'Somewhere to Go; Someone to Talk to'

A Report on the Outcome of a Consultation with Young People in West Wicklow

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The photographs featured in this report were captured by participants in the research. We do not name the photographers to preserve confidentiality. However, we do wish to gratefully acknowledge the effort made by the photographers in capturing these images, and the valuable contribution that they made to the research.

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Catriona O'Toole, Michelle Maher, and Victoria Showunmi

Executive Summary

This report presents the outcome of a needs assessment with young people in West Wicklow, which was commissioned by Kildare Youth Services, through funding awarded to them by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs through the new Value for Money Review Sample Projects Scheme. The purpose of the consultation was to ascertain how young people in West Wicklow define their own priorities as well as to identify their needs in relation to youth services and supports. The research adopted a participatory and Rights-based approach, drawing particularly on a method known as Photo Voice, whereby participants are encouraged to visually document aspects of their lives using photographs, which are then used to stimulate a conversation. In total, 58 young people and nine adults took part in the study.

The young people who took part in the study presented as dynamic and resourceful and they were eager to take on more active roles in the social and cultural life of their communities. They expressed positive views about their local areas, particularly in relation to sporting and cultural initiatives. Some young people also acknowledged the physical beauty and natural resource of the West Wicklow countryside. However, owing to a wholly inadequate public transport infrastructure, and poor internet connectivity, these rural communities have come to epitomise isolation and emptiness for many of the young people. This consultation clearly highlights that young people in West Wicklow have deep experiences of isolation, loneliness, social exclusion and marginalisation. They have few safe, accessible or attractive spaces for coming together and participating in social life with each other. Moreover, while they expressed appreciation for those adults who reached out to them; in general, they feel unduly judged and misunderstood by adults in their communities. They feel that they have very few supports or resources for helping them navigate increasingly complex issues, such as mental health and sexuality, which are prominent features of their present-day lives.

Two sets of recommendations are made to address the challenges that young people experience. The first set are those that are geared toward the future development of a West Wicklow Youth Project, and which thereby fall within the explicit remit of this consultation. The second set of recommendations speaks to broader issues, which will require input from other organisations and agencies in the West Wicklow Region. We include these latter recommendations in order to honour the contributions of the young people, who gave freely and generously of their time, and provided us with unique and valuable insights into their everyday lives. They also serve to highlight that any attempt to meaningfully address the complex challenges that young people face, will necessarily require multi-agency collaboration.

Section 1: Introduction

County Wicklow is synonymous with its mountains of the same name, which roughly divide the county in two. The eastern side of the county is heavily populated with large urban areas around Bray, Greystones, Wicklow Town, and Arklow. These towns have strong public transport links and are categorised as economically strong or vibrant in the *2016-2022 Wicklow County Development Plan* (Wicklow County Council, 2016). West Wicklow is more rural in nature. Blessington is the largest town on the west side of the Wicklow Mountains with smaller settlements in Dunlavin and Baltinglass. The *Children and Young People's Plan 2016-2018* prepared by the Wicklow Children and Young People's Services Committee, noted that services for young people were weighted to the East Coast of the county, with a corresponding lack of youth services in West Wicklow (2016:61). Thus, it has been identified that there is a significant gap in services and resources for young people in the West Wicklow region. There are also concerns about young people who may be marginalised or 'at risk' in the area, due to issues such as drug and alcohol use, mental health difficulties, poverty, isolation, and erratic school attendance.

The West Wicklow Youth Project (WWYP) has been recently established after years of campaigning by local people and the KWETB seeking a response to the growing needs of young people in the region. In recent times, the Blessington Youth Project (Alcohol Awareness Campaign), KWETB, and the South West Regional Drugs Task Force (SWRDTF) came together to respond to the urgent need of a group of young people in the area. This further highlighted the increasing need to put something permanent in place to support young people with additional needs in West Wicklow.

This report represents one of the first objectives of the WWYP, which was to further consult and conduct a needs analysis with young people in West Wicklow, and in turn, to make recommendations as to how a youth work approach could support young people and the community to meet their needs. Thus, the needs analysis will inform the planning and development of the newly established WWYP being undertaken by Kildare Youth Services (KYS) and Kildare/Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB), which is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) Value for Money Policy Review Sample Projects Scheme. Kildare Youth Services (KYS) are responsible for a range of community based projects that work with young people, children, and families across County Kildare and West Wicklow. In response to the aforementioned gap in service provision for young people in West Wicklow, the funding awarded by DCYA is being targeted at the establishment of the WWYP. The overarching aim of this Project is to develop creative and purposeful responses to needs expressed by young people in the area, specifically targeting those who have needs additional to those of the general population of young people. Thus, the findings from the consultation with young people will feed into the planning and delivery of youth services in the region.

The consultation was conducted by Dr Catriona O'Toole, Dr Michelle Maher and Dr Victoria Showunmi, Maynooth University Department of Education. A strong, collaborative

partnership was established between the research team and KYS and KWETB, which enabled the researchers to work closely on the ground with the WWYP Project Leader and Youth Worker. This close working relationship facilitated a participatory and capacity building approach with young people, and was crucial to the success of the research.

This report's analysis and recommendations allow WWYP and other relevant stakeholders to better understand the needs of young people in West Wicklow and to make informed choices that will help improve their experiences and outcomes. In opting to allocate funds for this consultation and in recognising the importance of consulting with young people, prior to any decision-making on their behalf, KYS and KWETB have demonstrated an important commitment to the values of participation, equality and democracy, as well as a valuable contribution to the development of youth work in rural communities in Ireland.

This report begins by setting out the theoretical framework informing the consultation, rooted firmly within the Lundy Model of Participation. Section Two provides a rationale for the participatory research methods employed. Section Three moves from the theoretical to the empirical by detailing how the research was planned and conducted. Section Four presents the research findings, and the report concludes in Section Five with our analysis and recommendations.

Section 2: Research with Young People

Perceptions of Young People

Research has consistently shown that adults, particularly those with authority roles (eg. parents, teachers, Gardai, security personnel etc) often hold negative perceptions of young people. Indeed, many adults are strongly aligned to an outdated and unsubstantiated '*storm and stress*' perspective, viewing the adolescent period as inevitably turbulent and charged with conflict, mood swings and rebelliousness (Hines & Paulson, 2006). Such stereotypic views are particularly acute when it comes to young people from lower socio economic backgrounds (Devlin, 2006). These negative perceptions are often deeply engrained despite the fact that most young people are doing well and are positive and optimistic about their futures (DCYA, 2012; Steinberg, 2016). Importantly, when adults in authority hold such views, the consequence is often to increase surveillance, impose restrictions, and create autocratic structures which restrict young people's opportunities for democratic participation in decision making (Horgan et al, 2015). Such practices are in stark contrast to young people's developmental need for greater autonomy, freedom and choice at this particular phase in the life cycle (Eccles, et al. 1993).

It was particularly important in this research that a more positive, optimistic and empowering approach to working with young people was adopted. A crucial consideration in the research design was to ensure that young people felt valued, respected and empowered to express their views. Therefore, the research was underpinned and informed by participatory and rights-based approaches as outlined hereunder.

Rights-based Approach

On 29 November 1989, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, enshrining respect for children as a global ideal. In ratifying the convention in 1992, Ireland committed to ensuring that the voices of children and young people are heard, and that their opinions are given due weight in matters that affect them (DCYA 2015:6).

For researchers working with children and young people Article 12 of the Convention has direct applicability.

Table 1 Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard

in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

For convenience, a common practice in applying Article 12 has been to abbreviate it to phrases such as the voice of the child; pupil voice; the right to be heard; the right to participate; and/or the right to be consulted (Lundy 2007:930). Concern that such shorthand had the potential to diminish Article 12's impact, or convey an imperfect summary of what it required, led Prof Laura Lundy to argue for a new model of understanding. Her model has become widely applied as the Lundy Model of Participation. Key to Lundy's argument is that Article 12 cannot be understood in isolation. Instead, it requires an appreciation of other Articles in the Convention; those which establish rights for children to be informed, to have adult guidance, and the right to be safe in an environment which is non-discriminatory and promotes their best interests.

Lundy's model places a focus on four elements which she argues present a practical way of applying Article 12 without sacrificing its scope or meaning (ibid.:933).

Figure 1. Lundy's Model of Participation

Each of the four interrelated elements; space, voice, audience, and influence speak to distinct facets of Article 12.

> *Space*: *Children must be given the opportunity to express a view.*
> *Voice*: *Children must be facilitated to express their views.*
> *Audience*: *The views must be listened to.*
> *Influence*: *The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.*

Participatory Research

Participatory research recognises and respects the knowledge of the people with lived experience of an issue area. In its full application it allows participants to have more control over research processes as well as influence over how findings are used (Bennett and Roberts 2004:viii). Operating without the input of those with lived experience means that the methodologies and interpretations are built on models and paradigms developed by academics, and approved by policy analysts and policy-makers (Lynch 1999:48). Consequently, public images about groups and contexts of inequality are created over which the population being studied have little or no control (ibid.). Instead, Lynch argues, emancipatory research should involve a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the research subject which recognises the moral right of the subject to exercise ownership and control over the generation of knowledge produced about them (ibid.:55-57).

Participatory research encapsulates Lynch's arguments for collaboration by recognising the expertise of non-academics, enabling them to share their own experiences and 'insider' knowledge (Fenge 2010:880). It can be described as a ground-up approach that involves participants from the outset in setting the agenda for the research to be undertaken. Research which starts from this point lends itself to identifying ways of working which result in people with experience having a voice – from defining the issues to working out the solution (Bennett and Roberts 2004:5). A key argument put forward in favour of participatory action research is that it improves research. Using poverty as an example, Wresinski (1980) questioned the capacity of researchers to understand the realities of extreme poverty on their own – especially the constant humiliation suffered by those in long-term poverty. They need those in poverty to help them. For the purposes of this report, a similar question might question the capacity of adult researchers and participants to understand the reality of what needs a young person in West Wicklow has, without the help of the young people themselves.

