

# Listen Up!

Children's  
Voices on  
the Future

A Consultation with children and  
young people on Children's Rights on  
the Island of Ireland: Responding to  
the uncertainty of Brexit and beyond

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## Listen Up! - Children's Voices on the Future

This research was commissioned by the Children's Law Centre and Children's Rights Alliance to give children and young people the opportunity and space to reflect on the following:

- 1. The impact that Brexit has had on their lives, directly or indirectly.**
- 2. Their understanding, experiences, and expectations with regard to their rights as children and young people.**
- 3. What actions could be identified which they consider important to guarantee that the voices of children and young people are heard in a meaningful way.**

The Children's Law Centre is an independent charitable organization established in September 1997 which works towards a society where all children can participate, are valued, have their rights respected and guaranteed without discrimination and every child can achieve their full potential. The organization is founded on the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 150 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

This research is funded by Community Foundation Ireland and Social Change Initiative.

Children and young people have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, their community and the wider society in which they live. It is critical that when developing policy and practice the lived experience and voice of those most affected is actively included and central to the decisions being made.

The right of the child to participate in matters affecting him or her is made explicit in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This article states that:

**“ State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”**

Article 12 affirms that all children who are able to voice their opinions must be provided with opportunities to participate in decisions which affect them. This applies not only to decisions that directly affect the individual child within their family, but also to decisions that impact on children as a group within their communities and wider society.

Article 12, along with the child's right to freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14), and freedom of association (Article 15), reaffirm the status of children as individuals with fundamental rights, opinions, and feelings of their own. In addition, Article 17 requires states to provide child friendly information to support children in accessing their rights.

This research offered children and young people the opportunity to engage in a conversation about their lives now, and what matters to them in the future. Their views provide a glimpse into their understanding of the world and how their lives are shaped. It provides a reflection on how they perceive their rights and what their expectations are of government and those in positions of authority.

## Methodology

### Background

The methodology used for the research offered the space for a wide range of children and young people across many organisations and communities living in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland to reflect on how Brexit had impacted on them directly or indirectly. They were invited to consider their rights alongside their hopes and expectations of governments in fulfilling their respective commitments made explicit in Article 12 of the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child.

The Children's Law Centre and the Children's Rights Alliance promoted the opportunity to children and young people to participate in the research focus groups across all their member groups and social media platforms. The criteria to take part included being under 20 years old and having an interest in sharing thoughts about the impact of Brexit on their lives and on the rights of children and young people more generally. A more substantive explanatory letter was also circulated with advice given on the process of how to become involved.

It was critical that the opportunity to engage was extended to all children and young people and embracing diversity in relation to gender, age, sexual orientation, geography, culture, and identity. The researcher reached out to Traveller young people, young people who had experiences in care, young people who had experience of homelessness and young people with disabilities. Given the nature of the consultation it was imperative that the views and opinions of young people

from different community backgrounds including loyalist/unionist backgrounds were sought, whilst respecting the sensitivities involved.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the process of recruiting and engaging young people for this research.

As restrictions lifted towards the end of January 2022, the researcher was able to conduct focus groups 'in person.' The first focus group met in early February 2022 in Dublin. Further groups were conducted with young people from Ballymena, Belfast, Cork, Galway, Lisburn, Newtownabbey, Derry/Londonderry, and Newry. A total of 64 children and young people engaged in focus groups each lasting a minimum of 90 minutes. All focus groups were 'in person' with the exception of one online focus group that took place to ensure the inclusion of two young women who were unable to travel. The researcher took care to be as inclusive as possible actively targeting young people from more marginalised communities. The consultation included young LGBTQ+ people, young people with disabilities, young parents, ethnic minority young people, care experienced young people and with ages ranging from 7 to 20 years old, all fully participating in focus groups.

### Structure of the sessions

The research took the form of a series of semi-structured focus group interviews which were conducted using age and situation-appropriate interactive exercises to maximise involvement of children and young people. A qualitative approach to methodology was selected as this gave the researcher the flexibility to explore with the young people, their perceptions, experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and insights. This approach enabled conversations and ideas to evolve organically within the groups and the researcher was able to get a depth of understanding and clarity through discussion and debate. The flexibility of the approach enabled the researcher to accommodate the obvious differences between children and adolescents in their verbal abilities and capacity to express themselves.

Each focus group included between 5-12 children and young people, who shared some common interests which helped to create a relaxed environment for discussion.

The focus groups used both discussion and interactive activity, with questions based on a generic framework<sup>1</sup> previously agreed with the research steering group.

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1 Annex 1 Group discussion framework

## Focus Group Data Management

Participants were fully briefed about the focus group purpose and process. Young people aged 16 and over with sufficient understanding gave their own consent to participate. Young people under the age of 16 had consent of parents/guardians to participate.

Confidentiality and anonymity were explained to participants. In accordance with GDPR guidance, anonymity was assured with the deletion of names, or any identifying information attributed to quotes.

Only the researcher had access to raw data and physical materials were destroyed on completion of the research.

