

Rights Here, Right Now

Children and Young People's Report
to the UN Committee on the Rights
of the Child about Children's Rights
in Northern Ireland

January 2023

YOUTH@CLC



**RIGHTS HERE
RIGHT NOW.**

The full report was written by Dr Deena Haydon, in collaboration with
the Children's Law Centre and Youth@CLC

Youth@CLC

Who we are

Youth@CLC are a youth advisory panel who inform the work of the Children's Law Centre in Northern Ireland. We are aged 14-18 from all backgrounds. We are passionate about children's rights and making sure young people have their voices heard because it is our right under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). We participated in every aspect of the consultations for this report.

What we do

Youth@CLC meet to talk about issues that affect us and other young people across Northern Ireland. We talk to decision makers like politicians, the media, teachers and other under 18's to bring about change for all children and young people.

About this report

This is a youth friendly version of the full *Rights Here, Right Now Children and Young People's Report* submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in December 2022. The UN Committee will use the report as part of the evidence it draws on to check if the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive are fulfilling international obligations to promote and protect children's rights.

The information in the report was collected by Youth@CLC through an online survey and a range of workshops and reflects what children and young people told us through these processes.

Thanks

We would like to thank Dr Deena Haydon for her assistance during the research and for writing the full report. We would also like to thank all of the organisations that helped us organise workshops with children. Finally, we would like to thank all the children and young people who took part in our survey and workshops as part of the consultation.



Contents

Overview	04
Participation	05
Participation in home life	06
Participation at school or college	07
Participation in policy making	08
Participation in decision making by professionals	09
Non-discrimination	10
Discrimination experienced by specific groups	11
Experiences of discrimination in their own words	12
Survival and development	13
Barriers to development	14
The needs of specific groups	15
Help and support needed in their own words	16
Knowledge about children's rights	17
Understanding and learning about children's rights	18
Children and Young People's Messages for Government	19



This is a summary of a longer full report. You can read the full report [here](#).

Overview



Children and young people feel they're **not listened to** by **politicians** and **professionals** like **teachers** and **social workers**. Some support **votes at 16**.



Children and young people feel they're being **failed by poor mental health services** which take too long to access and don't take them seriously.



Newcomer young people feel they suffer from **negative attitudes** towards their language and culture and are often **verbally abused** in public.



Children and young people **want more information at school** about **sex education**, **gambling** and organisations that can **help** them.



LGBTQ+ young people experience **negative attitudes**, feel unsafe and find it **difficult to access appropriate support**.



Disabled young people have **fewer social and educational opportunities**, feel **less supported** and find it **difficult to access services**.



Care experienced children and young people feel **stigmatised**, and that people **don't understand** the life **challenges they face**.



Young people in **conflict with the law** need earlier support in their communities and help to meet their **complex needs**.



Children from **poorer** backgrounds face barriers to development, including **access to play and leisure activities**.



Older teenagers are **less positive** about their opportunities and feel they are **viewed negatively** by adults in public and in the media.

Participation

UNCRC Article 12

The right of every child to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, with the child's views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

We found that

Children and young people didn't consider their views would be taken seriously by adults outside their home lives, **especially by politicians**.



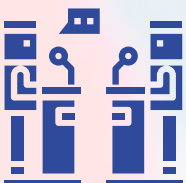
Most children and young people feel they're **able to take part in decisions made in their homes** and are listened to by their parents or carers.



The majority of children and young people **don't think teachers ask for their views** on what they're taught, how they're taught or about school policies. Some did not feel able to talk to teachers about **bullying**, or think bullying was dealt with appropriately.



Children and young people **don't think they're listened to by adults in their community** and aren't often asked for their opinion about services and activities in their local areas.



Most children and young people feel they're **not listened to by politicians** and few had been asked their views about matters affecting them or plans in their area.



Care experienced young people, those in **conflict with the law**, or needing **specialist mental health care don't feel they can give their views** or that professionals listen to them when making decisions about their treatment or the support they need.

Participation in home life



79% of children and young people told us **adults at home would listen to them if they gave their opinion** - 8% said they wouldn't and 13% didn't know. Fewer children and young people - 63% - felt adults at home talk to them about how decisions are made.



16-17 year olds and those with a disability were less positive about being listened to at home.



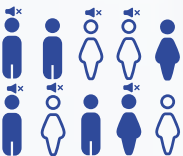
Times when children are not listened to are often when **parents or carers are busy**.



In a workshop of eight **LGBTQ+** children and young people, only one said they felt able to participate at home, because they lived in a family that was accepting of them and had a good relationship with their parents.