Since the turn of the century, a body of literature has emerged on social research with children, that advocates the use of participatory techniques. This literature has concentrated on designing research projects that are 'by' and 'with' children rather than 'on' children (White et al 2010:143). One method employed in this body of literature is the use of photography, variously described as photo voice, photo participation, or photo elicitation. In practice, photo voice and photo participation describe the same method; participants are encouraged to visually document their social landscape through photography and reflect on their photos to produce personal narratives (Allen 2012:443). Photo elicitation research makes use of photographs (or indeed other tangible images) to stimulate a conversation between the participant and the researcher (Smith et al 2012:368). As a qualitative research method it has been applied in various disciplines in the social sciences including education, anthropology, sociology, and psychology (Hatten et al 2013).

Photo Voice

Didkowsky et al (2010) argue that three serious issues that surface in research with vulnerable youth populations are addressed through the inclusion of visual methods such as photo voice (p.12). These are identified as: power imbalances between the researcher and the participant; youth participants' lack of engagement with the research process; and language barriers (defined as the lack of words to describe experience). Photo voice disrupts the traditional power imbalance because "collaboration and reflexivity between the researcher and the participant becomes imperative to fully understand the meaning behind the youth's images". (Didkowsky et al 2008:14). It has the capacity to engage young people in the research process because it compels them to think why they are capturing an image, and the subsequent contemplation prompts reflections that may not have arisen in a traditional interview, or even while the image is being taken. It is also argued that young people may feel ownership of the data, consequently increasing the validity of the research findings. Finally, the language barriers inherent in a reluctance or inability to express themselves verbally are mitigated because the young people may feel less 'on the spot' because there is material as a go-between to reflect on (Didkowsky et al 2008:14)

In research investigating the needs and experience of children, a technique is required which encourages participants to identify and recount aspects of their lives. Smith et al argue that encouraging participants to take their own photographs is one way of achieving this (2012:369). Control of data production is relinquished to the participant, which in turn drives the course and content of any interview or focus group discussion. In addition, and quoting Carlsson (2001:130), "the freedom to choose places, objectives and motives of the photos increases the opportunity for them to express their own conception of, and relation to, the surrounding world. In short, implicit in every photo there are several personal decisions."

In a similar vein, Hatten et al (2013) argue that photo voice is an entry point for participants who are unwilling or unable to verbalise their experience in an articulate manner: the burden is not on the participant to come up with a response completely on their own, they can use the photo to craft their answer. Lived experience can be difficult to articulate because it may be an unconscious process, and thus photographs help draw out ideas beyond the limitations of

the spoken or written word (Hatten at al 2013). Clark-Ibanez (2004) argues that it is an ideal method for interacting with young people. It overcomes challenges associated with linguistic ability, and the power dynamics of adults interviewing children. It provides a clear tangible prompt for conversation, and the photographs capture and introduce content area that otherwise (from an adult perspective) might be poorly understood or even overlooked (p.1512).

In summary, photo voice is a research method with the capacity to offer qualitatively different insights from more traditional data collection instruments. This is because photographs can generate data that illuminate a subject invisible to the researcher but apparent to the participants (Schwartz cited in Allen 2011:492). By inviting young people to supply their own photographs completely from their own perspective, they are empowered to bring their own voice to the research.

Like any research method, there is potential for complications when using photo voice. The taking of photographs can incite anxieties around issues of privacy and appropriate use. Participants may not want to take photos, they may regret the photos they take, or they may take different photos than they would if they knew the researcher would not see them. There is also the possibility of invasion of privacy. Hence, ethical issues, including negotiating consent and respecting participants' right to privacy and confidentiality, were paramount and were monitored closely throughout this project (see Section 3 below).

Summary

Informed by the Lundy Model of Participation, incorporating the voice of young people in West Wicklow in an analysis of what they need is the predominant consideration in the research design. Lived experience and associated needs can be difficult to articulate for a number of reasons. Young people may very well be unconscious of their needs. Eliciting that information in a conversation with a researcher that they have not had the opportunity to build a relationship of trust with, might understandably be challenging for a young person. Photo voice helps overcomes challenges associated with articulating one's views and needs by providing a prompt for conversation. It also introduces content that otherwise might be poorly understood, or even overlooked.

By adopting a participatory approach for this research, the ground work for the West Wicklow Youth project is strongly aligned with commitments to young people set out in three key government policy documents: *The Action Plan for the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making 2015-2020,* the *National Youth Strategy* 2015-2020, and *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020.*

Section 3: Conducting the Research

The research sought to understand what young people in West Wicklow want and need in terms of resources, supports and services, from the perspective of the young people themselves. Ethical approval for the project was sought and granted by Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-committee.

The research was conducted in three phases: (1) project planning with support from the West Wicklow Youth Project, Youth Advisory Group, (2) conducting informed consent & capacity building workshops with young people, and (3) conducting focus groups with young people and stakeholders. There are three main population centres in West Wicklow (Blessington, Dunlavin, and Baltinglass) and the research was conducted in youth or community settings in each of these areas.

Phase 1 – Planning

The first phase of the research was to plan the research design. During this phase, the research team worked closely with the WWYP Project Leader[1] in identifying and recruiting young people as well as liaising with stakeholders/community members. In keeping with the principles of participatory research, the planning commenced with a workshop with a newly formed Youth Advisory Group. This group was comprised of young people in West Wicklow identified by the KYS Project Leader for the purposes of providing ongoing advice and guidance in the establishment and development of a West Wicklow Youth Project. As part of this remit they were invited to help plan the design of the research in a workshop held in Dunlavin on 2nd February 2017.

Initially, the research team had hoped to engage the Youth Advisory Group as *co-researchers* -- to be involved in all phases of the research, including the design, collection and analysis of data. Engaging young people as co-researchers gives them greater ownership of the process and can add richness and validity to the findings, but it also confers significant responsibilities (Lundy, 2011; Kellett, 2011). Considerable preparatory and capacity building work would be required before these young people would be in a position to act as co-researchers in a meaningful way. Given the timeframe for the research as well as concerns regarding a burden of responsibility, the research team opted to engage the Youth Advisory Group in the project planning phase only.

Ten members of the Youth Advisory Group were available to attend the workshop. It was facilitated by the Project Team Leader. The purpose of the workshop was to ensure that the research was designed in a way that the Youth Advisory Group felt was both understandable,

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[1] The WWYP Project Leader was newly recruited by KYS through the same DCYA Value For Money Policy Review scheme that also enabled this research. Her role initially was to establish a presence in the West Wicklow area, develop relationships with young people, the community and wider stakeholders. She will subsequently lead on the ongoing development of a West Wicklow Youth Project.

and relevant to others in their age group. The workshop began with a scoping exercise to establish what the Youth Advisory Group believed to be typical young peoples' needs. The proposed photo voice research method was then explained and their input was obtained into both its viability and how best to implement it.

Two main areas of research development were driven by the Youth Advisory Group as a result of the workshop. Firstly, it was clear that significant preparatory work was required in order for young people to be able to *a)* identify what their needs were, and *b)* be able to capture those needs by way of a photograph. Secondly, the groups advice on data collection was that photo voice was a viable method as everyone had access to a smart phone, and taking photographs would not be an out of the ordinary activity. The recommended way of submitting photographs to the project was via Snapchat or Facebook from their phones.

Based on the input of the Youth Advisory Group, a number of research design decisions were made. The KYS project leader agreed to facilitate preparatory workshops with focus group members before data collection began. Snapchat was eliminated as a data gathering technique given that the sender and recipient would have to adjust settings to preserve the picture. Instead, three alternatives were identified that allowed photographs to be sent to the research team in a way that prevented others from seeing them, thus preserving confidentiality. These were via Viber or WhatsApp to a project mobile phone obtained specifically for this purpose, or via Facebook Messenger to a temporary data collection page on Facebook. A Facebook page was used rather than setting up a Facebook group so that participant anonymity was protected.

It was originally envisaged that a specific photo day would be selected in order to shape the data collection as "A Day in the Life of Me". However, the Youth Advisory Group suggested that a period of a couple of days extending over a weekend and into the midterm break would suit better. Consequently, 17th-21st February was selected as the photography task period, with photographs to be submitted by 21st February 2017.

Phase 2 – Informed Consent & Capacity Building Workshops

A series of five workshops were organised, which were facilitated by a member of the research team with support from KYS project staff. The workshops were held during February in Blessington, Dunlavin, and Baltinglass. Table 1 provides details of the numbers, ages and gender breakdown of participants. The recruitment of participants was based on the presence of need as identified in the Hardiker Model (Appendix 1) with priority, for this consultation, on level 2 into level 3. Non-probability purposive sampling[2] was employed to identify participants for the workshops and subsequent focus groups.

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[2] In purposive sampling each participant is selected for a purpose, usually because of their unique position and knowledge held.

During these workshops the facilitators explained the nature and purpose of the research, discussed informed consent and issues of confidentiality (a sample Information and Consent Forms is presented in Appendix 2). The photo voice task was also explained to the young people. The facilitators encouraged young people to think about what life is like for them, to consider their needs in terms of services and supports, and how they might use photographs to capture their ideas. Before leaving the workshop, each participant wrote down something that they had thought about in relation to their needs and sealed this in an envelope so that they each left the workshop with an aide-memoire for the photography task.

Table 1. Overview of participants who took part in the consent and capacity building workshops

Participants in Workshops				
Region	Total	Male	Female	Ages
Baltinglass	7	4	3	15-17
Dunlavin 5th Year	10	3	7	16-17
Dunlavin 2nd Year	10	5	5	14-15
Blessington	8	1	7	16-17
Blessington: Youth Reach	13	8	5	17-21

Phase 3 - Focus Groups

Six focus groups were conducted by the researchers over February and March 2017. Five of these were with young people; two in Blessington, two in Dunlavin, and one in Baltinglass. All those who took part in these focus groups had previously attended the consent and capacity building workshops. However, not all of those who attended the workshops were able to attend the focus groups (due to illness and not being able to secure transportation to the venue). Table 2 provides details of the young people who attended the focus groups.

A further focus group was held in Blessington with Stakeholders. The stakeholder group was an already established network of individuals drawn from agencies supporting the WWYP, including Kildare Youth Services, County Wicklow Partnership, secondary schools, An Garda Síochána, Wicklow County Childcare Committee, the Dara Project (Drug Free & Recovery Assistance Programme) and family support centres. Eight stakeholders attended (1 male and 7 female). In addition, an individual interview was conducted with a staff member in one of the West Wicklow secondary schools. This person was contacted by the research team, at the young people's behest, following one of the youth focus groups in which female participants made reference to sexual grooming. This professional validated the young people's concerns. In total, 58 young people took part in the research -- ten participated as part of the Youth Advisory Group; 48 took part in the workshops and of these, 40 participated in focus groups. A further nine adults participated (eight in a focus group and one by individual interview).