## Data Analysis

The focus group sessions were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded using an inductive framework developed by the researcher based on the key themes identified within the data. The findings presented are an analysis of the views, experiences and opinions of some children and young people living in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland at this time in our history. Their views are contextual, they have just experienced a global pandemic and witnessed on their screens, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The impact of Brexit for the UK, Ireland and Europe has been overshadowed subsequently by other events.



Photo: Ryan Tauss, unsplash.com

## Content

Aside from the issues of **Brexit**, **Covid-19** and the **War in Ukraine**, the participants had lots to say about other social issues. There was clarity regarding the shared concerns of children and young people irrespective of which jurisdiction they lived in and these could be grouped into three main themes:

- › **Homelessness & Housing**
- › **Education**
- › **Mental Health**

The scope of this research limits depth of discussion and analysis but the key areas of concern should be referenced for further exploration.

### Findings from the Consultations:

- ✦ **Brexit**
- ✦ **Covid-19**
- ✦ **War**
- ✦ **Homelessness & Housing**
- ✦ **Education**
- ✦ **Mental Health**
- ✦ **Participants under 10 years**
- ✦ **Concluding Thoughts**





Photo: Phil Hearing, unsplash.com

# 1. Brexit

On the 23rd of June 2016, the people of the United Kingdom (UK) voted in a referendum to determine the future of the UK's membership of the European Union (EU), the outcome of which was 51.9% of voters being in favour of leaving the EU. This was not the majority view in Northern Ireland, however, where 56% of those who voted, voted to remain in the EU. In January 2020, the United Kingdom left the EU, a decision which has, and will continue to shape the lives of young people in the UK and Ireland for years to come. For many of the children and young people in this research, Brexit seems distant both in terms of timing and relevance. The largest percentage of participants are in the 11-14 years old age range meaning that they were 5-8 years old respectively when the referendum took place.



**I was only ten when that happened – I thought it was a vote to be part of Ireland so hadn't really a clue.”** (Young man, Cork)

One view shared unanimously among those participants who had formed an opinion in relation to Brexit<sup>2</sup> was that the decision to leave the EU was not a good thing.

When this opinion was explored further the explanations were specifically related to what the young people had personally experienced. The most significant and immediate impact for many was simply the increase in postal costs and delays in receiving goods.



**It takes ages for things to arrive now, and lots of companies have just stopped sending to Northern Ireland completely. If they do send, they charge extra like its going to a different country – it should still be the same – we are still part of the UK... don't they know that?”** (Young woman, Newry)

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2 All participants were asked for their opinion, responses other than negative included 'don't know' and or 'don't care' or variations of these sentiments



**I have to pay extra now for everything from Amazon.”**

(Young man, Cork)

A young woman from Dublin explained the impact on her community (Romanian) because of the UK leaving the EU. She shared her thoughts on how the media in Romania was consistently broadcasting about the plight of families no longer feeling able to stay in the UK and having to return to Romania. She was clear that the impact was felt across the wider Romanian community including in Dublin.



**It was like we were seen as illegal and unwanted – already we face racism but it’s even more now. These people felt they lost their citizenship and had to go back to their old home or no home at all<sup>3</sup>. Surely everyone has the right to shelter and safety?”** (Young woman from an ethnic minority, Dublin)

The view that racist attitudes were increasingly noticeable was supported by others in the group and is reflected in a young woman’s story of a young Romanian immigrant who came to her school.



**It was so culturally different for him, he had to navigate – to do everything different – there was language barrier, cultural barrier – you could see he could never relax – he was always thinking, translating. He didn’t stay long at our school, he moved to another school where there were other Romanians – and you can’t say we weren’t affected because we were. I felt bad that those young people didn’t feel wanted. Anyone that says they’re not affected by Brexit are probably just not fully aware of how their emotions have been affected.”** (Young woman, rural Cork)

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3 No restrictions on free movement of EU citizens in UK immediately. Anyone wanting to stay in UK encouraged to apply for ‘settled status’ or ‘pre-settled’. The settled status applied to those in the UK for 5 years, pre-settled status applies to those not yet turned five, and who after five years can apply for resident status

Young people in Ireland intending to go to university had notable concerns about the cost of attending a university in Northern Ireland and/or Britain. A young man in Cork had examined figures in an exercise in economics class, the outcome being that higher costs associated may deter many from considering this as an option.

In Northern Ireland, a young woman in Belfast who is currently considering her options, is now planning to go to university in Dublin or Cork. She has worked out the fees and cost of living will be less prohibitive if she stays in Ireland in comparison to the travel and relocation expenses of travelling to universities in Great Britain.

The cost of further education is also causing concern and for many the opportunity is becoming increasingly something they feel is out of their reach.



**The cost of university fees is just not possible, not worth it – we're always told our education is important but so is being able to live ...I don't want to have a load of debt for the rest of my life... I could go back later if I want to – but now I need the money.”** (Young man, Cork City)

The impact of Brexit on the peace and stability of Northern Ireland was discussed by young people from across the island of Ireland. The geo-political differences perceived by children and young people are worth noting. Whilst acknowledging these perceptions we would exercise caution drawing any inference or conclusion given the confines of the research, but the observations are worthy of reflection and further study.

