



The  
**Community Foundation**  
for Northern Ireland

## HARD TIMES 3

### YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

*“I’d like to say to the politicians to stop bickering about the past and look towards the future.”*

#### Key Messages

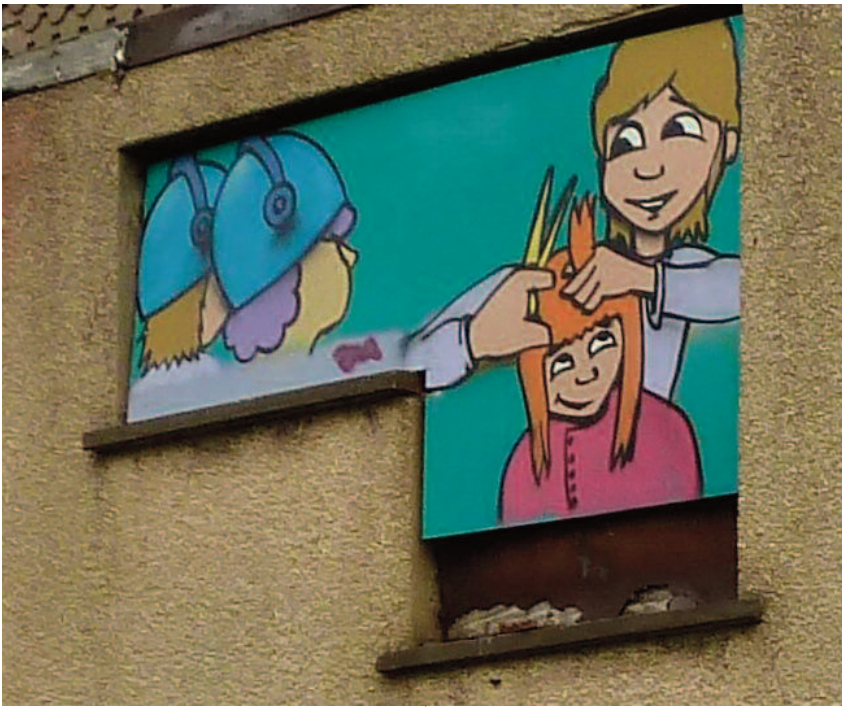
- Young people are striving to escape the cycle of poverty and debt.
- The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is seen as a vital resource for young people in education from low income families.
- Computers and internet access at home are unaffordable for many families.
- A university education now feels out of reach for many.
- Young people feel trapped in a cycle of part time low paid jobs, with few opportunities for full time jobs or a career.
- Young people do have hopes, dreams and aspirations and are doing what they can but they need more support to achieve their ambitions.

These key messages have emerged from detailed analysis of 6 transcripts of recorded conversations with young people (aged 8 to 22 years) from Ardoyne, Fountain Street and Springhill, Taghnevan and The Villages Together, between July 2012 and February 2014. Additional information was provided from CiA youth arts projects and workshops. Many of these young people’s experiences are supported by wider statistical evidence and academic research. More information on this community-led action research project can be found in HARD TIMES 4.

This is the third in a series of four *In-Briefs* presenting the latest findings from the Communities in Action (CiA) Programme, a unique community-led research project with eight working class communities across Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

Since July 2012, local people have been documenting their experiences of the recession, cost of living increases and changes to the Social Security system in the run up to anticipated Welfare Reform legislation.

This *In-Brief* examines young people’s perspectives on how the current situation impacts on them and their families, the challenges they face to escape ‘the poverty trap’ and their perspectives on what could be done to help them fulfil their potential.



## Nothing to Spare

*“We struggle sometimes with bills and stuff. My daddy is a taxi driver ... so if it isn’t busy he won’t get as much as he wanted, so that gets us stuck sometimes.”*

The number of children growing up in poverty in Northern Ireland is a cause for deep concern. The latest government consultation on Child Poverty reported that 109,000 children in Northern Ireland are now living in absolute poverty in 2011/2012, compared to 95,300 in 2010/11.<sup>2</sup>

For the young people in this community-led research project, they (like their parents), are noticing that things have become tougher in the last few years – especially at Christmas time.