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Table 2: Overview of participants (young people) who took part in the focus groups

Participants in Focus Groups				
Region	Total	Male	Female	Age
Baltinglass	4	2	2	15-17
Dunlavin 5th Year	9	2	7	16-17
Dunlavin 2nd Year	10	5	5	14-15
Blessington	5	1	4	16-17
Blessington Youth Reach	12	8	4	17-21

Conducting the Focus Groups

Negotiating a Contract

At the start of each of the young people's focus groups there was a brief ice breaker activity and then the researcher reminded participants of the nature and purpose of the research and signed consent forms were gathered. Facilitators then worked with participants to draw up a contract that would remain in place for the duration of the focus group. Flip chart paper was put in the middle of the floor and facilitators wrote down every suggestion put forward by young people. Thus, the young people took the lead in deciding what should be in the contract; however if participants omitted to mention crucial considerations (e.g. honesty, confidentiality), the facilitators prompted for them. The limitations to confidentiality in relation to child protection concerns was explained and accepted by all participants. When the discussion concluded, all adults and young people then signed the contracts. Table 1 below summarises the key elements the young people brought into the contracts.

Figure 2: Key elements of the contract drawn up by Young People for the Duration of the Focus Groups
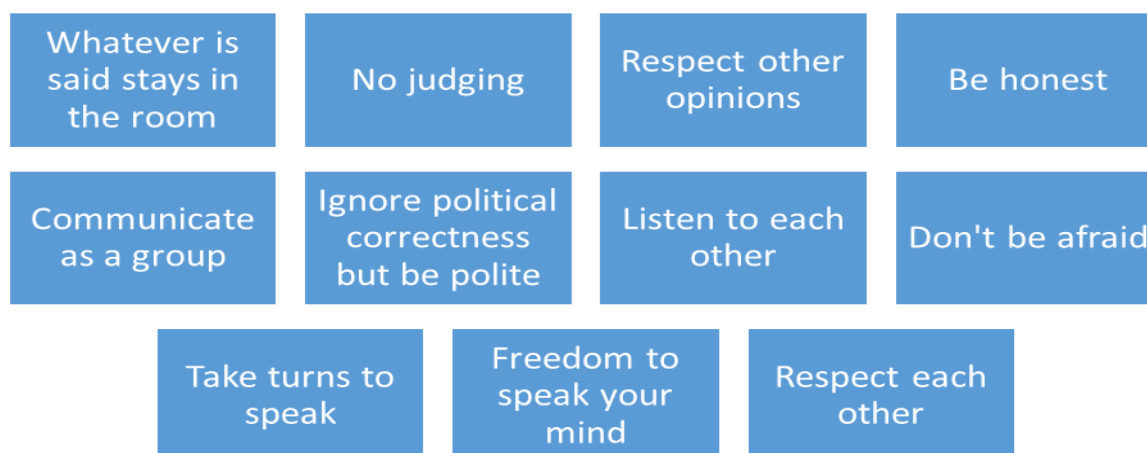
The contract was a vital part of the research process, and highlights the priority placed on respectful confidentiality by young people. In one focus group a participant self-disclosed their sexual orientation for the first time outside of two closest friends and a parent. This young person felt able to do so because, "I feel safe and after seeing the contract; like, you're not going to say anything else. I was like, "ok I can say this"".

Photo Voice

In practice, the photo voice task has mixed results. Both the young people and the adult participants (stakeholders) were asked to capture a photograph and submit it to the researcher by 21st February 2017. Indications from the Youth Advisory Group were that this would be unproblematic. However, most research participants were reluctant to submit photographs to the researcher in advance of the focus groups. This was despite follow up emails with the adult stakeholders, and reminder phone calls to young people. One stakeholder participant who completed the task commented on feeling self-conscious taking the photographs in the local area, mainly in case of being observed and looking suspicious to local people. Other stakeholders and young people said they struggled to know what to photograph, indicating that the aide-memoire from the workshops was not as effective as hoped. Nevertheless, most participants (adults and young people) had in fact captured a photograph, but left it until they arrived at the focus group venue to submit it to the researcher. Anticipating this scenario, the researcher had brought a printer to each of the focus groups. Participants were facilitated to hotspot off the researchers' mobile network to send the photo to Facebook messenger, after which they could be printed for immediate use.

Reasons for not submitting the photos varied. Some young people simply said that they forgot to complete the task. Others said they could not remember the Facebook page or had lost the phone number. The researcher did not pursue the matter in depth, to avoid any unintended comparison to a school-like probing for reasons for unfinished homework.

The Focus Groups Discussions

The approach used in the focus groups differed between that for the stakeholders, and those with the young people. The stakeholders were asked to reflect on what their needs and concerns were at different stages of their own teenage years. The reason for this approach was to encourage stakeholders to reflect on what they were like as young people, what supports they had growing up, and what the supports and resources facilitated them in successfully navigating their lives. Thus informed, the stakeholders then moved to consider the photographs they had taken.

Following the same format, the young people worked from photographs, where they were available. They started by identifying how the images captured a sense of what it is like being a young person in West Wicklow. This generally elicited an array of negative comments. The young people were also encouraged to talk about what was positive about growing up in West Wicklow, as well as share ideas for what a youth project in the region should look like. There was an effective visual to this approach as negatives were written on one colour post-it or paper plate, which were then covered by a solution or comment written on a different colour post-it.
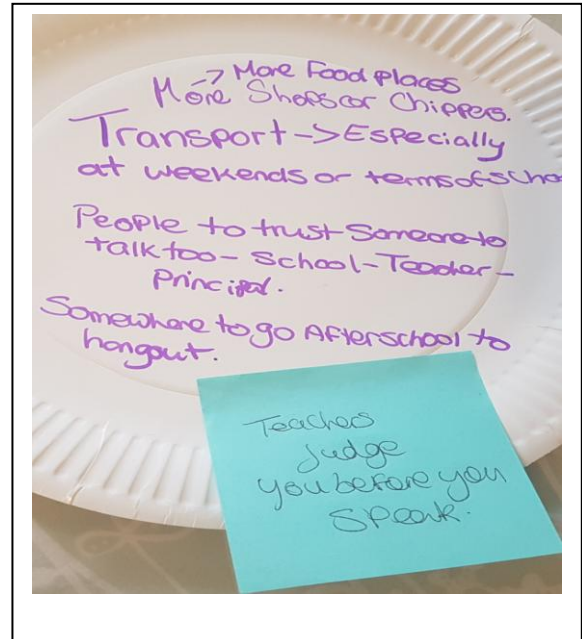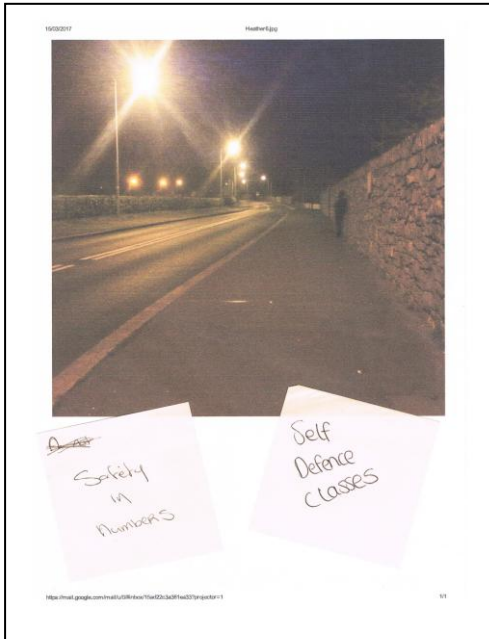
Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was sought from Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-committee. The research adopted a rights-based approach to working with young people in line with UNCRC (1989). The research methods and activities were designed to be participatory and inclusive of diversity. The research involved engaging with young people in creative ways through the use of photo voice, focus groups, as well as engaging a Youth Advisory Group. These methods align with Youth Work Ireland's policy on youth participation (2015), the Lundy Model (2007), best practice on incorporating the voices of seldom heard young people (Kelleher, et al, 2014), as well as DCYA's *National Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children* (2012).

As detailed above, prior to data gathering, the young people engaged in Capacity Building and Informed Consent workshops. Informed consent was obtained firstly from the children's parents/guardians and subsequently, the signed assent of young people was sought in person by the researcher. Children's assent was treated as a process rather than a once-off event and they were reminded that they could withdraw from the process and/or withdraw their data at any stage without repercussion.

The research team recognise our ethical obligation to the young people taking part in the study and the possibility that some may have experience of mental health difficulty, substance use, poverty and marginalisation. The choice of research methods and activities were specifically chosen to avoid putting undue burden on the young people, allowing them to share only what they felt comfortable with. Members of the research team had received child protection training, obtained Garda vetting and were familiar with national Child Protection guidelines (Children First, 2011; Our Duty of Care, 2002). Where issues of a

personal or emotive nature were discussed, these were responded to with tact and sensitivity by the researchers. As noted above, in one of the young people's focus groups, female members disclosed knowledge of sexual grooming. In line with ethical and child protection guidelines, this was immediately reported to relevant authorities.

In using photo voice as a method, the research team recognise that individuals and/or community spaces could be identifiable. Where individuals/groups or community areas are depicted negatively it has the potential to cause further stigmatisation and marginalisation. The Capacity Building and Informed Consent workshops were crucial therefore, in discussing and minimising the potential of the unwanted effects, including regret or embarrassment. In the write up of this report, every reasonable and practicable approach is taken to protect the young people and their communities. The use of images is guided by previous studies using photo voice as well as the Dochas Code of Conduct for Images and Messages. All data was anonymised and kept on a secure and password protected Maynooth University server, or locked devices/cabinets in accordance with the Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003.

Limitations of the Study

The challenges of engaging young people as co-researchers have been alluded to above. In terms of recruitment, the remit for the current study was to consult with young people who may have some additional needs (as identified by the Hardiker model) and the research team were reliant on the support of WWYP in identifying young people to partake in the study. There are certain groups of young people who are not represented in this research, such as young people with significant disabilities, those in care and those from minority groups. In addition, the time frame for the research did not facilitate the possibility of return visits to check or validate the findings with the participants, which can be an important consideration, especially in research with children and young people.

