The Open University

Learning from

WHY RIOT?

Addressing
the 'whys' beneath
youth violence

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LagmoreYouth

ST.P IMMACULATA YOUTH CENTRE

Alternatives Restorative Justice

ACT INITIATIVE

Learning from *Why Riot?*
Addressing the 'whys' beneath youth violence

Acronyms

ACT	Action for Community Transformation Initiative, Belfast
ADHD	Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ASB	Anti-Social behaviour
CNR	Catholic, Nationalist, Republican
DEA	District Electoral Area
EBAP	East Belfast Area Project
GCSE	General Certificate of Education
LYP	Lagmore Youth Project
LfWR	Learning from Why Riot? (action research project)
MC	Why Riot? Meaningful Change Framework measure or indicator
NBAP	North Belfast Area Project
NRA	Neighbourhood Renewal Area
OBA	Outcomes Based Assessment
OSC	The Open University Open Societal Challenges
OU	The Open University
PI	Principal Investigator
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
PUL	Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist
SBA	South Belfast Alternatives
SPIYC	St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre
VR	Violence reduction (e.g. VR Unit, Hub or Programming)

Note to readers: This report has been updated (04/06/25) to correct errors on pages 5 and 20 and a typo on page 40. On page 5, the number of participants was acknowledged incorrectly. The correct number is 60 participants of whom 40 completed. On page 20 (Table 3), the number at the End of the Study in Group C was printed incorrectly. The correct number is 10.

Glossary

Some of the terms used in the document are specific to either Northern Ireland, the project or the professional disciplines represented in the project.

Action research	Methodology of social science research which seeks transformative change through simultaneously taking action and doing research, linked together by critical reflection. (See also "participatory action research").
At risk	Refers to a young person under 18 at risk of harm.
Contested areas	A physical area which has become a site of conflict, ASB or violence between different groups. See Interface areas.
Dark tourism	Commercialised travel to places historically associated with tragedy. In Belfast it focuses on places associated with (a) years of conflict lasting from the late 1960s until 1998's Good Friday Agreement (b) the Titanic ocean liner, which was built in Belfast.
Detached young people	Catch-all term for vulnerable and excluded young people whom mainstream youth work and services may not reach.
Gateway programme	A first engagement or first step programme for detached youth into youth services.
Gliders	Buses used in Belfast's rapid transit system that currently run from East to West Belfast.
Interface areas	In Northern Ireland these are the intersections where segregated PUL and CNR neighborhoods meet, with visible barriers such as peace walls as well as invisible barriers. Interface can also be used to describe an intersection between other polarised groups. Interfaces are often flashpoints for violence/youth violence.
Kingian Non-Violence	A holistic approach to conflict, including understanding the nature of conflict, adhering to principles of nonviolence, and implementing steps for reconciliation inspired by the black American civil rights campaigner Dr Martin Luther King.
Newcomer	Commonly used in Northern Irish public discourse to describe ethnic minority, migrant and refugee communities who may have different languages, cultures and experiences to the local populations. See for example https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/newcomers.
Peace walls	Physical barriers between Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist communities and Catholic, Nationalist, Republican communities in interface areas in Northern Ireland.
Restorative Justice	An approach to justice that focuses on repairing the harm caused by crime or conflict, or in the context of Northern Ireland non-violent community responses to the issues of low-level crime and antisocial behaviour.

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

This report presents findings from *Learning from Why Riot?* (LfWR), an 18-month action research project exploring how the free OpenLearn course *Why Riot?* could be adapted as an effective youth programme enabling marginalised young people to develop their skills as thinkers, peacebuilders and positive changemakers in contested spaces across Belfast. These findings have implications for policy and practice beyond Northern Ireland.

The study and study sites

Youth workers from five community partners participated in this collaboration with The Open University (OU), representing two statutory (Education Authority) and two independent charitable youth work providers and one restorative justice organisation. Co-researchers worked together to co-design the study and a tool for measuring change called the *Meaningful Change Framework*. The study ran for 18 months from July 2023 to the end of November 2024 in working class and conflict-affected communities in interface/contested spaces in North, South, East and West Belfast.

Timeframe and phases

The *Why Riot? programme* recruitment, preparation and delivery time varied from 3 to 12 months depending on methods, approach and learning needs of the young people.

Programme delivery process

Flexible adaptative program design, creating emotional safety, co-creating dialogic spaces for critical thinking and reflection, being led by and responsive to youth needs and single identity spaces all featured strongly as mechanisms which supported change in this study.

Outcomes and impacts

Outcomes were measured using the bespoke *Meaningful Change Framework* to capture changes leading to longer rather than shorter term outcomes using 10 indicator areas.

- *Why Riot?* was **most effective with detached, marginalised and at risk young people** growing up in contexts of violence but all 5 groups showed improvements across all areas they measured, at the end of the course. These include improvements in young people's confidence and engagement/re-engagement in informal and formal education.

- **Follow-on engagement was highly significant for sustaining outcomes** with High to Very high levels of change in at least 8/10 areas for those who continued to November 2024.

- Self-destructive and self-harming behaviours dramatically reduced and at the end of the study (November 2024) **4 out of 5 groups reported 100% reductions in their engagement in interface violence/ ASB.**

- Anecdotal evidence suggests **these changes in young people have created ripple effects** into their families and communities, for example creating family pride through their educational achievements with *Why Riot?*, encouraging non-violence amongst their peers and through volunteering , peacebuilding and social change projects.

Conclusion

The LfWR project provides insights into the whys beneath youth violence. It provides evidence that *Why Riot?* works as an effective intervention through a co-created evaluation framework for measuring meaningful change and the value of community collaboration and co-creation as a model for developing effective ground up solutions.

Key recommendations

Youth violence requires reframing as a social and health issue, recognising that young people like those in this study can make a significant contribution to building a peaceful, inclusive and more prosperous future for all in Northern Ireland.

The following recommendations were refined through stakeholder consultation at an Open University *Evidence Café* held in Belfast in April 2025 as part of our co-creation process.

Strategic policy level

- Politicians, civil servants and institutions with authority in these areas should value those working with young people in contested spaces as youth development partners and not as 'the 4th emergency service'.

- The Northern Ireland Executive should implement flexible, responsive and long-term funding for the youth sector delivering these interventions.

- Policy responses to youth violence must be joined up with strategies tackling poverty and inequalities, including the Anti-Poverty Strategy under development by the Department for Communities and must address the needs of young people, families and communities by targeting persistent inequalities/underlying drivers of violence.

Programme level

- Invest in *Why Riot?* and related youth needs-led educational interventions.

- Following the example of the *Why Riot?* Meaningful Change Framework, statutory and non-statutory funders should embed new co-created evaluation models which focus on evaluating the meaningful change brought to young people.

- Develop an inclusive culture of learning/knowledge exchange to learn, share knowledge and to shape policy and practice in dynamic and meaningful ways.

Our final recommendation is aimed at enabling Northern Ireland to lead the way with an innovative, collaborative and ground up approach to this complex social problem:

- The Northern Ireland Executive should enable and support the **co-creation of a Northern Ireland Violence Reduction or Non-Violence Hub** drawing on the *Why Riot?* models of co-creation.

1. Introduction

> " The material [on riots and violence] that really engages them … if they're coming into our general provision it's like yes you are going to do a bit of good relations, you are going to mental health you're going to do art, you're going to do whatever. And a lot of the stuff they won't take to. Whereas this is a programme that is geared for them it's targeted for them. "
>
> **Daire**
> Youth worker, Group E

This report presents findings from Learning from *Why Riot?* (LfWR), an 18-month action research project aimed at exploring how and in what ways the co-created Open University course *Why Riot?* could be adapted as a youth programme to enable marginalised young people to develop their skills as thinkers, peacebuilders and positive changemakers in interface areas/contested spaces across Belfast. While this research was located in Northern Ireland, with young people growing up in divided communities affected by the legacy of violent conflict here, we believe the study findings have salience for those working with young people in other contexts of social and political division locally and internationally.

Background: The *Why Riot?* open education course

The *Why Riot?* course (full name: *Why Riot? Community Choices Aspirations*) is an open education course freely available on OpenLearn[1], co-produced by The Open University and The ACT Initiative in Belfast, in response to local youth riots and violent street disturbances in 2021. The *Why Riot?* course was co-created with eight young men from the Shankill and is part funded by the International Fund for Ireland (IFI). It is based on a face-to-face youth project devised and run by William Mitchell (ACT) with these young men in collaboration with the Boys' Model school Belfast.

Made with young people for young people, *Why Riot?* is designed as a flexible educational resource drawing on critical pedagogy approaches pioneered by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in the 1970s. It can be studied individually online or in small groups in community or classroom settings. *Why Riot?* is classed by The Open University as a 12-hour beginners' course when studied online.

As one response to violence, *Why Riot?* offers a framework for young people growing up with social and political conflict to become more self-reflective, to enable them to think critically about the world around them, explore different perspectives, make informed decisions and develop the skills needed to express themselves and pursue change in constructive rather destructive ways.

Course content

Why Riot? has been designed to support critical thinking skills amongst young people and is for use in community, school, alternative and independent settings. It comprises three modules:

- Module 1 is about community
- Module 2 is about choices
- Module 3 is about aspirations

Each of the three Modules can be broken down into shorter sessions or workshops (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Why Riot? modules content

Module 1: Community	Module 2: Choices	Module 3: Aspirations
1 Welcome to the community	**1 Why do you make the choices you make?**	**1 The future and you**
1.1 Who do you think you are?	1.1 Community, identity, belonging	1.1 Exploring possibilities
1.2 How others see you	1.2 How free are you to choose?	1.2 Considering the consequences
1.3 Not just hoods and thugs	1.3 Breaking the mould	
2 What does community mean to you?	**2 Thinking for yourself**	**2 Making decisions**
2.1 Community as a place	2.1 Social media influence and the riots	2.1 De Bono's 6 thinking hats
2.2 Community as a shared history	2.2 Filter bubbles and echo chambers	2.2 How to use the 6 thinking hats
2.3 Communities of spirit		2.3 Pulling it all together
3 Communities and conflict	**3 How to spot false or fake news**	**3 Being true to yourself**
3.1 Living at the interface	3.1 Information, misinformation, disinformation	3.1 How Marcus Rashford used his voice
3.2 Exploring different perspectives	3.2 Separating opinions from facts	3.2 Knowing your values
4 Community, your choices and you	**4 How to handle hate speech**	**4 The power of collective action**
	4.1 'March for our lives'	4.1 Becoming wiser
	4.2 Changing the conversation	4.2 Making connections
	4.3 How does it make you feel?	4.3 Becoming a positive changemaker

Desired learning outcomes for young people completing *Why Riot?* are for them to be able to:

- Consider how external factors shape their personal identity and choices.
- Ask questions and think critically about information.
- Explore different perspectives.
- Make considered decisions.
- Broaden their thinking about the future.
- Develop a voice to work with others for a positive change.

Widely accessed, but what impact did it have?

While the *Why Riot?* course had been accessed online on OpenLearn by 100,000+ users since its launch in March 2022 and delivered in a variety of community settings, we had no means of understanding how it was being used and the potential outcomes and impacts for young people and their communities. In keeping with the principles that informed the *Why Riot?* course, we decided to design an action research study with local youth organisations and marginalised young people in contested or interface areas (spaces of division between segregated communities with visible or invisible barriers such as peace walls) in Belfast.

Why this research matters?

> 66 **Rioting is not a youth issue. It's a social issue.**
>
> **Geraldine**
> Youth worker, Group F
> 99

Northern Ireland's recent violent conflict (1968-1998) and its legacy has disproportionately affected a small number of predominantly working-class communities, including those communities where many of the young people in this study are growing up.

Experiences of childhood violence and trauma is well recognised as having direct and destructive impacts on young people's lives, on their development and on their role in perpetuating cycles of violence (Flynn and Mathias, 2025; Walsh et al., 2025; Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022; Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020). Growing up in contexts and cultures of violence also deeply shapes equalities of opportunity for these young people, to grow and flourish.

Violence in all its forms - interpersonal, structural and cultural (Galtung, 1969, 1990) is an all-pervasive theme in the lives of these young people. This is particularly evident for those participants living in segregated inner-city communities and interface areas. In Northern Ireland 24% of children (approximately 109,000) live in relative poverty and 19% (approximately 86,000) live in absolute poverty[2], including most of the young people in this study. All 5 groups in this study (referred to as Groups A,C,D, E and F [3]) are in areas with persistently high levels of multiple deprivation (MDM,2017).

