

Youth voices: life, work and study in Northern Ireland



PIVOTAL

PUBLIC POLICY
FORUM NI

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Young people's voices and experiences are at the heart of this report, through results from a detailed survey about what would make Northern Ireland a better place to live, work and study. This follows Pivotal's previous report, *Reconciliation and deprivation: twin challenges for Northern Ireland* (Pivotal, 2023), which took stock of public policy, reviewed the literature, and gained the insights of leading practitioners and academics. A third report will analyse focus groups conducted with young people, including policy ideas for the future.

The findings from our survey of 14–25 year olds centre on four themes: **community**, **study**, **work** and **the future**. They provide a valuable window into the diverse experiences, challenges, perspectives and aspirations of young people living in Northern Ireland.

This report explores how young people feel about where they live – their education, housing, community, and the opportunities and challenges they face. It reveals how those surveyed

see their futures in work and study, and the main priorities they have for improving their lives and wider society in Northern Ireland. Also considered is the impact of paramilitarism on young people, the importance they place on understanding past conflict, and the priority given to the constitutional question.

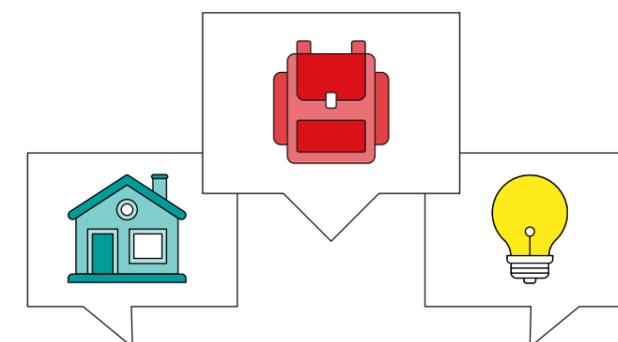
The Belfast Good Friday Agreement enabled this generation of young people to grow up without the sustained political violence their parents and grandparents experienced. However, as the first report in this project (Pivotal, 2023) concludes, the space created by the dramatic reduction in political violence has not led to widespread positive reconciliation. Important aspects of life remain deeply segregated along old divides for many young people, and furthermore the areas worst impacted by the conflict are still waiting for sustained economic peace dividends. The twin objectives of promoting reconciliation and tackling deprivation remain deeply entwined and are all the more urgent in the current economic and public spending context.

// This report explores how young people feel about where they live – their education, housing, community, and the opportunities and challenges they face. It reveals how those surveyed see their futures. //

Young people in this survey, all born after the Agreement was signed, continue to feel the impact of the conflict today. The largely segregated nature of the Northern Ireland education system reflects the long-standing divisions along community and religious lines that remain in housing, public services and wider society. As the first report in this project details, impactful reconciliation work, and courageous and dedicated grassroots community leadership, have positively affected the lives of many young people, but most of the key building blocks of segregation remain stubbornly in place. There is an urgent need to engage young people in these issues and empower them to help shape a new vision of how to bridge old divides and increase economic security.

Research conducted by Pivotal (2021) reported that young people have described ongoing division in community relations as a 'push' factor for studying elsewhere and identified this as a deterrent to returning home after studying. Furthermore, the research found that political instability and ineffective govern-

ment in Northern Ireland were motivations to leave and not return, with young people reporting that politicians in Northern Ireland did not reflect their views or concerns. Building on our previous work, this report asks young people for their experiences and for their answers. Here is what they have to say.



Who took part in this research?

Young people from across Northern Ireland took part in an online survey which asked for their views about community, study, work and the future.

Methodology

Before data collection, a Research Advisory Group (RAG) was created of five young people representing the same age group as those participating in the research. The RAG provided valuable insights into the lives of young people and supported the development of the survey questions. Young people piloted the survey to ensure that the language used and questions were appropriate for the target age group. The RAG also played a key role in the dissemination of the survey to young people.

The survey was available online during February and March 2023. It was shared through both regional and local youth organisations and social media. A total of 259 responses were captured from young people living in each county of Northern Ireland aged 14–25 years old. The survey covered four key themes:

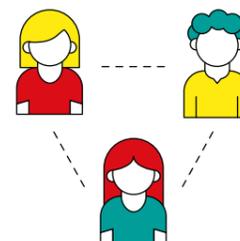
- 1. Community
- 2. Education
- 3. Employment
- 4. The Future

Analysis of the quantitative data was conducted through SPSS with the qualitative data thematically analysed. Note that no questions in the survey were mandatory so the number of responses to each question may differ, which has been noted throughout.

Demographics

The survey contains 259 participants and rich detailed material from across Northern Ireland, but it is important to highlight the demographic make-up of those who took part. As a small survey, we are aware that its composition does not fully match Northern Ireland as a whole, nevertheless our findings offer an invaluable snapshot of young people’s diverse experiences of living, working and studying here. The demographic breakdown of participants in the survey was:

Area: While participants were drawn from every county in Northern Ireland, most came from County Antrim (68.3%) mainly due to responses from the wider Belfast area. A total of 13.3% responses represented County Down with 11.2% from County Londonderry. A low response rate was recorded from County Tyrone (3.6%), Armagh (2.4%) and Fermanagh (1.2%).



