



## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

*...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*



# 'The Story I Want My Life to Be'

Lessons from Conversations  
Research for  
16–18 Education & Training Bill

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# Core Message

- Policy for YP must be:
  - Flexible - lived experience
  - Relational – learning not compliance
  - Equal – Greatest support requirement, least opportunity
  - Evaluated
- Summarised as FREE



# Why This Matters

- NEET associated with poorer long-term outcomes
- Outcomes shaped by interacting educational, social and health factors (Rahmani et al., 2024)
- Cause and causes - Long-term socioeconomic disadvantage (Gunnes et al., 2025)
- Reflected in national policy concern (Milburn, 2026)



# System Issues

- Young people navigate multiple disconnected services (not flexible)
- Fragmented education, employment and health systems (not relational)
- Opportunities unevenly distributed across society (not equal)
- Pathways not tracked (not evaluated)

# 16-18 Bill Consultation Response

- Create flexible pathways (not linear routes)
- Design relational support around young peoples' lives, not services
- Connect young people to opportunity-rich networks
- Track access to opportunities and engagement
- Use lived experience alongside system data

# The *Conversations* Model (O'Hare et al., 2022)

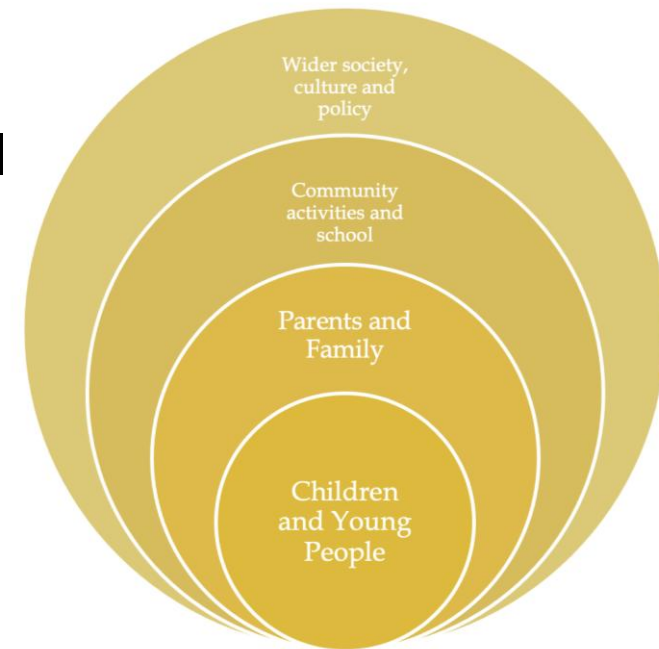
- One-to-one structured conversations (flexible)
- Build trust first, trained 'Pathfinders' then explore aspirations and context (relational)
- Iterative process:  
conversation → individual → community development → policy → feedback  
(creates opportunities)
- 'Living Evidence'



# Research Design

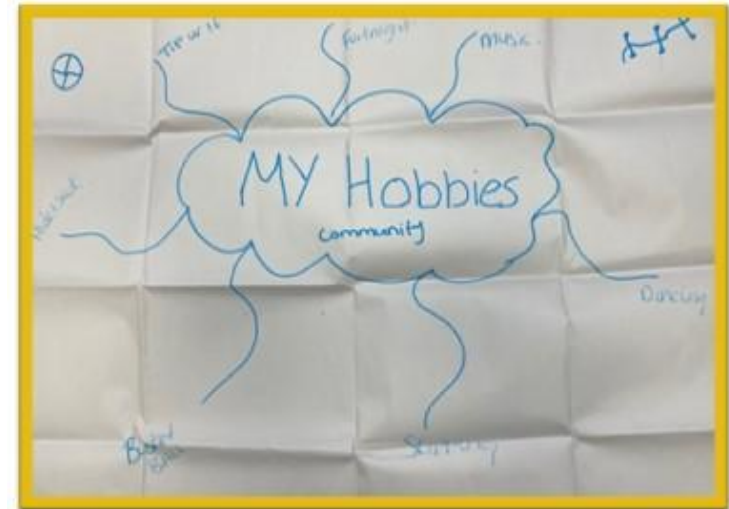
- Co-produced model with community partners
- 98 CYP aged 4-18 from Greater Shankill
- Child-centred (Bronfenbrenner) and rights-informed (Lundy Model)
- Mixed methods, iterative learning approach
- Granular coding of themes and aspirations
- Grouping themes into core domains
- Narrative + ecological systems analysis

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



# What Young People Tell Us

- Granular coding of themes and aspirations:  
Driving; Have children;  
Own place; Happy
- Lives are interconnected (self, relationships, learning, community)
- Strong aspirations and motivation
- Barriers emerge at transition points



# A Sense of Self

- 'I will be a very responsible person'
- 'I want to be happy and have a good life'
- Identity, confidence and stability central to aspirations

*'I will be a very responsible person'*

*(Boy aged 11)*

# Relationships

- 'My mummy will still support me'
- 'I want people around me who care about me'
- Need for mentoring and trusted adults who understand and engage



# Learning and Work

- Aspiration is not the issue
- ‘I will still love to learn’
- ‘I want to get a good job’
- High motivation but pathways unclear and often inaccessible
- Limited exposure to elite and professional pathways, e.g., universities, cultural and civic institutions, big business and government

*‘I want to leave school straight after my GCSEs. I want to go straight to work. I would like to work in daycare’.*

(Girl aged 15)

# Community

- ‘My community will hopefully be better’
- ‘I don’t want to leave where I live’
- Aspiration shaped by place, opportunity and safety
- Community Research Toolkit

## Community Research Toolkit: A Toolkit for Collaboration

*“Research is formalized curiosity.  
It is poking and prying with a purpose.”*

— Zora Neale Hurston



# Key Insights

- Young people think in lives, policy works in silos
- Conversations provide a process for creating:
  - Flexible, multi-component support (Mawn et al., 2017)
  - Relational, place-based support
  - Equal access through community development and policy
  - Evaluation by tracking opportunities and pathways

# References

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