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**Special EU Programmes Body  
Comhlacht na gClár Speisialta AE  
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# IMPACT EVALUATION OF PEACE IV

## OBJECTIVE 2.1

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 14 – 24

### Executive Summary

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# Executive Summary

## Background

Throughout the Northern Ireland peace process, funding from the European Union has sought to support and address economic and social development in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland. The current PEACE IV Programme focuses on a narrow range of activities to ensure that funding brings about significant change in four key areas: Shared Education, Children and Young People, Shared Spaces and Services, and Building Positive Relations. Specific Objective 2.1, Children and Young People, branded as PEACE4Youth, prioritises those young people aged between 14-24 years who are most disadvantaged / excluded / marginalised, and who have deep social, emotional, and good relations needs. Many of these young people are at risk of becoming engaged in antisocial, violent, or dissident activity, are disengaged from the peace process, and are not in formal education, training, or employment. The overall financial allocation of €37.6m (EDRF + match funding) was based on the desire to achieve significant regional impact through the support of funded projects designed to provide young people with the opportunity to participate in shared, outcomes-focused programmes of activity incorporating quality-learning experiences with an aim to, *“Enhance the capacity of children and young people to form positive and effective relationships with others of a different background and make a positive contribution to building a cohesive society.”* Phase I of the PEACE4Youth Programme commenced in the late autumn of 2017 and continued until late autumn 2018. Implementation of Phase II (2018-2022) was subject to the results of a positive evaluation of Phase I, conducted at the Programme level.

## Theory of Change

The Programme-level theory of change anticipates that through participation in purposefully designed projects, young people would develop capabilities in relation to three Programme outcome areas - Good Relations, Personal Development, and Citizenship. These capabilities in turn, would support broader societal change.

## Output Indicators

Initial targeting aimed for an anticipated 7,400 participants across both Phases of the Programme.

- Phase I: 1,875 young people aged 14-24 years who are most marginalised and disadvantaged completing approved programmes;
- Phase II: 5,525 young people aged 14-24 years who are most marginalised and disadvantaged completing approved programmes.

A participant was considered to have completed the programme if they have either engaged in at least 80% of the sessions or days agreed for that participant as part of their individual development plan, or, where relevant, passed an agreed form of assessment related to the programme. Projects were encouraged to incorporate at least 3-4 days of participant contact activity per week. At the Programme level, it was anticipated that 80% of participants will be from Northern Ireland and 20% from the Border Region of Ireland with variation across individual funded projects.

### Outcome Indicators

Funded projects and activities were required to show clear development of sustainable participant capabilities in relation to each of the three Programme outcome areas and their indicators. These included:

**Good relations** content will contribute to lower levels of community division, sectarianism and racism, and will make a positive contribution to reconciliation. Specifically, the participant will develop, understanding of and respect for diversity; an awareness of sensitivity to the values, beliefs, customs and traditions of others; an understanding of their own identity; respect for others from different community and cultural backgrounds, abilities and orientations; and a positive predisposition to others from a different community / cultural background.

**Personal development** content will develop the social and emotional or 'soft' skills of the participant including, an increased self-awareness, understanding, confidence and agency; planning and problem solving; relationships, working effectively with others, and leadership; resilience and determination; and other relevant knowledge and skills for supporting their own health and well-being.

**Citizenship** content will develop the capacity of the participant to make a positive contribution towards their participation in family, community and society. This will involve developing their knowledge and understanding of their role and developing capabilities for engagement with useful services; positive participation in community structures, initiatives and democratic processes; volunteering in communities of place and / or interest; positive family and community relations.

### Result Indicators

Through these actions it was anticipated there would be a measurable increase at the regional level in the percentage of 16-year-olds who:

- Socialise and/or play sport with people from a different religious community from a baseline of "very often" at 43% and "sometimes" at 24% to target values of 50% and 28% respectively.
- Think relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than they were five years ago from a baseline of 45% to a target value of 50%.

- Think relations between Protestants and Catholics will be better in five years-time from a baseline of 38% to a target value of 45%.

These result indicators were monitored from information collected by the Northern Ireland Young Life and Times Survey and evaluated using the 2022 survey against baseline data gathered from the 2013 Northern Ireland Young Life and Times Survey.

### Project Activity

To ensure that the design, duration, and intensity of PEACE4Youth would lead to a transformative experience, which both improves individual life circumstances and contributes to a more cohesive society, all funded projects and activities, were tailored to the needs and interests of participants with activities and methods underpinned by an agreed set of principles and practice standards. In total, 11 funded projects received funding through the PEACE4Youth Programme. Each project represented a collaboration of several different organisations, with one lead partner. These projects include:

