



“It can’t all be about young people doing the heavy lifting.”

**YouthPact report of the consultation with young people on
the SEUPB PEACE PLUS Programme Proposals
April - May 2021**

Joe Hawkins & Joanne Stainsby

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Introduction

YouthPact and Peace4Youth

The EU Peace4Youth Programme is managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), with all-island support from the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland) and the Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth (Ireland). The programme employs a youth work approach to address some of the most entrenched insecurities, inequalities and instability in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland, targeting 7400 young people aged 14-24 over a 4year period (2017-2021) who are disadvantaged, excluded, or marginalised, have deep social and emotional needs and are at risk of becoming involved in anti-social behaviour, violence, or dissident activity.

[YouthPact](#), the Quality and Impact Body for the Peace4Youth Programme, works with the funded projects to promote and support a culture of continuous improvement and to provide training and resources that enhance the impact of the work for participating young people.

The focus of the work is on good relations, personal development, and citizenship, which will bring about a positive change, in the form of clear, meaningful, and sustainable 'distance travelled' for those young people who participate.

Young Voices

One of the roles of the YouthPact initiative is to provide a Youth Participation Mechanism to complement the work of Peace4Youth delivery agents in this area of practice, which we call "Young Voices".

To date YouthPact has held four in-person Young Voices events with programme participants focussed on their experience of Peace4Youth itself, Brexit, their vision for the future (Vision 2040) and the initial PEACE PLUS consultations in Feb/Mar 2020. During the Covid-19 public health restrictions we went online to capture and highlight young people's experience as Peace4Youth Participants in the pandemic, entitled '2020 in 4'.

This Young Voices report, 'Something to Say about PEACE PLUS' came about following a request from SEUPB for support in capturing the voice of young people on its investment and spending proposals for the Programme. YouthPact agreed to undertake a coordination, facilitation, and a report-writing role to ensure that these voices are captured in a report that can feed directly into the consultation, but more importantly can be fed into the substance of future call documents for the PEACE PLUS Programme.

Quotes

The views expressed and the direct quotes used throughout this report are from young people who participated in the focus group consultation sessions. We have clearly highlighted when this is not the case, for example, where we have included a Youth Worker perspective.

Approach and Process

YouthPact contacted the 11 Peace4Youth Project Coordinators to check out the capacity within their projects and seek their support in this initiative.

Coordinators were also advised that YouthPact staff would be facilitating the consultation with young people and that it would take place online. We were clear that there was no obligation to take part and projects were invited to nominate young people who would be interested in participating in the consultation focus groups.

YouthPact facilitated **11 online focus group sessions** with **Peace4Youth projects**, during April/May 2021. **66 young people**, both current and past Peace4Youth participants, shared their insights, over a period of **17 hours of discussion**, and were supported by **18 Peace4Youth workers**.

The Focus Group Sessions

Typically lasted 1.5 hours

Engaged a balance of young men and women aged 14-24 years old.

Included young people from both urban and rural areas.

Involved young people from a wide geographical area across Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland.

Young people identified as coming from the two largest communities and neither, as well as from other minoritised ethnic communities, faiths and cultural backgrounds.

Footnote:

It was not intended that focus group makeup would be representative of Peace4Youth programme participants.

Session Plan

After a round of introductions, young people were invited to reflect on and share their own experiences of participating in Peace4Youth: what attracted them to the project they chose to participate in, what helped them stay involved and if there was one thing, they would change...?

This was then used as a platform for considering the six themes and investment areas contained in the PEACE PLUS Programme proposals. A short video produced by SEUPB specifically for this consultation process with young people was used in clips. The video featured the SEUPB Chief Executive, Gina McIntyre, who briefly spoke about what SEUPB does before outlining the scope of each of the six themes. It finishes by thanking young people for their participation and explaining how SEUPB would use the information gathered through the consultation process.

Following each clip YouthPact staff shared some additional information from the SEUPB consultation documents and invited young people to give their thoughts, views, and opinions on each proposed theme.

The third aspect of the consultation focussed on the question of identity and invited young people to share their feelings and reactions to being asked, 'do you identify as Catholic, Protestant or other?'

Looking back

Before considering the proposed themes and investment areas of the PEACE PLUS Programme we chose to take time to look back. The intention was to create a space for reflection, help young people connect with and make sense of their journey on the Peace4Youth Programme; in order to pick out those points that will help plot the course ahead.

We asked three questions:

1. What attracted you to the project?
2. What helped you stay involved?
3. What's the one thing you would change?

This was an essential part of the focus group process in that each young person had their own unique experiences and insights to share. It built their confidence for speaking and contributing, which was critical for when we moved on to look at the proposed programme themes and investment areas.

