



#ListenUP!

Young People's Voices



March 2019

The Integrated Education Fund

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Introduction

The voices of young people have often remained glaringly absent in debates and consultation about issues which directly affect them.

The Integrated AlumNI, the network for past pupils of integrated schools and supporters of integrated education, sought to develop a political engagement event to bring the voices of young people (aged 16-30) directly to Stormont politicians in an exploration of relevant, current issues.

To lay the ground for such an event, the team met representatives of organisations working with a range of young people of all traditions and backgrounds. As the plans took shape, post-primary schools and youth organisations in Belfast and beyond were invited to send students or members to take part.

This event became *ListenUP!* which was held on 15 November 2018 at the Rainbow Factory Studio, part of the YouthAction building close to the centre of Belfast. YouthAction has been working with young people and communities for more than 65 years. Its building at College Square North has been developed as a “shared space for a shared future” and seemed particularly appropriate.

ListenUP! brought together around 80 young people from schools, youth groups and civic organisations to meet MLAs representing the five main Stormont parties. The idea was to create a space for genuine dialogue rather than to offer a soapbox or stage a political hustings. The young people were there to tell politicians of their concerns, ideas and demands, and to ask them to engage with their generation when developing policies.

The Integrated AlumNI were delighted that Conor Keys, a comedian and writer who also has extensive experience in community engagement, agreed to chair the event.

Format

The room was set out café-style, with groups of eight young people and a facilitator seated around tables, with an additional seat for a politician at each group. The politicians spent the first part of the event listening to round-table discussions on a series of set issues: communities; political and social structures; education; health and wellbeing; and a vision for the future. The list of topics had been drawn up after consultation with young people and shared with the invited groups before the event. There were also prompts for facilitators to help stimulate conversation.

There was a theme board for each respective topic and these were passed around the tables so that every group got to discuss each subject. MLAs moved round the tables in the opposite direction to the theme boards, with the idea that every table would meet a representative of each party at some stage. During this part of the event, the politicians were asked to simply listen to the young people's opinions and concerns about Northern Ireland, although they occasionally put forward questions of their own.



The facilitators took notes and the young people also wrote down some of their concerns and suggestions on sticky notes and posted them on the theme boards.

When the Chair, Conor Keys, announced it was time to change topic the politicians and theme boards moved on. Whilst this happened, there was live e-polling of the young participants on topical issues, facilitated by LucidTalk*, with the results instantly relayed to the room. This created another layer of engagement as the participants could give anonymous responses to a series of simple questions.

After all the topics had been covered, there was a brief break and then the politicians gathered at the front of the room to give their thoughts on what they had heard. They signed a pledge that they would engage further with young people's groups and continue the conversation.

**LucidTalk is an independent research company based in Belfast, and is a member of all recognised professional polling and market research organisations, including the UK Market Research Society (UK-MRS), the British Polling Council (BPC), and ESOMAR (European Society of Market Research organisations).*

Communities

We join many communities throughout our lives: the schools we attend; the places we work; the sports and youth clubs we're part of. Communities are the neighbourhoods we live in and the friendship groups we are part of.

Table Discussion - *What more needs to be done to enable communities to work together to develop a more prosperous Northern Ireland?*

When talking about communities in terms of neighbourhoods, young people often said they felt theirs was neglected; there was also a widely-expressed wish to see more unity and more cross-community contact, although at least one person said their generation was mixing organically.

Many said their communities do not feel safe.

Under-funding was a common concern. One young person stated: "Areas where we live don't have a lot of money spent there." Some described the impact that a lack of funding has: "There is anti-social behaviour...there is broken glass in alley ways, and fires." This extended to the condition of facilities for young people: "Youth clubs - there are old buildings and not good resources." They feel, moreover, that this is a result of not being on politicians' radar: "Politicians don't think about youth club budgets for example. Cuts." There were calls for action by local Councils. One participant commented that more youth organisations and activities should be working to offer a way for young people's voices to be heard.



Claire Hanna MLA (right) at the table discussions



Declan Kearney MLA listens to the discussion

There was a huge emphasis on diversity and inclusion. One comment read: “Integrated schools, instead of getting the monologue; end the hate, get taught about real oppressors, not one community but the rich and partial powers that brought this about.” Another read: “Start from no age, integrate schools, introduce cross-community work via youth clubs, etc.”