- **Amplify** (€4,568,998.60): YouthAction NI in partnership with Foróige, Youth Work Ireland, NI Youth Forum, and Patrician Youth.
- **Breakthrough** (€3,193,909.75): Ashton Community Trust in partnership with StreetBeat Youth Project, Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum, Loughview Community Action Partnership, Newtownabbey Arts & Cultural Network, Ardoyne Youth Enterprises, Mount Vernon Community Development Forum, City Life Centre, and Youth Education Health & Advice.
- **Futures Project** (€3,640,751): Belfast Metropolitan College in partnership with Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Start360, and Southern Regional College.
- **Helping Equality Respecting Others Enabling Success (HEROES)** (€1,785,364.44): Mencap NI in partnership with Londonderry YMCA, Devenish Partnership Forum, and Health Service Executive.
- **Journeys** (€5,074,283.26): Springboard Opportunities in partnership with Roe Valley Residents Association, Cavan & Monaghan Education and Training Board, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Foras na Gaeilge, Ulster-Scots Agency, Belfast Central Mission, MACs Supporting Children & Young People, The Welcome Organisation, Queens University Belfast, Christian Brothers' School, Hazelwood Integrated College, Belfast Model School for Girls, Belfast Boys Model School, Burnfoot Community Development Association, Benbradagh Community Association, Black Community Association, Greysteel Community Enterprise (Vale Centre), Teach na nDaoine Family Resource Centre, Belfast Area Partnership, Little Flower Girls School, St Patrick's College, and Bearnageeha.

- **Mpower** (€3,541,772.95): YMCA Ireland in partnership with Southern Region YMCAs (Lurgan YMCA and Portadown YMCA), North Down YMCA, Youthbase YMCA Newcastle, Belfast YMCA, South East Antrim Region (Carrickfergus YMCA and Larne YMCA), Londonderry YMCA, YMCA Lisburn Ltd, and Young Women's Christian Association - Monaghan Branch.
- **Peace Bytes** (€3,795,063.93): Peace Bytes in partnership with TIDES Training, Merville and District Family Resource Centre, and Newtownabbey Arts & Cultural Network.
- **Strive** (€3,979,785.60): Include Youth in partnership with Youth Initiatives NI, Newstart Education Centre, Northern Ireland Alternatives, and Lifford/Clonleigh Resource Centre.
- **The Third Space Project** (€3,714,910): Extern in partnership with The Verbal Arts Centre.
- **Transformation Education for Positive Relationships (TRANSFORM)** (€2,390,685): Youth Link NI in partnership with Youth Initiatives NI and Royal MENCAP.
- **YouthScape** (€3,994,559.07): South West College in partnership with Donegal Youth Services and TIDES Training.

All funded projects received guidance and support through a Quality and Impact Body. Led by Cooperation Ireland in collaboration with Ulster University, National Youth Council of Ireland, and POBAL, YouthPact (€1,407,852.69) was tasked with developing a strong, nurturing relationship with all projects through centralised activities and events, structured project visits, and ongoing quality and impact conversations.

### Impact Evaluation

To ensure that the PEACE4Youth Programme met the requirements established through the Programme-level theory of change, all funded projects were assessed using quality distance-travelled measurements and project self-evaluation techniques aligned to the programme-level theory of change and evaluation framework. An Evaluation Plan was developed which outlines two types of evaluation; the first, evaluating the efficacy and effectiveness of the implementation mechanism established for the Programme and the second, evaluating the intervention logic of the three outcome areas and form a view of the effectiveness and impact of the investment. In November of 2017, the evaluation team from the Centre for Identity and Intergroup Relations at Queen's University, Belfast was contracted to complete the latter impact evaluation. To date, the team has delivered on the Project Initiation Document, the Phase I Impact Evaluation Report, in coordination with RSM UK, the PEACE IV Impact Evaluation Conference 2019, and the Phase II-midterm Impact Evaluation Report. The current document, the PEACE4Youth Impact Evaluation Final Report, builds upon and extends their insights, but acts as a standalone document evaluating the overall Programme from start to completion.

## Approach

To evaluate the intervention logic, effectiveness, and impact of the investment in the PEACE4Youth Programme, the evaluation team used a mixed-methods approach examining both primary and secondary data including:

- Review of project monitoring data
- An online project and cohort profile survey
- An online/paper participant profile survey
- An online/paper longitudinal survey completed pre-intervention (Time 1), mid-intervention (Time 2), post-intervention (time 3), and at 12-month post-intervention (monitoring survey) by young people participating in PEACE4Youth funded projects exploring the three outcome areas and their subsequent indicators, accreditation received, and plans following project completion
- An online early-exit survey of participants leaving project activity prior to completion
- Review and analysis of the 2013 to 2022 Northern Ireland Young Life and Times Survey datasets
- A series of three focus groups with key project personnel exploring internal and external factors impacting participants and project implementation
- Attendance at a random selection of YouthPact meetings and training events
- Review of publications and training materials developed by YouthPact and provided to project personnel

Together these sources of data allow for the exploration of both individual- and project-level factors that may influence Programme impact. Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately using appropriate analytic techniques, while insights gleaned from one analysis informed the analysis of the other. This strategy enabled clear identification of potential success on output indicators, outcome areas and their indicators, and result indicators, as well as identification of aspects of the implementation approach that may influence project delivery. The following is a summary of the major findings from the Final Report.