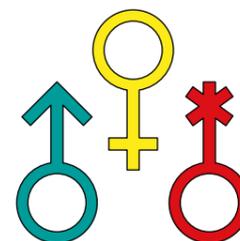
Community

59.8% Protestant
33.2% Catholic
6.9% Other



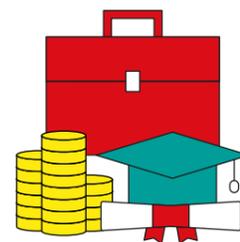
Age

60.0% 14-18 years
40.0% 19-24 years



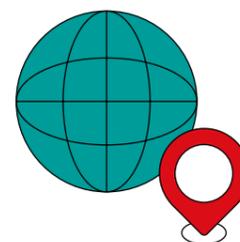
Gender

62.5% Female
37.5% Male



Education, training & work

60.2% School	15.1% Unemployed
29.0% Part-time job	3.1% Other
16.6% Full-time job	2.3% Training scheme
15.8% FT college or uni	1.5% Apprenticeship



National identity

55.0% Northern Irish
23.3% Irish
12.8% British
8.8% Other

Fig. 01 Research demographic - who took part? | N = 259

Section one: Community

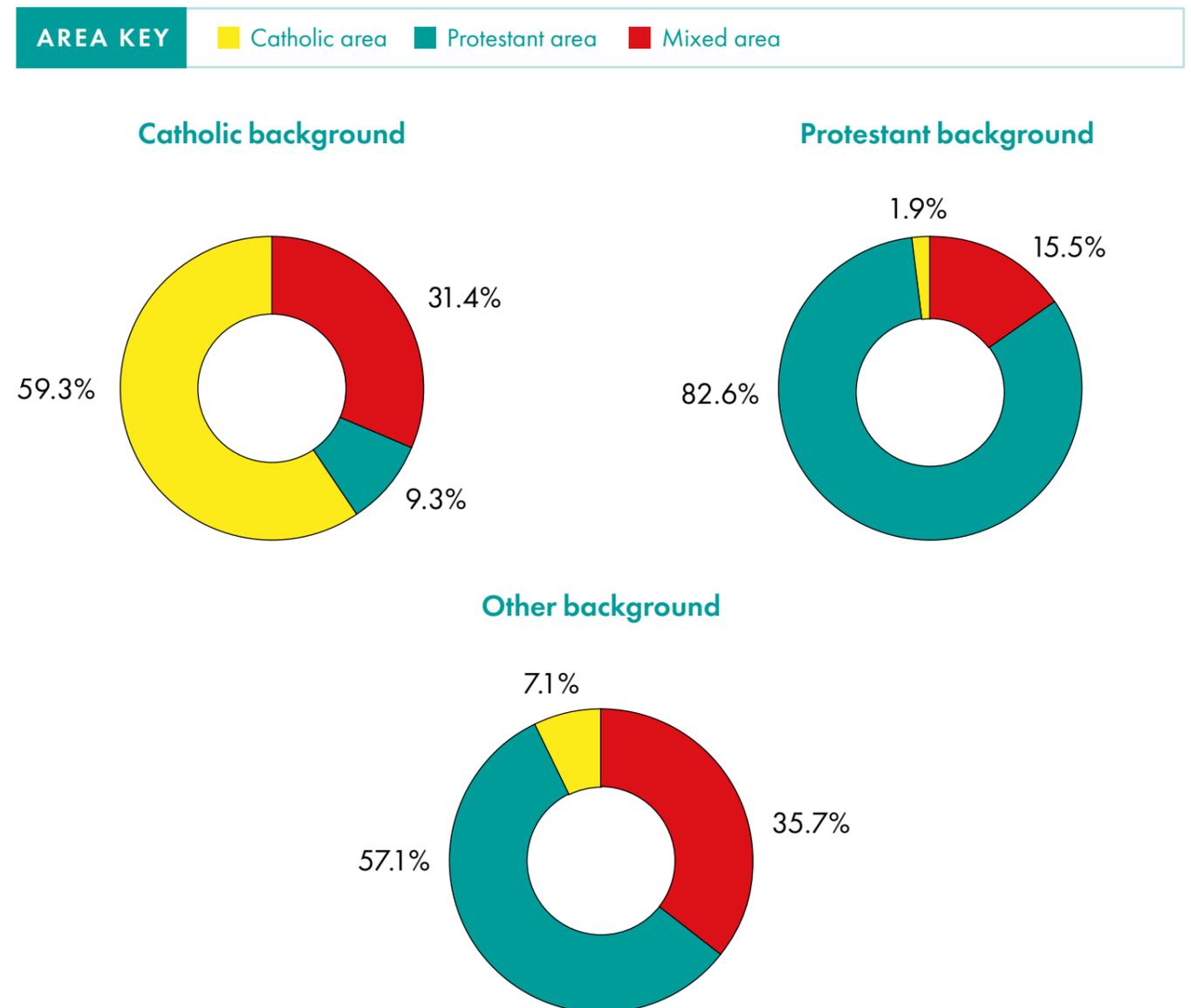
All respondents to the survey were born in 1998 or later and have a common experience of growing up in Northern Ireland after the signing of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Despite this, 66.5% of respondents reported that young people still feel the impact of the Troubles today.

One significant way this continues to be felt is through segregated housing. Results show that young people predominantly lived in areas of the same community background they identified with. As shown in Figure 02, 59.3% of young people from a Catholic background lived in a Catholic area, with 82.6% of Protestants living in a Protestant area. Those young people who identified as 'Other' were more likely to live in Protestant areas (57.1%) or mixed areas (35.7%) compared to Catholic areas (7.1%).

Another way young people may be affected by the Troubles is the continued presence of paramilitary groups in communities. Over forty percent (42.1%) reported that there is paramilitary influence over young people in their area. A higher proportion of young people from an Other (50.0%) or Protestant (43.9%) community background agreed that there is paramilitary influence over young people in their area compared to Catholics (37.2%), with young people aged 19 – 25 years more likely to agree (47.6%) compared to those aged 14 -18 years old (38.7%).

// Over forty percent of young people reported that there is paramilitary influence over young people in their area //

Fig. 02 Areas where participants lived by community background | N = 255



KEY FINDING

ONLY 10.5% of young people agreed that politicians in Northern Ireland do a good job of representing the issues that matter to them.