Some thought you couldn’t force people together, but there was also strong support for bringing communities together through common interests such as sports, and others thought cohesion should be the main aim of youth clubs. It was pointed out that this can be difficult where most are church-affiliated, though it was also said that faith-based organisations deserved more credit.

Interestingly, at a table where all the young people were from non-integrated schools, all agreed that the perception of the Irish language entirely belonging to the Catholic community was unhelpful, and that “both sides” should have the opportunity to learn Irish.

It was also pointed out that there are various forms of integration and that inter-generational contact was important for society as a whole.



“Integrate Ballymena”
“Villages - integration between rural communities is needed.”

Political and Social Structures

As of 15 November 2018, Northern Ireland had been without a government for 657 days. Northern Ireland had overtaken Belgium and now held the record for being without an administration for the longest period in peacetime.

Table Discussion - How can we get through the political deadlock in Stormont? Does Northern Ireland's conservative stance on social matters mean that we lag behind the rest of these islands?


Conversation on this topic indicated a strong interest in political engagement and in taking part in the democratic process, with comments such as "Voting age should be reduced to 16" and "We need another Brexit vote" (which would then include people too young to vote two years ago). Some said that to make this work, education about politics was important: "Second and third years should learn about politics or from start of secondary school."

Many young people called for politicians to compromise and co-operate, which suggests that, for this age group, what divides the parties is not worth the collapse of the NI assembly: "Sacrifice Irish language and Ulster Scots act! London is throwing us down a hole and we can't get ourselves out - No NI Government, Sinn Fein doesn't take seats and DUP disagree with May!" Some even felt that the Assembly could get on without the Executive: "Like naughty school children, the DUP and Sinn Fein should be sent out of the classroom to allow the other children to get on with their work."



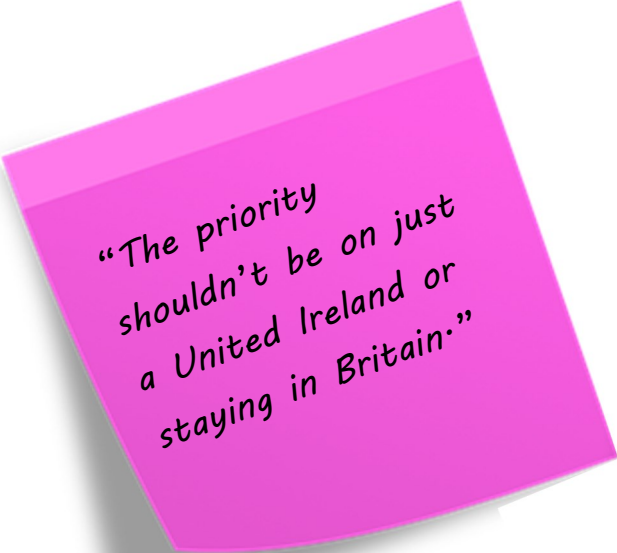
Paula Bradley MLA at the table discussions

Many young people suggested action they think should be taken to restore the Assembly. These included putting a decision to a referendum if compromise cannot be reached at Stormont: "Allow X amount of days for agreement on issues. Send to referendum if none." Some even suggested that there should be stronger penalties for MLAs, as extreme as imprisonment or a dramatic reduction in pay, until the Assembly is fully functioning again.



"We should have equal laws like the rest of UK."

Comments were invited on contentious issues faced at Stormont and in wider society such as abortion, gay marriage and an Irish language act. Predictably, there was a range of views on all these subjects. But the young people tried to find common ground on issues which interested them, such as education, and some pointed out this approach would be crucial for politicians if we are to progress at all.



"The priority shouldn't be on just a United Ireland or staying in Britain."

There was widespread criticism of the petition of concern mechanism: "The PoC is being abused" and even "Get rid of the current mechanism of nationalist and unionist".