For many young people living in Ireland there was an underlying apprehension that Brexit would be a catalyst for a return to conflict in Northern Ireland. A young woman in Cork observed:



**Obviously there is history to it – but if people are unsure of what its going to mean and they feel the need to protect their own and make sure their family are safe and that might get more contentious.”** (Young woman, Skibbereen)

Conversely, young people from Belfast and Derry/Londonderry said they were embarrassed and ashamed that people outside Northern Ireland would make judgements about people, and assume that everyone behaved in the same way.

“

**They think all we do is fight and be aggressive when its really not like that... well it is, but only in really small bits – like a certain street – and everybody will know where that is in their own community.”** (Young woman, Antrim)

The juxtaposition of the thoughts of two young women in Dublin was profound. One talked of her:

“

**...concern for people in Belfast, I would be concerned about riots, street fights, pop up gangs – because of the segregation – the difference between English and Irish people.”** (Young woman from an ethnic minority, Dublin)

The second young woman said:

“

**We only hear one side of the story, we hear about people being scared – and that fight or flight state... if there's something like that in one aspect of your life it can heighten the chance of conflict in other areas of your life ...like girls and women can be put in dangerous circumstances if conflict is accepted in society as a way of life up there – in other areas not just Brexit.”** (Young woman, Cork)

Young people living in Ireland have perceptions of violence in cities in Northern Ireland and a belief that Brexit will bring a return to violence on the streets. A young man in Dublin said he believed that Derry/Londonderry might be worse than Belfast as:



**It has a bad history of violence throughout the Troubles – like the Battle of the Bogside – I think its more dangerous than Belfast.”** (Young man, Dublin)

Interestingly, this young man also considered that adults today who were young during ‘the Troubles’ would be certain to:



**...have more control and influence over their children to make sure things don’t progress to violence again – there is a fear about going back.”** (Young man, Dublin)

Post-Brexit there is a general feeling from participants in Ireland that it will “more likely” bring back trouble and conflict but that it will not be on the same scale as before. For participants in Northern Ireland, they thought it unlikely that things would get worse.



**It’ll be the same as it always is – some people will use it as an excuse to start something up – they’ll always find a reason.”** (Young woman, Ballymena)

A young person from Cork remarked:



**Brexit is just one of the dominoes, some people can be quite articulate but the people that haven’t found their voice, they will be the catalyst for more trouble.”** (Young man, Cork City)

Participants highlighted the influence of the media on public perception.



**The media are forcing people to choose; they are showing two sides and you have to be either for it or against it. Will we see history repeat itself? There are people who will target young people because they are impressionable ...including parents, older siblings, friends ...to follow a particular way of thinking.”** (Young mother, Belfast)

The young people from the Galway focus group did not feel that Brexit was having a significant impact on them in Ireland.



**“There is no sign of anything Brexit related in Galway; doesn't seem like anything, maybe imports, but I haven't seen anything. The young people from the west coast, rural areas like, its already common to emigrate and I don't think Brexit has made a difference.”** (Young woman, Galway)

The issues emanating from Brexit do not escape the attention of children and young people across the island of Ireland. The research discussions in Northern Ireland pointed to children and young people believing continued dispute regarding the NI Protocol<sup>4</sup> would lead to more protest and violence and that young people would undoubtedly be 'used' to agitate and be at the forefront of street violence. There was a sense of inevitability about this with one young person remarking:



**...it's always the same, the politicians stir it up and young people think they're defending their country, it's all crap – most of them don't even know what the protocol is...and it goes on again and again...it'll never end.”** (Young woman, Ballymena)

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4 The Northern Ireland Protocol (formally the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland) was part of the EU-UK withdrawal agreement and became part of international law and came into force on 1 January 2021. Its aim and purpose was to prevent a hard border on the island of Ireland. It has since been superseded by the 'Windsor Framework' which was agreed and announced by the EU and UK in February 2023.



With another young person commenting:



**Stop the green and orange argument and work on the issues people are facing – food, heat, home – our basic rights.”** (Young woman, Belfast)

As Brexit was overshadowed for a period, by the global pandemic and the research sessions were taking place as the war in Ukraine was unfolding, it is important to reflect what young people had to say on these issues.

## Summary

This study does not suggest that the views presented here are representative of the views of the wider population of children and young people across both jurisdictions of the island of Ireland. It is interesting to note that there were differences in perspective in relation to what impact Brexit might have on peace in Northern Ireland with participants from Ireland feeling it to be more likely to bring back trouble and conflict on the scale seen before, while participants from Northern Ireland thinking it to be unlikely that things would get worse. With respect to other issues, children in Ireland indicated they were largely unaffected by Brexit whilst those in Northern Ireland were aware of a range of negative effects such receiving goods, paramilitary activity, and general political unrest. None of those spoken to believed Brexit to have been in their, or the UK's, best interests.



## 2. Covid-19

As noted earlier in this analysis, the negative impact on the mental health of children and young people during peak and post Covid-19 is well documented. Young people reported in the focus groups that they believed there was an increase in street and gang violence in both jurisdictions. One young woman had noticed that a long-standing, low tension/ conflict between two local schools had increased in Dublin.