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2 Department for Communities, Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2022/23 (nisra.gov.uk).
3 NB There is no Group B. A sixth girls-only group (Group B) was planned but fell through early in the research phase. The original group labels were however maintained.

Text box 1. Dimensions of violence

Violence research has been approached in many ways. This report applies Galtung's (1964, 1999) three dimensions of violence when referring to violence and the relationships between them:

- **Personal violence**: (Direct) including self-harming behaviours; domestic violence; organised fights, collective and communal violence.

- **Structural violence** (Indirect): social and structural injustices such as poverty, inequalities of opportunity and multiple deprivations.

- **Cultural violence** (Indirect); cultures and discourses which normalise and justify violence whether personal, communal or structural violence.

Four *Why Riot?* groups: Group A in inner South Belfast, Group C in Inner East Belfast, Group D in The Greater Shankill and Old Park areas in West and North Belfast and Group F in The Lower Falls and Clonard in West Belfast are all in segregated areas with multiple interfaces which become focal points for street disturbances and rioting. They are also locations where criminal and paramilitary influence and child criminal and sexual exploitation are persistent issues, alongside high levels of conflict related trauma, poor mental health, suicide and self-harm. Intergenerational trauma has become a normalised term to describe the multiple impacts of this violent conflict which disproportionately affected these close-knit communities. The past conflict also remains ever present through visual reminders from murals to memorials of atrocities and communal resistance. Dark tourism is hugely popular in these conflict affected inner-city areas, particularly along the main 'peace walls' where some of these young people are growing up, much of which focuses on past violence. Negative media coverage and stories of youth violence also dominate the mainstream media.

Challenging and changing these negative narratives was an important issue for young people in this study. Alongside the everyday culture of violence, fears and concerns around personal safety were a persistent background concern for these young people, especially for young women in Group A. This was due in part to the proximity to the city centre and its night economy, a significant street drug culture and visible homelessness as well as ongoing community tensions. In contrast, Group E in Collin DEA is a suburban area where historically CNR communities moved or were relocated during the violent conflict, marked by socio-economic disparities and poor community relations. Today it is known for its rapid growth and regeneration, leading to pockets of wealth alongside areas of persistent multiple deprivation and attendant issues shaped by the past conflict. For young people direct violence is experienced through what might be described as gang cultures involving organised fights and ASB, with the Glider buses providing a city link, a focal point for ASB alongside high rates of crime and high levels of mental health issues affecting young people across the area.

Collectively these young people are growing up in cultures where the past conflict continues to shape the present. Violence is every day and normalised by young people, their families, communities and wider society. This is experienced in myriad destructive ways on young people's sense of personal identity, their relationship with formal education and with risk and risky behaviours. It plays out in how they see themselves, often embracing labels they are given as 'hoods and thugs' while struggling between their own values, hopes and dreams (even if not yet fully formed). As young people full of potential at the start of their lives these impacts emerge

through the constraints they feel about 'who they ought to be' in the eyes of some in their communities and wider society.

More broadly, interpersonal, social and structural violence while 'normalised' has a deeply corrosive effect on young people. This includes on their mental and physical health, their life opportunities, their sense of confidence including in education and self-esteem and the limited expectations others hold for them and in turn they hold for themselves.

Research gaps

The significance and value of community collaborations (including with young people) in co-creating interventions for community-based education, conflict transformation, peacebuilding and for youth violence prevention or transformation is well recognised (Walsh et al., 2025; Hamilton et al., 2024; Walsh, 2023; Cooper et al., 2015; McEvoy-Levy, 2001). Key gaps in knowledge include examples of effective educational and violence reduction interventions, and ways to evidence and evaluate the benefits of these real-world programmes (Walsh et al., 2025). This study addresses both these gaps.

2. The study

> 66 Me and my friends, considering that we were so-called reckless hoods and thugs. That we were able to make something so empowering or powerful that young people may be able to learn off it and… maybe see a different point of view and think of what they're doing. That alone I found very powerful. For example, the group I took [Group D] was like a full-circle moment for me.
>
> **Stephen**
> Group D peer educator and youth co-producer of *Why Riot?* 99

The Learning from *Why Riot?* (LfWR) study is an Open University Open Societal Challenges (OSC) research project.

The study was devised as a participatory action research project (Schubotz, 2019). This approach to research aims to understand and improve the lives of research participants and collaborators by changing them. The three main features of participatory action research are *coproduction* (involving ordinary people in all aspects of the research), *non-hierarchical power relations*, and *transformative practice*.

Borrowing from other disciplines, LfWR can also be seen as a *proof of concept* project, aiming to demonstrate in a small way (in this case five programme settings involving fewer than 100 people) that an innovation or improved approach is feasible.

Co-research team

Youth workers from five community partners participated in this collaboration with The Open University (OU). Each partner had a very different background, context and approach.

Two statutory (Education Authority) youth providers, 2 independent charitable youth work providers and 1 restorative justice organisation. All were undertaking youth work in PUL and/or CNR interface and contested areas in North, South, East and West Belfast. All are experienced in outreach work and programme delivery with vulnerable and at-risk youth and in delivering informal/ community-based learning.

Co-researchers worked together between April and June 2023 to co-design the research study and co-develop a tool for measuring change. Each partner then led their *Why Riot?* programme design and field research in their different local contexts, political communities and areas of contestation. The OU team provided research support through co-research workshops, undertook regular research interviews with co-researchers across this 18-month study, analysed the case study data and produced findings which were then validated by youth workers.

Co research team members

Community partners: Education Authority: Scott Boyd (EBAP), Nicole McKee and Stephen McAllister (NBAP); Lagmore Youth Project (LYP): Colm Fanning and Daire Owens, South Belfast Alternatives (SBA) Brian Armstrong and Paris Caldwell, St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre (SPIYC): Geraldine McAnoy, Eamon Feerick and Stephen Hughes. William Mitchell (ACT Initiative).

The Open University team: Gabi Kent (PI), Jenny Meegan, Joanna McMinn, Philip O'Sullivan, Colette Hughes and Gareth Davies.

Ethics

Research co-design took place between April and June 2023 which included agreeing our ethical framework. Ethical approval was secured via The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. Reference number: HREC/4703

Research aims

To understand:

- How the Open Learn course *Why Riot?* which was co-created in one political community in Belfast, is used/ adapted for use in different communities and learnings from this process?

- What meaningful change or impacts if any take place for young people through this programme (and how to measure this)?

- What can be learned from this process to inform policy, programme development and scalability?

Methodologies and tools

Data sources and collection:

Co-researchers led the research on the ground in their localities, collected and anonymised data before sharing with the OU.

- OU methods included: baseline and endpoint surveys, the LfWR Practitioner journals, alongside interviews with youth workers and co-research workshop notes.

- Local partners' methods included: local youth self-assessment tools, flip chart notes capturing activity responses, audio recordings of group discussions and youth worker's journals, notes and reflections and a local report with recommendations.

- Contextual data was sourced from government and statutory sources (NISRA 2021 and NIMDM 2017, EA local needs assessment (2023) and EA Annual Review of Local needs (2024) and reports.

Methodology

We drew pragmatically from multiple traditions to construct a context-sensitive and flexible approach to analysing this data and to our evaluative practice. Collaborative and co-creation methods in this case through participatory action research (Schubotz, 2019), were central to our approach in keeping with the *Why Riot?* co-creation model. For analysis, case study research

(George and Bennett, 2005), developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011), and triangulation (Denzin, 1978). Case study methods were used to understand the particularities of each context, methods used, and outcomes for each distinct *Why Riot?* group. Realist evaluation methods (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) were used to examine mechanisms of change in each group through the interplay between this context, methods used (*Why Riot?* and community partner) and outcomes, before looking across all 5 cases to identify any overall patterns and themes in each of our three research questions.

A bespoke evaluation tool

A bespoke evaluation tool called the *Why Riot? 'Meaningful Change Framework'* was co-developed with youth workers (Table 2). This framework uses 10 indicators of change (MC1-MC10) alongside examples of measures, that youth workers agreed were foundational to support longer term impacts and transformative change for young people in contested spaces.

How we evaluated change

Case study data was collated from the multiple data sources, triangulated and coded to establish a baseline, track progression through thematic modules, and assess final outcomes in each group in consultation with youth workers. To support interpretation, measures of meaningful change and levels of change were then standardised create a five-point scale from very low to very high:

Very low
Very low indicating for example: Fully detached, socially disconnected, no self-awareness; very low to no confidence, self-esteem etc.

Low
Low indicating for example: low levels of engagement, low confidence within the group some self-awareness; questioning and some skills for discussions and group work, but fragile.

Medium
Medium indicating for example the beginning of a meaningful change process: becoming more confident/ growing self-awareness/ learning new skills, debating, engaging with some consistency within the group.

High
High indicating for example: application of knowledge and skills – more self-reflective, thinking more critically, examining and evaluating information, starting to make independent decisions in their lives and amongst peers.

Very high
Very high indicating for example: transformative changes beyond the group and in the world (problem solving, becoming positive peers and role models, making different choices, creating projects to effect change in their social world, seeking to benefit others (creativity/ praxis).

Levels of change were recorded for young people under each indicator at baseline, during the *Why Riot?* course, at the end of course and at the end of study. Final results were validated with each co-researcher for their group. This methodology emphasises transparency, reflexivity, and replicability, aligning with principles of developmental evaluation and participatory action research.

Table 2: Why Riot? 'Meaningful Change Framework'

MC1: Critical thinking

Becoming more self-reflective; questioning, exploring 'reasons beneath'; problem solving; thinking independently; making their own decisions.

Measures: e.g. self-reflection; questioning; problem solving; independent decision making

MC2: Belonging or connection

Engaging in youth services; increased sense of belonging/ connection such as to the youth centre, wider communities/ society; feeling loved, accepted, valued for positive reasons; contributing for benefit of others.

Measures: e.g. Engagement; feeling valued for positive reasons; contributing for benefit of others

MC3 Attitudes to violence and risky behaviour

Changes in attitudes, understanding and behaviour; increased empathy; changes in levels of attendance or participation in ASB or interface violence. Reduction in violent and self-destructive behaviours; encouraging non-violence

Measures: e.g. Understanding their drivers of violence; empathy for others; changes in behaviour

MC4: Aspirations

Thinking beyond others' expectations of them; expresses greater hopes, dreams or aspirations for the future, self or area; taking action towards these.

Measures: e.g. Thinking beyond others' expectations of them; pursuing hopes and aspirations

MC5: Respect

Increase in self-respect and respect for others; changes in understanding, attitudes and behaviours; no longer using self-derogatory/ sectarian/racist/ othering language; greater interest in and understanding of other perspectives.

Measures: e.g. Self-respect; greater understanding of/ respect for other perspectives and values

MC6: How they are seen

Changes in how they see themselves; taking action to change their behaviours and change others perceptions of them; Positive changes in how they are seen by others such as their families, the community, police, school.

Measures: e.g. Positive changes in how they see themselves and how they are seen by others

MC7: Positive peer cultures

Developing positive group norms and behaviours; mutual trust, respect and support; able to 'be themselves' in the group as they grow more independent.

Measures: e.g. Mutual trust, respect and positive support; able to 'be themselves' in the group.

MC8: Confidence in education and learning

Increased confidence in abilities; interest in and passion for informal/ formal learning; engagement/re-engagement in school; doing further studies/ training.

Measures: e.g. Increased confidence in abilities; interest in/passion for informal/ formal learning.

MC10: Safety

Increased sense of emotional/physical safety; developing relationships of trust with youth workers; feeling secure and free to express themselves and supportive of others.

Measures: e.g. Sense of emotional/physical safety; feeling able to share their concerns/feelings

Group F's use of the MC Framework as real time monitoring and evaluation tool

Group F, which started their programme delivery later than others, used the accompanying *Why Riot?* MC Journal to capture real time evidence as part of their reflection process at the end of each session. Over the study period this provided a rich body of qualitative evidence, allowing youth workers to spot sticking points, and change processes, review their practice and adapt the programme to respond to emerging issues and needs. At the end of the study SPIYC has continued to use this tool in their other programme evaluation work.

A case study is provided for each group in the accompanying *Appendix of Case Studies* offering insights into different delivery models and associated outcomes. Findings from analysing patterns within and across these case studies is presented here.

