

By Louise Close, Marina McConville and Karin McKinty

In April the Committee approached the Engagement and Education Services to develop a series of projects in order to better understand adverse impact of lockdown and school restart on the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people issue by hearing directly from a wide range of children and young people.

Three different projects were developed targeting a range of age groups and backgrounds.

The first project saw the engagement service deliver two stakeholder events for over 16s which provided young people the opportunity to share their views on the impact lockdown, school closures and restarts have had on their learning, emotional wellbeing and mental health.

For the first event any young person over 16 was able register to attend. The event was promoted via youth organisations and through a digital campaign on the Assembly's social media platforms. The second event took place for young refugees and asylum seekers and was in partnership with the Red Cross, Barnardos and Extern. In preparation for the event, Red Cross engaged with young people from Somalia, Syria and Sudan who arrived through family reunification in NI. Barnardo's and Extern engaged with Syrian young people who arrived through Refugee Resettlement -Syrian Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) in NI

For the second project the education service held SCHOOL BASED ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS which invited a number of schools to participate in a focus group activity on the topic.

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The final project, 'MY LIFE AND LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN' ARTS PROJECT, was an opportunity for young people to showcase their views, through the arts. We wanted to hear from young people of all ages and therefore they could submit their ideas through a wide range of mediums including art, photography, poetry or a short story.

Young people with various degrees of interrupted education and experience of formal education or English language were invited to attend pre-engagement meetings. Participants' experience of education- school or FE colleges were varied with some young people yet, unable to access appropriate education.

### **What was the most difficult thing about lockdown and what did you miss most?**

- Friends/ family in person/Socialising/Meeting new people
- A combination of uncertainty and lack of motivation left young people feeling they were in limbo.
- Lack of mental health support and support for school and peers. Home schooling was hard, no guidance from school, participating on zoom was hard. Learning online- really hard as no English language and no language support (interpreters). Did not understand the online classes
- Sport and extra circular activities, residential
- Missed structured days/weeks
- Not enough devices at home which stressed us more
- No printers at home. Have to go to school for print outs and that clashed with submission date which meant we submitted it too late

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- They then suddenly returned to school only for immediate exam overwhelm – beginning on the first or second day back, often more than one exam a day
- They spoke of never-ending, moving goalposts  
Those from the refugee and asylum seeker event also mentioned
- No education-arrived as part of family reunification in Dec 2020- unable to get a school place or college place
- New to NI-nowhere to go, familiarise myself with Belfast or area.  
No sightseeing

**Were there any benefits from lockdown and what did you most look forward to after lockdown ended?**

- On the plus side, many felt that lockdown provided an opportunity to slow down, reflect, realised they had been taking things for granted

*I learned to take more opportunities and to be more social as now more than ever the future is extremely uncertain and you never know when you'll have that opportunity again, for example you could be told to isolate the next day.*

- some young people said they felt more confident in themselves; they had had some room to grow during lockdown, time to work on

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themselves, to improve their own mental health. There was some stability that came from less exposure to the influence of other people.

- One young man with autism expressed that he felt virtual teaching created equality as he was on an equal standing as the more confident young people.
- *I learned to take more opportunities and to be more social as now more than ever the future is extremely uncertain and you never know when you'll have that opportunity again, for example you could be told to isolate the next day.*
- They felt some of these experiences had changed them for the better. They chose which people to keep in contact with and were able to step back and take a break from normal pressures.
- Some young people found new hobbies, joined new groups and got involved in projects. They had space for activism, eg black lives matter.

*I got to know my family a bit more and felt more closer to them during lockdown compared to a normal day, there was a lot of opportunities to do things I normally couldn't do or had time with like finishing my books or practicing hobbies*

- Spending time with family
- More sleep, no commute to school, being able to work at own pace

They looked forward to:

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- Normality, socialising with friends/family/youth groups
- Less screen time
- Shops reopening

## **How did your school or the government support your mental health and wellbeing during lockdown, if at all?**

The young people came out heavily in favour of family, friends and youth organisations who had given them emotional support, but felt that schools and the government were less helpful. For example, VOYPiC, Rainbow, Red Cross and BMC were commended by several young people. MLAs were praised too for work in their local areas handing out hampers.

They said there was a real lack of information from school and government.

The support varied greatly with many saying they had very little or none at all. If there were initiatives many felt they were tokenistic – thoughts for the day, youtube videos or pamphlets

Similarly, school assemblies might promote messages such as “don’t be depressed”. The young people didn’t find this helpful and would have liked to co-create messages that were more relevant to pupils.

A lot of the young people agreed that when they asked for help, they found adults tried to invalidate them: they didn’t act quickly or as though the issue was important; they started to explain why a problem was not a problem, instead of offering help or solutions.

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Though some did say that although Systemic mental health support was non-existent from school, individual teachers were sometimes helpful eg regular mental health check-ins by a teacher – How are you doing? How is your week going? It wasn't all about work.

*No, it was so stressful, I thought about returning to my country where I had friends*

Some young people did praise their school however saying it was extremely good in keeping contact with the students and making sure they were ok and providing us with different helplines and numbers they could contact. One school organised a couple of Action Mental Health sessions, others created Mental health and wellbeing ambassadors within school council. A student from Queen's University said that they had access to 6 counselling sessions if they needed them.

A common thread throughout all the rooms was the lack of access to counsellors, from funding to knowledge of how to access the services.

The EA 'Stay Connected' was praised by the young people and the big uptake was noted, however the young people did say that not all were aware of it.

In terms of learning, there seemed to be a real frustration due to the lack of consistency between schools. One young person was taking 3 A-Levels and never had a live, online class during lockdown. He felt very isolated and thought there would be more support and understanding during the second lockdown but this wasn't the case.

