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More integration, less sectarianism, better job opportunities – young people’s desires for a better Northern Ireland

Hear the views of local young people, in their own words. New research from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, looks at how young people feel about local life, education and the prospects of developing a career.

Northern Ireland’s young people feel the negative effects of its divided society, want to see more integration at every level – but know this could take time and feel that changing how and where we live, grow up, study and work won’t be a smooth process.

Many feel that schools could do more to prepare them for the future, including with practical skills like budgeting and starting a business, and that there should be a greater choice of subjects for exams like GCSEs and A Levels.

These are some of the findings from two new reports published today [**Thursday, October 26**] by Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland. The twin reports mark the third stage of Pivotal’s research series asking local young people how they want Northern Ireland to become a better place to live, study and work.

Youth Solutions for Building a Better Community in Northern Ireland looks at how local young people view our divided society and how it has shaped their lives. ***Youth Solutions: Improving Education, Training and Employment in Northern Ireland*** examines the state of schools, colleges and the path to a career, through the eyes of today’s youth.

The young participants’ were often forthright in providing their views. Some clear themes emerged around what they say are the big issues for them in Northern Ireland right now, and how those issues could be addressed.

For the most part, they want more integration across all layers of society. They say that residential segregation promotes fear and perpetuates social divisions – although parents, and parental fears for their children’s wellbeing, also play a role here.

They want to see more integrated education, starting from an earlier age, more cross-community schemes and more support given to allow them to understand life from the perspective of someone from a different community.

At the same time, they are aware that reducing segregation is not straightforward and could take time. They say sectarianism remains a problem, and some voiced fears that greater integration, either in housing or in schools, could provide more opportunities for bullying or violence. Some worried about the potential impact of integrated education on their cultural identity

Drugs and paramilitarism came up repeatedly as issues that should be addressed much more effectively. At the same time, and intertwined with drug use, young people want to see better mental health services and support.

Many were frustrated that schools focus too much on exams. They said that positive relationships with teachers could be transformational, but too often these relationships are poor and lack a personal touch or individual considerations. Many older youths sought a vocational career but struggled due to a lack of apprenticeships.

Participants said the lack of good job opportunities was a huge issue for Northern Ireland, especially compared to other parts of the UK, Ireland, and other countries like the USA and Australia.

This lack of opportunities was the number one reason given for why someone their age might leave Northern Ireland. This reflects the findings from previous Pivotal research, which indicated that almost 42% of young people planned to move away for work or study.

Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: “The importance of this research was in giving young people a platform to really voice their opinions, with room to talk at length and explain their thoughts in detail.

“A number of themes emerged. These reflected the findings of our previous research on young people’s views, which was carried out via anonymous polling. At the same time, the focus groups produced a wide range of individual voices.

“Young people are keenly aware that they have grown up in a divided society. They want that to change. They are far from naïve about how that might be achieved, and have quite clear ideas about what they want to see, both in terms of residential and educational mixing.

“They see drugs and paramilitarism as intertwined issues and want to see a lot more done to tackle both. Drugs are seen as both a problem that can harm the

mental health of people that use them, and also create a more dangerous society in general.

“When it comes to education, they want more practical help to prepare them for the world beyond school. They want positive relationships with teachers who see them all as individual people.

“They are unimpressed with prospects in the local jobs market. This is seen as the number one reason for why a young person would leave Northern Ireland.

“It is also clear that they want to be listened to, full stop. With that in mind, the best thing about this particular piece of research was the ability to give a platform to their varied opinions as individuals, in their own words – and, in doing so, trying to capture something of how young people think and feel as a group.”

Pivotal’s latest research paper was based on 12 focus-group discussions with almost 100 young people, which took place between April and June this year. The young people held in-depth conversations on community issues, education, and training and employment.

The contents of those conversations were analysed to find central areas of concern. This involved analytical techniques, such as feeding transcripts of all the discussions into software to allow full investigation of the content and identification of thematic issues.

Around 60% of participants were male and 40% female. None were asked their community background, although this often came up during the discussions.