Design issues and challenges (What we measure matters)

During the co-design phase at the start of this study youth workers described a number of challenges they faced in terms of how programmes were funded and evaluated. Collectively these hampered the kind of work they could do with those most marginalised and 'hardest to reach'. These challenges included:

- Outcomes Based Assessment (OBA) required by most programme funders that focused on short term outcomes rather than longer term or transformative impacts.

- Unrealistic expectations for e.g. on numbers to be engaged, retention levels etc.

- Outcome measures not tailored to the lived realities of young people programmes purported to want to reach (i.e. those with lowest levels of trust, most detached, living peripatetic lives, regularly involved in interface violence or ASB etc).

- Measures which failed to capture young people's unmet needs.

- Fixed programme aims and timeframes for delivery.

- Emergency and short-term funding for 'quick' rather than longer term interventions.

- Prescriptive rather than flexible programmes: For example, Good Relations or peace related programmes with pre-requisites such as only funding for cross-community programmes or demanded fixed quotas for PUL and CNR young people (not reflecting for example the need for single identity work or for programme that included newcomer communities).

Many of these issues were also highlighted in Learning from *Why Riot?* stakeholder conversation (April 2025) (See **Conclusion**). One aim in this study was to think differently about evaluation. To do this the co-research team focused on capturing young people's unmet needs and in envisioning 'what good might look like' in terms of meaningful change for these young people growing up in contexts of violence. Ten indicators for meaningful change were chosen that collectively would be foundational to longer term impacts.

Examples of measures were chosen to capture shifts in how young people feel, or in their understanding or their attitudes, with the caveat that these could be adjusted. For example: Feeling valued and accepted for positive reasons (MC2) or Confidence in education – formal and informal (MC8) rather than improved educationally outcomes. From this a very different picture emerges of both the lived experiences of young people and how to enable these young people to fulfil their potentials.

3. The study sites

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>
> The bitterness is drummed down into them… you're having to fight with so many other opinions that are not their own, you know what I mean? Like their opinions are formed on experience but it might not necessarily be their experience, it could be somebody else's close to them, you know what I mean? So you're constantly trying to fight against that.
>
> Nicole
> Youth Worker, Group D
> 99

The study took place in three predominantly PUL areas in North/ West, East and South Belfast and two predominantly CNR working class areas in West/ North and West Belfast. Each of these areas has a distinct geography, history and identity but all are home to PUL and CNR communities affected by legacies of the conflict, with communal narratives about the past that shape the present for young people growing up there. All areas were also home to smaller newcomer and minority ethnic groups. However, no participants in the *Why Riot?* groups were from newcomer or minority ethnic communities. All were in the top 10% of areas nationally in terms of multiple deprivation and designated as Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs).

Group A: South Belfast Alternatives

Target group: Vulnerable/ at risk girls and boys from CNR and PUL backgrounds via existing youth good relations programmes.

Study location: Inner south Belfast, a divided area of multiple deprivation made up of historic and shrinking PUL communities alongside CNR communities and newcomer communities, within the Central and Blackstaff wards of Botanic, Belfast's most ethnically diverse DEAs.

Group C: East Belfast Area Project

Target group: Detached at-risk young people who congregated in a local public area/ and at local interfaces.

Study location: Inner East Belfast, made up of the Titanic, Island, The Mount, Ballymacarrett and Woodstock wards of Titanic DEA, home to segregated PUL and CNR communities as well as newcomer communities. Has sites of significant economic and cultural regeneration attracting millions of visitors each year, alongside areas of persistent poverty and division.

Group D: North Belfast Area project

Target group: At risk young men from PUL backgrounds recruited (transitioned onto *Why Riot?*) via a previous Education Authority gateway programme

Study location: The Geater Shankill area and surrounds in Court North & Old Park District Electoral Authority (DEA) - a divided and predominantly Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) working class inner-city area but also home to CNR communities and a small number of minority ethnic groups including Polish, Romanian, Indian and Black African communities.

Group E: Lagmore Youth Project

Target group: Detached at -risk young men who congregated in a local park

Study location: Outer West Belfast, in a suburban area of Collin NRA in Court West DEA historically home to predominantly CNR communities many of whom were displaced from the Falls Road in the during the years of conflict. Today this is an area undergoing urban regeneration with pockets of wealth alongside areas of persistent multiple deprivation.

Group F: St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre

Target group: Detached at risk young people from CNR backgrounds at local interfaces

Study location: Inner West Belfast in the wards of Clonard and Falls, in Court West DEA a historical CNR area with communities divided from its neighbours by the Falls and Shankill peace wall and deeply affected by legacies of the conflict and experiences persistent poverty, inequities and multiple deprivation.

NB There is no Group B. A sixth girls-only group (Group B) was planned but fell through early in the research phase. The original group labels were however maintained.

Study participants

In total, 60 young people aged 13 to 17 years participated in the study across the 5 locations of which around 70% were boys. About 30% had ADHD or other special educational needs.

Group make-up is outlined below in Table 3. There was a notable shift in the make- up of two groups who began the study as mixed gender and identity and became single identity and single gender. These changes were led by the young people themselves during programme delivery.

Table 3: Group make-up at study start and end points

Group Name	Starting *Why Riot?* Group	End *Why Riot?* group
Group A	8 girls and boys from PUL backgrounds aged 13-16 years.	5 girls from PUL backgrounds
Group C	12 girls and boys from PUL and CNR backgrounds aged 15 to 17 years	10 boys from PUL backgrounds (out of a final group of 12 boys).
Group D	15 boys from PUL backgrounds aged 13-16	8 boys from PUL backgrounds
Group E	17 CNR Boys aged 14-17	12 CNR Boys aged 14-17
Group F	8 girls and Boys from CNR backgrounds aged 14-16	5 girls and boys from CNR backgrounds aged 14-16

Retention rates

All five groups experienced fluctuations and changes in membership over the duration of the programme and adapted to these changes as they went along. Retention rates also varied significantly by group from 83% to 53% depending on the context, target group, programme implementation process and timeframes and must be viewed holistically in relation to context and methods. In total, 40 out of 60 young people (67%) completed the programme (see Table 4).

Table 4. Programme retention rates by group

Group	Retention rate
Group A:	62.5%
Group D:	53%
Group C:	83%
Group E:	70%
Group F:	62.5%

Furthermore, in this study these figures represent the core numbers in the groups who started and completed. Overall the picture is messier, and group numbers were more fluid, with some young people dropping in and out and others joining later or becoming more involved over time depending on their personal situations. The flexibility of the programme and process allowed this. It should be noted that youth workers report retention above 60% for such cohorts as good.

Discussion of retention figures

Reasons for disengagement included:

- *Why Riot?* was not suited to some young people initially recruited. But the recruitment and preparatory process enabled youth workers to identify their needs and signpost or support them in other ways.

- In Group C, girls left the course expressing a desire for their own girls group instead, highlighting the need for more specific material for young women in *Why Riot?* (in contrast girls remained engaged in Group F and Group A suggesting further research is needed).

- Timing and order of the programme: In Group D *Why Riot?* was the second programme in a suite of 3 and came after a highly active gateway programme with police and emergency services. The young men were transitioned onto *Why Riot?* from this EA gateway programme.

- The 'pull' of on-going interface violence can very strong especially in the summer so thought is needed on the timing of when to start the *Why Riot?* programme, to ensure young people are already fully engaged prior to this period.

- Some described how it felt 'Too much like school'.

Factors that are significant to maintaining retention include:

- Creating youth ownership and buy in through specific preparatory sessions.

- Ensuring young people are able to choose to do *Why Riot?*

- Adapting materials and approach to youth learning needs and to nurture educational confidence.

- Being aware of educational shame as an underlying issue and finding ways to address this directly in the programme.

4. Diversity in delivery of *Why Riot?* during the study

> ❝ Prior to *Why Riot?*, these young people would hang out in [a public space]. It's quite affluent, but they choose to hang out there on a nightly basis. So the move from a park bench to meaningful youth work, meaningful relationships is a massive step forward for them young people.
>
> **Scott**
> Youth worker, Group C ❞

An important aspect of LfWR as action research was that youth workers had the freedom to deliver *Why Riot?* in whatever way they wished – but with the important caveat that all were asked to use the course resources and to commit to delivering a minimum of 8 to 12 *Why Riot?* course sessions or 3 months engagement. Each community partner identified young people in their local area who they felt most in need of and suited to this programme and created a *Why Riot?* group. The approaches varied by Groups and were informed by the community partner/ youth workers ethos, methods and approaches as well as their local context.

The study was anticipated to last for approximately 6 months in total from co-design in April 2023 to completion of programme delivery and field research. This timeframe was reviewed in September 2023 becoming open-ended in response to youth worker feedback with field research completing in April 2024.

Common elements in delivery

Common elements in delivery are identified below:

- All used and adapted the *Why Riot?* course framework, discussion topics and course themes (Communities, Choices and Aspirations) to their local contexts.
- Most groups (A, D, E and F) followed the course using printouts which they called 'The booklet'. This was broken down into sections and activities. One group (D) also used the online course which has interactive content in their sessions, on screens.
- All showed the *Why Riot?* films/ media resources online.
- All used *Why Riot?* methods of dialogue and reflection and critical thinking.
- All reflected the following principles in with their youth work approaches:
  - Youth needs led.
  - Trauma informed.
  - Strength-based.
  - Experiential learning and group based.
  - Promoting values of inclusivity and pluralism.
  - Creating safe spaces (emotional and physical) and relationships of trust.

However, these common elements did not mean uniformity in terms of programme approach or delivery (see Table 5).

Challenges and ways to improve course materials

During the study, youth workers also identified some challenges with the course and suggested improvements:

These include:

- The online course proved challenging when used as a teaching resource for young people. The printed 'booklet', especially when broken into sub sections/ sessions and taught using a combination of *Why Riot?* and youth work methods worked much more effectively with these groups.

- More variety in case studies would be useful. For example, young people from the Shankill found the *Why Riot?* case study was too familiar.

- Gender specific materials particularly for girls are needed.

- International media clips in the course were less popular than locally relevant clips and stories (though still of value to open different perspective). Sometimes young people shared their social media stories and clips for discussion instead.

- Expanding how interfaces are defined would be helpful to include visible, invisible and new interfaces.

Timeframe and phases

Why Riot? delivery time (Figure 1) varied significantly depending on the methods, approach and learning needs of the young people, from 3 months to 12 months in some cases. Four implementation phases emerged when running *Why Riot?* as a youth programme:

- P0: Recruitment of *Why Riot?* group
- P1: Preparation *Why Riot?* specific preparatory sessions
- P2: Course delivery *Why Riot?* course/ modules
- P3: Follow on group engagement and progression pathways

Figure 1: Why Riot? programme timeframe and phases
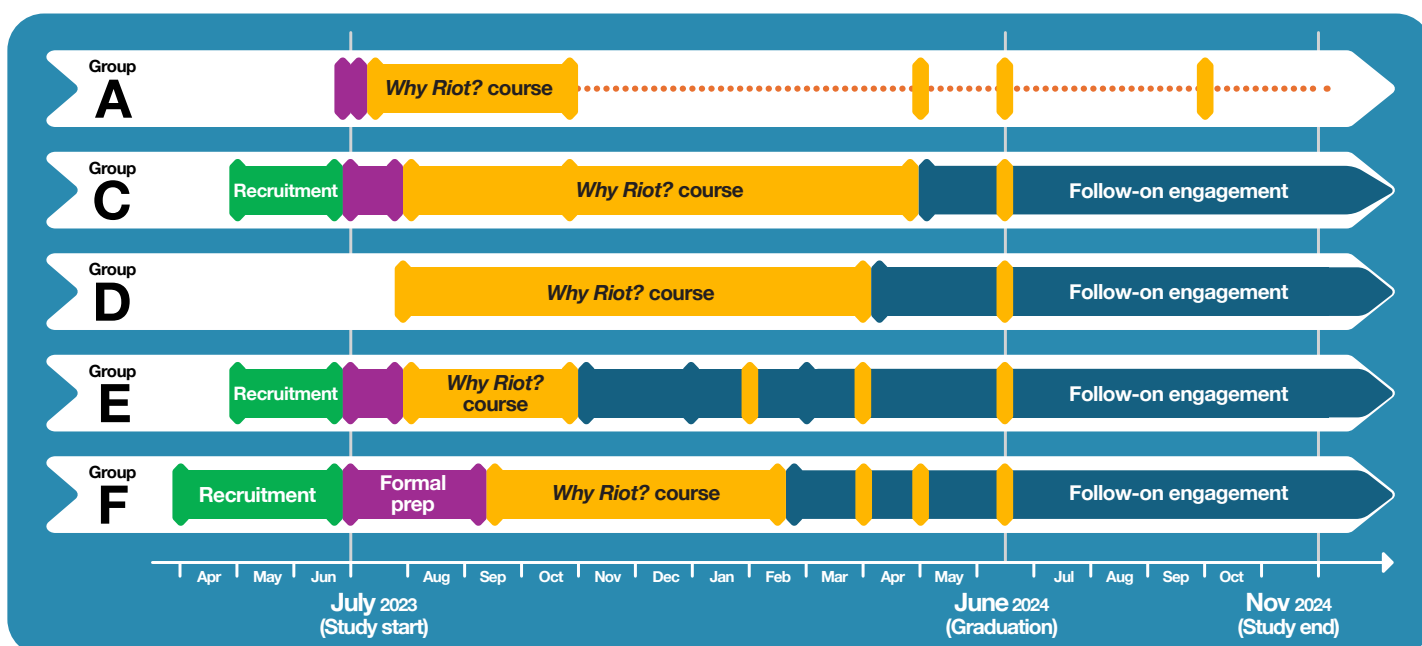
How groups used these phases, the duration of engagement in the programme and during the overall study all had a significant impact on the outcomes for young people.

