identity and culture	81%	7%	12%
I am accepting of others in their identity and culture	96%	2%	2%
I am happy and feel			

comfortable to celebrate my own culture	79%	10%	11%
I am happy and feel comfortable to celebrate other cultures	77%	8%	15%

Contemporary challenges

The young people were also asked to consider what they thought were the most important issues facing them in the community. The most frequently cited response was mental health issues (75%), followed by social media (37%) and drugs (36%). Other notable responses were Covid-19 (28%), money worries (26%) and housing (23%). In terms of the least popular responses these were crime and safety (13%), relationships (11%) and Brexit (4%) as detailed in Figure 20.

Figure 20: Young peoples' thoughts on the most important issues they face in the community (selected the three most relevant)



Finally, in relation to the impacts of the ongoing pandemic, respondents felt that the government should address or focus first and foremost on providing more support for mental health services, as well as increased funding for the community and voluntary sector, support for housing related issues, and support around education. Other issues deemed as a priority for the government in the current climate, are outlined in Figure 21.

Figure 21: Young people's ask to the government around addressing the impacts of Covid-19

1. *More mental health services*
2. *Possible increased investment in the arts sector and other sectors such as hospitality which were probably the hardest hit by the pandemic*
3. *Affordable student housing More accessible and free mental health support*
4. *Particularly address the impact on education such as refund or lowered fees for unis*
5. *Stop closing things down. Learn to live with covid*
6. *We are beyond this at this stage; nothing can be done to sufficiently address the impacts.*
7. *Listen to young people who have had a large impact due to education restraints and socialising*
8. *Investigate how it affected employment, health, education, and other areas and produce a report so they can address what areas need urgent attention*
9. *More funding into services that can help those impacted by all aspects of covid-19, e.g., loss of loved ones, mental health deterioration, student support for those who have had their education impacted.*
10. *Directly invest in the economy through large public infrastructure etc*
11. *Open more young youth centres for. Young people to go to instead of ruing about the city at night. Open more help centres for young people to attend as well.*
12. *Reopen society but do it in a way where we do not return to doing things the way we used to do. We should conduct a major review of government and redo our priorities in consultation with all aspects of society*
13. *More research into impact of long COVID-19*
14. *A rise in minimum wage as well as fixing the housing prices*
15. *More consistent decision making, decisions made in the interests of the public and not for the party's interests.*

Summary

In sum, this interim report provides an early insight into the views and experiences of young people that reside North and South of the Border. The survey has focused on a range of social, political, and health related issues, particularly in relation to how Covid-19 has impacted on the lives of young people. Key findings include:

Politics

- 49% have 'some interest in local politics' while a further 32% are 'extremely interested in local politics and follow it closely'
- 64% of young people agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that 'taking part in political activities was worth their time'
- 79% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that 'there was a trust issue between politicians and the police'
- 43% indicated that they thought a Border Poll within the next two decades was very likely, with a further 34% suggesting that it would be quite likely

Issues

- In terms of what social and political issues interest young people the most, the results revealed that the most important were:
 - mental health (54%)
 - human rights (42%)
 - environment and climate (35%)
 - education (32%)
 - discrimination (25%)
- In relation to what issues were most relevant to young people now in the community, the most frequently cited response was mental health issues (76%) followed by social media (38%) and drugs (28%).

Covid-19

- With regards to Covid-19 and young people's mental health, 43% felt that it had become worse, while a further 27% suggested that it had become much worse
- 46% of young people felt that Covid-19 had some/lots of negative impact on 'the right to a voice and be heard'
- 60% stated that there was some/lots of negative impact on 'the right to safe and affordable housing'

Culture and identity

- 81% of respondents agreed with the statement that they 'understand their own identity and culture' (81%)

- 96% agreed with the statement that they 'are accepting of others in their identity and culture'
- 79% agreed with the statement that they 'are happy and feel comfortable to celebrate their own culture'

The prevailing sense from young people was that Covid-19 had a significant impact on their lives, particularly in relation to their mental health. Furthermore, issues around human rights and climate change are important but there is a real disconnect between young people and politics because of a lack of trust.

4. Focus group findings

The second phase of the programme aimed to develop the survey findings into a series of themes, which could be explored in more depth through focus group discussions with young people across Ireland. Upon completion of the survey analysis, several young people from the steering group met with the researcher and representatives from the NIYF to develop the questions for the focus groups. These were conducted online in January 2022, in three counties and involved a total of 37 young people. A breakdown of demographics is provided in Figure 22 below.

Figure 22: Focus group details

Location	Gender	Age
Louth	9 female and 6 males	16-19 years of age
Galway	4 female and 8 males	17-20 years of age
Leitrim	5 females and 5 males	16-20 years of age
Total	37 young people	

The focus groups were facilitated by youth workers, who also gathered notes. Each session lasted approximately one hour, structured around the following questions:

What is your interest and involvement in politics and activism?

