

**A Youth Work
Support Needs
Analysis Report
for North Kildare
and Southwest
Wicklow.**

‘Nowhere to go... Plenty to say’

Executive Summary

This research was commissioned by KWETB and examined youth work support needs in North Kildare (Celbridge, Clane, Kilcock and Maynooth) and Southwest Wicklow (Aughrim, Carnew, Shillelagh and Tinahely). The research was carried out between May 2025 and March 2026. The research findings are presented from two perspectives: young people (those involved in youth projects and those not involved) and workers/service providers/volunteers and community representatives.

Among young people who attend youth projects (aged 10–12 and 15–16), older participants highlighted boredom, a lack of options outside of sport, limited safe spaces to meet, and negative perceptions of young people by adults. The younger group were somewhat more positive about their communities but identified issues such as poor lighting and road safety. Across both age groups, cost and transport were significant barriers to participation in activities. Those attending youth projects spoke very positively about their experiences, emphasising friendship, skill development, emotional wellbeing, having a voice, and having something to look forward to. They strongly valued having a safe, supportive space. When asked what was needed locally, they overwhelmingly called for more youth groups and dedicated spaces to gather.

Young people not involved in youth projects (aged 15–16) similarly described limited options outside of sport, spending time in parks or shops, and barriers related to cost and transport. Safety concerns were prominent, including poor lighting, dangerous roads, bullying (including online), drug dealing, litter, and unsafe driving. They also emphasised the lack of safe, youth-friendly spaces and the need for better transport, lighting, footpaths, and cycle paths.

A key difference between the two groups was the issue of youth voice. Young people involved in youth projects felt they had opportunities to express their views and be heard, while those not involved reported having no forum outside school where their voices could influence decisions. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of accessible youth spaces, increased provision of activities beyond sport, improved safety and transport infrastructure, and meaningful opportunities for youth participation in local decision-making.

Those attending youth groups spoke positively about the friendships, sense of belonging, skills development, and emotional support they gain, noting that without these groups, life would feel boring or depressing. Younger children highlighted local amenities and sports but also expressed a desire for more recreational facilities and groups, especially for teenagers.

The consultations identified a significant lack of youth spaces and services as one of the most pressing issues, echoing findings from previous reports and strategies. The absence of safe, dedicated spaces contributes to boredom, isolation, poor mental health, and negative perceptions of young people who are seen “hanging around.” It also limits service providers’ ability to deliver supports due to a shortage of suitable premises.

Mental health and anxiety were consistently highlighted as major and growing concerns, compounded by limited access to counselling and early intervention services. Post-pandemic impacts, rising school absenteeism, and insufficient school-based supports due to the lack of DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools and accompanying school supports such as HSCL and School Completion Officers are worsening disengagement. National and local data point to increasing anxiety, depression, self-harm, and low wellbeing, particularly among girls, alongside low levels of help-seeking.

Hidden substance and alcohol misuse—often involving parental use—was also reported, making issues harder to detect and address. Service providers noted increases in domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence, as well as homelessness, including hidden homelessness. The current deprivation scores do not reflect the significant pockets of disadvantage that exist in these areas. Rapid and diverse population growth, alongside proximity to Dublin, has contributed to increased criminal activity, including the targeting of young people by gangs, drug intimidation of families, anti-social behaviour, and unreported crime. Youth gambling was also raised, though it may be under-recognised.

Rural isolation and poor transport infrastructure further restrict access to services and activities, particularly where families lack private transport and roads are unsafe for walking or cycling. Finally, volunteering has declined since Covid-19, with some youth groups closing and ongoing difficulties recruiting volunteers, particularly in commuter areas where adults have limited time availability. Overall, the findings point to interconnected challenges requiring coordinated investment in youth services, early intervention, infrastructure, and community supports.

The identified needs are placing significant pressure on families and the broader community. Many families feel overwhelmed, particularly when supporting children with additional needs or mental health difficulties in the absence of adequate services. Drug intimidation, substance misuse, and unreported crime are contributing to fear and instability, while a lack of youth facilities fuels boredom and related tensions. Rapid population growth, without matching investment in services, has left existing supports overstretched and unable to meet demand.

There is a clear and consistent shortage of services across the areas studied. Key gaps include limited or non-existent youth work provision, a lack of Family Resource Centres and parenting supports, insufficient mental health and drug services, and a shortage of childcare places. Schools are also affected by inadequate numbers of HSCL coordinators and School Completion Officers. Limited early intervention services restrict referral pathways to practice models such as Meitheal, and there are few spaces outside school where young people's voices can be heard.

While youth work alone cannot address all identified challenges, it is widely seen as a vital part of the solution. The values of youth work; empowerment of young people, equality and inclusion, respect for all young people, involvement of young people in decision-making, partnership and voluntary participation are key to bringing about positive change in the lives of young people in communities.

Both universal and targeted youth work approaches are needed, particularly in rapidly growing towns. Increased provision would support prevention and early intervention, provide safe and supportive spaces for young people, strengthen referral pathways from other services, and benefit families and the wider community. However, any expansion would need to be delivered at sufficient scale to make a meaningful and lasting impact.

Summary of Recommendations:

1. Share the research findings widely to inform planning, policy, and funding decisions.
2. Use interagency partnerships to advocate for increased and sustained investment in youth services and spaces.
3. Review effective rural youth work models to strengthen local practice and inform national policy.
4. Embed meaningful youth participation in all stages of service and facility development.
5. Support and sustain volunteer-led youth initiatives through collaboration with relevant development bodies.
6. Identify and repurpose underused community premises as safe, youth-friendly spaces.
7. Strengthen rural youth representation and engagement, including through European networks, to support advocacy and informed practice.



Foreword

Kildare & Wicklow Education and Training Board welcomes the publication of this research. It reflects our commitment to the critical role youth work plays in shaping the social, educational and personal development of young people.

With over 35% of the population of both Kildare and Wicklow living in rural areas, how services can be best provided in these areas is of particular importance, presenting both unique challenges and opportunities for youth work services and young people.

Key factors such as geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, reduced access to services and smaller population bases can impact negatively on provision. It is important therefore to look to approaches that will take aspects of context more closely into account in our future work and planning if it is to have the impact needed to make real and positive changes to the lives of young people.

This study is grounded in the understanding that youth are not a homogeneous group. Their experiences are influenced by local economies, cultural traditions, transportation access, educational opportunities, and digital connectivity. By focusing on specific settings, this research highlights how context matters — how policy, funding structures, and institutional frameworks interact with local realities.

Furthermore, this research recognises the importance of listening to both practitioners and young people themselves. Their voices offer insight into the everyday practices, relationships, and emerging needs, this helps us define youth work and clarifies the case for additional supports for young people living in these areas.

The findings presented here aim to inform policymakers, practitioners, and community stakeholders. By deepening our understanding of youth work in these contexts, this research advocates for approaches that are context-sensitive, sustainable, and responsive to the lived realities of young people.

Ultimately, strengthening youth work in all settings is not merely a matter of service provision; it is an investment in the resilience, participation, and future vitality of both rural and urban communities themselves.



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March, 2026

Acknowledgements:

KWETB wishes to express its sincere thanks to Louise Monaghan for carrying out the research and preparing this report.

We would like to extend our appreciation to everyone who generously contributed their time to the consultation process that shaped this report. We are grateful to the young people from North Kildare and Southwest Wicklow, whose input ensured that the voices of young people were heard and meaningfully reflected in the research. We would also like to thank Emma Berney, Co-ordinator, Kildare Children and Young People's Services Committee and Fionnula Curry, Co-ordinator, Wicklow Children and Young People's Services Committee, who contributed additional information and research to this report.

Thank you to the young people of the 19th Wicklow Tinahely Scouts for their artwork which brings so much to this report.

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1. Introduction:

The areas identified for inclusion in this research were chosen because of the lack of youth work supports in these towns. The towns in North Kildare (Clane, Maynooth, Celbridge, and Kilcock) can be described as commuter/satellite towns, whereas the towns in Southwest Wicklow (Carnew, Aughrim, Shillelagh, and Tinahely) can be described as rural service towns. This research sets out to identify the extent of unmet need; to understand the specific barriers young people in these areas face (transport, isolation, digital exclusion) and to provide evidence to address geographic inequalities in service provision.

Youth work plays a preventative role in supporting mental health and wellbeing, in reducing risk-taking behaviours, in building resilience and life skills, and in promoting social inclusion and civic engagement. In areas with no provision, opportunities for early intervention are limited.

This local research aims to provide localised evidence to influence policy and advocate for additional services to support young people living in a mix of commuter and rural areas in Kildare and Wicklow.