1. What attracted you to the project?

The responses shared during this consultation as to what initially attracted young people to the respective Peace4Youth projects were highly consistent with those gathered in a previous YouthPact Young Voices session, YouthPact research and through the YouthPact staff team's engagement with project co-ordinators and workers over the period of the programme. For example:

Word-of-Mouth - hearing positive things from previous participants/their peers. *"I heard good things about the programme from people who did it before."*

Social opportunities - to make new friends, be part of a group, socialise and develop interpersonal relationships. *"Prior to the Programme I had limited social interactions. I was dealing with addiction issues. I initially got involved to get out of the house."*

Challenge - the chance to try new activities, *"I was quite shy – I saw this as an opportunity to push myself out of my comfort zone. I'm really glad I did."*

Safe & Secure – the importance of having a safe place to go and to experience a sense of belonging. A young person commented that *"I joined at a time when I wasn't in a great place - when I was out of work and not in education. I had not been doing much with my life so signed up for the programme"* in the hope to find a sense of direction. Others commented that they wanted to *"feel part of something bigger."*

Incentives - food, finance, travel, childcare, merchandise. Young people essentially joined Peace4Youth projects for a *"a combination of factors – friends, workers, content, trips, fun! Incentive payments were a bonus, and the food!"*

1a. What attracted you during the pandemic?

There were also responses that were specific to participants in 2020/21 during the pandemic and the resulting public health restrictions. These included a need to:

Feel connected - young people shared that the social isolation experienced during the extended periods of lockdown was challenging. *"[Being at] home, not doing much, where the days were running into each other, which was difficult."* Peace4Youth Projects offered the opportunity to connect with others, reduce social isolation and improve mental health.

Create Structure - to re-establish a routine and a sense of purpose to the week. The restrictions in 2020 meant that opportunities to get involved with projects that created connections were limited. Young people shared that they got involved as it offered, *"a chance to meet new people, as well as providing a structure and focus to the week."*

2. What helped you stay involved?

There were several factors that young people highlighted that encouraged and supported them to remain on the Peace4Youth projects:

Workers Cared - this was echoed across all 11 focus groups, from their initial engagement with project staff, young people commented that workers demonstrated positive regard and they felt listened to, respected, and valued. *"From my first interaction with workers I felt heard and cared for. I felt a strong sense that this programme was something worth doing."* *"The Worker cares. But they also push and challenge me."*

Peer Relationships - young people valued the relationships they formed with their peers, a feeling that they *"were part of something bigger."* Other young people referred to their group as being *"like family."* One young person described the bond they had formed with their peers, *"There is a strong sense of solidarity amongst all the young mums. And it is a great support network."*

Programme Content & Activities - young people expressed that they were interested and engaged in the content and the range of activities, and as one young person summed up, *"even on Zoom, so that's saying something!"*

Many young people stated that *"social and political issues are generally not discussed at school"*, however, the Peace4Youth projects offered a safe space where they could explore their own values and beliefs, as well as hear diverse perspectives.

As one young person articulated *"from learning sign language to exploring different cultures, I enjoyed expanding my knowledge in all these different areas. It all helped to breakdown stigmas and challenged prejudices."* Others highlighted that the content was tailored to the group, and that participants were actively engaged in shaping it, *"We are*

asked about what we need and what we want to do. The programme is very much based around our needs.” Another focus group reiterated this and shared the positive impact of being trusted to lead a process, “it was the first time I have been involved with a programme where young people could take the lead, for example with the community project. We had allocated responsibilities and we were trusted to follow through.”

Achieving qualifications was also an important aspect of Peace4Youth for many of the young people involved and working towards an end goal helped to motivate them to stay the distance.

Mentoring and Support - aside from group work and qualifications, an important aspect of Peace4Youth projects for many Young People was the mentoring support element, *“I really appreciated having access to counselling.”* Others highlighted *“the check-ins from the workers that kept me motivated, and on track”*, whilst some young people explicitly attributed their subsequent successes to this mentoring aspect, *“the support I received from participating in the programme, helped me to get back into education, and get a job.”*

Fun! - this resounded from young people across all focus groups, *“it was good craic,” “the activities were fun”, and “I looked forward to going. Even when I had to take two buses after school to get there, it didn’t feel like a chore.”*

3. What's the one thing you would change?

The young people who engaged in the focus groups had positive experiences of Peace4Youth projects. The majority were content with the overall experience and could not think of any particular aspects they would add, change, or drop to enhance the overall programme. However, young people felt that the following points should be considered for planning similar Youth Programmes going forward:

Duration - several young people from both current and previous cohorts, across many of the projects, highlighted they would have liked the duration of the project to have been longer - not the number of weekly contact hours, but the actual length of the programme, *“six months is not enough time to do what the programme sets out to do. Some participants were just starting to get comfortable when it came to an end.”*

Other young people who attended school suggested that that the programme hours are distributed differently, *“Do more hours over the summer months, and not quite as many during the school term.”*

Employability - a few of the groups suggested that going forward it would be useful to include a core element that *“focuses on employability skills and preparing people for finding a job and experiencing the workplace.”* Young people welcomed that this has been taken on board and will be embedded into the PEACE PLUS Youth Programme under Theme 3.