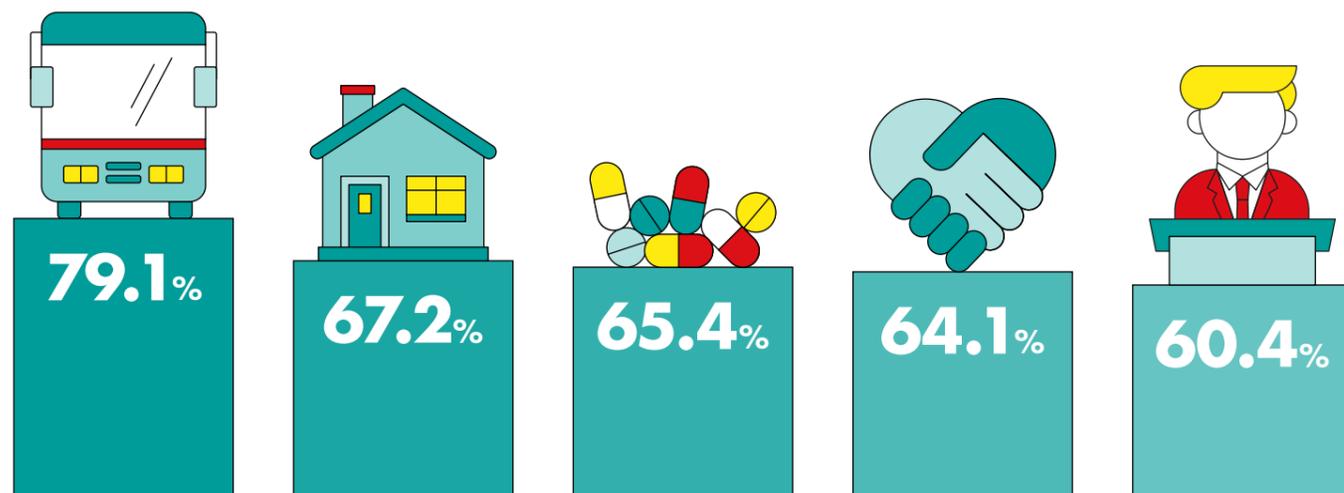


Fig. 03 Young people's top five areas for improving their communities | N = 257 - 259

To achieve a better future for those living in Northern Ireland, young people have identified the top five areas to improve their communities:

- 1 Better transport
- 2 Desegregated communities
- 3 Reduce impact of drugs
- 4 Build a sense of belonging
- 5 Politicians who represent young people's views

The three issues with the highest level of support were:



Better transport

The top priority for young people was better public transport links (79.1%). This was the case for both 14–18 years olds and 19–25 years olds, and for young people from all community backgrounds.



Drugs

The majority of young people drawn from both age groups and all community backgrounds reported that there are too many drugs available to young people in their area (65.4%).



Desegregated communities

Around two thirds of participants reported that young people have a more positive attitude to living in mixed areas than older generations (67.2%). Young people who identified as Other were much more likely to agree with this statement (92.9%) compared with young people from either a Catholic (66.3%) or Protestant (65.8%) community background.

Dealing with the past

Most participants recognised that it is important for young people to learn about Northern Ireland's past (83.6%). A total of 62.0% reported that they have a good awareness of the Good Friday Agreement. A range of sources are used by young people to find out information about Northern Ireland's past, including school (70.7%), parents (66.4%), the internet (61.8%) and social media (60.6%).

Overall, 68.5% of respondents agreed that too much focus is placed on traditional 'orange and green' issues in Northern Ireland. Young people aged 19–25 years old were more likely to agree with this (74.2%) compared to young people aged 14 – 18 years old (64.4%). Young people who identified themselves as Other in terms of community background were more likely to agree with this statement (77.8%) compared to Protestants (70.4%) and Catholics (63.1%). Results indicate that 92.4% of young people felt that politicians should focus on building a positive future for everyone living in Northern Ireland.

KEY FINDING

68.5%
agreed that too much focus is placed on traditional 'orange and green' issues in Northern Ireland

Section two: Study

This section examines two key issues that young people face in their education in Northern Ireland.

Firstly, while Northern Ireland is often recognised for producing academically high-achieving pupils, too many of our young people struggle with educational underachievement (Henderson et al, 2020). This section begins by exploring what young people experience as barriers to learning. Secondly, the segregated nature of the Northern Ireland education system reflects the long-standing divisions along community and religious lines that remain in housing, public services and wider society. It is estimated that 93% of children in Northern Ireland are educated in separate school systems (Milliken, 2021). This division is also seen in pre-school settings, teacher training colleges, staff composition and a number of sectoral bodies. This section also explores young people’s views on segregated education and their opinions on Shared Education Programmes.

Barriers to learning

Participants were asked if they had experienced a range of issues that might make it difficult for them to learn in school (Fig. 04). The question invited them to tick all issues that applied. The most prevalent issue identified by young people was too much exam pressure (58.6%). Although both males and females identified exam pressure as the biggest barrier to learning, a greater percentage of females indicated this (67.3%) compared to males (38.1%). Gender differences were evident throughout as females placed poor relations with teachers as the second

most common difficulty with learning (38.9%), while males chose ‘none of the above’ (30.9%). Both males and females identified bullying as the third most common issue making it difficult to learn (32.5%).

Segregated education

Results confirm the long standing, segregated nature of the education system in Northern Ireland. Participants were asked to indicate the predominant community background of the post-primary school they attended. The majority of young people from a Catholic community background attended a post-primary school mainly with other Catholics (85.7%). Similarly, most young people from a Protestant community background attended a post-primary school with other Protestants (76.0%). Those young people who identified as ‘Other’ were more likely to attend an integrated school (50.0%) compared to a school mostly attended by Protestants (27.8%) or mostly attended by Catholics (11.1%) as displayed in Figure 05. Analysis by age group showed little difference in this pattern.