## Theory of Change

### Output Indicators<sup>1</sup>

#### *Phase I (2017 – 2018)*

Initial Programme-level targeting aimed for an anticipated 1,875 young people aged 14-24 years who are most marginalised and disadvantaged completing approved programmes. Following initial

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are not fully verified and are subject to change.



Project-level targets estimating a total of 1,980 participants, several projects revised their initial targets resulting in a new Phase I target of 1,680. Records suggest that at the conclusion of Phase I, a total of 1,625 young people had completed approved programmes. While this is **lower** than the initial Programme-level target of 1,875 it is **consistent** with the revised Project-level target of 1,680.

### ***Phase II (2019 – 2022)***

Initial Programme-level targeting aimed for an anticipated 5,525 young people aged 14-24 years who are most marginalised and disadvantaged completing approved programmes. Following initial Project-level targets anticipated 5,806 participants; however, several projects revised their initial targets because of Phase I achievement resulting in a Project-level target of 6,278 participants. Records suggest that at the conclusion of Phase II, a total of 6,307 young people had completed approved programmes. This is **higher** than the initial Phase II Programme-level target, as well as the revised Phase II Project-level target.

Across both phases of the PEACE4Youth Programme, 7,932 young people aged 14-24 years who are most marginalised and disadvantaged completed approved programmes. This is **higher** than the Programme-level target of 7,400 participants.

### **Outcome Indicators**

The longitudinal surveys completed by young people engaged in project activity was used to assess the distance travelled for the three outcome areas and their subsequent outcome indicators. At the conclusion of the Programme, demographic information on young people completing the surveys had been collected from 4,676 young people (862, Phase I; 3,554 Phase II core; Phase II Illustrated and Arabic version), providing detailed information about participations from all funded projects. Across the duration of the Programme, there was a fairly even distribution of participants completing the surveys in terms of gender (Phase I 51.9%, Phase II 50.1% male; Phase I 47.1%, Phase II 48.7% female). The age range was skewed towards younger participants with the majority 13-17 years old (Phase I 53.5%; Phase II 72.5%) and the minority 18-24 years old (Phase I 42.9%, Phase II 25.5%) and the distinction was more so in Phase II than Phase I. The community background also showed a skew with consistently more young people reporting that they were from the Catholic community (Phase I 50.7%, Phase II 59.4%) than from the Protestant community (Phase I 25.6%, Phase II 23.8%). There was a consistent group of young people who reported that they were from neither the Catholic nor Protestant community (Phase I 12.6%, Phase II 12.1%). With approximately four out of five young people were from Northern Ireland (Phase I 80.5%, Phase II 78.5%) and one out of five from the Republic of Ireland (Phase I 19.5%, Phase II 21.5%).

The ethnic background of the young people completing the surveys was predominately white (Phase I 92.3%, Phase II 90.3%), with approximately one in ten (Phase I 7.7%, Phase II 9.4%) participants indicating that they were from a minority ethnic community (including Irish Travellers). In terms of disability, a sizeable group indicated that they had a disability (Phase I 13.3%, Phase II 13.9%), while a relatively smaller percentage were unsure (Phase I 3.4%, Phase II 5.7%). Of note, the percentage of young people who reported they were from a minority ethnic group or had a disability is substantially higher than those found in the 2011 NI Census (1.8% minority ethnic population; 2.7% 15- to 19-year-olds and 3.1% 20- to 24-year-olds reporting a disability). In addition, 9.9% in Phase I and 14.1% in Phase II indicated that they were a carer for someone they lived with who was sick or elderly or who had a disability.

To explore distance travelled across each of the three outcome areas and their indicators, wherever possible, the surveys were matched across three time points – beginning, mid-point, and end of involvement with PEACE4Youth. The evaluation team adopted a ‘repeated measures’ approach to the analysis, which enables the analysis of changes in mean scores over three or more points in time. In other words, this analysis measures the distance travelled in the core outcome areas.

Overall, for the **Good Relations** indicators there is *clear evidence of positive distance travelled*. Indicating that young people had enhanced their capacity to form positive and effective relationships with young people from a different background than themselves, including those from the other community, a different jurisdiction, and from other ethnic backgrounds. This included an increase in understanding of and respect for diversity; an increased awareness of and sensitivity to the values, beliefs, customs, and traditions of others; a stronger understanding of their own identity; and an increased respect for others of different community and cultural backgrounds; abilities and orientations. All measurement scales for these indicators showed significant change, save for reduction in sectarian behaviour which consistently across Phase I and Phase II showed no evidence of a reduction.

For **Personal Development**, there is *clear evidence of positive distance travelled* with all outcome indicators and their associated measurement scales showed significant change. This means that because of participation in PEACE4Youth projects, young people reported an increase in self-awareness and understanding; confidence and agency; planning and problem solving; positive relationships; working effectively with others; leadership; resilience and determination; and relevant knowledge and skills for supporting their own health and well-being.

Finally, for **Citizenship**, there is *clear evidence of positive distance travelled* as change was evident across all but 1 indicator. Specifically, clear change was found for engagement with useful services and volunteering in communities of place; participation in community structures, initiatives, and democratic processes; and family and community relations. There was no significant change, however, for a reduction in antisocial behaviours.