Youth worker approaches

As mentioned above, each partner approached this task based on their ethos, methods, geographic and historical context, local sites of contestation and the profile and needs of their target group of young people.

Table 5: Local approaches

Group Name*	Ethos and youthwork methods	Programme approach
Group A South Belfast Alternatives	Restorative Justice, Neuro Linguistic Programming and youth work approaches. Aims: to support individual development and independent thinking.	A short stand-alone prevention/ intervention programme for engaged but vulnerable young people recruited through previous good relations youth programmes
Group C East Belfast Area Project (EBAP)	Youth needs led, based on building relationships of trust and inclusivity and guided by the Education Authority's main frameworks for youth work.	A gateway prevention/ intervention programme for detached and at-risk young people recruited through outreach youth work at interfaces and public spaces .
Group D North Belfast Area Project	The team takes an innovative approach to develop models of best practice. Guided by EA frameworks to meet youth needs, provide support, keep them safe, think bigger and beyond other's expectations, outside the box	As one of a suite of intervention programmes for at-risk young people (the second of three) with young people transitioned on *Why Riot?* from the first gateway programme
Group E Lagmore Youth Project	Guided by the four principles of their youth work - building trust, personalised engagement, flexibility and positive role modelling - underpinned by patience, consistency, and empathy. Aims: To create opportunities for young people and make a difference to their lives	A gateway prevention/ intervention programme for detached and at-risk young people recruited through outreach youth work in public spaces.
Group F St Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre	Active, experiential learning and reflective practice, using theories of social justice, non-violence and tools of positive disruption as well as strength based, positive language: Aims: Committed to young people's needs, human rights, development and ownership over the process; 'Every YP as a person of promise'.	A gateway prevention intervention programme for detached and at-risk young people recruited through outreach youth work at interfaces.

5. Thematic analysis: the 'whys' beneath

> 66 Young people spoke about how they only 'belong' to their community when they are useful e.g. certain times of the year like collecting for bonfire any other times they [the community] don't want to know.
>
> **Nicole**
> Youth worker, Group D 99

A significant finding in this study was how the cultures and contexts of violence (interpersonal, structural and cultural) in which these young people were growing up shaped their needs and emerged as drivers of behaviours. In this study many of these young people are:

• Traumatised and in the words of some youth workers, 'brutalised' through their everyday lived experience of social and structural violence (poverty and multiple deprivation; social exclusion; social inequalities) alongside interpersonal and communal violence (e.g. domestic violence, criminal and paramilitary activity).

• Experience intergenerational traumas affecting mental health, physical health and communal cultures of violence as a legacy of conflict which serve to normalise violence.

• Demonised and labelled within and/or outside their communities, including in the media (e.g. as 'scumbags, hoods, wee fleas, druggies') .

• Used by untrustworthy adults and organisations (e.g. criminals, paramilitaries, some members of local communities) for their own ends.

Many young people also feel fear, shame and stigma, worthlessness, depression, anxiety, frustration and/or anger which in turn leads to/ perpetuates violence and self-destructive behaviours.

Themes: bringing youth issues and needs to the surface

A number of youth issues and needs emerged during the study. Some were visible at the outset, often expressed through violence and self-destructive behaviours and quite familiar in explanatory narratives of youth violence and rioting. Others were hidden or emerged over time through the *Why Riot?* Process (Figure 2).

Through a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), seven recurring themes were identified, many of which are interlinked and overlapping. These seven themes have been labelled using youth and youth worker descriptors:

1. 'Why doesn't anybody talk about this': Understanding violence and non-violence

2. 'Who I ought to be and who I am'. Struggles between self-identity and belonging

3. "We don't want youse to think we're dumb': Educational struggles, fears and shame

4. 'What it means to be a man': Navigating masculinities

5. 'It's all on social media now': Navigating social media and making informed choices

6. 'Lighting fires to feel the heat': Alienation and lack of belonging

7. 'Locals only'- but who is 'local': Rising racism and xenophobia

WHAT YOU SEE / WHAT IS SAID

Fight the Cops   Other communities

Drugs   Paramilitaries

FOMO

Boredom   Belonging

Thrill

Stories   Social Media

To fit in   Peer Pressure   **Revenge**

Buzz   Expected

Heroism   Defending our community

WHAT'S UNDERNEATH

Worthless   Low self-esteem

Educational shame   **Voiceless**

Stigma   **Unloved**

Loss

Labelled   Excluded   Unseen

Frustration

Unsafe   **Fear**   Self-hate

Figure 2: Interpreting hidden themes

Analysis of themes in this study also highlighted research gaps and learnings which it was not possible to address during the study:

- **Rising racism** emerged as an issue in four out of the five areas during the field research period (June 2023-May 2024), when we undertook our analysis. The study highlighted some of the challenges of how best to respond to these issues and how there were different youth worker perspectives on the nature of the problem locally. Addressing these challenges was beyond the scope of this study and is an area requiring further research including action research with minority ethnic organisations and youth on ways to use/adapt the *Why Riot?* approach and big picture learnings.

- Similarly, **gender** was an area where further research was needed. This includes exploring young women's experience of and relationship with interface violence as bystanders and supporters as well as actors, and their lived needs, issues and concerns around child sexual exploitation safety and interpersonal violence.

- Looking forward, a coordinated prevention/intervention response might be enabled by a Community of Learning and Practice for youth workers alongside real time evaluation mechanisms (e.g. Using the *Why Riot?* meaningful change journals/tool) to monitor, share information and identify emerging patterns early.

Effective youth worker responses by theme

The following sections provide examples from each of the five Groups of how these issues manifested alongside effective strategies employed by youth workers through the programme to address these issues. In all examples, a core unmet need was safety - emotional and physical. For most, with the exception of young people in Group A, this was coupled with a desire for belonging/ connection.

Theme 1: 'Why doesn't anybody talk about this' (Understanding violence and non-violence)

Violence was an overarching theme for all five groups impacting on every aspect of young people's lives. Visible expressions included for example: Anger, interface violence, rioting, organised fights, ASB, criminal damage, sectarian 'slabbering' (goading) and 'slegging' (insults) on social media. Hidden and emerging issues included for example: poor mental health, self-harming and self-soothing behaviours (drug and alcohol misuse), low self-esteem, low aspirations, frustration and disengagement from school, their community and society.

Effective responses: As a cross-cutting theme, the lived experience of and responses to violence emerged throughout the programme and are dealt with by each group differently. In this section we have highlighted one example of an effective and richly evidenced response to this complex crosscutting theme taken by Group F. Based on their years of experience working in Lower Falls, the SPIYC team has developed techniques for helping working class young people to understand why they might use violence, underpinned by theories of social justice and non-violence. These proved highly effective in their pilot study.

Spotlight: Group F: How to use *Why Riot?* to break cycles of violence

A. Understanding the problem

> We have found those involved in the interfaces - they're struggling with mental health. They're struggling in their family units. They can't talk in school. They can't articulate themselves to tell the teachers why they can't do what they can't do, so it goes straight to aggression. So then they're asked to leave [school]… it just all snowballs.
>
> **Geraldine**
> Youth worker, Group F

Group F was a group of eight boys and girls from CNR backgrounds in the Lower Falls and Clonard wards. This is a proudly Nationalist Republican area but one where communities are also deeply affected by the past conflict, histories of oppression and persistent socio-economic deprivation. Food poverty for example is an everyday concern and St Peter's included an evening meal in their weekly *Why Riot?* sessions, enabling young people to better concentrate and learn. All engaged in self-destructive behaviours such as ASB, organised fights and rioting with young people from neighbouring PUL communities in The Shankill. They used sectarian and racist language, felt demonised by and alienated from their local communities and showed a lack of empathy for others. For SPIYC these young people's anti-social and self-destructive behaviours cannot be separated from the context of everyday violence and inequalities within which these young people are growing up.

B. Looking beneath young people's destructive behaviours

One challenge for those working with young people involved in interface violence in Northern Ireland's contested context is not to simply see things through a sectarian lens, but rather to

consider a range of possible drivers of these behaviours. For example, during their preparations for starting *Why Riot?* young people in Group F stated that they wouldn't work with the *Why Riot?* course 'Booklet' which centres on the experiences of young people from the Shankill. When asked why they said: *'Because them'ins from the Shankill made it'.*

On the surface this appeared to be a sectarian issue. But when youth workers revisited this statement in the first sessions of the course using their methodology of *positively disrupting* the language young people used, a different issue emerged. The young people began to describe how: *'it wasn't because they were Protestants. It was that 'the Shankill ones made it, and we didn't get asked to make it'.* As Geraldine, the youth worker explained: *'Its 'someone got more than me…. when is it our turn or our time?'* This issue could then be discussed in the group through a different lens to explore <u>why</u> they feel that way. They discussed for example how growing up with poverty or feeling a sense of social injustice might impact on their lives and responses. This enabled the group to begin to find points of commonality with working class young people from the Shankill who were growing up in similar situations to them.

> ❝ **If we didn't explore and examine and unpick that sentence and spend two sessions on that sentence, even we maybe could have misinterpreted it for sectarianism. But it wasn't. All the words they use is 100% sectarian… deep down they don't understand. And no one takes the time and the patience and the deep breaths and listens and then walks through all the stuff.**
>
> **Geraldine**
> Youth worker, Group F ❞

C. Tools which enable young people to understand their lived experience of violence:

Group F youth workers see parallels between their work with young people in the Lower Falls and Clonard and work being done in other inner-city working-class communities affected by multiple deprivation around the world. When delivering *Why Riot?* SPIYC employed tools which helped young people look at the reasons beneath sectarian, anti-social, violent or self-destructive behaviours. They draw on theoretical frameworks which are grounded in an understanding of class, and social and structural inequalities. This included Paolo Freire's theories of liberatory education which uses dialogue, reflection and praxis (the application of knowledge to enable working class people to better understand themselves and their social worlds, in order to positively challenge and change things they are concerned about. This is also the theoretical framework that underpins the *Why Riot?* course.