What are your thoughts around Covid-19?

What is your interest and knowledge in Irish politics?

What are your thoughts on the future in terms of policy challenges?

The remainder of this section presents the main findings to emerge. Anonymous quotes have been used where relevant to illustrate the key themes which succinctly capture the views and sentiments of the young participants.

Political and Civic Activism

First and foremost, it was evident that politics as a topic, was of significant interest to young people. That said, there was less support for politicians. In fact, there was a consensus amongst the participants that *'politicians talk about the past instead of the future and this turns young people off'*. Quite simply, there was a lack of trust in elected representatives and a view that their promises and commitments were easily broken. Some also expressed strongly held views that politicians in general are not reflective of the population, nor do they represent or advocate for the interests of young people. Such views are illustrated in the following statements.

“Why are all politicians so old when Ireland has one of the highest youth populations in Europe? “

“Politicians are seen as old and boring and out of touch”

“They don’t talk about things that we care about”

“They bust our country and we can’t get houses or jobs”

“Formal politics seems a bit snobby or something”

Notwithstanding the negativity around individual politicians and parties, it was evident that many of the young people were keen to get involved in social and political issues but were struggling with finding a party or platform to position themselves within. They talked about climate change, housing rights, women’s issues, and student support as being topical among their generation:

“We want to raise awareness and campaign about the things that are important to us but sometimes not sure how to do it”

“Things like the environment are things that impact on everyone, and we need to spend more time highlighting those issues and not the ones that actually divide us”

There were some discussions about Brexit and Border Polls, although these tended to be subsidiary to other conversations about voting and rights. As such, all participants discussed ways in which registering to vote and voting itself could be easier, such as advancements in technology. Therefore, it was argued that the government should embrace online registering and voting to improve access and quicken up the counting processes. There were also very robust conversations within each focus group session, about why 16-year-olds should be allowed to vote. In fact, many could draw on evidence from other countries where it is common practice:

“16-year-olds are basically adults and many of the things’ politicians are making decisions on affect us directly so we should have our say”

“It’s simply not fair that older generations who are in the minority shape and direct policy that won’t even affect them that much in the future, well compared to young people anyway”

Finally, the young people also discussed the challenges and barriers they face in terms of getting involved in politics and issues-based activism. As noted earlier, many felt that the traditional parties do not represent their views or concerns, and as such, they do not appeal

to their core interests. For some however, online platforms offered them a way to engage with political parties from a distance, without fully committing to their agendas:

“Most of the parties would recognise my interests or worries...I would not fit in”

“I sometimes engage with politicians and parties online, especially Facebook. That way you can see what they are doing and be somewhat involved.”

It was apparent that many of the young people had been involved in some form of activism over the last two years (although Covid regulations had impacted on levels of participation). This ranged from signing a form, writing an online blog, participating in a march/protest, to organising campaigns. Overall, all participants recognised the importance of engaging in such activities, as these approaches best served the interests of young people moving forward.

Covid – 19

There was a palpable sense of concern and frustration amongst the young people when asked about the impact of Covid-19 on their lives over the last two years. Figure 23 provides a flavour of some of the main words used by young people when describing Covid-19. It was clear that they believed it had been detrimental to their quality of life and mental health:

Figure 23: Common words used by young people to describe Covid-19



The young people were generally quite critical of the government's response and felt that their freedoms and rights had been given less priority than other aspects of society, to the point that some now struggled to 'believe' anything that the state said in relation to Covid-19:

"At the start I listened to the government and the politicians but the longer this has gone on I just think that they are being overly cautious and blaming the young people – unfairly – when things seem to get worse"

"What about my education and chances of getting a job when this is all over...like who is going to look after me in the future, everything is going to be so much harder now?"

"Nobody knows how this will affect people in the future...being locked up and not socialising has been so difficult...I get really nervous now when I meet up with people"

For some, the fact that the pandemic was 'appearing to come to an end' was worth celebrating, as it also presented an opportunity to think more positively about the future. Therefore, participants discussed the things they had missed doing, and what they were excited about for the months ahead, especially in terms of 'reconnecting physically with people.'