Views on Integrated Education

Integrated education brings children, young people and staff from all religious and community backgrounds together in one school. Young people were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about integrated education in Northern Ireland. Results show that young people from different communities felt that schools provided a good place for young people from different backgrounds to meet (75.0%) and that more integration in schools would help increase understanding between young people of different backgrounds (77.0%). Most young people agreed that they would prefer young people from different backgrounds to be educated together (63.5%). Those who described themselves as Other

Fig. 04 Barriers to learning by gender | N = 249

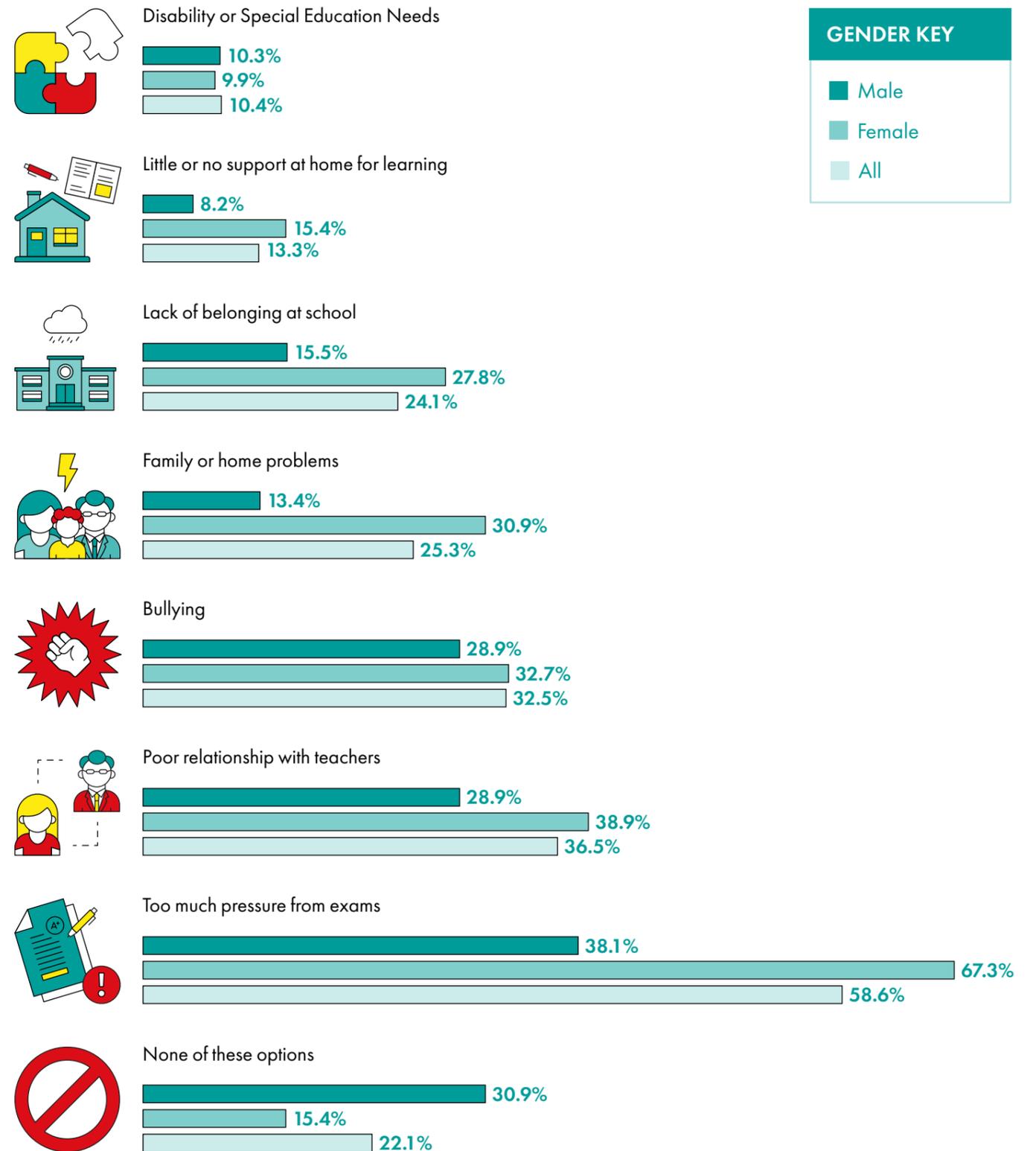
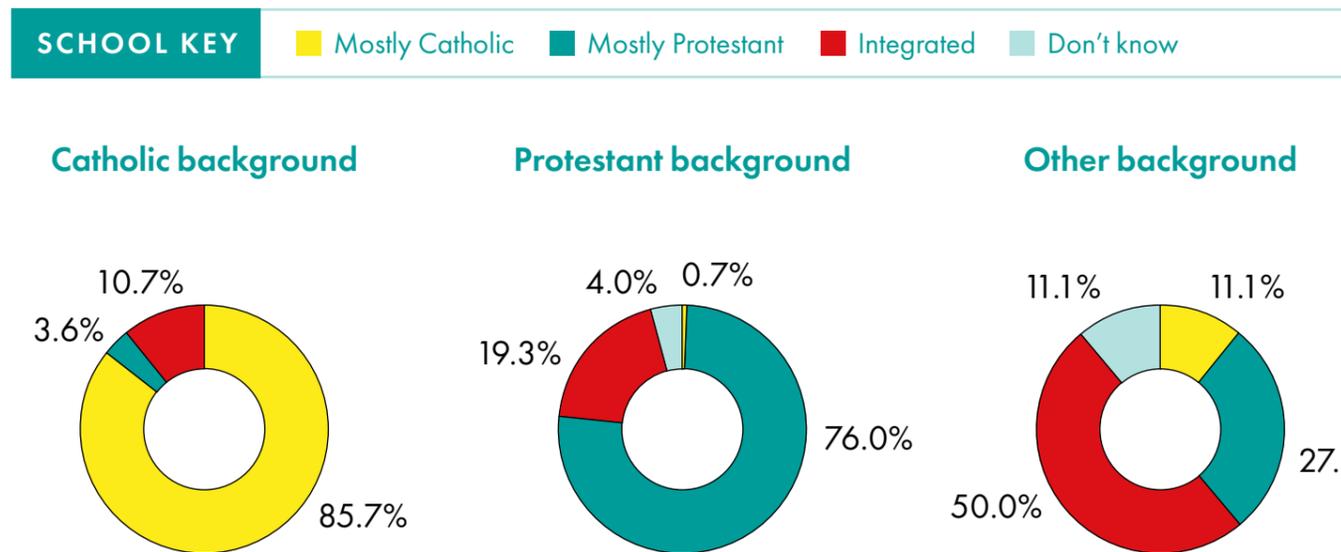