The process of this research included consultation with young people. This research creates opportunities to identify priorities directly from young people and service providers and will also contribute to the forthcoming KWETB Youth Work Services Strategic Plan 2026-2030.

1.1 Aim:

- To contribute to a body of evidence for the need for youth work provision in commuter and rural areas nationally.

1.2 Scope and Focus

This research specifically focused on the following areas in:

- North Kildare: Clane, Maynooth, Celbridge, and Kilcock (classified as commuter/satellite towns)
- Southwest Wicklow: Carnew, Aughrim, Shillelagh, and Tinahely (classified as rural service towns)

These areas were selected due to the limited or absent youth work provision.

2. Overview of Youth Work

Youth work in Ireland received formal statutory recognition under the Youth Work Act 2001, which defines it as a planned programme of education that supports the personal and social development of young people through voluntary participation, complementing formal education. It is primarily delivered by voluntary organisations, supported by the Department of Education and Education and Training Boards, and is aimed mainly at young people aged 10–25 from all backgrounds.

Youth work is a non-formal, educational and developmental process centred on active participation. Its purpose is to build young people's confidence, self-esteem, decision-making ability, social awareness and sense of citizenship. It provides learning opportunities, new experiences, and a platform for young people to have a voice in decisions affecting their lives.

Activities are wide-ranging and include sport, arts, citizenship and social action, health and wellbeing education, life skills development, critical thinking, intercultural learning, and IT. The approach is flexible and begins with young people's interests, encouraging growth and expanded horizons.

2.1 The values of youth work

The values of youth work match the purpose of education and are fundamental to the process, raising the confidence of individuals, their contribution to society, and their value as citizens. These values are:

- Empowerment of young people
- Equality and inclusion
- Respect for all young people
- Involvement of young people in decision-making
- Partnership
- Voluntary participation

2.2 Youth work benefits:

- Young people by building skills, confidence, belonging and future opportunities.
- Communities by strengthening relationships between young people and adults and fostering community spirit.
- Society by addressing social issues, reducing disadvantage, supporting democracy, and delivering strong social value.

2.3 UBU

UBU Your Place Your Space is a funding scheme which provides local services for young people and was developed in line with recommendations from the Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes (2014)¹ through the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). The mission of UBU is to provide out-of-school supports to young people in their local communities to enable them to overcome adverse circumstances and achieve their full potential by improving their personal and social development outcomes, while the vision is that all young people are enabled to realise their maximum potential, by respecting their rights and hearing their voices, while protecting and supporting them as they transition from childhood to adulthood.



¹ Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes (2014) Department of Children and Youth Affairs

3. Policy Context:

A range of national policy and strategic documents provide the foundation for the implementation of youth work, including the following:

Opportunities for Youth 2024 – 2028

Opportunities for Youth sets out Ireland's key policy ambitions for youth work and related services. It delivers on a commitment in Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028, which recognises the important role of youth work services in improving outcomes for young people and includes an agreed action to develop and implement a document setting out a strategic direction for the delivery of such services. It sets out three strategic objectives: to strengthen and better align the role of youth work services in enhancing young people's lives; to embed an equality- and rights-based approach across all services; and to ensure youth work provision is high-quality, accountable, sustainable, and informed by relevant data and evidence.

Young Ireland 2023 – 2028

Young Ireland is the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People in Ireland (2023-2028), aiming to ensure rights are respected for those aged 0-24. It focuses on key challenges, active well-being, and development. It supports UN convention rights, utilizing a 5-year, cross-government strategy. The key focus areas are promoting children and young people's physical and mental wellbeing, supporting their learning and development to reach their full potential, ensuring their safety and protection, and upholding their rights in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making

(Action Plan 2023-2028)

The Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making Action Plan 2024–2028 is Ireland's second national strategy to ensure children and young people (up to age 24) have a meaningful voice in decisions that affect their lives. Grounded in a rights-based approach and the Lundy Model of participation, it sets out 99 cross-departmental actions to embed participation across key areas such as community life, education, health, and the legal system. Supported by Hub na nÓg, the plan emphasises not only listening to young people but ensuring their views are seriously considered and influence policy and practice. The strategy emphasises that listening to children is not enough, as their views must be seriously considered when they are capable of forming them. It serves as a roadmap for government departments, agencies, and organisations to embed participation in their policies and practices.

Creative Youth Plan 2023 – 2027

The Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027 aims to nurture the creative potential of children and young people aged 0 – 24 by expanding access to creative opportunities in schools and communities, with a strong focus on equity, inclusion, and amplifying seldom-heard voices. It continues and develops key initiatives such as Creative Schools, Creative Clusters, BLAST, and Cruinniú na nÓg, introduces a Creative Youth Nurture Fund to support young people facing barriers, and promotes collaboration between education, arts, and community sectors, including cross-border projects across the island of Ireland.

National Youth Justice Strategy 2021 – 2027

The National Youth Justice Strategy aims to divert children from crime, promoting positive behaviour through early intervention, targeted family support, and community-based projects (Youth Diversion Projects). It treats young offenders as children first, focusing on rights-based, collaborative, and rehabilitative approaches, with detention used only as a last resort. It is grounded on child welfare principles, deriving, in particular, from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The objectives in the strategy are premised on the need to maximise opportunities to promote positive behavioural change, and it includes a wide range of issues relevant to children and young people at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025

The vision of Our Rural Future is to create a thriving rural Ireland that contributes fully to the country's economic, social, cultural, and environmental wellbeing, recognising the strong interdependence between rural and urban areas. It places people and vibrant rural communities at the centre, with a focus on creating quality jobs and sustaining the environment.

A key aim is to reverse youth outmigration by enabling young people to live, work, and raise families in rural areas. The policy promotes youth participation through initiatives such as the National Rural Youth Assembly, expands remote working and blended learning opportunities, invests in community infrastructure and amenities, and seeks to develop rural towns as vibrant employment hubs, including in the green economy. It also acknowledges challenges such as housing, transport, service access, and support for young farmers, while leveraging the growth in remote working as a long-term opportunity for rural communities.

The European Child Guarantee 2021

The Child Guarantee is a recommendation put forward by the European Commission that aims to prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion in the European Union (EU) by supporting the 27 Member States to make efforts to guarantee access to quality key services for children in need. It applies to children in need (children under 18 at risk of poverty or social exclusion) across the 27 EU Member States. It requires Member States to pay particular attention to the specific needs of children who are homeless; who have a disability; those with a migrant background; with a minority racial or ethnic background (particularly Roma); those being in alternative (especially institutional) care; and children in precarious family situations. The Guarantee requires the 27 EU Member States to work towards the implementation of six commitments - providing free access to early childhood education and care (ECEC); education (including school-based activities); a healthy meal each school day; and healthcare. It also calls on them to ensure effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

EU Youth Strategy 2019 – 2027

The three general objectives of the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 are to engage, empower and connect young people. The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 provides for the European Youth Goals, which were designed and agreed by young people across Europe during the 6th Cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue (2017–2018) and represent young people's vision for youth policy in Europe for the current period to 2027.

European Youth Work Agenda

The European Youth Work Agenda was adopted by all EU Member States in 2020. It provides a strategic framework or roadmap for further developing and strengthening youth work across Europe. Its priorities include expanding the youth work offer to engage more young people and further develop quality and innovation in youth work.

Regional Strategies

There are a number of additional regional plans and strategies which are referenced throughout this document including:

- Kildare Children and Young People's Services Committee: Children and Young People's Plan 2023 -2025
- Healthy Kildare plan 2022 – 2026
- Kildare County Development Plan 2023 – 2029
- Wicklow County Development Plan 2022 – 2028
- Wicklow Children and Young People's Services Committee: Children and Young People's Plan 2025 – 2027



4. Research Methodology:

4.1 Primary and Secondary Research

This report collated and analysed several different sources of information. An outline of the methodology is provided below.

4.2 Primary Research

Several focus groups and one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following groups of young people and key participants.

Table 1: Numbers of participants and Methodology for the research

Numbers	Methodology
48 young people	5 In Person Focus Groups including: 2 groups of Transition Year Students who are not engaged with youth services (These students came from the towns and surrounding areas identified for this research) 2 groups of young people aged 10 – 12 years engaged with youth services/groups 1 group of young people aged 14 – 16 years engaged with a youth project
36 individuals from external organisations, public representatives and community participants (from both Kildare and Wicklow)	2 focus groups and 10 Semi-structured interviews
8 youth service staff	Semi-structured Interviews - In-Person, and via telephone/zoom
4 volunteers	In-person focus group
Total Number	96

The research consultation process was aimed at:

- Young people engaged in youth work
- Young people with no experience of youth work
- Youth work staff and volunteers and
- Staff from organisations with experience of engaging with young people and families in the areas of North Kildare and Southwest Wicklow.