Regarding the photo voice method, although not everyone submitted a photograph, and few were submitted in advance, this did not appear to significantly detract from the quality of the data obtained. The capacity building workshops facilitated the building of significant trust and rapport in the groups. This coupled the whole-hearted engagement of the young people in the focus group discussions meant that there was a rich stream of dialogue. While the photos served as a valuable prompt, they did not need to be relied upon throughout, as participants were open and forthcoming about their experiences and were able to articulate their needs.

Section 4: Research Findings

Introduction

This section of the report sets out the research findings. It is divided into two parts. Part I describes young people's experiences of growing up in West Wicklow. Part II presents young people's ideas on what they would like from a youth project in their area.

Part I: What life is like as a young person in West Wicklow

Nowhere to go

There was unanimous agreement across all focus groups in each of the locations that there was a pressing need for somewhere to go to 'hang out'. Although common to all locations, there was a strong geographical dimension, since the need for somewhere to go was articulated most vocally by those living further south in the county. Here, young people described their area as "*awful*"; "*so boring*". They said "*there's nothing to do"; "you've nowhere to go after school"; "you're stuck"; "there is nothing really here -- no-after school clubs, no place to hang out, nothing!*"

The reality of spending an evening with friends was summarised this way:

> "*If you go out with your friends, all you do is walk to the shop, walk back, walk to the shop again, walk back. Maybe go to the forest, stand there for two minutes and walk back. There is nothing!*"

Another young person highlighted you could go *"up to the park, you don't do much in the park, you're just standing there for a minute and leave"*. Perhaps the most vivid portrayal was that to be a young person meant being *"bored, trapped, and wet"*.

Across all of the regions young people expressed a similar need: *"there's nowhere for people to actually just hang out; without paying."* Many of the photographs taken by participants spoke to this theme. In one village, the chipper was identified by young people as the sole 'hang out' space for their age group. However, they were acutely aware that there was a cost implication: *"you can go and sit down there, but like you're going to have to order food like"…"you'd feel awkward if you didn't. You can't really just go in and sit down; it's a fairly small room like"*.

Unsafe and Uninviting Spaces

In one region, a secluded laneway was identified as a place where *"people go to smoke and stuff like that"*. Even *"if it wasn't related to smoking or drinking, anything like that, it's just where you go to hang out"*. One young person captured the irony of this being one of the sole 'hang out' spaces for their age group: *"Even after school like, people do be drinking, smoking, doing all sorts down there. And this is having somewhere to go!"* Part of the appeal of this space was the certainty of company there, as *"most young people know where it is, like, and they'd know like, some people meet up there"*.

This sentiment was echoed by participants in other areas who also indicated the appeal of a regular 'hang out' space, so that if you wanted to spend time with friends *"you can check this place, because you know they're going to be there and you can just go there and chill"*.

Another attraction of this space was that young people were less likely to be bothered by adults *"you can't be seen unless you walk through it or walk around it. You can't see it in the car or anything"*. Even so, the young people felt there were efforts by those in authority to curtail their use of this space – they noted that *"you're still asked to move on from there"*, and *"they cut down all the trees and all, because we keep going in there"*.

The young people's conversation inevitably led to a discussion of concerns for their safety. They were acutely aware of their potential vulnerability in this type of secluded area. One advised that *"you wouldn't see someone if they were to come at you or something"*.

Therefore, they explicitly identified a requirement for *"somewhere to go to relax and feel safe, instead of being out on the streets."*

Indeed, many young people favoured safe, open, public spaces for 'hanging out' with friends (for instance they mentioned a shopping mall in one town, a chipper in another). However, there was considerable frustration because these more suitable places were not particularly welcoming of young people. There were cost implications (e.g. needing to purchase food) as highlighted above, and they frequently encountered the *"problem of people coming out and asking us to move on"*. In one focus group some young people talked about congregating out outside a pub where they could access free WiFi, which led to *"some people complaining"* and the WiFi being turned off until the young people left.

Some of the photographs taken by young people were of derelict or unused properties in their area. In discussion they remarked that *"if something like that was open more, you wouldn't walk around the streets"*. Another participant said of a photograph of an unused building, *"if it was open more...like young people wouldn't have to go into pubs and all that, the people in the pubs wouldn't be complaining about young lads going in that are underage"*. There was a tangible sense of frustration and a sense of powerlessness in their ability to effect change.

Feeling trapped

A lack of public transport was a major issue and the young people were understandably exercised about it. Where a bus service existed (apart from the Dublin Bus service from Blessington to Dublin) its infrequency and timing were heavily critiqued. A number of photographs depicted what young people felt was a dangerous walk home, along a poorly lit road.

A suggestion for a bus that looped around West Wicklow and coincided with the Dublin Bus times from Blessington was an attractive proposition for participants from further south in the county.
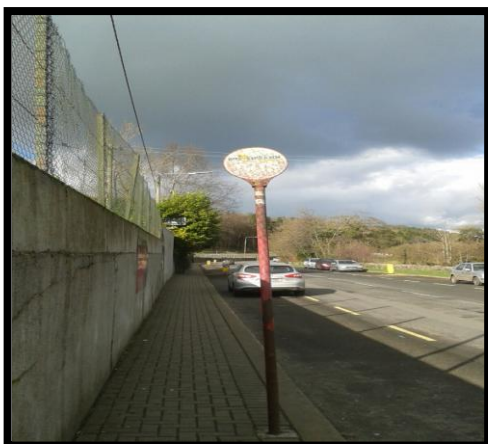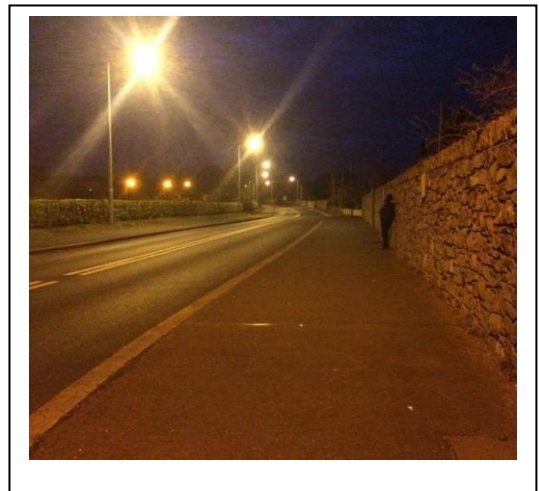
Baltinglass had a bus service to Carlow, albeit at a time deemed unsuitable by the participants. The isolation further south of the county greatly exercised participants living there. One poignant observation by a participant there was *"you're trapped! You can't go anywhere like. There's no transport out of it like"*. An excursion out of town meant *"you have to plan it, like, a few weeks ahead to go out"*.

Young people felt that the lack of transportation impacted their independence and made them overly reliant on others: *"there's no way out of the towns*

that you're in…you're reliant on someone to give you a lift out of it, as opposed to being able to get yourself out of it". This was also identified as critical by stakeholders, who linked the poor transport infrastructure to a curtailment of young people's need to experience freedom and gain independence.

A Sense of Place?

Despite much reference to isolation, bleakness, and boredom, many young people also spoke positively about their communities. West Wicklow is renowned for its beautiful scenery and idyllic countryside. Some had taken photographs of scenic areas, such as the lakes saying *"during the summer and all, we wouldn't really have things to do, so we'd end up going to the lake a lot".* Others mentioned community fundraisers and commemorations of the 1916 Rising. Their enthusiasm for such events suggests a desire to be involved in local activities as well as latent sense of pride in their community.
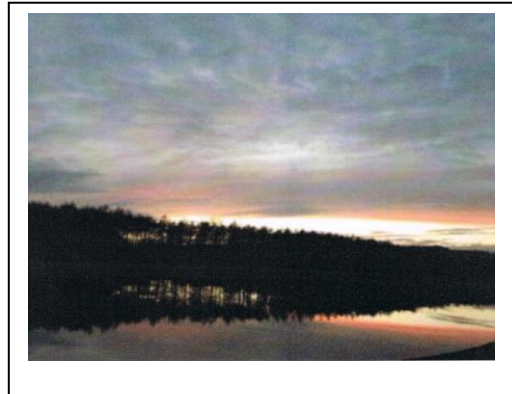
Overall, however, the countryside was not seen as a resource or amenity, rather, it tended to be viewed as empty and epitomising isolation. Some participants mentioned outdoor pursuits and adventure, (mountain biking and fishing). However, in the main, where the outdoors was mentioned it was in relation to the weather. For example, a park was somewhere young people could go, *"but like, you go there, there's no roof like, and it's raining as well, so you'd be soaked".* Consequently, *"you'd come back home soaked - it's either that or you're stuck in the house".*

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was noted as providing an important sporting outlet as well as a strong sense of community. However, there was also considerable frustration that public amenities, such as football pitches, were not available for casual use: *"there's other astro pitches and GAA pitches, but you're not allowed into that".* Also, the young people were aware that, *"if you don't play football you are at a disadvantage in Baltinglass, not maybe a huge one, but you know that's the first one people look to, to play sport".*

The impact of the 2008 recession on the development of the region was raised by some. The proposed site for a cinema in one town was depicted in photographs by some of the participants. Despite the fact that the cinema never materialised, young people felt it was still

"*a big space, it's a big field, you could have loads of things in there*". Photographs in another town showed a high number of closed premises invoking an observation that "*they're all closed down places and no one bothers trying to open them back up again*".

A community hall in one of the areas invoked a strong reaction among participants and was the subject of a number of photographs. Its facilities were listed as "*a snooker table and goals and all that*", "*a handball alley*", "*a big hall upstairs like with pool in it*". Activities on offer included karate, or less relevant to the participants "*bingo, Irish dancing, and jiving*". Participants indicated that you "*could go in there and pay €2 to play a game of snooker*". However, the consensus amongst the group was that this venue was not inviting; it symbolised young people's exclusion from the social life of the community.