Fig. 05 Attendance at post-primary school by community background | N = 254



(77.8%) and young people aged 19 – 25 years old (75.8%) demonstrated a particular preference for being educated together. However, almost one quarter of young people agreed that it is important for young people to be educated only with others from their own community background (23.0%). This was constant for both age groups, gender and community backgrounds, apart from Others with 16.7%.

The majority of young people (66.9%) agreed that a new integrated school system would move Northern Ireland forward. A further 23.6% remained neutral on this with 9.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. While all groups agreed that a new integrated school system was desirable, this sentiment was strongest among the 19-25 age group, females and those who described their community background as Other.

Shared Education

Shared Education programmes seek to bring children and young people from different backgrounds together to learn during school time. These programmes are used as one way

to increase regular contact between pupils from different community backgrounds. 60.2% of the sample had some experience of participating in a Shared Education programme. Young people aged 14 -18 years old were more likely to have taken part (63.1%) than young people aged 19 – 25 years old (56.4%). However, a greater proportion of the younger age group (16.8%) reported that they did not know if they had participated in a Shared Education programme compared to the older group (7.9%). Those that attended an integrated school reported higher levels of participation in these programmes (70.2%) compared to young people attending a predominantly Catholic (56.0%) or Protestant post primary school (56.0%).

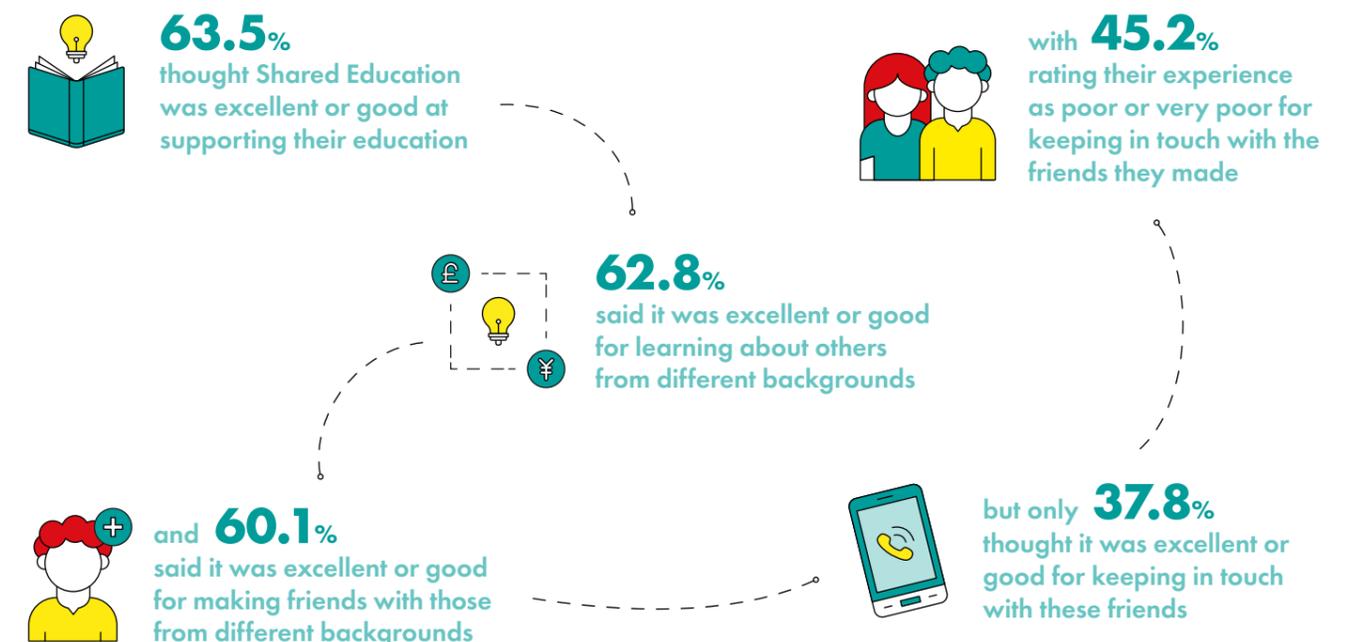
Of those young people who reported taking part (n = 148), they were asked to rate their experiences of Shared Education programmes in school in terms of supporting their education, learning about others from a different community background and making and maintaining friendships with others from a different background. Most young people rated their experiences as excellent or good (Fig. 06).

- **63.5% rated Shared Education as excellent or good at supporting their education**
- **62.8% rated Shared Education as excellent or good for learning about others from a different background**
- **60.1% rated Shared Education as excellent or good for making friends from different backgrounds**

Fewer participants rated the Shared Education programme they experienced as excellent or good for keeping in touch with friends from a different background after the programme ends (37.8%). Analysis by community background found that Catholics (42.0%) and Protestants (37.1%) were more likely to rate this as excellent or good compared to young people

who described themselves as Other (22.2%). In total, 45.2% of young people rated the Shared Education programme they experienced as poor or very poor for keeping in touch with friends from a different background after the programme ends. A higher proportion of females reported this aspect of the programme as poor or very poor (50.5%) compared to males (33.3%). Young people aged 14 – 18 years old were also more likely to rate this aspect of the programme as poor or very poor (50.6%) compared to young people aged 19 – 25 years old (36.8%).