**Things have gotten worse – what with being so bored staying inside, I feel with the pandemic young people were already going against the rules going out – so they take it even further, push the boundaries further and get into worse situations now. A 13-year-old I know is hanging out with older kids ‘cos there was fewer (his age) around – then with peer pressure it gets bad.”** (Young woman, Dublin)

Some children (7-10 years old) in Newry remarked that they had more discussions about rights during the periods of lockdown than previously. They talked about the messages they had received about rights and protections, for example that they were told that the government wanted to keep people safe, so people had to stay at home and whether having the vaccine or choosing not to have the vaccine was a right.

It was interesting that young children demonstrated an awareness in the complexity of issues and of conflicting rights in this context.

The focus group in Cork discussed with some vigour, the breaking of lockdown rules and how those in government upholding rights had been caught out. The disparity in how young people perceived how they would be treated by the police was not lost on them.



**They said everyone needed to stay at home and then they broke their own rules – what going to happen to them – probably nothing, .... But if we did something the guards would be onto us.”** (Young man, Cork)

In all the focus group sessions children and young people reflected on the last couple of years and the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on all aspects of their lives. The effect on their family, school and social life has been significant. The teenagers talked about how facemasks gave them acne. This seemingly trivial detail is included in the analysis as it nods to the increasing pressures on pre-teens and teenagers to be aware of their looks and image.

The social ties that we all have and that give us a sense of belonging are among the most important protective factors in managing stress and other behavioural issues. The natural need to connect and belong was compromised during the lockdown periods due to Covid-19. The youngest research participants talked about not being able to go out and play with their friends whilst, the older participants were concerned about how their studies had been impacted, and were anxious about not being ready for exams because they had missed so much school. The full extent of impact of the pandemic on children and young people is unknown. However, it will be far reaching on their education, social networks, emotional wellbeing, and overall resilience. It will be important to increase understanding of this and ensure appropriate provision in policy and service delivery in the future to address any issues that are identified.



## Summary

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**Since March 2020, the impact of Covid-19 has been significant in global terms. Whilst governments continue to manage the health and economic consequences, the impact on a generation of children and young people needs to be more comprehensively researched and analysed.**

**Children and young people have clearly articulated their concerns regarding education, social activities not returning (particularly in rural communities), increased stress and anxiety and underlying apprehension and fear that the virus is still circulating in their community.**

## 3. War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent outbreak of war came into focus during group discussions at various times. For some participants, the situation between Russia and Ukraine had resonance with the conflict in Ireland:



**Like everyone's [global leaders] disagreeing about Ukraine, but that's what happened here ...only it's taken Ukraine a few weeks to take back their land but the Irish still haven't got it back."** (Young man, Cork)

This same discussion developed further, addressing issues of culture and identity. The space to consider what it would mean to have your country taken over by another was insightful. One young woman stated in horror that it would mean they would have to change their national anthem, their national flag and would lose their Irish language, a key part of this young woman's cultural identity. When asked why she believed that would happen she replied,



**They don't know what Irish is across the border and [they] see the Irish language [as] optional in the North."** (Young woman, Cork)

It was interesting to note the young people's perception of what it was to be Irish and the role of language as a strong feature of Irish identity. This was of particular interest when after further reflection they talked about learning Irish in school in Ireland.



**We learn it, but we don't use it...why is it taught then? .... Everyone thinks it important, but it's not taught properly ...it's only important if you want to go to college and be a teacher."** (Young woman, Cork City)

However, for a young woman in Newry the highlight of the school year was going to the Gaeltacht and feeling totally immersed in the Irish language if only for a couple of weeks.

Clearly, regardless of jurisdiction, young people of all ages are aware of and making sense of the current affairs and social issues of our time. They have access to vastly increased levels of information in comparison to previous generations, which they need to navigate, organise, and process. This is a double-edged sword as one young woman from Cork casually remarked,



**I'm very aware that information comes from different sources, and I have to research *everything* which is interesting (reflective pause) ...but still...you can't ever be sure about anything."** (Young woman, Cork)



## Summary

There are many sources of research and literature available regarding children, young people, and conflict. Indeed, much relates to the Irish conflict and its impact on the well-being and life opportunities for children and young people who are or have been affected by it.

Even with this brief glimpse into the current thinking of children, the lack of understanding of culture and identity both of 'ourselves' and the 'other' is demonstrable.

It could be argued that the ongoing conflict in Ukraine is impacting everyone at some level, and we need to also think about how it may be affecting children and young people.

## 4. Housing and Homelessness

Across both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland participants have talked about homelessness, housing lists, housing costs and their inability to buy a house, the Mica<sup>5</sup> situation, and the cost of living.<sup>6</sup>



**It really bothers me, there's a whole family that's homeless (in Cork), you see them every day...and the children are only small .... I don't know why or what's going to happen to them...."** (Young man, Cork City)

A child in Newry was also concerned about homeless people:



**Everyone should have a home, even a tent, no one should have to sleep outside."** (Young boy, 9 years old, Newry)

A young woman in Belfast led a discussion about the right to have somewhere to live that's safe. She talked about leaving care and ending up in a hostel for homeless people, and how difficult she found that environment to be in.