The majority of these effects were significant regardless of the duration of the project, and, while there may have been a ‘dampening effect’ over the Covid-19 lockdown, the positive effects still held up. That is undeniable evidence of the positive impact of the PEACE4Youth Programme on the outcome indicators. Given the tremendous reach of the PEACE4Youth Programme, it is noteworthy that there was no significant change found for sectarian and antisocial behaviours. Closer examination of the mean scores for these two variables find that only a small minority of individuals reported engaging in these behaviours and those that did reported a low frequency. It may be that the measure was too “blunt” leading participants to report in a more socially desirable way or it is possible that these low scores represent an accurate depiction of the negative behaviours that these young people engaged in.

### Result Indicators

#### ***Socialise and/or Play Sport***

Results derived from the 2022 Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS) indicated that 58% of 16-year-olds socialised and/or played sports with people from a different religious community (30% ‘very often’, 28% ‘sometimes’). This is significantly **lower** than PEACE IV Programme baseline of 67% (43% “very often”, 24% ‘sometimes’) as well as the 2023 target of 78% anticipated by the Programme-level theory of change (50% ‘very often’, 28% ‘sometimes’). While the 2023 ‘very often’ target of 50% is not yet met, the 28% ‘sometimes’ target is currently being met.

For participants completing the participant surveys during Phase I, the majority (68%) indicated that they sometimes, often, or very often interacted with young people from a different community background than themselves. This figure is slightly higher than the comparison group derived of 16-year-olds completing the 2013 Young Life and Times Survey (68%) but **lower** than the 2023 target of 78% anticipated by the Programme-level theory of change. While the exact measure was not collected for Phase II, data exploring the extent to which participants had both face-to-face and online interactions with members of the other community showed that the same proportion as Phase I (68%) indicated that they sometimes, often, or very often interacted with young people from a different community background than themselves.

### ***Relations Better Now than 5-years ago***

Results derived from the 2022 Young Life and Times Survey show that 37% of 16-year-olds believed that relations between members of the Protestant and Catholic communities are better now than they were five years ago. This is **lower** than the PEACE IV Programme baseline rate of 45% as well as the target rate of 50% anticipated by the Programme-level theory of change.

For participants completing Phase I participant survey, 64% (62% from the Phase II survey) felt that relations were better now than five years ago. This is **higher** than PEACE IV Programme baseline of 45% as well as the 2023 target value of 50%.

### ***Relations will be Better in 5-years***

Results derived from the 2022 Young Life and Times Survey showed that 37% of 16-year-olds felt that relations will be between members of the Protestant and Catholic communities will be better in five years' time. This is **lower** than the PEACE IV Programme baseline rate of 38% as well as the 2023 target rate of 45% anticipated by the Programme-level theory of change.

For participants completing the Phase I and Phase II surveys, 60% felt that relations will be better in five years' time. This is **higher** than the PEACE IV Programme baseline rate of 38% as well as the 2023 target value of 45% anticipated by the Programme-level theory of change.

While the Young Life and Times (based on 16-year-olds) and surveys of participants on the PEACE4Youth Programme (14–24-year-olds) are not directly comparable, results suggest that participants on the PEACE4Youth Programme are reporting more positive outcomes than 16-year-olds at a Northern Ireland level across all three programme result indicators.

### **Qualifications and Progression**

Additionally, participants who completed the Time 3 survey were asked to indicate what their intentions were upon finishing their PEACE IV project, and whether they had obtained any qualifications during their involvement in the programme. At the conclusion of Phase I and Phase II the majority of young people indicated that they had clear plans for their future either in terms of education-based opportunities (Phase I 55.2%, Phase II 54.0%), job training opportunities (Phase I 22.1%, Phase II 19.1%), paid work (Phase I 21.2%, Phase II 30.8%), volunteering (Phase I 17.8%, Phase II 22.0%), or another youth project (Phase I 20.1%, Phase II 23.8%). A minority of young people indicated that they had no clear plans moving forward (Phase I 20.1%, Phase II 26.7%). In terms of accreditations achieved by participants by the end of their PEACE4Youth projects, at the conclusion of Phase I and Phase II the majority of young people indicated that they had received at

least 1 accreditations or qualifications (Phase I 56.6%, Phase II 62.5%), including those in the areas of personal development (Phase I 36.4%, Phase II 30.9%), good relations (Phase I 28.2%, Phase II 29.0%), and/or citizenship (Phase I 21.4%, Phase II 23.2%).

### Examining Contextual Factors

#### Internal and External Factors Impacting Project Implementation and Delivery

Three series of focus groups were conducted with key project personnel to explore in greater detail the internal and external issues which they feel may have affected participations and project implementation. In total, of the approximately 240 youth workers employed over the course of the PEACE4Youth Programme, 107 project personnel from Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland took part in semi-structured focus groups. The focus groups generally lasted for 60 minutes and consisted of 3 to 9 participants representing project coordinators, youth workers, monitoring officers, and specialist youth mentors. Focus groups, when possible, were conducted in person at a venue near participants and following the Covid-19 pandemic a number were conducted online allowing for a diverse range of personnel from across Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland to meet.