Increased engagement with wider groups - a few young people suggested that an international element, or more in-depth engagement with other smaller communities that call Northern Ireland and Ireland home, would potentially deepen understanding of different cultures, faiths, and traditions, *“Maybe getting away from the local area and engaging with minority communities, and learning more about their cultures, for example, with the Irish Traveller Community.”*

‘New Communities’ - some participants from New Communities also highlighted that families who may be relatively new to Northern Ireland, may have limited understanding of what happened in the past, and therefore can struggle with navigating the complexities within and between the two largest communities. They can be directly impacted by ongoing tensions within different areas yet may not be included in discussions around peacebuilding, *“Coming from a minority community, moving from one segregated country to a different country where segregation is also prevalent, was difficult. At school I often felt excluded, as people were not used to other cultures or communities. It can be difficult to make space for minority communities in a divided society.”*

Online Cohorts - participants, who engaged primarily online shared specific reflections of how their experience was impacted by the restrictions in 2020/21 due to Covid-19: this was echoed and reinforced by youth workers who supported the consultation sessions. Young people were vocal that they understood this was outside anyone’s control, *“I would love to have met in person, but this was the way it was for everyone, and we all contributed to making it work. We adapted.”* Others expressed a sense of disappointment and a feeling that *“due to lockdown restrictions our group missed out on some of the experiences that other groups had in previous years. This was outside anyone’s control though, because of Covid.”*

Some workers also acknowledged that it can be difficult interacting solely online, and that those participants who were part of the programme during restrictions, had a different experience than previous cohorts, with limited opportunities to go on physical trips, or engage face-to-face. However, workers also stated that the online approach facilitated the engagement of some young people who may not have engaged otherwise, if it was purely face-to-face.

Looking Forward

Having looked back to support young people make sense of their experience, the next stage of the focus group process was to look at and gather young people's feedback on the proposed PEACE PLUS themes and investment areas.



After following the process outlined in the Session Plan section on page 5, there was broad consensus and support across all 11 focus groups for the six themes proposed in the PEACE PLUS Programme

Theme 1: Building Peaceful and Thriving Communities

For example, this could be about rebuilding and enhancing areas that have had difficult times, projects that involves people from all different communities and/or improve places that people from all communities can share. Also, although significant progress has been made on improving relations between communities, persistent low levels of trust, and high levels of segregation remain. Young people were invited to share if this was their lived experience.

There was widespread acceptance that further work is needed under this proposed theme with agreement that investment should be made in this area.

Young people across most of the focus groups recognised that segregation continues to be a significant reality for many people in Northern Ireland, and this is reflected in their own lived experiences, *“division is still a big issue. Even political parties are hugely divided along these lines. I have also experienced sectarianism when I have been in areas that I don’t know.”*

Northern Ireland focus group participants also discussed the challenges of forming friendships with people from different community backgrounds when they live separately, *“How would we meet or be friends with Protestants when we all go to Catholic Schools? And outside school we do Gaelic Games?”*

For some young people, participating in a Peace4Youth project, was their first opportunity to engage with others from different community backgrounds to their own, *“I live in East Belfast. Before this programme I had never met someone from West or North Belfast (from a different background to me). I am 23.”*

Other young people highlighted that although they may live in areas that are perceived to comprise of people mainly from one community or the other, they still have mixed friendship groups, both within and outside of school. This was particularly prevalent amongst young people within the focus groups that attended integrated schools. A few focus group participants also commented that it is important to be able to *“feel respected, but also that no one should look down on others for celebrating their culture or religion”*.

Young people discussed the recent street violence in April 2021, that impacted different areas of Northern Ireland. Young people were at the forefront of this violence and focus group participants referenced how those engaged in the disturbances were being rallied on by adults cheering from the side-lines. *“There was violence recently on the peace-line, and in the videos circulating on social media you could see adults cheering on young people who were engaged in the riots. This may be the first time for some of those young people when they felt admiration from adults. Young people were being led like sheep for other people’s gains.”*

Some focus group participants were keen to emphasise the importance of challenging the attitudes of older generations. Young people shared that they have inherited the current separate education system, the segregated housing, and their parents/grandparents’ opinions of what happened in the past, therefore, to address segregation *“It can’t all be about young people doing the heavy lifting.”*

Young People from the Border Counties of Ireland reflected that segregation between Catholic and Protestant communities was not so much of a lived reality for them. Young people commented that *“people who live here [rural border county] and surrounding areas tend to be from the same community background.”* There was also agreement that *“there is less of a divide between Catholics and Protestants than there might be in more diverse towns and cities like Derry and Belfast.”*

There were discussions however around increasing diversity, and a Youth Worker commented that segregation is an issue in the Republic of Ireland, although it manifests differently than in Northern Ireland:

“There are divisions between people from the Traveller Community, and some Black African Communities. So, although Northern Ireland has divisions between Catholic and Protestant Communities, there are also segregated communities in the border counties of Ireland as well.” **Youth Worker**

Several young people acknowledged that participating in a Peace4Youth Programme has had a significant impact on how they view the world. *“I wasn’t brought up being told you can’t be friends with a Protestant, for example. But I just didn’t know what a Protestant was, because where I grew up you just weren’t allowed to talk to them, it was like a forbidden word. Since doing this programme though, I feel safer now driving into a Protestant area. I*

even went to an [Orange Order] March with my friends from the group, as I respected what their needs and traditions are. They also came to the St Patrick's Day Parade with me."