*“Christmas morning there’s not enough, not as much stuff sitting, even for my wee brother. There’s a big thing with money, I’ve noticed it anyway. It used to be that the living room is full, now there’s hardly anything... It’s just a whole big debt like.”*

Concerns over proposed changes to the Social Security system, like the ‘bedroom tax’, are a worry for some parents with older children, which in turn is having an impact on young people’s thoughts about their future.

*“My mammy canny afford that (the bedroom tax). I canny leave home cos I’ll leave my ma with more debt if I move out.”*

The struggles their parents are going through, however, are not something they usually discuss at home or with friends. It remains a taboo subject.

*“My mum... she won’t say I can’t get you this because there isn’t a lot of money. It’s like you don’t mention it. You just keep it to yourself ... You can’t talk to other people about it either, because my mum is a single parent too and so there is a lot of stigma...”*

### A culture of debt

It is not only their parents who are struggling financially. As the cost of living continues to rise and

financial support from family is limited, living on credit and going into debt is becoming a way of life for many young people. Some are using credit and store cards for their day-to-day needs and many talk about the pressure they experience from credit card companies and loan companies to get into further debt.

*“I am 18... Me and my mum moved house. Before that we lived with my Granny. I don’t know about my mum but I am in debt into the thousands.”*

*“Once you get into debt, it’s very hard to get out of debt ... the amount of letters I get sent me from credit card companies that I’ve qualified for a credit card and all I have to do is fill in the details and send it back, I could be sitting here with 10 credit cards if I wanted to.”*

Some young people continue to rely on friends and family for cash, when they need it, but this brings a burden of guilt along with it.

*“I feel awful so I do [borrowing from family]. Because it’s actually oil money for next year... I feel really bad taking it from my mam because there’s no other income coming into the house at the minute.”*

In response to the issue of young people in debt, some CiA community groups have set up budgeting classes and cookery skills courses, bringing together older and young people in the local community.

## ‘The Place Where We Live’

Young people taking part in this community research project are

from areas of high deprivation - urban and rural - across Northern Ireland. Two areas, Ardoyne in Belfast and the East ward in Strabane rank nine and twelve respectively (out of 890), in the list of most deprived small areas in Northern Ireland (NIMDM, 2010).<sup>3</sup> As young people in one area joked, there were no thefts from people's property there *"because there's fuck all to steal."*

Few of these young people come from households that can afford family holidays, or even day trips away. So the place where they live is where they spend much of their formative time.

***The majority of people in Northern Ireland believe a holiday at least once a year is essential for children. For 30% of families in Northern Ireland, this is out of reach.***

***(Source: PSE NI 2013<sup>4</sup>)***

Some areas have long-standing issues with different youth gangs, paramilitary groups and armed gang related activity, punishment beatings and shootings. Others are frontline areas with ongoing tensions between communities, especially around key events such as the 12<sup>th</sup> of July.

***"I only live down the streets from the riots so even if I am in my house I see everyone running up and pushing cars up, so my mummy tries to keep me in the house but it is hard ... you hear stuff in the night and all the day."***

While many of the young people found it hard to speak positively about their area, few would speak openly about this or express their sense of frustration to outsiders.



How they feel inside is another matter.

***"The police are always in and it makes the place look worse, to other people."***

***"Honestly, usually when people ask me where I am from, I feel ashamed to say I am from here because, again, how the news portrays it as car bombs and riots and that's all you hear."***

**No way out and nothing to do**

A lack of money, a shortage of local facilities and the frustration this brings are common themes raised by young people across all of the communities, but in particular in rural areas and small villages. 24.5% of households in rural areas are without access to a car.<sup>5</sup> Young people report that cuts to transport have also begun to have an impact in some areas.

