



Rialtas  
na hÉireann  
Government  
of Ireland

Ár dTodhchaí  
Tuaithe  
Our Rural  
Future



# Rural Youth Assembly Summary Report 2023

Department of Rural and Community Development

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National Rural Youth Assembly 2023 –

Civic Participation of Young People in Rural Ireland: Summary Report

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## Recommendations

The National Rural Assembly convened on Tuesday the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2023 in the Hibernia Centre, Dublin Castle. The National Rural Youth Assembly is a collaboration between the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).



*Joe O'Brien T.D., Minister of State with responsibility for Community Development and Charities, and Minister of State with responsibility for Integration, with delegates at the 2023 Rural Youth Assembly, Dublin Castle.*



# National Rural Youth Assembly 2023

Civic Participation of Young People  
in Rural Ireland

The Programme for Government committed to the establishment of a Youth Assembly for rural young people. In addition the Department of Rural and Community Development made a commitment in Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 to establish a Rural Youth Assembly to allow young people living in rural Ireland to make an on-going contribution to issues that impact on them and their future.

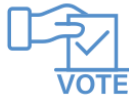
## RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Rural Youth Assembly took place on the 3rd October 2023. 60 delegates aged 12-24 from across Ireland attended, representing Comhairle na nÓg (Youth Councils), youth and community organisations and other interested organisations. The delegates attended a preparation session in advance of the Assembly and then took part in a day of discussion. They have produced nine key recommendations for the Government to consider. These are outlined below:



### Political

**Lower the voting age** to 16 especially in matters which affect young people in Ireland.



Provide every rural area and island community with a **dedicated youth officer** who is employed and funded by the local county council.



**Increase accessible opportunities** for political engagement to young people. This could be achieved through **awareness raising campaigns** and **funding transport costs**.



### Volunteering

The Department of Education should include **volunteering** to be made part of the **school curriculum** at both Junior and Senior Cycle.



Develop a **new policy or law** to allow younger people to participate in **volunteering opportunities** that are regulated and safeguarded.



In order to increase the opportunities for young people to volunteer, changes in **transport** should be made. **Expand the bus routes** to link rural areas to urban areas and expand the **free travel scheme** to all young people and provide subsidised fares across the population.



### Community

**Increase funding** for mental health services and supports for young people in the **transition to adult services**. Provide incentives for people to pursue a career in the mental health sector.



Provide **compulsory training** courses in relation to supporting **LGBTI+ young people** for SPHE teachers. Establish and **fund facilities** for queer people in rural areas.



Create **free, safe, accessible spaces** for **young people** to interact and grow in a healthy and welcoming environment e.g. parks, centres, gyms, playgrounds, pitches. This should be **included in urban planning** within 18 months and going forward.



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## Summary

The establishment of a National Rural Youth Assembly is a key deliverable under Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, under policy measure 73 to: “*establish an annual Rural Youth Assembly to allow young people living in rural Ireland to make an ongoing contribution to identifying and influencing policy issues that impact on them and their future.*”<sup>1</sup>

The priority of the National Rural Youth Assembly is to include the voices of young people in policymaking for rural areas. Our Rural Future commits to including the views of children and young people to help to ensure that Our Rural Future is a living instrument, adapting to changing circumstances and needs.<sup>2</sup> The National Rural Youth Assembly is also a structure that supports ongoing dialogue with rural stakeholders to enable new actions to be added through an annual work programme to respond to emerging needs and issues.<sup>3</sup>

The annual National Rural Youth Assembly is jointly convened by DRCD and DCEDIY as part of DCEDIY’s overarching National Youth Assembly of Ireland, which provides young delegates (aged 12 to 24) with a voice in decision-making on the implementation of Government policies.

The third annual National Rural Youth Assembly took place on Tuesday the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2023 from 11am - 4 pm in the Hibernia Centre, Dublin Castle, opened by Joe O’Brien, Minister of State at DRCD, DCEDIY and the Department of Social Protection (DSP). There were 60 delegates on the day, consisting of 41 sitting delegates and 19 guest delegates, aged between 12 and 24 years. Kevin McCarthy, Secretary General of DCEDIY, Carol Baxter, Assistant Secretary of the Equality, Youth and Participation Division in DCEDIY, and Robert Nicholson, Head of Rural Strategy and Social Enterprise Unit in DRCD were in attendance.

