

# OUR LIVES IN OUR WORDS

NORTHERN IRELAND YOUNG PEOPLE'S REPORT TO THE  
UNITED NATIONS COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD  
on behalf of all children and young people living in Northern Ireland



The NI Young People's Report was prepared by Emma Campbell and Deirdre McMahon, Children's Law Centre; in collaboration with: YOUTH@CLC, Save the Children and Children and Young People from across Northern Ireland

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## Introduction

The NI Young People's Report was submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, along with the NI NGO Alternative Report, in June 2015, to inform the Committee's examination of the UK Government's compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This report is a summary of the views and experiences of 900 children and young people, aged 7-17 years, who participated in research on their enjoyment of their rights under the UNCRC.

The full NI Young People's Report and NI NGO Alternative Report can be downloaded from the CLC website:

<http://www.childrenslawcentre.org.uk/homepage>

The NI Young People's Report aims to ensure that the views of children and young people are directly heard and taken into account by all decision makers with responsibility for improving children's lives in Northern Ireland.

## Youth@clc

Youth@clc, aged 15-18 years, are a youth advisory panel who inform the work of the Children's Law Centre in Northern Ireland. Youth@clc participated in every aspect of the research for the NI Young People's Report.

## Young people take their message to Geneva

Youth@clc, along with young people from the NI Youth Forum, the NI Council for Integrated Education and Include Youth, produced a DVD of the NI Young People's Report. A representative group of young people, including youth@clc, presented the DVD of 'OUR LIVES IN OUR WORDS' to the UN Committee on the 7 October 2015 in Geneva, as part of the UK examination process.

## What is 'OUR LIVES IN OUR WORDS' about?

The Report contains young people's views and experiences on how much they enjoy:

- **MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION** in matters affecting their lives (Art 12; UNCRC)
- **COMMUNITY LIFE** and leisure free from discrimination (Art 2; UNCRC)
- **KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR RIGHTS** and adult respect for rights (Art 42; UNCRC)
- **MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES** that meet the needs of young people (Art 24; UNCRC)

## What did young people tell us?

The research shows that some young people are enjoying some of their rights more than others depending on their particular circumstances. Older teens and those suffering from mental health problems are not enjoying community life as much as other young people.



## PARTICIPATION

Children and young people want adults to take their views more seriously when decisions that impact on their lives are made in schools, in community and by Government.

## School decision making

Young people think that schools councils could be more effective;

*"Some schools have a good framework (for) school councils...It's not consistent across Northern Ireland."*

*"Some schools don't do anything and are mainly just so the school can tick a box and say they have one."*

Young people want teachers to;

*"Listen to young people's views and opinions in order to make better decisions for the school, its staff and its pupils..."*

Young people also want to participate through suggestion boxes, voting, surveys, debates and through one-to-one meetings with teachers.

## Community decision making

Young people told us that local councillors don't take them seriously when they try to participate in community decision making on issues affecting their lives;

*"Councillors refuse to meet us as they're too busy."*

*"...need to act like an adult to be taken seriously...If you come from a young person's view you are seen as immature."*

Young  
People

Community

Ask

Questions

Young people want to have a real say in issues that directly affect them;

*"...we would like to give our opinion on leisure facilities (there are not enough in our area and they are getting too expensive) and all the schools closing down, especially primary schools..."*

## Government decision making

Young people feel disconnected from Government and feel that politicians are not interested in their views because of their age;

*"I feel as though the government does not care about what the younger generation have to say about Northern Ireland."*

*"It's not fair that we can marry our MLA and have children with our MLA but not vote for them."*

Young people (particularly those with a disability) feel that participation in government consultations has little meaning;

*"Yes they listen to us but they don't hear what we say."*  
(young disabled person)



Young people want Government to:

- Make school councils more effective and compulsory in all schools in NI;
- Guarantee that **every** child has an equal say in school, community and government matters;
- Lower the voting age to 16;
- Support the development of a NI Youth Assembly.

## KNOWLEDGE OF RIGHTS

Other research shows that less than half of 11-16 year olds in school have heard of the UNCRC (NISRA, 2013). Young people in our research felt that knowing their rights could improve their lives;

*"The Government could set up information sessions for young*

*people or give leaflets to improve our lives by making us more aware and making us more confident to make a complaint if our rights have been breached."*

Young people also feel that it is important that adults respect children's rights.