**That environment really brought me down, my mental health suffered really badly."** (Young woman care leaver, Belfast)

Their observations reflect the rising number of people and families unable to keep a roof over their head. The rapidly increasing cost of living and the cost of keeping homes reportedly likely to push many more over the edge to homelessness.

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5 "Ireland's Mica Situation. – The Rudd Site." 18 Oct. 2021, <https://theruddsite.ie/irelands-mica-situation/>

6 "NIHE | Northern Ireland Youth Forum." <https://www.niyf.org/nihe/>

Social housing and the criteria applied for getting points and subsequently a place on a waiting list was discussed across all the geographic areas.



**There is a big social housing waiting list (in Cork) ... you would find it hard to live independently. I couldn't afford rent at 19 – probably not until I'm about 25 with a decent job. To save up for a deposit on a house you'd need about €40,000 Euro – I'll be thirty something before that happens (laughs)."**<sup>7</sup> (Young man, Cork City)

The Mica<sup>8</sup> situation has also impacted thousands of children, according to participants everyone knows of someone who has been affected. Families are having to leave their home; some are staying in structurally unsound houses and can only use part of them.



**Sure, my uncle's house in Donegal, the whole side is collapsing but they don't have any money to do anything, the house isn't worth anything now...they're just living on one side until they can fix something else."** (Young man, Cork)

Again, a source of anxiety for those directly affected and their young friends who feel there is nothing they can do nothing to help.

The vulnerability of young LGBTQ+ people also came up. The reality for many young people is still family rejection and homelessness.



**There should be more acceptance of LGBTQ+ people... if your family have a problem with it, you're really screwed...I was kicked out and ended up homeless..."** (Young woman, Derry)

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7 [Will young people ever get on the property ladder?](#)

8 [Ireland's Mica Situation. – The Rudd Site](#)

## ➔ Summary

Children and young people have clearly articulated their concerns regarding housing ranging from homeless, affordability of housing and quality of housing. They felt that there is a need to ensure that children and young people's needs are central to housing policies and that there is an increase in social, affordable, and private housing to meet the needs of the population across the island.

They also felt that there needs to be a particular focus on LGBTQ young people and Care Leavers who are often more vulnerable to homelessness. Care leavers need trauma informed services including accommodation and housing that appropriately meets the needs of specific individuals.



Photo: Hayley Murray, unsplash.com



## 5. Education and School Culture

Within the discussion, each of the focus group was asked specifically about their knowledge of the existence of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Participants were all specifically asked if anyone had engaged with them in a discussion about the Convention or their rights more generally.

A simple show of hands indicated that whilst a few participants (approximately 10%) had learned about rights and the UNCRC in school or through their involvement in youth organisations, the vast majority had not.

Some organisations mentioned and credited with providing information about the rights of children or young people included the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's (NICCY) youth advisory group, Children's Law Centre (CLC), and Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) in Northern Ireland and Foróige and the National Youth Council of Ireland in Ireland. Participants who had engaged in programmes or projects talked animatedly about experiences.

A young woman in Belfast talked about her involvement in producing a youth-friendly leaflet<sup>9</sup> about rights with Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People and organising a launch event. She did question herself aloud though when she saw no one else in the group had seen or heard about it.

The research suggests that children and young people are not aware of learning about their rights in school. Further research is required as to the effectiveness of the current approaches and impact of what governments do have in place to meet their responsibilities in relation to informing and educating.

It was made very clear in each of the focus group discussions that the overwhelming consensus was that everyone should learn about their rights in school and that this should start at an early age.

Participants were somewhat varied in their views about what age this should begin, with opinions varying from preschool/nursery up to 7 years old. Interestingly age 7 was agreed as the upper age for beginning to educate children and within all focus groups, it was mentioned that children should get to know about their rights

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9 "Know Your Rights - niccy.org." <https://www.niccy.org/children-and-young-people/your-rights/know-your-rights/>



gradually using things that they can understand and relate to and developing that knowledge as they get older and their ability to comprehend deepens.

Some young people remarked that they 'have been' or 'are currently' a prefect or involved in a school's council. Except for one young man (Cork), they thought these groups were quite tokenistic and ineffective. Those who had experience of involvement remarked that often they were just asked to do particular things that the school would use for good public relations or an award.



**We just get to do things that made the school look good.”**  
(Young women, Belfast)

However, as the young man in Cork did go into some detail about his experience campaigning to have a non-uniform day on a Friday in school, he admitted it had surprised him that the campaign was successful.



**We didn't think they'd go for it at all – but we all got a petition going and then had a big meeting...where we made our case to the all the adults like... and she (the Headteacher) was like... ok then.”** (Young man, Cork)

He was undoubtedly proud of his achievement and clearly his confidence had grown because of the process.

It is obvious that the concept of student councils has not reached all schools and whilst there remains no mandatory expectation or quality assurance measures in place, the outcomes for those children and young people who are engaged in these roles and structures may not be consistently positive.

It would be unusual to have a discussion with young people of school age without the issue of uniform emerging. The issue of school uniform often provokes lively discussion, and these sessions were no exception.