REPORT ONE: Youth Solutions for Building a Better Community in Northern Ireland

Participants were asked to outline their views on how society and community impacts local young people, and then discuss their ideas on how Northern Ireland could be made a better place to live.

Divided society

Young people reported that **segregation** between Catholic and Protestant areas continues to influence their lives. Most of them said they live in single-community residential areas.

Often they use different community centres, shops and schools than those from the other community. Respondents said this segregation is reinforced by symbols relating to the Troubles, like murals, flags and barriers including peace walls.

One common observation was that this segregation is reinforced by parents or other family, out of fear that trouble could arise.

“Even like the streets, like one side of the street is Protestant, and one street’s Catholics. And like, my mummy and daddy would be like really on edge if I was close to a Protestant area because just in case something happens and it’d be the same the other way about, if a Protestant would come up to Andy Town their mummies and daddies would be a wee bit on edge.” - Female, 15, West Belfast

Closely linked to segregation were worries about ongoing **sectarianism**. Some said they feel fear when in areas seen as belonging to a different community background than their own. This fear was particularly acute amongst young people who live in interface areas.

Social media is used to spread sectarian abuse. This can lead to sectarian pile ons. Abuse tends to be concentrated around sporting or community events and can take the form of both public and private messages, as well as negative comments under photos.

Pivotal’s research found that social factors, family influences and personal experiences of sectarianism have **shaped local young people in two main ways**:

- Some feel that others hold negative stereotypes about them because of where they come from, their age, or their community background.
- Some young people expressed negative attitudes towards others outside of their community – mainly through comments about how other groups were perceived to get better treatment, more investment or better facilities. For a few of the young people, this attitude extended to those from an ethnic minority background.

“They see us all as wasters, that’s why. They look at us and they’re like ‘scumbags’.” - Male, 18, Derry-Londonderry

Social issues

As well as social divisions, young people raised a number of other areas where they want to see improvements in the community.

Drugs were the most commonly-identified problem that young people want to see change. They want to see fewer drugs on the streets, raised concerns about the effects of drugs on people’s lives, and their mental health in particular, and also said they were concerned for their personal safety when people were on drugs in their area.

“It’s getting worse. The police don’t really give a shit. From my view the police would stop you for the likes of, I’m trying to think of an example, going two miles over the speed limit and drug dealers are ignored, well-known drug dealers. They don’t do nothing about it cos they’re protected and they’re afeared of them. That’s my view.” - Male, 19, Magherafelt

Young people associate **paramilitary groups** with drug dealing, and raised the issue of intimidation that is used to control areas in order to make money through drugs.

There was a high level of consensus that reducing the number and impact of paramilitaries would improve Northern Ireland. However, some young people – largely male, and from Belfast – were equivocal about this, saying that paramilitary groups can also deter anti-social behaviour and offer protection for communities.

Many of the young people outlined how **services for young people are lacking**. The shortage of community spaces and activities was identified by the highest number of participants as the number one issue that could improve life in Northern Ireland, providing space for young people to make friends, participate in a range of activities, and develop trusting relationships with adults.

“Like there’s no clubs on Saturdays so a lot of people just go out drinking and stuff instead underage and get involved in things that they shouldn’t.” - Female, 14, West Belfast

Increased awareness and support for mental health was the second-most popular choice for something that would improve life locally. Access to services was described as inconsistent. Sources of stress for young people included exam pressure, bullying, a sense of hopelessness about whether things can change and, for some, problems at home.

“More support systems you know people are embarrassed to phone Childline and say how they feel. There should be like certain youth centres and stuff that people can go and talk to someone they trust and not just some randomer on the phone.” - Female, 16, Carrickfergus

Young people have also felt the effects of the **rising cost of living**, including in food and transport. For those in rural areas, the expense of taxis was raised as a problem.

Wages for teenagers can be considerably lower than pay for those even in their early 20s. From April 2023, the UK Minimum Wage hourly rate for 16-17 year olds is £5.28, £7.49 for 18-20 year olds and £10.18 for 21-22 year olds. Those over 22 years old receive a minimum hourly rate of £10.42.