Please see Appendix 1 which provides a list of organisations that participated in the process.

4.2.1 Consultation Process

The discussions were focused the issues impacting young people, the impact on the wider community, gaps in provision, and the potential benefits of increased youth work provision.

Please see Appendix 2 for the full list of research questions.

4.3 Secondary Research

A review of relevant strategies/plans/research reports was undertaken to ascertain emerging issues and needs of young people in North Kildare and South-West Wicklow.

Analysis carried out on both the primary and secondary research findings informed the findings and the recommendations of this report.

4.4 Ethical Guidelines

Ethical guidelines for research were adhered to throughout the process with contributions anonymised and their participation provided on a voluntary basis. The focus groups with young people were conducted in the presence of staff members/volunteers in adherence to child protection guidelines.



5. Area Profile

This section provides a brief overview of the population profile in both Kildare and Wicklow with more detailed information on each of the towns included in this research as well some projected population trends.

5.1 County Kildare

County Kildare has a total population (Census 2022) of 247,774, making it the fifth most populated local authority area in the State and represents 4.8% of the State population (5.1m). To put this in context, the population of Kildare in 2022 is just less than twice that of Waterford City and County (127k), three time that of Cavan (81k) and more than four times the population of neighbouring Carlow (62k). At the Municipal District (MD) level, the Kildare Newbridge MD (68,185) and Clane-Maynooth MD (66,159) are the most populous and each account for more than a quarter of the population of the county.

Over the course of the six years to 2022, Kildare experienced population growth of over eleven percent (+11.4%), an additional 25,270 persons (equivalent to the population of Newbridge). The county's population grew at a much higher rate than that of the state (+8.1%).

Two towns in Kildare are amongst the youngest ten towns in the State – Maynooth with an average age of 34 years and Kildare Town with an average age of 35 years. The age profile of Clane was significantly more youthful than that of the State with a higher share of younger cohorts and fewer elderly persons. This youthful demographic profile is typical of Kildare more broadly.

5.1.1 Overview of Celbridge, Clane, Kilcock and Maynooth (CSO 2022)

Profile of Celbridge

Age range	Numbers
0 -4	1267
5 - 9	1413
10 - 14	1645
15 - 19	1528
20 - 24	1223
Total population under 24 years	7,076
Total population	20,601
Percentage of population change since 2016	+ 2.4%

Profile of Clane

Age range	Numbers
0 -4	539
5 - 9	644
10 - 14	676
15 - 19	530
20 - 24	455
Total population under 24 years	2,844
Total population	8,152
Percentage of population change since 2016	+12%

Profile of Kilcock

Age range	Numbers
0 -4	778
5 - 9	724
10 - 14	824
15 - 19	566
20 - 24	421
Total population under 24 years	3,313
Total population	8,674
Percentage of population change since 2016	+ 42.36%

Profile of Maynooth

Age range	Numbers
0 -4	1184
5 - 9	1223
10 - 14	1013
15 - 19	1228
20 - 24	1902
Total population under 24 years	
Total population	17,259
Percentage of population change since 2016	+18%

5.2 County Wicklow

According to the 2022 Census, the population of County Wicklow is 155,851, marking a 9% increase from 2016 and making it the 16th largest county by population in Ireland. Children and young people under 25 make up 34% of the population. Many residents commute, with over 7,000 people moving within or into the county in the year prior to the census. Overall, Wicklow had a positive estimated net migration (numbers coming into Wicklow greater than those leaving the county) of 9.4 per 1,000 people between the 2016 and 2022 Census. This was higher than the rate of 7.5 per 1,000 for the State. Despite a declining birth rate happening nationally the strong youth population of Wicklow is supported by positive net migration.

5.2.1 Overview of Aughrim, Carnew, Shillelagh and Tinahely (CSO 2022)

Profile of Aughrim

Age range	Numbers
0 -4	54
5 - 9	105
10 - 14	141
15 - 19	121
20 - 24	66
Total population under 24 years	487
Total population	1437
Percentage of population change since 2016	- 0.35%

Profile of Carnew

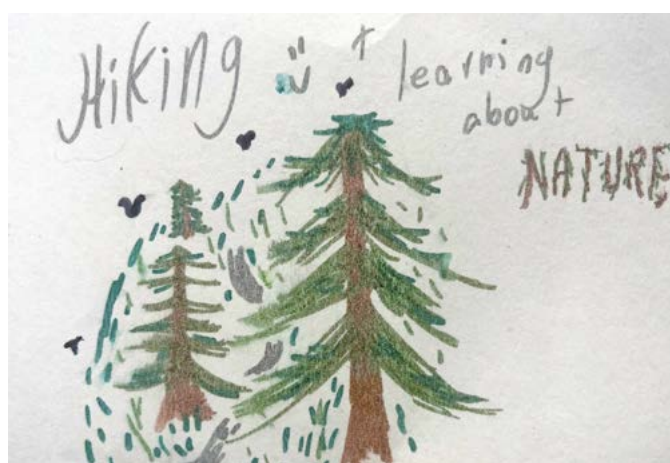
Age range	Numbers
0 -4	80
5 - 9	97
10 - 14	93
15 - 19	86
20 - 24	63
Total population under 24 years	419
Total population	1233
Percentage of population change since 2016	+17.2%

Profile of Shilelagh

Age range	Numbers
0 - 4	24
5 - 9	26
10 - 14	32
15 - 19	23
20 - 24	14
Total population under 24 years	119
Total population	390
Percentage of population change since 2016	+15.73%

Profile of Tinahely

Age range	Numbers
0 - 4	60
5 - 9	82
10 - 14	85
15 - 19	83
20 - 24	37
Total population under 24 years	347
Total population	1,037
Percentage of population change since 2016	+10.7%

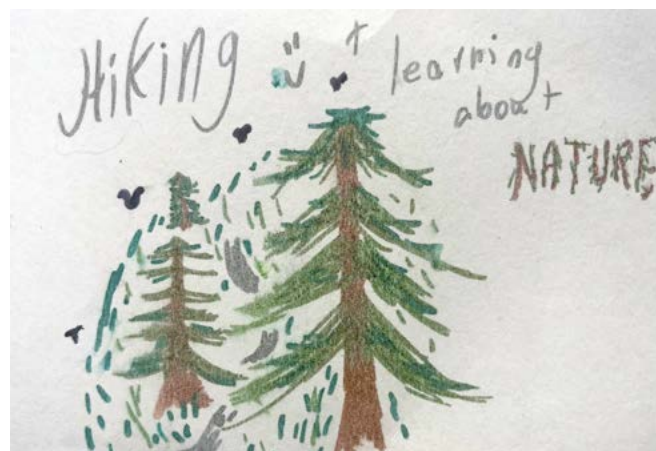


5.3 Projected Population Growth

CSO data shows the 'mid-east region', which includes Kildare and Wicklow, is expected to see the largest increases in population in the country. The Mid-East region which accounted for 14.9% of the total population share in 2022, is projected to increase to between 15.5% and 16.1% by 2042².

5.3.1 Key Projected Population Trends

- **County Growth Target:** The Kildare County Development Plan, updated to align with the 2025 National Planning Framework revision, aims to accommodate an additional 46,498 people within the plan period (running to roughly 2028-2031).
- **North Kildare Focus:** The Maynooth Key Town area has a specific additional allocation of up to 10,000 new residents by 2031 to support compact growth and transport infrastructure.
- **Rapid Growth Areas:** Census 2022 data indicated that Kilcock (+42%) and Maynooth (+18%) were among the fastest-growing towns, a trend expected to continue over the next decade.
- **Overall County Forecast:** ESRI projections indicate that Kildare will experience a population growth of approximately 18% between 2021 and 2040.
- **The Healthy Kildare Plan 2022 – 2026³** states that 'The demographic and statistical profile indicates a county that has been growing and will continue to experience significant population growth. Kildare is expected to have a higher-than-average growth of young people, working age population and older people than the state. The increase in population will place significant pressure on access to services such as primary care and housing, this will test already challenging circumstances'.
- **County Wicklow's population** is projected to reach between 160,500 and 164,000 by 2031. Based on the 2022 Census population of 155,851, this indicates an estimated increase of roughly 4,600 to 8,100 people over the next 5-10 years.
- **The Wicklow Economic and Community Monitor** predicts a 16.6% increase in the overall county population by 2040.



¹ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rpp/regionalpopulationprojections2023-2042>

² Healthy Kildare Plan 2022 – 2026. <https://kildarecoco.ie/media/Healthy%20Kildare%20Plan.pdf>

5.4 Current Youth Work Supports

The following voluntary led youth groups were in receipt of the Department of Education and Youth's Local Youth Club Grant Scheme funding, administered by KWETB in 2025.

