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Lifecourse and Society

Engaging Urban Youth:
Community, Citizenship, and Democracy

BY
Robert J. Chaskin, The University of Chicago, and
Caroline Mcgregor and Bernadine Brady, National University of Ireland Galway

JUNE 2018

European Commission

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

It is well known that disadvantaged youth in urban environments often experience marginalisation and disenfranchisement that can lead to serious consequences for them, their families, and the wider society. Such disenfranchisement is reinforced by negative media portrayals and punitive policies that treat certain urban youth as threats to be controlled rather than as young people with the agency and potential to contribute effectively to society. At the same time, it is also well known that successfully engaging young men and women in the institutions, communities, and contexts in which they live and building their capacity as social actors can be a critical factor in their positive development as individuals, enhance their future role as citizens, and promote their current positive contribution to these same contexts and institutions (Flanagan, 2015; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, and Flanagan, 2010; Yates and Youniss, 1999; McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman, 1994).
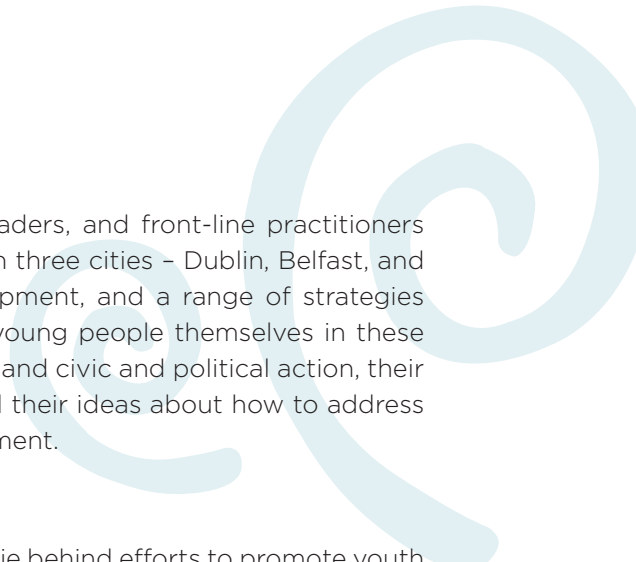
Concerns about the extent to which young people – especially young people at the margins – are increasingly disengaged from civic and political life have been prominent in contemporary discourse and are an increasingly common impetus for youth policy. At the supranational level, a number of youth-oriented policy frameworks developed by UN agencies and at the European Union, in particular, have identified youth civic and political engagement as important goals in themselves and have promoted youth engagement as a contributing factor to both youth development and broader societal change (Chaskin, McGregor, and Brady, 2018). There has been a similar focus at the national level in some states, particularly in Europe, including the Republic of Ireland, Britain, and Northern Ireland (ibid.).

Effectively engaging disadvantaged urban youth, however, can be difficult, and the factors that contribute to these challenges are complex and multilayered. Indeed, there is still relatively little known empirically about the specific contexts, strategies, and mechanisms through which disadvantaged urban youth can be most effectively engaged and the potential effects such engagement can have on youth development, social change, and long-term citizen engagement. We also know little about how such interventions can best be delivered, taking into account the diverse social, economic, and political circumstances in which such young men and women reside, particularly in the context of rapidly changing urban contexts. This is particularly true with regard to the engagement of young people as citizens – both civic and political actors with autonomy and responsibility for contributing to the common good. And we know little about how well the arguments and interventions proposed and supported by policy frameworks at the national and supranational level are reflected in and advanced by practice on the ground; how policy-focused professionals, civil society leaders, and front-line practitioners perceive the purpose of youth engagement, frame the challenges they face, and respond to them; or how young people themselves interpret their place in the world and the opportunities, barriers, and potential responses to constraints on their civic and political engagement.

This report seeks to shed light on these issues. Building on the foundation of a comparative analysis of policy frameworks generated by the UN, EU, and national governments in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and England[1] (Chaskin et al., 2018), the current analysis

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[1] National policies in England are often framed more broadly to embrace the entire United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland), but because of the nature of devolved government, UK component states often shape their own policies specific to their jurisdiction, even if Westminster policies are also enacted there. The National Citizens Service, for example, a UK policy to promote citizenship among secondary-school-aged young people that is part of our review, is being implemented across the UK, including Northern Ireland, but Northern Ireland has developed its own set of policies related to the promotion of youth engagement that are much more central to the implementation of this policy agenda there. We refer to UK policy that is not specific to component jurisdictions as English policy to highlight this distinction.

explores the perspectives of policy professionals, NGO leaders, and front-line practitioners seeking to promote youth civic and political engagement in three cities – Dublin, Belfast, and London – through government policy, programme development, and a range of strategies working with youth. It also examines the perspectives of young people themselves in these cities on their status in society, their ideas about citizenship and civic and political action, their experiences with efforts to promote their engagement, and their ideas about how to address the barriers and constraints to their more effective engagement.

The key research questions that guide our analysis are:

- What are the key ideas, rationales, and assumptions that lie behind efforts to promote youth civic engagement?

- What are the major strategic approaches to encouraging youth civic and political engagement in these contexts? What opportunities and constraints do they provide?

- What is the role of government, civil society organisations, and others in this field, and through what practical strategies (programmes, processes, supports, activities) do they play out?

- What is the role of technology, such as mobile communications and social media, in shaping opportunities and strategies for youth engagement?

- How do young men and women see themselves as civic and political actors in their current lives, and what are their expectations and aspirations for the future?

- Which youth get engaged? How, why, around what issues, and towards what end? To what extent do class, gender, and ethnicity play a role?

- How does the nature of the wider cultural and sociopolitical urban context impact on youth participation?

In pursuit of answers to these questions, we draw on data collected over the course of 18 months of field research in the three focal cities as well as contextual data on each context and a comparative analysis of selected policy frameworks at the supranational, national, and local levels in each of the jurisdictions that are the focus of the study.

The report is organised as follows. In the next section, we outline the research design, data, and methods on which the analysis is based and provide a brief overview of the three urban contexts – Belfast, Dublin, and London – in which the fieldwork took place. Next, we provide some background on the nature and importance of the topic, including a concise literature review examining some of the scholarly arguments for the importance of youth civic and political engagement, as well as some of the major approaches to and challenges facing efforts to promote it. We provide an overview of some key policy frameworks focused on promoting youth engagement at the supranational (UN, EU) and national (Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, England) levels. We then turn to our empirical examination of perspectives, approaches, and critiques of current policy and practice as suggested by professionals engaged in this work across the three cities who work at different levels and in different sectors. This includes an exploration of the rationales and expectations that drive youth engagement efforts on the ground; the strategies and mechanisms through which youth engagement efforts work; and the major challenges, critiques, and potential responses to promoting youth civic and political engagement. Next, we explore young people's orientations towards civic and political engagement, as well as their perspectives on the opportunities, barriers, and

potential approaches to improving policy and practice to more effectively promote youth engagement. Finally, we distil a set of implications suggested by the research and outline a set of recommendations for future action.

1.1 Research Design, Data, Methods, and Analysis

The analysis presented here is grounded in a multilevel contextual analysis and comparative case study design. Contextual analysis included a review of policy frameworks and mechanisms at the supranational (UN, EU), national (Ireland, Northern Ireland, England), and subnational levels focusing on three cities, Dublin, Belfast, and London. The study focused on policies, organisational environments, and strategies to engage marginalised young people in each city. The study received ethical approval from the NUI Galway Ethics Committee. In the application, a number of ethical considerations were outlined, including recruitment of participants, confidentiality, data protection, and anticipated risk. Detailed participant information sheets were prepared for the respective stakeholders. Particular attention was paid to the matter of consent. For young people over 18, written consent was sought and detailed participant information sheets provided. Those aged 16–18 were provided with information to share with parents about the study and their involvement in it. They then signed their assent, and their parents provided the consent forms. The agencies who recruited the young people kept the consent forms to maximise confidentiality. The ethics application paid particular attention to the challenge of researching with young people. On the one hand, we were aware of our ethical responsibilities for ensuring the protection of children and young people while at the same time recognising and respecting the autonomy of young people aged 16 and over.

The following sources of data were drawn upon:

Policy Review

A review and comparative analysis of selected policy frameworks provided a foundation for understanding youth engagement strategies on the ground in each of the three focal cities. It examined and summarised the key components of major legislation and policy framework documents that represent the goals, establish the mechanisms, and inform funding streams in response to the needs of marginalised youth and to support these youths' civic and political engagement activities. It focused on policies at three levels: (1) policy framework documents, reports, and other relevant literature promulgated at the supranational level by UN agencies and by the EU; (2) policy white papers, legislation, ordinances, etc. at the national level in Ireland, Northern Ireland, and England; and (3) policy documents specific to subnational units, including municipal policies operating in the three cities.[2]
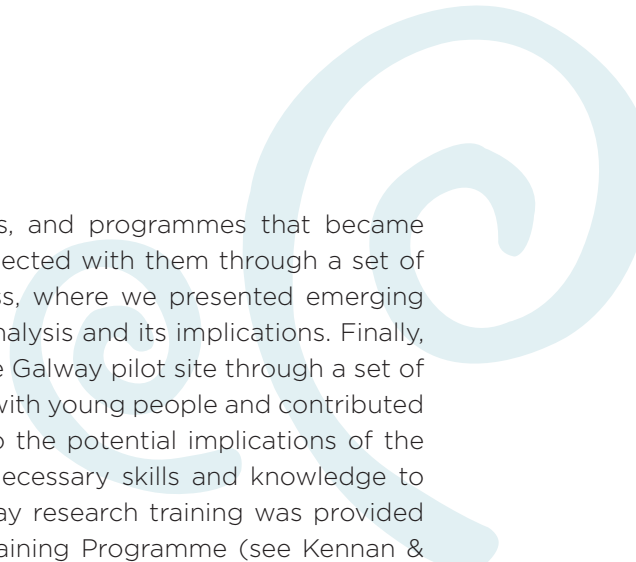
Stakeholder Consultation

The study was informed by consultation with a small set of advisors in each city as well as in Galway, Ireland, which served as a pilot site and the host city and university site for the project. Advisors were drawn from the academy and both the statutory and voluntary youth sectors. This included policymakers and other public officials, youth workers, and youth activists who helped us identify key questions, dynamics, challenges, and actors. Consultation occurred early in the research project, allowing us to refine aspects of research design and strategy

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2 Only a very brief overview of this review is included in this report, below. A comprehensive analysis is provided in Chaskin et al. (2018).

and specify the local contexts, populations, organisations, and programmes that became the focus of our case study investigations. We also reconnected with them through a set of 'stakeholder consultations' towards the end of the process, where we presented emerging findings, facilitated discussion, and invited input into our analysis and its implications. Finally, we consulted with a reference group of young people in the Galway pilot site through a set of workshops in which they reviewed data from focus groups with young people and contributed to their interpretation, and provided additional insight into the potential implications of the emerging findings. To equip the young people with the necessary skills and knowledge to analyse the data and engage in the consultation, a two-day research training was provided using a bespoke UNESCO CFRC Youth as Researchers Training Programme (see Kennan & Dolan, 2017; UCFRC, 2016a).

Organisational Inventory

In order to understand and be able to characterise the institutional infrastructure for, and the nature of, practice geared towards youth civic and political engagement, as well as to inform our sampling strategy for interviews and focus groups, we conducted an inventory of youth-serving organisations in each city and those that work at a national level to support and promote youth engagement. The inventory was framed broadly, seeking to identify organisations that engage youth in civic and political life, but with a particular focus on four strategic orientations: engagement through (1) community service, (2) youth activism, organising, and political mobilisation, (3) governance and deliberative forums, and (4) arts, sport, media, and culture. The purpose of the inventory was to be able to effectively situate the case study analysis in the broader context of youth engagement practice in each site. Selection of specific efforts and organisations in each city focused in particular on organisations focused in some way on developing youth as citizens, incorporating them in the everyday civics and politics of citizenship and community life. Sources of data for constructing inventories in each site included key informant consultation, resource directories, and a systematic review of websites.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with a set of policymakers and other public officials and practitioners (leaders of youth organisations, youth workers, and youth activists) in each of the three cities. These interviews served to provide a more detailed and nuanced understanding of both the policy and local contexts in which marginalised young people are growing up, the issues they face, approaches to understanding youths' position as citizens and the opportunities and barriers they face in performing the responsibilities and garnering the benefits of citizenship, and the nature, challenges, and effectiveness of interventions that seek to promote their engagement. Building on the organisational inventory and consultation with our advisors, we selected informants based on the work of the organisations with which they are associated, with a particular focus on organisations that sought to engage young people in some way in civic and political life, beyond either a narrow focus on youth development or enrichment activities or participation in the formal mechanisms of government (e.g., through voting), including promoting their involvement in more informal civic and political roles. We then used snowball sampling, asking key informants for additional recommendations of people it would be important to talk with, to extend our sample. A total of 66 formal interviews were conducted with policy professionals, front-line youth workers, and leaders of youth-serving NGOs across the three cities (see Table 1).

Interviews were semi-structured, guided by a common interview protocol of open-ended questions (modified slightly to better tailor questions for specific organisations or informants), and providing opportunities for informants to broach new issues and explore unforeseen avenues of inquiry. Questions included those exploring the work and strategies embraced by each informant's organisation and those designed to elicit an understand of informants' perspectives on a range of topics, including:
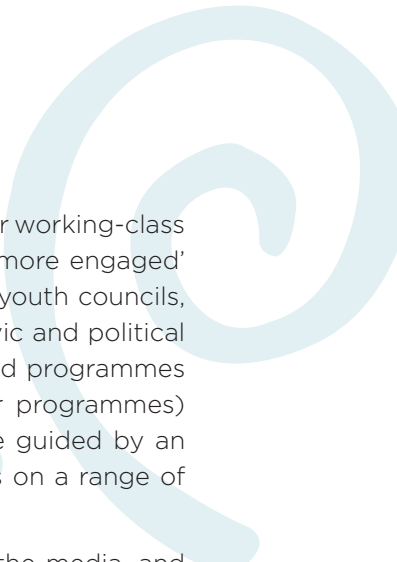
- how young people (particularly marginalised youth) are characterised by politicians, the media, and general discourse

- informants' views on citizenship, civic engagement, and political action as it relates to young people, and the importance of trying to promote more effective civic and political engagement among young people

- the key policy frameworks and schemes that seek to promote youth engagement in their respective contexts

- the importance, potential, and limitations of particular strategic orientations to promoting engagement, particularly for marginalised youth

- the key successes, challenges, and lessons learned so far about how best to promote the civic and political engagement of marginalised youth

- the most critical issues and enduring challenges that condition the success of efforts to engage young people

- the key recommendations they would make to improve policy and practice in this field.

Table 1: Key Informant and Focus Group Interview Sample

	Dublin	Belfast	London	Total
Policy professionals	4	7	7	18
Front-line practitioners	10	8	16	34
NGO leaders	4	5	5	14
Total	18	20	28	66
Youth focus groups	8	9	11	28

Youth Focus Groups

We conducted a total of 28 focus groups with young people across the three cities. Focus groups were designed to elicit the perspectives and experiences of young people and their ideas about citizenship, civic and political action, their role in society, and their perspectives on efforts to promote their civic and political engagement. Each group generally comprised between about 6 and 12 young people aged approximately 14–25, although a few groups were slightly larger or smaller. Focus groups included young people from a range of backgrounds, including socio-economic status, gender, religion, and ethnicity. Some groups were more homogeneous, including, for example, young Travellers in Dublin, or young people from either Republican or Loyalist communities in Belfast, or young offenders or Muslim youth in London. Others were mixed along some dimensions but homogeneous along others, such as ethnically

mixed working-class youth in London, or working-class boys and girls in Dublin, or working-class youth from across the sectarian divide in Belfast. Groups included relatively 'more engaged' young people, such as those participating in formal participatory forums like youth councils, as well as those who are largely disengaged and generally unconnected to civic and political action but with some connection, for example, to local youth clubs or targeted programmes (such as alternative education programmes for drop-outs or youth offender programmes) through which we were connected with them. Focus group discussions were guided by an open-ended instrument that invited young people to share their perspectives on a range of topics, responding to our central research questions, including:

- their perspectives on how young people are characterised by politicians, the media, and society generally

- the social issues that are most important to them and they would most like to see addressed

- the extent to which they think they have a voice in addressing these issues

- the importance of taking young people's perspectives into account in designing policy or shaping programmes

- their ideas about citizenship, democracy, and their roles, responsibilities, and influence

- the opportunities they have to engage meaningfully in civic and political life, and the barriers and constraints that condition their engagement

- their ideas about how to more effectively engage young people civically and politically.

Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically using the NVivo software package for qualitative data analysis. Coding was developed using a modified grounded theory approach, in which key thematic codes were established based on the basic deductive assumptions of the project, and open coding built on this initial framework to identify themes that emerged inductively from the data. Thematic codes were developed to capture key themes and issues, including:

- the rationale and expected outcomes of efforts to promote youth civic and political engagement

- the influences behind focusing on youth engagement in policy or practice

- aspects of socio-economic, political, and cultural context that condition to some extent the opportunities for, barriers to, and impact of youth engagement efforts

- perspectives on young people

- ideas about citizenship, democracy, civic engagement, and political participation

- strategies and mechanisms to support youth engagement

- challenges, risks, and barriers

- roles and responsibilities of actors in the statutory and voluntary sectors

- resources available and needed

- critiques of current policy and on-the-ground efforts

- lessons and recommendations for improving policy and practice.

Data output was organised by theme, and summary matrices of responses were created to allow for systematic comparison of perspectives across interviewee 'type' (policy, front-line practitioner, NGO leader) and by city. Comprehensive field memos of focus group discussions were developed and thematically coded in a similar fashion.

1.2 Contexts: Three Cities
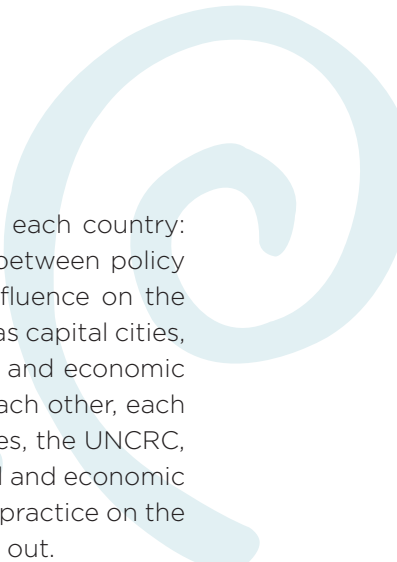
Fieldwork was conducted in the largest cities in the three countries that provided the national focus for our comparative policy analysis: the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and England. Each of these countries has generated policies with a specific focus on youth engagement and citizenship in recent years. The three jurisdictions have a shared and sometimes contentious history and operate within similar political systems while embracing somewhat different strategies towards this agenda. In addition, they respond to somewhat different contextual realities and challenges. These dimensions of commonality and difference inform our rationale for selection of these three countries for analysis, which together provide a useful comparison for exploration.

The Republic of Ireland, for example, is among the most 'youthful' states in the European Union[3], and has been energetic in pursuing national policies concerned with children and youth, including a strong emphasis on youth participation and consultation in policymaking, since the launching of the comprehensive, cross-ministerial National Children's Strategy in 2000 up to and including the Brighter Futures, Better Outcomes Policy (DCYA, 2014). Although experiencing increasing demographic diversity due to international migration, Ireland is still relatively homogeneous, but processes of globalisation and the economic growth and development of Ireland prior to the 2008 global recession, out of which the country is re-emerging with relative success, have also led to increasing inequality and shaped the nature of opportunity and dynamics of exclusion for working-class youth. Northern Ireland is (along with Wales) the poorest of the states in the United Kingdom (McGuinness, 2018).

Northern Ireland is (along with Wales) the poorest of the states in the United Kingdom (McGuinness, 2018), hit hard by deindustrialisation in the later 20th century. Although the degree of ethnic diversity and changing demographics has similarities to that in the Republic, the history and current (post-conflict) state of sectarian tensions and the complexity of political identity created by being on the island of Ireland but a part of the UK continue to influence youths' experiences, orientations to citizenship, and opportunities for participation. In England, a larger country with a more prominent role on the global stage, the impacts of globalisation on young people's circumstances and their relation to civic and political action are yet more keenly felt, further informed by significant ethnic diversity, especially in the cities. The outcome of the 2016 referendum for the UK to leave the European Union (known as Brexit), as well as rising concern about Islamic radicalisation and the dangers of future terrorist acts, further complicate these dynamics and condition young people's opportunities for and orientations to civic and political engagement. Chaskin, McGregor, and Brady (2018) provide a detailed overview of the policies relating to each country and further context that provides an important backdrop to this study (see UCFRC, 2016b).

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3 The Eurostat (2015) report What It Means to Be Young in the European Union Today found that Ireland had the largest proportion of children under 15 (22%) in 2014, compared to the EU average of 15.6 per cent.

Within these national contexts, we have focused our fieldwork in one city in each country: Dublin, Belfast, and London. This focus allows us to explore the relationship between policy ideas and provision, as well as the dynamics of their implementation and influence on the ground, in specific urban contexts. As the largest cities in each jurisdiction, and as capital cities, they are the sites in which the dynamics of globalisation, population diversity, and economic change are thrown into clear relief. Considering the three cities in relation to each other, each has a clearly influenced set of relations between government structures, policies, the UNCRC, and practice on the ground. Across the cities, historical dynamics, current social and economic circumstances, and the interplay between government structures, policies, and practice on the ground shape to some degree how efforts to promote youth engagement play out.

Important aspects of the context in Belfast include the policy and legislative structure for education and youth policy; the enduring impact of the Troubles since the Good Friday Agreement, and the challenges of working in communities divided by sectarianism or legacy issues; and the relationship between the current state of politics in Northern Ireland and efforts to engage young people in civic and political life. In Dublin, the structure for supporting youth engagement has improved remarkably in recent decades, including a significant effort to institutionalise youth consultation into policymaking through, especially, the efforts of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). Issues of inequality and class dynamics play an important role, and there continue to be major challenges in relation to how young people who are disadvantaged in general, and Traveller young people in particular, are engaged through formal and informal processes. In London, while both national and local policy have been established that to some extent shape how youth engagement efforts are approached, there is not a comprehensive youth policy (a point made by a number of respondents), and the level of support and nature of provision vary significantly by local authority within the city. Race, class, and religion dominate as core themes of concern and influence, and concerns regarding antisocial behaviour and radicalisation were particularly pertinent for interviewees in London, as was the recent Brexit vote and its future implications. Together, these cities provide an opportunity to understand common and divergent practices in the provision of youth services, the shaping of opportunities for youth civic and political engagement, and the ways in which local context plays a role in influencing implementation and outcome.

2. Rationale and Background

Prior to presenting our empirical analysis based on field data, we provide some brief background regarding the ideas behind efforts to promote young people's active engagement in civic and political life. First, we outline some of the main scholarly arguments regarding youth civic engagement and some of the known challenges to achieving it. Next, we provide a short summary of the policy frameworks that to some extent guide practice at the supranational and national levels in the three contexts that are the focus of our research.

2.1 Literature Review: Youth and Civic Engagement

Interest in the concept of youth civic engagement has been influenced by a range of factors, including concern about a perceived decline in levels of civic and political engagement among young people throughout the western world (Brady et al., 2012; Flanagan and Christens, 2011; Dolan, 2010; Ekman and Amná, 2009). Given that the participation of citizens is important in the functioning of a healthy democracy, there is a concern that young people disengaging from the political system will have a negative impact on the governance of society. Additionally, the potential for youth civic engagement activity to contribute to the personal development of young people, to promote their welfare, and to challenge injustice in society also provides an impetus for greater focus on civic engagement as a component of youth work and youth action. Shaw et al. (2014) argue that civic engagement is not a neutral concept, but rather reflects general assumptions about youth in society and the underlying 'problem' to be addressed. They identify five key discourses underlying arguments in relation to the perceived importance of youth civic engagement.

The first discourse focuses on the role of the *democratic citizen.* Here, the active involvement of individuals, including young people, is seen as important for society and for the survival and thriving of democracy. Children and you ng people are seen to have a right to participate, as set out in the UNCRC, while research has shown that civic attitudes, beliefs, and skills developed during adolescence are likely to influence ongoing civic participation across the lifecourse (Finlay et al., 2010). The rationale for a focus on youth civic engagement has been intensified by concerns about declining levels of political and civic engagement across society in general and among younger generations in particular (Henn and Foard, 2014; Flanagan and Levine, 2010).

The second discourse focuses on *youth development.* Civic engagement activities have been promoted as a means of strengthening the development and capacities of young people. Young people are seen to develop a range of competencies or 'soft skills' as a result of contributing to their communities, including personal and social skills, leadership, communication, and critical thinking skills, in addition to improved academic performance and career direction (Shaw et al., 2014).

The third discourse concerns ideas about *belonging and community connectedness.* Here, civic engagement is considered to be a mechanism through which young people can develop a greater sense of connection, feeling part of and contributing to community and society. This discourse is supported by social capital theory, which posits that social connections and trust between people are associated with multiple benefits for individuals and society in areas such as health and well-being, safety, and democracy (Ferguson, 2006; Putnam, 2000).

The fourth discourse focuses on the notion of *care*. Civic engagement is seen as a means of addressing specific needs of young people, particularly those who experience challenges such as poverty, health issues, disability, and exploitation. Dolan (2010) argues that youth civic engagement provides opportunities for young people to develop mutually supportive relationships with others and has the potential to help them to become resilient. Youth engagement has also been associated with a reduction in problem behaviours (Eccles and Barber, 1999), including alcohol consumption and criminal involvement.

Finally, ideas about *social justice* inform the fifth discourse. Youth civic engagement is seen as a means of fostering 'critical consciousness' among young people who have experienced marginalisation or disadvantage. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002), for example, propose a social justice model for youth development based on (a) self-awareness, which includes practices that help to explore and develop a positive sense of identity, and (b) social awareness, which encourages people to think critically about issues in their own communities (see Table 2).

Table 2: Discourses Informing Youth Civic Engagement (Shaw et al., 2014: 5)

Discourse	Key aim	Concern for	Desirable...
Democratic citizen	Participation	Recognition, voice, human rights	Engaged in decisions and influence
Positive youth development	Idealised adulthood	Adaptation Behavioural/cognitive/moral adaptivity Life skills	More socially adapted individuals for future adulthood; social conformity; less risky behaviours
Belonging	Cultivate affective social inclusion	To increase attachments to place and others; build social capital, trust, networks, norms Find spaces for sense of inclusion	Stronger connectedness; better interactions; stronger youth–adult interdependencies
Care	Build social support and resilience	Build strengths in adversity, prevent escalation of problems, increase protective factors	Supportive/more effective networks and programmes
Justice	Understanding and tackling injustice	Acknowledging root causes of structural inequality	Social justice

WHAT FORMS CAN YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TAKE?

Ekman and Amná's (2009: 8) typology of civic engagement is useful in that it draws attention to the range of forms that youth civic engagement can take, including individual or collective actions or inaction categorised as disengagement, civic engagement, and political participation (see Table 3 below). They view civic engagement activities as an important element in the creation of politically active citizens as well as for yielding value for individuals and society, enabling young people to learn the skills and develop the networks necessary to effectively engage in political activity.

Research suggests that young people are more likely to become civically engaged when they are in settings such as schools, workplaces, and community organisations where they are asked to take part, because their friends are participating, or because they learn about issues that concern them (Flanagan and Levine, 2010). Ballard et al. (2015) found that some youth were motivated for volunteer activities (whether political or not) for instrumental reasons (such as gaining experience to include in their CV), others because they identify themselves as people who help people, and others by personal experiences or issues that catalyse their engagement. While some young people may be driven by self-motivation, Stoneman (2002) argues that it takes a deliberate, consistent effort to organise any group of people into any form of civic activity.

It has been argued that forms of civic engagement change from generation to generation and that young people today are more likely to choose alternative forms of political engagement other than reading newspapers, joining political parties or unions, or voting (Sloam, 2012; Sherrod et al., 2002). Based on a comparative analysis of individual-level data from Germany, France, and the UK, Melo and Stockemer (2014), for example, suggest that we are experiencing changing patterns of participation for young adults rather than declining civic engagement. While voting is strongest among the elderly, other types of political participation are more pronounced among the young, such as participation in demonstrations. Henn and Foard (2014) similarly found that young people in the UK are interested in politics and have faith in the democratic process but are disillusioned with the political system and the established parties and politicians that dominate it. According to Bennet, Wells, and Freelon (2011), younger generations favour an 'actualising' form of citizenship, in contrast to earlier models of 'dutiful' citizenship based on one-way communication managed by authorities. This actualising form of citizenship embraces many forms of creative civic input, including government, consumer politics, and global activism facilitated through peer content sharing and social media. Similarly, Mycock and Tonge (2011) point out that new technologies enable different types of political activism which do not necessarily seek to interact with political parties or elected democratic institutions.

Table 3: Typology of Different Forms of Disengagement, Involvement, Civic Engagement, and Political Participation (Ekman and Amná, 2009: 22)

	Non-participation (disengagement)		Civil participation (latent-political)		Political participation (manifest)		
	Active forms (anti-political)	Passive forms (apolitical)	Social involvement (attention)	Civic engagement (action)	Formal political participation	Activism (extra-parliamentary political participation)	
						Legal / extra-parliamentary protests or actions	Illegal protests or actions
Individual forms	Non-voting Actively avoiding reading newspapers or watching TV when it comes to political issues Avoid talking about politics Perceiving politics as disgusting Political disaffection	Non-voting Perceiving politics as uninteresting and unimportant Political passivity	Taking interest in politics and society Perceiving politics as important	Writing to an editor Giving money to charity Discussing politics and societal issues with friends or on the Internet Reading newspapers and watching TV when it comes to political issues Recycling	Voting in elections and referenda Deliberate acts of non-voting or blank voting Contacting political representatives or civil servants Running for or holding public office Donating money to political parties or organisations	'Buycotting', boycotting, and political consumption Signing petitions Handing our political leaflets	Civil disobedience Politically motivated attacks on property
Collective forms	Deliberate non-political lifestyles, e.g. hedonism, consumerism In extreme cases: random acts of non-political violence (riots), reflecting frustration, alienation or social exclusion	'non-reflected' non-political lifestyles	Belonging to a group with a societal focus Identifying with a certain ideology or party Lifestyle-related involvement: music, identity clothes, etc. For example: veganism, right-wing skinhead scene or left-wing anarcho-punk scene	Volunteering in social work; e.g. to support women's shelter or to help homeless people Charity work or faith-based community work Activity within community-based organisations	Being a member of a political party, an organisation, or a trade union Activity within a party, an organisation, or a trade union (voluntary work or attend meetings)	Involvement in new social movements or forums Demonstrating, participating in strikes, protests and other actions (e.g. street festivals with a distinct political agenda)	Civil disobedience actions Sabotaging or obstructing roads and railways Squatting buildings Participating in violent demonstrations or animal rights actions Violent confrontation with political opponents or the police

YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: CRITIQUES AND CHALLENGES

Critics of contemporary policy and practice regarding youth engagement argue that the nature of policies promoting it tend to emphasise public forms of participation while ignoring the private and informal spheres, which have often been the domain of children and young people (Manning, 2013; Wood, 2012; Skelton, 2010; Lister, 2007). Wood (2012), for example, found that high-school children in New Zealand engaged in 'everyday' forms of political action within their schools and communities and showed both agency and resourcefulness with these spaces. In contrast, forms of engagement for young people are often designed to replicate adult democratic institutions and are based on adult notions of how young people should participate (Mills and Waite, 2017; Bynner, 2001). Approaches such as youth or student councils, youth parliaments, and mock elections have been critiqued on the basis that they 'mimic adult conceptions of the political', 'aim to prepare young people for future adult roles in a democratic society' (Wood, 2012: 339), and represent efforts by adults and the state to control the nature and content of youth civic engagement activity (Bynner, 2001). There have been calls for a move away from a normative citizenship agenda, whereby young people are taught what constitutes appropriate citizenship values and behaviour, in favour of an approach which allows them to shape what citizenship means in contemporary society (Hart, 2009; Bynner, 2001; Wallace, 2001).