Feeling Judged

Young people were quite annoyed about being unfairly and harshly judged. Some people "*even if they haven't even talked to you before, they've only seen you, let's say, do a bad thing once and they just have that in their mind, they just make their mind up about you*

without even talking to you". Being judged because of your family circumstances was especially upsetting for many young people. One participant felt, that they were "*judged for what you had in your pockets*". Speaking with particular reference to schools another participant said that "*you're judged by your background. You're judged like...what family you had in here before. Like, they never judge you for you. It's always who was in here before*". Similarly, another young person expressed outrage at being judged because of "*your history and your background. And where you're from*". There was a strong sense of hopelessness about this aspect of their lives with one participant saying that "*It's life. It happens everywhere. Even if you move to a different country where nobody knows you. But they would find out who you are*". The relative lack of population mobility in terms of people relocating into or out of the West Wicklow region was mooted within the stakeholder focus group as a contributing factor to the rigidity and fixity of people's judgements and stereotypes.

One participant voiced frustration at adults firstly not listening fully, and secondly contradicting young people before they had a chance to fully articulate their point. It was clear they wanted their views and feelings to be validated not undermined or contradicted by adults. As one participant put it:

"Like even when you go to like describe something to them, like say you're describing the town, they'd be like, 'Oh yes, I know what you're talking about' and they'd be like, 'it's not like that', that kind of thing. You should be able to tell them in your way".

However, young people recognised that there may be adults that genuinely do care, but they highlighted that having previous negative experiences can lead young people to be distrustful of the intentions of adults and to resist offers of support from them. In one conversation, young people described it this way:

"You see like, some people just get to the stage where, because people aren't listening to them, they feel like no one cares.

Yeah, and that they can't talk to anyone, so that when people actually genuinely try helping, they push them away."

Mental Health

Many participants made links between having a person they could talk to and positive mental health. The following observation was made by one participant who was experiencing family break-up:

"You don't have anyone to talk to and your friends whose parents have not split up, they won't understand what it's like. So you're just kind of like, 'I have no one', and then you confine in yourself and you fold in, and you kind of turn into an introvert, and you just stay, and you don't trust. You become more shy, you lose trust in people, and you have issues, like, with multiple things, and mental disorders. So you can't, you know, talk to someone about it."

Another observation was that "*some people keep to themselves and then they take it out on themselves. Like if they had anger or sadness and they feel like they're the cause of it, they take it out on themselves and they do stupid shit*". Suicide was recognised as an issue for this age group, with some participants noting an increased prevalence: "*yeah, especially with teenagers in the last three or four years....in the last year or two. It's been increasing*". The young people felt that social support was crucial and that "*even getting people out with their friends*" would be beneficial for someone going through challenging experiences. Other participants were philosophical in thinking through young people's experiences of distress. One felt that young people need to hear what loss through suicide felt like for survivors.

"Even just for a few hours and then maybe they might realise that, you know, like even for someone to talk about how families feel after losing someone really close, you know. And maybe if this person was thinking of

suicide it would make them realise and open their eyes that there's always someone worse than you."

Another offered the following insight:

"teenagers think they have the weight of the world on their shoulders and I know it's true and I'm really bad for it. I just think everybody's wrong and I'm right and my life is awful, but then I think that's just a part of growing up as well."

Sex and sexuality

In one focus group young people discussed their needs and experiences in relation to sexuality and sex education. The discussion began with a focus on school-based experiences of relationships and sexuality education. One participant felt a teacher had lacked adeptness at dealing with a transgender student and also gave examples of a class in which a teacher went *"skipping past pregnancy, he skipped past any sex talk, too uncomfortable".*

This led to a serious and thoughtful conversation about their sexual experiences. Female member of the focus group highlighted how younger girls in particular, need to know how to protect themselves. They referred openly to grooming, with one girl explaining:

"The lads are like completely grooming. And like... if like... you're in a group of girls and say in second year or whatever, one girl has had sex or she's done something, then another girl will be there – 'oh my God I have to do this now'...She wants to be on the same level as her".

Another girl revealed that *"lads like might even target first years. That has happened! It's happened! It happens all the time!"* With reference to the school, she said: *"like if they [the school] knew an older guy was having sex with a first or second year, wouldn't they educate them on it. We should be educated on pregnancy. People need information and they need to learn how to say no. And be a serious discussion, not one you laugh about".[3]*

Within the young people's focus group, sexual pressure was a feature of girls' encounters. They therefore highlighted a need to have support in how to resist unwanted sexual advances and how to negotiate problematic scenarios. For instance, with reference to sexting, one girl commented:

If someone is putting pressure on you, another guy or whatever, to send him pictures or whatever, or if you have [sent pictures], and now he is threatening to send them [to someone else], you need someone to talk to about it. And it's hard going to your mam or dad and be like 'I'm sending pictures to someone'. They will be ashamed of you in a way, but... it's only human.

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[3] These disclosures were reported to relevant authorities. A follow-up conversation with school personnel revealed that relevant staff were aware of these allegations and were taking measures to address them. See sections on *Ethical Considerations* and *Phase 3 - Focus Groups* in Section 3 above.

In identifying who might be a suitable person to talk to, some participants expressed a need for a counsellor. But, they also noted potential barriers: "*you can't get a counselling session without asking your mam to drive you there and she'd wonder why*". Others expressed reservations about the term 'counsellor', but were in agreement that young people may at times need professional support: "*well we wouldn't call it a counsellor, but someone to talk to*".

School, Study and Homework

Many of the conversations referenced young people's school experiences. The actions of peer cliques in school were problematic for many, "*you can feel them judging. Like you can literally see it. Literally coming out of their eyes*". Drawing on photographs, others cited feeling intimidated by walking past large groups.

The view expressed by the majority was that they were not always comfortable approaching a designated person in the school about problems that occurred with other students. One group expressed anger at overhearing teachers openly talk about students. A participant in that focus group referred to a friend who had spoken in confidence to a teacher and the teacher subsequently "*turned around and said exactly, like, what they were after being talking about. Out in front of everyone in the class!*". This promoted a feeling in the focus group that there was "*no one in school, no one you can trust. Student confidentiality is not a big thing up there*". Another opinion was that in the school environment "*it'd be your fault. Like you're making it happen. It's your fault the teacher asked you, or your fault...maybe you're not showing the teacher respect. All the teachers stick up for each other*".

An adult participant validated some of the young people's concerns acknowledging that schools can be guilty of a labelling young people based on where they live. She said this filters down to the young people, leading to "*completely alienating and isolating an entire generation of children through no fault of their own, other than their post code*".

The restrictive nature of some school rules was critiqued for their curtailment of self-expression through hair colouring and nail polish. A photograph of a yellow car standing out as being different led to a discussion about young people's need for self-expression and individuation – simply '*being able to be yourself*'. A direct association was made between a lack of opportunity for self-expression and poor self-confidence: "*no one really our age has the confidence to go out and express themselves because we've been shut down in school*".

Balancing this critique was positive support for some school programmes with SOAR identified as particularly beneficial. Schools were generally seen as being proactive at bringing in guest speakers to talk on various subjects such as cyber bullying, but some

deemed this as ineffective because *"they're not really talking to us, they're talking at us"*. Another young person referred to a talk on sexually transmitted diseases that she felt was not effective because the presenter wasn't very good.

Some participants spoke of the stress associated with exams and homework. The home environment was typically described as having *"so many distractions and there's so much noise"*.

Many acknowledged that the schools provided after-school study. Disadvantages to this were that in some schools there was a fee for the service, making it inaccessible for some. However, the main complaint about supervised study was the restrictive nature of it. It was described as *"sitting in a room by yourself, there'd be other students or whatever, but you can't talk, or speak or nothing apart from going to the toilets"*. Rules against listening to music, or having you phone, made it an unappealing facility.

The supervised school study structure meant young people were unable to collaborate on a problematic piece of homework. The example given was *"just like say I was struggling with maths, go to someone else who you know is good at maths or even if they're not, work together. So somewhere where you can get help for your homework, without doing after-school study"*. A less restrictive approach was seen as appealing. One participant said *"you could turn around, like say if you and a friend, whatever, said alright will we go study and take a break for a bit and then come back and do it again like"*.

This desire from young people for a less restricted environment echoed remarks made by some stakeholders when asked to reflect on their teenage years. They remarked how they *"would have liked things to have been less restrictive and confined"*, and passing through the teenage years was associated with an increasing level of rules*"*.

Libraries were not seen by the young people as offering a viable solution. In one town, young people relayed that the library only had limited opening hours that didn't coincide with their needs outside of school hours.

Parents

While many young people said they would be able to talk to a parent about issues that concerned them, at the same time there was a general feeling that with some issues *"you don't want to like, bother your parents with it, it's not that big a deal. But yet you can't stop thinking about it. It still needs to be sorted. You can't stop thinking about it"*. Another opinion offered was that *"you can talk to your parents; sometimes you can't say stuff that you want to say. You don't feel comfortable, something like that"*. Another was more forthright and felt *"it's impossible to talk to your parents"*. A solution offered in response was that

"*instead of talking to them which is hard, I just write notes and leave it beside their bed*". One participant felt that the project might have a role as "*like, parents need to have a class to understand kids*". Another agreed, adding that parents needed to understand "*what it's like to be our age now, rather than what it was when they were our age*". A further observation was that the ideal project leader would be someone "*that our parents will actually listen to*", indicating a need for help in communicating with parents.

Part II: Young People's Ideas for a Youth Project in West Wicklow

Inviting spaces and diverse activities

There was consensus amongst young people that they urgently needed somewhere to go and something to do. Stakeholders recognised that there were sports clubs and organisations like the *No Name Club* and *Foróige*, but that if you were not sporty or a '*joiner*', there was "*nothing for you as a teenager*". Young people's strongest desire was for a 'hang out' space, but without any particular structure to what might happen in this space. It needed to be, in the words of one participant, "*some place to go like, you know it's open, that you can go in and just relax, and like hang with your friends there, and just chill*". A need existed to

> "*get away from your house for a while, see if there's anything going on, but not even that, but you just want to go out, and, well because it's Ireland - you know it's going to be freezing outside - and you could just go there and, you know, have a bit of craic.*"

This was an appealing alternative to "*just stay at home and do nothing*". The 'hang out' element was captured by one participant as "*say like you have your phone like, you could be using it and you could be talking. Then you could put it down and chat away like*". Another posited that they'd like a few games but "*for the likes of people who smoke and all, they can go outside, have a fag, come back in and not be judged*".