- 3th Kildare Clane Scouts
- Celbridge Liffey Guides
- DLS Foróige Celbridge
- 1st Kildare 2nd Celbridge Scouts
- 5th Kildare Clane Scouts
- Kilcock Scouts
- Maynooth Foróige Club
- Maynooth Girl Guides
- North Kildare Maths Problem Club Maynooth
- 19th Wicklow Tinahely Scouts

There is extremely limited youth service provision in Clane through In Sync Youth and Family Services, funded through UBU (7 hours).

YMCA provides a Parents and Kids Together programme (PAKT), up to the age of 12 years, funded by Tusla in Celbridge.

While all these groups provide valuable and worthwhile opportunities for young people, their number and capacity are not sufficient to meet the needs of the growing youth population across these areas. As demand continues to increase, additional projects, clubs, groups and expanded provision will be necessary to ensure all young people have access to structured, supportive activities.



6. Research Findings

The research findings are presented in two parts as follows:

- Part 1: Findings from the young people – consisting of two cohorts (those who have experienced youth work and those who have not)
- Part 2: Findings from the workers/service providers/community participants/volunteers
- In addition, these findings are compared with findings and trends in other research reports and relevant strategies and plans.

6.1 Part 1: Research findings from the young people who attend a youth project:

There were two cohorts in this group, i.e. young people aged 15 – 16 years old and a younger cohort aged 10 – 12 years old.

6.1.1 Young people's experiences of life in their localities

In response to the question 'What is life like for young people in this area?', there were some differences between the two cohorts. The older group of young people spoke about the lack of options for young people in their area, experiencing feelings of boredom and the lack of a safe physical space to meet (outside of the youth project). They were also conscious of how they feel they are perceived by adults in various settings, often in quite a negative way.

'A lot of people think you're loitering ...going to cause trouble'

'The perception of young people people think you're in a shop to go robbing'

The younger cohort were somewhat more positive about their local communities and spoke about being able to use the local amenities in terms of walks, etc. However, it was also noted that road safety and poor lighting were issues impacting access to local amenities.

Both groups of young people were very clear about their experiences, in that if a young person is not interested in sport, there are very few other options open to them, and most of these other options have both cost and transport implications.



6.1.2 Young people's experiences of their local youth project /group

When asked about their experience of attending the youth project, and what they get from it, all the young people spoke about the importance of the social aspect, whereby they have the opportunity to meet people, make friends and learn new skills. Interestingly, many of the young people were also aware of the fact that they get to voice their opinions, express their needs and interests and felt that they were listened to.

'It gives you something to look forward to'

'I feel better at the end of the school day knowing I'm coming here'

'You learn how to identify your feelings and manage them'

'You get to go on trail walks'

'You get to go camping'

'You learn life lessons'

'You get medical lessons (first aid)'

'You get to use your voice'

When asked what life would be like if the youth group/project was not available to them, the young people were very conscious of the gap that this would create in their in their lives.

'It would be boring'

'It would be depressing'

'I wouldn't know what to do'

In addition, the young people from the 19th Scouts Tinahely made drawings representing what they experience in Scouts and what they gain from this experience. These images appear throughout this document.

It is important to note that, apart from sports clubs (and the youth groups already listed), there are no other youth groups for young people in these areas.

Finally, in response to the question 'What would you like to see for young people in this area?', responses overwhelmingly focused on the need for more youth groups and a safe, comfortable space for young people to come together and 'hang out'.

6.2 Research findings from the young people who do not attend a youth project/group

The young people in these focus groups were aged between 15 and 16 years. In response to the question 'What is life like for young people in this area?', young people spoke about hanging out in local parks, sports pitches and shops. They noted the volume of sports clubs in their local areas as well as some dance and music groups. Some of the towns had more options in terms of shops and cafés, however young people again were very aware that most options cost money and have transport implications. They were also conscious of some areas not being safe in terms of poor lighting, dangerous roads and dangerous driving and being isolated. They were also conscious of littering in some areas with broken bottles and empty vapes scattered around.

'If you don't do sports, you have nothing'

'There's nothing for young people'

When asked about the issues affecting young people in their areas, the young people were asked to think about this question in general terms and not to relate it to themselves personally. Again, the key issue identified was the lack of a safe space for young people to meet and hang out. Other issues identified related to safety including bullying and online abuse, drug dealing in some areas, road safety as well as the need for and the lack of transport options to enable young people to travel to various activities and events.

'Places are dark and people can be sketchy'

'It's not safe to walk or cycle'

'Bad drivers make us feel unsafe'

'It's isolated.... there's no good transport'

'It's important to get out and socialise'

When asked what they would like to see being provided for young people in this area, the overwhelming response again was having a place for young people to 'hang out...to have fun and to meet new people'. They also spoke about the need for more activities for both younger children and teenagers, as well as the need for improved transport to enable them to access various groups and activities. They were also keen to address safety concerns through the provision of better footpaths and cycle paths as well as improved lighting in public areas.

'A community centre for teenagers with space to hang out'

'Young people need to be out and socialising'

'A space to do things and hang out'

'More clubs'

'Vapes are left everywhere'

6.3 Youth Voice

The other key issue identified by the young people was that, outside of the formal school system, they were not aware of any other forum for their voices to be heard, and they were aware of the importance of having their voices heard. This was a significant difference in contrast to the groups of young people who participate in youth groups/projects, who stated that they did have that space to be heard and listened to within their groups.

'Asking our opinions is really important.... outside of school there's no other place for this'

'Young people are not respected'

'Adults don't understand the new generation'

In line with National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (Action Plan 2023-2028), both the Kildare County Development Plan 2023-2029 and the Wicklow County Development Plan 2022 – 2028, prioritise active, youth-led participation in planning for youth spaces and supporting initiatives that address needs identified by young people.

Tusla's Child and Youth Participation Strategy 2019 – 2023 highlighted the benefits of youth participation aside from the requirement to do so. These included improved services, improved decision-making, promoting children's protection, enhancing children and young people's skills, personal development and an improved society.



6.4 Part 2: Research findings from the workers/service providers/volunteers/community participants.

Thematic analysis was used to identify the key findings from the qualitative data collected and the following themes emerged

- Lack of infrastructure and facilities for young people
- Mental health and anxiety
- School avoidance
- Substance/alcohol misuse
- Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence
- Hidden deprivation
- Homelessness
- Integration of new communities
- Child exploitation by criminal gangs
- Youth gambling
- Rural isolation/lack of access to transport
- Discrimination
- Lack of volunteers to provide youth groups
- Challenges in relation to the recruitment and retention of youth workers

This group of participants also discussed the following questions:

- How do these needs/issues impact the wider community?
- What are the gaps in service delivery?
- What would be the benefit of increased youth work provision?



6.4.1 Lack of Infrastructure and facilities for young people

This was one of the biggest issues identified across all the consultations and it is an issue that has been identified repeatedly in various reports, plans and strategies. This gap has a knock-on effect, in terms of how young people are perceived when they are seen ‘to be hanging around on the streets’, as well as the impact of boredom on mental health for example, as well as compounding other issues such as isolation. In addition, the lack of physical spaces to meet or work in, is also providing challenging for many of the service providers, as they lack the physical space necessary to provide services to young people and their families.

Research carried out in Celbridge in 2022⁴ found that young people there reported a lack of outdoor facilities designed for their age group, which results in them using existing spaces such as playgrounds and car parks. They identified a connection between this shortage of youth-specific amenities and anti-social behaviour, and expressed a need for a safe, multifunctional outdoor space. Accessibility was highlighted as important, with young people wanting facilities within walking distance and connected by cycle paths to support independent mobility. The most requested feature was a dedicated space to socialise, with seating and shelter considered essential. Additional desired features included outdoor gym equipment, charging ports, Wi-Fi and zip lines. Skateparks, ball parks and youth-oriented playgrounds were also commonly requested facilities.



⁴ “Somewhere to hang out” Teenagers’ Outdoor Recreational needs in Celbridge. A partnership perspective Barron, C., Tolland, K., Emmett, M-J. (2022) “Somewhere to hang out” Teenagers Outdoor Recreational needs in Celbridge. A partnership perspective. Dublin. Dublin City University.

The Kildare CYPSC Children and Young People's Plan (2023 – 2025)⁵ and associated strategic material emphasised the importance of participation, access to services and supports, and recreation to ensure young people can be active, healthy, and connected. Limited facilities or accessible spaces can undermine:

- Opportunities for positive physical activity and informal socialising.
- Community engagement and sense of belonging.
- Mental and emotional wellbeing, as young people often need safe, structured places to meet, play, learn and express themselves.
- Specific items repeatedly raised included safe youth-friendly spaces and places, such as indoor and outdoor hang-out areas, parks and youth facilities — with local reference to areas like Celbridge.