***"You don't feel always it's a safe, secure place. Certain parts you don't go to."***



*“Last year we had rural buses and they were all cut. There was one, the school bus, it was cut as well but they argued with it and got it back, we only get it in the morning.”*

Many rural areas lack local amenities, as young people from one small village point out:

*“In the town they have pools and stuff and a gym and all, where we have to go to cities to get that kind of stuff. It’s kind of crap because there’s nothing to do.”*

Young people are also very conscious of what they lack locally compared to facilities in other areas. In Strabane for example, young people from the East ward commented on

***“You can’t really go anywhere and it all depends on buses and stuff like that and you can’t go to a cinema or bowling or stuff because the bus doesn’t work with that time ...”***

differences in services and sports provision particularly between the East and West wards.

*“Over the bridge [on the West side] they’ve got the sports centre ... it’s like with 2 pitches, they’ve got the park. What have we got? An astro turf out there with a big hole in the middle of the pitch.”*

For those communities with a range of facilities and sports clubs, there is a strong sense of pride. Young people saw having these facilities locally, as “making a place”. But the high prices being charged made many of these facilities out of reach for the young people in the CiA focus groups. Parents also struggle to pay for leisure activities on top of

other costs which makes free or affordable activities for young people all the more important.

*“There are sports centres ... but it can cost £40 to hire the youth centre for an hour – so if you are not part of the Centre of Excellence Sports Centre or did not belong to the church youth club, there was nothing.”*

However new play areas and sports facilities, in themselves, are not sufficient to engage local youth or to help them deal with the myriad social problems they face in their areas.

### **Drugs and the temptation of ‘easy money...’**

*“My wee boy is 10 years old and he said to me ‘when I grow up I’m going to be a drug dealer’. I said ‘what made you think that?’ and he said ‘well, such and such in my class, his daddy is drug dealer and he has been to Florida, he has seven bottles of aftershave and they have a motor home...’ That was just a gobsmacker.” (Parent)*

The open buying, selling and using of illegal drugs in their local areas are familiar issues for some young people in these conversations. In many cases, the older ones expressed great concern for younger children growing up in this environment where drug dealing can be seen as a tempting ‘career option’, especially when children see their parents anxious and struggling to make ends meet. Young people described the grooming process that takes place in the streets around them.

*“The back of my street, like I walked up the path and they were just there in the open taking drugs... they’re getting younger ones to sell it for them and then they’ll give them a few pound for selling them and then if they get caught it’s nothing to do with them.”*

*“I know ones where they’ve got involved in drugs, and they’ve become runners for drug dealers, because they see it as a quick and easy way to get a lock of pounds. It’s very difficult to get part time work, and if you do get part time work it’s only maybe for one shift a week, and that’s not going to pay anything, and the scene is all you have to do is deliver this package to wherever and we’ll give you a lock of pounds for it, and it’s easy money. I wouldn’t do it, it’s the not the morals I would hold.”*

*“It starts off as a wee favour and ‘don’t you worry about that’, and then next thing is, ‘where’s my money?’ And it’s not ‘I’ll write you a letter asking you for it several times’. It’s ‘if you don’t pay up, you’ll get ...’”*

*“There’s loads of people dealing drugs now, they’re all driving, they haven’t worked a day in their lives and they’re driving about in these big Audi’s... When you see the cars and all they’re driving and the way they’re living it would tempt you to do it... Lifestyle of a flipping footballer.”*

## The High Cost of Education

**66% of the people in Northern Ireland agree that children need a computer and the internet for their homework.**



### Resilience Story: Becoming Young Leaders in Strabane

“In this community we are at the coal face in terms of the impact of the cuts and poverty and a lot of things impact on young people here, without their say or input. We wanted to get their views on the issues that affect their everyday lives.” (CiA Community group practitioner)

Fountain Street and Springhill community groups are based in the East ward of Strabane, known locally as the Head of the Town, one of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. Hard to reach young people were specifically invited to participate in the CiA community conversations. Many of these young people were caught in ‘a poverty trap’, underachieving at school, developing a ‘bad reputation’ and becoming caught up in the criminal justice system. Few felt that they have any control over their lives. Fewer still were interested in voting.