Some **female refugees** said their brothers were allowed to be more independent and were less regulated by their parents than they were as girls.



In a group of **Travellers**, four felt their views were taken into account in their families but five felt this wasn't the case.

“If I was having problems with things I would go to my foster mum and she would listen to me” - Care experienced young person aged 15-18

“My dad always listens to me” - Refugee, aged 13-15

“Parents work too long” - Migrant Polish child aged 6-15

“When my dad's on the PS4 he tells me to go away” - 10 year old child

Participation at school or college



41% of children and young people in our survey **felt adults at school or college would listen** to them if they gave their opinion. **Younger children were more positive** about being listened to in school. Only 33% of **16-17 year olds** and 31% of people with a **disability** felt they would be listened to.



Children and young people were **least likely to agree that teachers asked their opinion about how they were taught**, with only 34% agreeing this happened. Children and young people felt strongly that **they were not asked their opinions about the rules** they have to follow - 41% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were asked their opinion about rules in school.



Some children and young people said they were **not listened to at school when approaching teachers about bullying**.



A group of **LGBTQ+ children felt unable to share their views** in school. A **refugee girl** said her opinions are not taken seriously because of her **cultural** and **religious** traditions. **Disabled** young people felt they had **far fewer choices** about the **qualifications** they could take, **options when leaving school** and being included in **school activities**.



Some young people were positive about **school councils**, others felt they failed to deliver any real change.

“Teachers do not take younger children seriously” - Migrant Polish child aged 6-15

“Children are not equally tolerated according to their abilities” - Migrant Polish child aged 6-15

“They [teachers] are dismissive of us and the situations” - Care experienced child aged 12-18

“You don’t have a say about exams” - Child in a group aged 15-18

Participation in policy making



Only **15%** of children and young people told us they **thought politicians would listen to them** if they gave their opinion. Younger children were more positive about having their voices heard, but **only 9% of 16-17 year olds felt politicians would listen to them. 49% felt politicians did not ask them how to get young people involved in decision making.**



Only **34%** of children and young people **agreed that adults asked them about new services or activities needed in their local area**, or about how to make their community **safer**.



Only **28%** of children and young people **with a disability thought they would be listened to** by adults in their community.



Children and young people were **positive about the establishment of a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly**.



A few children and young people thought that **the voting age should be reduced to 16** and that schools should teach about politics, voting and how to affect decision making.

“The youth should have a voice in their community, it’s where they’re growing up” - Young person in an in-patient mental health unit

“Outside, adults ignore when we want to play” - Younger child

“Politicians are just talk and no action” - Young person in conflict with the law

“We do not have an opportunity to pass our opinions, feelings and suggestions to them” - Migrant Polish child aged 6-15 talking about politicians

“I’d like to vote because I have the capacity to” - LGBTQ+ young person in a workshop of 15-18 year olds

Participation in decision making by professionals



Care experienced children and young people generally felt they were **not listened to or involved in decisions made by social workers or judges** about matters affecting them. They stressed the importance of having their views taken into account to make sure their needs are met.



As well as feeling that their voices aren't heard when decisions are made about placements, **young people in secure care** felt their opinion was not taken into account about the **food** provided and the **clothes** young women are allowed to wear.



Young people in the Juvenile Justice Centre felt their opinions were not taken into account when picking **school subjects** and that there was **no alternative to school for over 16s**. Key issues raised by young people were the need for **more activities, lack of privacy, inconsistent rules,** and **restrictions on going outside**.



Young people in the **in-patient mental health unit** also talked about **limited food options**. One young person detained in the unit felt they **did not have a say**, especially **in meetings about their care**. A young person said the process of being **restrained for nasogastric tube feeding** is not explained well and young people are not listened to when this happens.

“The social worker doesn't listen to me so I just don't talk to her anymore” -

Young person in secure care

“They - social workers and judges - should think more about how [the secure care centre] affects some young people. It does benefit some, but it affects my mental health. The judge doesn't see your daily struggles” -

Young person in secure care

“Once you're detained in here, no-one listens to what you say. They say,

‘Yes, we're listening’ but nothing changes” - Young person in the in-patient child and adolescent mental health unit

“In restraint, young people aren't listened to... in that moment they're really distressed and don't really care” -

Young person in the in-patient child and adolescent mental health unit

“If you don't go to school, you're locked in your room with no tv and the electric is turned off” -

Young person in the Juvenile Justice Centre

Non-discrimination

UNCRC Article 2

The right of every child to be treated fairly and without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's (or their parent's / guardian's) race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national / ethnic / social origin, property, birth or other status.

