



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

---

10.12.15

# Connections

Youth Mental Health



Erasmus+

## Background

The Northern Ireland Assembly is working on a project called Connections which aims to promote dialogue between MLAs and young people. It is funded by the European funding stream Erasmus+.

The participants have been challenged to investigate an issue of their choice and communicate their findings to Assembly Committees. The group decided to focus on the issue of mental health. They made three short films based around interviews with experts in the field. They then conducted quantitative and qualitative research on this topic. This paper summarises the research undertaken by the young people.

---

## Key Points

### Some points that came out of the survey are:

- 84% of the respondents are aware of mental health services;
- 31% of the respondents feel that schools do not offer enough support;
- 46% of the respondents indicated that mental health is a big issue for young people in their area;
- Only 35% of respondents would feel comfortable contacting a mental health organisation;
- 17% of the respondents would not seek help; and
- 40% of the respondents feel there are not enough services for young people.

### Many of the young people who responded to the open-ended survey questions suggested that:

*There is a need for greater awareness of services available - through advertising and outreach.*

*There is a requirement for greater awareness of mental health issues in society as a whole - through education and training for parents and teachers.*

*Young people want more services and they want them to be easily accessible and informal.*

### Some points that came out of the Focus Groups are:

- Negative influence of drugs in some areas;
- Mixed views as to whether schools provided adequate services;
- Importance of early diagnosis and intervention;
- Problem of stigma and fear of judgement;
- Lack of education around mental health in general and need for more practical, workshop based education in the curriculum;
- More communication need between MLAs and young people;
- Various pressures on young people;
- Make mental health a top priority for government;
- More openness and honesty around mental health; and
- Increase in awareness of services available.

# 1. Methodology

The research involved a survey of schools and youth organisations and a series of focus groups with young people.

Three short films were also made on the topics of:

- Mental health of the community;
- Mental health and schools; and
- Mental Health Services for young people.

Experts in the field were interviewed as a component of making the short films. A list of the people and organisations who contributed to the content of the videos can be found in appendix 1. The three films can be viewed at:

<http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/video-gallery/video/mental-health-community/current-state-mental-health-our-communities>

<http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/video-gallery/video/mental-health-schools/short-film-explores-mental-health-schools>

<http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/video-gallery/video/mental-health-services/role-6-mental-health-services-available-northern-ireland>