**The first series of focus groups** conducted in 2018 was designed to discuss the key challenges and success factors affecting project implementation and any internal and external issues which they felt had impacted (positively or negatively) their ability to achieve their specific project objectives. Findings suggested that a number of “teething issues” in the initial formulation of the PEACE4Youth Programme, including:

- Challenges developing effective collaborations and partnerships due to differing organisational culture
- Perceived competition from other PEACE IV funded programmes and governmental initiatives
- Difficulties recruiting along specified recruitment criteria
- Frustrations with administrative workload (e.g., tight deadlines, heavy workloads, etc.)
- Young people’s reluctance to engage with community relations work

However, a number of facilitating factors were revealed; including:

- Development of innovative recruitment strategies
- The importance of building rapport and developing strong young person - youth worker relationships

- The formation of cooperative and collaborative relationships between PEACE4Youth funded projects and within communities
- Use of flexible work practices and adapting project activity and content
- High levels of support from SEUPB project workers and Quality and Impact Body (YouthPact)

**The second series of focus groups** conducted mid-way through Phase II explored successes and challenges implementing as the projects began Phase II, the connection between core project activities and achievement of outcomes, external influences that have helped or hindered project impact, and recommendations for future support and programme design.

Discussions related to the **evolution of practice from Phase I into Phase II** pointed to a sense that projects had settled in and smoothed out initial teething problems resulting in:

- Stronger relationships between partners allowing for projects to draw from wider networks and resources
- Streamlined bureaucratic processes
- Working with SEUPB project officers to deliver more bespoke project activity
- Development of in-house activities and toolkits
- Refining project activity based upon feedback from early cohorts of young people
- Confidence in understanding of target group and how to work with them effectively

That being said, initial teething problems from Phase I had developed into more fundamental challenges, including:

- High level of needs among the target group of young people
- Perceived saturation in particular geographic areas limiting recruitment
- Continued difficulties recruiting young people from a Protestant / Unionist / Loyalist background
- Differing communication and practitioner approaches hindering effective collaborations and partnerships
- Bureaucratic pressures, workload, and the QUB evaluation survey

It was at this stage, however, best practice and key factors amplifying impact began to emerge, including:

- Person-centred, positive relationships between project staff and young people
- Where possible, developing positive relationships with parents and guardians
- Group work and diversity as a way to achieve social connections

- Importance of connecting good relations work to real life
- Residentials, outdoor work, and celebration events offer a bit of “magic”

When asked to think about the design of future peacebuilding programmes in light of the PEACE4Youth Programme, project personnel had clear recommendations moving forward.

- Greater care and attention to the complex needs of this specific target group of young people
- Opportunities to enroll in multiple projects
- Bespoke programmes offered based on the needs of the young person; specifically in relation to the level of commitment
- Attention paid to the best ways to transition young people out of the programme
- Where appropriate, engaging with and involving family and wider community structures
- Reconsider the target balance based upon a growing percentage of young people self-identifying as “Other”
- Community relations work needs to begin with a clear understanding of one’s own identity and building confidence in discussing contentious topics with others
- Greater attention and thought given to what active citizenship entails
- Developing more effective, and time efficient, ways of capturing success

The 2020 focus groups conducted during this time, were completed just as lockdown restrictions were easing in July 2020. As such, these discussions centred on the challenges that were presented by the move from face-to-face to online delivery at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as factors that had promoted programme successes during this time.

Discussions revealed the **tremendous efforts and commitment** that programme staff had gone through making a swift and creative move into the online delivery for participants in the advent of lockdown in March 2020. In all respects of the programme, staff were doing what they could, working long hours (sometimes at risk of burnout), to engage young people and create a positive impact, even though much of the programme impact has previously been attributed to factors that involve face-to-face experiences. Young people’s levels of engagement with online activities were reported as varied for different reasons, but by quickly developing their expertise and using multiple methodologies (often because of the sharing of ideas between professionals about promoting engagement), this filtered into a mainly positive experience for many young people, despite them missing certain key experiences such as residentials and celebration events. Youth workers believed that online delivery would likely form part of their delivery for the foreseeable future (and indeed, that despite the challenges of online engagement, there were some key benefits in doing so). As such,

there was a need for further clarity about best practice for online delivery in relation to the different outcome areas, as well as expectations from SEUPB about the verification of activities and online contact hours.