Also in attendance were two Independent Observers from the Ombudsman for Children’s (OCO) Youth Advisory Panel (YAP). Their role was to confirm that the Assembly was facilitated according to best practice as set out in the *National Participation Framework*<sup>4</sup> and that the recommendations and the views of delegates are represented fairly, transparently and without undue interpretation or influence, and reported on accordingly.

The theme for the 2023 National Rural Youth Assembly was ‘Civic Participation of Young People in Rural Ireland’. This theme was chosen as DRCD, in collaboration with DCEDIY, commissioned research on the civic engagement of young people in rural Ireland. The research was undertaken by the Economic Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the findings were presented to the young people at the pre-briefing preparatory session in advance of the Assembly. This preparation session took place online on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 2023. Guest speakers were Professor Emer Smyth, ERSI, Counsellor Ben Dalton O’Sullivan, Cork County Council, and Niamh Farrell, Macra na Feirme.

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<sup>1</sup> [Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025](#) p. 14 and p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p. 56

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p. 95

<sup>4</sup> The Participation Framework: National Framework for Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021). [View here](#)

The National Rural Youth Assembly facilitated consideration and discussion of the policy implications of the research undertaken by ESRI and to get the views of young people on how they can be addressed. The Assembly discussed three topics in relation to the civic and political engagement of young people in rural Ireland, focusing on the way in which rural young people engaged in:

- Volunteering
- Community
- Political engagement

The Assembly discussed the benefits, opportunities, and challenges under each theme and then proposed what the government should do to support opportunities and address challenges. All the delegates moved between thematic workshops and group discussions and contributed to each. Subsequently, in groups, all the delegates then prioritised the issues and considered, formulated, and proposed recommendations that had emerged, and put forward their selected recommendations for a vote by the Assembly. Nominated representatives from each of these groups gathered shortly after the Assembly to verify the recommendations and to finalise the wording.

Minister O'Brien welcomed the young people's views, ideas and suggestions, and encouraged them to continue the ongoing tradition of civic engagement in rural communities. He highlighted the fact that young peoples' voices are valuable, and their views and recommendations will be shared across Government so that appropriate actions can be considered.

This short summary report presents the recommendations and summarises the proceedings of the National Rural Youth Assembly 2023, compiled from written views from the delegates and notes of discussions taken on the day. Full transcriptions of these materials are available from DCEDIY on request.

The recommendations of the National Rural Youth Assembly will be proposed for consideration as part of discussions within DRCD and with other Government Departments that focus on developing the annual Work Programmes under the Our Rural Future policy. DRCD has committed to communicate young peoples' views and concerns when consulting on policy and programme development within their Department and across Government. DRCD uses the annual work programme planning and review process for Our Rural Future commitments to encourage all Departments to consider including actions that address issues of importance to young people. DRCD values the voice and views of young people and will report feedback on the recommendations arising from the National Rural Youth Assembly in an age-appropriate plain English format.

## Discussions

Delegates documented their views in writing on custom placemats during discussions. Additionally, DCEDIY representatives were on hand to capture content that was not included on the placemats. The following short overviews of the thematic conversations were derived from transcriptions of all the content. Word Clouds present visual representations of frequently occurring words and show the focus of the discussions. Qualitative content analysis of the transcripts provides an overview of the discussions and demonstrate the key concerns of the Youth Assembly in relation to civic participation in rural Ireland. The recommendations are presented in tables exactly as they were originally recorded, and the voting process for these final recommendations is also explained.

## Volunteering



The discussion focused most frequently on the challenges for young people volunteering because this involves attending meetings that conflict with their school, college, or work commitments. Transport was the second most discussed issue, and awareness of volunteering opportunities was third. Other areas discussed were public transport affordability, funding, and lack of opportunities.

At World Café discussions, groups of delegates identified that limited access to information about volunteering in rural areas was an issue and proposed solutions, including advertising events and volunteering opportunities, and promoting the benefits of volunteerism. They suggested an online accessible, easy to find government website which lists volunteering opportunities as a solution.

The delegates highlighted transport and geographic issues that limit their ability to take volunteer locally or further away. They proposed reduced prices, particularly for private buses, more accessible public transport, including expanding current bus routes and reopening rural train stations, as solutions to the impact of poor infrastructure and transport issues on volunteerism.

Delegates expressed the opinion that stigma, discrimination and stereotyping often impact their volunteering experience. They felt that they could be discriminated against due to their age and that youth stereotyping by adults either leads to adult distrust of them or to young people feeling infantilised. Solutions suggested were more information and education about the value of young people volunteering.