Fig. 06 Experiences of Shared Education | N = 148



Section three: Work

Most young people in the survey had already entered the world of work, with 61.5% having a job before (n = 150). Unsurprisingly, the older age group of 19 -25 years old were more likely to have a job (94.9%) compared to those aged 14 – 18 years old (39.3%).

Young people worked in a range of sectors in both part time and full-time capacities.

The most common part-time work was



Retail (30.5%)



Hospitality (22.1%)



Youth work (18.3%)

The most common full-time work was



Youth work (28.3%)



Other work (22.6%)



Health & social care (17.0%)

KEY FINDING

39.8%

of young people have found it difficult to progress in the career they want in Northern Ireland

// Nearly sixty percent (58.8%) of those young people who identified as Other reported they planned to move from Northern Ireland compared to Catholics (46.7%) or Protestants (37.1%). //

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements about working in Northern Ireland.

Limited job opportunities

62.1% of young people agreed that there were limited job opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland. Young people who had worked before were more likely to agree with this statement (66.2%) compared to young people who had yet to be employed (55.2%). Analysis by gender shows that a greater percentage of females (66.2%) agreed that job opportunities for young people were limited compared to males (55.2%). Comparison by community background found that more Catholics (69.3%) agreed with this compared to Protestants (58.6%) or Others (58.8%).

Skills from education

59.3% of young people agreed that their education had given them the skills needed to get the job they want. Little difference was found between young people who had a job (59.6%) and who had not worked before (58.6%). Significant differences between young people from different community backgrounds were found ranging from 69.3% (Catholic), to 58.6% (Protestant) and 38.9% (Other). Females were also more likely to agree that their education had given them the skills they needed (63.0%) compared to males (52.9%).

Careers advice

Although 45.3% of the sample agreed that they had received good careers advice about the range of options available to them, 30.0% remained neutral with around a quarter of young people disagreeing that they had received good careers advice

(24.5%). Females (31.1%) were more than twice as likely to disagree that they had received good careers advice compared to males (13.8%). Protestants were also more likely to disagree that they had received good careers advice (27.1%) compared to Catholics (20.0%) or Others (23.5%).

Career progression

Results suggest that nearly forty percent (39.8%) of young people have found it difficult to progress in the career they want in Northern Ireland. Analysis by gender found that females were more likely to find it difficult to progress in their career (43.8%) compared to males (33.3%).

Leaving Northern Ireland

A significant number of young people agreed that they planned to move outside Northern Ireland for work or further study (41.8%). Young people with work experience were more likely to say that they planned to move away from Northern Ireland (45.5%) than those who were yet to be employed (35.6%). Differences were also evident between young people from different community backgrounds. Nearly sixty percent (58.8%) of those young people who identified as Other reported they planned to move away from Northern Ireland compared to Catholics (46.7%) or Protestants (37.1%)

Section four: The future

The survey asked participants how they see their own future and that of Northern Ireland more broadly. What are the challenges they see ahead and the priorities they most want addressed?

Young people were asked if they see a good future for themselves in Northern Ireland. Just over half of young people (54.8%) reported that they see a good future for themselves here with 15.8% disagreeing with this and 29.3% remaining neutral on this statement.

While little difference was found between young people from either a Catholic (54.7%) or Protestant community background (56.8%), a lower proportion of young people who identified as Other agreed that they could see a good future for themselves in Northern Ireland (38.9%). Males were more likely to report that they saw a good future for themselves in Northern Ireland (59.8%) compared to females (51.9%). Young people aged 19 – 25 years old were the most pessimistic group about having a good future in Northern Ireland with 18.4% disagreeing that they saw a good future here.

Northern Ireland's constitutional status

Results indicate that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland is important to most young people. A total of 60.6% of young people felt that the constitutional question of whether Northern Ireland should be part of a united Ireland or remain part of the UK was important or very important to them. Analysis shows that:

- Young people aged 19 – 25 years old (69.0%) were more likely to report this was important to them compared to those aged 14 – 18 years old (55.5%).
- A higher proportion of males (67.0%) compared to females (56.8%) reported the constitutional question was important to them.

- Little difference was found between Catholics (60.4%) and Protestants (62.6%), however those who would describe themselves as Other were much less likely to report this was important to them (44.4%).
- Around one fifth (22.4%) remained neutral on this question with this group more likely to be in the younger age group and female.
- Fewer participants reported that this issue was not important to them (17.0%).