To support young people in developing more constructive responses to violence in their lives, SPIYC drew on Kingian [4](1967) theories of nonviolence. This is a body of knowledge and tools derived from the philosophy and methodology of nonviolent resistance developed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the Black Civil Rights Movement in 1960s America. Developed in response to black communities' experiences of social injustice, youth workers felt this approach resonated with the experiences of these young people and their community history.Adapting the *Why Riot?* course to local needs:

4 Kingian Non-Violence is built on six fundamental principles and a six-step process for resolving conflict which emphasise love, justice, reconciliation, and active resistance to oppression without resorting to physical violence. For more information see: The King Centre https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/ Accessed 27/09/2024

Group F youth workers noticed that their group as young people from a CNR background, struggled to listen to or engage with the perspectives of young people from the Shankill PUL community in the first *Why Riot?* session. In their reflections after the session, the youth workers felt this was because:

> " Until they learn who they are, they can't start giving their community and talking about their community. Or understanding where Matty and Dylan [young people from the Shankill in the *Why Riot?* course] and all are coming from, from their [the Shankill] community. "

To address this, staff re-ordered some of the *Why Riot?* course sessions and materials to be more in line with SPIYC's approach to developmental learning with young people growing up in contexts of violence. Their aim was to enable the young people to fully explore their own identity first, before exploring conflict more broadly, interface violence, and their and other's role within this. By deconstructing their own lived experiences young people in Group F began to identify external influences and communal expectations such as 'defending their community' alongside influences from their wider peer groups. In the words of one young person:

> " See now when you think about it and talk about it, you get caught up in it. Like everyone's talking about it and it bes in group chats. Like that's what influences you the most…it's my decision to go but the FOMO bes choking ya.
>
> **Young male, Group F**
> **Youth Worker's *Why Riot?* Journal Week 18** "

Using Kingian theories of nonviolence helped them unpack their lived experience of violence and explore how this shaped their lives and choices. One young person explained:

> " Conflict to me sometimes feels like when my [family member] is off his head and there's murder in my house … and then the cops are there and then he ends up in court and he fights with the judge and all.
>
> **Young person, Group F**
> **Youth Worker's *Why Riot?* Journal Week 18** "

Another described how:

> " When you are in conflict with yourself like you're overthinking and you can't stop and it melts your head.
>
> **Young person, Group F**
> **Youth Worker's *Why Riot?* Journal Week 18** "

Exploring the theme of conflict also enabled young people to express their feelings around topical events, including the Israel/Gaza conflict, which was a dominant theme in their lives at this time. Young people began to consider how conflicts and tensions (including on social media) could influence their behaviours and their response to violence. They also discussed more hidden issues of social and structural inequalities in their everyday lives and communities. As one young man noted, pointing to a quote by Coretta King on poverty and structural violence on the wall in the youth centre: '*Why does no one want to talk about that!*'

a) Meaningful change for these young people:

As they progressed through the programme staff observed young people becoming more self-reflective. The personal behaviours of these young people around violence were also changing. They were beginning to make different decisions. For example, one young man talked to the youth worker about choosing not to 'back up' a mate in a fight following a row on social media.

> **In terms of becoming more reflective we explored this, and the young man discussed how a number of months ago he would have: "felt like a dick". But saying no this time he didn't. He discussed how 'he felt braver maybe more courageous and a 'bit harder.**
>
> **Youth worker, Group F**
>
> Youth Worker's *Why Riot?* Journal Week 20

Staff also noted from their outreach work, that the *Why Riot?* group had reduced their attendance at spots along the interface where they normally socialised. By January 2024 the group were looking ahead to what they wanted to explore next after the *Why Riot?* programme. All chose to move on to a 2-year cross-community peace programme with '*themins from the Shankill*' and have developed constructive friendships with young people from the Shankill. Eighteen months after the start of this project these young people have all shifted from an active role in ASB and interface violence to completely disengaging from this and promoting non-violence with their peers. In their end of *Why Riot?* evaluation, comments included:

> **Why Riot? will help people understand their family, community and themselves.**
>
> **It helped me know myself better. It helped me not want to riot.**
>
> **Group F youth evaluations**
> **February 2024**

Theme 2: 'Who I ought to be and who I am' (Self-identity, self-esteem and self-confidence)

Low self-esteem and low self-confidence coupled with struggles to individuate were common issues for young people across all five case studies, leading to difficulties for example with articulating their own aspirations or making their own independent decisions around risky behaviours.

Effective responses: Safe emotional spaces; positive sense of connection/belonging dialogic spaces; critical thinking skills; Using positive strength-based language and approaches, positive role models, enabling young people to be honest, explore tensions between their values and other expectations and test different ways of thinking; encouragement and affirmation. Here we highlight an approach taken by Group C.

Spotlight Group C: Being true to themselves

During early discussions on Community in *Why Riot?* Module 1 the young men in Group C began describing the pressures and influences they experience in interface areas: Scott, the Group C Youth worker, noted that:

> **They all expressed the need to be seen to be protecting their area from other people from across the community. This brought up other people opinions, perceptions, values and beliefs around living around and interface and across Northern Ireland.**

Scott revisited these discussions again with the young men when they were exploring their choices (Module 2). In the safety of their group the young men began to reflect more deeply about their personal values and began to reflect on and separate their own values from other people's opinions of them:

> **The young men considered who the external influences are in their communities, how free young people are to make their own choices and when do they feel they can be themselves.**

Some young men described how it was only when they were at home that they could be themselves. The youth worker felt this discussion was a very moving experience for the group who all agreed in their session evaluation to *'try and be their true selves like they are at home'*.

These young men went on to make a short film at the end of the *Why Riot?* programme for other young people facing the same expectations they did. Their advice included: "looking after your head is as important as looking after your body", "staying away from the interface is important", and "don't let religious discrimination against others stop the opportunity to make friends".

All ten young men who completed *Why Riot?* went on to change their behaviours at interfaces and by the end of the study had completely disengaged from interface violence and ASB and were all involved in EBAP cross-community programmes. As a young man said in their *Why Riot?* film, '*I want to have a positive future'*.

Theme 3: *'We don't want youse to think we're dumb'* (Educational fears and shame)

Struggles with formal educational including education under attainment, high levels of suspension exclusions and school refusals are a familiar pattern amongst at-risk young people. In our study many young people had disengaged from school (though not all admitted this at the outset). A significant proportion over 30% also had some form of special educational needs.

Visible expressions of this issue included rolling suspensions or disengagement from school; anger and frustration with school e.g. 'school is not for us'; disengaging from anything that '*looks too much like school'* (including for some the *Why Riot?* 'Booklet' or online course). Underlying issues included: fears of being seen as 'dumb or stupid', shame about illiteracy or educational abilities and about asking for help or support (Groups A, C, D and F).

Effective response: Safe emotional spaces; group belonging/ connection; dialogic spaces; critical thinking skills; Sparking intellectual curiosity e.g. field trips out of their areas and offering different ways of framing things; opening up discussions about educational fears/shame/stigma; providing 1-2-1 support. sharing experiences of educational insecurity and ways to overcome this; adapting materials and approach to learning needs <u>while also</u> continuing to challenge and build confidence. We have highlighted two different and highly effective responses to address this theme from Group A and Group F.

Spotlight Group A: Developing the confidence to dream

Group A began as a mixed group of 8 boys and girls from PUL backgrounds in inner South Belfast before becoming a girl only group in Module 2, where these young women began to grow in confidence. All were previously involved in youth work and on the periphery of interface violence and ASB but still vulnerable. In this case study the youth worker who is also a restorative justice practitioner focussed on nurturing individual development through the *Why Riot?* programme

> " As soon as you ask them what their concerns are, they always say the same things, and I've seen a pattern in that from my work. But divert into what personally concerned them- they were concerned 'cause they had their GCSEs coming up.
>
> **Brian**
> Youth worker, Group A "

In their baseline surveys young people provided generic responses such as 'anxiety, depression, bullying' so the youth worker spent time unpicking these responses and encouraged the young people to identify their personal needs and concerns. At the end of Module 1 the group shifted from a mixed group to a girls only group, after which the young women became noticeably more confident. When the youth worker revisited their needs again four shared their anxieties about upcoming GCSE's and asked for support. The youth worker responded by setting up 1-2-1 tuition through an educational support project run by a local community organisation. Alongside skills and support provided in *Why Riot?* group this proved transformative for these young women, increasing their confidence in their education abilities but also in their confidence to express their aspirations- which for one meant going University.

In October 2024 some of the young women got together to record an audio which would be used to share their learnings with other young women. In this discussion they highlighted the importance of not being afraid to ask for support to pursue their dreams.

> " **You are trapped in a bubble full of anxiety and if you ask for help you will get it. The relief is unreal and you feel so much better.** "

At the end of the study these changes were sustained. The young women who received additional support were doing well in school and working towards their aspirations and goals.

Spotlight Group F: Addressing educational shame

When young people in Group F were first introduced to the *Why Riot?* course materials in its printed format, they rejected it:

> " **The booklet [course materials] totally horrified them. We had to break it down into two pages.**
>
> **Geraldine**
> Youth worker, Group F "

As a group they agreed to try again to work with the booklet when they were more confident at the start of Module 2. On the evening of this planned session however, 3 of the young people didn't turn up. The other group members explained that these young people might be feeling ashamed of their educational abilities and were thinking of dropping out. This staff reached out to the three young people to talk through their fears and together the group discussed feelings of shame around education. The youth workers who come from similar working-class backgrounds to the young people, also shared the own fears and feelings of imposter syndrome which they often felt and how they managed this. The young people explained how:

> " **We don't care about school and all 'cause we can just be cheeky and we get threw out. But we didn't want youse [youth workers] to think fucking hell they're dumb as fuck.** "

This was a significant turning point for the group. As one young woman commenting during their reflection circle:

> " **Do you not feel proud as fuck that you'se were able to get that off your chest and not hide from our group. Cas I'm so proud of us. We wouldn't be a group if you'se didn't.** "

All of the young people decided to continue with the programme and in the next session used the *Why Riot?* booklet alongside tools they were already familiar with such as 'the circle of control'. The youth workers observed how:

> 66   **The feelings or pride and achievement in themselves in terms of completing the session was a small win.**   99

Once their fears had been expressed, young people's skills and confidence in their abilities through informal learning began to grow. Those who needed it were also given 1-2-1 educational support through the youth centre. The group continued to use the *Why Riot?* booklet from this point onwards and it became a matter of pride and a tangible measure of their educational achievements through informal learning.

Theme 4: 'What it means to be a man' (Navigating masculinities)

The challenges young men[5] face in navigating their identities alongside others' expectations of them in this conflict-affected context, are experienced differently in each group. The term 'toxic masculinity' is used as a shorthand by some groups to describe these issues.

Visible expressions included: Violence and ASB; group mentality; wanting to be seen as 'hard' amongst their peers; 'defending their communities'; negative language towards/ about young women

Emerging expressions: Young men described being deeply affected by how they were seen and labelled by others in the community or the PSNI as 'hoods' and 'troublemakers'. They struggled with the roles they were expected to fulfill which were at odds with their personal values and identity.

Effective response: Building self-esteem, being a single identity group provided a safe space for discussing, challenging and unpicking fears and concern. Nurturing critical and independent thinking skills. Offering positive role models. Enabling young men to identify their own values, self-reflect and make decisions for themselves. Providing pathways for them to put ideas into action and to be recognised and valued for their positive contributions. See **Group E** below as an example of an effective response. This approach was also impactful in tackling alienation and building a sense of belonging and connection (Theme 6)

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5 There is a growing body of literature on violence and masculinities post conflict in Northern Ireland and other transitional states including on young men's self-perceptions, educational underachievement, mental health and violent behaviours *(Hamber, B & Murray, C, 2022;* Hamilton et al, 2024; Walsh C., & Schubotz, D 2019).

Spotlight Group E: Becoming role models and changemakers

Group E was made up of 14 young men from CNR backgrounds who met in a local park, embraced negative identities of 'hoods and hooligans' and engaged in ASB and intra communal fights (akin to gang cultures). For Group E influences of 'toxic masculinity' and a wider culture of violence shaped these young men's individual and group identities and behaviour and impacted on how they were perceived by others. As they journeyed through the programme this also became the issue young people in Group E most wanted to change. During one of the first activities in the *Why Riot?* course young men referred to themselves as *'hoods and scumbags'* and saw this as *'a positive thing that comes with power status'* amongst their peers. Yet when pressed, it became clear this was not how they wanted to be seen by the wider community.

> **They admit that scumbag's a negative thing. But it was the words 'hood' and 'hooligan' they kept using. To me their understanding was they just want to be hard … to be alpha male. It really comes back to a toxic masculinity thing which is massive within this group.**

The youth workers focused on methods to challenge these views, break down their group mentality and encourage the young men to express their own opinions in discussions about their values and what community meant to them. During the second *Why Riot?* module (Choices) which explores ways to navigate social media and ways to use it positively for change the young men engaged with the idea that they too can have an impact on issues within their communities and that their voice matters. The youth worker noted at the time in his journal that:

> **This session was really powerful…the lads began expressing aspirations of starting projects and social actions to improve their view within community.**

The young men came up with an idea for project to challenge and dismantle the stereotypes that young men face, promoting a more positive and accurate representation.