**The third series of focus groups** were conducted in 2022. At this final phase of the evaluation, as project activity was ending, participant recruitment for the focus groups was found challenging. Many youth workers at this stage were either redundant or left their jobs in pursuit of other jobs. Discussions centred on the successes and challenges of the Programme, the sustainability of the Programme moving forward, the impacts of the closure of the programme, and recommendations for future projects. Major themes focused on,

Key factors promoting recruitment, engagement, and retention:

- Programme design (qualifications, financial incentives, sustained nature of the programme)
- Focus on personal development
- Programme flexibility to craft adaptive approaches tailored to the target group
- Professional development for project personnel to gain training, network, and share best practice

Persistent challenges:

- Geographical difficulties with recruitment
- Bureaucratic and process challenges to do with transitions between
- Perception of unrealistic expectations by funders in relation to target numbers, programme hours, and number of outcome indicators
- 'All-consuming' nature of the work

Closure concerns:

- Impact on young people; particularly, vulnerable young people and early school leavers
- Loss in highly experienced and trained staff due to redundancies
- Gaps in service within the charity and voluntary sector

Sustainability and lasting impact:

- Young people's enhanced life skills, resilience, and social connections
- Skills and qualifications empowered young people to go on to further work, training or study
- Professional development of young workers

Recommendations for future programming:



- Additional flexibility regarding completion for individuals who require more or less time
- Flexibility around recruitment criteria, particularly in respect to the diversification of identity in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland
- Continuation of programming supporting qualifications and skills training
- Additional training for youth workers in mental health provision for young people
- Additional mental health support for youth workers to safeguard wellbeing

### **Maximising Impact: The Role of YouthPact**

The positive influence of the Quality and Impact Body could not be overstated by the project personnel. Across each series of focus groups, practitioners praised the quality of YouthPact's staff and their expertise. Trainings and support activities offered knowledge-exchange opportunities to address challenges and share best practice. YouthPact was positioned as integral to overcoming some of the significant challenges faced in Phase I and there is evidence to suggest that the project coordinator meetings and partnership development sessions supported the positive partnership development found in Phase II. Further, the bespoke resources, toolkits, and training events which have been developed for project staff raised the knowledge base and skill set of the key workers who are trying to deliver programme content and improve the lives of young people. This was critical during the lockdown as youth workers faced considerable challenges moving face-to-face activity to an online format.

### **Conclusions**

Stepping back and looking at the wealth of data collected across the duration of the PEACE4Youth Programme there is undeniable evidence that funded projects have positively impacted the lives of participating young people for the better. In line with the Programme-level theory of change, through participation in purposefully designed projects, young people developed capabilities in relation to the three Programme outcome areas of Good Relations, Personal Development, and Citizenship.

### **Output Indicators**

Looking over the completion rates for young people successfully participating in and completing PEACE4Youth funded projects, the overall target was indeed reached by the end of the Programme. By the time the Programme had reached its conclusion, 7,932 young people aged 14-24 years who are most marginalised and disadvantaged completed approved programmes. A figure that was higher than the target of 7,400. However, closer inspection of the numbers at each phase of the programme reveal that many anticipated targets may have been too ambitious, particularly at Phase I. Projects needed time to determine effective strategies for recruiting young people and once they

did there was considerable uptake in completion rates for Phase II. Recruitment success was strongly impacted by the positive reputation developed by the projects and word of mouth from young people completing the projects in Phase I and early cohorts within Phase II.

However, there is a disproportionate percentage of young people who self-report that they were from the Catholic community in comparison to those who report they were from the Protestant community. This is consistent with youth workers who vocalised that they were finding it difficult to recruit appropriate percentages of young people from Protestant / Unionist / Loyalist areas. Further, the geographical spread of projects and young people showed a high degree of “clumping” resulting in what the youth workers described as areas which had reached saturation by end of Phase II – often occurring in more urban areas of the region. Findings from the focus groups indicated that recruitment within the Republic of Ireland was particularly difficult due to the limited incentives available; a challenge that was amplified when young people from the two jurisdictions were brought together and comparisons were made. However, we would argue that based upon subgroup analyses, it was these tricky groups to engage with that showed some of the strongest improvement. Recruitment and engagement may be difficult, but clearly it is worth the effort. Moving forward, we recommend future programming carefully considers how funded projects can be supported so that they can engage with these groups in a meaningful way.

### **Outcome Indicators**

We feel confident saying that because of involvement in the funded projects, young people who responded to the surveys showed significant distance travelled on each of the three outcome areas, and an overwhelming number of indicators for each area. Young people developed an understanding of and respect for diversity, an awareness and sensitivity to the values, beliefs, customs, and traditions of others; an understanding of their own identity; respect for others from a different community and cultural backgrounds, abilities, and orientations; and a positive predisposition to others from a different community / cultural background. As well, young people who responded to the surveys showed increased self-awareness, understanding, confidence and agency; planning and problem solving; relationships, working effectively with others, and leadership; resilience and determination; and other relevant knowledge and skills for supporting their own health and well-being. Finally, that young people who responded to the surveys developed their knowledge and understanding of their role and developing capabilities for engagement useful services; positive participation in community structures, initiatives, and democratic processes; volunteering in communities of place and / or interest; and positive family and community relations.

Additionally, the number of indicators within each of the three major areas that showed positive distance travelled significantly increased over the course Programme - from analyses of the Phase I dataset, to the mid-term analyses conducted on the Phase II dataset, to the final set of analyses of the complete Phase II dataset. This suggests a clear growth in the skills and reach of project activities across the outcome areas and their indicators.