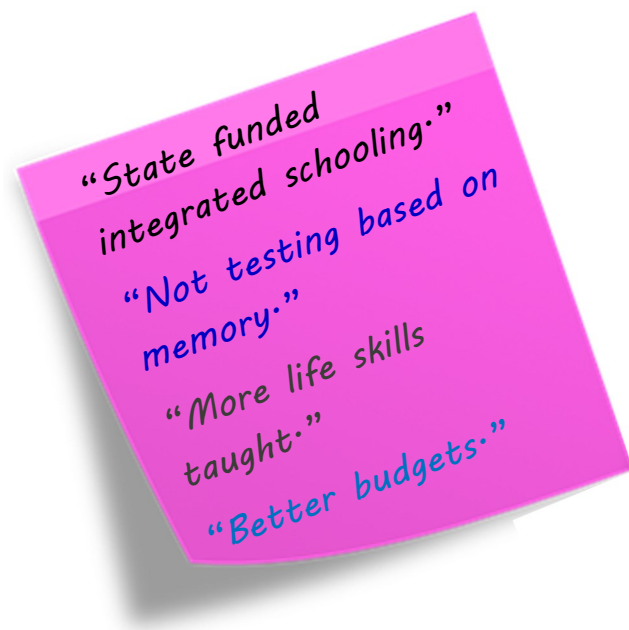
And at least one young participant felt that political leaders should be better role models: "It is hard to work together when politicians are setting a bad example to the nation."

Some young people praised the event itself for its contribution to democratic debate: "The key is promoting cross-community activities, meeting new people, allowing an open space for discussion."

Education

A primary school principal who spoke out over the education cash crisis has said it was "humiliating" to be seen begging for help after revealing how parents have been donating toilet roll, tissues and soap to his cash-strapped school. (Belfast Telegraph, Nov 2018)

Table Discussion - *What vision do you have for the school that your children might attend? Are you satisfied with your level of education (be it school, tech or university)?*

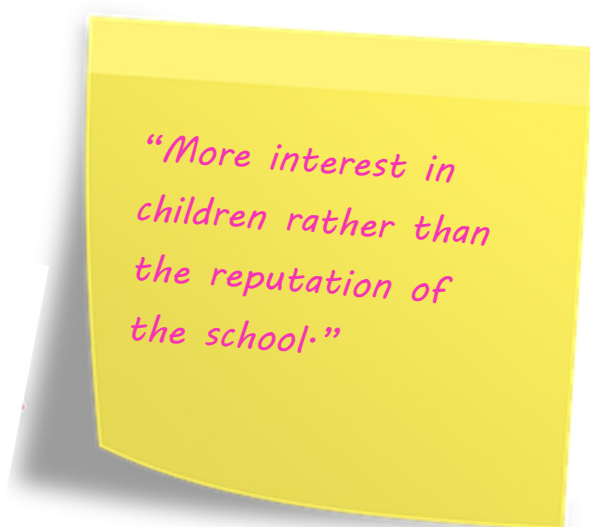


The theme of education was very relevant to the young people, whose opinion was divided on the quality of education they receive, probably reflecting the range of individual experiences of school:

"NI pupils do better in results"; "Children won't go to school because it's a bad system"; "It's very exam-driven"; "My parents moved back here because of the education system. It's good."

Some pupils found that the reputation of their school was very important: "It's the public perception of a school which counts for example, the Grammar school

reputation." At least one young person said this was to the detriment of individual pupils.



Many commented that they would like to see more integrated education: "We need more integrated education"; "More integrated schools in more areas". Another person suggested that by integrating people as children through schools, we get better results.

However, some felt that it is "irrelevant whether integrated or not; it is about children being well-funded." There were many comments on funding for education: "900 million spent on PSNI and only 600 million on education"; "University fees should be

abolished and be government funded. Teachers should not have to personally pay for resources"; but also:



Colin McGrath MLA at the table discussions

“Budgets for schools should be spent more effectively.” A young person from a grammar school commented that they did not feel the impact of cuts to their school: “We are fortunate; the cuts don’t seem to have hit our school. We are privileged.”

Overall the comments seem to show that young people want to reform education and they would like to see an education system which values and nurtures individual ability: “School to be pupil-centred rather than academic-centred”; “In a big class it is harder to learn”; “Learning styles not appreciated in schools. Need to look at other styles in schools. There are other ways to learn other than reading and writing it out.” Some stressed that “tech” is a good alternative to school with different options available.

Some said they felt classes like LLW (Learning for Life and Work) were not effective: “We need to be taught life skills.” Or “Having a system for students to support students learning how to survive after school.”

The young people were unhappy with the lack of global focus in young people in NI. One said: “Foreign students knew more about the world and their courses than QUB students when they visited schools.”

“More focus on linking academia and vocation together, not separately.”

Health and Wellbeing

Northern Ireland is reported to have a 25% higher overall prevalence of mental health problems than England. (Department of Health, 2014). When compared with 17 other countries, NI had the 2nd highest rate of mental ill-health. (Northern Ireland Study of Health and Stress, 2011)

Table Discussion - *Why is this the case and how do we as a society address this problem?*

"Being rejected from GP's lowers self-esteem."