In addition, studies note that young people from different backgrounds are more or less likely to engage in civic and political life and have differential access to opportunities for participation. Leonard (2005) emphasises how economic and cultural capital (education credentials, the 'right' school, etc.) can influence social and civic participation. Young people from marginalised backgrounds and families are less likely to engage in forms of civic action than their counterparts from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds and those with higher levels of educational attainment. Similarly, able-bodied young people and those in employment are more likely to participate than young people who are unemployed or have disabilities (Hart and Atkins, 2002). Kallio and Häkli (2011) found that school-based opportunities for political participation were often the privilege of a select group or the reserve of older teens. There is also evidence that youth from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds participate less in civic activities than their non-immigrant, ethnic-majority peers (Levinson, 2010).

A number of studies have found that young people are inhibited from engagement in collective activity because they sense that their participation is not valued in society (Hart, 2009; Milbourne, 2009). Stoneman (2002) argues that young people, especially those from low-income backgrounds, are conditioned to believe that nothing they will do will make a positive difference to society. There is a tendency for adults to hold negative attitudes and beliefs about young people rather than seeing them as individuals with the motivation and skill to contribute to others (Camino and Zeldin, 2002).

The discourses surrounding youth civic engagement have also been problematised in the literature. For example, Banaji (2008: 557) argues that civic engagement is seen 'as an unquestionable good' and that young people are seen 'as being troublingly in deficit when it comes to civic participation'. Similarly, Sveningsson (2015) and others have noted that youth are portrayed either as apathetic or disillusioned in political matters, or as engaging in new forms of 'politics', involving spectacular forms of protest and activism. Banaji (2008) believes that there is a tendency to see civic action as benign, altruistic, and democratic, with an emphasis on conformity rather than on critique, confrontation, or challenge. Others have critiqued citizenship education and the idea that citizens are seen 'in need of training' by state actors and other institutions in civil society (Mills and Waite, 2017).

2.2 Policy Frameworks

As detailed in our comparative policy analysis (Chaskin et al., 2018), a number of supranational and national policies currently focus on youth engagement and youth participation. Generally, youth engagement policy across these jurisdictions is concerned with the potential contribution that promoting young people's engagement can make both to the well-being of young people themselves and to society at large, although they differ somewhat in relative emphasis. Policy frameworks at both the supranational and national levels present a perspective of young people as both 'a source of concern and a beacon of hope' (UNDP, 2014: 10). One of the main motivations and rationales for the development and implementation of youth policy frameworks is young people's fundamental rights to participation as expressed in the UNCRC, though a rights orientation was most explicit and strongly stated in supranational policy frameworks and in those from the Republic of Ireland. National and supranational policies generally emphasise the need to strike a balance between engaging with youth as active citizens with a positive contribution to make to society alongside a recognition of the barriers that many young people face and a concern for preventing negative outcomes. Policies also recognise a need to address the problems that some – particularly those living in disadvantage and marginalised from the broader society by a range of circumstances, such as poverty, minority status, and disability – can cause through antisocial or risky behaviour and non-participation. Concerns about inequality and exclusion are common across all frameworks and are seen both to contribute to youth disenfranchisement and to shape the context in which efforts to promote their engagement must be addressed.

With regard to strategies for engagement outlined in policy frameworks, education is considered of central importance for promoting youth engagement, though this is articulated in different ways. Youth work is invoked across policy frameworks (but particularly at the supranational level) as a key mechanism for engaging young people and as especially important for connecting with and promoting the participation of the most marginalised youth. Policies also focus on the need for innovation and capacity building, with particular attention paid to promoting intersectoral collaboration to ensure that stakeholders are equipped to deal with the challenges facing young people in the 21st century. A focus on young people who are becoming marginalised from society, or are at risk of this, is a common theme across frameworks, although there are differences in how this is expressed in policy.

Alongside these similarities, there are some important differences in emphasis, rationale, expectations, and strategic orientation across contexts and between national and supranational policies. The supranational frameworks we reviewed, for example, are more explicitly concerned than the frameworks at national level are with the impact of political climate and the withdrawal of many young people, especially disadvantaged youth, from participation in formal political processes. The role of political conflict is especially noted in UN and Northern Irish frameworks, and youth radicalisation is especially noted in European and English frameworks. The importance of economic circumstances is common across frameworks, although UN and EU documents are most explicit about the impact of the 2008 financial crisis (also noted in Irish frameworks). In England and Northern Ireland there is a specific focus and concern regarding a subpopulation of economically disadvantaged young people – the so-called NEETs (not in education, employment, or training) – without particular reference to structural changes that may have contributed to their current circumstances.

Beyond these similarities and differences in policy, there are also some ambiguities and cross-cutting dynamics suggested by these frameworks and how they might play out on the ground. First of all, there are tensions between fundamental orientations. This includes a tension between a focus on rights versus more instrumental benefits, and on promoting positive youth development versus preventing negative behaviours and outcomes. Secondly, desired outcomes are often cited but not always clearly defined. Thirdly, countervailing pressures (for example, around funding or worries about radicalisation) lead to some potential tensions between the rhetoric framing and stated goals of policy frameworks, on the one hand, and the strategies they engage, on the other. Fourthly, policy frameworks argue for support of various strategies to engage young people, but without much clarity on their likely relative reach and effectiveness. Young people, after all, have different interests, have differential access to resources and opportunity, and face different kinds of constraints to their engagement. Finally, there may be fundamental limitations to policies seeking to promote youth civic and political engagement that need to be addressed beyond the boundaries of participatory schemes that engage them.

The findings we present and analyse in this report provide further insight into these issues and challenges in relation to youth engagement. They speak to some of these key discourses and debates to offer a more in-depth articulation of both the potential and the challenges of promoting the meaningful engagement of young people, especially those who are less likely to have their voices heard and more likely to be affected by disadvantage and marginalisation.

3. Views from the Ground: Perspectives, Approaches, and Critiques

We turn now to our empirical analysis of the ideas behind and implementation approaches to youth engagement on the ground, from the perspective of professionals working at different levels and in different roles across the three cities to promote youth civic and political engagement. First, we explore the rationales and anticipated benefits of youth engagement efforts. We then examine the strategies and organisational mechanisms that are employed. Thirdly, we elaborate the range of challenges and critiques identified by these actors, and some of the responses they suggest to address them. Finally, we examine the perspectives of young people themselves, and the extent to which their orientations align with, or call into question, the assumptions and approaches represented by policies and youth engagement professionals.

3.1 Rationales, Orientations, and Objectives

As we note in our comparative policy analysis (Chaskin et al., 2018), policy frameworks that seek to support the promotion of youth engagement strategies are based on a set of assumptions about young people, rationales for promoting their engagement in civic and political life, and expectations for what youth engagement might lead to. Professionals working to support or promote youth civic and political engagement have similar ideas about why youth engagement is important and the kinds of changes or outcomes they expect it to lead to. In this section, we examine two sets of assumptions. The first focuses on the ideas that professionals working in the youth engagement field have regarding the nature of democratic citizenship, its relevance for young people, and their orientation to the concepts of civic and political engagement. The second concerns the specific reasons they believe that promoting youth engagement is important and their expectations for the kinds of outcomes it should lead to.

DEMOCRACY, CITIZENSHIP, AND PARTICIPATION

Central to many of the policy frameworks promoting youth civic and political engagement is a concern for encouraging the 'active citizenship' of young people and their engagement in democratic processes. Ideas about democracy and citizenship are also at the heart of many efforts to engage young people on the ground, although they are more explicit in some cases than in others. How these core ideas about democracy, citizenship, and civic and political engagement are understood, defined, and acted on varies somewhat across different actors and contexts. Professionals working in the youth engagement field with whom we spoke had different ideas about these issues and their importance for young people. They also had some different orientations to the notions of civic and political engagement, the relative value of each, and the extent to which they are separate or aligned activities.

Democracy and Citizenship

Core to most respondents' definitions of democracy and citizenship is the importance of participation. 'Democracy is not a spectator sport', as a government official in Belfast put it, and it 'needs to have everyone involved', in the words of an NGO leader in London. Few respondents focused on the question of citizenship in its narrow, legal definition, focusing instead on the meaning of citizenship and the relevance of ideas about citizenship to the role and position of young people in society. In this frame, citizenship is thus viewed as active participation. But what 'counts' as participation may vary, and respondents noted the possibility of different kinds and levels of participation. While some emphasised involvement in programmes or volunteering, particularly at the community level, as central to their focus on participation, most of those who opined on the meaning and importance of the participation of young people in the context of democratic citizenship focused on the 'voice' of young people, giving them the opportunity to participate in deliberation, inform decision-making regarding policy, and – particularly in the context of youth programmes and organisations such as youth clubs – contribute to governance. They also stressed the importance of critical rather than rote engagement, and of participation being demonstrably meaningful – 'to ensure that young people are actually having a say and it is not tokenistic', as a youth worker in Dublin put it.

These orientations are directly connected to respondents' views of citizenship: having a stake and a say – and a potential impact – in one's community and in society more broadly. Citizenship is thus about both voice and action. As an NGO staff member in London put it:
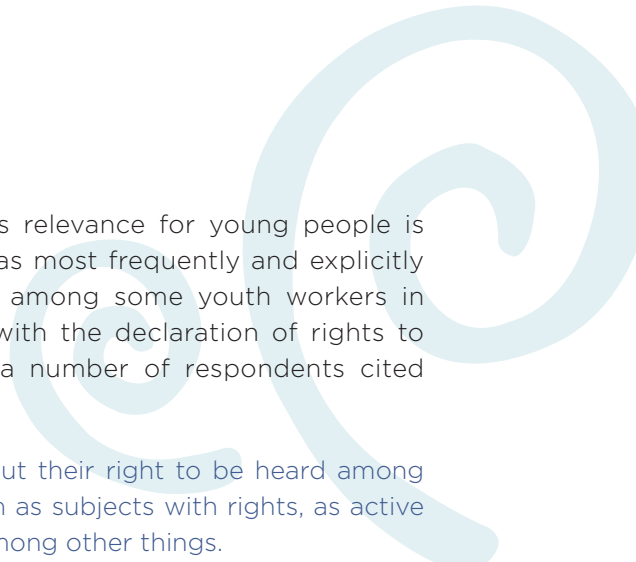
> Citizenship is what we think about in terms of the young people we work with being able to play an active role in society, so that is . . . working, caring about their community, volunteering in their community, highlighting the issues in their community, and knowing how to bring about change to those things. So using their voice to make a difference is what we would say in what we do as an active citizen.

Discussions of citizenship were also often tied to ideas about values and belonging, and about the imperative to contribute and 'give back', especially through local action at the community level. Respondents across the three cities connected ideas about citizenship with belonging, and, as we shall see in the analysis to follow, some respondents attribute the lack of a sense of belonging to be a significant barrier to promoting the engagement of marginalised young people, in particular. In contrast, the attention to values as a component of citizenship was most explicitly (and critically) noted by respondents in London. Connecting ideas of citizenship to specific values was controversial in this context, especially given the focus in the Prevent strategy – a policy framework established to address the threat of radicalisation, particularly (if implicitly) among Muslim youth – which promotes the importance of embracing 'British values' as central to citizenship. The critique of the leader of an NGO working with Muslim youth was typical:

> What is happening in an organised way is that Muslims are being made to feel [that] if you are a Muslim you can't be a citizen; if you are a Muslim you can't be British; these things are contradictory. And that is why you will hear politicians mention British values. What the hell are British values? It is still yet to be answered. [4]

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4 The values identified in the Prevent policy include 'democracy, rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom of speech and the rights of all men and women to live free from persecution of any kind' (HM Government, 2011: 34). The relationship between promoting citizenship, including embracing these values, and the goal of thwarting radicalisation is expressed as follows: 'A stronger sense of "belonging" and citizenship makes communities more resilient to terrorist ideology and propagandists. We believe that Prevent depends on integration, democratic participation and a strong interfaith dialogue' (HM Government 2011: 27).

For most respondents, the notion of citizenship and its relevance for young people is also significantly grounded in ideas about rights. This was most frequently and explicitly emphasised by interviewees in Dublin and Belfast and among some youth workers in London. To a large extent, ideas on this front aligned with the declaration of rights to participation codified in the UNCRC Article 12, which a number of respondents cited directly. As a government official in Dublin put it:

> For us obviously, young people as citizens, it is about their right to be heard among other participation rights and it is about seeing them as subjects with rights, as active participants and the realisation of their own rights, among other things.

Indeed, the UNCRC was invoked more than any other specific policy framework across the three cities. Many efforts seeking to engage young people place a significant emphasis, as at least part of their work, on rights education. While the focus on rights was foundational for most respondents, some also pointed to an instrumental connection between a rights focus and its value for promoting engagement. A youth worker in London put it this way:

> Although the UN Convention isn't upheld by law in this country, actually it is a really good framework. . . . Because a lot of young people don't think they have rights, and from their very bitter tough experience it is a little bit of a wake-up call: Oh, I've got rights; where did they come from? So it is quite a useful tool to get young people interested in politics, getting them interested in having a say.

Ideas about rights as core to the notion of citizenship were often explicitly coupled with claims about *responsibilities;* the two were seen by most respondents to go hand in hand. The leader of a youth-serving NGO in Dublin elaborated:

> I absolutely believe that people have rights and responsibilities, and with rights come responsibilities. That is not very popular in some areas of youth work, in some areas of society where people see that they have rights but very little responsibilities. I believe as a citizen, if you are a citizen, that entails the rights and responsibilities. . . . And for me that is a real, real piece, and not to be taken for granted. Society functions as a collective and about what people give and take. So that is the starting point for me in a lot of this, so young people, it is about give and take. If you live under the protection of the state, if you live under the protection of your parents, if you live under the protection of the community, then you have responsibilities to give something back or to be part of it or to be engaged in it. And to do that, it is about giving young people opportunities to express that, to learn it, to perfect it, and to carry it out.

But while this was clearly the majority view (even dissenters acknowledged that responsibilities are a part of citizenship), several respondents pushed back against a formulation in which the granting of rights is dependent on fulfilment of responsibilities. Instead, they argue that both are important but are separate issues, rather than co-dependent, as an advocate in Belfast argued:

> I think we should be talking about children's rights as entitlements, and that doesn't mean that children don't have responsibilities or [that] developing a sense of responsibility is not a part of what should be, I would say, general personal and social education. But I think it is about not tying rights and entitlement to a responsibility. You only have this, we will only give this to you if you do what we think you should be doing. That is the way people talk about children's rights, and that for me is completely not appropriate.

In this view, rights are inalienable. Responsibilities are part of life, but one's right to participation, to influence, and to action is not bound to the kinds of contributions to family, community, or society we might expect from young people.

Civic and (or versus) Political Engagement
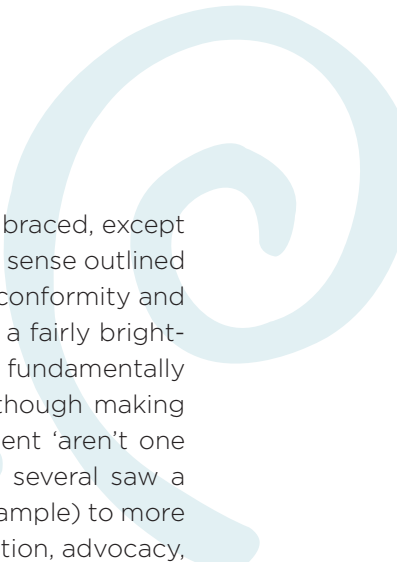
Respondents also had some differing views about youth engagement, the meaning of 'civic' and 'political' engagement, and the relationship between the two. For most, civic engagement concerns connection, involvement, and contribution, particularly at the community level. While some referenced the importance of having a voice on issues that matter to them in describing their views of civic engagement, respondents were more likely to emphasise volunteerism, responsibility, and participation in normative aspects of community life – such as after-school activities, employment, and community projects. For most, civic engagement had an element of producing public benefit through a range of different kinds of helping behaviours, and for many it is seen as explicitly non-political. As the staff member of a London NGO put it, describing how current UK policy frames the kinds of youth civic engagement the policy is meant to promote:

> I think it is about non-political social action. So I think it is very much at the wanting to encourage people to help each other more in a local area and develop stronger informal ties and social capital, but not the kind of social action that might make a demand on the state.

Political engagement, in contrast, was largely described in terms of rights, influence, decision-making, representation, and understanding power and how to effect change. While a few emphasised formal political engagement (such as voting or participation in party politics or party-affiliated youth groups), most respondents considered political engagement as concerned with what several referred to as 'small p' political engagement – promoting knowledge of the system, rights-based advocacy, civic activism. In some cases this includes explicit, outward-focused action; in others, political engagement may be embedded in a range of quotidian settings and activities, part of the fabric of young people's daily life. As a government official in Dublin put it, 'the personal is political . . . the things you do in your personal life, the way you treat people is a political act'. In a similar vein, a youth worker in Belfast described the relationship of attending an Irish language school to promoting young people's political engagement:

> Because they are based in the working-class areas as well, they will also go to the local schools at the bottom of the street, but there is quite political people sending their kids there. So that generation of young people are tuning in and they are political, and they are seeing the language as political, and they are seeing youth work as political, and they are seeing community work as political, and they are seeing the part that they have.

In general, the idea of civic engagement was uncontroversial and positively embraced, except to the extent that some believed an exclusive focus on civic participation, in the sense outlined above, without embracing a ('small p') political dimension, tended to promote conformity and social control rather than critical engagement. While some respondents made a fairly bright-line distinction between civic and political engagement, most saw them as fundamentally connected, either going 'hand in hand', as a youth worker in Belfast put it (though making the point that, in contrast to many working in the voluntary sector, government 'aren't one bit interested in political engagement') or linked in instrumental ways. Thus, several saw a 'natural progression' from civic engagement (in the form of volunteering, for example) to more explicitly political activities such as participation in public deliberation, mobilisation, advocacy, and other forms of activism, as well as formal participation in political processes like voting. That said, a number of respondents (especially in Belfast and London) noted the relative lack of emphasis on more political forms of engagement sponsored by the state and the relative difficulty of getting young people involved in explicitly political action. A staff member of an NGO promoting youth engagement in London put it this way:

> Civic engagement we would call community engagement, and that is about getting involved, feeling like a part of your community and doing something good for your community. And then political engagement, young people in this country – generalisation here [laughs] – is viewed with a bit more disdain, so a bit more caution, and I think they are further detached than they are from civic engagement. So it is a lot easier to get the person involved in their community, get them to volunteer, get them to run a community project than it is to get somebody, the young person, involved in politics. And I think they see it very differently.

There are, of course, important exceptions to this. Young people have been central to major political mobilisations around key issues they care about, historically and today, in these contexts and globally. Recent examples include the political activism among youth around the Brexit referendum in the UK, around marriage inequality in the Republic of Ireland, and around gun violence in the US, among others.

INTENT AND EXPECTATIONS

Interviewees elaborated a range of reasons for the importance of promoting young people's engagement in civic and political life and the kinds of outcomes such engagement might be expected to promote, particularly for marginalised youth and those living in disadvantaged circumstances. For the most part, these rationales and expectations aligned with those promoted by major policy frameworks in their countries, with some different emphases and arguments. Key arguments focused on the value of young people's engagement for promoting youth development; promoting a range of instrumental outcomes for youth, including both preventing negative outcomes and contributing to success in school and work; contributing to young people's active citizenship; promoting integration; and contributing to broader societal change.

Promoting Youth Development

Promoting the individual development of young people was the most frequently emphasised rationale and intent across cities and across 'types' of respondents, with some variation; respondents focused more on this issue in Belfast and Dublin than in London, and front-line practitioners were in general most explicit across the board.

Ideas about what aspects of youth development were most central to youth engagement focused on a combination of *confidence building, leadership development, and the acquisition of 'soft' skills.* These were discussed in different ways across respondents, with respondents in Belfast, in particular, often invoking the umbrella concept of 'personal and social development'.

Confidence, Self-Esteem, and Resilience

The most prominent theme to which respondents turned in describing the potential developmental benefits of promoting youth civic and political engagement was the importance of nurturing young people's confidence and self-esteem and, through this, helping them find their 'voice' and a belief that they have the capacity, as individuals and in their community, to understand and contribute to making change. A youth worker in Belfast explained:

> We try and adopt an approach that brings young people on a journey where they can look inwardly and look at their own value and belief system and they can bring about positive personal change through personal development work, through experiential learning, through opportunities. A lot of that work has been described by young people as life-changing. So for many young people, that is your cutting-edge stuff, that is working with marginalised young people, young people whose voices are often seldom heard, and bringing them into a level where they have the capacity, the confidence, and the self-belief to articulate their views at whatever level.

Indeed, benefits to individual young people were often cited as the principal likely outcome of successful efforts to engage youth in civic and political life, from deliberative forums to community projects to activism, as noted by a government official in Dublin:

> All the evidence and participation of children in decision-making is that the primary benefit is to themselves as an individual: it increases their sense of self-worth, self-esteem. It increases their sense of there being a point in opening their mouth and giving their opinion. So the primary benefits are very personal, and then they would see benefits to their community; they would see that certain things that have been changed in their community.

Among London respondents, in particular, this was frequently connected with the notion of resilience – the ability to draw on personal, social, or environmental resources to respond positively to adversity (e.g., Masten, 2001; Luthar et al., 2000). As a youth worker in London put it:

> It is about building resilience; it is about getting young people to be comfortable in their skin, to explore the world, to explore themselves, to note their limitations, to push their boundaries, to try different things. . . . We think that building those self-confidence, self-esteem, resilience, and understanding how you are in the world, that helps them to be more engaged, to be more proactive, to ask questions of people. It is all about being a confident person.

Soft Skills

The second major emphasis that is related to promoting youth development through a focus on civic and political engagement concerned the acquisition and nurturing of a range of soft skills that would serve youth well across a range of circumstances and contexts. These skills and capabilities are connected to instilling confidence and self-esteem in young people and include both relational skills and aspects of personal mastery – communication skills and knowledge of how to negotiate, how to work in a group, how to conduct research on a topic and assess a problem or situation, how to manage a project, how to speak with confidence in public, and how to network, motivate, and mobilise others. As a front-line practitioner in Dublin put it:

> They learned a huge amount of skills from that environment . . . in terms of challenging adults, having the power to be able to challenge adults in a very high-powered job. And in terms of listening skills, communication skills, finding different creative methods and mediums to be able to use when communicating with people.

Often, the acquisition of these skills is seen as beneficial to young people across a range of circumstances and contexts, including the classroom, the community, and the workforce; skills they can use 'outside of politics in their future careers':

> What that basically means is that when young people finish that process, they will have had a load of personal development and transferrable skills training, then they will have delivered a social action project and will have work experience through their volunteering citizenship and they will have a batch of qualifications.

In many cases, though, the focus on skills development, particularly among youth workers and especially in London, is explicitly on developing these skills for civic or political action. A youth worker in London's take on this is illustrative:

> Train them how to do research, and train them how to take action. Train them how to evaluate. They are learning the process of being in this public sphere and how to actually be organisers, but really it is how to be a person with a civic responsibility and can change things. And they are learning through that, they are learning how to do public speaking, they are learning how to research, they are learning how to negotiate with people in power. They are learning how to do analysis of situations and problems, and they are learning how to work as a team. They are learning how to take leadership.

Many of the skills are also seen explicitly as connected to the goal, discussed below, of promoting 'active citizenship'. In part this is about using particular 'soft skills' to effectively promote one's voice and have influence:

> So many of the people we work with will understand how to send an email but won't understand how to send an effective email that will command a response from the other person. And alongside that stuff like networking, public speaking, so these big six soft skills so they can use outside of politics in their future careers.

But for many practitioners, in particular, the focus is as much on the broader development of an orientation to participate and to commit:

It wasn't around people's abilities to write responses or to articulate and present. It wasn't entirely about what you could bring on a skills level in that traditional sense; it was about your commitment, about your participation, your participation in the sense of coming to a group. So how many times you came along to the group, how much commitment have you given to that? How keen are you, how passionate are you about being involved at that level? How willing are you? Are you ready to engage with decision-makers? Are you ready to engage with the decision-maker that might come from a different perspective than you?

A number of respondents also pushed back on what they saw as the tendency of an individual, soft-skills orientation to youth development by emphasising the need to promote, as a central part of skills-building, the knowledge and capacity for critical thinking and collective action. This emphasis on the importance of focusing on critical thinking was most often expressed by front-line youth workers, especially in Dublin and Belfast. As a youth worker in Dublin put it:

So youth work in this country is more personal development type approach; it is about trying to maintain young people within the status quo of the situation that they are in. There is no real eagerness to educate young people in a critical social change model: this is your situation, you are working-class, you are marginalised. Do we motivate young people to try to change that? That wouldn't really be an aspect of what they want us to do in terms of working with working-class young people.

This emphasis corresponds as well with a focus on cultivating particular kinds of *knowledge* – for example, on how the world works and young people's place in it, on key issues facing their communities and society more broadly, and on how to assess and respond to particular social problems.

The capacity of effective youth engagement processes to help young people understand their place in the world as a foundation for critical thinking and the ability to take positive action was a significant theme across cities, particularly among front-line practitioners.

For the most part, the focus was on working with young people to 'understand how the machine works' and how to 'connect the dots'; to question deeply why things are as they are and what role they might play to change them. In some cases, respondents discussed how this knowledge and critical thinking should lead young people to action, with a primary emphasis on moving youth to engage civically in their communities, contributing and 'giving back' through volunteering and community projects – politics, again, with a 'small p'. As a youth worker in West Belfast put it:

So the young person begins to see that actually there is all the issues affecting me personally, but then begins to question, why is it that drugs and alcohol are a major issue in my neighbourhood and not the neighbourhood a mile and a half away in a more affluent area? Why is that an issue? Why is young people gathering and joyriding an issue in my neighbourhood and it is not a mile and a half away? So beginning to make some of those linkages around why is it that my parents are more likely to die ten years before somebody in the south of Belfast. . . . So we try to place everything linked with personal to the community to the wider social. And the notion being then that we will eventually create young people who want to put something back through volunteering, learning, developing their own skills and take them back into the community and being a force for positive change within the community and creating again that ripple.

This kind of 'putting back' and engaging with others in the community also serves, as several respondents pointed out, as a way to change societal perspectives about young people:

> It also means that those people are now having to talk to kids who they might have seen in a hoodie in a stairwell, and they are talking about something positive for their own children. It is a bit of a changing and a framing of mindset.

For others, knowledge-building and critical thinking were more explicitly political, and sometimes contentious. Those with this orientation tended to ground their comments in the importance of a critical assessment of disparities in wealth, power, opportunity, and inclusion grounded in structural inequalities. Class differences and the dynamics of working-class disadvantage were most central to this across cities, and in Belfast were also framed within the broader, enduring dynamics of sectarianism. Race and ethnicity, especially regarding Muslim youth, were also of concern in London and, with regard to Travellers, in Dublin. In the words of an activist in Dublin:

> The reality is, there is two things: you want to see personal change for an individual, but the bigger picture has to be the collective action by that group of young people for collective outcomes for not only that whole group of people but community.

But even among young people who are politically astute, knowledge about how, specifically, the world works and about the opportunities and barriers to confronting challenges was seen as an important component of youth engagement. A youth worker in London put it this way:

> Whilst [some youth] are really politically minded and see things very much like, well nobody gives a shit about us in Tottenham and they don't care, they just want us all in prison, and they know a lot about the political state of affairs. But my experience to date is that they don't really know the channels through which they can create change and how to access them or why they would bother is the main thing.

Leadership

A third emphasis of youth development concerns the ways in which civic and political engagement is seen to both draw on and help build confidence and the range of skills and capabilities outlined above – relational skills, communication skills, organising, managing, and mobilising peers – towards developing young people as leaders. In some cases this is a happy by-product of engagement; in others it is an explicit goal of youth engagement efforts. As the leader of an NGO promoting youth engagement in Belfast put it:

> I suppose it is what it says on the tin. We talk about the power of one, and we talk about young people being leaders, and we try to inspire and motivate and build the capacity of young people to take on that leadership capacity, and you know I alluded earlier to young people being told or feeling apathetic. And if we look at what the big issues are in their life, and often people would say what difference could I make? So the peer change work is around bucking that trend and showing young people, well actually you can have a really positive impact amongst your peers.

As suggested by this quote, efforts to develop leadership among young people through civic and political engagement often focus on particular issues that affect them and that they would like to change. It also requires intentionality, through explicit discussion, facilitating group deliberation and planning, and supporting youth in shaping, launching, and managing a campaign or project. It may also include a more pointed educational process, through structured training programmes and supports, as noted by a London respondent:

> We have a training and accreditation centre for young people which looks at building their – not just their resilience and personal and social development but also accredited training to help them get involved in volunteering, citizenship, and take a bit of ownership.

In combination, these aspects of development were seen as both an outcome of meaningful engagement and as a necessary foundation for effective engagement as well as for the achievement of broader outcomes.

As a *foundation,* promoting young people's self-esteem and confidence and building the skills they need to be effective are seen as necessary precursors to broader engagement, particularly among young people facing significant adversity. A youth worker in East Belfast put it this way:

> If you are homeless, if you are dealing with mental health issues, if you are suicidal, if you can't pay your next bill and you are up to your eyes in debt, it is going to be very difficult for you to even think about how can I be a good citizen. So for us, one follows the other. Stabilise young people, begin to build their capacity, and then organically and quite naturally introduce the notion to them of giving something back, which is how we probably couch the whole issue of civic contribution.