We found that

Children and young people felt they were **often treated differently** because of their age and complained about **negative stereotyping**, particularly by the media. Some children felt that certain restrictions are in their best interests - to protect them.



Children and young people **felt they were excluded because of the negative way many adults view them** and because adults assume they don't understand situations.



Children and young people had **mixed views on how they were treated by adults** in their communities. Many felt that adults were **pleased to see children playing outside**, but there are **not enough safe places for young people to hang out**.

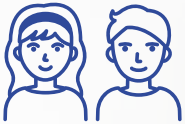


Most - 66% - agreed that children and young people are **negatively stereotyped in the media**. In workshops they said that **negative media stories about young people encourage discrimination** and that there are not many stories about the positive things young people do in their communities.



Children and young people felt that **those who are seen as being 'different' experience prejudice and discrimination**. Examples included those with a **disability**, those who are **neuro-diverse**, those from a different **culture** or **religion**, **LGBTQ+** and **care experienced** children and young people.

Discrimination experienced by specific groups



Older teenagers felt they were viewed more negatively than young children, seen as **troublesome** or even **dangerous**. In our survey, 47% of 16-17 year olds agreed that young people are told to move on when hanging out in public spaces compared to 29% of 12-13 year olds. Older teenagers also felt they have **fewer places to hang out** or **activities** to go to than younger children, and were far **less likely to agree that young people in their area trusted the police**. 78% of 16-17 year olds agreed that young people are **negatively stereotyped by the media**, compared to 56% of 12-13 year olds.



Disabled children and young people felt they **had fewer options and opportunities** in school, including missing out on activities like school trips. Their social lives were limited by lack of accessible places or transport. They are sometimes **verbally abused in public**.



Newcomer and **Traveller** children and young people are sometimes **treated negatively in school and in public**, including being **verbally abused**. They are treated differently because of their **culture, religion, language** and **dress**. Some **refugee girls felt they were treated differently than boys** within their community and had less freedom.



LGBTQ+ children and young people said they **experience discrimination** and are **targeted for looking different**, including **verbal and physical abuse**. Some said they have been **afraid of being outside** alone and were aware that **Trans** young people are particularly targeted.



Care experienced children often felt judged and that their **difficult life circumstances** were not taken into account in school or by social workers. **Children in care homes** faced more **restrictions** than other children. Those in **conflict with the law** felt they could not escape their negative reputation, that the **police don't understand mental health needs** and sometimes make situations worse.



Poorer children were less likely to agree that young people in their area trusted the police - only 23% of those who received free school meals [a measure of being less well off] agreed that young people trusted the police, compared to 41% of those not on free school meals.

Experiences of discrimination in their own words

“Why did I not get a Spend Local card from the government? I am 17 and I worked during the pandemic, but you had to be 18 to get the card. That’s unfair and it makes me really cross” - 17 year old young person

“When there’s a problem between parents and other adults and you ask what’s wrong they say ‘you’re too young to understand’” - Migrant child aged 9-15

“You’re expected to act like a grown up but get treated like a child” - LGBTQ+ young person aged 15-18

“Older people have no respect for us” - LGBTQ+ young person aged 15-18

“Adults look at young people and expect them to be trouble” - Care experienced young person aged 12-18

“[The police] expect us to be bad - always look at us suspiciously” - Care experienced young person aged 12-18

“Some media is sexist against girls” - Refugee young person aged 13-15

“Race makes you a target” - Young person aged 12-18

“If your family came from a different country, we would hear ‘Go back to your country!’” - Polish migrant young person aged 6-15

“Being female - you are treated worse than boys and we don’t have as much freedom” - Refugee girl aged 13-15

“Young people are dealing with so many emotions, but they’re getting judged from the start [for being in care]” - Care experienced young person aged 16-18

“My friend came out as Trans... I mentioned it to someone in my class [who] actually told me no longer to speak to him because of it” - Young person

“For the last couple of years... I’ve not been able to be with anybody in school and I find that very difficult... and I don’t stay to the time I want to - it’s just 9:30-12... I’m by myself all the time, alone” - Disabled young person

“I am 16 years old and I am a full time wheelchair user. I find when I’m out, not everywhere is accessible for me... I have found in school sometimes I don’t get to go on trips as it is so expensive to pay for a wheelchair accessible bus” - Disabled 16 year old

Survival and Development

UNCRC Article 6

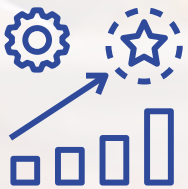
The right of every child to life, survival and development to the maximum extent possible - giving them the care, help and support they need to develop and protecting them from violence or exploitation.