*Workshop at the Rural Youth Assembly 2023*

Delegates discussed how volunteering enhanced personal development and skills, improved social connection, and provided career opportunities. However, they highlighted how time constraints impact their ability to volunteer, including clashes with part-time work, school, and homework requirements. Suggested solutions included incorporating volunteering into certain school subjects, such as Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE), or Physical Education (PE) for sports related volunteering and providing incentives for young people to volunteer such as gaining points towards Leaving Certificate results.

In groups the delegates then prioritised the issues and solutions identified and proposed recommendations. All delegates were invited to vote on the issue and recommendation that they wished to make to the Government. Delegates were each given a sticky dot to vote on their priority recommendation.

From these discussion groups each of the three priority areas, in this section, volunteering, with five recommendations were identified and these are set out in the tables below.



Recommendation 1	21 votes
Situation	Work being done
Transport - unreliable, hard to get to volunteering sites.	Local links available in most counties but still unreliable in some areas.  Rail Review - plans to expand railroad.
Action	Recommendation
<p>Better transport links from rural-urban to move from volunteering to career enhancements.</p> <p>Lower fares &amp; expand free travel scheme (volunteers are unpaid and unable to afford travel.</p>	<p>We have identified that transport and transport fares are a barrier to young people getting involved in volunteering. We recommend the expansion of bus routes to link rural areas to urban areas, this will help young people link their volunteering to their future careers. We also recommend that fares are lowered, and the free travel scheme is expanded as many students who volunteer don't have time to work so are unable to afford the added expense of travel to volunteer.</p>

Recommendation 2	14 votes
Situation	Work being done
Lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities in local communities. Restrictions on young people volunteering.	There are a few volunteering websites, but none catered to young people. Some scout groups allow young people to try out volunteering.
Action	Recommendation
<p>Talks in schools: to teach students why, how, and where they can volunteer.</p> <p>Online website: sorted by county, shows all volunteering opportunities in each county, filter by interest and age.</p> <p>Put more funding into volunteering organisations.</p>	<p>There is a lack of awareness of what volunteering opportunities are available to young people in Ireland.</p> <p>We recommend that volunteering organisations come into schools and talk to young people about how, where, and why they can volunteer as well as direct them to a website that has information on volunteering. This website should be kept up to date and have the ability to filter by county, likes, dislikes, interests, skills, and age.</p>

Recommendation 3	7 votes
Situation	Work being done
A lot of volunteer organisations only take people from age 16+ or in transition year. This isn't fair on the people who want to get involved in volunteering.	We don't think there is anything been done on this. It depends on the area and the organisation but it's not nationwide.
Action	Recommendation
We want younger people (secondary school students) to have the opportunity to be able to start volunteering before they're 16 or before they are in transition year.	A new policy or law to allow younger people to participate in volunteering opportunities that are regulated and safe guarded.

Recommendation 4	17 votes
Situation	Work being done
The lack of advertisements about volunteering in your area.	They are only advertising big organisations (e.g., meals on wheels) and you never hear about the small organisations.
Action	Recommendation
More advertisements in schools and youth organisations, publishing events in newspapers or news stations.	We recommend that more volunteering opportunities be advertised to young people in schools, youth organisations through news or social media.

Recommendation 5	4 votes
Situation	Work being done
Volunteering becomes part of the school curriculum.	Some schools do one week in transition year of volunteering. Gaisce is not offered in all schools, some schools charge (for senior cycles). SPHE is not under reformulation for the Leaving Cert. Some schools work with local charities already

Action	Recommendation
All schools to offer volunteering as part of their school curriculum.	Research has shown that volunteering leads to positive mental health and a sense of belonging and achievement. Therefore, it is the recommendation of us young people that volunteering should be part of the school curriculum at both junior and senior cycle.

After the Assembly, nominated representatives from each of the groups met with members of the Youth Advisory Group to review and revise the recommendations for clarity. The three final recommendations on the topic area of volunteering are as follows:

### Final Recommendations after voting and review

**Recommendation 1:** The Department of Education should include volunteering to be made part of the school curriculum at both Junior and Senior Cycle.

**Recommendation 2:** Develop a new policy or law to allow younger people to participate in volunteering opportunities that are regulated and safeguarded.

**Recommendation 3:** In order to increase the opportunities for young people to volunteer, changes in transport should be made. Expand the bus routes to link rural areas to urban areas and expand the free travel scheme to all young people and provide subsidised fares across the population.