Or, as stated by a youth worker in Dublin:

> I am trying to get them to not die by the time they reach eighteen really, or go to prison for a long time or kill someone else or end up on heroin. That is a lot of my work. So bringing them to a place where they can engage in civil society or politically is a long, long way off for these kids.

As it relates to youth development as an *outcome,* engagement is seen as the medium through which confidence-building and skills acquisition are nurtured. As the leader of an NGO promoting youth development and civic engagement in Dublin put it:

> Civic engagement is a way in which young people learn to develop communication skills, critical thinking, planning, goal setting, empathy, resilience, all of those. So it is a process piece, that skills development. The second thing then in itself is about that character building; it is about that inner sense of personal responsibility or drive and citizenship, that ownership piece.

Instrumental Outcomes

Aligned with this focus on personal and social development was a significant focus on the ways in which youth engagement could promote other kinds of instrumental outcomes.

This includes promoting positive outcomes – particularly success in school, seeking higher education, and engagement in the workforce – and preventing negative outcomes. The importance

of instrumental outcomes as a rationale for engagement strategies and likely outcomes promoted by them was especially emphasised by macro-level respondents (government officials, foundation officers, policy analysts) in Belfast and Dublin, but was also emphasised by front-line practitioners and NGO leaders. As the director of a philanthropic foundation focused on promoting social integration and youth civic and political engagement in London put it:

> And what we have found from that is maybe double their aspirations and self-confidence through the programme, and most of them go on to do either further education of what they would like to do because they feel like they can do it now, or a promotion in the current job, or going into politics as a job, which they didn't see as something they could do before. . . . By the end of it, out of all that training, our core aim is to not only deliver people that are able to take jobs that they seek to be doing in the future but also understand politics but also support each other as well.

The focus on employment was particularly emphasised, especially in London and Belfast – not surprising, given the policy focus on so-called NEETs and the tendency of many youth programmes to target them. In several cases, engagement in the workforce was a primary goal, sometimes more and sometimes less explicitly connected to civic or political engagement as a means. As the director of a youth-serving NGO in Belfast put it:

> It depends on the policy that you are working under. For example, the Department for Economy is not interested in mutual understanding or how young people deal with difference or community participation or any of that. The only thing they want to know is that this Joe is unemployed and gets a job and is employed or goes to training or whatever. I have always disagreed with that silo focus.

But often respondents were explicit about the connection between the ways in which personal development, skills-building, and engagement in civic and political life can directly contribute to more instrumental outcomes like employment. A youth worker in Belfast explained:

> The best way to deal with poverty indicators and that is to try and build skills for employment. And social action and civic action provide the most transferrable skills for employability: organising, risk assessing, working together, communicating. And if you get to the point where we have this small window where we work with young people up until they are maybe twenty-two, and they mightn't be with you until they are twenty-two, but if we can get them to the point where they are able to get into and secure jobs where they are going to be working with people from other communities. They have developed those skills.

Respondents also emphasised the particular role that youth work, non-formal education, and youth engagement projects in the voluntary sector play in this regard, often filling a gap not addressed in the formal education system. As a government official in Dublin noted:

> The net benefits of participating in youth work programmes are pretty extensive, again around the development of so-called soft skills. We were looking, there is some work there on the development of skills and how they match up to what employers need; we have seen that through various employability projects, we are working with people commonly referred to as NEETs. I don't particularly like using the word Not in Education,

> Employment or Training. And how youth organisations or youth projects, work with those less engaged, unemployed, and help develop those skills that maybe schools haven't developed but they have.

Even more frequently emphasised than youth engagement's contribution to positive instrumental outcomes like work and education, respondents focused on the role engagement can play in preventing negative outcomes. This was particularly the case among government officials and policy professionals in Belfast and front-line practitioners and NGO leaders in London. While a range of risk behaviours are of common concern across contexts, there are some differences in emphasis, with respondents in London focusing in particular on 'antisocial behaviour' and, in some cases, concerns about radicalisation. Several respondents invoked the 2011 youth 'riots' that took place in several major cities and included street protests, looting, and violence as an impetus for refocusing on the challenges faced by disadvantaged youth and promoting youth engagement schemes – as well as for more suppressive strategies to respond to youth crime or disruption. A local elected official in London put it this way:

> So when you look at the 2011 youth riots that we had in the UK, there was a recognition following that that we needed to do something about it, because actually the impact of such youth riots, it cascades out to everybody. It is not just contained within an isolated area; actually they are impacting on the right and the poor in terms of their perception of what is happening. And so that need to care is about if you don't take early intervention and prevention seriously, it impacts on us all at some point in time through increased crime, high levels of antisocial behaviour, the notion of feral youths, and all of these things actually coalesce and impact on everybody. And I think that is the difference here, that that impact is almost immediate.

Tensions around race and concerns about youth radicalisation also play a role in London that was not evidenced in the other cities, as does a specific concern about a rise in knife attacks among young people. But while addressing racial tensions and preventing radicalisation are included among the preventive goals of youth engagement efforts, they were sometimes seen as counterproductive. This was especially the case with reference to the *Prevent* strategy, particularly by those working with the Muslim community, as the leader of one NGO noted:

> I would argue that if you want to promote youth engagement, the first mistake the government is making is they are doing youth engagement through counter-terrorism. As soon as you do that, you miss an opportunity, and that will live long in the memories of that young person as soon as that engagement is through that. So if you are doing youth work, you do it as youth work; if you are doing community cohesion, you do it as community cohesion; if you are doing empowerment work, et cetera. If you are doing security, you do it as security, but the perception we are constantly being confronted with is that there isn't a community cohesion framework; there isn't an empowerment framework; there isn't an integration framework. There is only a security framework, and that is the problem.

In Belfast, there was also a strong emphasis on crime and antisocial behaviour. As a youth worker in West Belfast noted:

> Basically [our work is] the coming together of a government policy and a local community strategy around making this community a better place. Right from the outset that young people was right at the heart of what needed to be done. The reason for that was that like a lot of inner cities we were beginning to see growing levels of crime. . . . There was almost like a development in West Belfast, it was called hoods, subculture who were always young people who were almost always rejecting the authority in the local communities, which was the IRA. So the subculture emerged, basically putting their two fingers up at whoever their local authority was. Mixed into that, of course, major social economic deprivation, poverty, and living in the middle of a violent conflict as well.

Young people's involvement in crime in Belfast was often seen as connected to the dynamics of sectarianism and the role of paramilitary organisations continuing to operate in neighbourhoods after the Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998, which was the peace agreement that led to the cessation of the Troubles in Northern Ireland:

> So there are so many young people disengaged from communities who have been affected by paramilitary pressures. These paramilitaries come in and fill a void in young people's lives, particularly young men. So young men in Loyalist working-class communities or Republican working-class communities, underachieving or not achieving, very quickly they are spotted within their community by the vigilantes and the paramilitaries, who then prey upon them and go, We will give you money. . . . So all of a sudden the young people have a sense of purpose, they are getting a bit of affirmation, they have a role in the community but in a violent capacity and being involved in criminal activity.

In Dublin, the emphasis on crime and antisocial behaviour was often frequently noted as connected to drugs (though problems of drug use were often mentioned in the other cities as well, particularly in Belfast), and programmes focused on youth and youth engagement were often talked about as oriented particularly towards addressing these challenges by providing safe space and keeping young people out of trouble. As a government official put it:

> The young people's stuff is about keeping them busy and engaged and active. Now, thankfully, because we have very good quality standards framework in the youth sector, there is a lot of participation, but that is not the reason they are there; that is good practice within why they are there.

Promoting Active Citizenship

As foreshadowed above, respondents placed significant emphasis on 'active citizenship' as a rationale and goal for promoting youth engagement. Doing so requires engaging youth early enough to gain the skills, perspectives, and experience of citizenship, not waiting until they are eligible to vote.

Although frequently referenced, there was greater variation in the focus on promoting active citizenship. Interviewees in Belfast were most explicit about the importance of youth engagement promoting the capacity – and likelihood – of young people developing the skills, inclination, and commitment to contribute to society as active and productive citizens. Front-line practitioners across the cities focused more on this goal than did other respondents, although fewer than half of practitioners in Dublin talked about active citizenship as a principal goal or focus of their work. At the macro level, government officials and administrators were

the least likely to discuss this as a principal goal or intent, in spite of the explicitly stated focus on citizenship embedded in what is arguably the major national policy to promote youth engagement in the UK, at least (including Northern Ireland), the National Citizens Service.

But citizenship is also often a kind of unspoken goal, or one that is discussed in different terms, in part because it is believed that young people don't resonate with the term. In the words of a London youth worker:

> I don't think we ever use the word citizenship, but I think our starting point is them thinking about their personal identity and how that affects the people around them, then they move into dialogue skills and thinking about their community. So we never explicitly say it, because the big chunk of our process is around getting them to the point where they are thinking about social action. The end of the programme is being active citizens and politically engaged, but we don't necessarily explicitly define any of those.

Still, a number of respondents did talk explicitly in terms of active citizenship as a goal for youth engagement efforts, where young people can become engaged, contributing, informed, and participating in their communities and in society more broadly. An important component of this, expressed especially by front-line workers, is the need for youth to understand the structures, processes, and actors that shape their access to opportunities and either contribute to or in some way constrain their ability to lead a good and productive life:

> You want active, responsible, informed members of society, so people going to elections, you want them to make informed choices in the elections. You want them to propose laws that are sensible. You want fully functioning members of society, and the same way we teach them how to read and write, you should teach them how to take part in the civic life, because if you don't teach them when they are sixteen, they are not going to do it when they are twenty or twenty-five.

But the idea of active citizenship is not without contention, as we will explore in greater detail when examining critiques to current policy and practice from a number of respondents, particularly front-line practitioners, activists, and NGO leaders of organisations promoting youth participation. An underlying question is whether efforts to promote youth engagement are oriented more towards critical engagement or compliance. The leader of an NGO in Belfast elaborated on this in terms of the goal of engaged citizenship:

> I think what [policymakers] take from that and what I take from that are two different things. I think the interpretation there is they become good citizens in [the government's] definition of good citizens. So that they don't push the boundaries, young people don't push the boundaries, they don't express their identity, they don't act as a challenged function, that they don't do all those things that perhaps they shouldn't do because they are risky, like drinking under age. So that they are active citizens in the policymakers' definition of it. . . . Mine is to support them to become active citizens; is that they are able to engage in decisions and participate in decisions and processes that impact on them or impact on their lives, which is a very different thing. And that requires a reciprocity that those who might be of the former interpretation of that don't follow through on. So it goes to the whole idea of participation and engaging young people; the reciprocity is that if you engage them, you have to listen to what they say, take it into account, and if necessary change your view.

Promoting Integration

Promoting integration was another stated rationale and goal for youth engagement efforts. It was a significant focus, particularly in London among front-line practitioners and, especially, staff and leaders of youth-serving NGOs, and in Dublin among NGOs – but less so among macro-level policy respondents or youth workers. In Belfast, integrationist aims were made most explicit among front-line practitioners and respondents working at the macro level.

In London, the focus on integration is most often framed in terms of promoting cohesion, particularly across class and ethnic boundaries. Indeed, this is a central stated goal of the National Citizen Service – the policy most often referenced when discussing the integrationist goals of youth engagement efforts – which organises short-term programmes for young people, primarily 16- and 17-year-olds, to engage in volunteer activities and work with young people from different communities on 'social action' projects, both locally and beyond their communities. Through teamwork and spending time together, this kind of engagement is geared towards breaking down negative assumptions about others and being open to different perspectives and ideas, much in the way that contact theory suggests is possible (Pettigrew 1998; Allport 1954). A youth worker connected to the Young Mayor programme in one London borough put it this way:

> So young people, through their engagement, they might have one opinion that comes through their engagement, but then that opinion gets moderated, they have conversations, they come across other people's opinions. So through that engagement structure, their views then change, so what might have been a negative view gets moderated through a period of time, which then helps with community cohesion as well, because they may understand other people's views and what kind of ideas they hold.

In London and also in Belfast, integrationist aims of participatory schemes to engage youth civically (and sometimes politically) were also framed in terms of reparation, especially with reference to young offenders and participation in a range of restorative justice schemes. But in Belfast, for the most part, the aim of integration through youth engagement efforts focused on promoting 'good relations' among youth across Loyalist and Republican communities, even as efforts to move beyond that stark divide have been gaining momentum. Beyond youth engagement efforts, integrationist goals are also being pursued through efforts to bring young people together in schools through shared or integrated education schemes, although for the most part the education system is still segregated by religion. As a staff member at a NGO that focuses on youth inclusion put it:

> Citizenship and good relations for me are sort of like the same thing, and being a good neighbour and feeling like you are part of the community at various levels as well. That you are part of Northern Ireland, Ireland, UK, whatever, but you are also maybe rated in a particular community, particular age group, maybe a particular identity, be it LGBT or from a BME community or whatever it is. I think unfortunately citizenship in Northern Ireland would still have that thing of, are we going to talk about being Catholics and Protestants? You know, and trying to move people out of that.

As with the National Citizen Service, many of the participatory schemes organised to promote integration in Belfast tend to be short-term, often seeking to leverage sport or other kinds of group engagement towards mutual understanding and connection. This approach has its critics, as this youth worker noted:

> Those programmes are still happening: short impact, let's get both communities together, let's do a six-week programme, let's do a residential, and we will put out the funding applications and do the same next year. And it doesn't go – our argument would be that it doesn't go anywhere. It is about us developing young people, who they are and if you can get them . . . undertaking civic action or even better still in the employment, those kind of, the peace cohesion stability comes as a consequence for that; you don't need to concentrate on pushing together.

Dublin respondents were overall less focused on the issue of integration. Where it was a focus, it tended to concern breaking out of a kind of parochial localism that many working-class young people are subject to, including the disadvantages of poverty and risks of criminal engagement, along with a lack of awareness of and access to other people, opportunities, and challenges. In the words of a staff member at a youth-serving NGO put it:

> We are trying to help them navigate the journey to adulthood, the basics of youth work, and the big challenge for some of them can be some of these problems about offending and jobs, or there can be other challenges as well. And certain integrating and mixing together has got to be a big part of that journey, because then they will grow up thinking you are on the other side of the tracks. Either way, I don't mix with you and you don't mix with me, and we live in segregated communities or religious-wise or class-wise or whatever it is, or even increasingly you might say racial in Ireland, we just don't mix, we don't integrate. So that has to be a core principle for us.

The challenges of integration for Traveller youth, in particular, were noted by several respondents. These young people are seen as both discriminated against by 'settled' society and reluctant to engage because of cultural preferences, community pressures, or feelings of exclusion. As one practitioner described it:
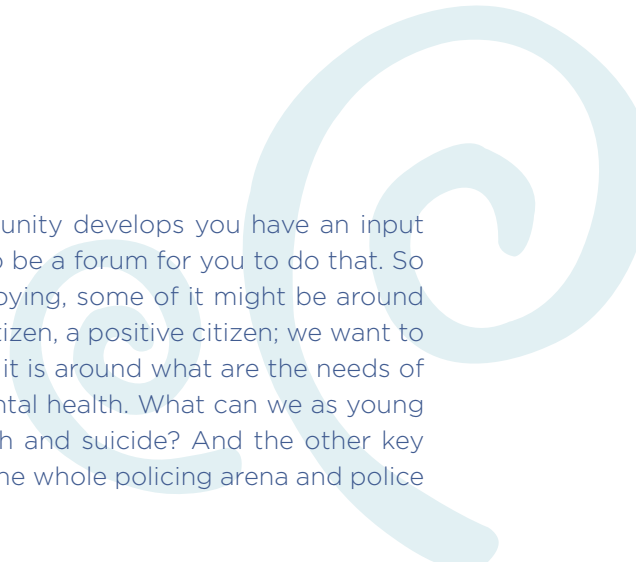
> And then there is also a fair amount of integration [efforts] into the mainstream youth project where you would have young Traveller girls that might be afraid to go in there because that is where I don't belong; I belong on the site with my friends, but in there, they are settled people, they do different things. So it is that fear of integration.

Contributing to Broader Societal Change

Finally, beyond benefits to individual young people, several respondents emphasised the potential of youth civic and, particularly, political engagement to contribute to broader changes in communities, in policies, and in society more broadly. This was most explicitly emphasised by front-line practitioners in Belfast and London and, in Dublin, by leaders of major NGOs focused on youth that work at a national scale.

In many cases, this impact was seen to occur most immediately, and most effectively, at the community level. A youth worker in Belfast explained:

> So we decided to say, look, these young people actually want to be involved in creating safer communities through active citizenship. So in this community, the Shankill community, North Belfast, East Belfast, there are now forums called Youth Safety Partnerships where young people are actively involved each year in choosing as a group four key pieces of work that they want to do and then carrying those out. But the thinking and the training

behind it is, This is your community, how this community develops you have an input in, and you have a say over, and we want this place to be a forum for you to do that. So some of the work that they do might be around lobbying, some of it might be around cleaning up graffiti, going out painting as an active citizen, a positive citizen; we want to help with the re-imaging of this community. Some of it is around what are the needs of the young people in this community, so here it is mental health. What can we as young people do to help address the issue of mental health and suicide? And the other key piece of work that they have done is to engage with the whole policing arena and police accountability mechanisms.

In some cases, though, the focus was at a higher level of impact, mostly through more explicitly political action. This may be through formal political engagement, including voting and party politics, or through political activism and engagement beyond the ballot, such as community organising and advocacy. A youth worker in London put it this way:

Community organising and the work we are doing is helping them to feel they can be powerful, and if you can be powerful, there is a place for you and actually a very important one. . . . That person may have been powerless before, swamped by their work, not getting involved in anything, now taking that public role to say, *This is an issue I have, but I am now organised with other people and I am going to take action on it.* Then let that person feel the power, and if they win, especially: *Wow, if I didn't do that, that would not have changed. And therefore there is a role for me in this and I don't need to be powerless.* So I think civic responsibility is taught through organising and, well, and it is also taught through the actual wins that help them to feel more powerful, and therefore there is a place for them in society that they need to play.

For many front-line practitioners, achieving these goals is in part about revisiting the role of youth work, as this youth worker in Belfast noted:

So what we are trying to say to youth workers is, It is your responsibility to try and have a broader remit which is about social change, and young people need to be part of that change process, and how do we nurture that sort of social civic responsibility.

However, as we will explore in more detail when we turn to critiques of current policy and practice, this orientation to youth engagement is often seen to be at odds with government policy orientations. An analyst and advocate for youth engagement in London noted:

So [government] are big on volunteering, big on helping your neighbour, big on informal support networks, not so big on community organising if it involves making demands on the state. Not so big on political action that would challenge, or social action that would challenge the state or try to make a claim on citizens' rights and entitlements. Anything that might imply a challenge to the state I think is not so welcome at the moment. But anything that is, *Let me go and help my Aunt Bertha to look after herself so she doesn't have to go into A&E,* is really where they are thinking and envisaging it at.

3.2 Strategies and Mechanisms

The orientations towards engaging young people discussed above are put into practice through a wide array of strategies across the three cities. We focus here on six specific strategies

that were engaged, sometimes in isolation, sometimes in combination. These are: establishing deliberative forums, engaging in relational youth work, promoting volunteerism and 'social action', engaging young people in arts and sport, supporting education and training, and leveraging technology and social media to promote engagement. In considering these strategies it is important to consider the role of different actors responsible for devising, supporting, and implementing them, including government agencies, the education system, and actors in the voluntary and community sectors. Appendix 1 provides a detailed commentary on these roles and relationships.
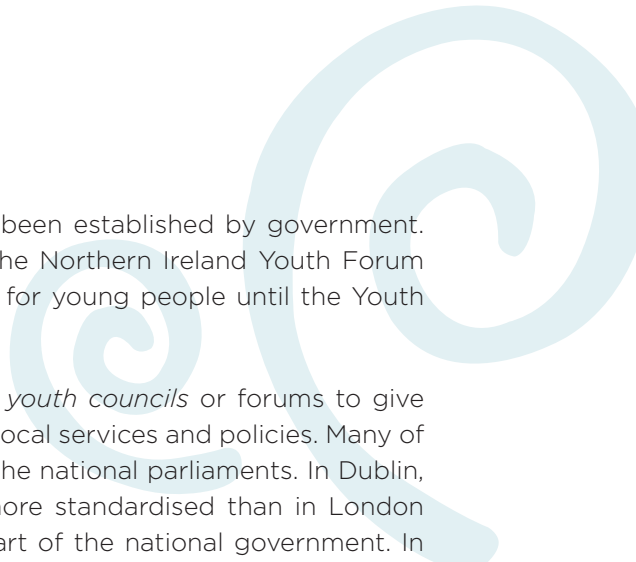
For the purposes of this section, a few core themes are notable to frame what follows. First, respondents expressed a range of views regarding the different roles played by the government and the voluntary sector. Respondents generally viewed government as the mechanism through which national and supranational policy was implemented, with a role of capacity building to support the delivery on these policies through existing statutory and voluntary mechanisms. With regard to the role of the voluntary and community sector, many respondents discussed the role of community-level actors and youth organisations in enabling and promoting young people's capacity for political engagement, with an emphasis on identity, leadership, and citizenship. As we will explore in the sections that follow, a number of respondents note a distinction between promoting political engagement versus more emphasising community-oriented civic engagement through service and social support activities. Finally, respondents noted the importance of the education system and schools. While a number of important critiques were made regarding the current contributions of schools to promoting youth engagement, a number of respondents note the potential role of schools to have a positive impact on improving engagement of disadvantaged young people, especially in partnerships between schools and organisations in the voluntary and community sector.

DELIBERATIVE FORUMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Across the three cities there has been a significant emphasis on establishing structures and processes to engage youth in deliberation and decision-making at different levels. These structures, which can be referred to collectively as deliberative forums, include national youth parliaments, local youth councils, youth advisory boards, and one-off consultative events.

In terms of deliberative forums, *national level structures* are in operation in all three cities but with some notable differences. Every local authority in the UK is entitled to have a young person elected by other young people to represent them in the UK Youth Parliament (UKYP), which has 364 elected representatives aged 11–18 years. The UKYP aims to give the young people a mechanism to express their concerns and priorities and communicate them directly to elected representatives of local, regional, and national government, providers of services for young people, and other agencies who have an interest in the views and needs of young people. The youth representatives elected to the UKYP sit in the House of Commons once each year and debate what they want their priority campaign to be for the following year. Not all local authorities choose to participate in the Youth Parliament.

In Ireland, Dáil na nÓg is the National Youth Parliament of Ireland for 12–17-year-olds. Two hundred young people are elected to Dáil na nÓg through their local Comhairle na nÓg (youth councils). The Dáil na nÓg meets for one day every year, and the 31-person Comhairle na nÓg National Executive is tasked with following up on the recommendations from Dáil na nÓg. The Dáil na nÓg is run by two national voluntary organisations on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

In Northern Ireland, no national youth parliament has yet been established by government. However, a National Youth Congress was established by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (an NGO) to address the need for a democratic structure for young people until the Youth Assembly is formally established.

Each of the three cities also hosts a broad range of *local youth councils* or forums to give young people the opportunity to have a voice in relation to local services and policies. Many of these structures also elect or nominate representatives to the national parliaments. In Dublin, the local youth council structure, Comhairle na nÓg, is more standardised than in London or Belfast because it is managed directly by the DCYA, part of the national government. In London, some local authorities have established Young Mayor programmes, in which young people in the borough are elected by their peers through schools. There is also a range of youth structures in existence in Belfast, as described by a government official:

> There are now 11 local councils and they are forming youth panels. There is a Northern Ireland Youth Forum, there is a Belfast Youth Forum. Many NGO organisations like the Commissioner for Children & Young People, the commission has 80 strong young people's panel. So . . . there actually is a big base of views for children and young people being sought in Northern Ireland.

In addition to establishing structures to support young people's involvement in deliberation and policy advising, government departments and local authorities frequently also undertake one-off *consultations* with young people to inform policy. Such processes are mostly adult-led, but respondents in London and Belfast in particular spoke of the increased use of more participatory, youth-oriented methodologies. For example, in London and Belfast, young people with specific experience have been recruited and trained as 'young advisers' to undertake consultations with other young people on particular issues[5], and a number of examples were provided across the three government departments 'co-designing' services with young people. A government official in Dublin explained:

> Over the years we have done a massive list of consultations with children and young people on anything and everything you could think of in partnership with other government departments. . . . We feed it into the relevant agency department and we have children's actual voices, their views, their opinions written up. . . . That is what children think, that is what they like, that is what they think is working, that is what is not working, that is what upsets them, that is what bothers them. And so it is not that hard to do.

Respondents also referred to the fact that participation has become much more embedded in the governance processes of youth organisations over recent years. Interviewees from youth organisations in all three cities described how young people are encouraged and supported to engage in deliberation around organisational priorities and programming, and to take on leadership roles within the governance structures of their organisations. In the words of one:

> So our board is made up of sixteen- to twenty-five-year-olds. So essentially my boss, the vice chair of campaigns and communication, is a young person who is twenty-one. But the difference is they govern the charity and steer the direction in making sure that our work is reflective of what the members want.

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5 In London, in particular, a bit of an industry has developed in this regard, with a number of organisations focused on recruiting, training, and connecting young people to local authorities, government departments, and others (for example, developers seeking to embark on neighbourhood revitalisation projects), in some cases as paid consultants.

Respondents articulated a range of reasons or justifications for the establishment and continued existence of these deliberative mechanisms. Across the three cities, a commitment to the realisation of young people's rights to democratic participation and having a voice in society was highlighted. While young people's rights under the UNCRC were frequently referred to, some respondents in Dublin and Belfast also highlighted that young people's right to be consulted is upheld in national legislation.

Deliberative forums and consultative structures were also seen by respondents as important for communicating to young people that they have a role to play in civic and political issues, and for inspiring them to realise that they have the capacity to bring about change in society. The point was frequently made that many young people see politics as something for older people and that the youth participatory structures offer the potential to awaken an interest in and the capacity for civic and political engagement in young people. As one respondent in London noted:

> Most young people, they view politics [as something] for the elderly community. . . . But the Young Mayors initiative, basically you can make a change in society when in school or college, and there is a future, and that will have an effect on younger people in the future time. So I think it is a good initiative.
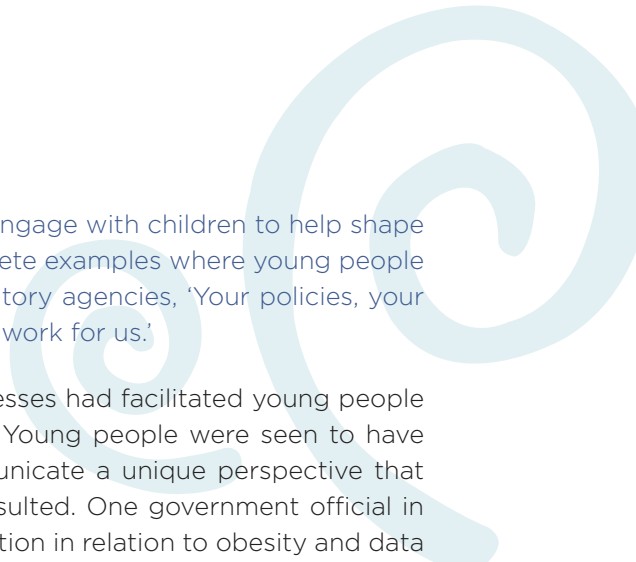
There was also a widely shared view that youth engagement with deliberative forums and consultative process builds the skills and capacity of young people to engage further with civic and political issues and facilitates young people to see themselves in a new light, which can have the effect of shaping their behaviour into the future. As a government official in Belfast described it:

> They [young people] were organising things themselves and haggling with people about prices for coaches and speakers. They were contacting MLAs themselves and learning about how that works, and I think that added to their toolbox in terms of civic engagement and wider engagement. It opened up channels for them that they didn't know existed.

The availability of a variety of youth structures was also seen as offering a mechanism through which young people can influence the provision of policy and services at local level. Many respondents expressed the view that young people are more likely to be engaged with issues that affect them in their day-to-day lives, and that using these issues as a starting point can kindle an awareness of politics, power, and democracy. In all three cities, examples were given of disadvantaged young people who were in conflict with the police having the opportunity to come face to face with them and move towards a more constructive relationship. Examples were also given of young people successfully influencing the provision of playgrounds, youth services, and transport services. Engaging with other young people through local councils was also seen as sensitising young people to issues affecting other young people that may have been outside of their own experience. A youth worker in Belfast noted:

> A lot of our young people have a very negative interface with the police, so we have lobbied hard on the police powers around stop and search and how they are implemented and how they are interpreted, and the negative impact that has on young people. We have worked hard to get the police training around young people changed and for young people to be at the centre of that, so young people now talk to police around

what it means to engage with young people and to engage with children to help shape that training. So I suppose those are some very concrete examples where young people have been involved in saying to government or statutory agencies, 'Your policies, your procedures don't work for us, but here is what would work for us.'

Respondents also spoke of how these structures and processes had facilitated young people to influence policy at national levels in a meaningful way. Young people were seen to have the capacity to speak openly and honestly and to communicate a unique perspective that would otherwise be missed if young people were not consulted. One government official in Dublin gave examples of how national strategies and legislation in relation to obesity and data protection were greatly enriched by insights gleaned through consultation with children and young people:

What the teenagers were able to share with us is now heavily informing the guidance that the Law Reform Commission is giving to the government on the development of legislation as to what should constitute criminal behaviour online. And if we hadn't gotten the views of teenagers, none of that stuff would have come up in the way it has.

A range of challenges or critiques relating to formalised youth structures, such as parliaments and councils, were raised, concerning their tendency to attract participation from largely middle-class, confident, and particularly able young people who are already likely to be engaged civically, the formality of the structures and their tendency to reproduce or mimic adult structures, and the extent to which they provided the opportunity for more critical engagement or have any real impact. These issues will be discussed in greater detail later in this report when we turn to challenges and responses to current efforts.

RELATIONAL YOUTH WORK

Beyond structured deliberative forums, youth work emerged across all the stakeholder interviews as a foundation for much civic engagement activity for young people and as a principal mechanism to get them engaged. The purpose of youth work was commonly described as promoting personal and social development and social inclusion for young people, and as facilitating a sense of identity and belonging.