Another young person commented that *"participating in this programme was the best thing to help me grow as a person. We were all from different backgrounds, but we had the opportunity to talk to each other, challenge each other, but in a respectful way. These were the foundations on which we built strong friendships."*

Theme 2: Delivering Economic Regeneration and Transformation

For example, this could be about funding opportunities for smaller employers to get back on their feet after the effects of the pandemic and Brexit (e.g. Tourism & Hospitality) through improved training and skills and upgrading technology in towns and villages.

There was consensus across all 11 focus groups that this theme should be resourced.

Young people welcomed this proposed theme and investment area, *"I am one of those people who will need a job, so hopefully this makes a difference to the opportunities that will be available!"*

Focus group participants were keen to emphasise their support for investing further in broadband infrastructure, and increased internet access for everyone. Some young people commented that this past year, with people working and studying from home, the issue of access to good quality broadband connectivity has been problematic for some, particularly for those in rural areas. *"I have just completed this Peace4Youth training programme online. This would not have been possible without good internet connection. Not everyone has access to that."*

Focus group participants also highlighted the importance of investment in training opportunities that are good quality and provide positive learning experiences.

Some young people from the Border Counties of Ireland commented that *"more investment is needed to improve the transport networks as Donegal, for example, can feel quite cut off from the rest of the island."*

There was also a feeling that the variety of jobs currently available in the border counties of Ireland can be limited, *"the way things are at the minute, I just can't see myself staying [here] after school. There just isn't the same opportunities as there are in other places. So yes, it would be important to invest more in the local economy."*

A **Youth Worker** in the border counties also highlighted that a *"large part of our economy is tourism. We need to invest more in young people to encourage/support them to stay here – to avoid another mass exodus like ten years ago."*

There was discussion in some focus groups that the economy is about people and the conversation moved towards building confidence, self-esteem and aspiration. Some young people suggested that support for workers' mental health and training in their rights as employees should be a core feature of economic regeneration. Young people also felt that an aspect of this should be about investing in communities that may be underrepresented in some sectors. Young people highlighted that if they can see people who look like them, from similar backgrounds, succeeding in a particular job and sector, then they can also aspire to these roles.

Several participants also referenced the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on small, local businesses and called for more support to help them to rebuild, *"it can be harder for small businesses to build up a reputation, keep up-to-date with all the latest skills/techniques - as a young entrepreneur myself, I have been heavily impacted by Covid and so I welcome investment to support economic regeneration, particularly for small, local places."* Other focus group participants also called for more investment to support and encourage young entrepreneurs.

Theme 3: Empowering and Investing in Our Young People

There was a high degree of consensus across all 11 focus groups that this theme, and the proposed investment areas, should be funded.

i) Shared Learning Together Programme

For example, shared learning together programmes which are about creating opportunities for children and young people from different religious backgrounds to be educated alongside each other.

Young people were asked if they had experience of Shared Education, for example, when a class at one school shares a subject with a class from a different school and if they agreed that funding Shared Learning Together Programmes was a good use of money?

The majority of young people were unsure or did not know if they had direct experience of Shared Education at school. A small number of young people from across the 11 focus groups were confident they did have some experience of Shared Education at school, in the form of joint classes on specific campuses. Others shared examples of much earlier Primary School experiences of joint trips with children from different schools.

Although not everyone had experienced it, there was general agreement that Shared Education should be resourced and extended beyond schools to include Youth Work Programmes. *"These programmes are much needed. Our history may never be agreed, but we still need to prepare young people for living and working together going forward."*

Several participants mentioned that although they had not experienced Shared Education within the school setting, they have had similar experiences within youth work programmes, *I have done these activities with youth clubs. Not everyone goes to a youth club though, so more of these opportunities should happen at school."*

Other young people reflected that *“Shared Education is so important. Many people continue to stay in their own community group, and don’t venture beyond it. There can be limited opportunities to meet people from different backgrounds if you go to separate schools and live within separate communities. One of the ways to break this down is through shared education”*.

A number of focus group participants emphasised that they agree *“Shared Education is a good idea; so long as it really is about young people and teachers in schools from different denominations coming together.”* Others emphasised that, *“for it to be truly shared, it has to include a whole class, or even a whole year group, and not just a select few.”*

Several participants highlighted that the themes of Shared Education should be broader, *“Shared Education programmes should be more long-term and also go wider than looking at the Catholic/Protestant Communities.”* They should also include a focus on things like *“race, gender and sexual orientation”*.

ii) PEACE PLUS Youth Programme

For example, a programme that builds upon Peace4Youth. The key areas would include good relations, personal development, citizenship and employability.