NI Young People want Government to:

- Prioritise education on children's rights for all children;
- Encourage adults to respect children's rights;
- Make information on rights available in schools, youth groups and through social media.

## ENJOYMENT OF COMMUNITY LIFE WITHOUT DISCRIMINATION

### Use of leisure facilities

Many young people said there was a lack of leisure facilities in their area;

*"In my area there are not many leisure facilities... and then (they) wonder why we hang around the area with our so called 'anti-social' behaviour. I think the area should have a centre for young people to go to free of charge and just hang about with mates..... there has never been meetings or groups for the young people to decide what happens with our funding..."*

Many young people find leisure facilities too expensive or unwelcoming to young people;

*"Make them cheaper!!!! £5.90 for a cinema ticket, flipping rip off!"*

*"We are not welcome in the local leisure facilities, I think because the workers think of us as 'street scum' who have no money and wish to use these facilities for free."*

Young disabled people told us that local play facilities rarely meet their needs;

*"I can't go to it as there is no activities that I can use..."*  
(young disabled person)

## Negative stereotyping of young people

Nearly two thirds of young people in the survey (mostly older teens) said they had been 'moved on' by adults in their communities for reasons which, in their opinion, were unjustified. Young people report they are mostly asked to 'move on' by the PSNI, local businesses and local residents;

*"The PSNI...constantly and repeatedly make us move away as we are apparently causing trouble and making others feel*



*uncomfortable...we just sit around and talk...no violence or trouble is caused. But due to the area we are from ... we are categorised as young youth that causes trouble/violence but it's not the case and because of that stereotype set by the media and others we constantly become penalised ... the public and police service don't see beyond the hood...!"*

*"...hoodie...track bottoms...suspected..."*

NI Young People want Government to:

- Include under 16s in the new NI Age (Goods Facilities and Services) legislation;
- Ensure ALL young people are treated fairly;
- Urgently address the UN Committee's 2008 recommendations on the demonisation of children.

## MENTAL HEALTH

### Awareness and comfort in seeking help

Our research showed that many young people are aware of mental health issues but few report feeling comfortable about seeking help if they needed to.

27% of children and young people surveyed report having a mental health concern;

- Of these only a third said they had received help for their mental health problem and only two thirds of those who received help said they were satisfied with the help they received;
- Many young people with a mental health concern said they were more likely to go online or nowhere at all.

Many of the young people in the research workshops felt that the stigma of having a mental health problem, or a lack of adult awareness, prevented them from asking for help;

*"...diabetes is ok...depression or mental health problems are not..."*

*"...there's a lack of knowledge among teachers...they only touched on depression and self-harm..."*

### Experience of using mental health services

In the survey some young people reported positive experiences;

*"I feel my mental health improved after I completed a series of counselling sessions and felt a lot better in general."*

*"The doctors at CAMHS at xxx helped me to become healthier."*

However an equal number of young people reported negative experiences;

*"It didnt help me the way I wanted it to because I still felt the same way after getting the help for a long time and it had a lasting negative affect on me until only recently this year."*

*"I felt that I was unsupported, patronised and intimidated."*

*"The waiting list to see autism intervention service was very long. Almost every health care professional I saw thought that they were not the best person to see, so I felt a bit discriminated against because of my autism."*

Additionally, some young people felt that the services were not age-appropriate;

*"...not trained to deal with my age group...I realised what I had to say, to get out of it cause I hated it..."*

### Ideal mental health service

Young people told us that they want mental health services to be:

#### available 24/7

*"...available on weekends during the day and evening, and after school times during the week."*

#### better resourced

*"I think there should be more facilities so young people wouldn't have to wait so long to be seen when they are desperate for help."*

#### available locally

*"I think there should be more mental health services available to young people who live in rural areas."*

#### less intimidating for young people

*"Normal house or building to go to... something young people wouldn't be embarrassed to go to."*

#### provided by staff trained to work with young people

*"...understanding doctors not people that are strict or boring... people that are easy to talk to and can give actual practical help..."*

NI Young People want Government to:

- Properly fund services for young people with mental health problems;
- Provide more programmes to encourage young people to seek help;
- Fully consult with children and young people in developing better CAMHS in Northern Ireland.

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