While youth work plays a critical role in supporting youth civic engagement activity, a number of respondents expressed the view that youth work has lost much of its focus on critical engagement of youth, and that many youth workers do not see their role as having explicit political or civic purpose. These informants were critical of mainstream youth work's principal focus on recreation and personal development rather than promoting a critical analysis of the reasons for young people's marginalisation in society. As a youth worker in Belfast put it:

We speak to youth workers as well, and they were not necessarily seeing the work politically or seeing the link politically, almost seeing it as an altruistic form of helping the individual. There was no great link between what they were doing and politics; they were almost rejecting, a lot of youth workers almost going, *That is too political.*

Indeed, for many respondents, the civic and political dimensions of youth work are of critical importance, as a youth worker in Dublin pointed out:

> For me it is about critical social education, not just personal development in young people, because personal development is really useful and good but probably not if you are a Traveller who comes from a really poor background. Personal development is all about giving you the skills to fit into this wonderful society that we all live in, but if I can't get a job and I go to a school that is crap and if I have a mother and father who are alcoholics.

The relationship between the youth worker and the young person was emphasised as pivotal to the approach of youth work. Some models of youth work, such as detached youth work, are particularly focused on the development of a relationship between the young person and the youth worker. Where the relationship can be built that is perceived by a young person as genuine and meaningful, there is a greater likelihood of the young person engaging and linking in with other activities. Another youth worker in Dublin put it like this:
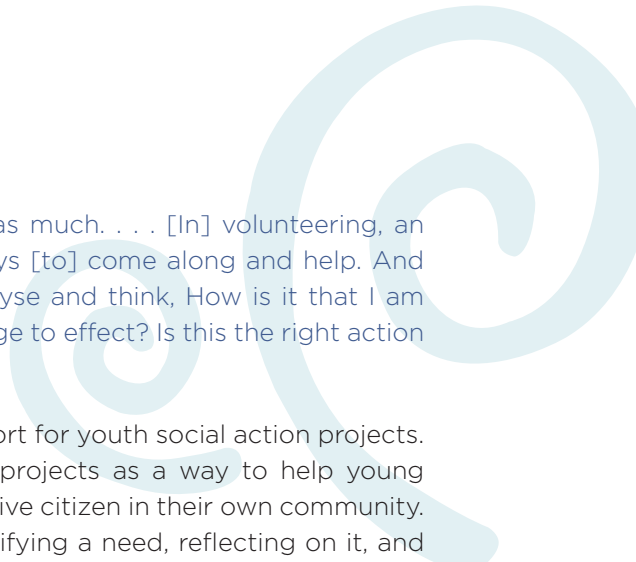
> It is not about fixing; it is about building relationships, it is about getting to know them, it is about them getting to know you, getting to trust you. They can talk to you; you are there to listen.

Many respondents, primarily youth workers across the three cities, emphasised that before civic engagement work can happen, they must build a relationship with the young person and also address their personal, social, or emotional development. While this process can take a long time and may not lead to the young person becoming involved in civic or political action, some young people can move over time from the personal to the civic and political. This movement is part of a larger process, as a youth worker in Dublin describes in the case of some young people's participation in a leadership programme delivered in the youth work setting.

> From that then those young people were able to see that a lot of the problems they were facing were quite similar and that the answers weren't in the community. And that happened organically. And from that then they tried to mobilise and talk with local community leaders, which they did do. Now they have managed to get some small changes in that community, some small changes around what services were being provided, and also they were able to access funding for particular projects.

YOUTH VOLUNTEERISM AND SOCIAL ACTION

Engaging young people in volunteering was noted as a major strategy to engage them in their communities – sometimes through the activities promoted in the context of community-based youth work, sometimes through structured programmes like the National Citizen Service, and sometimes through activities promoted by schools or in their communities. However, while the term *volunteering* was used by a number of respondents, there was considerably more emphasis on the concept of social action. Indeed, one youth work respondent in London argued that the term *volunteering* has been replaced by *social action* as a result of its usage in government funding schemes. Many respondents, particularly in Belfast and London, used the term *social action* projects to describe youth activity in the community that is conceived, planned, and implemented by young people themselves. As one respondent argued, social action is a project that focuses on 'doing something good' in the community and requires reflection and analysis on the part of the people taking action, whereas he sees volunteering as more 'passive':

> Social action is really powerful; volunteering is not as much. . . . [In] volunteering, an organisation has created an opportunity and just says [to] come along and help. And that is good, but you never ask why. You never analyse and think, How is it that I am going to effect positive change? Is this the right change to effect? Is this the right action to effect the kind of change?

Many respondents spoke of the rationale behind their support for youth social action projects. One interviewee from a London NGO sees social action projects as a way to help young people to feel that they are contributing to and being an active citizen in their own community. Going through the process of social action, including identifying a need, reflecting on it, and undertaking action, allows the young people to experience fully what it means to be an active citizen in their own communities and to be acknowledged for doing so. The young people are also seen to benefit in terms of skills and personal development:

> And there is just a great sense of well-being when they complete that, and ninety-nine times out of a hundred you have got the chair of the residents' association or the local community police officer or the school coming over saying, What a fantastic job and thank you, and all the rest of it. . . . They also get all of the additional skills that come with identifying issues, planning a project, talking to strategic partners, getting the support, delivering the programme, and evaluating it at the end. So in effect you have almost got a mini-project-management experience piece that goes alongside their personal development.

In London, at least, the use of social action entered the discourse as a result of its central place in the UK National Citizen Service (NCS). Since its establishment in 2011, the NCS has provided the most wide-reaching (and most generously funded) of the key mechanisms though which youth civic engagement is promoted in England.[6] The programme is a three week government-funded initiative for older teenagers, who take part in a residential programme for two weeks, followed by designing and implementing a social action project in their communities. There were mixed views from research participants regarding the benefits of the NCS. Many respondents said that they had heard of or directly experienced positive benefits for young people, including having fun, developing awareness and understanding of diversity, and gaining experience of undertaking community action. The outcomes were described by some as greater care and compassion for others in their communities, in addition to increased skills and greater appetite for future community engagement. As an NGO leader in London put it:

> It does bring different people together, which is great, especially in terms of when we look at the snapshot of the world we are in right now, the rise of the far right, the xenophobic behaviour, the hate speech. If we create nice social experiences for people of difference, religious difference, cultural difference, anything, if they have a good time together, then that slowly does diminish the ability for them to be divided on their differences. So that I think it does great.

Many who were positive about the NCS also critiqued it on a range of grounds, while others were wholly critical of the programme. For some, the model is simplistic or unrealistic in expecting a 'transformational' experience for young people over a three-week period. While taking part in the NCS offers young people an enjoyable experience, they questioned whether the benefits are sustained in the longer term, and whether it amounted in effect to a quick-

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6 The NCS is also operative in Northern Ireland, but much less expansively, and many of our respondents were unaware of its activities there.

fix citizenship model in lieu of the longer-term investment in youth work. In addition, some respondents criticised the fact that the NCS is 'expensive' and was rolled out at the same time as significant cutbacks to youth services in the UK – a theme to which we will return. Others argued that the type of social action promoted by the government through such schemes is depoliticised: not about challenging inequalities in society but about shoring up public services through volunteerism.

Young people's involvement in some of the mechanisms described in this section did lead to young people mobilising to advocate for particular policy responses or to protest on particular issues of importance to them, and interviewees did point to a few key examples of youth organising and mobilisation leading to active social action campaigns: on funding cuts to the youth service, marriage equality, and community violence, for example. But we found relatively little emphasis on youth organising as a widely embraced strategy.
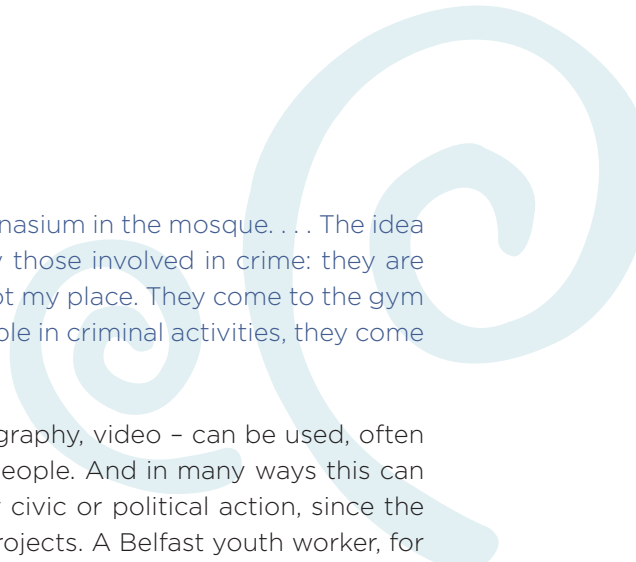
ARTS, SPORTS, MEDIA

The mechanisms we have focused on so far provide fairly direct means of engaging young people in civic and political life, even if their potential to do so is not always realised. There are also somewhat more indirect methods, using recreational and cultural activities to engage young people in this way. As with youth work, where a focus on recreation or personal development may not lead to more active civic or political action on the part of young people, the same is often true in the context of sport, arts, and media programmes. But there were also a number of examples provided of how they can be used as a starting point for engaging young people more broadly. The point was made that disadvantaged young people are often not involved in these activities, as they don't have the opportunities, resources, or confidence to do so. In the words of one Dublin respondent, 'they are not joiners'. Providing these opportunities can thus provide a bridge to other forms of engagement.

A youth worker in Belfast, for example, described how football was used as a means to engage young people in activities they are interested in but from which a sense of belonging and commitment to their community can develop. Another, in Dublin, described challenging racism against a group of young Africans by organising football matches, outlining how the matches and follow-up discussions led to the development of solidarity and understanding of difference. And youth workers in London spoke of using sport as a 'hook' to engage young people, with the aim of subsequently linking them with other opportunities. A youth worker in Belfast described the process in this way:

> A lot of them don't feel that they belong. And when they become involved in negative belonging, it can be that they get in with people who are involved in drugs or criminal activity or stuff like that. But even a civic role could be that we are working with them and as part of their journey they develop, say, a football club and they organise a football team and they get young people involved in playing football, and that becomes something that they can become part of and that they belong to. . . . So that civic community role can develop out of that.

Similarly, an interviewee from a London mosque described how they built a gym with the aim of bringing in young people who may otherwise be hard to engage. When they feel comfortable and get to know people there, they may then be willing to engage with other community activities.

> We were the first to have a proper, purpose-built gymnasium in the mosque. . . . The idea was really how do we meet young people, especially those involved in crime: they are not going to come to the mosque; they will feel it is not my place. They come to the gym and work out and get to know you. A lot of these people in criminal activities, they come to the gym and then we engage them.

Similarly, arts activities – graphic arts, drama, music, photography, video – can be used, often to powerful effect, in civic engagement work with young people. And in many ways this can speak more directly to issues and provide a foundation for civic or political action, since the activities can explicitly incorporate issue content into the projects. A Belfast youth worker, for example, described how young people used a variety of creative methods to share their views with policy makers during a consultation event:

> Thinking of really creative ways down to simple artwork and different ways to portray messages that were really important and really strong messages, but done in the way that young people want to do them. So we use ideas like messages in a bottle, we used bunting where young people had wrote some really powerful messages about how they were feeling, how they were treated in services, issues for young people, but this was all done colourfully; they did like maps and journeys.

Similarly, a youth worker in Dublin spoke of how drama has been used for many decades by young people in her project to tell their stories. She described a recent initiative whereby young people told their stories and had them read anonymously by other young people. This project led to an innovative training programme for new recruits to the guards (police), who read the young people's stories as part of the process of dialogue between young people and the guards. A youth worker in London also gave an example of how a hard-hitting play developed by young people experiencing homelessness was used as a focal point to engage young people in a discussion and dialogue with policymakers about housing needs.

These and other examples were given to illustrate how the medium of the arts can have an impact in a way that other methods may not. As a final example, a Belfast youth worker described the impact of a photographic exhibition undertaken by marginalised young people to document their lived realities in terms of service provision. The photographic evidence communicated 'very starkly and directly' to those in positions of power and led to numerous changes in practice:

> There was a photograph, an image of a young person leaving residential care with nothing but a black bag with their belongings, and the commissioner had absolutely no idea that this happened; she was outraged. And the young people who the photographs belonged to were there beside their photographs and were able to say, 'No, actually, this is my experience.' . . . And that is powerful because you can't take young people's experiences away from them. So she had said, 'That is it.' And that is changing; that is not to happen.

EDUCATION

Education was also noted as an important mechanism to promote youth civic engagement. Much of the focus here concerns training and education programmes in the voluntary sector; the role of formal education was also discussed, but mostly by way of critique, a theme to which we will return.

With regard to education for youth civic engagement in the non-formal sector, interviewees identified a broad range of education and training programmes that have been developed to educate young people about politics. These include local-level training aimed at young people who are new to civic engagement, focusing on developing young people's understanding of the system, building competencies and developing leadership skills, and engaging in social analysis. They also include training at an advanced level for young people with experience and ambitions to become further involved in politics. A youth worker in Belfast, for example, outlined the nature of education and training provided for young people who have been elected to the Belfast Youth Forum.

> It is really education for social justice, so when they come in we do a lot around equality, human rights, UNCRC, how to use those instruments to actually create change where you live. Campaigning and lobbying training [on] how to engage with decision-makers, how to lobby them when you meet them in a committee.

Unsurprisingly given its size, many more examples of these types of training programmes were given by respondents in London than in Belfast or Dublin; there, a rich and diverse array of youth civic engagement training opportunities was described, principally in the voluntary sector. Many of these concerned both training and connecting young people to decision-makers at various levels, thus giving them the opportunity to contribute to policy debates and encouraging them to engage in local politics more broadly. As a staff member at an NGO that runs one such programme in London described:
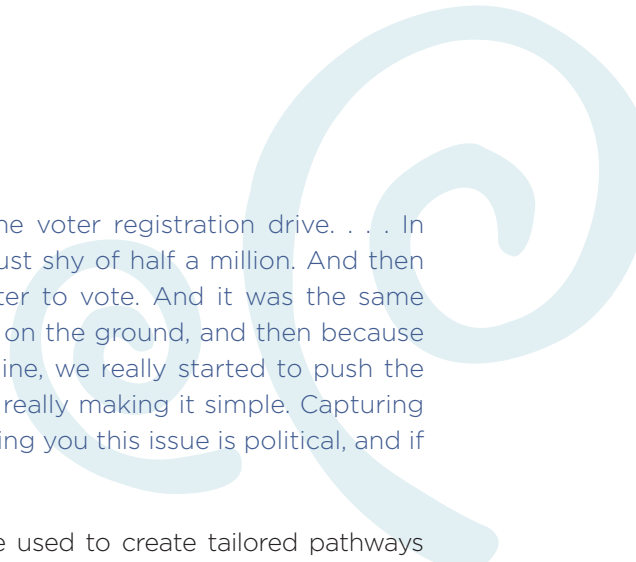
> Our ultimate aim is to remove the imbalance of society in the sense of either removing those by teaching or explaining, or by giving people the skills to bring themselves out of that downward spiral. And giving them the skills of saying, 'I am equal to you.' So obviously we have gone down the route of teaching, mentoring, training, and giving them the knowledge that they need so that when they are in the environment where they need to somewhat prove themselves, they have the ability to do that.

Some organisations include young people in the design and delivery of training, as observed by the founder of an organisation that trains youth to serve as paid policy advisors to government and other organisations:

> These are all co-created with young people, and they were designed around the things they felt they needed more skill in to deliver a successful young advisor team. So we have got things like mentoring and coaching; we have got branding, marketing and digital. We have got leadership and leading community mapping, engaging young people, effective social action, service appraisal, and inspection. The psychology of influence in change.

TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In addition to the kinds of direct, face-to-face strategies so far described, some organisations also use social media and other forms of communications technology in a wide variety of ways for the purposes of promoting youth engagement. Some of the larger youth organisations, for example, use sophisticated, tailored online campaigns to engage young people, including encouraging them to vote. At least one organisation has also developed games and quizzes to engage young people on social network platforms, such as Tinder, that are popular with young people and to encourage them to see that the issues they are interested in are political issues. The leader of one London NGO described their process around the Brexit referendum campaign:

> We followed the footsteps of the US in terms of the voter registration drive. . . . In three years that went from 50,000 registrations to just shy of half a million. And then in the referendum, 1.85 million applications to register to vote. And it was the same principle: go to where people are, where you can be on the ground, and then because government legislation meant you could register online, we really started to push the online engagement . . . to harness social referral and really making it simple. Capturing your interest based on an issue and then slowly showing you this issue is political, and if you care about this you are political.

In Belfast, examples were given of how social media can be used to create tailored pathways through which young people could communicate with politicians.[7] A youth worker there described one of these efforts to connect young people directly with their political representatives:

> If you go into a youth group that night and they were really passionate about something . . . what you used to be able to do was say to them that here is this mechanism, just put in your post code and up will pop your local councillors and a format of a letter is already there, you just need to populate the letter with what your issue is. And the young people push the button, done immediately, nice and easy, doesn't become a whole big furore, and then all of a sudden maybe the local councillor might respond and say, 'I will come out and meet your group the following week.' Fantastic.

There were also examples given of youth organisations using social media to communicate with young people regarding activities and services, but also as an important channel to disseminate information on issues. A Muslim youth centre in London, for example, uses social media to respond quickly to inaccurate media reports and promote positive messages.

Many respondents in the three cities also cited the use of social media and technology to gather feedback from young people for research, evaluation, or consultation purposes to inform policy development. A youth worker in Dublin gave an example of how one group of young people used blogging as a means of documenting a citizenship project they were undertaking, and another discussed an example of phone-based apps and games being used to engage young people in detached youth work in Belfast.

While most organisations made some use of social media, some indicated that their organisations had decided thus far not to engage through this medium, either due to the absence of a clear rationale or because of the risks associated with it, including concerns about privacy, sharing inappropriate content by and with young people, and the potential for cyberbullying. The constant availability of popular media content was also described as 'a distraction' which can make it harder to engage young people; the fact that some young people are staying online at home and not engaging face-to-face in their communities was also cited as a challenge.

Councils and government departments were described as more risk-averse in this regard than NGOs, but some NGOs also expressed reservations regarding the role or value of technology in their work. But most interviewees, particularly from the NGO and youth work sectors, saw technology as an essential means of communicating with young people, who have grown up using technology. Indeed, there was a sense that organisations failing to engage with technology risked 'being left behind':

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7 This work had been undertaken by an organisation called Public Achievement in Northern Ireland, which is no longer in operation due to funding cuts.

I think we need to go where young people are, we need to meet young people wherever it is that they are, and young people are very, very technological, even from a really young age; they are all over it, way better than us. Engagement and participation people and officers and people who want to engage with young people need to become very technologically savvy, because we are not [savvy] enough, I don't think.

But it is clear that strategic use of social media in this realm is still developing, and many organisations are struggling to come to terms with how best to manage the risks while also realising the possibilities and promise of the new spaces that can be created through social media, as articulated by an NGO respondent in London:

The first thing that the youth workers are talking about is defensive, in the sense that they see it as a world of risk, the way in which youth workers have increasingly seen their role as about safe spaces; there is a caution about risk that has seeped into the work over the years, really. So it is almost as if this digital world is seen as a danger, and they want it to regulate more almost before they touch it. They are worried about safety issues, which are all very understandable, but the first reaction – and this is again very subjective – but the first reaction seems to be one of anxiety about it as a space rather than excitement about it as a space.

A recurring theme across the three cities was the sense that adults are out of step with technology and the youth culture it facilitates and creates, which in turn has implications for their capacity to use technology effectively for youth civic and political engagement. The view was widely shared that young people use social media in specific ways, which mostly relate to communication with friends, and it cannot be assumed that they will respond to something just because it is online. The director of a youth-serving organisation from Belfast described the challenge of engaging young people through this medium:

Unless there is a subject topic that is of immense interest to them, unless you trigger something or have a hook that engages them and that is part of the youth culture, that is of its time in their youth culture and you would really need to be able to align to it. Whatever it is, I don't know what it would be, but if it means something to them, they will want to do it.

Some respondents highlighted the importance of personal social networks in the effective use of social media:

When a friend posts something, you are more likely to listen to it than when an organisation puts something up. So it could be something that a friend says – 'Do you want to join me on this' type of thing – and my Snapchat, personal WhatsApp. So that has great impact. So I wouldn't say social media – what I mean by social media is mass social media – but local social media has a huge impact, because we can ask one volunteer to message ten people in their WhatsApp group and then that is a reach out on a personal level.

3.3. Challenges and Responses

PROBLEMS AND CRITIQUES

Efforts to promote the civic and political engagement of young people, the strategies they use, and the organisational, professional, and voluntary resources they draw on face a number of significant challenges. Some are generic to the task and aims; others are specific to local context and to young people living in particular circumstances of disadvantage and marginalisation. Challenges presented by what many respondents described as 'Islamophobia', for example, were mentioned by several respondents but only in London. Although other forms of discrimination based on race or ethnicity were discussed in Belfast and Dublin, they were not given a lot of focus, with the partial exception, in Dublin, when discussing Travellers. In both Dublin and Belfast, other forms of discrimination discussed were in relation to LGBTQ youth, young people in (or recently exiting) care, or youth with disabilities. Some challenges concerned contexts and systems – some of the major 'givens' within which youth engagement policy and practice must work. Others led to more pointed critiques of current policy or practice as it tends to be implemented.

We focus in this section on five major challenges and critiques noted as significant, to a greater or lesser extent, across the three cities: (1) capacity and resource limitations; (2) the tendency of young people to be alienated from systems and the public sphere and the lack of incentive for or barriers to engagement; (3) the challenges of inclusion more broadly; (4) the influence of both local community and the broader socio-political context; and (5) the limitations of youth-oriented policies in general, and those seeking to promote youth engagement in particular.

Capacity and Resource Limitations

The most frequently raised challenge, particularly among front-line practitioners and leaders of NGOs, and especially in London and Dublin, concerned resource limitations. To a large extent this concern focused on financial resources, particularly in light of significant budget cuts in the wake of the Great Recession. Hardest hit, respondents across cities noted, are youth services, and particularly more informal – *foundational,* youth workers in particular would say – programmes and organisations like community-based youth clubs. As a youth worker in London put it:

> At the moment where young people have so few spaces and being on the street is demonised or almost impossible for many young people, depending on who they are, where they live, and what they look like and so on. So that kind of youth work is hugely under threat, and it is partly about funding cuts, it is partly about youth work is disproportionately cut compared to other services, and it is partly about the open forms of youth work are by far disproportionately cut compared to the more structured, targeted forms of work. And then that links to a couple of things which is to do with how youth work is valued or measured or evaluated, or what is in someone's interest to do, what looks good.

The contraction of funding for youth services across the three cities has led to the need for organisations to compete with one another for scarce resources, and has obvious implications for the broader capacity of these organisations to do their work, in terms of staffing, space, programming, and numbers of young people they can reach, engage, and work with over time.

This is particularly important in the context of working with marginalised youth, who often face a range of challenges both as individuals and in their homes, communities, schools, and other institutions with which they interact, such as the criminal justice and child welfare systems. As a youth worker in Dublin explained:

> The trouble is we can't compete with the realness of the world out there and drug dealing and so much action going on; we can't be that real all the time. We can't generate enough realness; it just takes too much organisation, too many limitations on us, whether it be health and safety, whether it be child protection, resources, whatever it might be, to be that real all the time. You are trying all the time to be real, but to get substantial realness into their lives is a resource issue essentially.

But beyond the challenges created by shrinking financial resources, the constraints placed on implementing organisations by the specific funding terms was also noted. Working with disadvantaged youth requires time, care, and attention, as noted by a leader of an NGO focused on youth development and engagement in Dublin:

> But I suppose for us just the young people that I work with, it takes a long time for that change to happen, and with the young people we work with, you can kind of see a difference after about six months of working with them every week, where their heads are higher. And after a year they are talking about college and talking about doing the Leaving Cert, and they never talk about that before. But that takes a long time, so I don't know how much we can do in a few days.

In light of this, the lack of certainty about funding and the tendency towards short-term support is problematic. A London youth worker observed:

> I think it has left quite a chaotic picture and one that is guided by either political terms, four years, or by funding terms, which are some funds are only a year long, some two years, some three years long. You very rarely get a project now that is more than three years funding.

Some concern was also raised about ill-considered priorities and how resources may be inappropriately allocated based on, principally, government priorities or bureaucratic exigencies. Across cities, allegations of misguided funding focused primarily on a lack of appreciation for the foundational importance of youth work to engage and respond to the needs and circumstances of marginalised youth, in particular. In London, several respondents connected this with not just the retrenchment of funding for the youth service generally and for local youth clubs and activities in particular, but with the massive investment the national government has made in the National Citizen Service. A London youth worker's comments are illustrative:

> NCS I have very mixed feelings about, well actually I don't have mixed feelings, it is a total waste of money. It is fine if we had unlimited funds, but given we don't have unlimited funds the current budget for the next four years is £1 billion, and I object to that as the best use of £1 billion of youth sector funding. I think the premise of 'you give these young people a holiday and the experience of social action, and therefore all this is going to happen on the back of it' doesn't stack up, and it is way too expensive. I mean they are engaging a load of kids and lots of kids who wouldn't do this thing normally, but the

> majority of kids are middle-class kids for whom it is a free holiday and something to do, rather than a life-transformational experience for kids who have never experienced having their voice heard.

Similar concerns about misguided funding priorities, but focused on a different policy, were expressed in London by respondents working with Muslim youth and focused on issues of social cohesion and inclusion. As one explained:

> So one community that the government has put a fair amount of funding into engage with is the Muslim community, but a large amount of that has been to do with the Prevent strategy. And for certain people, that has rubbed them up the wrong way, obviously: relating Muslim community to terrorism and using it as a way of funding organisations has annoyed certain people in certain communities.

Beyond the level, availability, and allocation of funding, a number of respondents also pointed to challenges grounded in how funding is provided, and the processes, rules guiding, and constraints and requirements placed on organisations that receive funding. Much of this critique centred on increasingly onerous reporting requirements, ill-suited performance metrics, and narrow targeting of particular groups of young people – in particular those at risk of engagement with the criminal justice system (especially in London and Dublin) and workforce engagement among NEETs (especially in Belfast) at the expense of broader support for all youth, particularly those in disadvantaged communities. A youth worker in Belfast observed:

> So ten years ago it was a universal service; it was all about voluntary participation, it was about being needs-led, starting where the group were at. Now you are seeing an agenda that is very much 'we need these very specific young people, we need to do these programmes, and we need this kind of outcome', and actually the voluntary nature of their engagement kind of gets eroded, because we need to get to this point. And maybe that is me being very, very cynical as a practitioner, but when you look around that is the kind of vibe and the feel that you get.

And a youth worker in London:

> Yes, because over the last ten years we have moved to a much more targeted base of youth intervention, so it is a youth offending service, it is a young at-risk, a carer service, but there is fewer universal youth services. And I think what that does is it is kind of social labelling theory, whereby the young person is accessing that service because they are drug-using or offending, and all of a sudden they are automatically a beneficiary rather than a co-creator.

In part, this move was seen as a turn, or return, to deficit-focused, problem-driven orientation towards young people rather than one that seeks to build on young people's capacities and interests and to engage them in more developmentally oriented, normative contexts and activities, as this youth worker in Dublin observed:

> I think they are perceived as a menace to society who just need to be educated and not [be] on the streets, and the funding for young people isn't where it should be. It is being taken away from the likes of youth centres and away from youth cafes and initiatives and it is being pumped into Garda diversion projects and schools, and that says it all for me really.

Beyond targeting, several front-line youth workers and leaders of youth-focused NGOs across the three cities spoke critically of the increasing embrace of narrowly focused outcome measures and monitoring. A leader of a Dublin-based youth organisation noted:

> They create this incredible bureaucratic monitoring that ties project managers and middle managers and even workers rigidly in to try and fit things into square boxes that really drives workers on the ground mad, because they are all the time thinking, 'Does this fit with our funding, or if I do this will it be outside the funding and will somebody come and challenge us?' So they are not allowed to actually choose their job in the responsive way they would like to.
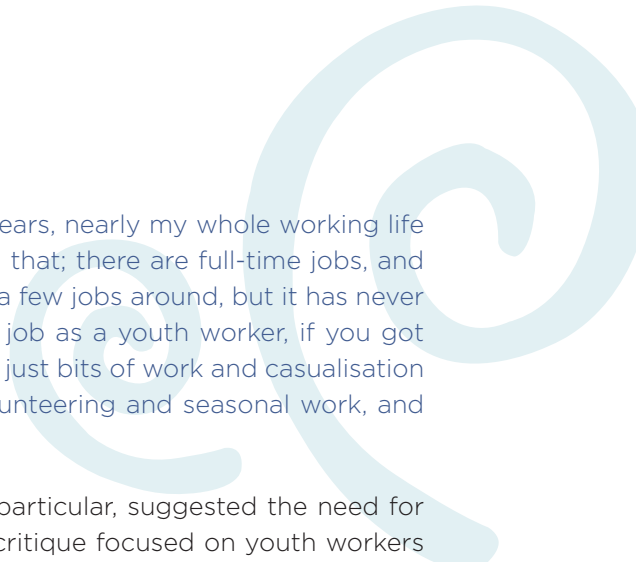
Some see this trend as an overweening focus on accountability: 'We need to get this money out, and we need to make sure that they vouch for every single penny', as another youth worker in Belfast put it. But more fundamentally, those expressing concerns on this front (principally, and unsurprisingly, youth workers across cities) lamented the violence this orientation does to the mission and promise of relational youth work and its capacity to engage young people, promote their meaningful participation, and develop in them the knowledge, inclination, and critical analytic skills to be effective and active citizens:

> But I think the dilemma at the moment is that as soon as things get rendered programmatic, we very quickly lose the spirit that I am trying to suggest is so important. So what I feel has been lost and isn't recognised within the devastation of the youth service across England, particularly but in the UK, is the loss of a distinctive space where there is a young-person-centred, process-led engagement between worker and young person which is voluntary, it is creative, but it doesn't believe that it can guarantee where it is going to end up. It believes in that process.

That said, a number of youth workers also noted the limitations of youth work, either because as a field it has shifted away from more critical engagement and towards a more service-oriented, recreational, conformist orientation, or because of inherent limitations given the complexity and severity of the challenges facing many young people. A Dublin youth worker commented:

> I am doing this work seventeen years. I have worked in this community; I have worked in other communities. I don't know what difference we really make long-term. We give young people memories, our relationship there with an adult, it can be a unique relationship that they can have with a youth worker, but when you are looking, you are just this tiny dot on a big circle of other stuff that influences the life of a young person. I think there seems to be a ground movement of protests in this country, and some young person will get drawn into that at some level, but to have a broad, more empowered, politically minded, civically minded working-class community, I don't think it starts here, and I think I would be lying to you to say it starts in a youth organisation.