For young people living apart from their family, it was particularly difficult to buy food and pay bills.

“Cost of living is bad at the minute. Even at our age we’re feeling it like. Some of us are out working and the money’s gone like that.” - Male, 16, Randalstown

There was consensus that young people are not given enough education around budgeting, money management and the different ways to earn money – such as starting a business – as well as a lack of support for those in financial difficulties.

Solutions suggested by young people

Young people want less segregation and more opportunities to interact with young people from different backgrounds. They felt cross-community work could start earlier in childhood, happen more regularly, and be supported by education around how to talk to others about difference and how to understand alternative perspectives.

“Coming together, supporting each other, and respect, and protecting each other. And how can you stop the bad things from happening? Stop using symbols to identify people. Don’t stereotype and don’t be judgemental.” - Female, 14, North Belfast

However, there was acknowledgement that reducing sectarianism and the abuse of symbolism could take some time. There were also mixed views on desegregation, particularly around residential integration. Some felt this could be a risk to good relations and may leave people feeling unsafe in their own homes.

Young people want more places and activities in the community. They want more investment in both safe spaces and planned activities, more youth workers and more opportunities for community-wide events – all of which they said could improve their sense of belonging.

“More opportunities to get to know people from different religions better. So, like creating more like different groups like [youth project], through sports and stuff, like integrating, like you know the residentials we’ve done with the football team, with different people from different areas.” - Male, 15, North Belfast

Young people want to feel safe in their community. For some, this means more youth workers, for others it is better mental health support, while the need for better policing was also strongly linked to feeling safe.

Young people felt that the police often hold stereotypical attitudes about their age or background. They also believed that the widespread availability of drugs needs to be addressed.

REPORT TWO: Youth Solutions: Improving education, training and employment in Northern Ireland This report examines young people's views on how to make education, training and employment better in Northern Ireland.

Improving Education

Previous Pivotal research found that large majorities of young people would like to see less segregation in education. This was echoed in the focus groups, where positive comments around integrated education were about twice as common as negative comments. Indeed, more integrated education was the number one priority for participants when it comes to improving the education system.

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

However, concerns were raised about potential problems with more integration – including the risk of sectarian bullying, and also that it could be difficult to achieve because of *residential* segregation, given that young people already have fears about travelling to areas they identify with a different community background.

Teaching history was raised as an issue within an integrated education system, with languages and the choice of sports to play also identified as potential problems.

“I think when you’re in school, in history class and like The Troubles and stuff are brought up and it’s like your teachers tell you like ‘Protestants did this’, and ‘Protestants did that’ and stuff like. That’s why I don’t think schools should mix because I want to learn about my history, not theirs.” - Female, 15, West Belfast

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

Reducing **exams and exam pressure** was the top answer when young people were asked what education needs to do more or less. Many feel overwhelmed and demoralised by the amount of revision, coursework and exams.

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

Participants viewed teachers as a source of pressure in relation to exams. Young people proposed that the exam system should be changed in three main ways: more choice in subjects for GCSE and A Levels; more focus on coursework carried out

through the year; and spreading exams out more throughout the year could also reduce stress.

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

Young people held strong views about how their **school environment** needed to improve. They want positive relationships with teachers but experiences of this vary. For some, poor relationships with teachers led to a lack of motivation or discouraged their efforts for a certain subject and it even led some to leave school early. For others, particularly those with additional needs, a lack of extra support or care about individual needs is frustrating.

“They learn you something and then you don’t understand it they tell you to ask a question but when you ask a question, they shout at you for not knowing.” - Male, 15, North Belfast

“I’ll go an entire class not having a f**kin’ clue what I’m doing. I’ve really bad eyesight and sit at the back of the room, but you’re not allowed to change seats at all. She’s writing in size twelve font, I can’t see shit. Won’t come over, I’m saying ‘Miss, can you come over and help me here?’, She says she’ll be over in a minute, and doesn’t come and help me for like the first hour of the class and then she’ll be like ‘You’ve nothing done’ but she hasn’t told me what to do. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do and then she’ll be getting on as if it’s like my fault.” - Male, 15, North Belfast

Participants were broadly supportive of school uniforms, in principle, but many felt that current uniforms (including blazers) are unsuitable, and that uniform rules are both too strict and lead to disproportionate punishments.