After completing *Why Riot?,* with support from the youth workers they went on to secure funding for this project and delivered it to other young people, becoming role models for other young men. Through their actions they also changed their relationship with their local community and how others saw them. In their final report, the youth workers identified this as a highly significant outcome in which the young men shifted from:

> **'Passive recipients' to 'active change agents'. Young people also reported feeling more connected and engaged with their local community, leading to increased participation in community activities and a greater sense of belonging.**

Theme 5: 'Its all on social media now' (Navigating social media and making informed choices)

> " The group explained how fake news is part of their everyday life...The conversation was then taken back to living in segregated communities and how social media can be used by people to exploit division and encourage young people to get involved in negative behaviours.
>
> **Brian**
> Youth worker, Group A "

Social media was used by young people to share local/peer and community news and as a 'trusted' source of information. It was also mistrusted because of misinformation and 'fake news'. More broadly social media is recognised as highly influential in mobilising or fuelling violence, street disturbances and rioting including for example, the Spring 2021 riots in Northern Ireland and more recently in August 2024 as an 'amplification mechanism' for racially motivated violence in inner city areas of Northern Ireland (CAJ, 2025:41). For these young people it also amplified the impacts of global conflicts such as the Israel/ Gaza conflict, which featured strongly in their conversations during the research period.

Visible expression included: Influencing behaviour e.g. responding to calls; attending interfaces and organised fights, slabbering' (insulting and goading each other) sharing misinformation and hate speech online.

Emerging expressions included: Mistrust of mainstream media, not knowing what to believe or how to evaluate information, concerns about self-image and identity and being perfect (e.g. Group A girls); curiosity, fears and concerns about justice, injustice, and the psychosocial impacts of wider and global violence shared online (e.g. the Israel/ Gaza conflict).

> " A real-life issue was raised which started an interesting discussion about living their lives over social media and how your reputation can be tarnished with one allegation. The young men learned from this and shared their thoughts and concerns around myths which have impacted on their lives.
>
> **Scott**
> Youth worker, Group C "

Effective Response: Safe emotional spaces; group belonging/ connection; dialogic spaces; critical thinking skills; Use real world examples from their lives (e.g. discussions they are having online, escalation of local incidents on social media etc) in discussions; use the *Why Riot?* tools and activities alongside quizzes and other youth work tools, to develop critical thinking (questioning, analysing and decision making). Use and adapt *Why Riot?* activities in Choices and Aspirations modules to help young people analyse information and make informed decisions .(For an example of an effective response see Group D who addressed the cross cutting theme of racism and xenophobia.)

Theme 6: 'Lighting fires' (Alienation and lack of belonging)

> 66
>
> **A child who is not connected to his community will burn it down to feel the heat.**
>
> **Eamon**
> Youth worker, Group F
>
> 99

Alienation and a lack of belonging was a common issue felt by many of the young people in this study (4/5 groups) but was most acutely felt by those who from their baseline measures, were most vulnerable and at risk. This lack of social connection was accompanied by a lack of empathy.

Visible expressions included: Taking on identities of 'hoods' and 'thugs'. Engaging in violence, ASB and criminal damage.

Emerging expressions and needs included: Feeling demonised, labelled or not feeling valued; very little sense of connection; feeling negative about themselves and/ or their community. Most of these young people also struggled to feel empathy for those around them. This was a significant issue for 4/5 groups (C, D, E and F).

> 66
>
> **The environment for the young people can be very toxic and very demeaning and leave them feeling very isolated. For a young person to grow and develop and feel that sense of belonging and feel loved, that's stuff you should feel from your community, but when you're constantly demonised and constantly labelled you're not going to feel it.**
>
> **Eamon**
> Youth worker, Group F
>
> 99

> 66
>
> **It was the words hood and hooligan they kept using…but they want people to think about them differently.**
>
> **Daire**
> Youth worker, Group E
>
> 99

Effective responses: One of most effective approaches that all youth workers employed was building relationships of trust and creating safe emotional and physical space for young people. Other effective mechanisms included positive strength-based language, positive role modelling. As young people began to feel an increased sense of safety, belonging and connection and felt seen, heard and valued through the programme, their ability to have empathy for others also increased. For many this proved transformational– leading to what youth workers describe as 'penny drop moments', as illustrated by one young person below:

> 66 **I feel bad because the park was closed cas the bins were burned and it burned the floor so the council shut the park and the wee kids couldn't go in it. I wouldn't give a fuck before, but I dunno, I do now like.**
>
> **Young person, Group F**   99

Towards the end of the programme, once a sense of social connection had developed, it provided young people with the opportunity to contribute, for example through volunteering and to use their skills in social action through which young people could begin to challenge and change their relationships with wider communities. Young people in Group D and Group E for example worked directly on challenging negative stereotypes and changing narratives during and after taking part in *Why Riot?*.

> 66 **The *Why Riot?* programme has significantly impacted young people's perception of their place within the community. Participants have reported feeling more connected and engaged with their local community, leading to increased participation in community activities and a greater sense of belonging.**
>
> **Colm**
> **Youth worker Group E**   99

Theme 7: 'Locals only' (Rising racism and xenophobia)

Racism and xenophobia are not new issues in Northern Ireland (HC, 2023; Loader et al, 2023). During the field research period (June 2023-June 2024) however PSNI reported the number of race incidents (1,411) was 'the highest 12-month level recorded since the data series began in 2004/05' (PSNI and NISRA, 2024. *Why Riot?* discussions revealed some of the complex challenges facing young people from PUL and CNR backgrounds in developing and separating their values from wider communal anxieties and negative public discourses for example, about other political communities, about newcomers and about minority ethnic communities.

Visible expressions included: Discussions about 'what it means to be 'local'; racist and sectarian language'; negative and racist tropes and assumptions about different culture and communities.

 Emerging issues included: concerns about how to talk about issues without being 'labelled as racist' e.g. because of where they live; echoing of public, political and communal discourses for example around feeling 'unheard around their housing needs' and 'misunderstood as racist'; increased awareness and talk of 'locals only – no foreigners' campaigns and posters in their neighbourhoods and of online campaigns .

Effective responses: Unpicking and addressing racist and sectarian language; fostering self-respect and respect for others; using discussions effectively as dialogic spaces to explore fears and assumptions about 'others', encouraging the exploration of different perspectives, challenging and disrupting myths and misinformation, building empathy and finding points of human connection; providing opportunities to engage with young people from different backgrounds. See for example Group D's response below.

Spotlight Group D: 'Challenging assumptions and thinking outside the box'

Group D was a core group of 8 young PUL men in the Greater Shankill, a predominantly Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) working class areas but also home to minority ethnic groups including Polish, Romanian, Indian and Black African communities. During the field research period there was an increase in 'locals only' campaigns in the area and discussions about this, racism and 'what it means to be local' featured strongly in this group.

> **There was a lot of racism locally during this bit ...** *Why Riot?* **was space for the young people to process. It was down to me and Nicole to challenge them – they were naturally flowing conversations.**
>
> **Stephen**
> Group D peer Educator

The *Why Riot?* discussions became a space for the young men to begin to think more critically and independently. Importantly their conception of what community was or could be, was expanded.

> **Young people thought critically about the communities they belonged to once they realised that it was more than just Protestant.**
>
> **Nicole**
> Youth worker, Group D

Through *Why Riot?* discussions they were challenged to question why they thought the way they did, often by the peer educator Stephen as someone similar in age and lived experience to the young men, providing a strong role model. The young men also explored issues they were seeing and hearing about in social media from different perspectives. Stephen noted how as they neared the end of one discussion on the Israel/Gaza conflict (a significant theme for all groups during the research period) the young men were beginning to express views that were different to those that might be expected of them:

> **We were all talking about Israel and Palestine, and a couple of the lads were saying 'No, we have to stay with Israel 'cause you're a Protestant'... and a young person within the group said, 'Lads, for all of them, people are just human. People are dying'. You wouldn't expect my young people [from a PUL community] to say it ... that was another penny dropper for me.**
>
> **Stephen**
> Group D peer educator

Together Nicole (lead youth worker) and Stephen cultivated a culture of questioning and dialogue and critical reflection that contributed to change, which while subtle at first appears to have been foundational for more significant change over time. Those young men who completed *Why Riot?* continued on the EA cross-community programme. At the end of November 2024, Nicole, the youth worker noted that:

> **Young people had also met and worked with asylum seekers and ethnic minority young people and many had become friends.**

6. Outcomes and impacts

> 66 The program fostered a sense of hope and possibility.
>
> **Brian**
> Youth worker, Group A 99

Outcomes were measured in each of the 10 MCs[6] using the three key data points: their baseline status in July 2023, their status at the end of their *Why Riot?* course which was a different date for each group and their status at the end of the Why Riot study (November 2024). Levels were measured and colour coded from Very low (red), Low (pink), Medium (Yellow), High (Light green) to Very high (dark green). Results for each group are visualised below in Figure 3, right.

*Baseline (**Centre band 1**), end of the Why Riot? course (**middle band 2**) and end of the study in November 2024 (**outer band 3**).*

Looking at the outcomes over time, five very different change journeys took place, with some change happening at different stages depending on the context.

- Baselines in July 2023 varied for these groups with F and C evidencing the most unmet needs/ lowest baseline levels **at the outset.**

- All *Why Riot?* groups showed some improvements across all 10 indicator areas **at the end of the course.** The most significant outcomes were in Groups F, C and E with high and very high levels of change in 7 or more MC indicators.

- **By the end of the study** (November 24) 4/5 groups all of whom continued with follow on engagement showed continued progression, evidencing high to very high levels of change in at least 8/10 indicators at the end of the study (Groups C, D, E and F).

Figure 3: Levels of change for each group by MCs over time.
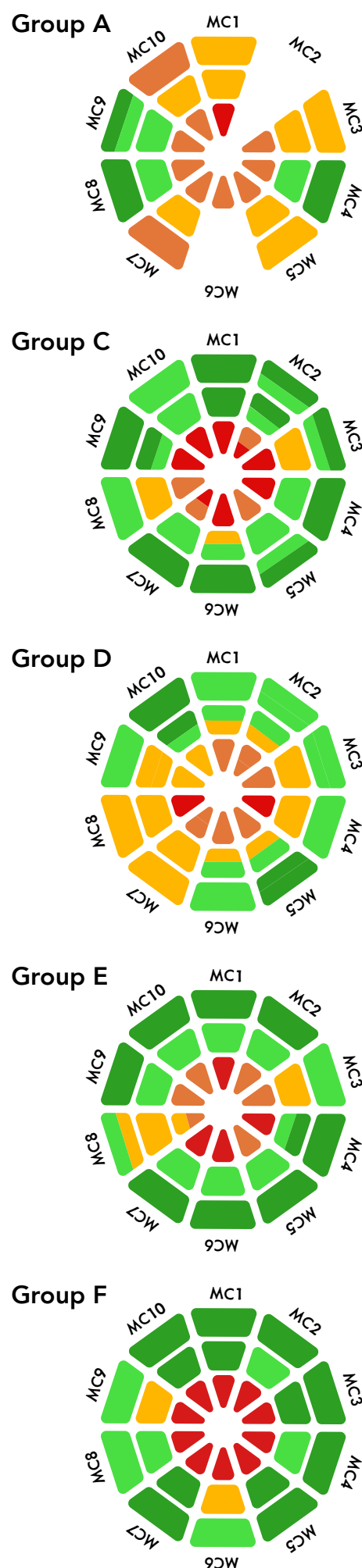
6 With the exception of Group A where only 8 indicators were used (See Appendix:Case studies)

Distance travelled

Figure 4 captures the overall improvement or change for each group at the end of the study in November 2024, compared to where they started (baseline) as a % of the highest achievable outcome across the 10 meaningful change indicators (MC1 to MC10)[7].

Looking across the data *Why Riot?* delivered positive improvements for all groups but the overall levels of change from baseline to endline varied considerably.

7 With the exception of Group A where only 8 indicators were used. In this case the % was calculated out a maximum of 80.
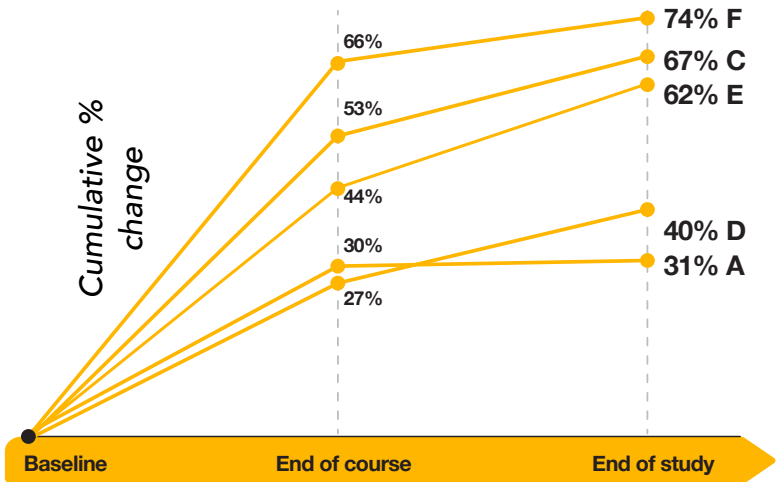

Figure 4. Distance travelled measured as meaningful change across 10 indicators (MC1-MC10)

- Three groups (F, C and E) went on the greatest change journey from baseline to endline.