Finally, although the lion's share of discussion about resource limitations focused on explicitly funding-related issues, a number of respondents, particularly front-line workers and NGO leaders, also raised issues of challenges presented by capacity limitations in the workforce. Part of this challenge concerns the need in general for greater support for youth workers and for youth work as a profession. As a youth worker in London noted:

> [Youth work] was never well paid; apart from three years, nearly my whole working life as a youth worker was part-time, and I was fine with that; there are full-time jobs, and maybe I didn't choose to do some of them; there are a few jobs around, but it has never been really well valued. But it was possible to get a job as a youth worker, if you got qualified it was possible and live on that, and now it is just bits of work and casualisation and pretend self-employed contracts and lots of volunteering and seasonal work, and the National Citizen Service really intensifies that.

But in addition, some youth workers and NGO leaders, in particular, suggested the need for better training and capacity building. To some extent this critique focused on youth workers themselves, as in the case of the UK, where the NCS requires a large number of workers not all of whom are effectively trained in youth work, according to some respondents. But more likely the call for additional training and capacity building focused on others who interact with young people in the context of youth-engagement efforts, such as government officials, and in some key contexts in which young people spend their time and in which their voice and perspectives are less present than they might be, especially schools. As a front-line practitioner working with youth experiencing homelessness argued in Belfast:

> I think we kind of missed the trick in some instances in preparing decision-makers to meet with young people, because the young people were impressive and sometimes the decision-makers were way out of their depth. . . . We need to change the environment, just the awareness of what young people need, and where they are at in their lives, and where they are at in their journeys, and how you have to listen to them.

In addition to government decision-makers, the need for teachers, in particular, to be trained to be more sensitive to youth perspectives and more encouraging of their participation in deliberation and decision-making was raised by several respondents, as this NGO leader in London noted:

> So it is about encouraging a culture of adults that are willing to and want to listen, but who will also get to the source of what is really going on for a young person. And that is gone. . . . So in terms of the system that we have created as a country, a curriculum if you like for social work training, teacher training, all of our educators are going through a tick-box exercise rather than actually using their noggin and starting to think creatively and problem-solve with young people rather than just fix stuff for young people.

Or, as a Dublin youth worker put it:

> These policies are all well and good, but there is no point in having them if they are not effective and they are not put into practice. In terms of even the word *participation,* there are so many different meanings to it that adults have that confuses the whole process. And I think there is still that element in our society that children should be seen and not heard. . . . So I think in terms of the government rolling it out, I think whatever they are doing hasn't been effective. I think there is a huge amount of training that is probably needed in schools around participation and in all walks of life in terms of adults that work in the area of young people and children.

Emphasising a need for training and capacity building also extended to the need to more intentionally train *young people* to be active and effective participants in deliberative processes and social action. This takes time and requires significant investment of attention and resources. As an NGO leader in Dublin noted:

> Young people don't always know, and until they are exposed to how they can do –. I keep saying you walk into a new club, and before they get involved, before you have trained them up, you ask them what they want to do, and they want to do discos and music and things like that before they actually see what the possibility is. So youth participation is really a balancing act between connecting to young people but also being able to challenge them appropriately and to ensure that there is a skilling element of it before they can really. . . . So I believe youth participation is incredibly important, I think the voice of young people is incredibly important, but I am not naive enough to think it is simple or that it happens automatically. It only happens when there is a lot of time and effort and skill put into developing it and bringing it out.

Alienation, Barriers, and Lack of Incentives

A second major challenge raised by respondents concerned the general state of alienation among young people, particularly those from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. Framing this challenge was common across cities, but with relatively more emphasis placed by youth workers in Belfast and Dublin, by policy professionals and government officials in Dublin and Belfast, and by NGO leaders in London and Dublin.
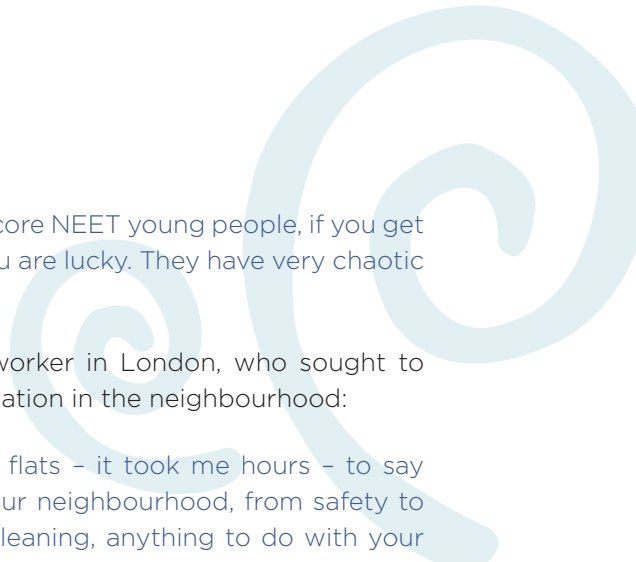
Much of the commentary on this focused on a lack of sense of belonging – indeed, a sense of exclusion – among many marginalised young people. As a staff member at a London NGO put it, referring primarily to ethnic minority and Muslim youth:

> So I would say the first stage is general disengagement with their local community in general about politics in that regard, and that is quite obvious; when you don't feel part of something, you are not going to actively engage with it.

For youth from disadvantaged backgrounds in general, respondents noted this tendency towards disengagement in response to a sense of alienation, particularly from the government and the arms of the state that are most present in their lives. As a youth worker in Dublin noted:

> So when a young person thinks 'government', they make sense of it in terms of what surrounds them, so the guards, the schools. And that is where this would need to happen, right at the very. . . . Bringing a young person in here and sitting them down and going, 'We want to run this programme, and we want to get you to understand the political system.' It is just not that interested, this attitude, and these young persons are growing up in homes as well where the parents are completely disengaged from politics. And for a lot of families it is hand to mouth, it is surviving.

Tensions between young people and the police – and the challenges of the police being in many ways the principal point of contact between disadvantaged young people and the state – was mentioned by respondents across cities, especially by front-line practitioners. But the multiple pressures on these young people, given the individual, family, and community circumstances in which they live, was most commonly identified as a major challenge for promoting their engagement. As a practitioner working with NEET youth in Belfast put it:

> The nature of the young people we are talking about, core NEET young people, if you get them coming back the second time, the third time, you are lucky. They have very chaotic lives; it is not like we have young people competing.

One illustration of this difficulty is provided by a youth worker in London, who sought to engage young people in a community development consultation in the neighbourhood:

> I knocked on all the doors on this block and all the flats – it took me hours – to say this is your chance to engage in what happens in your neighbourhood, from safety to lighting to services to shops to building houses to cleaning, anything to do with your neighbourhood; this is your chance to join up and have a say. And out of however many hundreds of flats and houses I knocked on, I didn't see one person here. Then when I went back the next day and asked, 'What happened to you yesterday? You didn't come; you said you would.' 'Oh, I didn't think it was very important.' 'It is about where you live. Do you think your estate is clean enough?' 'Well, no, it is not.' 'Well, if you don't say, how is it going to change?' 'Oh, I didn't realise.' 'You will come to the next one?' No one has come. So if it is not urgent, or if it is not absolutely about them, they don't want to commit. And if that is the circumstance you are living in, that is what you grow up with, and so where is the push? Unless you have an individual curiosity to see what is out in the wider world.

But a further challenge noted by respondents, especially those on the front line, is that even when young people get engaged to some extent, the lack of follow-up, feedback, and evidence that their input was listened to and acted on leads often to a return to disengagement, and to further (and reinforced) disillusionment, as a youth worker in Dublin pointed out:

> And young people aren't stupid, even the young people who might be marginalised who come into these processes, then it is like we sent off these people and they were all part of this process, and even in Dublin there is Comhairle na nÓg, but then in a year or two they are saying, 'What ever happened to them things I went to?' We don't really know. Did anything change? Well I can't really see anything. It is like we have set up all these systems to let people think they are participating in the bigger project, but I don't know if we are.

In addition to lack of follow-through, in critiquing current policy and practice many respondents noted the ways in which paternalistic orientations to engagement and an implicit emphasis on social control contributed to alienation and reproduced, or erected additional, barriers to effective participation among youth, especially the most marginalised. This was particularly emphasised by front-line workers in Belfast and London and, to a lesser extent, by intermediaries and NGO leaders in London and Dublin.

Part of this critique concerns the extent to which youth engagement efforts, particularly those focused on engaging youth in deliberative processes connected to government – such as youth advisory boards, youth councils, youth parliaments, and the like – are more ritual than real engagement, limited to advisory functions rather than actual decision-making. Respondents levelling this critique often referred to such efforts as 'ticking a box', putting in place a deliberative forum or engaging groups of young people to consult on a particular policy issue in order to be able to claim youth input. This critique of ritual engagement focused on three dimensions: that such efforts are often organised and shaped by adults rather than young

people; that the format for these efforts was modelled on formal, normative, adult-focused deliberative processes that reproduced the alienation of young people already alienated from the systems upon which they are modelled; and that decision-makers participating in them – particularly politicians who agree to engage directly with youth on a particular issue – often don't take them seriously, going through the motions but without actually listening to or taking on board young people's perspectives. A youth worker in London, for example, spoke to the limitations of formal structures like youth councils:

> I think it is really good that there is that pathway for young people to contribute at that level. It is pretty boring, it just is – it's like trying to get young people to sit in our adult structures; that is not what we need. The adult structures are broken, they don't work for today's communities, they are inherently formalised, and all of these things. . . So I think yes, we live in the world where we have an elected parliament, yes, therefore we should have an opportunity for young people to try that out. However, we need to work harder and do more for young people who feel like they are getting left behind by those kinds of structures.

And the staff member of an NGO focused on youth inclusion in Belfast notes the disappointment of ritualised engagement by decision-makers:

> That event, like many others, we had three ministers turn up, did their bit for ten minutes. The whole event was held up until they arrived. They came, gave their quick speeches and went again, and the young people are saying, 'They didn't even stay to hear what we did on the programme.' That happens time and time again, and it's an amazing mistake that politicians continue to make.
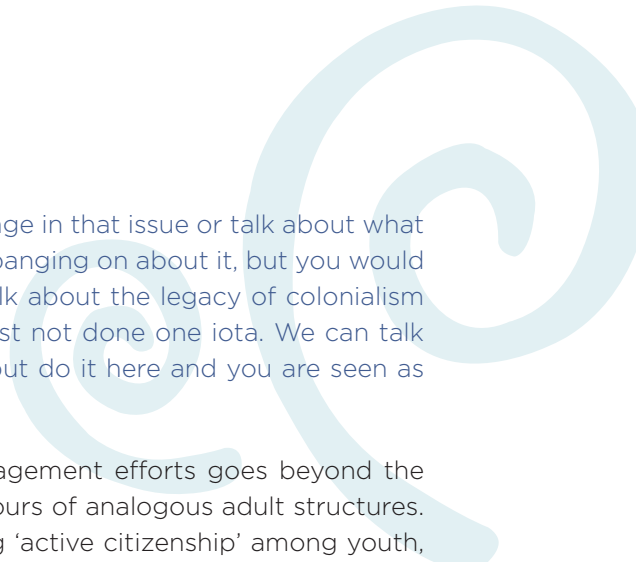
Beyond ritual, youth workers pointing out the limitations of deliberative forms as they are often run speak to what they see as a largely implicit agenda of conformity and social control, particularly for disadvantaged youth. In some cases this is linked to the formalism of the strategies engaged, as a youth worker in Dublin noted:

> And then I think the people that end up in the parliaments, and it is a difficult one, young people I know who would have a lot to say, they wouldn't want to be near any of this, because the system looks like and smells like and is like something that they don't like. So there is one argument. You have to be realistic, you have to show people what the system is and allow them to get used to working within that system. Which is a point. But my point is we keep saying that, but what that manifests itself in is you either conform or you don't. It is about conforming. What I have seen over the years with some young people that went into that system, it is a bit like social workers: I have met a lot of social workers when they came into the system and thought they were going to change the system, but you become socialised by a system.

Or, as a youth worker in Belfast put it in speaking of the city's youth council:

> I think it is on the participation ladder; I just think it is maybe lower down. I think it is maybe a safer, I don't know if that is the right way to term it, but a safer version of participation, or maybe you question but you only question so much. . . . So we will let you come out of your box a wee bit, but we will really not let you push. So marriage equality is totally acceptable now, so we will let you campaign on that, but again let's not

> talk about the border. Let's not let young people engage in that issue or talk about what happened here for the last forty years. I know I keep banging on about it, but you would think in a post-colonial society you would at least talk about the legacy of colonialism and engage with that with young people, but it is just not done one iota. We can talk about doing it in other places like India and Africa, but do it here and you are seen as being extreme or pushing an agenda.

The implicit social control orientation of some youth engagement efforts goes beyond the more formal efforts to structure deliberation with the contours of analogous adult structures. As noted earlier, in our discussion of the goal of promoting 'active citizenship' among youth, the critique concerns the extent to which critical engagement, critical thinking, and 'pushing the envelope' are encouraged, diverted, or shut down. A practitioner working with youth experiencing homelessness in Belfast made this observation in connection with the Priorities for Youth policy framework:

> We would have the policy of Priorities for Youth which would kind of be outlined. It is not great, and I think you alluded to it here, I think it is kind of about service-orientated strategies, kind of about young people being better citizens and how they should be active in their communities and stuff. But it is not about getting young people to think critically, and I think that is the limitation to that. And that is what we wanted to do – we wanted young people to think, and the young people we were engaging with put a lot of blame on themselves, so they weren't considering all the other structural factors about why they were homeless, and that was really interesting.

In this context, critics argue, 'youth engagement' is often less about promoting civic and political participation and promoting and taking into account youth 'voice' on critical issues that affect them, and more about incorporating young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – into systems and institutions in ways that conform to a state-sponsored notion of the 'good citizen' and the productive member of society through work and adherence to norms and expectations. A youth worker in London discussed this with reference to the focus on NEETs:

> It is just that engagement seems to have become a more . . . it seems to be used quite promiscuously, really, to be honest. A few years ago the government had a youth engagement fund which [organisations] bid upon, and it was enormously . . . if you were going to win a bid, it was employability, so it was engaging with young people in order that you could in that sense assist them in some way to become more employable, rather than any sense that they had a greater say in the world. They would be more available workers or however you want to see it. . . . So you see projects winning money, calling themselves youth engagement projects, but that just being almost a title that is given to their efforts to draw in those young people into the system in one way or another. Again it has not particularly been about citizenship, or active citizenship, political education; it has been about bringing them back into the fold, if that makes any sense.

That said, respondents also noted how in response to particular social issues about which young people were particularly concerned, or which affected them in particularly direct ways – marriage equality in the Republic of Ireland, for example, or impending cuts to youth services across the three cities – young people have worked collectively to mobilise peers, protest, and engage in political advocacy that clearly broke the bounds of these kinds of constraints, as a youth worker in London noted:

> Some of the youth councils were really involved in protesting about local and national cuts to youth services, and I thought that was encouraging, because sometimes those structures have seemed a bit safe and youth workers feeling really nervous to touch on any challenging issues. So it was good to see that, but a lot are pretty much just getting the most engaged people at school to come and do some civic engagement stuff.

Challenges of Inclusion

As suggested by the quote above, another significant challenge noted by a majority of respondents concerned the challenge of encouraging, and sustaining, the participation of young people who are most marginalised – 'hard to reach' or 'seldom heard', as it was often put. Young people experiencing specific types of adversity – such as disability, or homelessness, or engagement in care or justice systems – present yet additional hurdles to engagement.
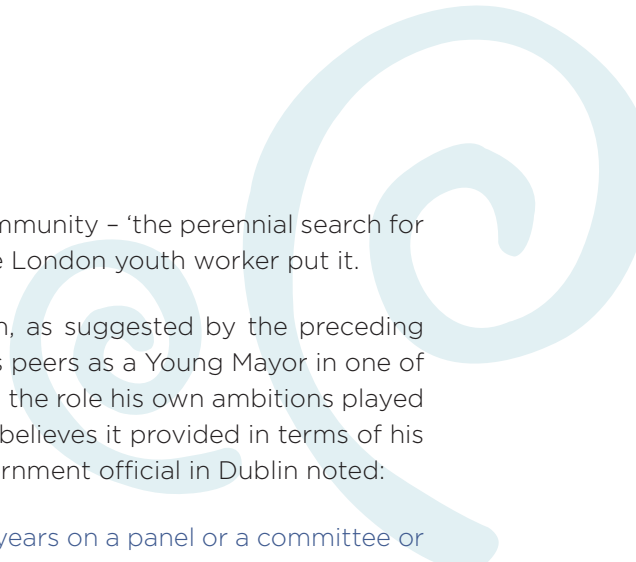
This challenge was recognised as a universal challenge for all efforts that seek to promote the civic and political engagement of young people, but was most frequently invoked with reference to the major deliberative forums, such as youth councils, assemblies, and parliaments. Most respondents argued that, while providing an important opportunity for the young people who participate, and contributing in significant ways to their development, knowledge, access, and broader engagement, they often failed to engage young people beyond those from relatively well-off and majority (middle-class, white) backgrounds and those who, regardless of class or ethnicity, are more confident and accomplished young people – doing well in school, already interested in civic and political issues, already engaged in a range of activities in their schools and communities. A London youth worker's comments are typical:

> There are lots of initiatives, really good ones in the UK like UK Youth Parliament, where we have the equivalent of a Parliament but consisting of younger people, as is obvious from the name. And those tend to attract, again, very socialised young people who either want to be in politics or are definitely going to go to university, et cetera. I think those young people get it, and long may that continue, because it is a great way for young people to have a voice. What I really felt was lacking was the facility for young people who didn't connect with that whole world to effect positive change and feel like they could be agents in that change, which wasn't really the case before.

Or, as a youth worker connected with one of the deliberative forum schemes in Belfast put it:

> It is not a perfect model. I would prefer our group to be more diverse. I don't know if I am totally convinced the youth forums are the best place to attract the most marginalised young people. I think that they need to be radically changed, and the whole set-up of them would need to be radically changed. Some workers would probably disagree, but stuff like youth assemblies linked to government, they are important but I don't think it is the be all and end all, because I think by and large they attract young people who do really well anyway and are going to go to uni, are going to get good jobs. So I am more interested in finding other mechanisms in the city to engage young people who probably are never in their life going to fill out an application form to apply for a youth forum.

Professionals working with these particular kinds of efforts were quick to recognise the challenge, although they often pushed back against this critique, noting, for example, the explicit efforts they take to increase diversity. And the challenge of inclusion is, of course,

endemic to participatory processes regardless of age or community – 'the perennial search for the mythical perfect group, which no one ever finds', as one London youth worker put it.

A large part of this challenge is grounded in self-selection, as suggested by the preceding quote. Indeed, a young person who had been elected by his peers as a Young Mayor in one of London's boroughs was explicit about his own privilege and the role his own ambitions played in leading him to seek out the position, and the benefits he believes it provided in terms of his own educational and professional trajectory. And, as a government official in Dublin noted:

> Not every child or young person wants to spend two years on a panel or a committee or working on an issue or six months on a campaign; not every child or young person wants to give that time. Some do, and that is great, but not everyone does. So I think there is something to be said for giving children and young people opportunities, being able to give a little but not expect them to give a lot.

Beyond self-selection based on interest, confidence, and access, there are broader challenges to recruiting many marginalised young people given the nature and multiplexity of challenges that they often face, as noted above. As a youth worker in Dublin explained:

> It is easy for young people who are doing really well in education, with a good solid family background, with enough money and resources to do what they want, to then participating for the Vincent De Paul because they are in Trinity College, or the debating society or any of that stuff in school. It is very difficult for the child who is hungry to do it; it is very difficult for the child who has come from a house where the stresses are there because there is not enough money and they are worried about paying the bills.

And of course the nature of the opportunity for engagement matters. This includes the format it takes, the issues it focuses on, the kinds of activities it makes available, the context in which it takes place, the ease or difficulty of access, and the kinds of young people who are already engaged. Noted above was the concern a number of respondents raised with regard to more formal mechanisms for engagement modelled on adult organisations and processes, versus more informal mechanisms that provide more flexibility and fluidity for young people to engage at their pace and around what they most care about. Several respondents also noted the challenges that more marginalised youth may face in the context of engagement opportunities that are dominated by more privileged, confident, or accomplished young people. As one explained:

> We find a lot of our young people won't engage with them, and okay, they are fine, but we find they are much more middle-class, affluent young person that are engaging in that, more educated young people who have that capacity. Again it is back to the expectations. Take a lot of the young people out of this community and they shrink, they are not able to. . . . Some are, of course, and some will go through the system, and some of the young people that were at the workshops are very good, but by and large they are very insular, and it is to do with that feeling of inadequacy, lack of confidence, lack of expectation, lack of opportunity, all them things.

In seeking to engage a broader, more diverse body of young people, such organisations often seek to improve their recruitment efforts. While schools are the major recruiting ground for most such forums – and because teachers and principals often recommend students to be

considered who are among those with the greatest interest and capacity, though some will also come from disadvantaged backgrounds – organisations increasingly look to develop more diverse participation by, for example, reaching out to other organisations who work more directly with marginalised youth for their help in recruitment. This includes organisations working in particularly challenged working-class communities as well as those working with particular groups of young people, such as young people in care, those with disabilities, LGBTQ youth, young offenders, ethnic minorities (including, for example, asylum seekers), and young people experiencing homelessness. Several also note the importance of street work – active outreach, but beyond outreach, engagement – with young people in public spaces in disadvantaged communities along the lines that detached youth workers have long been engaged. Although street engagement is difficult, time-intensive, and requires workers to have the flexibility, skills, capacity, and patience to persist and build trust among neighbourhood youth, it was noted by several respondents as necessary for engaging the most marginalised youth:

> One of the big things that the team talk about is they hang around, so whereas a lot of youth workers might go out and engage with a group of young people and if those young people don't want to engage they just walk away and think, Okay, they are not interested. The psychologists and the youth workers in our teams talk about hanging out for six months, like lurking and stalking young people and reassuring them they are not going to leave and they are not going to go away, and building trust in the relationship and building a secure attachment is what they would call it. And I think that is something that is quite important for this group. They are so used to being abandoned by all manner of professionals, and sometimes family members as well, that sometimes the hardest bit to develop is the reassurance that this one is going to stay around.

Although more common in the past, less emphasis has been placed on this strategy, and fewer resources in general are available to support it. It is also made more difficult in the current context, where overriding concerns about antisocial behaviour among young people lead to 'broken windows' strategies of policing the very presence of young people on the streets, as a youth worker in London pointed out:

> It takes young people being welcome on the streets for that form of work – which young people were never welcome on the streets, but it was at least legal to be on the streets. Whereas [in] many estates we work on now, there are exclusion zones, and they are not allowed out at this time, or if you have more than three people the police are going to stop you, or all the young people who would hang out on the streets are known to the police, and the police just sort of occupy the area and constantly talk to them and harass them. Yeah, just so many issues where young people who are not feeling safe at home or not feeling they have got space, are somewhere but they are no longer on the streets. So they are in someone's house or in a corridor or in a van. It is actually pretty hard to reach young people now for street-based youth workers. I think it has got a lot harder; meeting young people who are in that situation is quite a lot harder than it was ten or fifteen years ago.

Community and Sociopolitical Context

Another set of challenges referenced by respondents concerned the broader sociopolitical contexts in which young people live and youth engagement efforts take place.

At the community level, challenges noted across cities reflect the dynamics of disadvantage common in many urban communities: poverty, crime, drugs, gangs, and higher levels of health issues and mental health issues and of involvement in criminal, child protection, and social welfare systems than in more affluent communities. In London, racial tensions and discrimination were also noted, and exacerbated in communities with larger Muslim populations, by the discourse around and policies currently governing state responses to extremism and fears of radicalisation among youth. All of these factors are seen to contribute to the alienation and disenfranchisement of many – though by no means all – young people from these communities.

In Belfast, the legacy of the Troubles contributes to specific community-level dynamics that complicate efforts to engage young people civically and (perhaps especially) politically. Although young people under the age of 25 were likely too young (and under 20 had not been born) to remember the violence of the conflict prior to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the Troubles remain inscribed, for example, in the landscape of neighbourhoods largely segregated by religion, the 'peace walls' that continue to divide them from each other in some interface communities, and the still largely segregated school system in which most young people go to schools with their co-religionists in spite of efforts to more broadly promote access to integrated schools or, more recently, 'shared' education through cross-community school partnerships (Loader and Hughes, 2016; Hansson et al., 2013). Respondents, especially youth workers in both Republican and Loyalist communities, noted the effect that the continued presence of paramilitary organisations has on this front in two ways. First, their continued role in maintaining informal social control preserves a barrier between local young people and the broader society and contributes to the distrust many young people have of the state and state institutions.

Second, paramilitary organisations may act as 'gatekeepers', constraining access to those seeking to engage young people from outside the community and setting up local organisations as speaking for local youth and the community more broadly:

> A lot of these groups are working in areas where there are armed groups or formerly armed groups or there is gatekeepers or there are people who come to the attention of the justice system or the police or whoever it is, and the groups and the programmes have to engage with those people, and so there is risks.

At the more macro level, the challenges discussed across cities focused on particular systems – especially the dynamics and constraints of the political system, on the one hand, and the role of schools and the education system, on the other. Regarding the political system, challenges that were noted concern the perceived constraints placed on youth-serving organisations that wish to engage young people in more activist and explicitly political ways out of fears that their funding would be placed at risk or some other sanctions would be forthcoming. As a leader of a youth organisation in London put it:

> I think civic engagement is important; I believe that social action is a really good mix to get young people more engaged in their communities. I think political engagement is something I would love to do; personally I think it is so important to get young people engaged in politics, but we need to have more rein to be able to do that and we are not allowed to. I don't know what the punishment would be [laughs] but there would be some sort of ramification.

In addition, many practitioners argued that young people have lost faith in the political system in general – 'a sense that the government isn't listening', as one respondent put it – and in politicians in particular, creating additional barriers to political engagement, in particular. The Brexit referendum, leading to the planned withdrawal of the UK from the European Union, exacerbated this dynamic in Belfast and especially in London. For young people under the age of 18, this is also connected to the sense that they have no real political voice, but the tendency for voting-eligible youth to forgo the polls extends the challenge:

> The reason policymakers don't think about young people is that young people don't vote. So they wouldn't do too much that affects an older generation, because they know if you do anything for the forty to sixty or sixty-plus, they won't vote for you. But because eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds don't go out to vote, it means that I as a policy maker, I don't really need to consider what they think is important, because they don't hold power at the ballot box.

The school system, in particular, was noted as a site of both promise, given its access to most young people and the institutional resources it possesses, and disappointment, given the lack of emphasis on citizenship education and participatory processes embraced by most schools. At the root of this critique was the sense that while some version of citizenship education is present in the curriculum, it tends to be marginal and its content tends to be relatively unchallenging. Indeed, beyond a specific focus on citizenship skills, respondents offered a broader critique regarding schools' general failure to cultivate critical thinking and engagement among young people. A Dublin youth worker's comments are typical:

> Also I very much believe in Paulo Freire's approach to working with people, that the education system and how it functions like a banking system; it is banking information into people, it doesn't teach young people to ask questions and challenge their status. It doesn't ask young people, young people don't get asked, What do you think about that, bring your experience to this process rather than sitting there listening.

Or, in the words of a youth worker in London:

> What purports to be education isn't education: it is training: This is what you are going to learn; this is what you have learned. Now tell me what you have learned. To me, that is not education. Education is about some form of critical self-actualisation, and at some point we have to get back to what are the role of public institutions around these things.

Beyond these structural challenges, respondents often referred to another challenge to engaging young people. This is the fact that young people are often viewed and portrayed – in the media, by politicians, the police, and society at large – in negative terms. Often talked about as the 'demonisation' of youth, these messages were most often cited by front-line practitioners in London and by respondents across the board in Belfast. The media come in for particular criticism on this front. Much of this concerns the tendency of media reports about youth to focus almost exclusively on young people as a *problem.* Given this tendency, a respondent in Belfast argued:

> Society has an obligation, the media has an obligation not to always tar them with the same brush in terms of young people standing on a street corner, obviously up to no good, the stereotype there.

This orientation also gets internalised by many adults in communities, as a youth worker in London pointed out:

> Coming back to the labelling and targeting of young people, quite often young people feel that they are excluded from mainstream society even within their own community. An example would be that if a group of young people are hanging around at the bottom of the stairwell because it is raining, they are not particularly doing anything bad, but if you are an old lady living on the third floor who has got to walk past them they could be seen as quite intimidating. So there is that whole thing about young people, especially in groups, are automatically perceived as a threat and a problem, which then means that the young people don't feel that they are part of their community because they are ostracised and pushed to one side.

Related to this, an increasing government emphasis on addressing antisocial behaviour – including moving resources towards young offenders programmes, for example, and away from more broadly developmental youth work – and police responses to young people in poor and working-class communities, in particular, were also cited as creating challenges to promoting engagement. A government official in Belfast noted:

> And we've been cutting youth services. Youth services were the first to go whenever money started to get tight; youth services went out the window. And so what are we doing, moving them along from corner to corner but not providing any services for them. Not providing anything for them to do. So when the police arrive and try to move a group of young people along who are standing on a street corner because they have nowhere else to go, and all they are doing are talking to their friends. They are not underage drinking, because the police have said to us there is no criminal act being committed, and they think it is appropriate to ask them to move along – what type of response are you going to get from young people? And then you are into are you inciting young people to get involved? It is very, very tricky.

Policy Limitations

Finally, respondents across cities levelled some more fundamental critiques regarding the limitations of youth engagement policies themselves.

Much of this focused either on the lack of clarity in policy frameworks in terms of what engagement, or citizenship, or participation should look like, or a degree of disjunction between policy goals and the kinds of programming and activities it supports; or, in England and Northern Ireland (and in contrast to the Republic of Ireland), a lack of coordination across government and a lack of joined-up thinking when it comes to children and young people. On this latter point, the director of a youth organisation in London noted:

> The UK . . . doesn't actually have one policy, and if there is anything it is the fact that that methodology sits across probably four or five government departments. So we would have to, at any one time we could be in a position where some of our workload sits under DCMS – culture, media, and sports. Some of it sits under education, training, and skills. Some of it sits under youth justice and policing. Some of it sits under the Department of Communities and Local Government. So if you put it all together, the big issue that you probably get is that nobody has the remit that you just described, youth engagement

> and youth progression. And as a result I think there isn't and never has been a joined-up strategy about young people's engagement and progression.