## Community



A primary focus of the discussions was the prospect of reopening rural train stations. This topic was closely intertwined with other critical points, such as transportation challenges, infrastructure issues, and safety concerns on rural roads. The participants emphasised the need to address these interconnected issues to enhance the overall well-being of rural communities. The second most prevalent concern raised was the insufficient promotion of volunteering opportunities for young people. Participants underscored the importance of actively promoting and facilitating volunteering initiatives.

During the World Café, participants identified key challenges related to transportation, emphasising the lack of reliable public transport and its associated impact on travel. Also, unsafe roads discourage young people from walking, and adults are hesitant to drive, exacerbated by high-speed limits, inadequate footpaths, poor lighting, and insufficient traffic controls. Recommendations include improving public transport infrastructure, enhancing road conditions, and promoting safety for buses and the Luas, along with incorporating road safety into education programmes.

Another significant challenge discussed was the scarcity of community resources and services. Delegates pointed out the limited availability and distance of shops and libraries, with few diverse opportunities beyond activities like Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). To address the lack of youth initiatives and clubs, delegates urged increased government funding for villages, towns, and rural businesses. They proposed the appointment of a 'Rural Concerns Officer' in each county council to identify and support local initiatives. Delegates also highlighted the need for a centralised website to share information, raise awareness, and promote opportunities through various channels: poster, leaflet, and social media campaigns, within education settings and libraries. Discussions also focused on social and cultural challenges within community organisations. Delegates expressed concern about the lack of diversity and inclusivity, particularly towards immigrants, neurodivergent individuals, those with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ community members.



Recommendations included incorporating tolerance education into SPHE and CSPE, teaching critical race theory, promoting understanding of different identities, and commemorating events like Black History Month, Disability Month, and Pride Month in schools. To create safer community spaces, delegates proposed the establishment of an 'Independent Government Coordinator' to address local issues arising from differing opinions and political divides.

From these discussion groups each of the three priority areas, in this section, community, with six recommendations were identified and these are set out in the tables below.

Recommendation 1	4 votes
Situation	Work being done
Lack of mental health supports for people in the community.	Insufficient services - pilot remote CAMHS scheme. Awareness campaigns - talk not action.
Action	Recommendation
Incentives for mental health careers - better pay. More supports for young people in the transition between adolescent and adult services.	More funding for mental health services and support for young people in the transition to adult services.

Recommendation 2	8 votes
Situation	Work being done
Negative stigma around getting involved in the community.	No awareness (especially adult) of this stigma.
Action	Recommendation
Get rid of this stigma.	Anti-stigma workshops in schools and communities to educate about benefits, achievements, and chances we can make through community engagement.

Recommendation 3	13 votes
Situation	Work being done
Young people and adults not being able to participate in their community due to poor roads.	There is roadworks and road improvements being carried out across the country. Primary school children also receive road safety education.
Action	Recommendation
For the rural roads and back roads to have drastic improvements and that secondary school students receive road safety education.	The government should provide funding, resources, and education around improving rural roads, raising awareness about road safety and driving etiquette, especially around rural areas.

Recommendation 4	15 votes
Situation	Work being done
Lack of safe youth spaces in largely/rural populated spaces - especially suburbs.	GAA clubs are widespread throughout Ireland, both in cities and rural areas.
Action	Recommendation
Youth spaces need to be created, funded, and advertised in suburban and rural environments (e.g. parks, centres, gyms, playgrounds, pitches).	The government needs to create free, safe, accessible spaces for young people to interact and grow in a healthy and welcoming environment in plain sight within 18 months and going forwards.

Recommendation 5	4 votes
Situation	Work being done
No LGBT+ supports in rural areas. Rural areas are heavily rooted in the Catholic religion and have a higher population of elderly people - prejudice. There are less facilities.	There is Stand Up week in schools where pride flags are raised, and information is shared about the queer community. It depends on the teacher/school, there is no set curriculum.
Action	Recommendation
Proper education in schools and communities that is mandatory. Normalisation of queer relationships and identities in school education and RSE courses. More education mandatory for teachers around LGBT+ people.	Provide compulsory training courses in relation to supporting LGBT+ young people for teachers. Establish and fund facilities for queer people in rural areas.

Recommendation 6	10 votes
Situation	Work being done
Not enough awareness and engagement from young people in politics within the education system.	There is a CSPE course that is semi-functioning within schools depending on the teacher/school if it is delivered correctly. Schools are more accepting of the voice of the Student Council.
Action	Recommendation
Teach more about the current political climate. Have CSPE every year - focus on different topics each year. Teach people how to register to vote in 6th year.	Properly train CSPE teachers in a standardised course. Have CSPE offered in all years in secondary school.