The Wicklow CYPSC Plan (2025 – 2027)⁶ highlighted that within the wider local planning and infrastructure assessments, there are gaps in outdoor recreation and youth-appropriate facilities in some parts of West Wicklow. The Plan recognises that many young people feel disenfranchised due to a lack of facilities that meet their needs. It states that young people — especially those who are too old for children's playgrounds and not necessarily involved in formal sports clubs — still lack adequate spaces for socialising and relaxation. Examples of facilities considered attractive and necessary include mixed-use games areas (MUGAs), skate parks and youth centres (often with space for informal use). In addition, the Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Plan 2025-2030⁷ notes a lack of outdoor recreation facilities in West Wicklow.

The Wicklow County Development Plan 2022-2028⁸ acknowledges that young people lack access to social, recreational and informal gathering spaces and seeks to ensure that planning and development processes support the delivery of appropriate facilities. It embeds objectives to identify infrastructure gaps (including youth facilities), to require consideration of these gaps in development proposals, and to guide the provision of community and recreation spaces that young people need — whether in larger settlements or in more rural parts of the county, including West Wicklow.

It was suggested that access to local schools in the evenings/directly after school could provide a solution to the lack of youth facilities, however, this is an option which would require further exploration and consultation to consider the practicalities involved, as well as young people's preferences,

'Students are bussed in and out from schools and when they get back home they have nowhere to go' (Community representative)

'We're trying to do one to one work in coffee shops' (Service provider)

'There's no space available to arrange an access visit' (Service provider)

'We have an Arts Centre but there's not a lot to attract young people in' (Community representative)

⁵ Kildare Children and Young People's Services Committee. Children and Young People's Plan 2023 – 2025. https://www.cypsc.ie/_fileupload/Documents/Resources/CYPP/kildare/children-and-young-people-s-plan-2023-2025-final.pdf

⁶ Wicklow Children and Young People's Services Committee Children and Young People's Plan 2025 - 2027

⁷ Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Plan 2025-2030. Wicklow County Council.

⁸ Wicklow County Development Plan 2022 - 2028

6.4.2 Mental health & anxiety – compounded by a lack of counselling/support services.

In common with research findings across the country, the issues of mental health and anxiety were repeatedly referenced in all the consultations with workers. The longer-term impacts of Covid-19 are impacting this generation of young people, and the issue of mental health is also related to the issue of school avoidance, as well as a number of other issues. Research indicates that mental health difficulties are common and rising among young people, including increased rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm and low wellbeing, especially following the pandemic.⁹

The Planet Youth Survey (Wicklow) 2024¹⁰ highlighted significant concerns around young people’s mental health and wellbeing, particularly among girls, who reported much higher rates of self-harm and lower levels of positive mental health than boys. Help-seeking was low, and many young people felt support was not available when needed. Heavy social media use and poor sleep were common and linked to poorer wellbeing.

In addition, research conducted by the National Youth Council of Ireland in 2019¹¹ highlighted a number of specific challenges in relation to mental health for rural youth, which are still relevant in the current climate, including:

- **Isolation and Transport:** A major barrier for rural youth is limited public transport, which restricts access to services (mental/sexual health) and causes significant social isolation.
- **Limited Services:** There is reduced access to mental health services and counsellors in rural areas compared to urban centres.
- **Invisible Pressures:** Rural youth often face a “hidden” crisis, with increased anxiety linked to academic pressure, family issues, and, for young farmers, fear regarding future financial stability.
- **Infrastructure Issues:** Poor broadband in certain rural areas inhibits access to online mental health supports.

‘Theres a chronic shortage of mental health services for young people’ (Service provider)

⁹ (Dooley N, Power E, Healy H, Cotter D, Cannon M. Mental health of Irish adolescents following the COVID-19 pandemic: results from a population-based cross-sectional survey. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*. 2024;41(4):430-438. doi:10.1017/ipm.2024.16)

¹⁰ Planet Youth Wicklow. *Results of Survey 2024. What young people say about living in Wicklow.*

¹¹ Youth Work in Rural Ireland. A Qualitative Research Study Exploring the Provision of Youth Work in a Rural Context. Mc Aleer, M (2019) National Youth Council of Ireland.

6.4.3 School avoidance:

Again, this was a key issue identified in the interviews and focus group. The lack of support services in this regard was also highlighted. While this is an increasing trend across the country, Kildare has the fourth highest national rate of primary school absenteeism¹² and the percentage for Wicklow was higher than the state average in the past academic year for which data is available¹³. This, coupled with the lack of DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools and accompanying school supports such as Home School Community Liaison (HSCCL) and School Completion Officers, further compounds this issue in these areas. Recent national research¹⁴ shows a sharp rise in school absenteeism since the COVID-19 pandemic, with around 1 in 5 primary and post-primary students now missing more than 20 days per year — nearly double pre-pandemic levels. The problem is particularly severe in disadvantaged DEIS schools, where up to 35% of pupils miss 20 or more days annually. This trend reflects widespread school disengagement rather than isolated cases.

Anxiety and emotional difficulties are identified as major contributing factors. Surveys and feedback from guidance counsellors highlight anxiety as the most common mental health issue among students, with increasing levels of school avoidance linked to stress and isolation¹⁵. Academic research further confirms that poor mental health is a strong predictor of attendance problems, even among younger children, with those experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties significantly more likely to miss school regularly. In addition, service providers working with young travellers highlighted the low literacy levels among these young people as another contributing factor to school avoidance.

New research, published by the ESRI and produced in partnership with Tusla's Education Support Service (TESS)¹⁶, used Growing Up in Ireland data to provide the first Irish evidence on the effects of school absence at age 13 on educational qualifications, labour market outcomes and wellbeing at ages 20 and 25. Some of the key findings included that:

- Even short spells of absence of one to two days at age 13 are linked to lower Leaving Certificate grades.
- There is a very large performance gap related to chronic absence, defined as missing 20 or more days a year, a gap of over 80 Leaving Certificate points even taking account of a range of other factors that affect performance.
- This performance gap is evident across all social groups. There is therefore no evidence that more advantaged families can successfully counter the negative effects of absenteeism for their children.
- Longer school absence at age 13 is significantly related to lower chances of going on to higher education and of achieving a degree by age 25.

¹² School Attendance Data Primary and Post-Primary Schools and Student Absence Reports Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2019-2022. TESS

¹³ Wicklow CYPSC Plan

¹⁴ Sharpe, J., Bunting, B., & Heary, C. (2023). A Latent Class Analysis of Mental Health Symptoms in Primary School Children: Exploring Associations with School Attendance Problems. *School Mental Health*, 15(4), 1128-1144. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-023-09610-0>

¹⁵ Walk in my shoes. St Patrick's Mental Health Services. Survey of Guidance Counsellors. (2025).

¹⁶ Smyth, E., Moya, A., and Darmody, M. (2026). The long-term outcomes of school absence, ESRI Research Series 220, Dublin: ESRI, <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs220>

6.4.4. Substance/alcohol misuse

Key participants reported that much of the substance and alcohol misuse within these community remains largely hidden, often occurring behind closed doors in family homes. It was noted that this issue is not limited to young people, but frequently involves parental substance misuse, which can significantly influence attitudes and behaviours around alcohol and drugs. This hidden nature can make the problem more difficult to identify and address, particularly where there may be stigma or reluctance to seek support.

While there has been an assumption at national level that youth drinking is no longer a major concern, recent research indicates increases in alcohol consumption among young people. The Youth Drinking in Ireland (2026)¹⁷ report by Alcohol Action Ireland showed that alcohol consumption among 15–24-year-olds rose by 3% between 2024 and 2025, with 78% of young people in this age group now drinking—well above the national average of 71%. This marks a significant increase from 66% in 2016, representing a 12% rise over the past decade. The report also highlights that over 43,000 young people across Ireland are currently living with alcohol dependence.

The Planet Youth Wicklow Report (2024)¹⁸ indicated that alcohol remains the most widely used substance, with many teens reporting early use and parental provision of alcohol. Wicklow also has comparatively high rates of cannabis use, alongside notable levels of vaping and smoking. Boredom and a lack of safe, structured community activities were identified as key issues, with expanded youth spaces and facilities suggested as protective measures.

In response to the findings from research, the draft National Drugs Strategy 2026–2029¹⁹ sets out a health-led, evidence-based approach to addressing substance use, covering both drug use and harmful alcohol consumption. It recognises that alcohol and drug-related harms are often interconnected and should be addressed through coordinated policies rather than separate strategies. The strategy specifically highlights the need to tackle harmful alcohol use — the most common substance affecting children and young people — alongside illicit and prescription drug use within a comprehensive prevention framework.