The tendency of policies to be shaped from and promote top-down responses was another critique, noted across cities, that seems to cut against the stated participatory goals of policies meant to support youth engagement. In part this concerns the tension between broad reach and deeper engagement – the tendency to promote short-term projects that may reach more young people but with limited effect. It is also in part about the constraints this may place on engagement given rules generated from above, as a youth worker in Belfast pointed out in describing a youth engagement effort focused around peace-building:

> The method of engagement is that you can only work with so many young people, and the young people have to come in three days a week to your programme, so Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday or whatever. That is not how we envisaged a really creative, innovative, practice policy type peace programme.

And there was a general concern about follow-through, most explicitly noted by youth workers in Dublin. In the words of one:

> Where is the processes, where does that go, where do we link it, what do we link it to? Do you understand? Okay, so I can work with a group of young people from this area; we can do a process on building their awareness around the political system, building their awareness around the classes, we can do all that. But where then do you go with that?
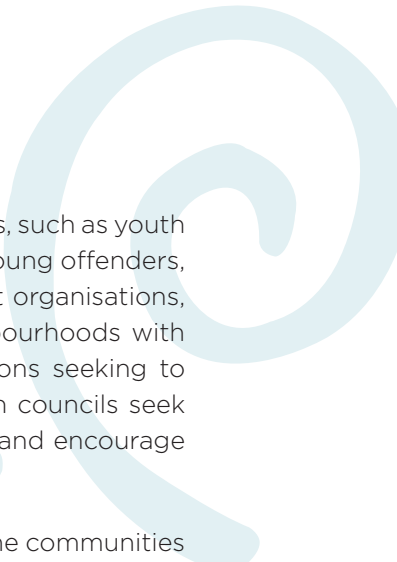
SUGGESTED RESPONSES

As is clear from the foregoing, professionals concerned with engaging young people in civic and political life were quite thoughtful about the challenges facing youth engagement efforts and had important critiques about current efforts and the structures, systems, and processes on which they rely. Several also had concrete suggestions about potential responses, though with limitations given the complexity of the contexts, restricted resources, the multiplicity of possible goals, and the social, economic, political, cultural, and organisational constraints on making meaningful change. We focus here on three kinds of responses that were most often identified: (1) improving outreach and engagement strategies at different levels; (2) cultivating contexts of trust and openness to promote youth voice; and (3) providing for sustained commitment. These are, in various ways to and a certain extent, a part of current practice that respondents suggest require broader implementation, support, and refinement.

Strategies of Engagement

Recognising the challenge of engaging a broad range of young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – led professionals to suggest a range of different kinds of outreach and engagement strategies in an effort to promote broader participation and representation. Much of this focused on different ways of targeting particular groups of underrepresented young people and operating through different kinds of communications channels and strategies.

Perhaps the most common strategy focuses on organisational networks – leveraging the access that different kinds of organisations have to young people in different kinds of circumstances.

This includes specialist organisations that work with particular youth populations, such as youth in care, ethnic minority youth, asylum seekers, young people with disabilities, young offenders, and young people experiencing homelessness. It also includes more generalist organisations, such as youth clubs and community-based organisations in particular neighbourhoods with high concentrations of socio-economic disadvantage. In this way, organisations seeking to engage young people across the city and participatory forums such as youth councils seek to move beyond the major recruitment sources (especially schools) to target and encourage participation from young people who are otherwise unlikely to be engaged.

Grounding engagement and recruitment strategies at the grass-roots level, in the communities in which young people live and around issues that most affect them, was seen as particularly important to some professionals, most frequently expressed by front-line workers in London. Community-based youth clubs and community centres offer an important foundation for this work. Because of the informal, open-door orientation to youth work that many youth clubs embrace – providing a youth-centred space that welcomes drop-ins and allows for unprogrammed 'hanging out' and interactions with both peers and youth workers – youth clubs provide the potential to build relationships with young people, cultivate their trust, and over time engage them in more substantive, goal-oriented, participatory engagement. Such engagement might include deliberation around social and political issues, decision-making on club priorities and management, and shaping social action projects at the community level or through broader political mobilisation.

But beyond what may happen inside a youth club, respondents also noted the importance of moving beyond formal organisations, structures, and opportunities. Here, the role of street outreach was again noted as particularly important, but also the importance of multiplex strategies, including social media. A youth worker in London noted:

> Well actually we know a lot of the young people aren't going to give their views through formal mechanisms, so we need to engage, like the equivalent of the state of the nation, some big process, whether it is an annual basis or biannual basis, to listen and hear from young people with a mix of methodologies. So online consultation, street youth engagement to hear from kids who would never do it otherwise, go into the prisons and talk to the kids there, a process of the country saying we want to listen to our young people. It is our job to reach out effectively.

Again, social media was invoked as an important tool to inform young people of opportunities for engagement, for recruiting them to participate, and potentially as a mode of engagement, on its own or in combination with face-to-face interactions in deliberative forums or social action projects. While few of the professionals we spoke with had a lot of success with specific strategies for leveraging communications technology and social media, it was clearly recognised as an area ripe for attention, engaging the 'networked individual' and the 'different ways of being together' that social media facilitates, as a London youth worker notes. Or, as a public official in Dublin put it:

> And then it is also of course about the way in which social and digital media's heart is in civic and political life. Okay, there is how children and young people use it, how might they use it or might they be inclined to use it in order to make their views known on different issues or whatever. . . . I think there is a lot, it is early days for this, but I think it is really interesting looking into the future. Because it is going to be, almost inevitably, a potentially vital space.

Cultivating Contexts

While intentional outreach strategies can help widen the net to engage a broader array of young people, keeping them engaged and making engagement meaningful requires attending to the nature of engagement itself, and to the contexts, intensity, longevity, and interactions that frame it. For marginalised young people, in particular, significant investment is required that is not always facilitated by the limitations of project timelines, programmatic scope, or available resources. As a youth worker in London argued:

> But then the reality was the programme isn't deep enough to hold those kids. So the more marginalised will drop out because it is a light amount of holding from us in terms of the monthly session and minimal contact in between. . . . You need probably much more contact and more one-on-one support. And there is some capacity for that, but it is also hard for those kids in a diverse group because the type of conversation is not just around things that are interesting and fun. In fact we tell them this isn't about doing something that is fun; when we say it is fun, don't do this, you will be engaging and you will enjoy stuff, but actually this is around shaping your community, and that is not about having fun.

Additional contact, engagement over time, and support (informal and in terms of specific training) are critical in this regard. As noted above, in London in particular, a number of training and engagement organisations – analogous to what Caroline Lee (2015) describes as the evolution of a 'public engagement industry' in the US, here focused on youth – have emerged to recruit, prepare, and connect young people to decision-makers, in some cases paying youth to serve as young advisors.

Perhaps most critical, however, is developing relationships of trust and mutual respect. This also requires time, patience, and connecting with young people around the issues they care about, with an understanding of and in response to their circumstances. As a Belfast youth worker explained:

> Trying to make the connection for young people between the personal and the political, and for me that is how young people are engaged when they make the connection between what is going on and what is happening at a bigger level. And that for me engages those most difficult to reach. . . . But for those on the margins, it is about trying to make the connection between their lived experiences and what is happening and that there is a link. So for me it is about that process, about starting where people are at and bringing them with you.

Building relationships and building trust in particular is a central concern noted by respondents, especially front-line youth workers, across the three cities. Part of this is facilitated by contexts – less formal, more open – that are inviting to young people and in which they can engage in their own way and time. As a staff member of a foundation supporting youth engagement work noted:

> Young people need to be engaged from the outset so they don't feel there is a model or structure being imposed upon them but actually they are part of creating something that they can see the benefit of.

The reduction of funding that can support these kinds of contexts was a pointed concern among youth workers, in particular, who are concerned with 'trying to hang on to spaces where engagement and participation has loosened up, is not so organised and conformist', in the words of a front-line practitioner in London. As another argued:

> Well I think it is really looking at the kind of universal youth provision that there isn't, or that there is, and making sure that that kind of provision exists in the reach of all young people. Obviously the type of engagement there is really important. If we are not just getting young people engaging and socialising with each other and other adults, then we are missing a trick, really.

Beyond context – the spaces and places in which engagement takes place – building trust also takes time and cultivation. And while it starts with the individual, if the goal is to move towards civic and political engagement, it requires intentionality, as a Dublin youth worker pointed out:

> You want to offer up a safe place where young people can come and get some change in their own lives. But also that has to move on to an element of politicisation, and it doesn't have to be me trying to politicise them into any one thing. They have to decide themselves if they want to do a campaign . . . . I suppose that is what it is about, when you are working with young people, it is giving them an opportunity of creating space where they get to look outside yourselves, because they are always being taught [that] you are the problem, you are going to prison, you have been in a young offenders institute, you can't get a job, you have been thrown out of school because you are stupid.

A few respondents pushed back on the idea of focusing on isolated, safe spaces, or at least noting their limitations if engagement ends there, arguing instead for the need to engage young people directly in the world, including integrating them into the contexts in which decisions and actions are actually being taken. As a front-line practitioner in London put it:

> What I found works is when young people are acting in the environment where it really happens and not a subset of it. It is going back to what I said earlier that whenever I have seen young people engaged in political activity in reality, not in isolation, not in a safe place, not pretend, I have seen them really get into it. I have seen them excel and I have seen them really think, *Yeah, this is what life is about.* So I think this demarcation of young people and others from the political spectrum isn't a good idea.

Along these lines, a few argued for the importance of integration of young people across class and background, building an understanding of the different circumstances from which young people come and leveraging the resources and privilege of the middle classes. In the words of a staff member at a youth-serving NGO in Belfast:

> My argument would be is if you want overall to have change within people but also within communities, that you need to bring people together who are from middle-class communities and from working-class communities. Obviously from disadvantaged communities. . . . And that is something that I have believed for a very long time, but no funder will ever fund it, because the resources are limited so it has to go to obviously disadvantaged areas. But in the long term, the buy-in from young people who will work together and work in those communities would be immense, I think, and be massive in terms of impacts and benefits down the line.

Or, in the words of a staff member at a large youth-serving NGO in Dublin:

> Integrating and mixing together has got to be a big part of that journey because [otherwise] they will grow up thinking you are on the other side of the tracks. Either way, I don't mix with you and you don't mix with me and we live in segregated communities or religious-wise or class-wise or whatever it is, or even increasingly you might say racial in Ireland, we just don't mix, we don't integrate. So that has to be a core principle for us.

Sustaining Commitment

As suggested by some of the foregoing, respondents recognise the importance of sustained attention to promoting youth engagement. This might occur on at least two levels: at the level of individual interactions with young people on the ground and at the systems level.

At the level of *individual interactions* the focus is on support for ongoing engagement, over time and across developmental stages, in which young people become educated about their rights to participation and socialised into an expectation of active engagement in which their ideas, concerns, priorities, and suggestions are notably taken into account. Particularly with reference to young people from marginalised backgrounds, time and ongoing commitment were noted as critical, as this Belfast youth worker pointed out:

> Recognising the time involved in that to get to the bit that looks like participation takes a big lead-in if you are working with the most disengaged, that the lead-in time for that is much longer than those who are already interested, and to allow for that.

A central dimension of time here is the importance of starting early, laying the foundation for increasingly substantive engagement from a young age and maintaining meaningful, and increasingly impactful, opportunities over time. A government official in Dublin noted:

> And so we would say it is absolutely bizarre for somebody to wake up on their eighteenth birthday and go, I can't wait to be out there and be a citizen. If you have never asked them what they thought up to then, why in the name of God would they want to give you their view and be an active full participating citizen suddenly by magic on their eighteenth birthday? If they haven't in some way been involved all the way through their life and seen the value of their contribution and their voice, then I can't see how you would ever expect them to want to contribute and want to play an active role in society.

The director of an NGO focused on promoting political engagement among young people in London broke it down:

> I think from four to eleven you must ensure that the skills and values of citizens is introduced, developed and enhanced in children. Then as they enter the secondary school space from eleven to eighteen, that is when the real-world knowledge gets applied. So you have got these skills and values, but this is the political system, this is you, this is your role, this is your responsibility. So a real timely *Oh I get it,* and then at sixteen, then when the introduction comes to register to vote, the chances are, people are treating it like a rite of passage: I am ready; I want to be part of this. And for some people it might just be tiny, and some people's engagement it might be full on: I am joining a party and I am campaigning for climate change. There is a spectrum, and who are we to decide where people fit in? But everyone should be on it.

Along the way, over the course of this process, retaining youth interest and engagement is further facilitated by recognisable, stepwise progress, little victories that build confidence and demonstrate the possibility of making a difference. 'Change is really slow,' an NGO leader in Dublin noted, and 'for a teenager it is even more magnified'. Or, in the words of a staff member at a youth-serving organisation in London:

> Without seeing some sort of a change, it really doesn't have that much impact. These young people have to be empowered to do something positive, and no matter how small it is, seeing the benefit they have made, so none of those outcomes that we talked about would be here without a good context of some sort of social impact.

At the *systems* level, respondents spoke of the need to institutionalise commitment within government and the organisations that work with young people and on which they rely. Part of this is about cultural change. As a government official in Belfast put it: 'You have to embed seeking citizens' views with adults and young people very much in the culture of all the public sector organisations.' And some respondents, most notably in Belfast, argued for more robust enforcement and accountability mechanisms to ensure compliance with expectations of participation of young people in decision-making.

Schools were noted as an important institutional foundation for embedding a participatory ethic and shaping opportunities for engaging young people meaningfully over time, but with caveats. On the positive side, schools provide access, continuity, and resources, as a youth worker in London pointed out:

> There is a continuity and sustainability from doing it from within an institution. It doesn't have to be a school, but because the school is here and the school is not going to suddenly, unless it is doing really badly, get closed by the government, so it will be here and it will be here next year. . . . And having that institutional reinforcement is helpful. So as long as you have a school that buys in properly, then it is super helpful.

On the negative side, as noted above (and as young people themselves noted with near unanimity, which we will discuss below), many respondents had significant concerns about the weakness of schools' orientations to citizenship education and the extent to which they represent contexts of open debate and critical engagement, and offer opportunities for young people to acquire the kinds of knowledge, skills, and experience that connect their education effectively to the world and their place in it. A youth worker in Belfast put it this way:

> It would really focus on young people learning by doing and where knowledge isn't just the retention of facts, that it is really about exploring life and fulfilling a young people's potential outside of exam results.

And, of course, while most young people are in school and have the opportunities schools provide available to them on a daily basis, some youth – arguably some of the most marginalised whose lack of engagement is of most concern to policymakers – become alienated from school and drop out prior to graduation from secondary school, complicating efforts to effectively engage them.

Finally, ideas around how to sustain and institutionalise engagement focused on resources and institutional relationships. Regarding the former, this includes both funding and workforce development through training and staffing. The challenges of resource constraints

have been discussed at some length above. Responding to this in an institutionalised way, respondents across the three cities argue, requires commitment on the part of government, in terms of both its own actions and its support for voluntary sector organisations. As a practitioner in Belfast put it:

> But I do still think the government have a role to make sure that in a democracy that they want to have the voice of young people heard, they have to pay for that, that it is not all about pushing it out to the third sector to say, It is up to you now to make sure that you provide this – that they recognise that. But I also do think there is a role of building that structure, of people mobilising for themselves and doing some of that. So the network or how that would work would be really good.

But beyond financial resources, building the capacity of the workforce to support youth engagement was also noted as essential. A youth worker in London noted:

> I think there is a big issue around training of professionals. The professionals are not equipped with the skills to engage with young people and ready to listen. They think they are, but actually they are sitting around the table and being really patronising, and it is not to do with young people. But this thing of are they really ready to share power?

Regarding institutional relationships, respondents noted the need for better collaboration and coordination with the youth sector, including across government departments, between government agencies and the voluntary sector, and among voluntary sector organisations: 'something that starts to encourage cooperation and integration between the structures within society that the young people come into contact with', as a Dublin youth worker put it. Or, in the words of a staff member of an NGO working on youth engagement in London:

> The sector maybe needs to work together a bit more. I think in a time of limited resources, there needs to be greater collaboration so that the young people we represent are represented in something as much as organisations that specifically works with young BME people. And in that coming together we represent a united 'This is what young people think', and for those organisations to be included in decision-making.

3.4. Young People's Perspectives

Up to now we have focused on the perspectives of professionals who work on developing and managing organisations, programmes, and activities that seek to engage young people civically or politically and of those working directly with young people in these efforts on the ground. How do these perspectives compare to those of young people themselves? We turn now to address this question. In doing so, we focus on three broad themes. The first concerns young people's orientations to civic and political engagement, the extent to which they believe they have a 'voice' and are taken seriously by decision-makers, and the reasons they believe their participation is important. The second theme focuses on young people's perspectives on the opportunities that exist for them to engage civically and politically and the barriers they face. Finally, the third theme concerns young people's ideas about how to improve efforts to engage them.

ORIENTATIONS TOWARDS CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Young people with whom we spoke had a range of ideas about the meaning of citizenship and the ways in which they could engage in civic and political life. As suggested by a number of the professional key informants we spoke with, the idea of citizenship – or at least the term – did not resonate with all young people, and was not something many of them had spent much time considering. Young people in Belfast and Dublin tended to focus on a formal definition of citizenship grounded in one's nationality, but even this definition is not completely straightforward. For some young people in Belfast, for example, claiming national identity was complicated by the complexity of the Northern Irish context – including its status as a subsidiary national jurisdiction within the United Kingdom and the enduring legacy of sectarian strife – leading to some discussion about whether young people saw themselves as Irish, or British, or Northern Irish, or whether the question of nationality was central to the idea at all. Similarly, some young people from ethnic minority backgrounds in London sought to balance their formal citizenship with recognition of a kind of dual identity. As one young person, a Young Mayor and participant in the UK Youth Parliament, noted:

> Being a citizen is I'd say being a part of the country, I'd say. For us, it's like being part of the UK Youth Parliament was, sort of helped us in making me feel more like a citizen. . . . [But] I see myself as a Bangladeshi British, and I would take more pride in that.

Indeed, across cities, young people were more inclined to focus on the relationship between citizenship and identity and connection. At its foundation, citizenship was seen as connected to belonging, to getting involved, to 'being part of society', as a young person in Belfast put it.

There were a number of ways in which enacting citizenship – 'getting involved', in the sense of civic and political engagement – could be approached, in young people's view. At one level, this includes simply 'being aware' and contributing in potentially 'little ways', as a young person in London phrased it, including signing e-petitions or participating in substantive discussion on important issues. It also includes more active engagement, through volunteering and engagement in community projects, for example, and through voting and participating in demonstrations and public protests. Young people sometimes made a distinction between civic and political action, noting that many community projects, for example, which often focus on service-oriented volunteering or, in Belfast in particular, engaging in cross-community sport as a way to promote 'good relations', should not be considered political acts. Others, however, took a much broader view of political action; as a Belfast youth who was a member of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum put it:

> Everything we do is political; everything we do in our eyes is defined by politics. And if you just take part in, like, you pay your taxes or you go to school or you are in school council, or you volunteer part-time in the scouts, everything you do has an impact in some way – like, you are contributing to something even if it is not political like you joining a party. You have still taken part in something.

But when discussing political action in particular, young people most often emphasised the importance of voting – while recognising that young people under 18 do not have the right to vote (an issue to which we'll return) and that many young people in their late teens and early twenties choose not to vote. They also emphasised involvement in protest and direct action. Indeed, almost all of the groups of young people with whom we spoke stressed the

importance of public demonstrations (whether they actively engaged in them or not) as a legitimate and potentially useful avenue for political action. This was true of young people across the three cities, whether from relatively disadvantaged or middle-class backgrounds or involved in more formal deliberative bodies (such as youth councils, forums, and parliaments), or informal community-based clubs and organisations, or not particularly involved at all. As a young person in London expressed it:

> Being politically active is to stand out and speak about oppression and you advocate for your rights. . . . Being politically active does not mean you're just going to challenge policies or economic development. It's all about challenging the problems in your society or problems that we face.

Indeed, given the limitations of the vote and the perspective that alternative forms of action, such as petitioning, were unlikely to be taken seriously by decision-makers given their youth, young people saw participation in public demonstrations as a way to effectively make their voice heard and as an opportunity for socialisation into political action.

This broad orientation towards belonging and involvement was explicitly connected to the question of *rights,* particularly among young people in London and, to some extent, Belfast. As a young person in London put it:

> To me, it means that you have rights, and for example if you are a British citizen here you have rights to being in this country and now freedom of speech, freedom of religion, because that's what it means to be a citizen.
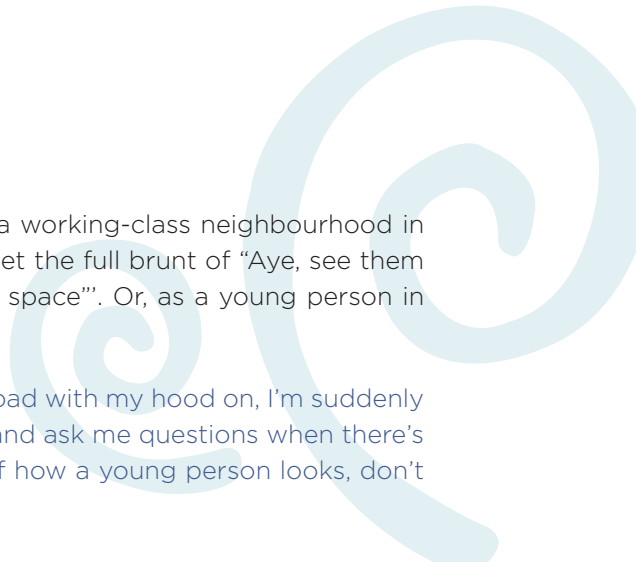
That said, young people were somewhat sceptical about the extent to which rights were equally available and equally protected for all members of society. This was a theme most explicitly explored by young people in London, particularly from economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds. 'Rights are an illusion', as one put it, and, while recognising that rights exist within a democratic society asks, 'Are they really applied? Do we know them?'

Perspectives on the Status of Young People

Scepticism about the extent to which respect for rights was equitably embraced reflected a broader perspective regarding the particular status of young people in society – all young people, but particularly those from marginalised backgrounds. Overall, young people expressed the belief that they were not seen as full and equal members of society or their communities, too often dismissed because of their age and inexperience. As a young person in Dublin, a member of the Comhairle na nÓg, framed it: 'We're numbers in a grid to the government at the moment. We're just an egg cooking; we haven't reached our potential, so we're useless'.

The idea that young people are not taken seriously by decision-makers in government and school, for example, or by adults in society more broadly, was common across our discussions with young people. To some, it was more a question of perceived lack of knowledge, or experience, or seriousness: 'mindless drones who just want to buy everything that's in fashion', as a Dublin youth put it, or 'lazy, moody, or you know like just angsty', in the words of a young person in London. Other young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, expressed a view that they were not merely dismissed because of their youth but because of stereotypes that labelled them as antisocial or even dangerous – problems to be addressed

rather than citizens to be engaged. A young person from a working-class neighbourhood in Belfast, for example, noted that youth like him in the city 'get the full brunt of "Aye, see them ones, just forget about them, them ones are all a waste of space"'. Or, as a young person in London put it:

> So for example, just because I am walking down the road with my hood on, I'm suddenly a gangster, and they wanna pull over and search me and ask me questions when there's no need to. So, what my point is that, just because of how a young person looks, don't judge them as a criminal.

These societal orientations towards young people contribute to the extent to which young people believe they have a voice in decisions that affect them. Overall, young people across the three cities consistently expressed the belief that they were generally not listened to or, when given the opportunity to provide input and make their perspectives and priorities known, were not heard – or their input was frequently not taken into account.

That said, young people, particularly those engaged in formal deliberative forums like youth councils, recognise that there has been some change on this front, noting that decision-makers are more likely to seek their advice than before, although they were cautious about the impact of such consultations. As a young person participating in the Northern Ireland Youth Forum put it:

> I think increasingly more so, but not to the point that it should be. Like I think that, like decision-makers and stuff are at least trying to make it look like they are [listening to us], but whether they actually are or whether it's just sort of like the tokenistic thing, we don't actually know or I don't actually know.

Or, as a young person involved in a consultation group connected with a local development project in London noted:

> I think we are definitely are listened to. I just think that nothing is actually taken in. I feel like definitely, people do listen to young people and they make them by reports and speeches. But just because they are listened to it doesn't mean they are actually taken in and do anything about it. I almost feel like we are listened to so that we don't like complain that 'Oh, the government is not listening to us'.

And young people were careful to point out that context matters, and that those able to connect with a group, whether a youth club in their community or a more formal deliberative forum like a youth council, were more likely to have their voice heard and have influence over things that matter to them. Not all young people have the opportunity to engage in this way, however, and as a matter of general perception, the larger question of young people's voice in society was seen as needing substantial attention, as a member of a different group in London pointed out:

> Us sitting around this table right now are in a very fortunate position, because we are currently standing on a platform where we can voice our opinions and all our friends' and youth clubs' opinions – if we are still saying that we're not being heard enough, imagine those who aren't even given the opportunity to speak.

Young people's perspectives, several groups noted, are more likely to be taken into account depending on class background (particularly stressed among young people in London) and if young people act collectively, noting that there is strength in numbers.

The Importance of Young People's Voice

In spite of this, young people argued that their voice and perspectives are critical and should be taken more into account by decision-makers in local institutions, like schools, and by government overall. The stated rationale for their engagement falls largely into three sets of ideas. First, and most prevalent, is the notion that young people 'are the future' and will be the most impacted by decisions made today. As a London youth noted:

> Young people are only twenty per cent of our society, but we are hundred per cent of our future. So, guess it's the fact that, everything that is going to happen in the future is going to be based on us. This generation is going to be the next politicians, the next doctors, the next teachers, and so on and so on and so on. So, if the whole system is made by people who are older, we are going to come into a system we don't even agree with, and why would you want to be in a system that you don't agree with?

Or, as stated by a young person in Belfast:

> It's our future. It's us that are going to have to deal with all the problems, and we deal with problems on a daily basis now, so we know what's going on and what needs to happen to stop it all or to help them to progress to better things in the future.

This last comment also points to a second argument, that both their lived experience and relative proximity to many of the issues that need to be addressed ('we see what's going on', as a young person in Dublin put it), on the one hand, and their relative open-mindedness and connection to a changing world, on the other, lend them a particularly important perspective that decision-makers need to take into account. Older people, they claim, are often out of touch with current circumstance, mired in the routine of work and daily life, and distant from the issues that are most central to the concerns of young people and likely to affect them in the future. As another young person in Belfast noted:

> Times are changing; there's different things happening, like there's an increase in suicide that maybe wasn't happening twenty years ago, or mental health issues. The figures are rising and they're kinda leaving the main choice up to people who aren't going through it or haven't gone through it, and they're not listening to the younger ones who are going through it at the minute.

A London youth concurred:

> [Young people have] a new perspective of the world, like, 'cause we grew up in a new generation, I'd say we know how the word is evolving, and we know like what's gonna happen, and what we should do about it.

Different issues were presented by young people to illustrate this disjunction with reference to what was going on in their particular contexts at the time. For London youth, Brexit was a particularly important current issue. In Dublin, the constitutional referendum on marriage

equality was a topic of concern. In Belfast, the enduring legacy of sectarian conflict was often noted as viewed differently by young people and adults. On the last point, a young person in Belfast noted:

> I think young people are a lot more open-minded than like the older generation because we don't live with the Troubles. We might have heard stuff from our families and things like that, but we are able to form our opinions really because we don't have the – like, we weren't actually there to live it.

Finally, though less prominently, some young people (particularly in Dublin) noted the developmental benefits of youth engagement. It was suggested that engaging young people in deliberation, decision-making, and civic and political action gives them a foundation for and a pathway to more effective engagement in the future, as well as important influence today – 'a starting point to allow more young people to have a voice', in the words of one Dublin youth.

OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

In discussing the various ways in which young people are able to engage in civic and political life, young people noted both specific opportunities for engagement and specific challenges and constraints.

Opportunities for Engagement

Regarding opportunity, young people focused primarily on four major avenues for engagement: youth clubs and community work, youth councils and forums, the use of social media, and public protests and demonstrations.

Youth clubs and community organisations were most often mentioned as an opportunity for engagement, and are the principal mechanism through which many of the young people we talked with became engaged in the first place. As a young person in London noted:

> I think youth clubs, because I'm pretty sure that's how every single one of us got started . . . . Without my youth club I probably wouldn't have been this engaged in like society and in politics and in actually understanding and raising my voice.

Youth clubs and community organisations are seen to play a number of crucial roles. They provide safe space and access to both peers and supportive adults, and a place to discuss important topics in a context in which – in contrast to school, for example – young people get 'treated more like an adult', in the words of one Belfast youth. Much of what happens in many youth clubs and community centres is highly informal, providing a space to hang out and enjoy recreational activities, on the one hand, and to receive support for personal and social development and on pragmatic issues like job-search preparation and counselling, on the other. Some young people were more dismissive of youth clubs' role in promoting effective and substantive civic and political engagement as compared, for example, to youth councils and forums, which provide an explicit opportunity for deliberation and decision-making. Many young people, however, credit youth clubs with providing an important foundation for broader engagement – getting them 'out of trouble', as one London youth put it, and providing deliberative opportunities through discussion sessions and shaping social action projects in the community. As a young person in Dublin put it: 'It's a creative space as well, and the youth workers are trained to, like, listen to young people and treat them as equals and all that kind of thing.'

Moving from providing a generally youth-focused supportive environment and support for personal and social development to more explicit support for active engagement in civic and political life, however, requires intentionality. This includes providing opportunities for critical discussion, drawing on young people's experiences and current concerns and cultivating analysis of the relationship between these circumstances and the social, economic, and political processes and structures that shape them, and providing opportunities for concrete action, from what are often referred to as 'citizenship projects' or 'community work' to conducting action-oriented research to assess and shape responses to a particular community problem, to organising and mobilising direct actions and advocacy campaigns.

In addition to the more general role that youth clubs and community organisations play, specific programmatic interventions or youth groups were also noted as of particular value for promoting engagement, particularly among specific youth populations. Young people involved in a restorative justice programme in Belfast, for example, credit the programme with increasing their knowledge about and interest in civic and political action. As one put it: 'I started to care more about politics, and I never talked about politics before, until I started coming here.'

A second important opportunity recognised by young people are the kinds of *deliberative forums* provided by youth councils and the like. As a member of Dublin's Comhairle na nÓg put it:

> This is probably the best role I can do in politics, until I get older, and I've never really wanted a career in politics, but if I can I may as well should, and I'm pretty sure I'll have some good ideas about it.