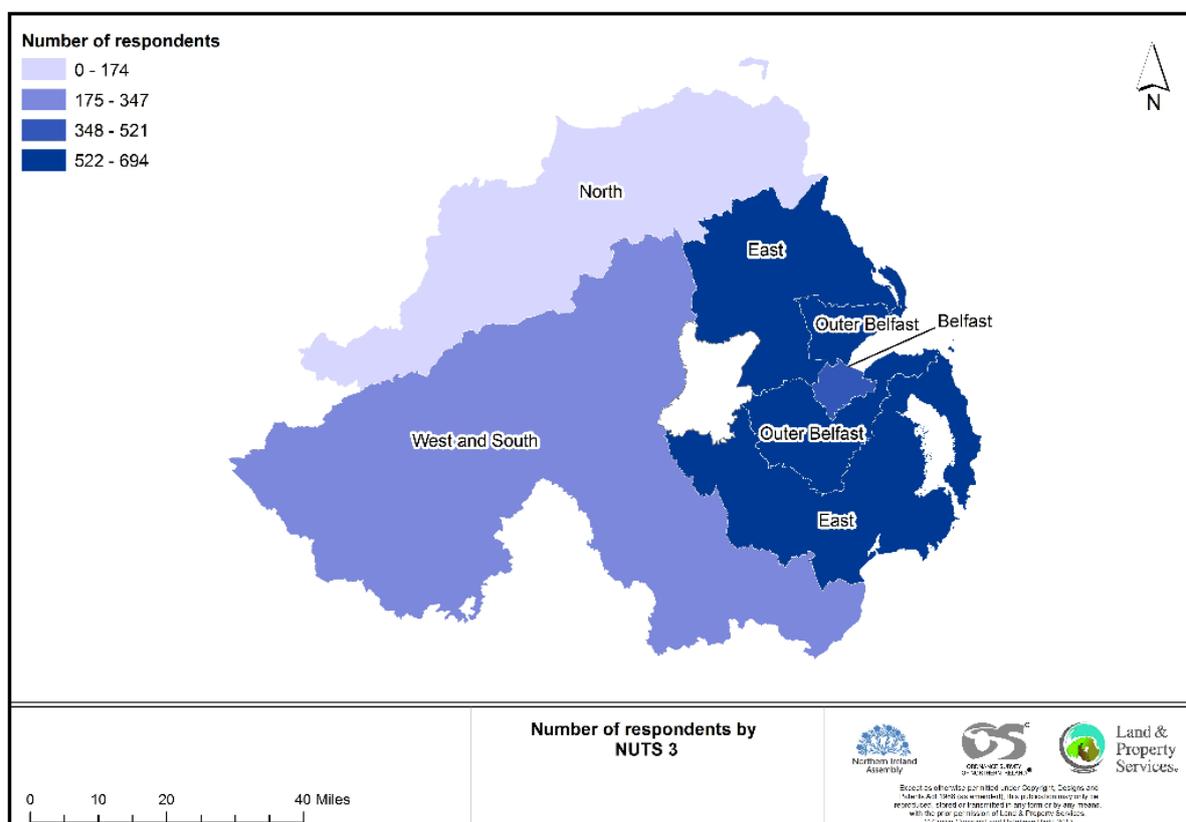


## Survey

The aim of the quantitative survey was to gather information about young people's perspectives on mental health services in Northern Ireland. Interviews with experts in the field helped to inform the design of the questionnaire. The participants designed the survey with support from an Assembly Research Officer.

A total of 2,390 responses from young people aged 11-25 from across Northern Ireland were received. There was a good spread of respondents across Northern Ireland (see map1).

### Map 1: Respondent Distribution



## Focus groups

The qualitative phase of the research aimed to provide more detailed information about the perspectives of young people on mental health issues. The Connections participants led the focus groups after training from Dr Laura Dunne of Queen's University Belfast. Four focus groups were conducted:

- Non-selective controlled post-primary (NSCPP) – Urban;
- Integrated post-primary (IPP) – Rural;
- Maintained post-primary grammar (MG) – Urban; and
- Forum for young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) - Urban.

The focus group sessions concentrated on four broad themes:

1. What does mental health mean to you?
2. If you had a problem who would you ask for help?
3. What stops young people from getting help?
4. What is your message to politicians?

---

## 2. Research Findings

The following section summarises the outcomes of the survey and the focus groups.

### 2.1 Survey Results - Closed questions

#### Help in schools for mental health issues

- The majority of young people who participated in the survey (84%) said they are aware of what help is available in their school, college or university.
- Those at post-primary school (86%) were more likely than those at college (78%) or university (72%) to say that they are aware of what help is available in their education setting.
- 86% of young people said their school, college or university provides a counselling service while 80% said their school, college or university provides a teacher or lecturer responsible for pastoral care.

#### Support offered for young people

- 31% of young people who participated in the survey said they do not think their school offers enough support for young people with mental health issues.
- Males (44%) were more likely than females (28%) to say that their school, college or university offers enough support for young people with mental health issues.
- Catholics (38%) were more likely than Protestants (33%), those with other religions (34%) or those with no religion (32%) to say that their school, college or university offers enough support for young people with mental health issues.