- Group F in which young people had the most unmet needs (lowest baselines in all 10 indicators), travelled the greatest distance at 74%.

Time and impact

When analysed this data highlights the significance of time spent in youth engagement on overall outcomes (Figure 5):

- Those who spent longer on the *Why Riot?* preparations and *Why Riot?* course (P1-P2) showed the greatest changes (Groups F and C).

- Those who continued to engage with the young people as a group after *Why Riot?* providing through follow on pathways and programmes, also showed continued improvement. For Group E this was 18% followed by Group C (14%) , Group D (13%) and Group F who had already undergone the greatest journey from P1-P2, this was 8%).

Figure 5. Percentage uplift by phase and group

- The anomaly is Group A which showed only a 1% increase. Here *Why Riot?* was delivered by SBA which is not a youth centre and so was not able to offer follow on or wrap around programmes.
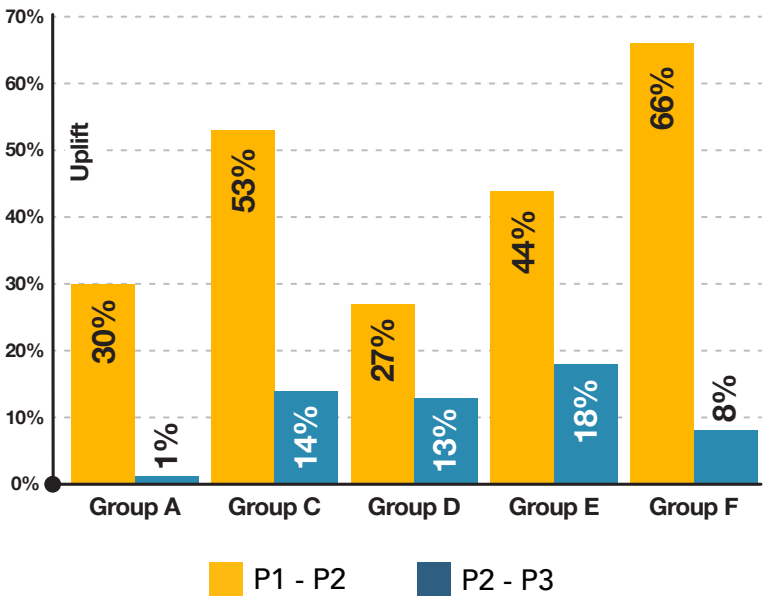
Violence reduction

All groups showed changes in attitudes around violence, rioting and ASB at the end of the *Why Riot?* course and one Group, Group F showed very high levels of change.

At the end of the study (November 2024) the 4 groups who continued working together as a group with follow on engagement all reported:

- Significant reductions in self-harming and self-destructive behaviours
- 100% reduction in interface violence and ASB
- Young people were completely disengaged from attending interfaces and now engaged in cross community and social action projects.
- Many were also promoting non-violence with peers.

In Group A with the shortest delivery and no follow-on engagement there was no further improvement after the end of the *Why Riot?* course.

What change looks like

Text box 2. Youth workers' comments on change

> Listening to two of the *Why Riot?* lads in here the other day when we were talking about the graduation*, something has changed in their minds. Something has changed in their attitudes to education. It's like they feel worthy. Do you know?
>
> **Stephen**
> Youth worker Group F

> Through *Why Riot?* discussions the group questioned their own values and were critical of others in a safe and reflective way which was brilliant to see. From this they have developed a stronger sense of their own values'.
>
> **Nicole**
> Group D youth worker

> The young men have developed a stronger desire to challenge and change the negative stereotypes and expectations often placed on them, particularly young men.
>
> **Daire**
> *Youth worker, Group E*

*The Open University *Why Riot?* Graduation for programme participants in June 2024.

The types of change that *Why Riot?* fosters in young people include becoming:

- Curious about themselves and others:
- Thoughtful, reflective critical thinkers and learners.
- Independent decision makers.
- More confident about education.
- Supportive nurturing friends.
- Peer role models and leaders in non-violence and becoming active, creative agents for positive change in their social worlds.

This in turn has reduced self-destructive and self-harming behaviours, and their engagement in ASB and interface violence.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that these changes also created ripple effects beyond the groups into their families and wider communities. For example, the reduction in interface violence, self-destructive (drugs and alcohol) and anti-social behaviours locally was noted by community members and PSNI who commented on this to youth workers. As one youth worker reported, in line with what others were saying, *'We were getting positive feedback from the community about these young people who, four or five months earlier, we were getting the complete opposite!'* (Colm, youth worker Group E).

Community members also noted the contribution these young people were making locally through volunteering. Changes in how young people are seen within their communities is remarkable given the reporting restrictions imposed through this research study to protect young people's anonymity. This prevented youth workers from publicising the good work young people were engaged in. Through their social action projects the young people are using their skills to change things for the better for other people. Some young people have also been nationally recognised for their social contribution through youth leadership awards.

7. Identifying change mechanisms

> " I don't think I realised quite how it would impact the young people in terms of having them set their own goals, and how do we meet them and action plans and how long the impact has come from the seeds that it's planted in the young people, in terms of their own aspirations and how they're getting there. I don't think at the beginning I would have imagined that it would have snowballed into this bigger thing, into other projects. "
>
> **Daire**
> Youth worker, Group E

We applied realist evaluation methods to examine change processes in each case study and to identify any patterns across case studies (Greenhalgh and Manzano, 2022; Emmel et al., 2018; Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Realist evaluation methods explore the interplay between the **context (C)** in which an intervention is taking place, the **mechanism (M)** of the intervention and the **outcomes (O)**, to 'understand what works for whom in what circumstances and why' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This CMO approach allows us to recognise the complexity of these factors, while also identifying the process of change through the *Why Riot?* programme in each of the five-case studies. It also allowed us to look for any common factors or 'generative mechanisms' across all five groups. Using this analytical framework our questions were:

1. For **whom** will *Why Riot?* work and not work, and why?

2. In what **contexts** will it work and not work, and why?

3. What are the main **mechanisms** by which we expect this programme to work?

Key finding: For whom is *Why Riot?* most effective?

Why Riot? **is most effective for detached and highly marginalised** young people (boys and girls) growing up in contexts and cultures of violence, who are at risk of exploitation/ coercion and/or of engaging in violence, ASB or self-destructive behaviours.

- *Why Riot?* is highly effective as a gateway (first step) educational intervention or prevention programme for deeply marginalised, high risk young people including those engaged in interface and sectarian violence, ASB and/ or on the police/ youth justice radar, leading to transformative impacts for these young people (Group C and F).

- *Why Riot?* is highly effective as a gateway programme (first step) educational intervention or prevention programme for marginalised young people on the fringes of postcode and group/ gang related ASB and violence leading to transformative impacts (Group E).

- *Why Riot?* can be effective as a follow-on programme with vulnerable young people who have or are already engaged in youth services through other programmes. However if delivered in this way, thought must be given to preparation time to build ownership and engagement and adapt delivery to youth needs and to introduce *Why Riot?* specific concepts of reflection, dialogue and critical thinking (Group A, Group D).

- *Why Riot?* is effective as part of a wraparound approach (as one of a number of interlinked programmes) but is likely to be most effective as the first gateway programme in a sequence of programmes, to provide foundational critical thinking skills (Group A, Group D).

Key finding: In what contexts is *Why Riot?* most effective?

Why Riot? was most effective when delivered in the following learning contexts:

- In a youth centre that can provide a safe location for young people to develop their sense of belonging, social connection and relationships of trust with adults and where they can continue their individual and collective (group) development pathways (Groups C, D, E and F)

- When delivered in single identity groups (e.g. CNR or PUL) where young people can explore and develop their own values and identity, independent of what others expect of them, and explore their fears and assumptions, before looking outwards / joining mixed identity groups (Groups, A, C, D, E and F)

- It can also be delivered successfully to mixed gender groups, but requires sensitivity and awareness to ensure gendered needs are addressed (Groups A and F)

- Attending the *Why Riot?* Open University Graduation (June 24) was highly impactful for young people and boosted their confidence and led to a sense of pride in their educational achievements which was also expressed by their families.

Transferability

The *Why Riot?* course was co-created with young men from the PUL community in the Shankill in Northern Ireland. One of the aims of the LfWR study therefore, was to test the applicability of the programme in other communities and contexts.

This overall study was limited to the experience of a relatively small number of young men and young women from Catholic, Nationalist, Republican backgrounds and Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist backgrounds. Our evidence however suggests this programme – **when delivered by experienced local youth or community workers and tailored to local context and specific youth needs** – is applicable to young people in other communities and contested contexts. This includes with young people involved in social conflicts such as intercommunal, postcode or gang related tensions and conflicts. Additional research is needed on how to adjust and tailor material for the specific needs of young women.

Key finding: What are the main mechanisms that supported change?

Looking at the interplay between context, mechanisms and outcomes in case studies the following common mechanisms were observed. Their interdependence is emphasised in Figure 6:

1. Safe spaces (emotionally and physically) for learning.

2. A structured process for critical thinking.

3. Context specific tools e.g. Non-violence.

4. Dialogue and reflection.

5. Youth worker methods.

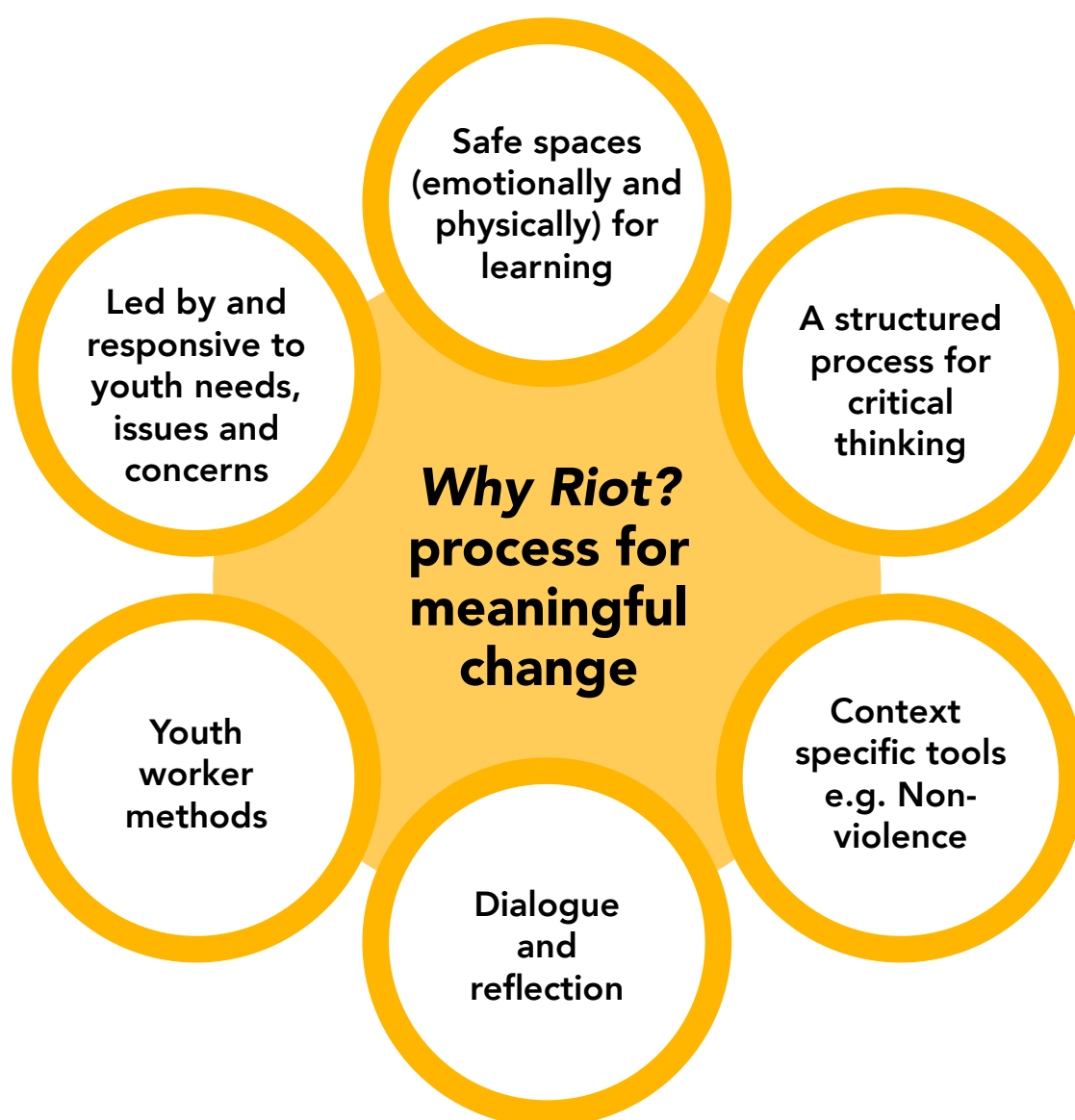6. Led by and responsive to youth needs, issues and concerns.