Young people across all the Peace4Youth projects represented supported the proposal for funding this investment area. They also agreed that an employability element would be a welcome addition to further enhance PEACE PLUS Youth Programmes.

Although not an explicit aspect of Peace4Youth, several young people commented that the programme supported them with developing practical skills that helped them to secure employment, *“This was the best Youth Work Programme I have participated in. We were one big friendship group. I achieved qualifications, and from this secured my first job.”*

Many focus group participants stated that formal education *“doesn’t sufficiently prepare young people for the practicalities of living independently, or how to go about securing employment.”* They felt this should be addressed in any new Youth Programme, *“no one is born knowing how to do these things - looking for a job, interview skills, or how to do a particular job, therefore young people need to be supported with developing these [practical] skills.”*

Other elements that were highlighted by focus group participants that they feel should also be integral to an employability element of future PEACE PLUS Youth Programmes include:

- Understanding employment rights and responsibilities.
- Advice on starting your own business
- Understanding different financial services
- Understanding Credit Scores; and
- Good budgeting/financial management.
- Understanding compulsory employee contributions (tax, NIC, PRSI)

Some participants also mentioned that within school young people can already take part in work experience placements, therefore they consider it important to adopt a flexible approach to this within future Youth Programmes. For example, work placements could be very valuable to some young people, whilst for others it could feel like an additional pressure.

Youth Workers also emphasised that sufficient time for sourcing valuable placements and supporting young people during any work experience placements, would need to be factored in.

iii) Youth Mental Health and Well-being Programme

For example, a programme that would help young people with mental health challenges and improve their wellbeing.

Resourcing a specific Youth Mental Health Programme was widely welcomed across all the 11 Focus Groups, *“There is a need to focus on mental health with young people – and others – particularly after this year. Mental Health issues have increased during lockdown.”*

Some young people commented on the disparity between the other two areas in this Youth Specific theme, and asked the question *“why only £20m for Youth Mental Health and £45million for Shared Education?”* Others reflected on this further, *“if more is invested into mental health services for young people, to support them to be more accepting of themselves, they will then be more able to build relationships with other people, no matter what their religion or background.”*

Many young people spoke candidly of their own experiences of accessing Mental Health Services, and highlighted areas that were problematic and/or under-resourced.

Several young people outlined how they are encouraged to reach out, and talk to others, if they are experiencing difficulties, *“however when young people do ask for help, there is often a shortage in available services.”* Other anecdotes shared included, *“I know so many young people personally who have been diagnosed with a Mental Illness. Although there is more support than there used to be, it’s still not enough.”*

A few young people highlighted that in Northern Ireland *“there is a significant difference in support available for a 17-year-old, and an 18-year-old. Once I turned 18, I could only access three hours of counselling. Does it take someone to be in a crisis, a life and death situation, to get the appropriate help they need? There needs to be more focus on the needs of young people aged 18+ to support with the transition to adult services.”*

Some other focus group participants also referenced carers, *“It is important to widen this and invest in services that support those who are supporting people with mental health illnesses. And to consider children who are living with parents, or siblings, who might have mental health issues.”* Others highlighted that *“there is very limited support available for carers.”*

Some young people did not necessarily agree that further Mental Health programmes for Young People are the answer. They reflected that it is adults (teachers/parents etc.) that need more awareness and greater understanding of how to respond appropriately when a young person confides in them that they are struggling.

Young people highlighted that current Mental Health Training can be too generalised. They said that that often comments from teachers/parents/other adults can be most damaging and can demonstrate a lack of empathy: *“What have you got to be sad about?” “School days are the best days of your life.” “Why are you lying in bed all day – don’t be so lazy.”*

Young People commented that stresses from exam preparation, and other workloads, can have a negative impact on their mental health. Some participants shared that their experience of speaking to teachers about this can often be met with inflexibility and a perceived lack of empathy.

Theme 4: Healthy and Inclusive Communities

For example, more than just physical health, it's about the well-being of communities and investment areas under this theme will include collaborative cross-border healthcare delivery; tackling inequalities and enhancing social inclusion in rural communities; and support for Victims and Survivors from the conflict.

There was consensus across all groups that this theme, and the investment areas should be funded.

Young people across all the focus groups agreed with the proposal to resource the improvement of access to healthcare for people in rural communities, and those living in the Border Counties.

They also agreed that Victims and Survivors impacted by the Troubles should be supported.