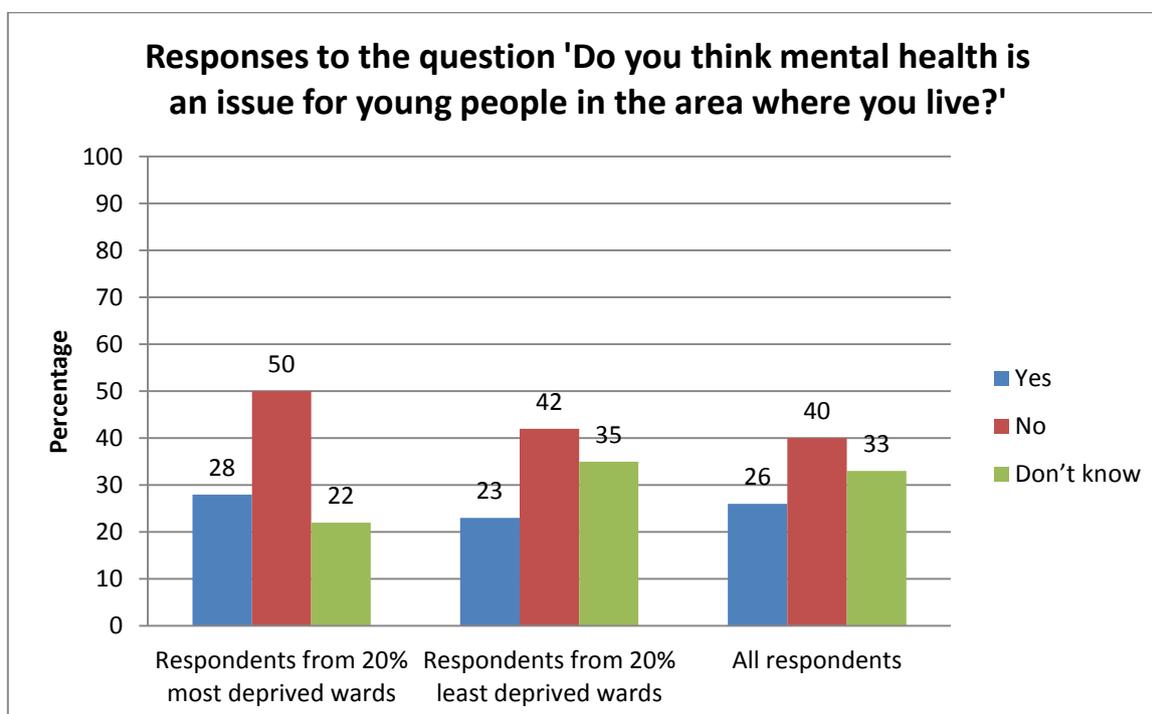
#### Mental health in your area

- 46% of young people who participated in the survey said that they think mental health is a big issue for young people in the area where they live.
- Females (57%) were more likely than males (33%) to say that they think mental health is a big issue for young people in the area where they live.
- Catholics (50%) were more likely than Protestants (42%) to say that they think mental health is a big issue for young people in the area where they live.
- Young people living in urban areas (51%) were more likely than young people living in rural areas (35%) to say that they think mental health is a big issue for young people in the area where they live.
- Young people living in the 20% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland (57%) were more likely to say that they think mental health is a big issue for young people in the

area where they live when compared to those living in the 20% least deprived wards (50%).

- 20% of young people think the area they live in affects their own mental health in a good way; 13% think the area they live in affects their own mental health in a bad way.
- Males (25%) were more likely than females (17%) to say that the area they live in affects their own mental health in a good way.
- Those with no religion (18%) were most likely to say they think the area they live in affects their own mental health in a bad way followed by those with other religions (17%), Catholics (14%). Protestants (10%) were least likely to say that the area they live in affects their own mental health in a bad way.
- Young people living in urban areas (15%) were more likely than those living in rural areas (9%) to think the area they live in affects their own mental health in a bad way.
- Young people living in the 20% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland (17%) were more likely to say that area they live in affects their own mental health in a bad way when compared to those living in the 20% least deprived wards (12%).

