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## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

# Policy Briefing: 'The story I want my life to be'

Place-Based Evidence for the 16-18 Education and Training Bill

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## KESS Policy Briefing

*...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making within Northern Ireland*

## Executive Summary

This briefing presents findings from the Conversations research and aligns them with the Northern Ireland 16–18 consultation findings. It focuses particularly on the experiences of young people in disadvantaged communities.

The evidence shows that participation is not driven primarily by provision, but by whether systems are flexible, relational, equitable and effectively evaluated. Young people understand their futures holistically, integrating identity, relationships, learning and community. However, those in disadvantaged communities face structural barriers to accessing opportunities, navigating systems and building supportive relationships.

Consultation responses reinforce these findings, highlighting the need for flexible pathways, better support for vulnerable groups and improved coordination across services.

So the evidence suggests that effective policy must be:

- Flexible in pathways
- Relational in delivery
- Equal in access to opportunity
- Evaluated for success

Summarised as FREE.

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## Context and Policy Relevance

The 16–18 Education and Training Bill seeks to increase participation and improve outcomes for young people. However, both the Conversations research and the consultation findings suggest that participation cannot be understood solely as a matter of increasing provision or enforcing engagement.

The consultation analysis highlights concerns about the clarity and accessibility of pathways, the adequacy of support for young people with additional needs, and the complexity of navigating the current system. Respondents noted that existing structures can be difficult to access and may not reflect the realities of young people's lives. In short, unclear pathways, barriers for vulnerable groups and fragmented systems.

This reflects a broader structural issue. Policy systems are typically organised into separate domains such as education, employment and health, while young people experience these domains as interconnected. This mismatch can result in disengagement, particularly at transition points. This issue is directly relevant to Assembly business, as it intersects with education policy, skills development, health and wellbeing, and community regeneration. Addressing it requires a whole-system approach that aligns policy design with lived experience. This has been reflected in national policy concerns through the recent UK Government "Young People and Work" interim report (Milburn, 2026).

## Methodology and Evidence Base

The Conversations research ([O'Hare et al, 2022](#)) was co-produced with community partners and is grounded in a child-centred, rights-informed approach. It involved structured, one-to-one conversations between young people and trained adult Pathfinders, focusing on aspirations, experiences and perceived barriers.

The research used mixed methods and applied systematic analysis, including granular coding of aspirations and narrative and ecological interpretation. This enabled identification of recurring patterns across individual accounts. A key feature of the methodology is the generation of "living evidence", meaning that insights are continuously fed back into practice and policy rather than remaining static.

The findings are supported by a wider evidence base. Research indicates that young people who are not in education, employment or training experience poorer long-term outcomes across health, employment and wellbeing (Rahmani et al., 2024). These outcomes are shaped by interacting social, economic and health factors, with socio-economic disadvantage playing a central role (Gunnes et al., 2025). Evidence also shows that multi-component and relational interventions are more effective than single-issue approaches (Mawn et al., 2017).

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The consultation response complements this evidence by highlighting stakeholder perspectives on system challenges, particularly around transitions, access and coordination. Together, these sources provide a robust and triangulated evidence base.

## Key Findings

The research demonstrates that young people think in terms of whole lives rather than discrete policy categories. Their aspirations encompass identity, relationships, learning and work, and community, forming an integrated vision of the future.

Across all domains, aspiration is consistently high. Young people express strong motivation to learn, work and contribute. However, they encounter barriers at key transition points, particularly when moving between education and employment or training. These barriers are often structural, including unclear pathways, limited access to opportunities, and fragmented support systems.

Relationships emerge as a central factor in engagement. Young people emphasise the importance of trusted adults, mentoring and supportive networks. These are not peripheral elements but core enablers of participation.

Place is also significant. Aspirations are shaped by local context, including perceptions of safety, belonging and opportunity. Many young people experience a tension between remaining in their community and accessing opportunities elsewhere.