We found that

Children and young people understood what they need to be **healthy**, support their **development**, become **independent**, and feel **safe and protected**. They told us:



To be **healthy**, children and young people need **healthy food, sleep, play, leisure activities, healthcare, a home, safe living and learning environments**. Some mentioned that too much **screen time** and **social media** can **damage health**. Some complained about **difficulty getting a doctors appointment** and **long waiting lists for specialist services**. **Access to mental health support was a real problem for many**.



To help them **develop to their fullest potential**, children and young people need **education, safety, love, care, good role models, play, social opportunities, leisure and support**. They also need **acceptance of their home languages, traditions and culture, involvement in community life, more life skills and work experience**.



Children and young people's **well-being and development are negatively affected** by **parents working long hours, long school days, too much homework, bullying** (at school, on the street and online), **abuse and neglect, family stress, drugs, alcohol** and **negative influences**.



To **prepare for living independently**, children and young people need **computers, internet access, information about organisations that can help them, life and work experience, home skills, driving lessons, budgeting advice and help from the government** until they start a job.



Safety and protection is provided by parents, family, well-behaved adults, friends, police, healthcare, schools and social workers. **Children in care** emphasised the need for protection from **drugs and alcohol**. **Most** children and young people **felt they get the care they need**, but those with **disabilities** were less likely to agree that this was the case. Some **children in care** said they **wanted better social workers**.

Barriers to development



Poverty is a barrier to development, with children and young people saying those in poorer families often don't get the help and support they need.



Disabled children and young people **did not feel they received the help and support they needed** to develop to their fullest potential, and become independent.



Lack of access to play and leisure activities is an issue for many children and young people. **Only half of those in our survey agreed they could easily access things to do and places to go in their area.** Those with a disability, in poorer families and older teenagers were less likely to agree that they could afford to go to places like the cinema and leisure centre.



Young people emphasised the importance of **non-judgemental and confidential healthcare** from GPs and nurses. They said it is sometimes **hard to get an appointment**, especially for an assessment or to see a specialist.



Difficulty accessing healthcare is a significant barrier for those experiencing **mental health problems**. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (**CAMHS**) were criticised by many. **Long waits, rescheduled or cancelled appointments, not having enough time to talk** and **not being taken seriously** (unless self harming) were issues.



Younger children were more likely to go to family members for help and support while **older teenagers relied on friends**. There was some awareness of **free helplines**. Low numbers said they would seek help or support from a **teacher** or **professionals** such as a **doctor, social worker or school counsellor**. Reasons for not asking for help were fears about lack of confidentiality, not being taken seriously, or being judged.



Lack of access to appropriate information at school is a real problem. Less than half the children and young people in our survey felt they got enough information in school about organisations offering support, **family support, relationship and sex education** and **gambling**. Young people want more teachers who **listen**, are **approachable, helpful** and **fair**. Lack of understanding around **behavioural or mental health issues** that can affect learning in school was a concern.

The needs of specific groups



Younger children identified access to nature and more grass spaces at school as particular needs. They also identified the need for playgrounds, sports and social opportunities, and free access to local clubs offering activities such as art, dance, theatre and cooking.



Young people with a **disability** told us they need the right to **privacy, support to live independently, access to social workers who don't keep changing, information about available services** (especially when they reach 18) and **affordable transport** to help them access **leisure and social activities**.



Newcomer children and young people emphasised the need to speak their native **language** as well as opportunities to practice and celebrate their **traditions** and **culture**.



Refugees talked about **basic needs** including clothes, shoes, money, friends and family.



Some **LGBTQ+** children and young people were **critical of CAMHS and school counselling**. They mentioned **long waiting lists for specialist LGBTQ+ services** which lead to many 'going private' and paying for treatment.



Care experienced young people, including those in secure care, talked about their need to develop a sense of identity and family history. They emphasised the importance of having **good relationships with social workers, stability, security** and a **strong support network**. **Preparation for leaving care and living independently** is important (including financial security, practical skills, coping strategies, education, training, housing, addiction and mental health support).



Young people in the **in-patient mental health unit** need **activities** that interest and motivate them, an **individual care plan** which changes to reflect improvements and **regular attention from specialist staff**.



Children and young people **in conflict with the law** need **earlier support in their local communities**, without being judged. Young people in **custody** need access to **drug rehabilitation services, social workers, legal advice and representation** and **accommodation** (especially for those who cannot apply for bail because they have no address).