Some young people commented on their understanding of the past conflict and shared how they felt victims/survivors have been treated poorly, *“I am learning about the Troubles in History. Often the needs of victims have been swept under the carpet. Our teacher shared with us what Boris Johnston has proposed recently in relation to drawing a line under what happened during the Troubles, which means many will not get any justice. So many innocent people were murdered. This should never be brushed under the carpet! It’s important to try to provide some sort of closure to all these families.”*

Other young people shared their family experiences from the conflict and the long-term impact this has had, *“My granny wasn’t injured physically, but she was traumatised when a bomb went off in a pub below her. Even people who may have been involved in paramilitaries were impacted by their involvement, and the things they saw. All these different people need to be supported.”*

Another focus group participant reflected on a story that was shared with her, by a friend's father, of seeing his best friend being shot, during The Troubles. *"He still remembers it all, from start to finish. I think he is still traumatised."* Young people reiterated that *"It is important there is help and support for victims and their families. There should be space for people to come together, to share/talk about their experiences."*

A number of focus group participants referenced the impact of intergenerational trauma on families and communities, and suggested that if this is not properly addressed, that people's mental health will continue to be negatively impacted.

Theme 5: Supporting a Sustainable and Better Connected Future

For example, climate change related projects, environmental protection, cross-border water ways/water quality, energy efficiency development. Encourage appreciation of our outstanding and irreplicable natural beauty. Cross-border rail improvement between Belfast and Dublin.

There was widespread agreement that this is an important investment area and should be funded.

Young People were invited to comment on whether they see or hear opportunities in the proposals under this theme, for themselves, their peers, their families, and their communities.

Young People highlighted that *"We have to do something to protect the environment. These issues effect all of us."* Focus group participants also reiterated that *"there needs to be more awareness raising around how we can all do our bit."*

There were discussions that not everyone is aware of the small changes they can make in their own lives, and the positive impact that these could potentially have. Some young people also mentioned the recent fires that were started deliberately in the Mourne Mountains and suggested that more awareness is needed to ensure that people are informed of the negative, long term consequences that incidents like this can have.

Young people also suggested that there should be more opportunities to *"get people involved in regeneration, and community environmental initiatives. For example, like the Greenway in East Belfast. It used to be a dump, and now it's a space where everyone feels proud off. It would be good to replicate projects like this, where the community can get involved and take ownership."*

Some young people commented that they are aware of areas where, *"even now, recycling isn't something that everyone can get involved with. There are flats for example, in Belfast, where residents are not supported to recycle."*

Focus group participants also highlighted that *“there is a lack of things in place to support E-Cars, for example,”* and suggested that there is need for investment in practical solutions that support people to make better environmental decisions.

Focus group participants were also keen that there is funding made available under this theme that will *“support people to advocate, campaign and challenge – so that people can hold governments and organisations accountable on environmental issues.”*

Theme 6: Building and Embedding Partnership and Collaboration

For example, cross-border co-operation and helping organisations on both sides of the border plan things together. Helping local people on both sides of the border to do things together.

There was general agreement that funding should be available to promote and support cross-border collaborations as, *“it’s important to promote good relationships,”* and *“finding common ground.”*

In one focus group there was a sense of surprise that cross-border cooperation required funding, *“I think that this should happen anyways without money being involved.”*

A number of young people were keen to emphasise, *“that cross border collaborations should involve a wide spectrum of different communities [and that] the groups from Northern Ireland need to be cross-community for this to work.”*

A small number of young people who contributed to this consultation have uncertain immigration status, or there are restrictions on their ability to move between Northern Ireland (UK jurisdiction) and the Republic of Ireland. This is important to note as it can have a bearing on their ability to engage fully in cross-border projects and collaborations.

Identity and Equality Monitoring

"It is important that the rejection of traditional patterns of identity are acknowledged by politicians, policy makers." ([Changing identities in Northern Ireland, Devine, 2021](#))

Young people across all 11 focus groups were asked if they were put off or bothered by this question, "Are you a member of the Catholic, Protestant or Other Community?"

There were mixed responses to this question. Some responded favourably, *"It doesn't bother me. I am proud of my background,"* whilst others stated *"I hate this question. People shouldn't feel categorised."*

Many young people had a general understanding of why the question is asked, *"I understand that it helps funders and programmes determine the level of engagement from people from different community backgrounds."*

However, others expressed that they didn't understand why the question is asked in this way, or how the information is used. *"I am confused why it matters? We were all born after the troubles and not as much emphasis is put on these things in Donegal. I was okay being asked the question though."*

Some young people were keen to highlight that Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland *"are more diverse and complex than just two communities, and that even within those two communities, there is a range of diversity and multiple identities. Therefore, what do the responses to this question actually tell you?"*

Some suggested that a more open question might be more appropriate, for example, *"What religion are you?"* OR *"How do you identify?"*

Some Youth Workers shared that from their experience young people are *"increasingly reluctant to put labels on their identity, and therefore being asked to tick boxes, so they can be labelled, goes against many young people's instincts."* Other Youth Workers also suggested that a more useful approach might be to have a question around socioeconomic situations.

YouthPact Takeaways

10 takeaways from the consultation with young people on the PEACE PLUS Programme proposals.

1. Why young people join

When asked, "what attracted you to the project?", the responses of this group of consultees resonated with what YouthPact have consistently [heard before](#) from young people:

Social opportunities - to connect with others, make new friends, be part of a group, to socialise, to develop interpersonal relationships, to gain a sense of belonging and experience being part of something bigger.