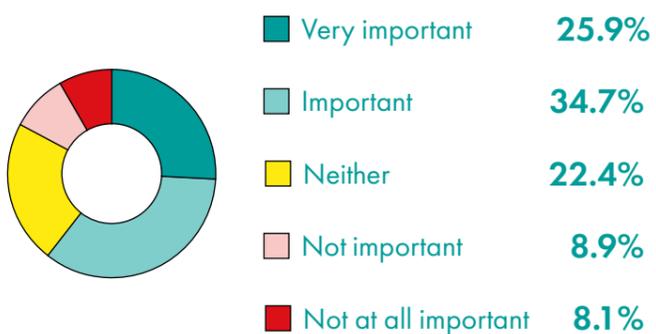
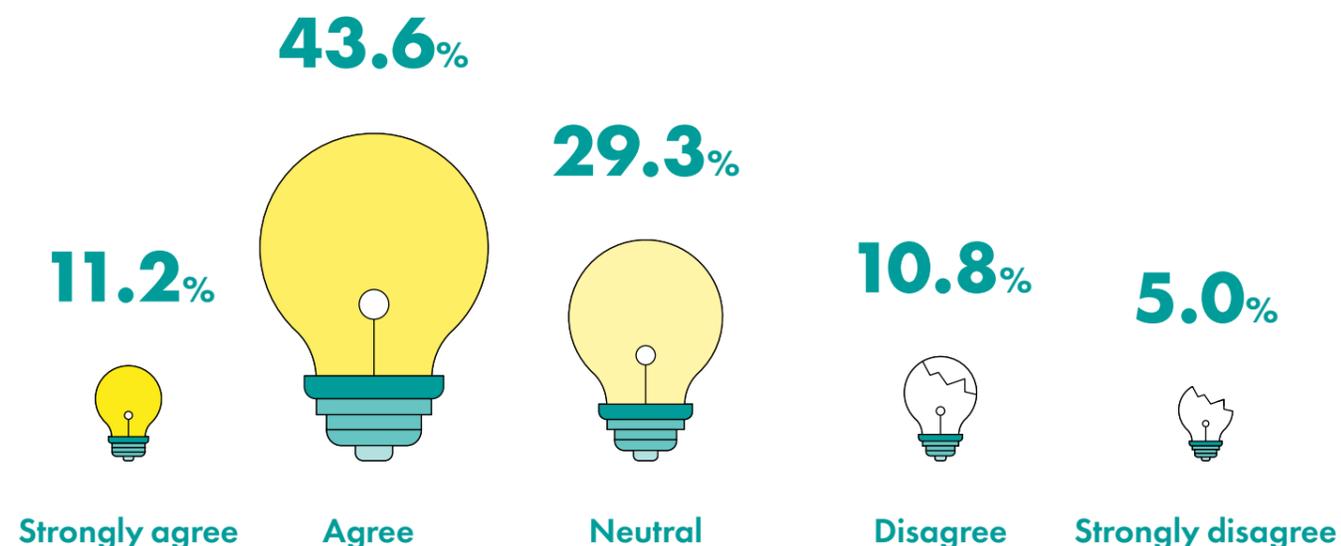


Fig. 07 How important is Northern Ireland's constitutional position to you? | N = 259

Fig. 08 Do you see a good future for yourself in Northern Ireland? | N = 259



Future challenges

Respondents were asked to identify the biggest challenges facing young people in Northern Ireland in the next five years. The question invited them to tick all issues that applied. As shown in Figure 09, the majority of young people were concerned about the high cost of living (82.4%). This was identified as the leading challenge by all groups including by gender, different age groups and community backgrounds. Poor mental health was also chosen by most young people (73.1%) as a challenge, with a higher proportion of females (78.3%) identifying this compared to males (64.3%). Males were most likely to recognise drugs as a problem (67.9%) compared to females (62.2%).

Although 49.8% of the sample viewed cuts to education and youth services as a future challenge for young people, there was significant variation between groups. A higher proportion of females (55.5%) reported this as a challenge, compared to 40.5% of males. Similarly, young people aged 19 – 25 years old were more likely to recognise this as a challenge for young

people (69.6%) compared to those aged 14 – 18 years old (36.6%). Differences were also found in terms of community background with more Catholics (64.0%) and Others (62.5%) reporting this as a challenge compared to Protestants (40.4%).

KEY FINDING

62.1%

agreed there were limited job opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland

Changes for the future

The survey asked participants to rank a number of changes that would make the most positive impact on young people. The top five priority areas were:



1. Better careers advice for young people to make choices about their future

Nearly forty five percent of young people (44.4%) ranked better careers advice for young people as their first or second priority. This corroborates findings from Pivotal's research on transforming the 14-19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland, which found 79% of young people reported that careers advice could be improved. Further analysis found that all groups indicated this was their top priority, apart from those aged 19 – 25 years old and those who reported Other as their community background. The top priority for both these groups was to remove paramilitary influence.



2. Creation of more mixed housing areas

One third of participants (33.9%) ranked the creation of more mixed housing areas as their first or second priority for change. Comments from young people who identified this as the change that would have the most positive impact suggested that increased mixed housing areas would support better community integration between Protestants and Catholics and help build a shared future:

"Making areas more integrated and getting young people to mix with each-other who are from different backgrounds also teaching young people about different backgrounds."

– Female, 15 years old

"A change to community life between Protestant and Catholics"

– Female, 18 years old

"Having a government that can actually work together for a shared future that is fair and equal for both sides of the community that we can live together in peace."

– Male, 20 years old



3. Greater job opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland

Greater job opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland was ranked by 29.5% as their first or second priority.

"More opportunities for low income backgrounds to escape the stereotypical life that society has planned for them."

– Female, 18 years old

"Personally, greater employment opportunities for graduates/school leavers - we need to address the brain drain as NI is horrendously under skilled and poorly paid. This obviously leads to the requirement of good governance in NI. Stormont does not function effectively and the power sharing / consociationalism framework we have relied on has not been benefitting the people here. Investing in our youth will only benefit us for the future."