"I cannot wait to go travelling and go on a summer holiday"

"Just going to the cinema and meeting up with friends without worrying about catching or spreading the disease will be a relief"

Irish politics

Part of the discussions also focused on young people's levels of awareness and understanding about some of the significant issues associated with Irish politics. The majority of participants were aware of topics such as 'partition', the 'Troubles' and 'the peace process'. Furthermore, several were extremely vocal about these issues and suggested that they were crucial in understanding contemporary political issues in Ireland both North and South:

"I would be well versed in topics such as the partition and its impact on the lives of everyone on this island"

"I know about the Troubles, actually that Tommy Tiernan show was really good in explaining some of the issues"

In contrast however, other young people had very differing thoughts on these topics, suggesting that:

“These issues are boring and not even relevant anymore...the problem with this place is that we are always looking backwards”

“These are things that aren’t relevant to me...this is all about the North”

In thinking about the conflict/Troubles, young people focused on events such as Bloody Sunday, Omagh and even internment, claiming that these in some way epitomise the hurt and sadness of what had happened. In terms of personalities, the young people talked about Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, with many also revealing that they receive most of their information about the conflict/Troubles through family members.

In terms of looking forward, there was a prevailing sense across each group, that there should be more opportunity for young people across the island to meet and challenge politicians on issues which directly impact on them:

“We should be lobbying on issues that affect us like climate change and housing...creating the one story about the lives of all young people on this island means there is more chance in making changes.”

“The island is small so we should all be working together say on issues like public transport and voting rights...we should be creating the one voice and then going to our politicians”

Future

Finally, all participants were given an opportunity to think about the future and to highlight what they feel should be key priorities for the government moving forward. Although various issues were deemed important, the young people had some success in ranking them in terms of priority.

*Fuel poverty
Homelessness
Education
Mental Health and well-being
(Including lack of services or
Postcode/Eircode Lottery regards
services)
Exam Stress*

*Unemployment (Lack of
opportunities for youth
employment)
Inclusion & Rights
Poverty & Housing (Student
housing needs, cost of property
and rent)
Racism
Sexual Identity Issues*

*Transport Issues (Rural
transportation)*
*Education (Movement to online
education, Student university fees,
inadequate learning online)*
Gang related crime/Knife Crime

A significant number of young people talked about what they called the 'housing crisis' and how they felt anxious and concerned about their ability to move from their parents' homes, and the financial implications associated with this. This is perhaps best captured in the following statements.

"When you think about it there is no chance of me moving out, the average rent in Ireland is €1,516 per month and the Minimum wage in Ireland is €1,774.50 per month...that just does not add up"

"I couldn't afford to leave home...I might never be able to afford to leave home, so I want to know how the government is going to fix it"

For other's the main priority (especially coming out of the Covid-19 regulations) was the need to address the growing mental health crisis and issues surrounding drug and alcohol support services, coupled with issues pertaining to equality and rights:

"We need to focus on mental health issues, especially among young people. That means targeting schools and youth clubs and being proactive"

"Look at how much homelessness is caused because of drugs and alcohol...if we can help people with addiction issues then we can save resources in other places"

"We need to think about Equality, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth."

Other issues of significance, as highlighted by the young people included climate change, support for refugees and asylum seekers, LGBTQI+ issues, and violence against women and girls.

"We need to start doing something about climate change before it's too late, maybe focusing on renewable energy and promoting it within schools"

"For me it is all about support for refugees and asylum seekers. As a society we need to recognise and welcome diverse needs and cultures; more support in terms of language barriers; more support in terms of linking in with social networks, sports clubs etc"

"We need to address violence against girls and women and all the other stuff like spiking, sexualisation of women, fear of walking alone (women), how women are viewed by men and the lad culture and acceptance of sexualised language and behaviour"

“There is not enough being done to find solutions to LGBTQI+ issues...we need more support for parents and families of young LGBTI+ young people. We need to better educate service providers, schools, etc with regards to LGBTI+ issues and those faced by young people young people.”

“We need to strengthen sexual health services and education to respond to the needs of LGBTI+ young people (active and healthy) and create a supportive and inclusive environment for LGBTI+ young people in formal education settings (achieving in all areas of learning and development).”

Overall, the focus group sessions with young people were refreshing, especially on issues about the future and very different to the ones structured around Covid-19. They see an opportunity to transform public policy and address some of the issues around housing, mental health and the climate which are affecting the most vulnerable in society.

Summary

The findings from the focus groups provide an insight into the views and experiences of young people in Ireland. Three observations which best capture those thoughts include:

1. There is a real disconnect between the young people and politicians with the assumption that politicians and politics more generally is focused on the past and uninterested in the views and opinions of the younger generation.
2. Covid-19 has significantly impacted on the lives of young people. It appears to have been particularly acute in relation to mental health, increased sense of isolation and ability to build and maintain relationships.
3. In terms of the future the young people maintain that a focus should be on addressing issues such as housing and homelessness; drug and alcohol addiction; climate change, and violence against girls and women

5. Conclusion

Overall, this has been an extremely interesting project as it was one of the first undertaken by the NIYF which captured the views and experiences of young people across this island (North and South). There have been difficulties in terms of recruitment and logistics which have been compounded by the evolving and different Covid regulations North and South of the border. However, the project has been a success and delivered a range of outcomes and engaged with significant numbers of young people from various community and geographical backgrounds. The remainder of this section sets out the main achievements followed by an overview of young people's thoughts and experiences and concludes with a series of recommendations.