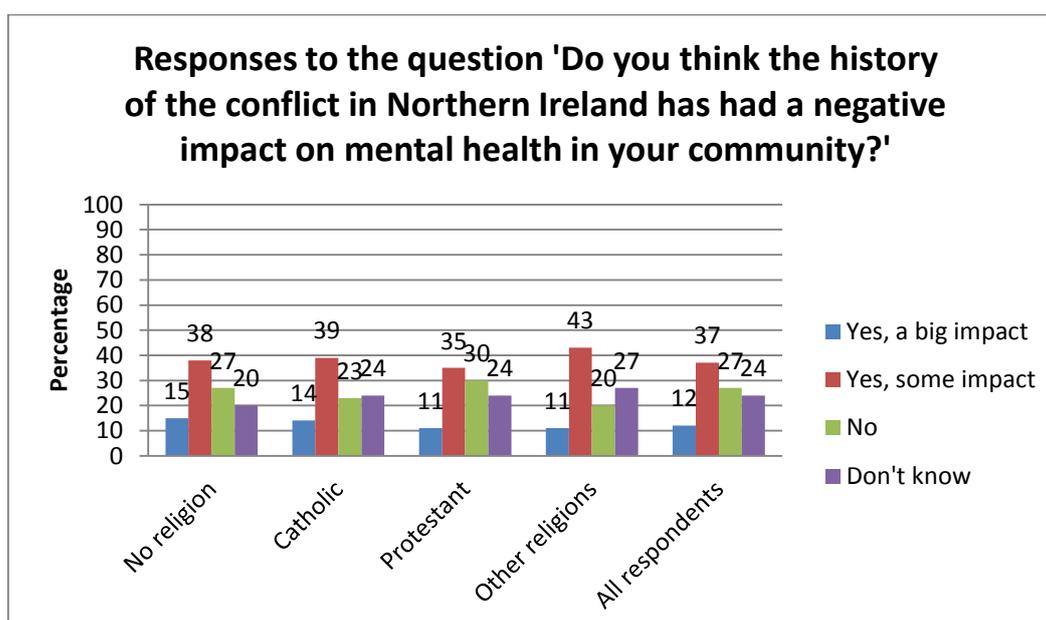
**Figure 1**



## Impact of the history of the conflict (See Figure 2)

- 12% of young people who participated in the survey think the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland has had a big negative impact on mental health in their community while 37% think the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland has had some negative impact on mental health in their community.
- Those with no religion (15%) were most likely to say they think the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland has had a big negative impact on mental health in their community, followed by Catholics (14%). Protestants (11%) and those with other religions (11%) were least likely to say they think the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland has had a big negative impact on mental health in their community.
- Young people living in the 20% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland (19%) were more likely to say they think the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland has had a big negative impact on mental health in their community when compared to those living in the 20% least deprived wards (11%).
- 3% of young people who participated in the survey said they think the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland has had a big negative impact on their own mental health while 13% think the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland has had some negative impact on their own mental health.
- Young people living in the 20% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland (5%) were more likely to say they think the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland has had a big negative impact on their own mental health when compared to those living in the 20% least deprived wards (2%).

**Figure 2**



## Sources of help for young people

- If they had a mental health issue, young people who participated in the survey said they would be most likely to turn to family (77%), a friend (71%), or a health professional (63%). 49% said would turn to a mental health organisation; 36% would turn to a counsellor in their education setting; 23% would turn to an online forum. 17% of young people who participated in the survey wouldn't get help.
- Males (68%) were less likely than females (74%) to turn to their friends for help.
- Males (82%) were more likely than females (73%) to turn to their family for help.
- Protestants (37%) were more likely than Catholics (24%) to turn to a youth leader or youth worker for help. Those with other religions (33%) and Protestants (31%) were more likely than Catholics (17%) to turn to Church for help. Young people with no religion (33%) were more likely than Catholics (23%), Protestants (21%) or those with other religions (21%) to turn to online forums.
- Young people living in rural areas (34%) were more likely than young people living in urban areas (28%) to turn to a youth leader or youth worker.
- Young people living in rural areas (29%) were more likely than young people living in urban areas (19%) to turn to a Church.