**It just doesn't make sense – there is no logic – I could have my hair purple and that would be ok but wearing makeup or having piercings is distracting for other people in my class.”** (Young woman, Galway)

The suitability and practicality of current school uniforms was questioned by post primary participants in the main. The point most wanted to make was that it wasn't that they had a problem with the concept of having a uniform of sorts, but that the style had not changed in decades, and they were not practical nor comfortable.

The young people chatted animatedly about things they did or didn't like in school and talked quite generally about how they feel teachers don't listen to them.

One issue that came up in repeatedly both with young people across both jurisdictions was that of having to ask an adult to go to a bathroom/school toilet.



**I really think needing to ask a teacher to go to the toilet is a disgrace, surely that's a basic right... if you need to go you need to go, like right away."** (Young woman, Dublin)

The young people reported that on many occasions teachers did not give permission to leave the classroom to use the toilet, and that on some occasions they were forced to leave class without permission. Those talking about their experience know that some students mess about but by having a blanket no toilet rule presents a real issue and one they believe impacts on their basic rights.

It remains clear that governments and their respective education systems in both jurisdictions have not fully embraced and acted upon their obligation to inform children and young people about their rights in a systematic and effective manner.



## ➔ Summary

The views of participants in this research points towards opportunities being missed for all children and young people to have a good education about their rights within their school setting. The evidence is convincing that pupils who actively engage in the school environment have better educational outcomes and a more positive regard for learning generally.

Further investigation is undoubtedly needed to understand what the current challenges and barriers are to providing a more integrated approach to rights education in schools and a rights-based approach to education more generally to include how young people are more meaningfully involved in their school.



Photo: Monica Sedra, unsplash.com

## 6. Mental Health

The overarching message from children and young people throughout this research was that they are aware of what is going on both within their local communities and globally.

They see themselves as part of a world that is infinitely smaller than anyone could have imagined in previous generations. They speak of living in an age when technology has brought many benefits but has also bombarded children and young people with information and situations that are constantly evolving.

The young people talked of their concerns about navigating this new digital age in the full spotlight of social media which they recognise can potentially be a very toxic environment. Respondents reported feeling very emotionally aware but also acknowledged a feeling of powerlessness when it came to dealing with the serious issues such as war and climate change.



**I don't think our parents really understand what's going on, but I know they want to, they want to help us, but don't know how cos it's all new to them too.** (Young woman, Skibbereen)



**We all need someone to talk to at times and I know there's help out there, even in school, cos my friends see a counsellor in school, and can talk through their issues. But I see other young people who are isolated and don't know that help is there...how do they ask – they don't know who to ask ...** (Young woman, Dublin)

The voices of young people who have had lived experience within the care system were also vocal about the challenges they faced and with hindsight what they felt they should be taught.



**Young people leaving the care system should definitely know about their rights – every social worker should be expected to tell us about everything. Like I didn't know about VOYPIC<sup>10</sup> until I came here (Belfast), and my friend took me with her ...now I'm getting on much better with the support I get from them... but everyone should get that ...social workers don't inform us ..."** (Young woman, Derry)

Another young person highlighted the issue of the increased risk of homelessness for care leavers. This is not a new issue but clearly the remedy has not been found and the multiplying effects of childhood trauma on this vulnerable section of society is a moral abhorrence.



**The number of young people leaving the care system that end up homeless cos they don't know anything is a disgrace."** (Young women, care-experienced, Antrim)<sup>11</sup>

The voice of young mothers was also heard in the discussion about mental health.



**When I had my baby, I didn't have a clue what to do – I was told different things by the midwife and the health visitor and my social worker – everyone had an opinion, and I didn't know which one to believe ...it was really confusing, and I really struggled ... something needs to be done about that. My baby had rights from [when] she was born, and nobody cared about that."** (Young Mother with a Disability, Belfast)

Across all ages the rising costs of daily living and essential items was highlighted. One young boy in Newry chatted about how things were at his home.

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10 "VOYPIC - Home - Facebook." <https://www.facebook.com/voiceofyoungpeopleincare>

11 "Leaving care | Housing Advice NI." <https://www.housingadviceni.org/leaving-care-0>



**“My mum is really worried.”** (Young boy, Newry)

He was not alone as others mentioned that their parents had concerns about the expense of food, school dinners and school trips.<sup>12</sup> They related an incident of bullying in their classroom because someone was “poor.”



**“He’s always scruffy and a bit smelly...always getting picked on or left out...it’s not his fault.”** (Young boy, Newry)

The children went on to reflect about the situation facing young people in Ukraine who were having to leave their home. They displayed empathy and were visibly concerned about these children.



**“What must it be like for them? Not having a house, or food, a bed, toys a bike, water, or money?”** (Young girl, Newry)

Clearly images of war in Ukraine circulating, graphically displaying the trauma facing other children which we view on our screens daily is also having an impact on children.

This, in addition to the emotional impact of living through a global pandemic, compounds an already increasing mental health crisis. Whilst the intersectionality of effects is yet unquantifiable, the question must be asked, how do we monitor this, measure the long-term impact, and mitigate against the worst of the effects?