An ideal mentioned by some participants was a youth café, with some referencing youth cafés they had encountered elsewhere. For example

"I know an example in Kilkenny there, it's called Drum and its run by Foróige. They have, you know they have like foosball and they cook and stuff and it's kind of, everyone is kind of welcome in it like. So it would be an ideal, I know it can't be expected like but it's kind of one of those things like where it could be ideal in the town if enough people got behind it".
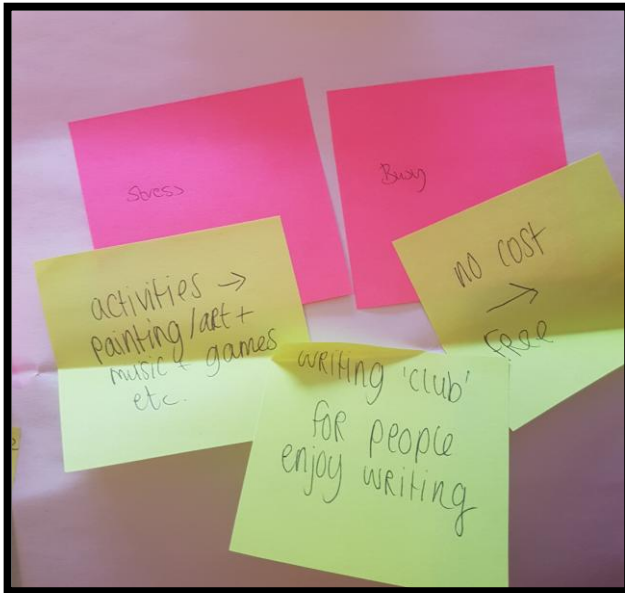
Other activities suggested included self-defence classes, make-up tutorials, cookery, writing workshops, and DJ-ing.

Some had firm ideas about the décor and ambience of this hang out space. It would be a space "*where you can go in and you can sit down and just, food provided, you don't have to pay for. And warm when it's winter*". Music was a major requirement in making it an appealing place to hang out for young people. One group felt that it could accommodate a practice venue for aspiring DJs "*let them do it there, and they wouldn't have like, people drunk. They'd be able to do it and that's them practicing as well. So then they'd have people to listen as well*". Another referenced a venue in Cork that was "*really cool like they had a ping pong table and then they'd a pool table out the back and then there's speakers and all where you can play music*".

It was clear from many contributions that for the project to establish a service that was appealing, it would have to meet a largely undefined definition of being both 'cool' and 'craic'. A lack of agenda or pressure to join in with activities seemed closest to meeting this need. Consequently, the ideal was typically articulated as "*somewhere to go, like to chill and relax, you don't want to go for people to keep constantly asking you questions*".

The lack of a cinema in the area, the expense of cinema going, and the absence of transport to larger towns led to suggestions that a movie night would be appealing, especially if coupled with pizza or a take-away. Pool tables were also seen as attractive. An outdoor space, "*a garden, like sit in the sun*" was suggested by some, while a space for kicking a ball around was also identified as making a hang out space attractive.

Many participants expressed a wish for trips to be organised; however suggestions made by some were often tempered by others voicing concern at the price. One observation speaking to this point was that there was a need for "*just like something that is reasonable, that like families could afford as well. For families that don't have that much. And that want to get their child to get involved in something*".

Someone to Talk to who will Listen and Understand

A strong impression emanating from the focus groups was that at times they described a need for a person, not a place, setting or activity. This person was someone they felt they could trust to not judge them, and that they could confide in if they wanted to. Some young people directly mentioned a need for someone to talk to. Remarks such as *"like even someone, say you're stressed with studying or something like that, someone just to talk to"*. They recognised, if there is no one to talk to *"you just bottle it up"*.

As noted above, feeling judged by others was an issue that exercised many participants leading some to consider that the adults associated with any youth project should not be local.

> *"Because it's such a small town. Everyone knows each other. So, if you're going to speak to someone, you might want someone from outside. You know like, you might not speak to someone from here."*

There was a clear opinion voiced that before confiding in someone, you needed to have a relationship with them that would come from "*just being with them, talking*". Also, *"if you got to know someone, you get a sense of trust like"*. Some thought that this might take some time with one saying "*but you wouldn't have, at the start though you wouldn't have any, how do you put it, respect for them like*". Another offered that "*maybe if you had an adult there you could trust, that if they heard enough of the story of how you felt, they could try and help you…*". They felt that adults needed to *"understand where you're coming from as a kid, growing up with nothing to do, being bored all the time*".

There was no clear sense that participants felt a strong requirement for a problem solver. In fact, when asked did they need someone to come up with a solution for them, the response was "*No, someone to talk to*". In another, it was simply a requirement for "*someone older, like an adult in charge. Be around like, if you needed to talk, or something*". A fear that their feelings might be deemed inconsequential by adults (they gave the example of being laughed at or ridiculed), was discussed in one focus group and was seen as a deterrent to young people opening up. For instance, a young person might rationalise her thoughts or emotions; "*oh well that's not important, I can't go and talk to anybody about it, but yet it's eating at her mind. She needs someone to ease her mind in a way like*".

In one focus group, a debate ensued over whether, when you had something on your mind, it was easier to speak to someone directly or remotely. One male participant had a strong view that it was easier to talk to someone if they were not in front of you, citing examples of online gaming. Another disagreed favouring "*face to face, you know, interactions with people whereas if you're talking over the computer screen the whole time, it's going to be, I don't know, I just find it harder*". A balance emanating from this discussion was the suggestion that

young people could game on screens beside each other, not necessarily having conversations as they played but "*if you felt like it, yeah somebody there if you felt like it*".

On balance, one female participant highlighted that while it was certainly a good thing that people have someone to talk to when things '*get on top of them*', this should not be the sole focus of any youth project. It would be off-putting and counter-productive, "*because they'll be all going with their problems*"; and ultimately, "*no one will really be going [to a youth project] to listen to other people's problems*". Thus, if the project was primarily about young people going to talk about what was troubling them, it would detract from the appeal of going there. Understandably, the young people also want a place where they can get away from the stresses and tensions that characterise their everyday lives; a place where they can go to just relax or have fun .

The Need for Choice

One description given that captured the spirit of many responses was a need for:

> "*A place to hang out and there's activities like. It's your decision if you want to join in them and it's not just people making you. Say if they were doing an activity and you didn't want to do it, that there'd be other activities, say you could just join in then if you wanted to*".

This quote captures a consensus that there should be a strong ethos of choice over what was happening so that you wouldn't be "*like, forced into it*". One suggestion was a survey to see what to do over the summer and Easter holidays. Being able to decide what happened would help make the project appealing "*because you'd actually want to be there*". Another noted that "*because you're not going to want to come to a yoke where everyone has made up ideas, and you're just sitting there, and you have no say in what's happening*".

Some participants wanted a service and a place to hang out to be open every day after school. Others mentioned that the weekends were particularly boring. It was clear that any service would have to come to the young people as a lack of public transport was a universal theme across all focus groups.

Access to Internet and Technology

Technology was seen an essential component of what would make the space appealing, with a strong focus on gaming and the need for WiFi. Some alluded to playing tournaments online against others on Play Station or Xbox and described a scenario where they could meet up to "*game with your friends*", where "*instead of talking online, talk to them when they are with you*".

The necessity for WiFi was referenced frequently; "*like you're going to actually hang out with your mates or whatever like, but you have to have WiFi as well*". A typical need was expressed as "*mostly though like a place to like actually hang out that has WiFi*". The young people were also able to articulate what they did not want in a youth service. Some had experienced youth clubs where "they take your phones off you", where they were not allowed to leave to go to the shop and where there was no "craic". In sum, the young people did not

want undue restrictions imposed on them. It was important that they were treated more independently and were consulted in relation to any rules or guidelines.

An Educational focus

There was an unconscious articulation for an educational component to the project. Young people referenced needing to be better educated on sexuality and mental health. For example, a discussion in one focus group arose over the error of self-diagnosing depression "*so we should know way more information about that*", to be able to distinguish between feeling a bit down and suffering from anxiety. Instances of people posting pictures of themselves on Instagram implying they suffered from anxiety impacted on "*people who actually do suffer from anxiety, like, will be looking at that. They're over-shadowed*". As previously highlighted, the young people also expressed a need for guidance and support around sexuality and sex education.
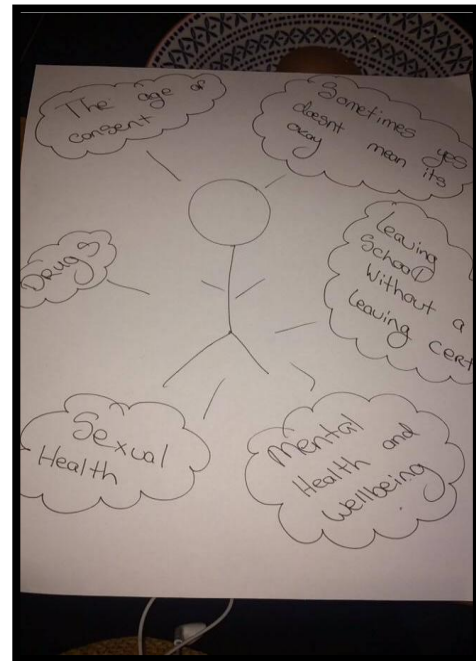
Permanence and predictability

The transience of some previous enterprises was noted by young people. One participant spoke of a successful youth club that he had enjoyed which was now "*shut down completely. There was no interest after like everybody turned 16, 17*". The volunteer nature of youth club conveners was put forward as a reason for this: "*Like people who are volunteering like, their kids weren't old enough, so they were thinking why would they bother*". It was important therefore, that whatever service was being mooted be "*something that's always going to be there*". A stakeholder recognised the tenuous nature of funding and voiced a fear that resources would not be put in place to "*make it happen*". Speaking from experience she recalled how services were asked to drill deeper to reach or "*get the people left behind*", meaning those who were marginalised and unable to access supports. Clearly frustrated, she explained that having reached out to people, the resources were never put in place; consequently, "*we got everyone's hopes up, and then you could go feck of. They put nothing in place*".

An Advocate or Representative

An opinion amongst some older (late teens/ early 20s) participants was that they needed a person who would be able to represent them if they brought ideas forward. A photograph of a disused football pitch evoked a discussion about how the pitch had fallen into disrepair to the extent that football was now played on the road beside it. Disputes with neighbours over footballs going into gardens was a contributing factor; "*spending more money on balls and then they're getting taken off you*". This annoyed the participants in this focus group because it was an example of "*no one's bothering with it*" and if you complained, no one really listened, "*they'll just tell you what you want to hear*". The same group named a deceased critical actor in the community who they saw as being proactive on behalf of young people. They highlighted an absence of any other person with whom they could identify as representing them, and getting things done.