“We had a couple of cards in our school. Every time you wear a jumper you get signed and three signatures was a detention for wearing a jumper.” - Male, 16, Randalstown

Young people feel that there is a disconnection between school curricula and the tools they will need to succeed in life. In some cases, they struggle to see how some subjects are relevant to their lives, and they also feel that more should be done to teach them about managing money, mortgages and tax, as well as other skills like first aid, cooking and parenting.

The lack of education around how to start a business or become an entrepreneur was a key concern. Some participants planned to become self-employed through learning a trade, developing a brand or expanding a family business.

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

Educational solutions

The solutions young people identified to improve education included:

- More integrated education, from a young age.
- An improved exam system with more choice of subjects, greater importance on coursework, and a more sympathetic exam schedule.
- More understanding from teachers about the lives of young people.
- Extra support for difficult subjects, particularly for those with extra needs.
- A revised curriculum to ensure all content is useful, including more about practical skills such as budgeting and become self-employed.

Making training and employment better

Nearly 40% of participants were older than sixteen and therefore past the age of compulsory education. After leaving school, a majority enrolled at a vocational course in further education or with local independent training providers.

Three main themes emerged about **experiences of training** courses: a lack of preparation in schools; a lack of apprenticeships; and levels of financial support.

The **lack of preparation in schools** mirrored the views in the section above that schools could do more to develop practical skills.

The **lack of apprenticeships** was most striking for those trying to move into an industry without pre-existing connections in that sector. Being unable to secure a place means young people could not progress on their vocational course, because on-the-job experience is a requirement. As a result, young people tended to start a different course with the hope of finding an apprenticeship in that area, or they simply left further education.

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

Young people’s **finances** have been affected by the cost-of-living crisis, in particular with food and transport. Those who were training as part of an apprenticeship were paid as little as £5.28 per hour, with some finding it difficult to cover costs. The Educational Maintenance Allowance was crucial for some, but this only amounts to £30 paid every fortnight to eligible 16-19 year olds.

When it comes to **employment**, participants in the focus group said they were worried that career options in Northern Ireland were poor compared with other places, including other parts of the UK, Ireland and international destinations such as Australia and America.

Young peoples' top priority for improving local employment was to see more job opportunities in Northern Ireland.

Getting on to the jobs ladder was also seen as difficult, with many young people saying they had been turned down for work because of a lack of experience, which became a vicious cycle.

Another perceived barrier to employment was employers' attitudes about people their age – and, when a job has been secured, they said they often face lesser pay and conditions than older workers.

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

- Female, 16, Carrickfergus

Young people also say they experience discrimination about their community background, the area they live in, their religion or class.

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

The lack of job opportunities was the most common reason given by participants as a reason to leave Northern Ireland. This was compounded by perceptions that they would be able to earn higher wages elsewhere.

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

Derry-Londonderry

Solutions for training and employment

Young people want to see:

- More support for obtaining apprenticeship places through (i) increasing the number of placements and (ii) better support from FE Colleges to match students to employers.
- Increase financial support for those on training schemes.
- More and better job opportunities for young people.
- Increased minimum wages.
- More help with the process of getting a job including job searches, application process and interview technique.
- Less discrimination against young people due to their age.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

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1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland
2. Pivotal's earlier reports are available [here](#)
3. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are Peter Sheridan (Chair), Chief Executive of Cooperation Ireland; Richard Good, public policy consultant; Sarah Creighton; Jarlath Kearney; Rosalind Skillen; Andrew McCormick, former NICS Permanent Secretary; Seamus McAleavey, former Chief Executive, NICVA; and Alan Whysall, Honorary Senior Research Associate, Constitution Unit, University College London
4. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 20 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (2014-2019)
5. Pivotal has received funding and in-kind support from Belfast Harbour Commissioners, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, NICVA, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University
6. For further information about Pivotal see pivotalppf.org or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835

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