We could not leave the theme of school and education without again flagging the issue of bullying. Unsurprisingly, bullying was identified as an issue by younger children, with participants reporting not feeling safe at school, in the playground, or online. The focus group of under 10's in Newry was very vocal about bullying.

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12 “Social Justice Ireland: Poverty Focus 2021.” 14 Jun. 2021, <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/social-justice-ireland-poverty-focus-2021/>.





**It is my right not to be bullied in my school.”** (Young boy, Newry)<sup>13</sup>

## ➔ Summary

As noted earlier in the report we need to consider the mental health needs of children and young people and provide a holistic and strategic response. This research only reflects a fraction of what is already known about the crisis in mental health, and it could be argued that we have not yet reached an understanding of that challenge will increase in the coming years.



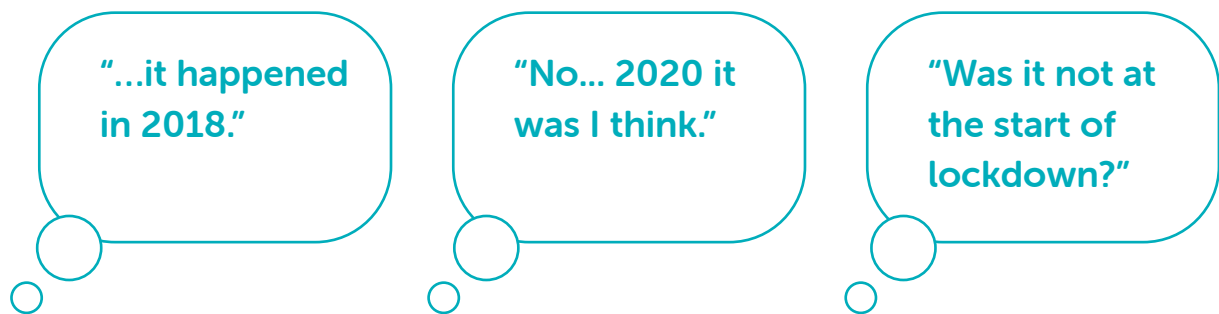
Photo: Markus Spiske, unsplash.com

13 "Anti-Bullying Policy | Department of Education." <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/anti-bullying-policy>  
"Scholarly Articles on Bullying in Schools: History & Prevention." <https://www.gale.com/open-access/bullying>

## 7. Participants under 10 years

As the research engaged children under the age of ten years, the initial focus of exploring the impact of Brexit did not resonate with their experience. Their knowledge of the implications of Brexit wasn't really understood although the children were familiar with the word 'Brexit' and that it was about leaving the EU.

Beyond basic word recognition their knowledge was a bit tenuous although in their eagerness to chat some had a guess:



Subsequently their focus group discussion centred more on the exploration of their thoughts and experiences of rights, and these insights tell a story by themselves.

**The most important rights from a child's perspective at this time were the following:**





These undoubtedly reflect a moment in history, but it is interesting that from the age of seven children have demonstrably organised their thinking about rights and related them to the issues of the day. For these young people, having 'rights' was very tangible and real.

As discussions evolved into how children could learn about rights a similar thought process emerged. It was about the everyday application of having rights or protecting the rights of another that came to the fore.

“

**Sticking up for the rights of yourself or a friend (even though I'm not purple)" – an enthusiastic boy who was so excited to share his views he took his turn early.** (Young boy, Newry)

“

**My friend Danny was being picked on – you'd have a conversation about how they were being rude."** (Young girl, Newry)

“

**Have a video about children helping."** (Young boy, Newry)

“

**My teacher got everyone to compliment everyone else in the class – it made us all feel very special and good."** (Young girl, Newry)

“

**I think the rights are the same in Cork but different in Donegal."** (Young boy, Newry)

“

**Most of the time it's only all the adults as apparently they don't think children are responsible enough."** (Young boy, Newry)

When asked do you think adults listen to what you're saying the children's automatic response was a **resounding NO from everyone ...but then** within a few moments, views become more considered and reflective.



**Sometimes they listen but don't agree."**



**My mum doesn't listen, she says no to going to McDonald's" (does she have a reason for saying no? – asks researcher) "cos she likes us eating vegetables... to keep us safe and healthy (laughs)."**

When children were asked to think about what questions they would ask of politicians, the diverse responses reflect a genuine interest in understanding how and why things work the way they do.

The participants had a range of questions which immediately came to the fore. This clearly reflects an interest in the 'political' from an early age and lays a challenge to those holding office, to communicate their personal roles and that of the institutions of government clearly to children.



**"Who can sit down and watch the Government work?"**



**"How many cameras are in there?"**



**"I'd like to go and see the government for real" (when the question was asked of the full group, over 50% also wanted to visit)**



**"How does the government keep track of all the work?"**



**"How many people in government are there?"**



**"How many people work there?"**

The political interests of children went beyond the people and structures of government and represented in questions as follows:

-  **"Why do I have to do the transfer test?"**
-  **"What is the next thing they are going to do to keep children safe?"**
-  **"Why are they going to keep Northern Ireland and Ireland separate?"**
-  **"Are children important?"**
-  **"Why has the price of all essentials gone up so much?"**
-  **"Where's the Ukraine people gone?"**
-  **"What football team do you support?"**

## 8. Concluding Thoughts

The focus group sessions concluded with a question put to the children and young people about how they thought adults and governments could do better to help them secure their rights. There was a remarkable confluence of opinions across age groups and geographic location which best reflected in the word's children and young people.