Safe and Secure - the importance of having a safe place to go, which could help them break from either a negative routine or a damaging relationship. A space and place to practise who they would like to be. The financial incentive offered by the programme was noted by some attenders as important in securing their commitment.

Challenge - the chance to try new activities and to push themselves incrementally out of their comfort zone, a desire to develop a growth mindset, build resilience and a feeling of being able to overcome hardship and guide their own destiny.

Employability - the perceived relevance of the programme in gaining experience which would be relevant to finding a job, training or further education course and to gain relevant qualifications.

2. Why young people stay

The Peace4Youth Programme Principles stood up and stand out in young people's accounts of why they joined and why they stayed in projects. "Children [and young people] are adept at spotting authenticity and genuine interest and feel let down by adults who they feel do not have time for them." ([Mason & Prior, 2008:24](#)). The sense of being "more than a number", that the youth workers "cared", how safe young people felt, having choice and that it was a "fun" and enjoyable experience were repeated over and over by participants in the consultation.

3. Time

Speaking primarily of their experience on the Peace4Youth Programme, the majority of young people who took part in the consultation, whether they were pre-pandemic participants or those who signed up in lockdown, indicated that in any new programme they would welcome "more time" - "six months is too short". A redistribution of the contact hours would be welcome, e.g. over the summer months for when young people may have more time to engage, but essentially this was a request for a longer time-period, rather than an increase in the number of hours per week. This would also fit well with the Contact Theory that the current programme is predicated on.

4. Mental Health & Well-being

As well as having a distinct Youth Mental Health and Well-being Programme, there was general consensus from young people that mental health and well-being should be a cross-cutting theme *and* underpin the whole of the PEACE PLUS Programme.

A small number of school-age consultees weren't convinced that further investment in this area was required as it's somewhat covered in schools, whilst older young people were very clear that it was "much needed – though maybe not enough money" (€20m), highlighting a poor experience of services post-18. Some explained that, in their experience, mental health programmes "can be too generalised".

Young people from across the region articulated concerns around how disclosing negative feelings around mental health were perceived by others and how this compounded the experience. Caution was urged around the tone/implicit attitude of projects that might be developed under this investment area and that it is actually adults (teachers/parents, etc.) that need more awareness and greater understanding of how to respond when a young person confides in them that they are struggling. There was a clear view that young people should be involved as co-designers of any mental health and well-being projects or initiatives that emerge under 'Theme 3: Empowering and Investing in Our Young People'.

A number of focus group participants referenced the impact of intergenerational trauma on families and communities, and suggested that if this is not properly addressed, that people's mental health will continue to be negatively impacted.

5. Investment in a digital strategy for young people

In a year that saw a rapid shift to online youth provision, learning and working from home and in which tremendous creativity was displayed across the youth sector on the island, digital poverty, access to digital equipment and online platforms have been a real concern. Furthermore, where young people already experienced inequalities or marginalisation, this was often exacerbated by the move from the face-to-face programme to the online experience ([At the Threshold, McArdle & McConville, 2021:28](#))

Focus group participants were keen to emphasise their support for investing further in broadband infrastructure, and increased internet access for everyone. Some young people commented that this past year, with people working and studying from home, the issue of access to good quality broadband connectivity has been problematic for some, particularly for those in rural areas. *"I have just completed this Peace4Youth training programme online. This would not have been possible without good internet connection. Not everyone has access to that."*

A strategy and investment are required to support further innovations, build capacity for online provision and to ensure that bespoke regulatory protections are in place ([Reclaiming Youth Work, Hammond & Harvey, 2021](#)).

6. Shared Education

There was no common understanding across the groups of what Shared Education is. The majority of young people were unsure or did not know if they had direct experience of Shared Education at school. Although not everyone had experienced it, there was general agreement that Shared Education should be resourced and extended beyond schools to include Youth Work Programmes. A number of focus group participants emphasised that they agree *“Shared Education is a good idea; so long as it really is about young people and teachers in schools from different denominations coming together.”* Others emphasised that, *“for it to be truly shared, it has to include a whole class, or even a whole year group, and not just a select few.”* Several participants highlighted that the themes of Shared Education should be broader, *“Shared Education programmes should be more long-term and also go wider than looking at the Catholic/Protestant Communities.”* They should also include a focus on things like *“race, gender and sexual orientation”*.