– Male, 24 years old

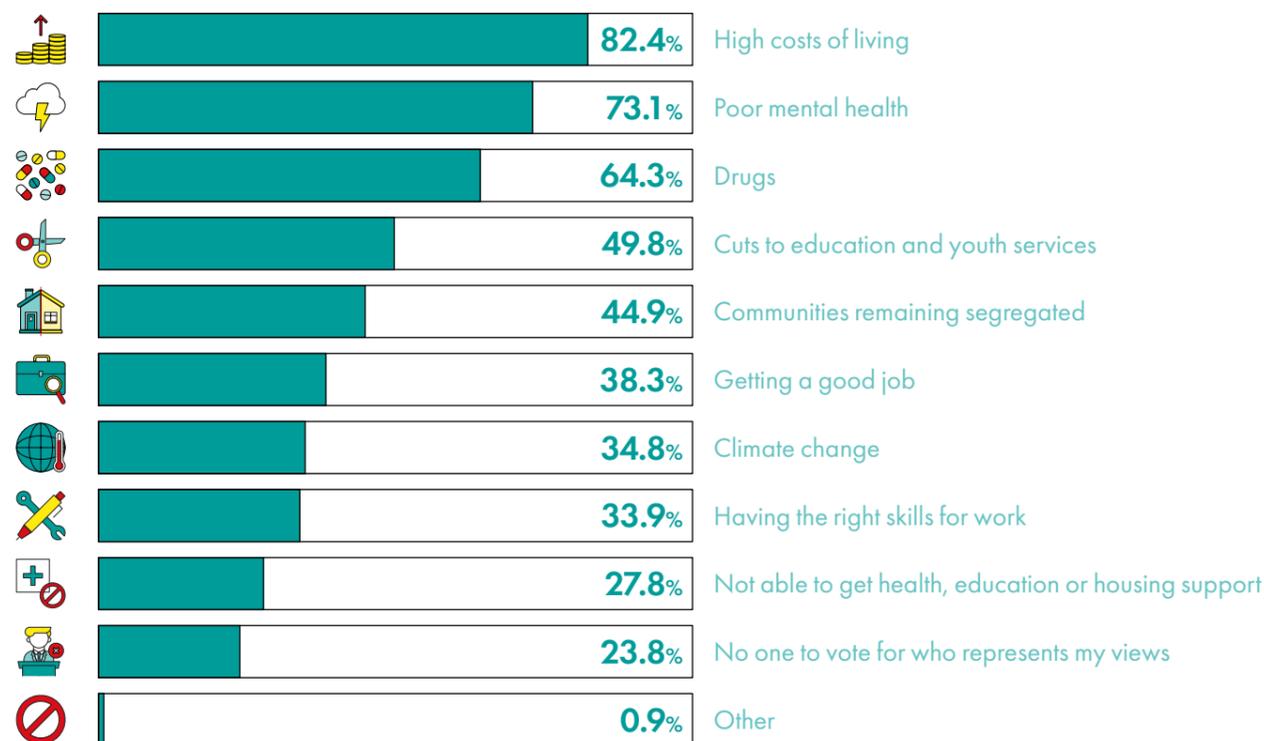


4. Remove paramilitary influence

A total of 28.5% of young people ranked the removal of paramilitary influence as their first or second priority. A higher proportion of young people aged 19 – 25 years old prioritised this compared to young people aged 14 – 18 years old. Comments indicate that young people closely associate paramilitary groups with the availability of drugs to young people in their areas.

"Actually doing something about the drug dealers in local areas and the psni not protecting them drugs has had a huge impact

Fig. 09 Challenges facing young people in Northern Ireland in the next five years | N = 227



on my life and I'm only 14 no one should have to go through what I have at such an early age."

– Female, 14 years old

"Combatting the influence of paramilitaries and drug availability for young people, particularly young men. The context in which I work, I see young men who very much experience the adverse effect of drugs and sectarianism."

– Male, 21 years old



5. Young people being able to make decisions about issues that affect them

Almost a fifth (18.2%) of young people prioritised the need for young people to make decisions about issues that affect them. Interestingly, females were twice as likely to prioritise this compared to males.

"Young people need to be able to have a say in the problems that affect them!"

– Male, 15 years old

"Being able to talk about issues that affect me and be able to make changes."

– Female, 18 years old

Issues young people identified as important to them included mental health, women's rights and access to public services they need.

Conclusion

Results from this survey provide further evidence that young people in Northern Ireland today still feel the impact of the Troubles, and still live in a deeply divided society. These issues sit alongside, and often reinforce, challenges about education, jobs and health.



Most young people continue to live and be educated separately from other young people with a different community background. The education and housing of those surveyed highlights the structural barriers to building a more united community faced by any new reconciliation strategy, and which is one of the defining themes of this Pivotal project.



The survey points to support from young people for desegregation. Support for more shared and integrated schooling is clear. However, the challenge remains to turn this broad aspiration, long held across the generations, into concrete change.



Worryingly, just over half of young people reported that they see a good future for themselves in Northern Ireland. Results indicate that the broad consensus amongst young people was for politicians to focus on building a positive future for everyone living in Northern Ireland.



While a majority wished for day-to-day politics to move away from “green and orange”, the constitutional question is still important for a majority of those surveyed. Large majorities of respondents also asserted the importance of understanding past conflict, and felt they had a good knowledge of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. These findings suggest that any perception of young people being indifferent to the issues of sovereignty, political identity or the conflict should be queried.



The continuing impact of paramilitaries on the lives of young people is a major finding of this report. That this experience was noted by a higher proportion of older participants and a higher proportion of those from Other and Protestant backgrounds is important to highlight.



There is a desire, especially among young women, for a stronger voice in decision-making. There is an untapped potential in young people to improve the democratic culture of Northern Ireland, making it more inclusive of voices across communities and generations. The importance of healthier democratic participation, and wider civic involvement, is vital to any strategy promoting reconciliation or tackling deprivation.

Findings suggest that young people will face a range of challenges within the next five years, such as high cost of living, poor mental health and drugs, which may affect young people from any community background. Developing lasting solutions to these issues will support young people to improve their lives in Northern Ireland.

Themes to explore

This project will conclude with a third report presenting the outcome of in-depth focus groups conducted with multiple groups of young people, including key issues identified in the project and policy ideas for the future. The first two reports clearly point us towards a number of themes to be addressed in the focus groups:

1. The priorities and ideas that young people have for making Northern Ireland a better place to build their futures
2. The ongoing segregation of key aspects of young people's lives
3. The impact of past conflict on young people and their understanding of it
4. How safe young people feel in their communities
5. The disconnect many young people experience between learning in school and the skills needed for work

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