To address these issues, Fountain Street Community Development Association has focused its efforts on supporting young people to change their own lives. The group used some of its BBC Children in Need CiA funding to work with a group of older teenagers and develop a youth empowerment project. In workshop sessions, these young people said that they wanted to improve facilities for younger children in the area. The CiA group provided youth development training to enable these young people to begin to deliver their own stand-alone activities and to pioneer youth-led solutions.

The group has also taken part in workshops on the political process, attended Stormont and met their politicians. For some young people this has kindled a deeper interest in local politics, voting and in the role they can play locally, socially and politically in shaping their future here in Northern Ireland.



**22% of households with children in Northern Ireland do not have a computer with access to the internet.**

**(Source PSE NI 2013)**

Parents and young people both point out the growing costs involved in education, from transport to school uniforms to books and technology.

*“It’s a few hundred pounds for a uniform, you don’t want him picked out by his friends... rather than buying a pair of shoes at £15 you’re trying to save £30-£35 to buy a pair of shoes, because your kids are coming in crying that girls are making fun of me because I’m wearing this and*

***“I have to find places which have free internet ... so I will stand outside McDonald’s just so to get their free WIFI.”***

***that, and that’s just society these days.”*** (Parent)

Some young people reported a sharp increase in their bus and travel fares once they turned 16, which meant going to school, college or vocational training became an expensive business.

*“In 5<sup>th</sup> year [under 16] I had to pay it too, but you were paying a child’s return, you were only paying £3.50 or something for a return, now you’re paying £10.00.... If I can’t find £50 I don’t go to school.”*

### **The technology gap**

Young people describe how schools and colleges increasingly

rely on technology such as computers and the internet and ‘expect’ students to have access to these resources. For many families this is simply not possible and many homes cannot afford internet access even if they have a computer.

***“For my younger brother and sister for school, my parents are paying maybe £40 a month, because the school says they have to have iPads in order to do their class lessons ....the stress that they’re putting on my parents.”***

Some young people describe staying late in school to use the computer and internet facilities there, but that time is limited as schools usually close at 7pm. Free internet is available in libraries, however printing may be costly, if available. Some young people have also noticed changes to library services in their local area.

***“The library usually stayed open to 8 o’clock but they were closing at 5 o’clock which, by the time you got out of school, you were only there for an hour and a half.”***

### **The EMA**

The Education Maintenance Allowance, provided by the government for young people aged 16-19 staying on in school or further education, is seen as a vital resource for many, enabling them to continue their education. The recent introduction of means testing, however, can make a huge difference for young people and their families, especially for those who are just above the income threshold.

***“Because my dad got his new job halfway through this year I’ve just found out I don’t get***



*anything from EMA next year and like he only earns like an extra few hundred over what he should... It's just the fact that I have to ask my dad for that money."*

**“How can we afford university?”**

*“I think the likes of student loans are actually putting people off going to university and stuff because you know you're stuck with them for life and then people are coming out of*

*university and still not getting jobs.”*

Gone are the days when an education through university was seen as an escape route from ‘the poverty trap’ or a way of expanding their horizons. Young people talked about the need to find paid work rather than pursuing their interests in further education. For many parents and young people high university fees are presenting a real barrier to their life opportunities or leading to more debt.

*“Luckily enough I get my fees paid for me, but I've still got loans, although I didn't take as big a loan this year, but I'm already £8000 in debt from the first 2 years.”*

*“My middle child is going to be the first one to go to university ... Oxford are actually requesting him. How could I afford to send him to Oxford? And I'm scared to death because I feel I'm going to jeopardise his future because he's coming from a low income family.”*  
(Parent)

In 2013, about 21% of 16-24 year olds in Northern Ireland were not in employment or training – more than anywhere else in the UK.<sup>6</sup>

**“I'm forever applying for part time jobs. Forever.”**

**The Future**

**Wanting more than just a part time job**

Building a career seems a distant dream for many of the young



people taking part in these community conversations. Those who are in work are usually in part time, low paid work, with little job security. Between 2007 and 2011 employment rates for young people aged 16-24 dropped by over 11%.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, part time employment has increased across the labour market.