7. Employability

Whilst there was recognition of how the Peace4Youth programme had contributed to their employability, young people were very clear on the value of adding employability as a distinct pillar to the PEACE PLUS Youth Programme: *“no one is born knowing how to do these things - looking for a job, interview skills, or how to do a particular job), therefore young people need to be supported with developing these [practical] skills.”*

The elements that were highlighted by focus group participants that they feel should be integral to an employability element of future PEACE PLUS Youth Programme include:

- Devising a CV
- Job search & Interview preparation skills
- ‘Job taster’ and work placement opportunities
- Understanding employment rights and responsibilities
- Advice on starting your own business
- Understanding different financial services
- Understanding Credit Scores
- Good budgeting/financial management
- Understanding compulsory employee contributions (tax, NIC, PRSI)

8. Good Relations in context

Some participants from New Communities, highlighted that families who may be relatively new to Northern Ireland, may have limited understanding of what happened in the past, and therefore can struggle with navigating the complexities within and between the two largest communities. They can be directly impacted by ongoing tensions within different areas yet may not be included in discussions around peacebuilding, *“Coming from a minority community, moving from one segregated country to a different country where segregation is also prevalent, was difficult. At school I often felt excluded, as people were not used to other cultures or communities. It can be difficult to make space for minority communities in a divided society.”* In PEACE PLUS it will be important to ensure that there is sufficient

awareness of this issue so that participants from minority ethnic groups and new communities are meaningfully engaged, not just as recipients of information or tokens of diversity, but as active and full contributors to a more peaceful, prosperous and stable society in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland.

Also, a small number of young people who contributed to this consultation have uncertain immigration status, or there are restrictions on their ability to move between Northern Ireland (UK jurisdiction) and the Republic of Ireland. This is important to note as it can have a bearing on their ability to engage fully in cross-border projects and collaborations.

There is need for clarity in the language to be used. The PEACE PLUS Consultation Information Document uses both Good Relations and Community Relations; it is unclear if these terms are interchangeable or if Good Relations encompasses Community Relations.

The emphasis in the Consultation Information Document is, perhaps for obvious reasons, focussed on young people and community relations in Northern Ireland, however, young people from the Border Counties of Ireland reflected that segregation between Catholic and Protestant communities was not so much of a lived reality for them. The different context in the Border Counties of Ireland needs to be better recognised and reflected in PEACE PLUS that young people have felt it to be in PEACE IV. However, the challenge of recognising and reflecting the different contexts and realities in Northern Ireland and Border Counties of Ireland should not detract from the cross-border work being a common or default feature, as far as practicable, of all projects.

9. Peace4Youth in the pandemic

This pandemic has demonstrated the role that youth work can contribute across the full multi-disciplinary spectrum and across a range of mental health, educational, recreational and social policy priorities set by government. ([At the Threshold, McArdle & McConville, 2021:6](#))

At the end of 2020 YouthPact put out a call for submissions from young people on their experience of being part of the Peace4Youth programme in the pandemic, entitled '2020 in 4'. YouthPact received 40 responses involving just over 100 young people, which have been collected in an [online gallery](#). The five key messages that emerged from '2020 in 4' are:

- (i) Young people are significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic (loss of connection, isolation, disrupted relationships, education, opportunity).
- (ii) Youth work helped mitigate that impact (by holding connection, "being there", maintaining relationships and hope).
- (iii) Young people demonstrated resilience and drew on their own sense of self-efficacy to sustain themselves through the pandemic.

- (iv) The experience, whilst sharing similar characteristics with that of their peers, was different for individual young people.
- (v) There is need for tailored responses and significant investment in youth work as we prepare again to emerge from the public health restrictions.

10. Identity

An ARK Research Update, from March 2021, opens with the line, “Identity is a complex concept, and we can hold many different identities at the same time.” It ends by highlighting that “It is important that the rejection of traditional patterns of identity are acknowledged by politicians, policy makers.” ([Changing identities in Northern Ireland, Devine, 2021](#)). This is as relevant in the Border Counties of Ireland as it is in Northern Ireland.

On the question of identity and how young people feel about or react to the question ‘do you identify as catholic, protestant or other?’, there was a mixed response and it depended on whether or not they had some insight or understanding as to why the question was being asked. Some young people were keen to highlight that Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland *“are more diverse and complex than just two communities, and that even within those two communities, there is a range of diversity and multiple identities. Therefore, what do the responses to this question actually tell you?”* This quote highlights that more work needs to be done on this matter.

And finally...

‘Who can benefit?’

A key question that will need to be resolved in advance of any call for applications, is whether or not a participant (be they young people or adults) can be a beneficiary on more than one project at any given time.

Pathways and progression routes

Often delivery agents offer pathways and progression routes, within their projects, for some young people who have completed a project cycle and as a result are experts by experience. Besides the impact for the individuals and the chance to practise their personal learning, these young people add value to projects e.g., as volunteers, programme ambassadors, interns or peer leaders. Formal recognition of these roles and their potential to strengthen programme impact through these routes should be embedded as targets, outputs and deliverables of any future youth programme.

Appendix 1 - List of participating projects

On behalf of SEUPB and YouthPact thank you to all the young people, youth workers, Peace4Youth projects, and the respective organisations, who gave their time so graciously and engaged so openly with this consultation process.

Amplify
Breakthrough
Futures
Journeys
Peace Bytes
Mencap
Strive
Third Space
Transform
Youthscape