



# Children Seen and Heard 1916 – 2016:

Report of consultation  
with children and  
young people in  
Northern Ireland

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An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

*YouthAction*  
NORTHERN IRELAND

# Consultation with young people in Northern Ireland – Feedback Report

The aim of this report is to set out the findings of a consultation with young people from Northern Ireland about where they live and the wider world around them. The following feedback is entirely from the young people who participated in the workshop and was not influenced by the facilitators in any way other than to ask 3 key questions to prompt their discussions.

For this workshop, there were 20 participants from YouthAction NI's Rainbow Factory in Belfast. The workshop was facilitated by Maire Campbell, Artistic Director and Team Leader for the Youth Arts team at YouthAction NI. The young people had so many ideas and a huge amount of enthusiasm for discussing the issues that they see as facing not just themselves, but society as a whole.

## Exercise 1 – What do you like about where you live?

For this exercise, young people were split into pairs and gave feedback by discussing topics amongst themselves, writing down their key points and feeding back to the full group afterwards.

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When you try to think about what you like about your country, it becomes difficult as you always focus on what you don't like. It is so much easier to criticise rather than compliment!

Different things came up in this part of the consultation, but they almost all fell under the following topics:



One thing that everyone agreed on is that one of the best things about Northern Ireland is the people! The young people talked about how people are so friendly and easy to talk to, great craic, and are passionate about the place they live. Northern Ireland is where their family and friends live, and people are open and engage with strangers. There was a strong appreciation for the Northern Ireland sense of humour and unique slang. There are a lot of good cross-community initiatives.

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When discussing life in Belfast and Northern Ireland, the young people spoke of a hopeful attitude of change. The weather is always surprising - which was mentioned as a good thing! There are lots of opportunities and Northern Ireland doesn't need to worry about natural disasters. As the group is from Belfast, there was a lot of discussion of what makes the city great:

- An active city life;
- Everything is within walking distance;
- It's forever changing - there are new buildings and places;
- Great transport links was also a popular theme.

Northern Ireland is welcoming and slowly becoming more accepting of other cultures

The group felt strongly about the importance of Arts, Culture and Sport. They spoke of the unique, thriving artistic community, and the many different cultural activities: rock and roll music, Belfast Culture night, busking and music culture, band parades, murals and street art. They spoke positively of the many different religions and cultures that feed into all of this. The big range of sporting talent and sports on offer was a big plus - from Rory McIlroy to George Best, from soccer to Gaelic football to rugby...

History and politics here are very interesting to study and different to everywhere else

The group was very aware of history and politics. It is important that there are many different views of our history. They were glad to have a good education system, free healthcare and the right to vote.

Northern Ireland has so many beautiful places to visit - tourism and activities were seen very positively. There are always lots of tourists (and tourist attractions), beautiful scenery all over our country and loads of places to visit:

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- The Giant's Causeway, Titanic Quarter, and the beautiful beaches were all mentioned;
- There are loads of festivals and things to do, and Irish people throw the best parties;
- They talked about the amazing food - the Ulster fry, the Belfast bap and Irish stew;
- The range of shops and restaurants was also seen as very good.

## **Exercise 2 - What don't you like about where you live?**

Working in groups of 3, this exercise was more discussion based to let young people tell stories about what they perceive to be bad about Northern Ireland. Feedback was given to the group by everyone and key points were recorded by Maire.

Mental health was a big concern – the lack of funding to this sector and the high suicide rate was discussed a lot. The group spoke about the pressure that young people feel under: from people talking negatively, to social and peer pressure, or the pressure to act or look a certain way. They felt that older people often assume young people don't know anything, or are uninformed about the world – they want young people to conform to societal norms and not be different.



They worried that cross-community activities are too focused on young people and not on the older generations, which is where they felt many of the issues with sectarianism and racism remain. They felt that older people are unwilling to accept changes, are reluctant to use technology, and judge young people for using technology so much.

The group felt that Northern Ireland is behind when it comes to human rights, including on abortion and marriage equality. LGBT individuals still suffer verbal and physical abuse. They didn't like societal reactions to worldwide issues like the conflict in Syria and ISIS, feeling that it is often racist. The arts are constantly being cut, and the national minimum wage is too low for under 18s. Drug and alcohol education aren't adequate, and underage drinking even with young children is a serious issue. Drugs are too readily available.

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They felt that political representation was poor, that politics and religion gets mixed up too much - young people want political change but the older generation keeps voting the same parties into power.

They spoke of the divide in society in terms of Catholics and Protestants, with people still not feeling comfortable or safe walking into "other" areas. Sectarianism is still a problem. They felt that both communities are living in the past and unwilling to move on or compromise, and that no one can celebrate their culture without someone else protesting/taking offence.

### Exercise 3: What would you change about where you live?

In pairs, young people discussed what changes they would like to see in Northern Ireland. They wrote down their key points on post it notes and then they gave feedback to the group explaining what they think the changes would look like. Here are some of the ideas they identified as priorities for change:

Better society	Political reform	Cultural awareness	No more “them vs. us”
Litter police	Change in attitude	Lower working age	Lower voting age to 16
Better education	Respect everyone	Youth justice reform	Better sex ed in schools
1 flag for all of NI	A united Ireland	Free bus for students	Less underage drinking
Freedom for all	More music shops	Legalise gay marriage	Gender neutral facilities
Higher pay for all	Equal rights for all	Cross community engagement	Better educated society
More funding for arts sector	More referendums and public power	Give junior doctors what they want	No more abuse of the “petition of concern”
Equal pay and opportunity for all genders	Equal treatment by justice system regardless of wealth	Better funding and treatment for mental health issues	More funding for youth sector and better access to youth groups

## Conclusion

Young people in Northern Ireland love a lot of things about where they are from, as is evidenced above. However, they feel that the things that they love the most (arts, music, culture, youth work) don't receive enough support, and the issues that matter most to them (equality, voting rights, and proper political representation) are dismissed or not fully supported supported by the main parties. This makes them feel that they aren't valued as a part of society.

Most of the issues discussed were those that came up in consultations across the island: the importance of arts, culture and tourism, unique cultural heritage, gender equality and LGBT rights, the need for young people to be listened to.

This consultation shows how incredibly aware young people are of the key issues in the society and world around them, and the forward thinking vision they have for society and politics.

Young people are a major asset to society and to building a brighter future for Northern Ireland.

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