Figure 6. Common mechanisms

8. Summary: *Why Riot?* as a community-based intervention

> 66 Detached [youth work] isn't about being the fourth emergency service, it's an educational process.
>
> **Geraldine**
> Youth worker, Group F 99

As action research, LfWR moved the *Why Riot?* from being an online course to an on-site youth programme. In the process, we learned that *Why Riot?* leads to **transformative (significant and potentially sustainable) outcomes** in young people's lives when delivered:

- As a gateway prevention or early intervention programme to marginalised and detached young people, in their social worlds.

- by youth workers through holistic, strength-based and trauma informed, youth work approaches.

- led by and responsive to youth needs (adaptable, flexible, unbounded by time constraints, with sufficient preparatory time, delivery time, wrap around activities and follow on pathways).

- combining youth work and critical education methods such as group work discussions, activities and tools and dialogue and reflection within a structured learning framework.

- in youth centres/youth settings designed to give young people opportunities to develop belonging, trust and connectedness and where they can continue their developmental journeys.

It works by:

- Addressing basic needs of safety/ security (physical and emotional); building relationships of trust; providing a sense of positive belonging and connectedness.

- Using 'safe dialogic space' for young people to discuss difficult, contested topics of concern. By dialogic we mean non-judgmental spaces that foster questioning ('the why's beneath'), actively challenge biases and assumptions, and encourage young people to explore different perspectives and become self-reflective.

- Developing critical thinking skills (understanding, evaluating, decision making) and providing young people with the skill they need academic o expand their horizons, 'think outside the box' and make their own considered decisions.

- Working in single identity groups where young people can explore and develop their own values and identity, independent of what others expect of them, and explore their fears and assumptions, before looking outwards / joining mixed identity groups.

- Supporting them to continue on their learning journeys (informally and formally) after the *Why Riot?* course, enabling them to flourish and to positively contribute to their communities and society.

The necessary conditions for effective community based educational interventions

- Recognise and value youth and community organisations working on the frontline in interfaces and contested spaces as experts in providing educational and developmental processes for at risk young people.

- Provide dedicated funding for *Why Riot?* and similar educational programmes co-created with and for vulnerable and at-risk young people to address their needs and develop their skills for growing up in and navigating contexts of violence.

- Develop Communities of Practice to support youth workers facilitating educational interventions and programmes, to share experiences and learning across boundaries (political geographic, communal). These are essential to support reflexivity, challenge assumptions and bias, and provide spaces for ongoing research and Knowledge exchange.

- Provide mechanisms/pathways for feeding community-led action research into policy and practice.

- Encourage innovation and risk taking.

- Support real and transparent reporting.

Effective *Why Riot?* programme delivery requires:

- Time and longevity.

- Provide long term Programme Funding (minimum 18 months).

- Fund targeted interventions in locations of most need (interfaces / contested spaces).

- A focus on meaningful change (sustainable/ transformative impacts) rather than numbers and short-term outputs.

- A holistic approach to address youth needs as part of a youth developmental journey.

9. Conclusion

> 66 You'se care what we do. But you care why we do it, if you know what I mean
>
> **Young woman**   99
> *Why Riot?* Group F

The LfWR project has provided many insights into the complex 'whys' behind youth violence, and the impact programmes like *Why Riot?* can have. At its most fundamental, the study has illuminated the process of transformative change that has taken place through this programme:

1. Young people in this study are full of promise and potential, but unlike many of their peers have not enjoyed the benefits of the peace dividend.

2. Neglect of young people's needs or constraining their potential is part of a complex process driving cycles of violence, ASB, self-harming (drugs, alcohol) and self-destructive (anger ASB, criminal) behaviours.

3. A holistic approach to informal education that addresses core needs alongside developing skills to think critically, self-reflect, evaluate and make their own choices is transformative.

4. This in turn reduces self-destructive and self-harming behaviours, and engagement in ASB and interface violence. (Evidenced in Why Riot MC outcomes framework).

Many of the young participants in this study embarked on transformative journeys with the support of their youth workers through the *Why Riot?* programme. Their lived experience of violence, the corrosive impacts of this upon them and the challenges young people face in making sense of how this shapes their own behaviours and in navigating alternatives pathways, was an overarching theme.

Collectively these young people are growing up in contexts and cultures where violence is normalised yet deeply felt in myriad ways, impacting on young people's sense of personal identity, their relationship with their peers, families, communities, formal education and with risk and risky behaviours. It plays out in how they see themselves, with most embracing labels they are given as 'hoods' and 'thugs' while struggling between these identities and their own values, hopes and dreams even if not yet fully formed. It shapes their confidence, aspirations, self-esteem and their mental health. It also makes them vulnerable to exploitation. Young men described the weight of expectation they feel to perform a role[8], for example as 'protectors' or 'defenders' of their communities and young women to encourage if not participate in this risky behaviour. As young people full of potential at the start of their lives the constraints they feel about 'who they ought to be' in the eyes of peers, some in their communities and wider society were also powerfully evident.

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8 For an exploration of normative masculinities see for example Ulster University's 'Taking Boys Seriously' project and (Harland, 2015;)

What *Why Riot?* offers: A holistic approach addressing unmet youth needs

The *Why Riot?* programme is highly effective in delivering meaningful change when part of a holistic approach to community-based education which is first and foremost, led by and responds to youth needs. **The most significant overall change in this study was observed with marginalised and detached young people who had the most significant unmet needs** (Group F, followed by Group C) . The most effective processes for delivering transformative change amongst young people involved identifying and directly addressing youth needs and enabling young people as critical reflective thinkers and changemakers as part of a holistic youth development process.

While this study is specific to the experiences of young people in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the results suggest the *Why Riot?* programme and process has transferability to young people in other communities and contexts. Given the successful *proof of concept* in this study, we believe it has the potential to be valuable in international contexts, particularly those most marginalised and at risk of experiencing and perpetuating violence.

What this study highlights about the role of youth work

The value of youth work

This study highlights the professionalism and extraordinary commitment of youth workers from both statutory and independent sectors working with young people in some of Northern Ireland's most challenging contexts. It also celebrates the wealth of knowledge, expertise and creativity of youth workers in addressing young people's needs, delivering foundational skills and enabling young people to grow and flourish.

The importance of dialogic spaces for practitioners

This study also highlights the diversity of views and approaches held by youth workers working in these contested spaces, each with different backgrounds and lived experience. A key learning from this study was the need for intercommunal **Communities of Learning and Practice** for those delivering *Why Riot?* and similar interventions in interfaces and contested spaces. This could provide a safe, respectful, dialogic space for those who are both working in and also affected by cultures and contexts of violence, support critical thinking and reflective practice, provide training and CPD for youth workers and nurture and support cross-community working, real time information sharing and cultures of learning.

Funding and evaluation challenges

This study also highlights how youth work like this is long, difficult but also potentially transformative work. The youth sector (independent and statutory) and frontline youth work with young people who are often the most difficult to engage, is undervalued. It is also often hampered by the constraints of current ways of framing programme responses alongside funding and evaluation methods and support for those delivering these programmes. Funding is experienced differently by the statutory and independent sector. Youth workers from the independent sector in this study for example, describe challenges they face with consistency and longevity of funding and persistent underfunding, within a wider context of funding pressures and rising costs. As an independent restorative justice network SBA describe having access to and applying different funding models. All struggle with longer term flexible funding for youth programmes like *Why Riot?* These experiences suggest the needs for a fuller discussion on funding models.

Co-created solutions with youth and community experts

Academic community collaboration and co-creation has been central to the *Why Riot?* approach. This included:

- The co-creation of the original *Why Riot?* course and ongoing collaboration with this community partner William Mitchell (ACT) on its development and related research.

- LfWR as an action research collaboration.

- Co-creating an evaluation framework – The *Why Riot? Meaningful Change framework*.

- Stakeholder event to collectively discuss and refine policy recommendations.

This study highlights the value of community collaboration and co-creation as a model for developing effective ground up solutions with youth workers as experts by experience and practice. This co-creation approach employed by The Open University and community partners also presents a potential blueprint for moving forward on the recommendations of this study. The proposal of a Northern Ireland Violence Reduction (VR), non-violence or youth peace hub emerged through our conversations with youth and community partners, and in the Evidence Café stakeholder conversations. Calls for the creation of a 'Non-Violence Institute' are also taking place independently at a community level[9].

What was also powerfully expressed was the need to value the expertise of those in the youth sector and community sector who are working in the interfaces with young people and to value the voices of young people themselves. One model that appears to be most engaged with and informed by grassroots stakeholders is the Scottish VR model[10] but there is currently no example of a **co-created** VR or Non-violence hub in the UK. Co-creation in this context would be a novel approach.

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9 See for example: Innate nonviolence (2025) 'A call by Dr. Kate Laverty Director of Forthspring to create a non-violence institute'. https://innatenonviolence.org/wp/2025/04/01/readings-in-nonviolence-nonviolence-and-plans-for-a-nonviolence-institute-in-belfast/ https://innatenonviolence.org/wp/2025/04/01/news-april-2025/

10 For information on this and other Violence Reduction Units in England, Scotland and Wales, see for example: Irwin-Rogers et al, 2020: The Youth Violence Commission final report Available at: https://www.yvcommission.com Accessed: 06_05_2025

10. Key recommendations

Young people like those in this study can make a significant contribution to building a peaceful, inclusive and more prosperous future for all in Northern Ireland. This is the starting point for any lasting solutions.

An initial set of key policy recommendations were developed by The Open University and co-research team. These were tested and refined through wider stakeholder consultations before finalizing.

In April 2025, The Open University held a one-day stakeholder consultation Evidence Café[11] in Belfast on the key findings from this study and to discuss, test and refine our LfWR policy recommendations. This event included a variety of participants from the public, community, voluntary and statutory sector concerned with youth violence. This included representatives from the Education Authority, youth justice, PSNI, Safeguarding teams, community and youth organisations and some government departments. These have been used to inform and refine our final LfWR policy recommendations.

These recommendations are organised at different levels. All will require reframing youth violence as a social and health issue needing joined up policy responses alongside targeted interventions:

Key recommendations

Strategic policy level

- Politicians, civil servants and institutions with authority in this area should value those working with young people in contested spaces as youth development **partners** and not as 'the 4th emergency service'.
- The Northern Ireland Executive should implement flexible, responsive and long-term funding for the youth sector delivering these interventions.
- Policy responses to youth violence must be joined up with strategies tackling poverty and inequalities, including the Anti-Poverty Strategy under development by the Department for Communities. Policies must address the needs of young people, their families and communities by targeting persistent inequalities and underlying drivers of violence.

Programme level

- Invest in *Why Riot?* and related co-created youth needs-led educational interventions
- Following the example of the *Why Riot? M*eaningful Change Framework, statutory and non-statutory funders of youth services should embed new co-created evaluation models which focus on evaluating the meaningful change brought to young people.
- Develop an inclusive culture of learning/knowledge exchange to learn, share knowledge and to shape policy and practice in dynamic and meaningful ways.

Our final recommendation is aimed at enabling Northern Ireland to lead the way with an innovative, collaborative and ground up approach to this complex social problem:

> The Northern Ireland Executive should enable and support the **co-creation of a Northern Ireland Violence Reduction or Non-Violence Hub** drawing on the *Why Riot?* models of co-creation.

11 Evidence Cafés is a tool for facilitating inclusive equitable knowledge exchange between diverse stakeholders. Clough, G. and Adams A. (2017). Evidence Cafés: A how-to guide. The Open University, Milton Keynes.

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