"...community barriers = crux of issues. Break the barriers, and break the walls."

The discussions of health and wellbeing were focussed on two issues: services and attitudes to mental health in Northern Ireland. But the young participants were also concerned that having insufficient services negatively affects their general health.

Many young people said mental health service provision was poor in Northern Ireland: "Not enough counselling services"; "I feel we lack [sic] behind the rest of the UK on mental health."

Stigma was cited as a big problem: "There is stigma and a lack of good support"; "The biggest issue is STIGMA. It must be talked about"; "Stop telling people to 'Man Up!'". Someone pointed out that females are more likely to access help.



Conor Keys chairing ListenUP!

The young people made suggestions as to the reason for higher mental health problems in Northern Ireland. They believed that legacy issues from the Troubles impact mental health: "Why do legacy issues and past violence affect men especially? How do we address this? We need funding and community work"; "A lot of the issues are PTSD and are related to the Troubles. These are an almost complete separate stream of ill-health competing for resources.

There are two channels needed so one type of mental problem is not prioritised over another."

Many said the continuing divisions in NI society had a negative effect on wellbeing.



Mike Nesbitt MLA

Some young people suggested ways schools could help: “Schools need to be active in setting up student groups.” However, young people also described teachers being reluctant to engage on mental health issues: “Educate teachers and pupils to guide those with mental health problems”; “There should be training in mental health and behavioural problems for teaching staff and youth workers.”

On the other hand, some said that people don’t want to be seen going to a counsellor or support worker at school because of a sense of shame. One suggested: “Counselling should be introduced as a positive thing.”

One participant said they had found a mentor through a youth group, which had helped a lot.



Some highlighted the need for targeted services for young people: “Should be more facilities around the country for people under 18”; “Different kinds of therapy should be offered.”

It was also remarked that it is far too easy for young people to access alcohol and drugs.

The Future

Only a third of graduates who studied in England, Scotland and Wales returned home to work in Northern Ireland last year. (BBC News, Aug 2018)

Table Discussion - *The vision of the future: what do you see?*



John Blair MLA joins a round-table conversation

On this issue, some expressed hope for social change in Northern Ireland: “I see NI progressing and moving away from legacy issues” and “Equality and respect for everyone”; “Walk down any street in any area feeling 100% comfortable from sectarian abuse.”

However, one merely described the future as “bleak” and many listed aspects of life which would make them want to live elsewhere: “I want to

remain in the EU”; “NI is stuck in old traditionalist views”. On the other hand, participants who had lived in other countries praised the opportunities and the landscape in NI (though others expressed concern that their environment was not in good hands).



Kellie Armstrong MLA



Linda Dillon MLA (left) listens to the young people's views

Many young people expressed frustration with polarised “green and orange” politics, making comments such as “People should be voting for their parties based on policies rather than religion”. Whilst a number of participants expressed anger about the deadlock at Stormont, one said that they were disappointed with the pace of progress even when the Assembly was functioning: “2015: Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson aim to get rid of peace walls. This has not happened.”

Some commenters said they were torn on where their future lay, but others were clear: “I don’t see a positive future here in NI”; “I don’t see me staying, no outcome to benefit my future”. Whilst one said: “I want to go into politics but NI would be a bad move for me” another was more optimistic: “I want to stay to go into politics and bring about change.”

ListenUP! E-Polling

The table discussions were punctuated with a series of five questions and votes in a quick-fire poll, run by LucidTalk, using electronic polling devices to gather responses and display the results instantly. The questions were loosely related to the topics under discussion or to the overall *ListenUP!* event, but there was no deliberation at this stage.

The strongest majority opinion (90%) was for legislation to enable same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland closely followed by support for a major review of the NI education system (86%).

There was a fairly even split between those in the audience who saw themselves living in Northern Ireland in ten years' time and those who didn't. Some politicians later said the fact that so many young people saw their future elsewhere was worrying.