The consultation findings reinforce these points. Respondents highlighted the need for better support at transition points, more inclusive pathways, and improved coordination between services. Concerns were also raised about unequal access to opportunities and the challenges faced by disadvantaged groups.

Overall, the evidence indicates that system fragmentation is a key driver of disengagement. Young people must navigate multiple disconnected systems, leading to gaps in support and uneven outcomes.

## Policy Implications

The combined evidence from research and consultation suggests several implications for policy. It should be:

- Flexible, by supporting multiple pathways and transitions rather than linear progression models.
- Relational, by embedding mentoring and trusted adult support within delivery systems.
- Equal, by expanding access to opportunity, particularly for disadvantaged communities, including access to institutions and networks.
- Evaluated, by measuring engagement, belonging and access to opportunity, not just participation.

First, there is a need to design flexible pathways that reflect the diversity of young people's lives. This includes enabling movement between academic, vocational and skills-based routes, as well as providing opportunities for re-entry and progression. The consultation responses indicate strong support for greater flexibility in the system.

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Second, relational support should be embedded within delivery. Mentoring and trusted adults, such as Pathfinder roles used in the Conversations research, are critical to engagement and should be considered core components of the system rather than optional enhancements.

Third, access to opportunity must be expanded. Young people in disadvantaged contexts often lack exposure to institutions, networks and pathways that enable progression. Policy should therefore focus on widening access and to business, universities, professions, cultural organisations and civic institutions. Also, linking these institutions more closely to communities through engagement opportunities.

Fourth, pathways need tracked and evaluated for success in improving outcomes. This isn't simply outcomes like employment and qualification (although important) but also outcomes like belonging and access to opportunities.

## Comparative and Spatial Implications

International evidence suggests that systems with integrated services, sustained support and flexible pathways achieve stronger participation outcomes. Some European systems with lower NEET rates (e.g. Holland) have adopted coordinated, multi-agency approaches that align education, employment and welfare support.

Spatial factors are also important. Disadvantage is often concentrated in specific areas, and local context shapes both aspiration and opportunity. The Conversations research demonstrates the importance of place-based approaches, and the consultation responses reinforce the need to consider geographic variation in policy design.

## Evidence Gaps

Despite a strong evidence base, gaps remain. There is limited longitudinal data tracking engagement, belonging and aspiration over time. There is also a need for better integration of lived experience data with administrative datasets.

Further research is needed to understand how relational and multi-component interventions can be scaled effectively, and to assess their long-term cost-effectiveness. The consultation process also highlights areas where stakeholder perspectives require further exploration, particularly in relation to implementation.

## Cost and Implementation Considerations

Implementing the proposed changes will require investment in relational roles (e.g. Pathfinders), cross-departmental coordination and expanded access initiatives like the Conversations process. However, these costs should be considered in the context of the long-term costs associated with disengagement, including welfare expenditure, justice costs, health impacts and reduced economic productivity. Evidence suggests that early and sustained support can reduce these long-term costs by improving participation and outcomes.

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## Key Questions for Policymakers

The evidence raises several questions for Assembly consideration. These include how the Bill can support flexible pathways and avoid reinforcing linear progression models, how relational support can be embedded within delivery systems, and how departments can coordinate effectively to address cross-cutting issues.

Further questions relate to how access to opportunity can be expanded in a meaningful way, and how success should be measured beyond participation, including indicators such as engagement, belonging and aspiration.

## Conclusion

The Conversations research and consultation findings point to a shared conclusion. Young people are not disengaged from their futures, but are often disengaged from systems that do not reflect their lives. Addressing this requires a shift from system-led design to life-led design. This includes flexible pathways, relational support, expanded access to opportunity and integrated systems.

The central message is clear:

Young people are not short of aspiration; they are short of routes, relationships and access. Aligning policy with this reality offers a pathway to improving participation and outcomes in a meaningful and sustainable way and the Conversations process provides a model for doing that.

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