‘Theres a lot of drug use in this area.... including parental drug use’ (Service provider)

‘There’s a lot of hidden harm.... people don’t want to be seen looking for help’ (Service provider)

¹⁷ Youth Drinking in Ireland. What’s the real picture. 2025. Alcohol Action Ireland.

¹⁸ <https://wicklow.planetyouth.ie/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2025/10/Wicklow-2024-County-Report.pdf>

¹⁹ National Drugs Strategy 2026-2029 An integrated, equitable and evidence-based response to drug and harmful alcohol use. Department of Health.

6.4.5 Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence

Service providers reported that the incidences of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence were increasing and impacted all age groups in these areas, in common with trends across the country.

Kildare had one of the higher rates of domestic abuse calls to Gardaí in 2024, at 13.28 per 1,000 people, which is above the national average. Domestic abuse in County Wicklow is also rising, with 599 people applying for protective orders in 2023, up from 527 in 2022.

In addition, research has highlighted the complexities of domestic abuse in rural communities as more than one in four (27%) of the population in County Wicklow lives in a rural area. While strong community spirit is one of the great strengths of rural life, fostering connection and mutual support, that same closeness can sometimes unintentionally enable domestic abuse to remain hidden or continue unchecked, simply because of the tight-knit and private nature of rural communities²⁰.

'Theres a lot of this abuse happening.... but its hidden in a lot of cases' (Service provider)

6.4.6 Hidden deprivation

It was noted across all the consultations that the deprivation scores for North Kildare and South-West Wicklow do not adequately reflect the pockets of severe deprivation within these areas.

A report on Child Poverty Profile in Kildare in 2025²¹ highlighted the issue of significant hidden disadvantage whereby 'While Kildare is ranked as the fourth most affluent local authority in Ireland, nearly a third of its total population and 1 in 4 children live in disadvantaged areas. Due to Kildare's large population base, rates across a range of child poverty, risk factors translate into significantly high absolute numbers, indicating a scale of need that is at serious risk of being overlooked when focusing on proportions or percentages alone.'

A PPN Report (2020)²² on Food Poverty highlighted a deficit in West Wicklow of supply of food distribution and collection responses. In addition, the CYPSC Wicklow Children and Young People's Plan 2025 – 2027 notes that 'The overall index of deprivation and the patterns of population throughout the county, masks pockets of deprivation in a number of areas of the county in the north, east and south of Wicklow.

'New housing estates with private housing at the front and social housing at the back is skewing the picture of deprivation' (Service provider)

'If your family doesn't have money and a car, you won't get access to much' (Service provider)

'Town x is a massive area of disadvantage.... with no services at all' (Service provider)

'Resourcing is linked to the deprivation index.... this is a very blunt measure...doing a disservice to the level of need in this county' (Service provider)

²⁰ https://www.cypsc.ie/_fileupload/Documents/Resources/dsgbv-page/wicklow-domestic-abuse-final-feb-22.pdf

²¹ Kildare Child Poverty Profile. Dowling, A. (2025) CYPSC Kildare, LCDC, Slainte Care Healthy Communities.

²² Falling Through the Cracks. A look at Hidden Poverty in Wicklow. (2022) Public Participation Network.

6.4.7 Homelessness

The issue of homelessness was also highlighted by service providers. Evidence in this regard was more anecdotal, focused on hidden homelessness involving reports of ‘couch surfing’, overcrowded houses, temporary accommodation, etc.

A report to the Public Participation Network (PPN) in Wicklow in 2022 highlighted some of the issues in relation to hidden homelessness and multi-occupancy, including mental illness, depression and anxiety among the family unit. The report also noted that intergenerational caregiving arrangements can reshape family dynamics in significant ways. In some cases, grandmothers assume primary caregiving responsibilities for a new generation of children, effectively taking on a maternal role once again. As these dynamics shift, some mothers may become less engaged in the day to day responsibilities of parenting, leading to role ambiguity within the household. Issues of privacy also emerge as multiple generations share the same living space, often resulting in a lack of personal boundaries. Financial strain frequently intensifies under these circumstances. Household expenses increase as the number of dependents rises, and higher living costs can exacerbate existing economic challenges. Adult children, while legally independent, may struggle with the tension between seeking autonomy and remaining reliant on their parents’ household, creating emotional and interpersonal conflict. Such patterns underscore the complex emotional, relational, and economic implications of multigenerational living and caregiving.

In addition, data from a variety of sources indicates that homelessness has reached record levels in both County Wicklow and County Kildare.

6.4.8 Integration of new communities

Service providers consistently highlighted that North Kildare and West Wicklow are experiencing significant and increasingly diverse population growth. Key hubs like Maynooth (18.7% non-Irish nationals), Kilcock (16.5%), show high diversity. Wicklow has a 14% non-White Irish population, with major communities from the UK and Poland, while Kildare has high concentrations of Polish, UK, Romanian, and Indian nationals (Census 2022). Those consulted noted that this population growth is not only numerical but brings increased complexity of need.

The Wicklow CYPSC plan recognises that County Wicklow’s population has grown not only through natural increases but also through positive net migration and the arrival of new communities, including international protection applicants and refugees (e.g., from Ukraine). It also notes that these demographic changes have placed increased pressures on local services such as housing, education and health. Kildare CYPSC recognises that children and young people

²³ Falling Through the Cracks. A look at Hidden Poverty in Wicklow. (2022) Public Participation Network.

²⁴ https://www.kildare-nationalist.ie/news/numbers-of-homeless-families-double-in-co-kildare_arid-83859.html

²⁵ <https://www.eastcoast.fm/news/wicklow-news/latest-figures-show-70-people-registered-as-homeless-in-wicklow/>

from migrant and international protection-seeking families have specific needs that intersect with mental health, education, and belonging — and that these must be understood and planned for collaboratively - linking education, health, family support, and community services — to ensure that local responses are coherent and accessible to new communities

‘We need more staff to work with these communities...the needs are huge’ (Service provider)

6.4.9 Child exploitation by criminal gangs

Key participants reported that criminal gangs are targeting children and young people, particularly in North Kildare, because of proximity to Dublin. This has numerous knock-on effects for families and the community at large. There are reports of families being intimidated because of drug debts, incidents of anti-social behaviour as well as levels of unreported crime due to intimidation.

This trend is in line with findings from research such as the Greentown project, a long-term research programme led by the University of Limerick in partnership with Irish Government departments, which found evidence that criminal networks recruit children into criminal activity as young as 10–11 years old. These children can be used as runners, carriers and in drug-related tasks. The recent legislation, Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Act 2024, was introduced in response to recommendations arising from a variety of sources. This legislation criminalises adults who groom, compel, coerce, or induce children to engage in criminal activity.

‘Young people are falling into crime’ (Service provider)

‘The ages of young people involved is very young...young teens up’ (Service provider)

‘There’s a lot of unreported crime as a result of drug intimidation’ (Service provider)

6.4.10 Youth gambling

Youth gambling was very briefly raised in several consultations. However, this may reflect a lack of awareness about what constitutes youth gambling, as activities such as gaming arcades, gaming apps, and loot boxes within games are not always recognised under this classification.

Recent ESRI research²⁶ examined how childhood exposure to gambling affects the likelihood of problem gambling in adulthood in Ireland, where around 1 in 30 adults experience problem gambling. The study found that 64% of adults reported gambling as children, most commonly through slot machines, scratch cards, betting, bingo, lotteries, and gambling with friends. Those who gambled before 18 were nearly twice as likely to develop problem gambling as adults. Having a parent who gambled increased the risk by one-third, while having a parent who gambled heavily almost doubled it. A positive parental attitude toward gambling also raised the risk. When combined — particularly early gambling and heavy parental gambling — the risk increased fourfold. The findings indicated that childhood gambling experiences are strong predictors of adult problem gambling.

²⁶ Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice (REPPP), University of Limerick, Department of Justice & DCEDIY. (2016/2021). Greentown Report: Examining the influence of criminal networks on children in Ireland. University of Limerick.

²⁷ Ó Ceallaigh, D., Timmons, S., Robertson, D., and Lunn, P. (2026). Childhood exposure to gambling increases likelihood of problem gambling as an adult, ESRI Research Bulletin 202601, Dublin, Ireland: ESRI, <https://www.esri.ie/publications/childhood-exposure-to-gambling-increases-likelihood-of-problem-gambling-as-an-adult>

6.4.11 Rural isolation/lack of access to transport

The issue of rural isolation, and the lack of adequate public transport was consistently highlighted, creating another level of challenge. If families do not have ready and timely access to a car, then young people are restricted in what they can access. It was also noted that a significant number of roads in these areas were unsafe for walking and cycling, making the limited number of local facilities difficult to access.