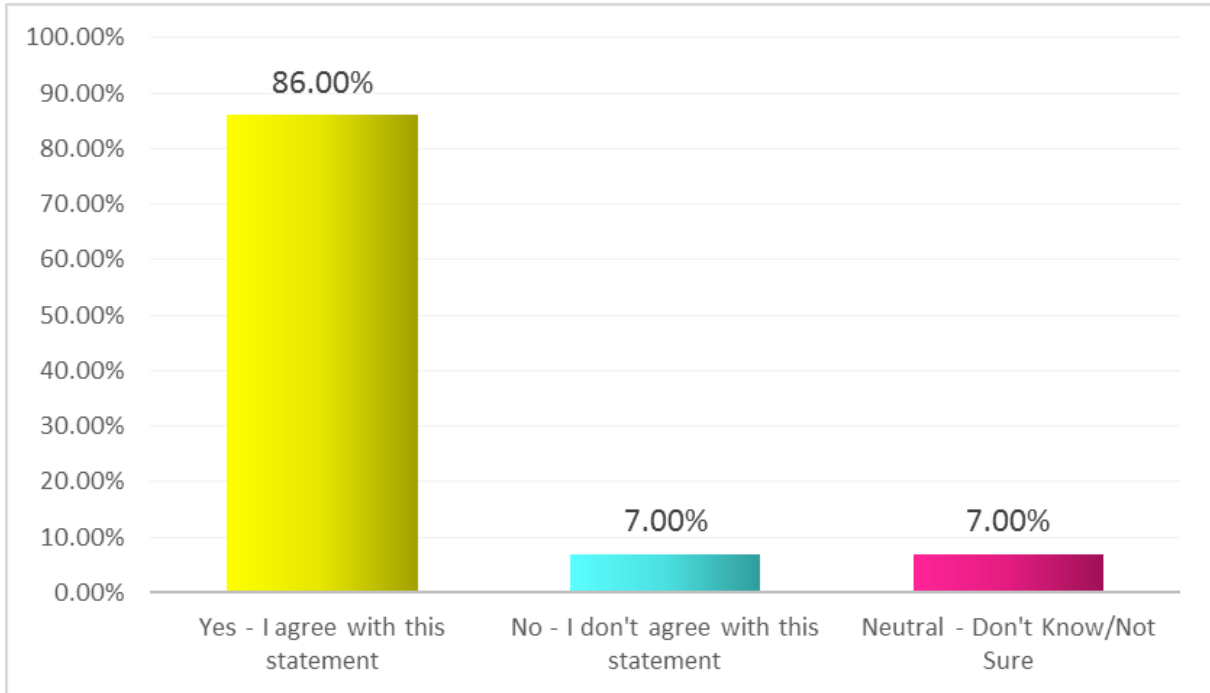
The results of the poll are shown graphically here:



Education in NI

QUESTION 1: Do you agree/disagree with this statement:

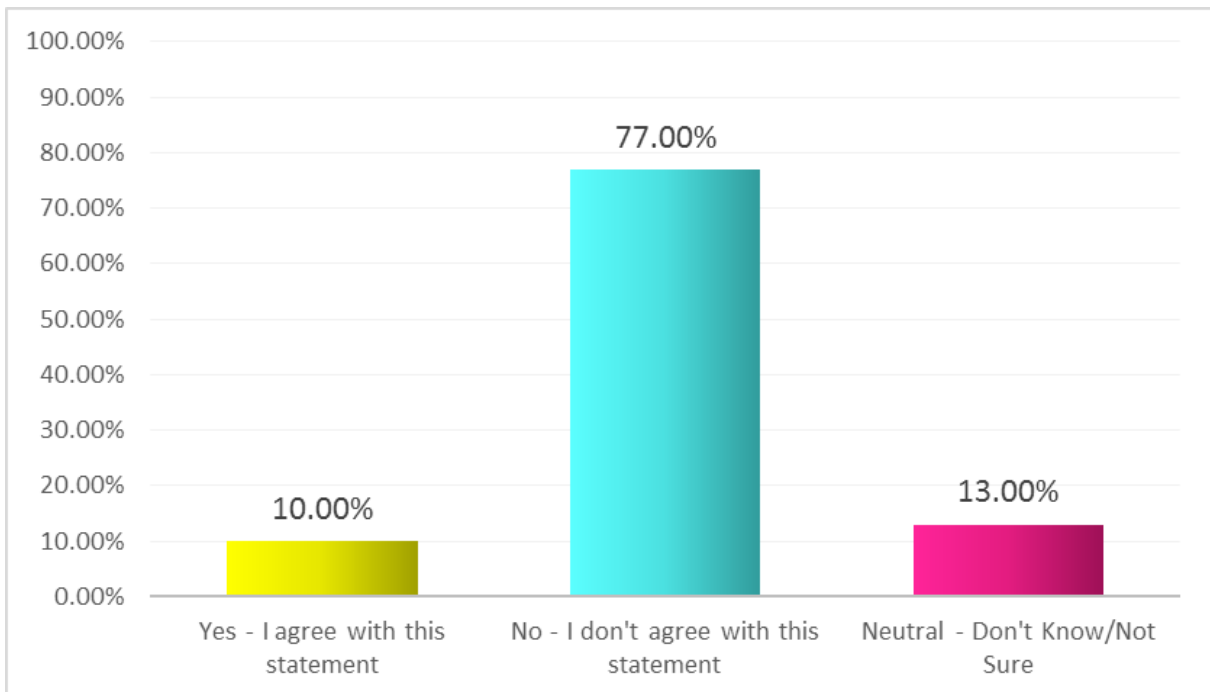
"We need an independent commission to review the education system in Northern Ireland."