Key outcomes:

- a. The NIYF established a group consisting of 15 young leaders from North and South of the border to develop a research strategy, lobby elected representatives and produce a communications and engagement strategy.
- b. The group of young people participated in a series of research methodology sessions; designed a series of survey questions; produced a survey; promoted and advertised the survey; analysed the results of 620 young people; contributed to a final report and organised a dissemination strategy.
- c. The young people engaged with a series of policy makers; NGO's, government committees and elected representatives on the survey findings, with an emphasis on the impact of Covid-19, and a Border poll.
- d. The young people supported the development of focus group questions based on the survey findings so as to capture qualitative feedback on these issues.
- e. The NIYF with support from youth workers hosted three focus groups with 37 young people and gave them a safe platform to discuss both sensitive and sometimes challenging issues.

Due to Covid regulations and sickness the NIYF/young people have been unable to meet with the North South Ministerial Council or present to the Equality Coalition or Human Rights Consortium. However, it is anticipated that the group will have the opportunity to present in these forums at some point in 2022.

Young people's experiences:

- a. There is a real sense from the focus groups and surveys that young people's mental health has been affected by Covid-19. On numerous occasions the issues of isolation and restrictions of movement were cited by young people as being detrimental to their mental health and social wellbeing. This finding was also evident in the 'Growing Up in Ireland' study¹ which provided information on the experiences of 12- and 22-year-olds during the pandemic and found that 48% of 22-year-olds had an elevated scores on measure of depressive symptoms.
- b. In general, there is a tiredness and negativity from young people around Covid-19 and the health regulations. This sense of weariness was evident in the analysis of the survey and focus groups. Interestingly, this is becoming a common theme in other pieces of research and consultancy e.g., the Young Minds² survey in England of 2438 13-25 year olds with a history of mental health needs concluded that 'around three-quarters of young people who responded to our survey said that the current lockdown has been harder to cope with than the first one, for a variety of reasons: a growing sense of isolation; a loss of faith in their prospects for the future; freezing weather that disrupts basic routines; and for those in school or university, the pressures of home learning'.
- c. There is a growing disconnect between young people and politicians evidenced by the results from the survey and focus groups. For the most part the young people felt that these forums were focused on the past or on issues that were not relevant directly with young people. This has also been reinforced by recent media reports such as Moore (2021)³ who suggested that "without a greater presence of young people in our political institutions, laws being passed by older politicians, longer removed from the coal face, may be detrimental to the short - and long-term interests of those coming behind them".
- d. There is a consensus among young people that voting rights both North and South of the border should be extended to 16- and 17-year-olds. This reinforces the work of the NIYF and the National Youth Council of Ireland⁴ who are strongly advocating for a change in legislation.
- e. Although there was a lot of frustration from young people about the impact of Covid-19 along with the current situations around housing and employment, there

¹ <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/BKMNEXT409.pdf>

² <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/esifqn3z/youngminds-coronavirus-report-jan-2021.pdf>

³ <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-40324454.html>

⁴ <https://www.youth.ie/get-involved/campaigns/vote-at-16/>

was also a sense of optimism. They are energised about a range of social, moral, and political issues and want to influence and shape policy but do have concerns around opportunities and platforms on which they can voice their views. Recently, Co-Operation Ireland⁵ found similar results through their survey of 570 young people from across Ireland, noting that young people were ‘passionate about playing a part in society; remained largely hopeful for the future and were committed to playing a constructive role in society’.

Recommendations

- a. There is an opportunity for the NIYF, and the young people associated with the programme to meet with government committees and outline the key findings from the report. Furthermore, through this engagement it may be possible to explore what platforms exist to support young people that want to participate in policy-making processes
- b. Given the commonality in issues facing young people North and South of the Border there may be an opportunity to explore in detail the practicalities around developing a North-South Youth Forum. The emphasis within this forum could be on promoting activism, undertaking youth-led research projects, and building cohesive networks with elected representatives and policy makers
- c. As society slowly emerges from the Covid-19 health regulations and begins to adapt to the impact of the pandemic there is a clear need to ensure young people have a place to share their experiences and consider how their lives have been affected. The NIYF should explore ways to extensively capture young people’s stories; get young people to personally reflect on the last two years and provide support for young people whose plans and aspirations have changed because of Covid-19.

⁵ <https://cooperationireland.org/young-people-across-ireland-fear-lack-of-opportunity-following-covid-pandemic-says-survey/>