NYCI’s (2019)²⁸ research indicated that rural young people (16–24) face significant barriers to education, employment, and social life due to limited public transport, forcing a heavy reliance on private cars or lifts. This creates “transport poverty,” impacting mental health, limiting job opportunities, and access to apprenticeships, education and social activities and leading to social isolation. The research also indicated that over 80% of rural households own at least one car, but young people often rely on being passengers, with 16% in one study relying on others to travel to work or education. There are also financial and safety barriers in this regard as high car ownership costs combined with poor public transport infrastructure limits the economic mobility of rural youth.

‘Transport is a massive issue’ (Service provider)

‘There are no regular buses.... people are hitching lifts to get to services’ (Service provider)

‘Some of the facilities in the town are great ...but how do you get there if you live three miles out’ (Community representative)

‘If you do manage to get an appointment with a service, a whole day is gone travelling there and back’ (Service provider)

‘We have an Arts Centre but there’s not a lot to attract young people in’ (Community representative)

²⁸ Youth Work in Rural Ireland. A Qualitative Research Study Exploring the Provision of Youth Work in a Rural Context. Mc Aleer, M (2019) National Youth Council of Ireland.

6.4.12 Discrimination

Service providers working specifically with young people from the Travelling Community highlighted the issue of discrimination, both in terms of young travellers experiencing discrimination and the fear of discrimination when looking to access groups and services. This alongside all of the other issues already outlined, create additional challenges for these young people, leading to greater levels of exclusion and isolation.

6.4.13 Lack of volunteers to provide youth groups

In line with national trends, there has been a drop off in the numbers of volunteers working with young people in these areas. Several youth clubs and groups closed over the period of Covid-19 and some of these clubs have not re-opened. Key participants spoke about the challenges in relation to trying to recruit volunteers. Given that both Wicklow and Kildare are within the 'commuter belt' for Dublin, it stands to reason that many adults are spending considerable amounts of time travelling to and from work, leaving little time and energy to volunteer in youth groups. However, the necessity for, and the benefit from volunteering means that this is an area requiring more support going forward.

Research indicates that volunteers have always been foundational to youth work, enhancing organisational capacity, safety, and community credibility. Research conducted by the ESRI (2023)²⁹ shows that young people who volunteer are more satisfied with their own lives. They are also more confident of themselves as adults, and more likely to report feeling like an adult. Volunteering may also help protect young people from the negative effects of living in more socially disadvantaged communities, with fewer facilities and fewer friends and family locally. In these areas, young people tend to have worse mental health, less trust in society and are less confident of themselves as adults. However, young people living in these areas who volunteer do not share the same negative outcomes.

In addition, research conducted by NYCI (2023)³⁰ indicated that volunteering improves young adults' confidence, well-being, and life skills, such as leadership and communication, while protecting mental health in disadvantaged communities. They act as trusted, non-parental mentors who foster social cohesion. They help young people to build essential life skills, including patience, empathy, and leadership, which serve as assets throughout their lives. Volunteering also helps protect young people's mental health from the negative impacts of social disadvantage and improves overall life satisfaction. Youth organisations (supported by volunteers) play a major role in welcoming young people into new communities. They promote active citizenship and encourage young people to engage in decision-making and community development. Volunteering also provides opportunities to develop employability skills, such as management and networking, helping young people make decisions about their future careers.

'More people are working from home, but we are not seeing the uptake in volunteerism' (Service provider)

'There's a massive gap in volunteer led services' (Service provider)

'I got involved in volunteering because I wanted my child to have access to a group' (Volunteer)

'We need to create more awareness around volunteering' (Service provider)

²⁹ Laurence, J., and Smyth, E. (2023). Civic and political engagement among young adults in Ireland, ESRI Research Series 171, Dublin: ESRI, <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs171>

³⁰ <https://www.youth.ie/articles/new-nyci-research-shows-role-of-youth-work-near-universally-valued-by-public/>

6.4.14 Challenges in relation to the recruitment and retention of youth work staff

While this research was focused on the needs of young people, it is worth highlighting the current challenges in the sector in relation to the recruitment and retention of youth work staff. This is a national issue and has been raised in various fora and settings, including during a series of national consultations with the youth work sector held by NYCI in Ireland in 2024, as part of the European Youth Work Agenda Bonn Process project (The Bonn Process is the implementation phase of the European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA), designed to strengthen and further develop youth work across Europe). The primary recommendations in relation to addressing these challenges include increased funding, improved pay, better working conditions, and targeted workforce development strategies^{31 32}. Opportunities for Youth (2024)³³ recognises the range of youth work workforce issues that emerged during the consultation phase for the development of this strategy and has identified a specific action in relation to the development of a workforce strategy.

6.5 How do these needs/issues impact the wider community?

The consultations highlighted that these identified needs and issues have a significant impact on the wider community. Service providers reported that they come into contact with families who feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope, particularly when trying to support children and young people with additional needs, including neurodivergence and mental health difficulties, often without adequate services in place. Drug intimidation and drug-related debts are placing further strain on households, with some crimes remaining unreported, because of this intimidation. The lack of appropriate youth facilities gives rise to boredom on the part of young people, and this also has a knock-on impact on families. The broader impact of substance misuse and local drug dealing affects community safety and wellbeing. At the same time, rapid population growth has not been matched with sufficient investment in services, leaving existing supports overstretched

‘They’re building houses without sufficient infrastructure’ (Service provider)

‘The playground in town x had to be shut down....it wasn’t safe for kids to play in.... now it’s used by older teens...there’s anti-social behaviour and needles laying about..’ (Community representative)

‘There’s a knock-on impact for families and parents when a young person in struggling with their mental health and parents are trying to support them with little access to services’ (Service provider)

³¹ Inspiring Future Youth Workers (2025) NYCI. <https://www.youth.ie/articles/inspiring-the-next-generation-of-youth-workers/#:~:text=The%20youth%20work%20sector%20is%20facing%20a,European%20Youth%20Work%20Agenda%20Bonn%20Process%20project>.

³² Youth Work Ireland Budget Submission 2025 <https://www.youthworkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/YWI-Pre-Budget-Submission-2025-final.pdf>

³³ Opportunities for Youth. National Strategy for Youth and Related Services (2024). Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

6.6 What are the gaps in service delivery?

All participants involved in this research strongly emphasised the overall shortage of support services across both areas and their surrounding communities. Key gaps identified include limited youth work provision (and in some cases no youth work provision), both in terms of voluntary engagement and paid youth worker roles. There is also a notable absence of Family Resource Centres, resulting in reduced access to family and parenting supports. Participants highlighted insufficient mental health services for children and young people, alongside a lack of dedicated and adequately resourced drug and alcohol services. The lack of childcare places was highlighted. Concerns were also raised about the absence of DEIS schools, alongside the accompanying lack of HSCL (Home School Community Liaison) coordinators and School Completion Officers. More broadly, a lack of early intervention services is contributing to limited referral pathways for practice models such as Meitheal. Finally, there are few accessible spaces outside the formal education system where young people's voices can be meaningfully heard and represented.

'Our area is under resourced.... provision has never caught up with the significant youth rate in the population' (Service provider)

'What happens is that because we have such a low level of service provision, there is nothing to link any new services into' (Service provider)

'There's no access to services (transport)...and there are no services' (Community representative)

'There's a basic level of provision that is needed right across the board' (Service provider)



6.7 What would be the benefit of increased youth work provision?

While youth work alone cannot comprehensively address all the issues identified in this research, there was widespread recognition for the significant contribution that youth work could make. The need for both universal and targeted provision in youth work was emphasised. Many of the towns in the research area are experiencing a population explosion and are due to grow even more into the future. Participants viewed that additional youth work capacity would benefit young people, their families and the wider community in terms of both prevention and early intervention in relation to many of the issues identified. It was noted that young people would be able to access support and many other services spoke about the benefits of being able to make referrals to a youth service/project. However, it was also noted that any additional provision would have to be at a meaningful level to bring about any significant improvement in the lives of young people in these areas.

A review of research conducted by the University of Galway in 2022³⁴ indicated that a range of benefits accrue from universal youth work, including personal development and growth, relationships, connection and support, gains made in terms of youth civic engagement, community service, leadership and volunteering. Enhanced social responsibility and knowledge of issues related to equality and diversity also emerged as an outcome of youth work participation, as well as improved health and wellbeing.

Opportunities for Youth³⁵ recognises that youth work and similar services have an important developmental role to play, one that is especially important for young people experiencing barriers to opportunity. Opportunities for Youth is intended to strengthen the capacity of the youth work sector to support the delivery of the 5 National Outcomes for young people and to address new and emerging challenges for young people, such as navigating the digital environment and the growth of disinformation.