**Youth workers should help, and support young people aged 7+, and educate young people on their rights."**

(Young man, Belfast)



**Early years workers should help with families to protect rights of babies, children and parents."**

(Young mother, Belfast)



**Teachers supporting students, educating young people on rights but also adhering to the rights of young people."**

(Young woman, Cork)



**Having rights implemented into education from primary school onwards."**

(Young man, Cork)



**The police should be protecting us, looking out for signs of abuse & helping us knowing what to do...help children and young people be safe."**

(Young lesbian, Belfast)



**More rights & advocacy workers like the ones in VOYPIC, NICCCY, CLC."**

(Young woman, Derry)

“

**Legal advice that's easy understanding and accessible to young people, to protect young people's safety, protect their rights.”** (Young woman, Derry)

“

**Does the government actively involve young people in consultation processes? – we should be involved from the start.”** (Young woman, Antrim)

“

**Ask how they are implementing law to protect our rights and then ask how young people are impacted.”** (Young woman, Lisburn)

The focus group sessions ended with participants sharing concluding thoughts about how they would like governments to better listen to children and young people.



Photo: Sarah Dietz, pexels.com

1. Our parents should know that we have rights from birth which protect us from harm.
2. We should learn about our rights in primary school.
3. Teachers, social workers, and adults who work with us should be knowledgeable about our rights.
4. We should understand when someone is harming us and have somewhere to go for help.
5. We should be involved by government(s) in developing solutions to our issues.
6. Government(s) should tell us what they are doing to protect our rights.

# Conclusion

This research provides a glimpse into the thoughts of some children and young people in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The one constant throughout the consultation is that children and young people from an early age are aware of the wider global narrative, are reflective of the experiences of others as well as their own and are not blind to the moral questions of the day.

In relation to the impact of Brexit, it is interesting to note that there were differences in perspective in relation to what impact Brexit might have on peace in Northern Ireland. Participants from Ireland felt it would be more likely to bring back trouble and conflict on the scale seen before, while participants from Northern Ireland thought it to be unlikely that things would get worse. Children and young people in Ireland indicated they were largely unaffected by Brexit whilst those in Northern Ireland were aware of a range of negative effects such as receiving goods, paramilitary activity, and general political unrest.

In all the focus group sessions, children and young people reflected on the last couple of years and the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on all aspects of their lives. Children and young people have clearly articulated their concerns regarding education, social activities not returning (particularly in rural communities), increased stress and anxiety and an underlying apprehension and fear that the virus is still circulating in their community. Further work needs to be done to understand the full impact of the pandemic on children and young people.

In relation to culture and identity, there were discussions on what it meant to be Irish and the role of language as a strong feature of Irish identity for children and young people. It is interesting to note that some of the young people in Ireland feared the loss of the Irish language. Even with this brief glimpse into the current thinking of children in both jurisdictions, the lack of understanding of culture and identity both of 'ourselves' and the 'other' is demonstrable.

The children and young people who took part in the consultation clearly expressed their concerns regarding housing ranging from homelessness, affordability of housing and quality of housing. They felt that there is a need to ensure that children and young people's needs are central to housing policies and that there is an increase in social, affordable and private housing to meet the needs of the population in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. Across all ages, the rising costs of daily living and essential items was highlighted.

In relation to education about rights, it was clear that the children and young people who took part felt that not all children and young people were receiving the information and education they needed. The views of participants in this research point towards opportunities being missed for all children and young people to have a good education about their rights within their school setting. Further research is needed to understand the effectiveness of current approaches and to understand what the current challenges and barriers are to providing a more integrated approach to rights education in schools.

This study does not suggest that the views presented here are representative of the views of the wider population of children and young people, however it is interesting to note the many similarities in the experiences of children and young people.

### **They want:**

- to be taken seriously**
- to have information and education about their rights**
- to have their rights visible and accessible**
- to be able to come together to campaign on common interests**
- health professionals and others to listen and support**
- inclusion and equality promoted in society**
- support services and counsellors available 24/7 providing talking therapy and preventing suicide**



## Annex 1

### Focus Group Road Map

- › **Welcome and icebreakers**
- › **Outline purpose of the session**
- › **Clarity about UNCRC and rights for children and young people**
- › **Explore if Brexit has had influence on their own lives or the lives of young people generally.**
- › **Explore what it is like to live on the same island and if there are any geopolitical differences.**
- › **What life is like for children and young people (needs/rights) in various parts of the island?**
- › **Consider the concept of principles in relation to how they would like their rights to be protected, promoted. Who should be doing what?**
- › **How could young people's involvement be guaranteed by governments.**



Photo: Daiga Ellaby, unsplash.com



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