*“I tried to get work everywhere as a mechanic and I couldn’t ... and the way the tech works, if I didn’t have work I wasn’t allowed back because I couldn’t complete the course... so now I’m working on a temporary contract for 13 weeks in Tesco, night shift two nights a week...I would like a different job. The night shift is bad and I would like a full time job, not temporary.”*

With so many young people looking for work, most jobs require relevant experience alongside qualifications even in the most entry level jobs. The irony of the situation and the hoops they have to jump through,

is not lost on young people. *“I can’t get experience because nobody will give us a job.”*

*“There was a job in the chippies and ... they were like ‘you need substantial catering experiences’. ... You want me to have substantial catering experience, to like serve someone greasy sausage?”*

For many, emigration remains one of the few viable options for pursuing a career.

*“I’ve looked in Australia – I did want to do nursing but sure there’s no jobs for that either, so I want to do business or something, but move FAR away”*

### Still daring to dream

*“What would I say to other young people? Dream big and hope for the best.”*

Some of the young people taking part in this project were asked

what they wanted to do in the future, if they had no barriers in their way. All had big dreams whether as midwives, youth workers, global entrepreneurs, teachers, chefs, poets or artists. What they need is targeted support to enable them to fulfill those ambitions.

As part of this project some of the young people were also asked what they would want to say to politicians. Many felt that their voices had little value or that politicians wouldn’t listen to ‘the likes of us’ but given the chance, this is what they would say:

*“They need to help our parents who are helping us.”*

*“I would be telling them about the area I live in and there is not lots of stuff to do and I would like more stuff to happen for teenagers.”*

*“What could be different? More jobs and stuff, more chances...”*





## Youth Recommendations

**1. Young people feel it is important to provide more support for their parents who are, in turn, supporting them.** Increasing levels of poverty and a lack of opportunities are impacting on them, their families and younger siblings. More support for families is needed during these hard times. A dedicated budget to eliminate child poverty in Northern Ireland as suggested by the Child Poverty Alliance, might be one step towards this goal.

**2. Young people feel the high cost of transport [post 16] needs to be addressed, especially in rural areas.** Free transport to young people still in training or further education would make a big difference to their options. Ensuring better transport in rural areas would also address some of their feelings of isolation.

**3. Young people feel more innovative and inclusive approaches could be used to improve services and activities in their areas.** There is a need for accessible recreation resources – not in the pursuit of excellence but as a base for community activity and social life. These should be locally identified, ideally in consultation with local young people. For example, young people in Ardoyne suggested that better use could be made of existing disused buildings in their area with more provision for young teens such as ‘teen gyms’. Young people also want more opportunities to visit other places.

**4. Young people feel it is vital to have equal access to computers, digital technology and the internet.**

Suggested solutions include expanding the provision of technology centres (computers, printers and subsidised printing) and free WIFI access to all low income and working class communities. The government should also consider ways to invest in libraries and schools in disadvantaged areas as local resources, or at the very least to protect the levels of service provision in these areas.

**5. Young people feel the high cost of further education needs to be addressed.** One solution is a review of the student loan system and how it applies to students from low income families. The Centre for Economic Empowerment discussion paper on *Expensive Lending* offers some policy suggestions in this area.

**6. Young people feel the government should do more to create real job and career opportunities, not just training and part time, low paid work.**

**7. Young people feel there should be more forums to have their voices heard.** Young people’s suggestions included more youth councils and more opportunities to meet with and talk to politicians. It is important to increase opportunities for young people to understand and connect with the democratic process and pathways to influence social policy. Suggestions include creating effective Youth Councils with a diverse and representative membership.



<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Ruth Moore and Charlene Logue for additional information provided from their workshops with young people in The Villages Together and Fountain Street and Springhill Park, Strabane.