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One young person in Sixth Form at a grammar school complained of the huge amount of work expected of them in the second lockdown, with deadlines that were 'undoable' and the school provided no counselling services.

Many felt there was no proper planning. Returning to school, all the emphasis was on the academic side of things. There should have been more 'leeway' when it came to assessments.

*Being completely honest I don't think they helped much at all. It was more of a "we understand this is stressful but it is what it is"*

No support for the for the transition between school and uni/college

**If there are further lockdowns what could the school or government do to support your emotional wellbeing and mental health?**

**What one thing could the school or government do to help you cope with school life now and in the future?**

**Is there anything else the Committee should consider about the impact of lockdown on learning and young people's mental health?**

### **1. Counselling and mental health support**

- Access to counselling was mentioned in all groups.
- Make it easier to access counselling
- Provide confidential support for people who want it that they can access without going through a teacher or guardian. Sometimes they themselves tried to get help with mental health issues, but a

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trusted adult was always required to get a referral and not all of the young people had someone like that in their lives.

- Make mental health professionals more accessible, such as through websites or text messages as a lot of people would even find helplines on the telephone difficult.
- They referenced a proposal for a youth mental health website with a chat facility and said they would be in favour of that.
- They suggested school could organise counselling sessions in which students and teachers discuss ways to support mental health in lockdown, have more mental health days or have time in the school programme for social chats online rather than always having the focus on work.
- A designated teacher to oversee mental health within the school
- More advertising for support and services

## **2. Flexible schooling**

- Consider more flexible school working pattern in the future – hybrid schooling, change in school timetables to allow young people to start later, shorter more frequent breaks, could there be more free time to do extra curricular activities eg sport or art

## **3. The right to a private life**

- encourage teachers to stop posting on google classroom all the time. there is no “off time”

## **4. Learning and exams**

- Ease back into let us get used to it again

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- Postpone all exams for gcse grade students. Others felt exams should go ahead with reduced content.
- A reflection of a young person who had developed new IT and woodwork skills felt there should be less pressure on academic success and work with students more at what they are already good at or passionate about
- Provide schools with more funding to increase the quality of teaching to make up for the loss of learning. Online Facilitation training for teachers.
- Language support to understand classes
- Additional intense ESOL to help bridge the gap to access BMC

## **5. Consistency**

- Ensure there is consistency across schools for home-schooling and equal access to equipment.

## **6. Planning and Consultation**

- Involve us in the decision making involving our future
- A member of the NICCY Youth Panel said that young people had a right to be consulted by government regarding the decisions being made about exams etc. 'Government should act in the best interests of young people.
- Have a space to communicate with the executive about what the issues are and how to solve throughout lockdown
- Plan in advance. We are aware of COVID there is no excuse for lack of planning now. It's been over a year.

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- Make a decision about thing quicker and not chop and change all the time
- Make a firm decision they are willing to stick to based on assessing the current situation and not leaving it at the very last second causing panic and confusion
- Ensure there is language support for those who don't have English as their first language.

## **7. Additional support**

- Extra support in more unique circumstances
- Wifi and digital and other connection
- Provide us with basic Technology
- have better funding for counseling services for local areas or better advertising to show that support is available
- Monitor and confront students who commit major violations of COVID-19 preventative behavioral guidelines.
- Outdoor space and time in nature should be promoted more
- Support food banks more to avoid poverty leading to suicide from poor mental health

## **8. Consideration of the impacts**

- *Just because we're still doing well academically doesn't mean we're not struggling*
- *It can feel like adults don't realise how much it affects us*

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The young people stated here will be groups of young people who may have suffered more than the majority for reasons such as moving on foster care, domestic abuse, death in the family, lower income etc and they should receive an increased amount of support

*Overall just keep in mind that lockdown has left many of us in a fragile mental state, especially those who were struggling prior, and that it make take us a while to return to normal.*

*The impact was massive, and will be an experience that no one will forget and I think the committee should ensure that this is something no children should have to go through again by enforcing protocols so that there is no unnecessary confusion.*

**MY LIFE AND LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN' ARTS PROJECT**, was an opportunity for young people to showcase, through the arts, how they felt lockdown, school closures and restarts has impacted on their lives. We wanted to hear from young people of all ages and therefore they could submit their ideas through a wide range of mediums including art, photography, poetry or a short story.

**72** *Submissions were received from young people aged from 6 to 18 from across Northern Ireland.*

## **Poetry and Prose**

**St. Patrick's College, Dungannon**

**Howard Primary School, Dungannon**

**NYCI-Co-operation Ireland (YouthPact)**

**The poetry and Prose express the fear, frustration, boredom and anxiety young people felt during lockdown.**

**One young person used the opportunity to thank youth worker who supported them, saying that they were supportive, thoughtful, reliable, informative, valiant and energetic and entertaining.**

**And we even have the perspective from one young person wrote their prose from the perspective of their dog and how confusing it was for them... showing it impacted on everyone in their household.**

## **Photos**

**St. Mary's Grammar, Derry**

**Loneliness and detachment from the outside world and the massive impact masks have had on our lives.**

**Brownlow College, Craigavon – Slide 12**

**Edmund Rice College, Glengormley – Slides 13-14**

**EDIT NWTC - Slide 15**

Life and Learning in lockdown: Summary of 2021 issues and artwork

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**Howard Primary School, Dungannon – Slides 16-17**

**St. Ita's Primary School, Belfast – Slides 18-27**

**NYCI/Co-operation Ireland (YouthPact) – Slides 28**

**Independents – Slides 29**

- **Stay inside**
- **Masks**
- **Stay away**
- **Corona**
- **Lockdown**
- **No hugs**
- **Locked doors**
- **Mising friends**

**Fresh Air, park walks, watching movies, friends, home learning,  
google classrooms, baking, homework**