MLAs

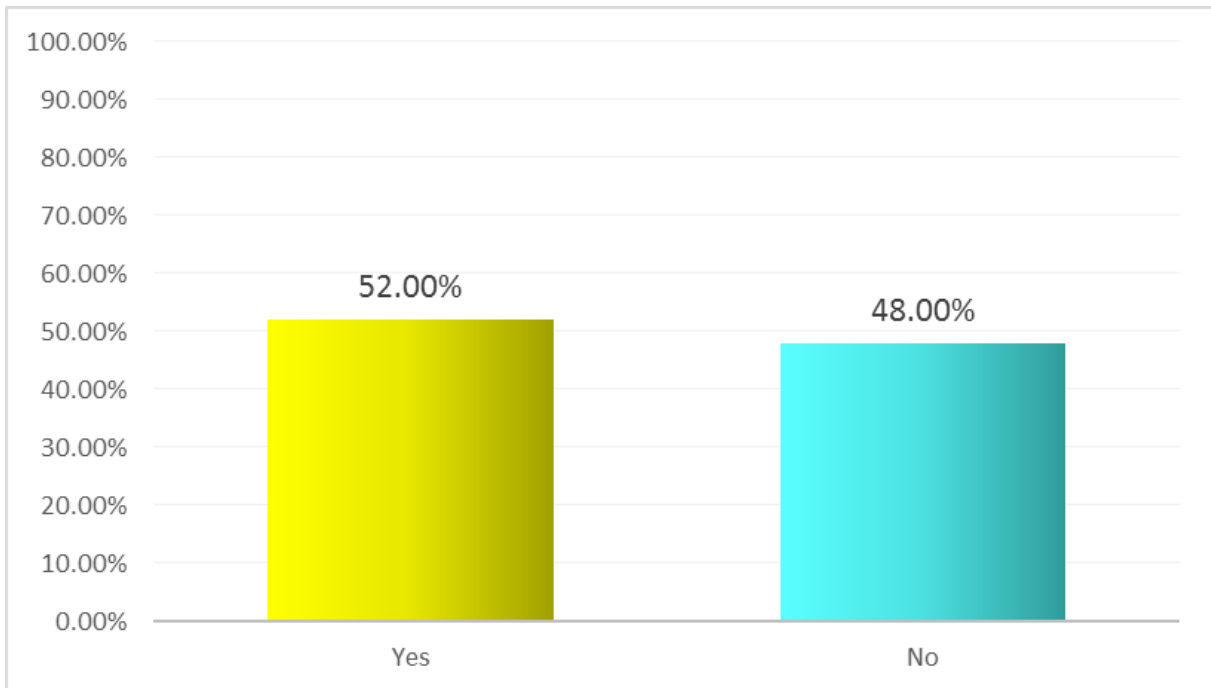
QUESTION 2: Do you agree/disagree with this statement:

"I feel that Northern Ireland's elected MLAs actively understand the concerns that my peers have."