## Mental health organisations

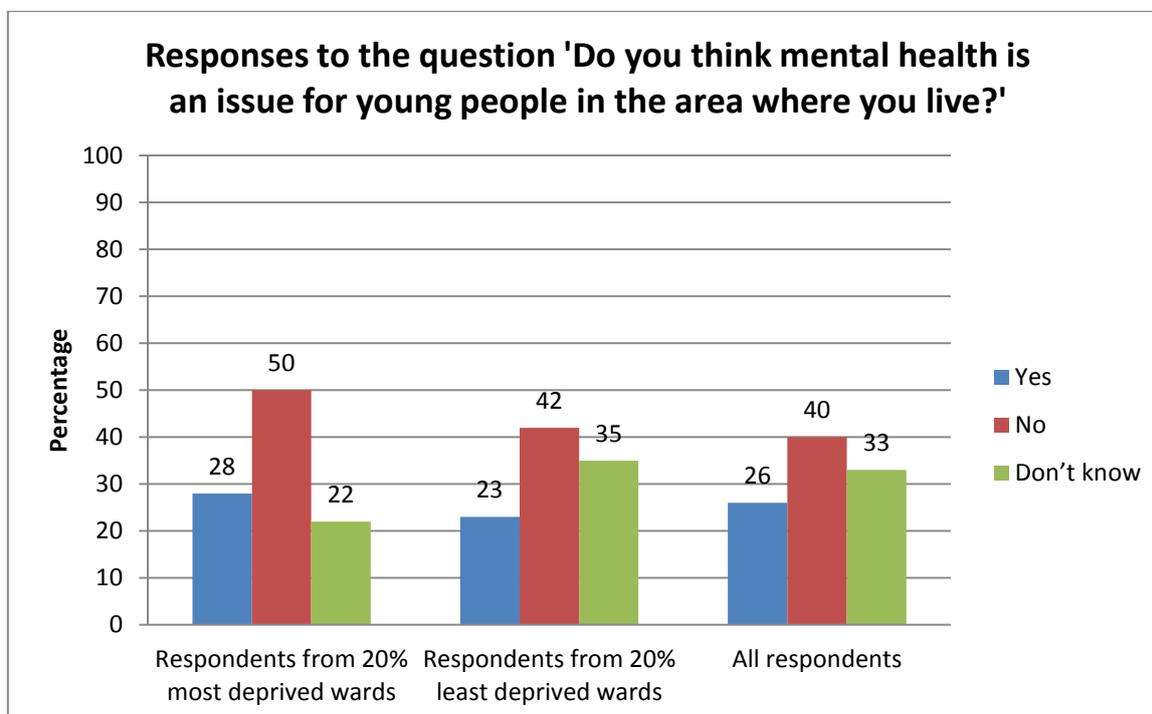
- 95% of young people who participated in the survey said they have heard of Childline; 85% have heard of Lifeline and 72% have heard of Samaritans.
- 35% of young people who participated in the survey said they would feel comfortable contacting a mental health organisation if they had a mental health issue.
- Males (40%) were more likely than females (31%) to feel comfortable contacting a mental health organisation if they had a mental health issue.
- Those with other religions (44%) were more likely than Catholics (37%), those with no religion (36%) or Protestants (33%) to say they would feel comfortable contacting a mental health organisation if they had a mental health issue.

## Mental health services for young people

- 40% of young people who participated in the survey do not feel there are enough mental health services for young people in their area.
- Females (50%) were more likely than males (27%) to say they there are not enough mental health services for young people.

- 50% of young people living in the 20% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland said they do not feel there are enough mental health services for young people in their area.

**Figure 3**



## 2.2 Survey Responses- Open Ended Questions

Some broad themes emerged from the open ended survey questions. The following section summarises over 1000 responses focusing themes of:

- Awareness and advertising of mental health services;
- General awareness of mental health issues; and
- Service Accessibility.

### **Awareness and advertising of mental health services**

The main issue which emerged in survey responses was that young people feel that awareness of the mental health services available to young people in Northern Ireland needs to be improved. The respondents suggested a combination of:

- Advertising; and
- Outreach visits to schools, higher education institutions, community organisations, and places of work.

Regarding advertising, the respondents stated that they would like to see more advertising of services on TV, online, on billboards and on the radio. There was also the suggestion that mental health organisations could go door-to-door, deliver leaflets, or hold community talks. Respondents indicated that people should be made aware of:

- What the services do;
- Where they are located; and
- How to access them if needed.