Section 5 Analysis and Recommendations

Using a participatory and rights-based approach, the current research sought to ascertain how young people in West Wicklow define their own priorities, as well as to identify their needs in relation to youth services and supports. It was prompted by a previously identified gap in service provision for young people in the region (Wicklow CYPSC, 2016). Our findings clearly show that this gap in service provision is being keenly felt by young people and it is negatively affecting their experiences of growing up in West Wicklow. The young people's experiences are considerably at odds with what is envisaged for them in *The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People* (DCYA, 2014). Thus, there is an urgent need to address the issues that serve to marginalise and stigmatise young people in West Wicklow.

This section of the report has two broad objectives. First, we briefly summarise, analyse and contextualise the key findings. We do so under four emergent themes: 1) Spaces for Participation and Belonging; 2) Supportive relationships; 3) Identity and Exploration; and 4) Sexuality and Mental Health. By linking the current findings to broader national and international literature, we aim to build a richer picture of young people's lived realities. In this way the overall significance of the views that the young people expressed can be better understood.

Second, we offer two distinct sets of recommendations. The first set of recommendations has to do with the development of the WWYP. As such, this fulfils the overarching purpose of the current work, which was to identify specific recommendations that could inform the planning and the development of the Youth Project. These are followed by a second set of recommendations, which are broader in scope. It is evident on hearing the young people's perspectives, that the WWYP cannot address all of the challenges that they encounter. On the contrary, many of the issues that the young people perceived as requiring urgent action, fall within the remit of other organisations/agencies; and in many cases will require multi-agency collaboration. Thus, although this set of recommendations is beyond the scope of the WWYP alone, we wish to honour the contributions of the young people, who gave freely and generously of their time, and provided us with unique and valuable insights into their everyday lives. It is our hope that these recommendations will be helpful to both the young people of West Wicklow themselves, and to the relevant agencies and organisations in the region, particularly in relation to leveraging support for much needed change.

Taken together we hope that the recommendations will better enable the young people of West Wicklow to live more fulfilling lives and will support them in contributing meaningfully to social and cultural life as valued members of their communities.

Analysis of key themes

Spaces for Participation and Belonging:

It is well recognised that young people enrich their local communities, contributing to the vibrancy of civic, economic and social life. Indeed, in the *Wicklow County Development Plan* the high youth population is explicitly referenced as a strength for the County (Wicklow County Council, 2016). However, the young people we spoke to in West Wicklow do not feel that they are perceived as valued and respected members of their communities. On the

contrary, they have deep experiences of isolation, loneliness, marginalisation and social exclusion.

The lack of an adequate transport infrastructure in West Wicklow is severely curtailing young people's freedom and independence. Yet, even when young people have some limited mobility, there are few spaces available to them where they can engage in social life with each other. Meeting in cafes or the local chipper costs money, which the young people don't have. Meeting in shopping centres tends to be frowned upon by business owners who frequently ask or demand that the young people 'move on'. Meeting each other in outdoor spaces can evoke similar requests to move along, and it also means being exposed to the inclement weather. Many existing amenities (e.g. community halls, playgrounds) are geared toward adults or younger children; for teenagers they tend to further epitomise a sense of exclusion. Hence, there was a unanimous concern that young people have nowhere to go; they feel trapped and isolated within their communities.

Young people expressed concerns about their physical safety and a potential risk of harm in some communities. Walking home in the evening in poorly lit areas, risks associated with alcohol and substance use, as well as possibilities of assaults or violence in local 'hang out' spaces were all issues of concern to young people. There was a geographic dimension to these experiences, in that isolation and hopelessness were expressed most acutely by young people in the south of the county, whereas a risk of harm – substance use and sexual and physical violence – was articulated most strongly by young people further north.

Supportive Relationships

Often what young people wanted most was not an amenity, activity or resource; rather it was the presence of a person -- someone who would take an interest, listen, and understand. This person was envisaged as an adult, or more knowledgeable other, who could offer guidance, perspective and support. The young people deemed it essential that such an adult would have a good understanding of what life is like for contemporary young people and that they could listen without casting judgement. The presence of at least one caring adult in a young person's life is crucial and can act as a buffer against stress, thereby supporting more positive psychological functioning (Dooley and Fitzgerald 2010). The emphasis that these young people placed on relationships is also reflected in international findings. For instance, Nolas (2014) writes that young people are less preoccupied with the activities and resources on offer in any youth club or service; they tend to be more interested in the opportunities these activities give them to relate to each other and to the youth workers.

The young people's existing relationships with adults in their communities were characterised as problematic and conflictual. They felt that community members are unduly judgmental and did not seem to care what young people think. They were also deemed to have very little understanding of the challenges associated with growing up in contemporary society. Young people voiced concerns in relation to the restrictive nature of school life, a lack of consultation, and poor relationships with teachers. These concerns are echoed in previous research within the Irish context (Devlin, 2006; Horgan, et al, 2015; Lundy, 2007). However, they need to be understood within a national and international context of increased educational accountability together with competitive and high stakes assessment regimes. It

is well acknowledged that where there is excessive pressure on students (and teachers, for that matter) to get 'good' test results, then there tends to be a negative impact on student (and teacher) wellbeing (Biesta, 2015). Thus, there is a need to reconnect with the goals and purposes of education and to balance the goals of academic achievement with those of democracy, participation, inclusion and social justice.

Feeling judged and negatively stereotyped was a matter of enormous concern to the young people. As mentioned in the Introduction, such stereotyping is a common feature of young people's lives. For the young people who took part in this research, there were particularly negative experiences of being unfairly judged based on their family background and socio-economic status. The establishment of the WWYP offers a crucial opportunity to enrich the relational life currently experienced by young people in the area. Youth workers can play a vital role in 'rewriting the script' -- challenging the negative stereotypes that exist and promoting more positive and optimistic portrayals of young people. Youth workers might also feature as a significant adult in the lives of young people through their availability to listen, understand and support.

Identity & Exploration
Adolescence is an important time of exploration, where young people can try out different roles, activities and personas, as they develop a sense of their own individuality and identity (Steinberg, 2016). It is also a time where young people desire a greater sense of autonomy, choice and freedom in decision-making. However, young people in West Wicklow feel they have very few outlets for exploring their emerging sense of identity, and few opportunities for participating in decision-making. While many young people use social media to play around with a multiplicity of identities, as well as stay connected with each other; managing these different personas can present its own sets of challenges (Boyd, 2014; Gardner and Davis, 2013; Turkle, 2012).

The young people clearly desired opportunities to explore their personas in the context of real-life relationships and interactions. Schools were perceived as overly restrictive, curtailing young people's self-expression through the monitoring of clothes, hair etc. They were also seen to impose rules without any consultation. The lack of a decent public transport system was noted by young people and stakeholders alike, as placing limits on young people's freedom and restricting their opportunities for engaging in the sporting, social and cultural life of their communities. Without sufficient opportunity to explore their identities, strengths and capabilities, young people felt they were going out in the world lacking in confidence. In essence, they felt unsure about their identities and potentials, because they had not been afforded sufficient opportunities to try out various roles or activities.

Sexuality and Mental Health
The stories recounted by girls in relation to sexual predatory behaviour are deeply concerning. They talked about grooming, pressure to send sexually explicit images as well, as threats to disclose those images. Many of these accounts were discussed matter-of-factly; they seemed to be regarded as an almost inevitable or expected feature of the girls' sexual

encounters. These issues are not unique to a single school, town land or region in the country. It has previously been highlighted that in Ireland, 37% of all perpetrators of child sexual abuse are themselves children, 97% of whom are boys (RCNI, 2013). Nationally and globally, it is recognised that young people are growing up in a highly sexualised world. Sexual content, particularly sexualised images of girls and young women, is pervasive and found in virtually every form of media, as well as in advertising and merchandising (APA, 2007; Kiely, et al 2015). Moreover, children and young people's exposure and access to pornography has increased hugely in recent years due to internet enabled technology (OCC, 2013).

Clearly these global phenomena are impacting the lives of young people in West Wicklow, and their influence is likely experienced in particular ways within the context of rural and small town living. When it comes to navigating sexual encounters, it was evident that girls shouldered the burden of responsibility. The girls involved in this study talked of their need to be better educated, their struggle to find someone whom they could talk to or seek guidance from, and the need to protect younger girls (particularly those entering first year of secondary school) from the sexual advances of older boys. There was no discussion of how boys might need to be challenged, prosecuted, educated or supported. Yet, evidently boys need access to more progressive masculine role models and need to find ways to resist and challenge hegemonic masculine identities centred around the macho predatory male (Connell, 1995; Wight, 1994). The mixed messages given to teenage boys also places them at considerable risk. Requesting a nude image from a girlfriend might be seen as normal teenage behaviour, yet when boys turn 18, the same request made to a minor places them at risk of potential criminal investigation.

A multi-agency and multi-pronged approach is necessary at both national and regional levels, to more effectively challenge the pervasive and provocative sexual messaging directed at young people. In addition, critical media literacy, while not a panacea, may give young people (both male and female) better skills in understanding, resisting and challenging the messages they receive. Central to this approach would be a critical analysis of relationships of power; that is, the power and interests of global media, advertisement and pornography industries, compared to the relative powerlessness of their teenage audiences (O'Toole, 2017). Also important is to think about sexuality in relation to class, gender and other axes of oppression (Gill, 2012).

Similarly, in relation to young people's mental health, there is a need to move beyond basic functional literacy aimed at improving recognition of mental health conditions and prompting help-seeking behaviour (O'Toole, 2017). As part of a *critical* health literacy approach, young people may be supported to understand the social determinants of mental ill-health, and become empowered to make choices and take actions that benefit their own mental health as well as the health of others (Chinn, 2011; Nutbeam, 2008). Of course, such work can only take place in the context of young people being afforded respected and valued roles in their communities.

To conclude, the young people who took part in this consultation were capable, competent and resourceful. They articulated a strong desire to be play an active role and contribute to the vitality of their communities. However, most young people felt a sense of powerlessness in their ability to affect change because of their marginalised position. They had grossly

insufficient supports or resources available to help them navigate their increasingly complex lives. Addressing these issues will require interagency co-operation and sustained investment.