Living in NI

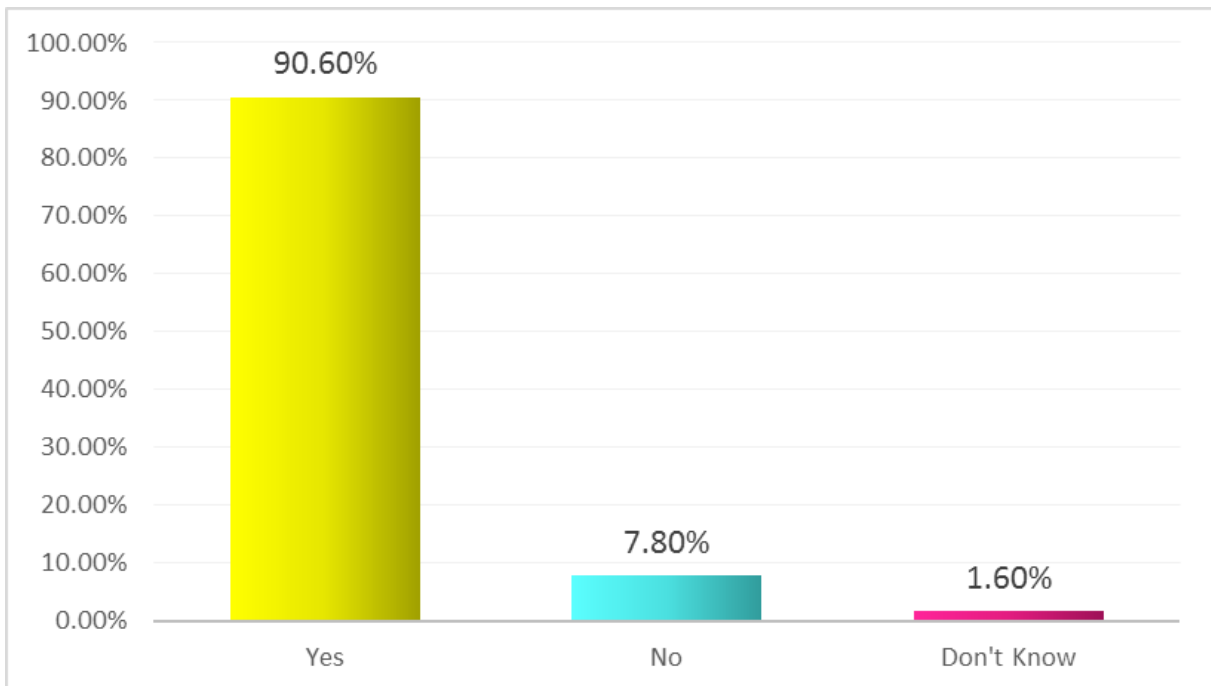
QUESTION 3: "Do you see yourself living in Northern Ireland in ten years' time?" Yes/No



Same-Sex Marriage

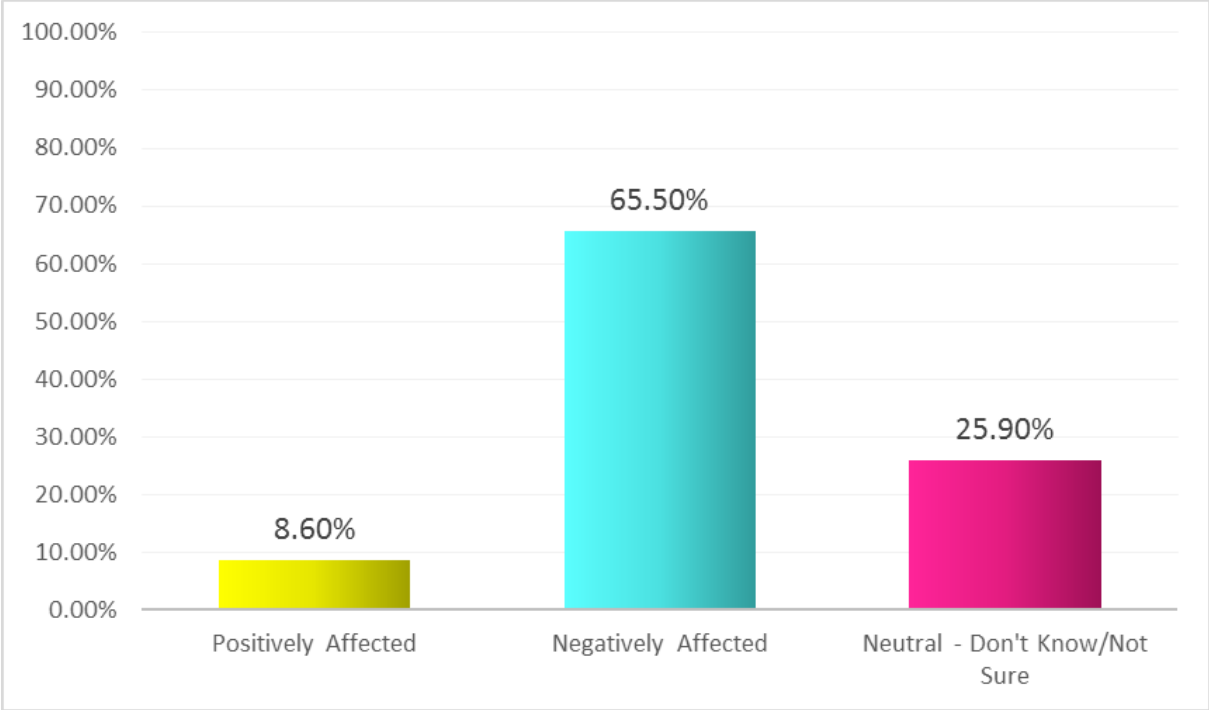
QUESTION 4: "Would you support the introduction of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland?"