With reference to schools the respondents suggested that:

- Mental health organisations come to schools to talk to pupils;
- Mental health to be a larger part of the curriculum; and
- Young people are educated on self-help and other coping mechanisms for ill mental health.

Education in schools was described as a preventative measure, i.e. educating people on mental health would reduce the requirement for treatment at a later stage. Respondents also argued that educating young people on mental health could help reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues.

According to the respondents, schools could also improve advertising and quality of their own mental health services such as in-house counsellors or pastoral care arrangements.

For some respondents, youth clubs play an important role in developing positive mental health. It was suggested that they offer activities that contribute to positive mental health.

### **General Awareness of Mental Health Issues**

The respondents demonstrated a broad desire to see a greater awareness of mental health across society, including moves to remove the stigma around ill mental health. Some respondents stated that they would like to see ill mental health treated as seriously by general society as ill physical health. The respondents emphasised the importance of:

- Education;
- Training for parents, i.e. coping strategies; and
- Training for teachers - identifying issues and providing support for young people.

### **Accessibility to Mental Health Services**

A large number of the young people commented that mental health services need to be more accessible to them. They suggested that mental health services should be more welcoming, easier to get to and less formal. Suggestions included online chats, new facilities with relaxed settings, and peer support.

Waiting times were seen as a problem for young people responding to the survey. Some respondents stated that people were being turned away due to lack of capacity.

Many of the respondents suggested that more localised services would make them more accessible. Some commented on a centralisation of services in Belfast which does not sufficiently serve rural communities.

Some respondents stated that they would like to see more peer support as part of the services on offer. It was suggested that this could involve people who have experienced ill mental health supporting other people. Some comments suggested that that it would be easier for people to open up to someone around the same age, or who had been in a similar

“If workshops and educational programmes were provided both by young people for young people that treated the issue with delicacy... more young people would be able to open up and discuss their mental health.”

situation as themselves.

Many respondents would like to see a greater number of online services. Some indicated that being able to make appointments online, or being able to communicate with someone via messenger system would be preferable to phoning a hotline.

## 2.3 Findings from Focus Groups

### Theme 1: What does mental health mean to you?

There was general agreement across the focus groups that emotional wellbeing is an important aspect of mental health. Some of the young people emphasised that emotional wellbeing involves the ability to understand emotions and use them to have a positive effect on life. A large portion of the respondents talked about how good mental health means having a positive outlook on life in general.

Many of the young people talked about factors which have a negative influence on mental health. They mentioned:

- Trauma;
- body image;
- stress of life in general;
- the impact of bullying;
- challenging family situations;

- difficulty learning, which leads to stress;
- social media pressure and trolling;
- peer pressure and pressure to succeed;
- exams;
- relationships;
- the ignorance of others / lack of understanding; and
- worrying about lots of little things.

The respondents from the non-selective controlled post-primary school stressed the negative influence of drugs in their community and the effect that it has on the mental health of young people. It is worth noting that this school is located in an urban environment, in one of the more deprived wards in Northern Ireland.

Some of the young people interviewed in the NEET forum suggested that mental health wasn't always taken seriously by the general public. One of the students from this group commented that mental health means different things to different people but there was a general agreement that it affects all aspects of people's lives.

Depression was mentioned as being a common cause of mental ill-health by several of the respondents in the Integrated post primary school. However, no other clinical conditions were mentioned by any of the respondents in any of the other groups.

## **Theme 2: If you had a problem who would you ask for help?**

There was a dramatic difference between the responses to this question, depending on the group interviewed.

The Non-Selective Controlled Post Primary respondents were universally positive about the counselling service available in school. They commented on the good relationships between pupils and teachers and felt confident that they could approach teachers in privacy about problems. They described a proactive approach to mental health in school and were proud of the measures in place. The students indicated that they are aware of services delivered by Prevention of Suicide and Self Harm (PIPS).

**'We have teachers we can trust and we all know what to do if we need help.'**

The Maintained Grammar respondents were less satisfied by the services in school. They talked about a lack of privacy and having little confidence in pastoral care within the school. This group indicated that they were much more likely to seek support from friends than

teachers. They had some knowledge of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

The general consensus of the Post Primary group was that they would seek help from friends and family. The students also expressed dissatisfaction with the support provided at school, the main barrier being lack of teachers they could trust.