Our recommendation for future programming, however, is to caution against the sheer number of indicators, particularly vague indicators, which participants were required to show positive distance travelled. Project personnel consistently vocalised the challenges they, and the participants, had with the time-consuming nature of the evaluation survey used to measure progression on these indicators. We do not disagree. Using academically rigorous and psychometrically sound measurement tools to explore the distance travelled across each of these indicators resulted in a very long survey during Phase I. Even after Phase II when the evaluation team was able to engage with a youth advisory forum to redraft the survey, remove redundant items, minimise scales due to significant overlap between indicators, and minimise some indicators down to one or two items the survey was still far too long and demanding. Perhaps for future evaluations more creative measurement tools can be capitalised upon, particularly ones which can be used to engage young people in project activity. But first and foremost, the number of indicators needs to be reduced.

### Result Indicators

Three result indicators were used to measure potential change at the societal level as a result of PEACE4Youth Programming; each focused on the Good Relations outcome area. These included measurements of cross-community contact in more social or informal interactions (socialise and/or play sport), as well as beliefs that relations between the two communities were better than 5-years ago and would continue to improve in the subsequent 5-years. Not only were targets not reached, but they in fact fell **below** baseline estimates. Participants in PEACE4Youth Programming, however, did reach, or quite close to reaching, these targets for the result indicators.

As an evaluation team, we feel that there are two reasons to be skeptical of the YLT as an appropriate source for measuring societal change based upon PEACE4Youth Programming. First, an examination of the results of each of the three indicators from 2013-2022 reveals a, not surprising, decline between the 2019 and 2020/21 survey during the Covid-19 pandemic. By 2022, none of the indicators had returned to pre-Covid measures. A second reason is based upon the discrepancy between the target group of young people involved in the PEACE4Youth Programming and the sample which the YLT targets – a representative group of 16-year-olds. Young people recruited between the ages of 14-24 years who are not in employment, education, or training, who come from

some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged areas, who often suffer from multiple risk factors, and who are susceptible to recruitment and/or victimisation by paramilitary groups are a very niche group of young people. There is every reason to believe that this group should think, feel, and behave differently to the wider population of young people in Northern Ireland. Which is in fact the very reason that this group was approached for this specific objective. To observe societal change based upon this group's experiences with the programme, we believe, it is important to track their progression over time as the positive impact of the participation ripples out into other areas of their life. For example, it would be relatively easy to include specific measures that ask about participation in the programme within the broader Northern Ireland Young Life and Times, as well as the Northern Ireland Life and Times which targets adult age-ranged respondents. This variable can then be analysed in relation to other responses found within these impressive datasets.

### Facilitating Factors

There are several key factors which led to the incredible success of the PEACE4Youth Programme. Considerable thought and detail went into the design of the Programme with attention paid to both theoretical and practical considerations. While much can be said about the importance of the structural elements such as the layout and design of the overall Programme and specific projects, we believe that the biggest impact upon success was the work of the youth workers to develop positive, supporting relationships with young people facing tremendous obstacles in terms of their own life story and because of the impact of Covid-19. Of prominence was the role of mentoring relationships and the positive dynamic created between youth workers and young people, the role of diversity within group work, and the 'magic' of residentials to cement learning and provide opportunities for more informal development.

We feel, however, that a less cited aspect of project activity was the ability the youth workers had to adapt their work not only to the young person, but also to the situation. For example, the evaluation found a plethora of evidence in relation to practitioners' high levels of skill, flexibility, creativity and innovation in adapting to the challenges presented by Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown. Staff utilised their professional networks and the support of YouthPact to make the transition to online delivery as smooth and effective as possible, and a wide range of methodologies has been employed to make online delivery engaging for young people, for all three outcome areas (Good Relations, Personal Development, and Citizenship).

It should not go without saying, that along the way, the projects and youth workers had an external organisation which acted to support and build their skill set along the way practitioners were keen to

stress the positive impact of YouthPact's work on the efficacy of their partnerships and their practice, which filtered into positive impacts for young people. The evaluation highly recommends the continued promotion of, and investment in support mechanisms like YouthPact in all programming moving forward.

### **Challenges**

This is not to say that the funded projects did not face considerable challenges across the breadth of the Programme. In Phase I of the Programme, there were teething issues related to project initiation that were to be expected. For example, practitioners found it challenging to coordinate with partner organisations when setting up the programme and recruiting young people. For the most part, by the Phase II report organisational issues such as these had been overcome. There were areas, however, that remained a challenge across the duration of the Programme that need to be taken into consideration when discussing future programming.

### **Mental Health**

Practitioners stressed that the challenges with working with this unique target population were not fully taken into account when designing the Specific Objective and that the high level of need and the complex mental health challenges they faced were often overwhelming.