Yes/No/Don't know



Brexit Impact

QUESTION 5: "Will your community be positively or negatively affected by Brexit?"



MLA Responses

After the round-table discussion a representative of each political party gave feedback on what they had heard.

Mike Nesbitt



“The panel of all these parties shows that if we go away for five years or five minutes and come back we will still be Nationalist, Unionist or Other and we have to build relations and work together. You have shown me I have to work harder at relationships - YOU can do that and you have shown me that.”

Colin McGrath



“This afternoon started with me being told I and the other MLAs should go to jail for not working at Stormont! This was reduced to continual reduction in our pay. But key for me was that half the young people in the room said that they don’t see themselves as staying here: that has to be a wake-up call.

I thank you for the engagement and for the challenges you put to us today.”

Kellie Armstrong



“The young people weren’t afraid to challenge. It always strikes me that people coming from outside tell people here how great Northern Ireland is...we need to start saying that ourselves.

Co-design and co-production are buzzwords in terms of policy development and young people need to be part of that process. This event has told us things...you have a strong voice and don’t lose that. I’ve heard genuinely great ideas on tackling mental health problems and on getting Stormont up and running.”

Declan Kearney



“I came in with high hopes and I wasn’t disappointed. I genuinely enjoyed the event. We are all different, with many sides and traditions forming one community in this part of the island. What today has shown me is that the answers are in the room, when we work together to find them.”

Paula Bradley



“I have been to several events in this building and I knew what to expect - including comments that were hard to hear, but that’s good. I’ve heard that prejudices are instilled from a young age, but they needn’t be if people can be educated together.

Many of you were angry with politics in NI but you have good ideas for the future...I think we are going to have a better NI in the future. You have clear ideas of how you want to vote in the future: on POLICY and on MANIFESTOS...that is good to know.



Thanks

The *ListenUP!* event could not have been so successful without the supportive and friendly contribution of many groups and individuals.

Thank you to all the young people who took part with openness, respect and honesty and to the youth groups, teachers and leaders who encouraged participation.



l-r Declan Kearney MLA, Paula Bradley MLA, Michael Lynch (Integrated AlumNI), Laura McCance (Integrated AlumNI), Colin McGrath MLA and (front) Kellie Armstrong MLA.

Thank you to Conor Keys who kept the whole thing both entertaining and under control and to the table facilitators whose notes have been a major help in drawing up this report.

Thank you to the MLAs who were open to debate, discussion and challenge and who have pledged to continue to engage with young people in Northern Ireland.

Thank you to YouthAction who supplied the premises, organised the conference facilities and catering, and who helped everything run smoothly on the day.

ListenUp! was hosted by the Integrated AlumNI; credit in particular goes to the organising committee - Michael Lynch, Laura McCance and Stuart Irwin; a special mention goes to Nancy Eaton for her hard work in producing this document. Thanks to Declan Roughan for the photographs. The event and this report were supported by the Integrated Education Fund.

Taking Part

MLAs

Declan Kearney, Sinn Fein
Linda Dillon, Sinn Fein
Paula Bradley, DUP
Mike Nesbitt, UUP
Colin McGrath, SDLP
Claire Hanna, SDLP
Kellie Armstrong, Alliance
John Blair, Alliance

Youth Organisations

Youth Link
Belfast Youth Council
NI Youth Forum
RSPB
Junior Chamber International
Integrated AlumNI
Youth Initiatives
YouthAction

Schools

Slemish College, Ballymena
Lagan College, Belfast
Rathmore Grammar, Belfast
Methodist College, Belfast
Strathearn Grammar, Belfast
Ashfield Girls' School, Belfast
St Malachy's College, Belfast
Down High School, Downpatrick



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