However, the recommendations in relation to addressing the current challenges in the youth work sector in relation to recruitment and retention, i.e. increased funding, improved pay, better working conditions, and targeted workforce development strategies need to be implemented in order to ensure that young people can benefit from youth work provision.

‘The difference would be huge’ (Service provider)

‘If we had more resources we could run 30 groups a week, instead of 11’ (Service provider)

‘If we had more resources we could work with 12 – 18-year olds’ (Service provider)

³⁴ Brady, B., Silke, C., and Shaw, A. (2022) A Rapid Review of the Benefits and Outcomes of Universal Youth Work. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway.

³⁵ Opportunities for Youth...

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

The research findings present a clear and consistent picture: while North Kildare and West Wicklow are often characterised as relatively affluent and growing areas, there are significant and, at times, hidden pressures affecting children, young people, families and the services that support them. Across all stakeholder engagements, the same interconnected themes emerged — inadequate infrastructure for young people, rising mental health needs, school disengagement, substance use, hidden disadvantage, and limited service capacity.

A central and recurring concern is the lack of youth infrastructure and safe, dedicated spaces. The absence of facilities not only limits opportunities for positive engagement but also contributes to boredom, isolation, and negative perceptions of young people. Service providers emphasised that this gap has wider implications — affecting mental health, increasing vulnerability to substance misuse and antisocial behaviour, and constraining their own ability to deliver supports effectively due to a shortage of suitable premises.

Mental health and anxiety were identified as critical and escalating concerns. Providers described a generation of young people still experiencing the after-effects of COVID-19, with school avoidance, emotional distress, and social withdrawal becoming more visible and entrenched. Evidence from the Planet Youth Survey (2024) reinforces these concerns, particularly in relation to girls' wellbeing, low help-seeking behaviours, poor sleep, and high social media use. At the same time, the lack of accessible counselling, early intervention supports, and in-school services — including the lack of DEIS schools and accompanying supports such as HSCL and School Completion Officers — is compounding school absenteeism and disengagement. National research indicating that one in five students now miss more than 20 days per year underscores the scale of the challenge.

Substance misuse, particularly alcohol, remains a significant but often hidden issue. While there may be a perception that youth drinking is declining, recent findings from Alcohol Action Ireland highlight rising alcohol consumption among 15–24-year-olds. The Planet Youth Wicklow report further identifies early alcohol use, parental provision, cannabis use, vaping, and smoking as ongoing concerns, with boredom and limited structured activities cited as contributing factors. Providers also noted that parental substance misuse and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence are affecting family environments, often in ways that remain hidden due to stigma and under-reporting.

The data on deprivation and child poverty reveal another critical dimension. Although Kildare is frequently ranked among the most affluent local authorities, the Child Poverty Profile (2025) highlights substantial hidden disadvantage, with nearly one-third of the population and one in four children living in disadvantaged areas. This pattern is mirrored in parts of Wicklow. Providers cautioned that reliance on county-level averages risks obscuring concentrated pockets of need. Hidden homelessness, overcrowding, and couch surfing further illustrate the precarious circumstances facing some families.

Rapid population growth, increased diversity, rural isolation, and inadequate transport links add further layers of complexity. Young people without access to private transport face restricted participation in education, recreation, and support services. The decline in volunteer-led youth provision since COVID-19, alongside the closure of several youth clubs, has reduced protective community structures at a time when they are most needed. Concerns were also raised about the targeting of young people by criminal networks, particularly in North Kildare due to its proximity to Dublin, and emerging issues such as youth gambling, which may be under-recognised.

The consultation findings demonstrate that the challenges facing children and young people in North Kildare and West Wicklow extend well beyond the individual and have tangible consequences for families and the wider community. Parents are frequently described as overwhelmed, particularly when trying to navigate neurodivergence, mental health difficulties, substance misuse, and limited service availability. Drug intimidation, hidden crime, and anti-social behaviour further undermine community safety and cohesion. At the same time, rapid housing and population growth has not been matched by commensurate investment in infrastructure or services, leaving communities feeling under-supported and overstretched.

Across all consultations, there was a strong and consistent message that current service provision is insufficient. Gaps in youth work, family supports, mental health services, drug and alcohol services, early intervention pathways, childcare, and school-based supports are contributing to unmet need and limited referral options. In some areas, there is not only a shortage of services, but an absence of the basic level of provision required to build coherent local responses. In addition, the limited nature of funding, such as the proliferation of once-off or time limited grant funding, alongside the absence of ongoing core funding for youth related projects and programmes contribute to challenges in service provision.

Within this context, increased youth work provision was viewed as a practical and preventative response with the potential to generate wide-ranging community benefits. Evidence from the University of Galway (2022) highlights the positive developmental, wellbeing, and civic outcomes associated with universal youth work. Similarly, Opportunities for Youth recognises youth work as central to delivering national outcomes for young people and addressing emerging challenges. However, with absence of ongoing core funding of project/programmes that align with values of youth work approach and could go some way to addressing recruitment & retention issues

While youth work alone cannot resolve the structural gaps identified, stakeholders were clear that meaningful investment in both universal and targeted provision would strengthen protective factors, improve early intervention, enhance referral pathways, and support safer, more connected communities. Organisations such as In Sync, Crosscare, and YMCA cover wide catchment areas and operate with limited resources, placing considerable strain on their capacity to respond to local needs. Without this investment, existing pressures are likely to intensify; with it, there is significant potential to improve outcomes for young people, families and the wider community alike.

7.2 Recommendations:

1. Disseminate the research findings

Ensure that the findings of this research — particularly those relating to funded youth work provision, volunteer-led youth initiatives, and youth-led spaces — are widely disseminated among statutory agencies, community and voluntary organisations, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders to inform planning and resource allocation.

2. Strengthen Interagency Advocacy for Investment

Utilise existing interagency structures at local, regional, and national levels to advocate collectively for increased and sustained investment in rural youth work provision and the development of accessible, youth-friendly spaces.

3. Review and Inform Rural Youth Work Models

Examine established models of rural youth work to identify examples of best practice, with a view to strengthening local delivery and contributing to the development of national policy in this area.

4. Embed Meaningful Youth Participation

Ensure that youth participation is systematically embedded in the planning, design, implementation, and evaluation of services and facilities, in line with best practice principles.

5. Support and Strengthen Volunteer-Led Provision

Engage with relevant organisations that support volunteer development (e.g. club development officers and national youth organisations) to encourage, resource, and sustain voluntary youth clubs and groups, aligning with the objectives of emerging national volunteering strategies.

6. Repurpose Underutilised Community Premises

Liaise with local authorities and statutory and voluntary agencies to identify publicly owned or underutilised premises that could be repurposed to provide safe, accessible youth-friendly spaces.

7. Promote Rural Youth Voice and Representation

Strengthen mechanisms to amplify rural youth perspectives, including engagement with European platforms such as Rural Youth Europe, to inform local practice and broader advocacy efforts.

Appendix 1: List of Organisations that participated in the research

- An Garda Síochána (JLOs and Community Gardaí – Kildare and Wicklow)
- Celbridge Community Council
- Clane Youth Project
- Colaiste Bhríde Carnew (Transition year students)
- In sync
- Kildare County Council
- Kildare Councillor
- Kildare Children and Young People's Services Committee (Coordinator)
- Maynooth Community College (Transition Year Students)
- Parents' Representative (St Wolstan's, Celbridge)
- Primary and Post-Primary School Teachers and Principals (Kildare and Wicklow)
- Scout Leaders
- Tusla (CFNS Kildare and Wicklow, Social Workers)
- West Wicklow Community Informant
- Wicklow Children and Young People's Services Committee (Coordinator)
- Wicklow Travellers' Group
- YMCA



Appendix 2: Research Questions

Cohort	Research questions
Young people participating in youth groups/projects Aged 10 – 12 years	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is life like for young people living in this area? 2. What's good about coming to this group? 3. What would life be like for you if this group wasn't here 4. What else would you like to see provided for young people in this area?
Young people aged 15-16 years participating in a youth project	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is life like for young people living in this area? 2. What's good about coming to this group? 3. What would life be like for you if this group wasn't here 4. What else would you like to see provided for young people in this area?
Young people aged 16 – 17 years in Transition Year not in attendance at youth groups/projects	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is life like for young people living in this area? 2. What are the issues impacting young people in this area? 3. What would you like to see provided for young people in this area
Volunteers, key community participants, youth workers and service managers, related service providers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the key issues/needs impacting young people in this area? 2. How do these needs/issues impact the wider community? 3. What are the gaps in service delivery? 4. What would be the benefit of increased youth work provision? 5. What difference would additional youth work provision make in this area?





A Youth Work Support Needs Analysis Report for North Kildare and Southwest Wicklow.



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‘Nowhere to go... Plenty to say’