There was consensus among participants that more mental health training support for youth workers are needed in future programming. Youth workers highlighted that many young people joining the programme came from vulnerable, disadvantaged backgrounds and often with complex mental health needs and that youth workers needed to be better equipped to handle difficult situations. They argued that mental health training not only related to 'crises mental health' but also related to day-to-day issues should be provided. It was also mentioned that dealing with young people with various mental health issues leaves the staff members vulnerable. Therefore, more training should be available to staff members to support young people and look after their own mental health. In future projects, a trained mental health practitioner or organisation was considered essential, especially when working with vulnerable groups.

### **Identity and Community Relations**

Youth workers reported a growing number of marginalised young people who would benefit from the content of the PEACE4Youth projects but who indicated that they do not identify with either community background but were not necessarily from a minority ethnic community. Data suggest that those individuals choosing to identify as neither Catholic nor Protestant are making a conscious decision to move away from the traditional community identities which may define the area in which they are raised and the identity with their family may still hold. There was also a sense that for some

young people, disclosing their community background or designating themselves as either Catholic or Protestant was something that they were only comfortable doing later in their involvement as they built a relationship of trust with their youth worker.

This speaks to a wider discussion around the community relations content offered by the projects. Youth workers reported that young people felt that community relations and discussions of the Troubles had nothing to do with them. At the same time, they also reported feeling anxious and fearful about meeting young people from the other community and not wanting to go outside of their own area, and survey results suggest that there was not a decrease in reported sectarian behaviours. It could be that there is an issue with the way community relations is 'branded' or presented to them. Young people may not see the relevance of community relations if it is viewed as something from the past; in other words, if community relations activities are seen as a history lesson on The Troubles. Challenges around issues of identity and community relations are not new in Northern Ireland. However, we do believe that a new conversation needs to be had, potentially with young people themselves, about how we understand and think about identity in a post-conflict society.

### **Sustainability**

Across the wide body of data collected through surveys and focus groups with young people and youth workers, as well as in-depth conversations with the Quality and Impact Body, there is a belief that for marginalised young people, the services that PEACE4Youth provided will always be in high demand. Youth workers felt that the closure of the Programme was a loss of opportunity and a 'safe spot' for young people to grow and develop. The space between PEACE4Youth and whatever will come next presents a considerable gap leaving many young people at a loss. While practitioners believed that elements of their project activity could be continued, specifically those around personal development, funding was considered a critical factor in the successful running of the programme as it allowed for the intensity, longevity, and resources necessary to provide support for the targeted group.

The gap between funding also presents a high degree of uncertainty for youth workers. Like young people, youth workers showed substantial growth in their skills over the course of the Programme. The on the ground training coupled with the training and resources developed by YouthPact resulted in a highly trained staff who now faced unemployment. While some may find employment in other areas of youth work, others would have to leave the sector entirely. This is a tremendous loss to the

sector. For those who are able to stay in the sector, the strongest contribution PEACE4Youth may have is the impact that these youth workers will have moving forward.

### Recommendations

Based upon the wealth of data collected through participant surveys and focus groups with key project personnel, as well as our own expertise in the fields of peace psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, and research and evaluation methodology, we offer the following recommendations.

Future programme development:

- Rethink recruitment criteria allowing for self-declared identity
- Explore best practices to target hard-to-reach groups
- Consult with youth workers to explore potentially reasons for the reported decrease in participation in sectarian behaviour found in the school-based cohort

Future programme delivery:

- Incorporate mentoring and group based activities
- Allow for formal and informal opportunities for positive intergroup contact
- Include opportunities for outdoor work, residentials, and celebratory events
- Provide space for youth workers to adapt to the young person and the situation
- Consult with young people about how we understand and think about identity in a post-conflict society
- Promotion of and investment in similar quality and support mechanisms like YouthPact
- Develop mechanisms to support the mental health of young people and practitioners

Future monitoring and evaluation:

- Ensure that the logic behind the Programme and Project theory of change are clear
- Don't limit ambition... but the limit number of (vague) indicators
- Provide clear operational definitions with universal understanding
- Promotion of evaluation approaches with a high degree of rigour
- Co-develop measurement tools with young people
- Incorporate a strong feedback loop between evaluators, QIB, and practitioners

### Final Thoughts

Based upon the data collected, we believe that there is irrefutable evidence of the effectiveness in the attainment of the Specific Objective set and the anticipated results, as well as the efficacy in the relationship between the funding disbursed and the results achieved. Regarding lasting impact, there is no question that the lives of the young people involved in the Programme have improved, but we feel that the strongest contribution will be to the upskill and professional development training offered to the youth work sector. Future research will show whether these capabilities, for both young people and youth workers, will in turn support broader societal change.

We also would like to close by echoing the thoughts of the key project personnel involved in the PEACE4Youth Programming. Programming addressing the needs of this unique group of young people was desperately needed in Northern Ireland and the Border Region, and, unfortunately, will be a necessity in the future. Projects funded through PEACE4Youth reached a challenging group to recruit, engage, and elevate but they did so with overwhelming success. The objectives within PEACE4Youth and the aims of the funded projects align with the wider Northern Ireland peace process, Europe 2020 strategy, as well as the EU Horizontal principles. We can only hope that future programming of this nature is encouraged.







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