The value of these kinds of structures – including the youth forums in Belfast, Comhairle and youth reference groups in Dublin, and youth councils, advisory groups, Young Mayor schemes and Youth Parliament in London – is evident in that they were recognised as important opportunities by young people across the three cities, some of whom argued that they should be made available to more young people. Indeed, many young people in the groups we spoke with were unaware of their existence, and those who were aware, while generally supportive (and in some cases, as the quote above suggests, highly enthusiastic), also raised the caution that, in addition to the fact that knowledge of and access to these opportunities is in practice limited, the extent to which they make a difference is unclear. A London youth, for example, argues that 'if you utilise it properly then it can be an invaluable tool for the young to be heard on a proper big scale, make changes'. Others, however, were concerned about the extent to which deliberative forums and youth consultation procedures are essentially a 'rubber stamp' or empty ritual. As a young person in Belfast put it:

> We would get contacted all the time about young people wanting to do a focus group on, like, raising the age of criminal responsibility or, d'you know, different issues like that, and they come together and they do the focus group and there's great discussion, but then, what's the next step? And so actually sometimes that's more detrimental, because young people are feeling like, 'Oh, we have a say here', and then they never hear what's happened with anything they've talked about and they don't see it coming to fruition or whatever.

A third opportunity noted by young people concerned the availability of *social media* as a communication tool and, in some cases, a mechanism for mobilising social action among peers. References to the potential of social media were most frequently made by the young people we spoke with in London. As one put it:

> I'd say social media is a very strong tool these days, and I'd say most young people express themselves that way. . . . I don't think you have to make a strong argument, I just think you have to make a lot of noise, and then people will respond.

A young person in Dublin agreed:

> You can do petitions and all, and like say if you see something on Facebook and you want to share it around, everyone starts sharing it, like then someone's bound to see it.

Finally, some young people we spoke with, particularly those in London, invoked the possibility of engaging in *public demonstrations* as an important opportunity to make their voice heard and engage actively in political life, both 'giving hope' and inspiring others to stand up and take action as well. As one put it:

> When you're collectively in those marches, it doesn't matter what social background you come from, what your ethnic group is, it's the fact that you're all standing up for the same thing, and I think things like that give a sense of humanity and hope for everyone.

Young people also cautioned, however, that more public displays of political action such as protests can be misconstrued, particularly in the (still relevant) aftermath of the 2011 disturbances in England. Young people in several groups we spoke with in London, for example, noted the importance of distinguishing between riots and protest, and debated whether what were largely described in the media as 'youth riots' in 2011 were driven by bored youth causing trouble or should be seen as a form of political rebellion due to frustration at the fact that young people aren't being given 'basic things that young people should have'.

Barriers to Engagement

Regarding barriers and challenges, three issues were among the most commonly identified by the young people with whom we spoke: a lack of trust in decision-makers and people in power, particularly politicians; a lack of interest among young people and insufficient incentive to engage; and insufficient knowledge and education to engage effectively. Young people (primarily in London) also noted differential opportunities for engagement, particularly for those from disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds.

A lack of trust in politicians was commonly noted across cities, and was especially strongly stated among young people in Belfast. This dynamic is grounded both in the sense that politicians are out of touch and largely unconcerned with the priorities, challenges, and issues most salient to young people, and in the belief that when they do engage with young people they do so cynically and episodically, when it suits their political needs – to 'tick their box on youth involvement', as a young person in London put it. A young person in Belfast notes: 'You only ever see politicians when it's coming up to elections; you never see them any other time, they don't do nothing else.' But young people also noted the distance between people in power and the people they represent, particularly young people and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A young person in London observed:

> I don't feel like there's anything you can specifically say to them to make them understand; sometimes you just need to get people to live these certain circumstances. You try living off fifty pounds a week, tell me how you do it, because you spend fifty pounds on bloody black cabs.

Or, as a Belfast youth argued:

> There's actually real problems going on in the North, and in—not just Belfast, sometimes our politicians are happy to hide behind the divide up there in Stormont. I almost think sometimes they're happy they have Catholics and Protestants still clashing with each other.

This lack of trust contributes to a degree of apathy and lack of interest among young people. Although it was recognised that many young people were simply not interested because their attention was elsewhere – 'they'd worry more about their social lives, stuff you normally do than, like, politics and all that', as a Dublin youth noted – young people across cities also connected a lack of interest to a lack of incentive or the belief that engagement is likely to be futile, unlikely to change things, a waste of time. A different young person from a working-class neighbourhood in West Belfast put it this way:

> I think that young people are that disempowered. They're that far removed from decision-making from Stormont right now, they don't believe that anything that they say will have an impact on anything, so they're going, 'Then why should I get involved?'
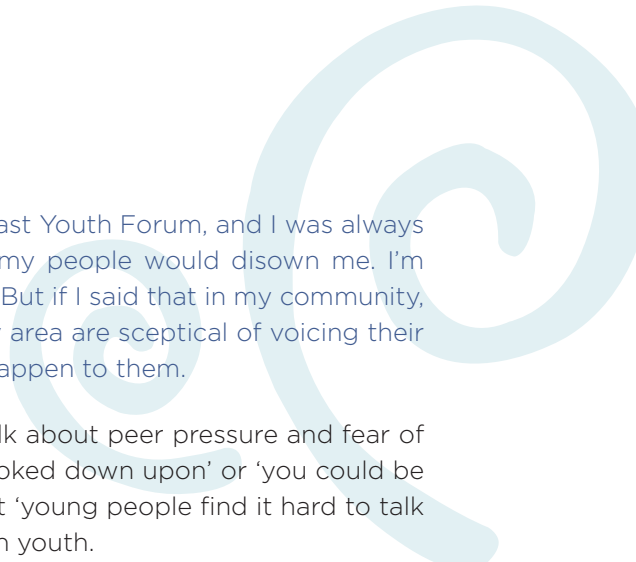
The fact that young people under 18 are not entitled to vote was a significant issue for young people across cities and contributes, in their view, to a lack of incentive to get involved in other ways, since without the vote what incentive is there for politicians to listen? A statement by a young person in London connected to a borough-level youth advisory board is typical:

> I think it comes down to the fact that young people, if even, are like, the last people that people turn to for opinion and advice, and the biggest problem is that young people, like half the people in here, they can't vote, and a lot of these decisions that voting would entail would help these people, and honestly you can tell that most of the people in here know exactly what they want and they will be affected by decisions that these parties will be making. The fact that they can't vote is another reason why there's problems with just young people being neglected.

But even among young people eligible to vote, many expressed a lack of faith in its ultimate importance, as another London youth noted:

> In terms of voting, I think there's a general consensus that your vote doesn't count, and I think that's just been accepted across young people, and young people are even telling people, 'Ah, I don't wanna vote 'cause my vote's not gonna make a difference.'

Young people also discussed the kinds of disincentives to engaging due to family, or community, or peer pressures. In Belfast, this was raised in the context of family or community dynamics and a kind of ossified political culture grounded in the legacy of the conflict:

> Because especially in my area, I am going to join Belfast Youth Forum, and I was always very scared that if I give my views, my family and my people would disown me. I'm Protestant, and I used to support Irish Language Act. But if I said that in my community, people would be at my door. So a lot of people in my area are sceptical of voicing their opinions out of the fear of not knowing what might happen to them.

In Dublin and London, young people were more likely to talk about peer pressure and fear of rejection, the fact that participation might lead to being 'looked down upon' or 'you could be slagged for it', as two young people in Dublin noted, or that 'young people find it hard to talk because people downgrade them', in the words of a London youth.

Beyond a lack of trust in decision-makers and a lack of interest, incentive, or belief that their participation will make a difference, young people also noted significant *limitations in knowledge, information, and the quality of education* to prepare them to be effective, engaged citizens. This was a common theme across all three cities. Much of the critique on this front focused on the education system and the ways in which schools address political and citizenship education. Although schools across the three jurisdictions do include some kind of curricular input on politics and citizenship, young people across the cities suggested that it was insufficient in terms of content, intensity, timing, and duration. As a young person in Dublin noted:

> There wasn't really enough education relating to current events, like actual politics that was going on and everything, like it was only one year for CSPE [Civic, Social, and Political Education], and like, we only learned a little bit and then after that it was gone, so we didn't care really, about it.

In Dublin, several young people complained of an outsized focus on religion in schools and, to some extent, on historical rather than contemporary political topics. In Belfast, young people noted the problems of a segregated school system and political bias in the curriculum in which, for example, students in Protestant schools 'get taught about British history but they don't get taught about Irish or even Northern Irish history'. In London, young people critiqued the short shrift that political education receives in school, the lack of a focus on critical analysis in favour of teaching to the exam, and the stark differences in education in private versus public schools. In the words of one London youth:

> Rich people send their kids to private schools because they get taught to lead, and most of us working-class kids get sent to school and learn a routine, and so we get taught to be led whereas they get taught to lead. . . . That makes such a huge difference to how we all grow up and leave school and what we think our role in society is, really.

The impact of the limitations of the education system in terms of preparing young people to be active and effective citizens is compounded by access to social media and the misinformation it often provides ('There's more bad than good on it', as a young person in Belfast put it). In this way, young people were aware of the double-edged nature of social media: a potent tool for communicating and mobilising others to action, as noted above, but also a source of faulty information that can create barriers to effective engagement. As a young person in Dublin stated:

> The majority of young people now would be focusing on social media and what's on social media, so if you see someone put stuff on Facebook, and you're reading it, 'Aw

> well, I believe that', but it's not really true, it's still gonna stick in your head because you have read it and you're like, 'Well, I'll just go by that and I'll go by what I believe', whereas it's not the truth.

Finally, young people across cities noted the relative *paucity of opportunities for engagement,* particularly given cuts to funding for the youth service, and especially the challenges of differential opportunity for engagement based on class or racial and ethnic background, particularly noted by young people in London. As one explained, with specific reference to the Youth Parliament:

> I think the whole point of it was to try get the young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get involved in politics, but when you look at Parliament, it's like . . . if you look at some of the young people that get elected, they're not your typical, like young people who are actually disadvantaged.

For those involved in these kinds of youth councils, government-sponsored forums, and consultative bodies, the challenge of representing the young people they were selected or elected to speak for is notable. As a member of a youth advisory board connected with the Young Mayor in one London borough put it:

> We are representing; we are listened to. But at the same time, look how many there are. There's a few of us and we are representing the whole of [this borough]. I think it's a stressful task, because we're only a small sample, and most of us are friends and things like that, so we use each other's experiences to help us, but then – I'm not gonna lie, I can't say that we do represent the whole of [the community], because yeah, we have diversity and everything, but we're not the whole of [the borough] and we're never going to be. So I feel like there's always going to be a limit about how much we are listened to, but I think it's because of projects like this that we are moving further forward, and I think people need to understand how helpful things like this are.
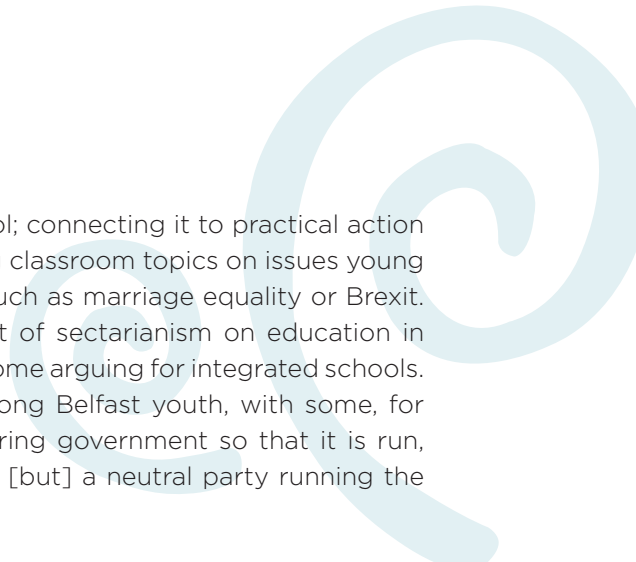
RESPONSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Young people with whom we spoke had a number of ideas about how to better promote youth engagement in civic and political life. Across cities there was broad agreement, in particular, about four issues: (1) improving civic and political education; (2) providing more resources for youth clubs, groups, and organisations; (3) increasing and improving consultation with young people; and (4) lowering the voting age.

Improving Civic and Political Education

Addressing the shortcomings of civic and political education – and more generally raising the awareness among young people of key civic and political issues and the opportunities available to them to get involved – was the most prominent response suggested by young people across the three cities. Young people were fairly unanimous about the failures of the school system to educate them on basic information about the workings of government, the importance of civic and political engagement, the capacity to critically analyse and act independently as effective citizens, and basic engagement with current events and their importance – understanding 'what's going on in the world', as one London youth put it. Specific recommendations included making citizenship education more robust and (potentially) mandatory; beginning it earlier

and extending it through the final years of secondary school; connecting it to practical action through, for example, workshops and projects; and focusing classroom topics on issues young people 'will actually care about', as a Dublin youth put it, such as marriage equality or Brexit. In Belfast, young people were also focused on the impact of sectarianism on education in general, and civic and political education in particular, with some arguing for integrated schools. (Moving past sectarianism was a more general theme among Belfast youth, with some, for example, also calling for integrated housing and restructuring government so that it is run, as one put it, not by 'either Republican or Unionist parties [but] a neutral party running the country for the greater good for the future'.)

Although young people noted some limitations to relying on schools for this purpose, largely because of the formal, top-down, social-control orientation of many schools that make it an unfriendly place for some young people (and why non-formal education through youth clubs and other volunteer opportunities are important), most young people noted the importance of schools given their relative level of access to young people. As a Belfast youth put it:

> I think in schools, like schools are the only places where you will get every young person. So, in youth group, there's still gonna be young people that aren't connected with any youth group or like community groups, but in schools, that's where you find all the young people, and I think that's where, in the school, they need like politics, it needs to be taught and like they need education on it. They need education on how our political system works, who are the parties, what do the parties stand for, and all that, and how politics affects your life, because it's not being taught, and the only time it is being taught is if you stay on for A-level, and that's too late.

Supporting Youth Clubs and Non-Formal Education

As essential as schools are, however, young people also noted the importance of non-formal education and opportunities to participate on a voluntary basis in youth clubs, community organisations, and grass-roots social movements. The lack of funding for the youth sector in general, and youth clubs in particular, was seen as a major problem. In part these contexts are seen as foundational – a way to keep young people out of trouble, give them a safe place to 'hang out' where they feel some ownership and connection, build relationships with peers and supportive adults, and provide alternatives to risky behaviour. As a young person from a working-class neighbourhood in Dublin noted:

> Since like they have nowhere to go, like they're just gonna like sell drugs and that, because they have nothing else to do. They're just gonna be going around the streets and all.

But beyond this, youth clubs and other kinds of informal opportunities were seen as important for providing the occasion to foster critical thinking and civic and political action in ways that young people want to be involved. A young person in Belfast who is active in the Northern Ireland Youth Forum suggested:

> You need to have a really good balance of like fun basically and then workshops within that, like, rather than just have people come in and teach them non-stop. Like bring youth work and, basically, and have youth work and like learn politics and policymaking mixed together – like have a good balance for people who actually want to be involved.

Improving Consultation Processes

Also high on the list of young people's recommendations was the need to increase the level of consultation and engagement with young people, the number of opportunities available to them, and the quality and seriousness of engagement efforts. As a London youth put it:

> I think we need to like already establish that young people are very political and they probably do know, it's just the fact that the facilities there are not there to help them, or the system's not on their side anyway, so I think that's where the actual problem is.

As suggested above, young people's frustration with current opportunities to engage with decision-makers, especially politicians, and to contribute to policy deliberations concerns the sense that such interactions are often ritualistic, tokenistic, 'tick-box' exercises. In response, young people argued both for more engagement with decision-makers and, importantly, for more *authentic* engagement, as a young person in Belfast argued:

> For like, the politicians and all to actually listen to the young people, and then do something about it, and then other young people might see that it's actually working, and then they might come forward and say how they feel, what they want done.

How to structure engagement most effectively is less than clear. Some were less than sanguine that improving consultation processes was likely. A young person in Dublin, for example, lamented: 'I think protests is the only way that like, they're actually going to listen to you – if you actually stand up to them.' Others noted the potential for more intensive engagement, with decision-makers spending more time with youth to understand their circumstances and priorities. Yet others argued for formats that precluded decision-makers' tendency to dodge questions or stick to formalities, for example, through more direct, face-to-face, public encounters. Still others suggested that rather than proliferating a range of youth-specific opportunities, young people might be integrated into existing structures, including having youth representatives in government. A young person in London suggested:
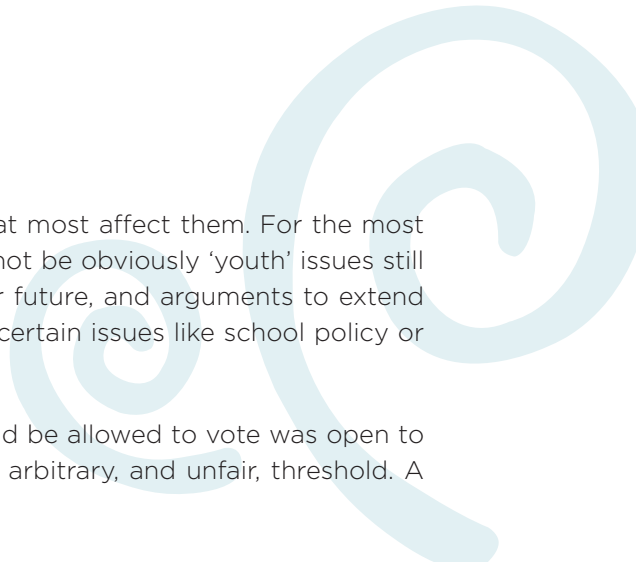
> We were talking about creating new things to include young people. But there are a lot of things that are existing for them at the moment that are specifically into adults. It is not going to be that difficult to include young people more. Like, first thing is in a political party, youth wings could definitely be sort of expandable rather than just creating new things.

Finally, some young people argued that the kinds of issues young people are consulted on need to change; that youth are capable of participating in much more consequential issues than those they are typically engaged around, as another London youth proposed:

> In regards to consulting young people, we're only consulted for little things, like, 'Oh, we're going to open a new swimming pool, OK, how do you feel about that?' We're consulted for little things like that, but we need to be consulted on bigger issues.

Lowering the Voting Age

A fourth key issue for young people was the voting age. A majority of the young people with whom we spoke were in favour of lowering the age of eligibility, although there was some disagreement on what age would be appropriate and on whether young people should be

enfranchised to vote generally or only on certain issues that most affect them. For the most part, young people recognised that many issues that may not be obviously 'youth' issues still have a significant impact on young people's lives and their future, and arguments to extend the franchise below the age of 18 were not constrained to certain issues like school policy or youth services.

The question of when a young person is capable and should be allowed to vote was open to some debate, but the general consensus was that 18 is an arbitrary, and unfair, threshold. A Dublin youth associated with the Comhairle noted:

> It's not like we're saying five-year-olds should be allowed vote, but I think we should lower the age to like, what – fourteen, sixteen, around that age. I think we're old enough to understand politics or stuff that we have to vote about.

Debate around the proper age threshold for voting focused largely on the question of capacity – on when a young person has likely achieved sufficient knowledge, maturity, and seriousness to vote responsibly. As a young person in Belfast put it:

> I know when I was sixteen I was a baldie, like I had no clue, so I wouldn't have known what to do. And I know that the majority of people would be like that, there would be very select few people who – the only young people who are very, very interested in politics from a young age are the ones who study politics. So I think I'm all for lowering the age, but the education needs to be better on informing people on how it all works. I still don't know how it all works.

Noting, however, that age is but one factor to consider (many adults are relatively ill-informed or uninterested in politics but have the right to vote as citizens), most young people agreed that by the age of 16, youth had the capacity and, with improvements in their education, are likely to be sufficiently well-informed to vote effectively. Further, given the range of responsibilities they begin to take on in their later teens before they're extended the right to vote, enfranchising them is only fair. The remarks of a different young person in Belfast is typical on this point:

> I think when young people aren't even allowed to vote until they're eighteen, and yet they can work at sixteen, they can have sex at sixteen – you know, there's a lot of things they can do, but they're told, 'Oh, but you're not allowed to vote 'til you're eighteen.' I think that's where there's a conflict. And so it's saying, first of all, when does a young person become an adult? And second of all, when does a young person's voice actually be heard? Is it with the age of voting or is it before that?

4. Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations
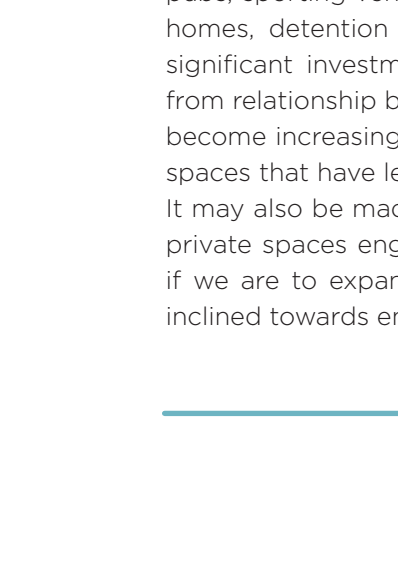
The foregoing analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how a range of policy professionals, front-line practitioners, leaders of youth-focused NGOs, and young people in three cities – Belfast, Dublin, and London – understand the possibilities and challenges presented by efforts to promote the engagement of young people in civic and political life. It provides insight into how they characterise some of the key ideas and expectations that lie behind such efforts; the nature and relative effectiveness of different strategies that shape action on the ground; and the challenges faced and some of the possible responses to improve policy and practice in this realm.

Clearly, the importance of promoting youth civic and political engagement is an explicit policy goal in the three jurisdictions that are the focus of our analysis, informed in part by policy frameworks at the supranational level promoted by UN and EU agencies. And there is significant action on the ground, by both state and non-state actors, which seeks to engage young people in various ways, through different kinds of strategies, and towards different anticipated ends. These efforts represent an expanded set of opportunities for young people to participate in deliberation about issues that are important to them, to have their perspectives taken into account by decision-makers in both specific institutional contexts (schools, community organisations, programmes) and broader policy debates, and to contribute directly to address issues in their communities and participate in broader social action projects and campaigns.

But there are also a number of recognised limitations to these efforts which create barriers to more meaningful engagement and the engagement of a more diverse group of young people. These include tensions between different orientations to promoting engagement and to the goals they seek to achieve and circumstances presented by the broader contexts in which youth engagement efforts take place. These factors limit, to some extent, the reach, quality, and impact of these efforts. Many of these challenges are similar to those faced by efforts to promote engagement and participatory democracy more broadly, particularly among disadvantaged or marginalised populations, for example, in the community development field. But they are further complicated, to some extent, by the liminal position young people hold between childhood and full adulthood, particularly in the context of the extended transition to adulthood that many youth currently experience, and the pressures of rapid transition in some realms that young people from more marginalised backgrounds with fewer resources are forced to embrace (Settersten et al., 2005).

In this final section, we close with a brief set of recommendations that build from the implications of our analysis. We focus in particular on four dimensions of action:

- broadening outreach and deepening engagement

- normalising participation

- responding to ideological and practical tensions

- addressing structural inequalities.

Across this set of responses, implementation needs to take into account the specific influence of local context, responding to the particular social, cultural, political, and economic factors that shape young people's lives and condition the nature of their opportunities, incentives, and likelihood to engage. It also needs to address fundamental resource constraints. This obviously includes a need for funding, but also for building capacity in the field through training and education and ensuring that the rules and processes that govern the allocation of funding are not overly constraining, burdensome, or out of sync with the goals, strategies, and capacities of the work being funded. This requires significant and sustained investment.

BROADENING OUTREACH AND DEEPENING ENGAGEMENT

The challenge of promoting the inclusion of a diverse range of young people in youth engagement efforts, particularly those most marginalised, is widely recognised. Partly this is a function of the fundamentally voluntary nature of youth participation. Some young people are simply more interested than others, more confident in their capabilities, and more attuned to the possibilities that opportunities to engage in civic and political activities might provide. It is also partly a function of recruitment strategies, and of reductions in support for universal youth services that can engage young people in informal ways, over time, at the community level.

Most formal efforts to engage young people in civic and political life – through deliberative youth councils or civic volunteering programmes, for example – tend to rely heavily on schools for recruiting young people. As a practical matter, teachers or principals often select and recommend specific students to put themselves forward for consideration. In some cases, selection and recruitment efforts try to explicitly take into account the goal of diversity, and while this certainly helps in recruiting some young people from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, the lion's share of young people who get involved through such processes tend to be relatively more successful academically, personally ambitious, and inclined towards active participation. To remedy this, engagement efforts sometimes go beyond schools, reaching out to a range of organisations that work with specific marginalised youth – young people in care, in specific disadvantaged neighbourhoods, involved in the criminal justice system, with disabilities, from particular ethnic minority groups – which then steer young people towards engagement opportunities. These are useful strategies, but to increase the possibility of reaching a broader array of young people, including the most marginalised, more diverse, multiplex, grounded, and flexible strategies should be considered. We argue for increased attention, in particular, to four interrelated lines of action.

The first is increased emphasis on and increased support for *detached youth work,* in which youth workers are dispatched to, and spend significant time in, the informal spaces where vulnerable and marginalised young people spend their time – on the streets, in parks, at cafes, pubs, sporting venues, and the institutional settings in which some are isolated, such as care homes, detention centres, and prisons. This is time- and labour-intensive work, requiring significant investment to build trust and make connections with young people and move from relationship building to effective engagement. And, as noted in the analysis above, it has become increasingly difficult as security concerns are used to justify the regulation of public spaces that have left young people with fewer places in which they are welcome to hang out. It may also be made more difficult to the extent that more young people spend their time in private spaces engaged in virtual activities like social media. But the effort is worth making if we are to expand the franchise beyond the relatively well-off, well-connected, and most inclined towards engagement.

Second, increased support is needed for the kinds of open-access, youth-friendly spaces – *youth clubs,* community centres, youth cafes, and the like – that provide the opportunity for young people to connect with peers and supportive adults in their communities, in their own time, and on their own terms. To be effective mechanisms supporting the meaningful engagement of young people in civic and political life – embracing their role as active, empowered, contributing citizens – activities in these spaces need at some point to provide more than recreation or shelter for unstructured leisure time, promoting critical reflection and discussion and opportunities for social action around issues that young people most care about. This is a delicate balance, since many young people are, quite reasonably, attracted to such spaces specifically for the opportunities they provide for leisure and socialising, unfettered by goal-oriented activity. But access to facilities and relationships that afford a sense of belonging and independence from the adult-dominated and rule-oriented contexts of school and work, for example, can be an important foundation for shaping young people's identity and orientation to the wider world, and for their potential broader engagement in community and society. Skilled youth workers in these contexts can promote an environment where critical discourse can hone young people's interests and understanding of civic and political life and their place within it, and provide resources to allow for ultimate action on these interests through projects, campaigns, and various kinds of social action.

Third, we suggest that a focus on *families and family support* may be an important strategic avenue for promoting youth engagement. Young people who grow up in families in which parents are knowledgeable and attentive to current events, politically active (even minimally as regular voters), and engaged in some way in their communities are more likely to understand the importance of civic and political engagement, to have engaged in discussions about social problems and potential solutions, and to have a vision of their own role in influencing and contributing to social well-being and social change. For families on the margins, the challenges of survival often supersede other concerns, resulting in disenchantment and disenfranchisement. Supporting parents around both basic needs and promoting their skills, interest, and belief in the value and potential impact of their own participation may contribute to their children's interest and likelihood of engagement.

Fourth, *communication technology and social media* offer an opportunity to reach large numbers of young people, including marginalised youth. How best to do this requires further investigation. While a number of respondents, professionals and young people alike, discussed the potential of social media, for example, as a tool for recruitment, for disseminating information, and for mobilising young people around particular issues, they also cautioned about the potential risks of social media (including privacy concerns, cyberbullying, and the spread of misinformation), and specific strategies for effectively using social media largely remain to be developed. Young people, some pointed out, do not necessarily go to social media to engage in civic or political discourse, or seek out the sites that youth organisations, youth councils, and other participatory forums are likely to use. Effort should be made to learn from young people directly about their social media and communications technology habits, interests, and ideas for extending its use.

But outreach strategies should not be just about reaching young people to draw them into consultation processes, deliberative forums, youth clubs, or prevention and integration programmes. They can also *integrate substantive engagement* as a part of the outreach process. This requires intentionality, but also a longer time frame, patience, and sustained effort. And beyond embracing multiple strategies and tools to identify, cultivate relationships

with, and draw young people to opportunities to engage in deliberation and civic and political action, youth engagement opportunities themselves need to provide the possibility for more substantive and impactful engagement. Respondents – both professionals and young people themselves – noted the tendency of some forums to feel more like rituals of engagement than meaningful opportunities to have an impact on the issues that young people care about. The extent to which participation is adult-driven and formalistic, and the frequent lack of follow-through on recommendations or actions young people have made, sometimes lead to frustration, cynicism, or withdrawal. To deepen engagement, opportunities for critical discussion and planning, civic and political action, and participation in deliberative processes should be more fundamentally youth-driven, with adult and institutional support, clear communication lines between youth and decision-makers, and genuine engagement from the latter.

Similarly, more informal contexts for engagement, such as youth clubs and community centres, while retaining their fundamental character as informal spaces in which young people feel ownership, autonomy, and respect, should be intentional about promoting opportunities for critical discussion and offer specific support for youth-led interest in engaging in civic and political action. Striking this balance requires a kind of organic nurturing of young people's interests and potential for engaging in social action, which takes time, trust, and a light touch.

NORMALISING PARTICIPATION

Targeted programmes and structures to promote youth civic and political engagement are important, even with the limitations elaborated in our analysis. But they are, by definition, in some ways exceptional. They engage specific groups of young people, in specific contexts, through specific mechanisms, and for specific periods of time. Policy initiatives to promote civic engagement are often time-limited, providing perhaps excellent opportunities for those young people who participate to explore issues, meet new people, and contribute in specific ways to a programme or campaign. They might provide a foundation for longer-term engagement, or be a one-off experience. Promoting youth engagement in such a way that young people understand their role and potential for impact and internalise an interest and belief in the potential efficacy of their civic and political action – in small and large ways – requires normalising the idea of participation and establishing a range of opportunities, in developmentally appropriate ways over the course of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, to realise it.

Schools are likely a central component to a strategy of normalising participation. Schools have access to most young people over the course of their childhood and adolescence. They are a foundational institution for educating young people on the workings of society, the nature of social problems facing it, approaches to governance, and the promise and challenges of democracy, and for socialising young people with regard to their role as citizens. Yet the majority of our respondents pointed out the limitations of contemporary citizenship education in schools. Critiques include the extent to which pedagogy focuses more on promoting league-table success than critical thinking, puts little emphasis on current events or the workings of political systems, and is more oriented towards social control than encouraging participation and enterprise among youth. Critiques also focus on the relatively minimal attention curricula give to issues of citizenship and civic and political education. While civics, politics, and citizenship education is a component of curricula in schools in all three contexts, attention to it appears to be episodic, largely voluntary, and drops off in a student's final years of secondary school. Young people – including those who are most civically and politically active – were

most explicit about these limitations, arguing for a stronger (and, many suggested, mandatory) curriculum of civic and political education that includes a robust focus on current events and social problems and that begins early in one's school career and extends throughout secondary school. We take these critiques and recommendations seriously, and suggest a fundamental review and reorientation to citizenship education in schools that is integrated into the curriculum throughout a student's educational career; provides a sound understanding of the structure, function, and process of governance; focuses on critical reflection and engages young people in serious discussion of current events and social problems; and connects students to opportunities for engagement – beyond the kinds of episodic and highly curated volunteer opportunities that are most often supported in schools.