Help and support needed in their own words

“Get healthier food at school” / “Good sleep” / “Proper and faster healthcare” / “[A] healthy and suitable environment everywhere - outside, at school and at home” - Migrant Polish children aged 6-15

“Saturday Language Club is the best because I can speak my language, doing arts and crafts activities” - Newcomer young person

“Some services are difficult to access due to long waiting times - mental health or abuse-related services, such as Women’s Aid” - Young person in conflict with the law

“People with problems have to wait a long time on waiting lists” - Young person in custody

“Young people do one bad thing and they are stereotyped so hard. People can change, especially when they are young” - Care experienced young person aged 16-18

“From hearing friends talk about their experience with things like counsellors or CAMHS, it seems like it would make me feel worse or not work” - Young person’s comment in our survey about why they would not ask for help

“Trans healthcare in NI is awful - my GP knew nothing about it” - LGBTQ+ young person

“I am in a chair... I can’t go out on my own because [there are] no taxis out there. I find it very hard to get out... I can’t do that because I can’t walk at all” - Disabled young person

“I think what young people lack is love... staff in the children’s home are my family... staff show love by spending time with you” - Young person in secure care

“There needs to be more funding for in-patient CAMHS - this is the only one in Northern Ireland. People say ‘you’re going to the best place’, but it’s the only place, not necessarily the best” - Young person in the in-patient mental health unit

“There’s no rehab over here... If you’re 17, they put you in [the secure care centre]... They should have a rehab centre where you agree to go in” - Young person in custody

“I’m not allowed to apply for bail because I don’t have an address... the social worker should have to find you an address if you’re under 18” - Young person in custody

Knowledge About Children's Rights

UNCRC Article 42

Making the principles and provisions of the UNCRC widely known to adults and children - incorporating the UNCRC into school curricula and into the training of all adults who work with / for children.

We found that

Children and young people **want to know more about their rights** and how rights affect their lives.



A quarter of children and young people in our survey **had not heard of children's rights**, and **over half had not heard of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**. Older teenagers were more likely to have heard of the UNCRC, usually in school.



Only a third of children and young people in the survey **had heard of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)**.

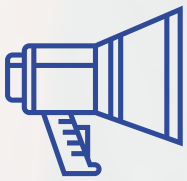


Most agreed that children and young people should learn about their rights. School was the place where almost all (94%) thought children and young people should learn about their rights. Other suggestions were the internet, the media, organisations such as UNICEF, Amnesty International, NICCY and the Human Rights Commission, libraries, youth clubs, church groups, community groups, parents, carers and guardians.



Less than half of the children and young people in the survey **knew a lot about their rights** or agreed they were confident about **making a complaint** if treated unfairly.

Understanding and learning about children's rights



The rights they thought children and young people should have included the rights to **play, freedom, food, express themselves, education, development, protection, relationships, opinions, health, freedom of thought, non-discrimination, identity** and **privacy**.

Some felt their **right to education was affected by language barriers**. **Care experienced** young people prioritised their right to **access personal information**.



Children and young people **felt it's important to learn about rights** because it might help them **make better decisions** and they have the right to know.



When asked **where they should learn about rights**, children and young people thought **school** was the best place. Other suggestions included **after school clubs, churches, projects or groups they attended, community groups, residential homes** and from **the person in charge** (eg. of school or the secure care centre).

“Everyone should know about their rights. Aye, 100% they definitely should” -

Young person aged 16-18

“[T]hey might be able to make better decisions on things. Because some people might not think they are in a position to say anything or have the right to” - Care experienced young person when asked why they should learn about rights

“They should know more about their rights, like in certain situations [such as] being put in here, being institutionalised” -Young person in secure care

“Parents should teach you about rights” - LGBTQ+ young person aged 15-18

Children and Young People's Messages for Government



Promote **inclusion** and **human rights**.



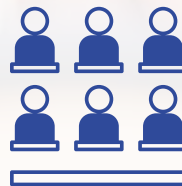
Protect the **environment**.



Improve **play** and **leisure** facilities and make people **safer** in their communities.



Prioritise **mental health** support and **services** for children and young people.



Make changes to how **schools** work and what they **teach**.



Recruit more **social workers** who care about children and young people and can interact well with them.



Recruit more **foster carers** and put greater emphasis on their caring role.



Develop opportunities for **disabled** children and young people, both in school and in their communities.



Fund **charities** and local organisations that **help** children and young people.



Protect young people **from harm**, including practices like **conversion therapy** for Trans young people.



Consult children and young people and make sure they **take part in decision making** about matters affecting their lives.

You can also find an extensive list of recommendations on pages 15-31 of [the full report](#).

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