**‘No-one makes use of the counsellor at our school-  
there’s no trust’**

The young people in the NEET forum said that they would look towards friends and family for support. This group had little knowledge of support services available. They said that they would welcome more publicity and awareness for support services. It was suggested that, when they were in school, they would not have made use of the counsellor service for fear of being judged. The group advised that mentors with relevant experience would be a valuable form of support.

The young people across all the groups agreed that early intervention was necessary to help people who are experiencing mental health problems.

### **Theme 3: What stops young people from getting help?**

The Integrated Post Primary group felt that there was a stigma associated with mental ill health. They expressed concerns around fear and embarrassment. Some students were worried that teachers would talk amongst themselves and they feared breaches of confidentiality. They also said that boys are more likely to express themselves in a small group rather than individually. There was a general consensus that there should be more practical content in the curriculum around mental health. Workshops were cited as useful measures that could be taken.

The Non-Selective Controlled Post Primary students said that some people may fear judgement by others. They also said that teenagers want to be more independent as they get older and feel that they should be able to deal with things themselves. It was suggested that this perception might stop people asking for help. Some of the students said that males are less likely to talk about mental health than females - this was not a unanimous position.

The Post Primary Grammar students also indicated that females were more likely to talk about their feelings and emotions than males. It was suggested that mental illness was often associated with older people. They said there needs to be more awareness of how mental health should be addressed at all ages. This group expressed concern about the lack of education around mental health in general.

The young people in the NEET forum emphasised the gender divide in seeking help.

**‘Boys don’t tend to talk - they’re told to buck up’**

One of the young people in this group suggested that some people only trust themselves so they feel that they can not rely on the services provided by people they don’t know. There was also a comment that some people feel so low that they can’t motivate themselves to access the services.

**Theme 4: What is your message to politicians?**

The Non-Selective Controlled Post-Primary students felt that there was a lack of communication between young people and those in power. They said that MLAs live in a bubble and do not appreciate what is going on “at street level”. The overarching message from this cohort was related to drugs. They also expressed a demand for more mental health services on the ground.

The Integrated Post Primary cohort described schools as very stressful and pleaded that MLAs listen to their generation. They said that the life is harder today for young people compared to previous generations. Improved assessment strategies to identify mental health problems were cited as being important. The students also asked for more medical checks and the development of workshops designed to prevent mental ill-health. It was suggested that there should be a greater variety of outlets for stress release. This group appealed to MLAs to make mental health a top priority.

The Maintained Grammar students indicated that mental health should be more prevalent on the curriculum. The group also argued that they are overeducated on drugs and alcohol but there is not enough focus on mental health at school. They pointed out that Learning for Life and Work (the part of the curriculum where mental health features) is replaced by Careers

**‘Just when we need it most mental health education is lost in school- it’s replaced by a focus on careers education just when we are hit with exam stress.’**

education (Key Stage 4) just when the stress levels ramp up from exam pressure.

The NEETs forum group also asked MLAs to think about revising mental health content in the curriculum. They commented that teachers who are responsible for mental health should have relevant experience and qualifications. They appealed for a more humanised approach to teaching about mental health. They also suggested that mental health education should be a strong feature of primary education. The NEET respondents also suggested that that early diagnosis was critical to the process of treating people who have a mental illness.

Concern was expressed around the regulation of social media and the young people appealed to politicians to exercise their influence in this area. The young people would like

there to be more openness and honesty surrounding mental health and they would like to see the services available have a higher profile.

### **3. Issues for Further Research**

It is clear that this is an issue young people feel strongly about. Their responses have identified issues that should be addressed:

- Why did 17% of the survey respondents indicate that they would not seek help for a mental health issue?
- How can young people be made more comfortable in talking about mental health and approaching support organisations?
- How can the issue of accessibility to services be addressed?
- What can be done to make mental health more prominent on the curriculum?
- How can the good practice, with respect to mental health education, which was identified in some of the focus groups, be shared with others?