Recommendations for the Future Development of the West Wicklow Youth Project

Young people's ideas in relation to the establishment of a youth project are detailed in the findings. Here we consolidate the major themes and present the following recommendations of how a youth work response may address some of the themes:

- Offer young people safe spaces with opportunities to come together and connect with each other in non-formal youth work settings.

- Ensure young people have access to professional, trained youth workers that young people can talk to at times when they need support.

- Facilitate a diversity of opportunities for young people to engage in structured youth work activity.

- Ensure the youth project has presence and visibility across the entire region and is accessible to all communities across the region.

- Find innovative ways of reaching young people who have no access to public transport. A mobile service delivery, such as a custom designed and equipped bus, which could travel to rural communities, seems ideal. Online supports might also be considered, although at present there is poor internet and mobile phone connectivity in some areas.

- Acknowledge the diversity of young people's lives and work to ensure that the project meets the particular needs of individuals, recognising that these may differ depending on gender, social class, geographical area and other factors.

- Continue to engage the Youth Advisory Group and ensure that young people are centrally involved in planning and managing all aspects of the youth project in their areas.

- Given that some previous initiatives in their communities were short-lived, it is crucial to ensure there is permanence, continuity, and predictability in the delivery of a youth project. Ensure young people know, and can influence, when the project is open and can depend on it, both now and into the future.

- Support more positive and optimistic portrayals of young people in the local media and within local communities.

- Work with young people to identify ways in which they can participate actively in decision-making within their communities and support them in accessing these opportunities.

- Support young people in developing pride in their communities, by advocating for and encouraging young peoples' involvement in local initiatives, and by facilitating their access to and use of the natural environment.

- Liaise with young people's parents, as appropriate, acknowledging the importance and complexity of their parenting role, and fostering deep insights into contemporary youth culture

- Develop young people's critical media literacy and critical health literacy

- Empower young people to critically analyse the sources of stress and tension in their lives and support them to make choices and take actions that benefit their wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. In so doing, consider drawing on critical pedagogies that facilitate the raising of awareness of sources of oppression.

- Engage young people in a sexuality education curriculum, to include critical discussions on issues of direct concern to young people, including sexual consent, pornography, sexting, and positive masculine and feminine identities.

Recommendations for the Development of Broader Services and Supports for Young People in West Wicklow:
- Sustain and build upon the investment in youth services in the West Wicklow region.

- Highlight, and work to improve, the deficiencies in the transport infrastructure, as well as the deficiencies in internet and mobile phone connectivity, across West Wicklow as a matter of urgency.

- Ensure that the built environment is safe for young people and the whole community e.g. that footpaths and walkways in towns/villages and at designated bus stops are well lit.

- Establish dedicated youth spaces across the whole region, such as youth café's and accessible green areas.

- Identify youth advocates in local communities to help foster respectful, open relationships with adults, including teachers and parents.

- All agencies and institutions working with and for young people should be underpinned by explicit values of democracy, participation and equality.

- Educational leaders in the region should facilitate discussions on the goals and purposes of education, incorporating the views of young people themselves; and find ways to offer young people more opportunities for meaningful participation in educational decision-making.

- Ensure young people have opportunities to present their perspective so that those working directly with them have an understanding of what life is like for rural young people in contemporary society, including an awareness of the strengths that young people possess and the challenges they face.

- Ensure that those agencies promoting the West Wicklow countryside as a resource, as an amenity for recreation, or as a tourist destination also consider the needs of local young people.

- Ensure that young people themselves and the agencies representing them in West Wicklow have strong representation on public fora, and work collaboratively with public representatives, and community members to address the social exclusion and isolation of young people.

- Harness interagency and interdisciplinary expertise locally, regionally, and nationally to advocate for targeted measures to support young people in developing positive and healthy sexual relationships.

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Section 7: Appendices

HARDIKER MODEL

The Hardiker Model was developed in 1991 in the UK to help understand different levels of need within a population of children (Hardiker *et al*, 1991). This model is now widely used and has been found to be a useful planning framework by both the UK and Irish Governments.

The model outlines four levels of intervention, as follows:

Level 1: Refers to those mainstream services that are **available to all children** - healthcare, education, leisure and a range of other services provided in communities. It also offers the potential for targeting resources through community development initiatives (such as parent and toddler groups, community houses and women's groups), which may be available to the whole community but are particularly targeted at disadvantaged communities.

Level 2: Represents services to children who have **some additional needs**. Services at Level 2 can be characterised by referral, and full parental consent and negotiation. Examples would be behaviour support, parenting support, additional educational services, and support for children who are deemed vulnerable through an assessment of what their need is, and via targeted specific services provided by education, health, social services, law enforcement and the voluntary sector.

Level 3: Represents support to families or individual children and young people where there are **chronic or serious problems**. Support is often provided through a complex mix of services that usually need to work together well in order to provide the best support. State intervention can have a high profile at this level. Examples would be children on the Child Protection Register or who have come before the Courts.

Level 4: Represents support for families and individual children or young people where the family has **broken down temporarily or permanently**, where the child or young person may be looked after by social services. It can also include young people in youth custody or prison, or as an in-patient due to disability or mental health problems.

*DCYA: Government Publications (2015): National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) Resource Manual: **Planning, Needs Assessment and Evaluation***

Appendix 2

Sample Information and Informed Consent form for young people

West Wicklow Project Information Sheet

What is this all about?

This is a consultation to explore what life is like for young people (10-24 years) in the West Wicklow region to find out what activities, services, amenities and resources young people would like to have available around where they live.

As part of the project we will talk to young people about their views. These conversations can take place in a group with other young people (a focus group) or on your own (an interview). They will last no more than one and a half hours. They will take place in community or youth centres in three towns: Blessington, Baltinglass and Dunlavin.

We will also invite you to take photos of where young people spend time. Afterwards we will talk to you about the photos, what they mean to you, and why you took them.

Another part of the research will involve talking to the agencies that work for young people in the West Wicklow area, so we can hear their views.

We will use all of this information to write a report for Kildare Youth Services, which will help them make plans around the types of services and support young people in West Wicklow need.

Who is doing the research?

A research team from Maynooth University (Catriona O'Toole, Victoria Showunmi and Michelle Maher). Michelle Maher will conduct the focus groups and interviews and will be working with Kildare Youth Services and Kildare/Wicklow Education and Training Board throughout the project.

Do I have to take part?

No, only if you want to. There is a Consent Form for you to sign and one for your parents to sign if you are under 18 years of age. You will be given a copy of this information form and consent form to keep. You can stop being part of the research at any time.

Will my participation in the study be private?

Yes. We won't use your name. We may include some of the things that you say, but we won't say that it's you saying it. If there is a possibility that you are recognisable from the photos you take, we will talk to you about whether or not you want to share the image.

What will happen to the information that I give?

We are hoping to record the focus group and interview conversations if that is ok with you. We also hope to collect some of the photos you take and use these in our report, but only if you are happy for us to have them. When the research is finished we will keep the information safely for 10 years and then it will be destroyed.

What will happen to the results?

We will write a report for Kildare Youth Services which will inform the development of the West Wicklow project. We also hope to publish some of the findings in papers and books. The research gives you an opportunity to have your say regarding the kind of services and supports young people in your area need. However, we cannot guarantee that any or all of the services you would like to have in your area will be provided. We also hope that the sessions will be fun and interesting and that you will enjoy the opportunity to have your voice heard and help to shape how we do our research.

It is possible that some people might find the process boring, uncomfortable or inconvenient. As we said, you can stop being in the research at any time.

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, you can contact one of the research team: XXXX at XXXX or XXXX. If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the Consent Form attached.

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner. On rare occasions research can become evidence in an investigation. In the very unlikely event of this happening with our research in West

Wicklow, a court may over rule the promise of confidentiality we have given you. The University will do its best to ensure that confidentiality is maintained.

Parent(s) / Guardian(s) Consent Form

In consenting to my child's participation in this research, I
understand the following:

- All information from the research project will be treated confidentially.
- All interviews or group discussions shall be recorded on a hand held Audio recorder
- The data (information), including audio recordings, photographs, transcribed interviews / focus groups will be stored securely in accordance with data protection laws. Electronic data will be stored on a password protected file on a password protected device.
- I can request feedback about the research project from the researcher.
- The data collected as part of this study will be put together to form part of a report that will go to Kildare Youth Services and the results and photographs may be included in other publications or presented at conferences.
- Your child's identity in all publications and presentations will be protected, unless we have consent to use a photograph in which they are identifiable. I understand that it cannot be absolutely guaranteed that we will not be recognizable from the data.
- My child is free to leave the research project at any time and may withdraw the data obtained from their participation, if they do so wish, up to the time of publication of the report.
- Results from this research work will not be used deceptively or without my consent.
- I have been assured that my concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.
- I have received a copy of this letter and consent form for my own records.

I _____ (PRINT NAME)

agree to my Child / the Child whom I have guardianship of_____
(PRINT CHILD'S NAME) to take part in the research process being undertaken by
Maynooth University for Kildare Youth Services

Signed: _____   Date: _____

Signed: _____   Date: _____

Signed: _____(researcher)   Date: _____

Consent Form for Young People Participating in the Research

In consenting to participate in this research, I confirm the following (please tick the box provided):

I have read the information sheet about this study	☐
I understand what is involved in this study and what I will be expected to do	☐
I understand that the data collected as part of this study will be put together to form part of a report that will go to Kildare Youth Services and the results and photographs may be included in other publications or presented at conferences	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop taking part in the study at any time up until the research is published	☐
I understand that the focus groups and interviews will be audio-recorded	☐
I understand that I may be recognized from the photographs used in publications and conference proceedings but they will only be used with my consent	☐
I understand that I have the right to access my personal data at my discretion	☐
I understand that I do not have to answer any questions I am not comfortable with	☐
I understand that my participation and the participation of other young people will be kept confidential except if there is a child protection concern	☐
I agree to my data being securely stored by the researchers and Maynooth University and only for the purposes of this study	☐

Please tick as appropriate:

☐ Yes, I agree to take part in this study.

☐ No, I do not agree to take part in this study.

Your name (print): _____

Your signature: _____

Date: _____