While foundational, schools alone cannot carry the burden of socialising young people towards active citizenship or providing them with opportunities to engage in social action. Indeed, for some young people, particularly marginalised youth, school may be an unfriendly context associated more with rules, reprimand, and social control than with critical engagement in issues they care about. As noted above, the extent to which the families in which young people grow up successfully socialise them to their rights and potential as active citizens is often fundamental. And non-formal education in the voluntary sector – through youth work and the activities and opportunities provided by community organisations, for example – is an important context in which young people can learn about and experiment with the various ways in which they can have an impact on issues they care about, in their communities and in society more broadly. They can do this through a range of strategies, such as providing space and a forum for informal critical discussion, organising community projects, and supporting young people in organising and mobilising social action campaigns.

It is also useful to think about the ways in which to connect formal and non-formal education and to bridge learning about civic and political engagement with opportunities to act. A practicum-oriented curriculum in schools, for example, where classroom learning is connected to workshops, projects, and campaigns, can help ground educational content in concrete action. Voluntary sector organisations may play an important role in shaping and supporting the action-end of this continuum.

Finally, greater attention to and recognition of the many ways of effectively engaging as citizens – participating in public (and private) debates, disseminating information on key social issues, promulgating or signing online petitions, participating in local organisations and community projects, voting in formal elections – can help make clear that civic and political engagement is multifaceted and normative, and can shape an understanding of the potential benefits of participation. It is also flexible, with the possibility of more or less active engagement based on interest and proclivity. Not all young people (as, indeed, not all adults) will be highly active citizens, but all should at least be aware of their rights to participation, be knowledgeable about the way the world works and the potential levers of influence and contribution available to them, and have access to a range of opportunities for engagement should they choose to participate. And while voting is but one important and limited way to engage as citizens, the bright line demarcating full citizenship as represented by the right to vote creates a false barrier between youth and citizenship. And, to the extent the determination of the age of enfranchisement is seen as arbitrary and disempowering, as the young people we spoke with suggest, it creates a disincentive for engagement among youth even as they reach the age of majority. Lowering the voting age to sixteen, in combination with the suggestions outlined above, may go a long way to promoting interest and incentive among young people to engage in civic and political life.

RESPONDING TO IDEOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL TENSIONS

Our analysis identified some fundamental tensions that shape the nature of engagement efforts. They also condition the extent to which youth engagement strategies succeed in promoting the participation of young people, how and the degree to which young people do engage, and the likely impact of their engagement. These include a tension between more formal and informal strategies and contexts and between a focus on more service-oriented civic engagement strategies and those that emphasise political and social action.

These tensions raise fundamental questions about the policy goals behind the rhetoric of youth engagement, and about what different efforts that seek to promote their engagement are about. 'Engagement' can mean many things, and various efforts to promote youth engagement focus, in the event if not the rhetoric, on different goals. While some policies focused on engaging young people dislocated from school and work (so-called NEETs) in England and Northern Ireland, for example, embrace the language of civic engagement, their focus is largely on engagement in employment and training, seeking to support young people to fulfil particular aspects of what might be called a civic duty to contribute to social functioning and harmony through work, self-sufficiency, and a successful transition to adulthood. These are important goals, but they represent a relatively narrow view of civic engagement and largely steer clear of nurturing the capacity and expectation for these young people to exercise their rights and responsibilities as political as well as civic actors, both of which are part of citizenship.

That said, several of the organisations whose work we learned about that involve these populations, as well as others such as young offenders, incorporate a significant focus on citizenship more broadly, engaging young people in critical discussion and deliberation, enhancing their understanding of institutional and political processes, building their confidence and capacity to organise and engage with decision-makers, and sometimes providing opportunities to represent their interests to them. Similarly, more formally organised efforts, such as youth councils and other structured deliberative forums, while principally focused on deliberation and representation, may also provide opportunities for the development of civic projects and social action, and service-oriented efforts that focus on promoting volunteerism can incorporate opportunities for critical deliberation and mobilisation. Whether or not they do so relies to a large extent on the skills and proclivities of those working directly with young people, and on the guidelines, expectations, resources, and degrees of freedom provided by the policies and funding arrangements that support this work. They can mean the difference between promoting efforts that more fundamentally empower young people versus those that are more oriented towards conformity and social control. 'Engagement' in this context needs to strive to promote the participation of young people beyond seeking their integration into the workforce and non-problematic interaction in their communities. This is particularly important given the current sociopolitical environment, in which populist regimes that embrace authoritarianism are on the rise in a number of countries, challenging many of the fundamental norms and remaking the institutions established to promote and protect democracy. Seriously engaging young people in ways that affirm their rights, promote their understanding and capacity to critically assess and respond to social and political challenges, and empower them to act can provide an important bulwark against an encroaching democratic deficit.

ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES

Finally, there may be fundamental limitations to policies seeking to promote youth civic and political engagement that need to be addressed beyond the boundaries of participatory schemes that engage them. Young people face many challenges and competing pressures. The day-to-day lives of marginalised youth and those living in disadvantaged circumstances, in particular, face significant challenges that need to be addressed if they are to have the opportunity to perform as, and receive the benefits of, full and equal members of society. Beyond promulgating participatory opportunities for consultation, deliberation, volunteerism, and social action – all of which are important – attention needs to be paid to the structural inequalities that shape disadvantage and constrain participation among the most marginalised. This includes equity in the distribution of resources, access to high-quality education, opportunities for social and economic mobility, and addressing institutionalised discriminatory practices that put young people who are poor, from ethnic minority backgrounds, living with disabilities, experiencing homelessness, in care, or involved in the justice system, for example, at significant disadvantage and close them off from the opportunities that do exist to be meaningfully engaged in civic and political life.

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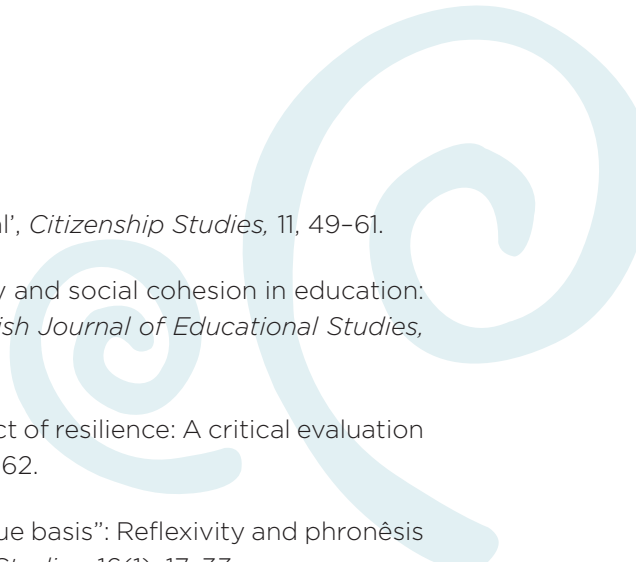
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Appendix 1: Overview of Actors, Roles, and Relationships Based on Stakeholder Interviews

Participants' views on the roles and relationships between different actors in relation to civic and political engagement of marginalised youth highlight a variety of perspectives about the role of government and its policy, schools, and community- and youth-oriented organisations. The following commentary is a summative illustration of the themes emerging in relation to actors, roles, and responsibilities to give further insight into the different views on who should be responsible for leadership in relation to youth engagement. The differences in approaches, depending on the actors, are also of interest to note.

With regard to the role of government, the dominant themes discussed are:

- differences in agenda between government and community sector
- resources and bureaucracy
- government intentions
- importance of working in partnership between the government and the community sector.

With regard to the role of schools and education policy, the most dominant themes from stakeholders were:

- importance of the role of schools and education in relation to promoting civic engagement
- role of facilitating and enabling youth engagement through policy development and implementation
- role of schools related specifically to the impact of educational disadvantage on civic and political engagement
- positive impact on engagement of marginalised young people that school can have
- importance of working in partnership with the community and voluntary sector.

With regard to the role of the voluntary and community sector, the main themes discussed were:

- views about how young people are connected to their civic and political context, with an emphasis on identity, leadership, and citizenship
- how much efforts are focused on challenging the status quo and promoting political engagement versus more community-oriented civic engagement through social support activities
- views about the perceived role in promoting the right to participation and engagement, and issues arising specifically for marginalised young people to acquire these rights
- the role of supporting families within communities
- the need to critically frame issues around engagement within wider contexts of social structural disadvantage and societal inequality.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN IMPLEMENTING NATIONAL AND SUPRANATIONAL POLICY

Respondents generally viewed government as the mechanisms through which national and supranational policy was implemented with a role of capacity building to deliver on these policies through existing statutory and voluntary/community mechanisms. This came up mostly with regard to Belfast and Dublin respondents. As a youth worker in Belfast commented:

> I [do still] think the government have a role to make sure that in a democracy that they want to have the voice of young people heard, they have to pay for that, that it is not all about pushing it out to the third sector to say, 'It is up to you now to make sure that you provide this', that they recognise that. But I also do think there is a role of building that structure, of people mobilising for themselves and doing some of that. So the network or how that would work would be really good.

The **difference in 'agendas'** from government and community sector was expressed often in terms of government being more conservative or 'prescribed', or conversely, the voluntary and community sector being more proactive in terms of working 'against the State'. Generally government is expressed more in terms of a top-down approach that is often at odds with the principles and practices of youth work and deemed to be more prescriptive:

> There is a top-down approach which again is coming from government. Where I feel CDYSB should represent the youth workers and the young people, I feel the table has turned where you have all these organisations in the middle and the people who run them, and instead of us being agencies we are becoming agents of the State, we are becoming arms of the State.

The difference in ideology between State and community sector was articulated as part of this narrative. The government was perceived to have a more liberal or neo-liberal narrative of what participation was. Linked to this, a concern about a different and more narrow focus from a government perspective was expressed by respondents in all three cities. For example, a Belfast respondent commented:

> I just think that the way things work at the moment, the terms of reference within which we are working are getting narrower and narrower and narrower, and that is because they are very much being driven from a statutory perspective. And when the statutory service talks about youth work, they talk about educational outcomes in terms of GCEs, in terms of exams, so that is where youth work is getting pushed. It is getting pushed. . . . Yeah, I think that is as simple as it is, youth work is getting driven down the road, where the outcome is all about exam results, whereas we see it as more holistic.

The second major theme discussed was that of **resources,** both in terms of the scarcity of funding and the bureaucracy often involved in securing resources. This was expressed with regard to lack of resources at an organisational level and a sense of consultation fatigue in relation to government engagement with community organisations. One respondent described this as being like 'a sense of the government isn't listening, a sense of we are the community, there to follow; the government is there to lead'. The challenge of actually getting resources was discussed mostly in the context of bureaucracy. This was mentioned by many respondents and reflected the following viewpoint:

> They create this incredible bureaucratic monitoring, the ties, project managers and middle managers, and even workers rigidly in to try and fit things into square boxes that really drives workers on the ground mad, because they are all the time thinking, Does this fit with our funding, or if I do this will it be outside the funding and will somebody come and challenge us? So they are not allowed to actually choose their job in the responsive way they would like to.

The third theme centres on specific critiques of **government intentions** in relation to supporting disadvantaged communities; the mismatch between policy and impact on community groups and marginalised populations was explored especially by Dublin respondents. Reflecting on a government process of investing in two nearby community projects, who were 'pitted against each other', a Dublin youth work respondent commented:

> If we want to work and have meaningful participation with people who are being marginalised, we need to redistribute not just the wealth but the power, because that is not what is happening. We are intervening all the time, but all our interventions are based around. . . . As youth groups, youth groups are being given more and more mandates, more and more control, so instead of as opposed to being turned from agencies to agents of the State. So the State is enlisting more and more control over the processes by which we engage with marginalised people.

For this respondent, it is not just about problematising the government agenda in relation to youth engagement but also about understanding how certain working-class communities relate to and have been impacted by the government.

> In our community, when we grew up, our only experience originally of the police, of State, was coming in to cut off the electricity or coming in to cut off the phone or to come in and arrest someone. So you very easily come in and build up a view of what the State represents. So youth work offers something different. . . . The problem is that the government or the State are trying to control more and more so how we engage with young people. So they are not listening to what young people want, really. They are saying it is all about . . . . Like where I come from, a critical and social education standpoint that young people are being discriminated against, young people face inequalities, end of. I mean, I think a lot of the funding that goes into projects that are aimed at participating with young people is about that the problem is just about fixing the young people; it is not so.

The fourth main theme centred on the **importance of partnership working and cooperation** between the government and the community sectors, which was emphasised in many responses across the three cities. For example, referring to the Young Mayor in London, the importance of having the backing of the Mayor's Office to support the work was emphasised. Reference to Comhairle in Dublin was likewise described in terms of partnership by a policy respondent. The nature of this relationship is described by a Dublin respondent as follows:

> Yeah, they are not necessarily about youth work or youth work organisations but young people and those who work with them, which could be a lot of people; it could be schools, in theory. It is voluntary – I should have said that at the start – when you have got these people who participate in our work voluntarily, it is a very important point: it has got to be about that social development, and it has got to be about that critical journey

to adulthood. So there are certain things that we see as youth work that the government will say, Yeah we are happy enough with that. But we are doing other things too. We are about work with young people, as opposed to youth work – a very subtle distinction but certainly one that we see.

ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS IN RELATION TO SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION POLICY

A major emphasis was placed by respondents on the **importance of the role of schools and education in promoting civic engagement.** In London and Belfast particularly, the increased emphasis on non-subject-related teaching and focus on civic engagement in recent years was emphasised, as this quote illustrates:

> I think right through from schools, there is an opportunity there to not just educate our children to be intelligent, or have an intelligence, but to help them be socially and civically aware. Help them to be rounded people, not just smart people.

The promotion of civic engagement through schools was deemed to be less well developed in the Irish system, with one Dublin respondent describing it as 'anything but child-friendly'. Linked to this, the disconnect between the structure of schools and the lack of space for critical thinking was highlighted by another respondent:

> Again, you can't work in a vacuum either, so the formal education system encourage that way of thinking, and I think again if there is a real eagerness on behalf of the State, the government, to encourage a more proactive, critical thinkers from communities like this, well then there would be a real effort in terms of the education system as well and something that feeds out then into a young person's social time. And again that is not really there.

Overall, there was a view expressed in responses about the need for government to use schools and education more extensively to **facilitate and enable youth engagement through policy development and implementation.** A barrier to this included the 'individual focus' of schools and the need for reform in the education system. A related issue identified was the need to **differentiate activity according to the age group of children and the different developmental requirements depending on level.** The developmental role of civic engagement work is captured well in this comment from a Belfast respondent:

> But that is why it goes back to what I was saying about schools that have an opportunity when children are younger, eight or nine, right through to thirteen or fourteen to influence. . . . Influence isn't really the right word, but support them to understand how they can develop.

The need to be particularly aware of young people who have been marginalised within schools or had bad experiences and thus negative connotations was emphasised by a Dublin respondent:

> We go and we do the consultations with children; we had to do some of them in schools because the kids were so small they wouldn't bring them out. But we try if possible not to work with children in schools, because it is contraindicated in the literature, because for a child for whom school is not a good experience, you are looking to hear what children think about something, it is not a good place to do it.

The second major theme discussed in relation to the **role of schools related specifically to the impact of educational disadvantage on civic and political engagement.** Respondents from Dublin and London in particular commented on the role the school had in addressing the impact of educational disadvantage on the capacity for young people to participate. There seemed to be general consensus that greater disadvantage – social or educational – led to less potential, opportunity, or capacity to have experience of civic and political engagement. The comment from this London respondent reflects this:

> We can float around the edges and try and give people access and skills and belief in themselves, but at the end of the day, if you can't afford to get to London to go to Prime Minister's Questions, or you can't afford to go to a good university, or you don't feel that you can afford to, or you don't feel you have the right to get into somewhere that good, you are always just going to be floating around the edges.

The potential role of the school to have a **positive impact on improving engagement of disadvantaged young people** was highlighted. For example, a Dublin policy respondent noted:

> Schools would be an obvious place to have very vibrant programmes in terms of building children's capacities around active citizenship, around children and young people's involvement in school decision-making, and so on and so forth. It is a perfect place for children and young people to develop the knowledge, the skills, the confidence, the competencies, and the experience of participation.

But the limit on the scope of the school was noted as a major constraint, again by a Dublin respondent:

> I think there is a huge element of the education system that misses out on giving young people the opportunity to discover what social and reality is, after and beyond school. Life does go on after school whether you finish it or whether you drop out. I think young people don't know their rights, they still don't know their rights; they may tell you that they understand their basic needs need to be met, and that is one of the rights they are aware of – 'Okay, I need to be fed and have shelter over my head' – and the whole thing around homelessness has highlighted that, I think, a little bit more.

The third main theme discussed related to **work in partnership between schools and the voluntary and community sector.** Many respondents provided good examples of cooperation between schools and the youth/community sector and showed the role that this collaboration could potentially play in promoting greater engagement of marginalised youth people in civic and political life. For example, a London youth work respondent described how three different faith groups cooperated to go to speak to students in a school together. Another London respondent discussed practices of working with schools to raise awareness and break down barriers. Where tensions were noted, they centred on different views on the role of education versus youth work and the fact that school was compulsory and youth work voluntary. The core difference in the nature and purpose of formal education vis-à-vis youth work was a recurring theme. As explained by a government official in Belfast:

> The Department of Education is responsible for youth work in Northern Ireland, and they carried out this consultation called Priorities for Youth when they were trying to develop the latest youth work strategy. . . . And in that report there was a very strong sense of

youth work providers not seeing their job as part of the formal education system and not doing what formal education system prioritises, which I think would be more of that citizenship civic engagement type stuff. They felt that very much their work should be focused on personal and social development and social inclusion – that is the phrase they would use for that kind of working with disengaged or disaffected young people.

VOLUNTARY SECTOR ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS – COMMUNITY LEVEL

Many respondents discussed the role of community-level actors and youth organisations to specifically enable and promote young people's capacity for political engagement. A number of themes emerged from this.

Regarding the first theme, relating to the **context of youth engagement,** generally the potential for promoting engagement was seen as lying within local rather than national political contexts, and within a community context. One of the challenges in promoting engagement at this level was identified as young people's sense of not belonging as citizens connected to the political 'system'. For example, this comment about London captures this issue:

So the way that we describe citizenship, I think there is a particular group amongst young people that do feel like they are not part of Britain, they don't feel like they are citizens, they don't feel like they need to take part. But what we try to explain is that politics and everything that you encounter is part of that civic duty that you talk about and which we talk about, public life; that is part of engaging with the knowing your neighbourhood issues.
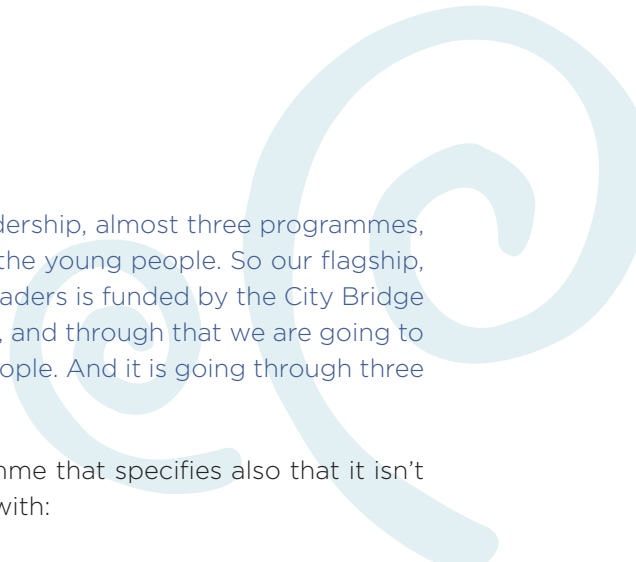
The responsibility of the community and voluntary sector to promote and enhance this sense of citizenship was discussed by many respondents across the three cities. The following statement captures viewpoints from London respondents as an example:

Citizenship is what we think about, in terms of the young people we work with, is being able to play an active role in society, so that is working, or maybe more so democratic processes, but working, caring about their community, volunteering in their community, highlighting the issues in their community, and knowing how to bring about change to those things. So using their voice to make a difference is what we would say in what we do as an active citizen.

With regard to how to foster a sense of identity in promoting citizenship, the need for local leadership was emphasised in the three cities with regard to ensuring local structures are in place as well as processes of community organisation that link young people to specific issues, institutions, and community:

And what I think community organising does is it links young people through their issues and through their institutions closer to their community and therefore British society. And therefore teaches them why it is important and what place they can have in it.

Specific examples of leadership programmes were discussed in this context. For example, in London the City Leaders project was discussed:

> Two of our programmes are very much based on leadership, almost three programmes, I suppose, are based on boosting leadership skills of the young people. So our flagship, largest programme is called City Leaders, and City Leaders is funded by the City Bridge Trust. So from the City of London, just down the road, and through that we are going to be engaging thirty clubs and three hundred young people. And it is going through three stages: team, club, and community.

In Dublin also, reference was made to a leadership programme that specifies also that it isn't necessarily something all young people would be involved with:

> For instance our leadership programme . . . gets young people active in their own community, again a certain type of young person, let me be clear on this; there is young people I could not engage in that programme. So there is programmes out there where they can just become aware of who they are in their community and the role they could play within their own community.

Underpinning the strong emphasis on youth citizenship is the fact that children and young people are so central to communities and a challenge to attitudes that portrayed young people in a negative sense (e.g., the older community think of them only as a problem). This came across strongly in many of the responses, such as the following quote from a Belfast respondent:

> Children are much more part of the community than adults, really. They are in the community more, they use the facilities more, they are on the streets more because there is nowhere else for them to go. They have really valid points to make, really valid things to say, but I am not entirely sure there is anybody listening.

The second main theme on the role of actors in the community and voluntary sector related to **the extent to which participation and engagement were framed in terms of 'non-political social action' as opposed more overt political engagement.** There was much variation in the views on this matter, depending on the respondent's view of the role, purpose, and potential of organisations to promote civic and political engagement. Some respondents suggested that their actions were more about promoting engagement in social rather than political action, though the line between this overlaps:

> We wouldn't try and push people towards any sort of political activity. It would be more about social action projects and development, stuff like that, and their civic responsibility and their community responsibility and a sense of belonging to their community.

Others noted the tendency to avoid wider political engagement and focus more on community and civic engagement activities. This comment from a London respondent captures this:

> Anything that might imply a challenge to the state, I think, is not so welcome at the moment. But anything that is 'Let me go and help my Aunt Bertha to look after herself so she doesn't have to go into A&E' is really where they are thinking and envisaging it.

The importance of an inclusive approach to community was emphasised by a London respondent:

> So one thing we always say we will try to do for every single thing we ever plan to do is intersectionality, is make sure whatever we do is not segregated to one community or work for a specific community.

The contested nature of 'community' was also highlighted, for example in London:

> I think the people, in my experience, over the last twenty years, the organisations and the people that really make a difference are the ones who are really rooted in those communities and those who have a local traction. Which is why we only work in those four cities where we have been asked to set up and work. And that is why our partnership approach is there.

In Belfast, one respondent captured this as follows:

> It is actually a love–hate relationship with your community, because the fact is that they love the close-knitness of it, but they hate how it can isolate them at the same time.

The third theme, relating to **the role of the community and voluntary sector to promote engagement, was also expressed with regard to rights.** Overall, respondents were very clear about their core role in promoting participation and noted the diverse interpretation of this concept to incorporate personal and civic development and participation. When consider political engagement, the need to ensure this does not spill into promoting specific political viewpoints or political recruitment is noted as important. The need to have a less paternalistic view of young people's potential contribution and for a change of paradigm underpins many responses. The responsibility to promote young people's right to participate, given their own limited rights in this sphere, came across strongly from a number of participants. As one London respondent put it:

> They are not adults; they are not treated as equal, and from a political point of view they don't get to vote, so they are not important in the political process and there is very little will to listen to them or follow or do anything in terms of that, because they don't bring in the vote.

Many important themes emerged with regard to the specific role of community-level actors and youth organisations in promoting the rights and interests of marginalised disadvantaged groups. As aptly stated by a Dublin respondent, involvement in a leadership programme through a youth organisation led to consciousness raising and awareness about discrimination and marginalisation:

> They got funding to organise a six-month personal development leadership programme for young Travellers. So I took part; I was one of the first Travellers to be on that programme. . . . And in that six months the training I received and the consciousness raising and being politicised was absolutely remarkable, because it was the first time I became aware. . . . It took somebody outside of our community to come in and get us to take a step back and to be able to think and reflect and critically analyse why things are the way they are. Because this is a genuine fact, and it is true of me and it is true of others – we thought things were normal, we didn't know any different. So in other words it was intergenerational racism, intergenerational poverty, intergenerational

unemployment, intergenerational no education attainment passed down from your great-great-grandparents, right down. So you didn't question it, you didn't ask any questions, you didn't see a problem, you would think this was normal.

A fourth theme relates to **the role of community-level actors in supporting families and parents within the community.** This was discussed by many respondents, who emphasised the role of community-level actors and youth organisations supporting local communities, families, and parents. The aim of such engagement was to enable young people to be more 'civically minded and take more actions, whether it is family, community, or whatever scale, then it builds an experience of doing it' (London respondent). As expressed by a Dublin respondent:

Most people want to live in good communities; most people I have ever come across, if you are parents you want what is best for your kids. And in most cases, people are willing to invest in helping that come about. So providing the structures and supports for that to happen is absolutely possible; it just needs investment, it needs time, and it is about investing in people and people's skills and supports. And belief that community is important, which is not always the case.

Within this, the importance of noting diversity of 'community' was highlighted. For example, a London respondent commented:

There is something as well about attachment to place, and as a borough we have all these different communities, new migrants, second-generation, and what you want is everybody to feel attached to the place, because that is what makes a cohesive community, and in order to do that some people have to be encouraged to participate more so than others.

Linked to this, encouraging community groups and councils to ensure young people are included in community planning and development, and avoiding an overly 'adult-focused' approach, was emphasised in a number of responses. For example, a Belfast respondent argued:

If you are working in a geographical community with young people, the citizenship is different, and you are trying to nurture that relationship with adults in the community and intergenerational relationships. . . . We would work along with local councils, and with local councils we are trying to help them think about community planning. So often they go about their community planning in a very adult-focused way. . . . So we try to work along with councils to try and look at complementary ways of engaging young people which is more young-people-centred, young people ownership, young-people-friendly.

The knock-on effect of youth engagement work on families is expressed in the following quote from a Belfast youth work respondent.

And another thing I will show you is from a parent who talked about the impact of our work, the impact that our work had on her son, and how that then was like the pebble in the water for the family. His positive behaviour became a positive behaviour within the family, and how that then goes out into the community and how people become more involved. And that young person that the mother talked about, and it is in our goals evaluation impact report, he is now a positive role model, and he now has a trade, and he has just taken on someone from our programme who is a younger person as an apprentice.

A fifth major theme arising in the discussions related to **the importance of problematisation of the impact of social structural issues such as housing, employment, and welfare on young people's engagement.** As one London respondent put it: 'There is no point in having elaborate structures improving the civic attitude of young people if they are pissed off from that fundamental part of their lives.' The complex relationship between State and communities who experience marginalisation is expressed in various ways by respondents. For example, the question of how much government and policy really wish to empower the disadvantaged was raised, as shown in the following quote relating to Belfast:

> And the other thing probably that is important in this conversation, because it is important for the voice of young people, is that they were afraid of working-class communities empowering themselves. So with that almost comes that sense that you are too left-wing, you are too socialist, too communist, you are rising up, all of that; there was big fear around that in Northern Ireland and as communities began to empower themselves that they would begin to challenge the status quo.

A similar point is made in relation to policies in Dublin, specifically policies on engaging marginalised communities in this instance:

> So the idea of community development or youth work in Ireland is to work with people who have been marginalised and ask them what the issues are, what are the problems facing them. And then I suppose go through a process of allowing people to discover for themselves, a bit of conscious[ness] raising. And that has been de-powered over the last while. They basically said in the process of alignment, which was sold, it was a bit of a Trojan horse; it was sold to communities as something that would give back local power to local people. What it has done is it has transferred power over to local government, which are unelected, which have more power and have more control, which aren't interested in what local communities are saying.

Again on this theme, a critical awareness of the complexity of community and youth engagement is reflected in the respondents' discussions. For example, with regard to Belfast, the following statement captures this:

> One of the things that came through in the evaluation for example was that a number of young people communicated that they were very switched off from engaging with their community because of influences in their community that they didn't want to get tied up, or they had got tied up with and extricated themselves, and they didn't want to get tied up again. There were barriers there to a certain kind of engagement locally.

The connection between marginalisation, disadvantage, and criminality also arises in this critical discussion – regarding Dublin in the following quote, but reflecting a concern in all cities:

> We advocate on behalf of young people, and we challenge the structures that discriminate, but we also take part in situations where there are some young people, there is not a youth worker approach with these kids, they have gone too far in criminality. And around here there are criminals, they are in a gang, there is loads of stuff that is related to a feud as well. So some of our kids are cousins, and there is all sorts of connections there. So we engage in policy debates about young people and particularly around policing.

CONCLUDING POINTS

As reflected in the main research findings report and the policy review, the role of promoting youth civic and political engagement is one shared by the government, the education system, and the community and voluntary sector. The importance of work in partnership across the sectors to enhance youth engagement, and the need to recognise and resource the particular challenges for young people who are marginalised and disadvantaged, are emphasised. In all instances, engagement at the level of the individual, their family, and their local community is of significance. Each stakeholder has a particular role to play, and it is expected that differences on viewpoint, intention, and approach will exist between the different main stakeholders. Diversity within each core domain of education, government policy, and community and voluntary action is also important to emphasise and recognise, as illustrated in this summary and in the main report.

UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre
Institute for Lifecourse and Society
Upper Newcastle Road
National University of Ireland Galway
Ireland

T. +353 91 495398
E. cfrc@nuigalway.ie
W: www.nuigalway.ie/childandfamilyresearch
Twitter: @UNESCO_CFRC
Facebook: ucfrc.nuig