<sup>2</sup> DSDNI (2011-2012) *Poverty in Northern Ireland 2011-2012* available at [www.dsdni.gov.uk](http://www.dsdni.gov.uk)

<sup>3</sup> (NISRA 2010) Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure [www.nisra.gov.uk/deprivation/nimdm\\_2010.htm](http://www.nisra.gov.uk/deprivation/nimdm_2010.htm)

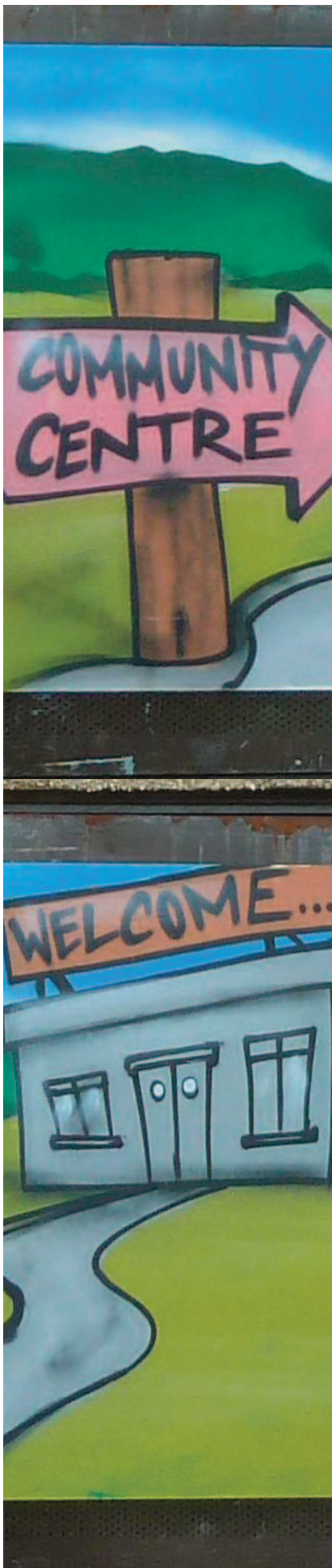
<sup>4</sup> PSE NI (2013) *Northern Ireland Faring Badly* available at: <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/pse-uk/pse-northern-ireland>

<sup>5</sup> Rural Community Network (2011) RCN Response to consultation on Budget and Departmental spending plans

<sup>6</sup> [www.delni.gov.uk/es/statistics-not-in-employment-education-or-training-neet.pdf](http://www.delni.gov.uk/es/statistics-not-in-employment-education-or-training-neet.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Tomlinson, M (2012) *Young people and the legacies of the conflict* [www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/pse-ni/presentations](http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/pse-ni/presentations)





## About Communities in Action

To date, between 60 and 80 local people have joined a series of community conversations facilitated by the following community groups, under the Communities in Action Programme:

- Cregagh Community Association, Belfast
- Donegall Pass Community Forum, Belfast
- Doury Road Development Group, Ballymena
- Fountain Street Community Development Association and Springhill Park Community Development Association, Strabane.
- Grace Women's Development, Ardoyne, Belfast
- Lettershandoney District Development Group, Co. Derry/L'derry
- Taghnevan Community Development Association, Lurgan
- The Villages Together encompassing the villages of Donemana, Bready, Magheramason, Artigarvan, Ballylaw, Ballymagorry and Newbuildings.

Communities in Action is a unique community led action-research project developed by Community Foundation Northern Ireland (CFNI) working in collaboration with BBC Children In Need. Communities in Action is part of CFNI's Social Justice Approach to Community Development Programme that is supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies. Queen's University Belfast and the Open University supported the development of the research process as part of their community engagement remit for a major academic research project on poverty and social exclusion in the UK (PSE UK).

For further information on Communities in Action go to:

<http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Communities-in-Action->

Community portraits and short films made by Communities in Action groups with support from the Open University can be viewed at:

<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/community/northern-ireland/communities-action.>

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