After the Assembly, nominated representatives from each of the groups met with members of the Youth Advisory Group to review and revise the recommendations for clarity. The three final recommendations for the topic area of community are as follows:

### Final Recommendations after voting and review

**Recommendation 1:** Increase funding for mental health services and supports for young people in the transition to adult services. Provide incentives for people to pursue a career in the mental health sector.

**Recommendation 2:** Provide compulsory training courses in relation to supporting LGBTI+ young people for SPHE teachers. Establish and fund facilities for queer people in rural areas.

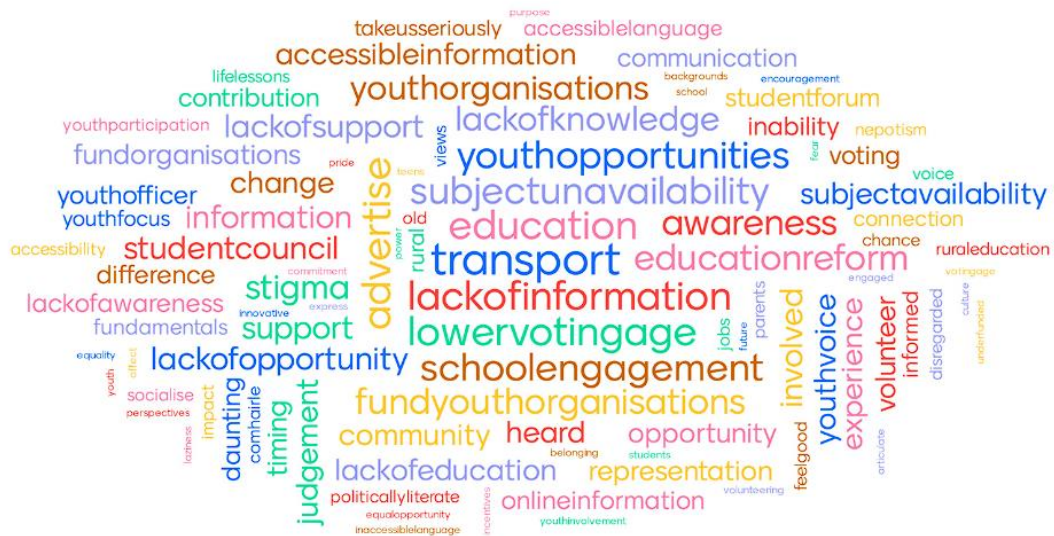
**Recommendation 3:** Create free, safe, accessible spaces for young people to interact and grow in a healthy and welcoming environment e.g., parks, centres, gyms, playgrounds, pitches. This should be included in urban planning within 18 months and going forward.



*Workshop at Rural Youth Assembly 2023*



## Political Engagement



The discussion primarily focused on challenges associated with educational limitations and lack of accessible information regarding political participation. The second most prominent issue discussed was insufficient opportunities and support mechanisms for young people seeking to engage in political activities. A perceived stigma attached to political involvement, and concerns tied to transportation and connectivity were other issues discussed.

During the World Café discussions, delegates identified significant challenges related to educational constraints and lack of information about political engagement. Their proposed solutions included enhancing the educational curriculum at secondary school level by making subjects like Politics and Society universally accessible and ensuring that the educational materials and information are not only readily available but also engaging for students. The hope for young people is to foster a more comprehensive understanding of civic, social, and political engagement.

To tackle limited opportunities and support for young individuals in political engagement, participants proposed proactive approaches in promoting awareness of political causes. This includes increased financial support for youth organisations. They also recommended enhanced online and in-school promotion to raise awareness about political engagement opportunities, such as involvement with youth political parties or organisations like Comhairle na nÓg. Additionally, there is a significant demand for greater opportunities for youth voices in politics, emphasising the need to lower the voting age to sixteen.

Young participants identified stigma as a significant barrier to their political engagement, citing concerns about judgement, stereotyping, and feelings of overwhelm in political spaces. They suggested addressing this challenge through increased promotion of political information and youth-focused opportunities. They emphasised the importance of enhancing political education in schools, fostering discussions for improved accessibility, and understanding. A broader effort towards inclusivity and creating opportunities for diverse backgrounds was highlighted as crucial in overcoming the stigma associated with political involvement for young people.

Finally, the young people highlighted transportation challenges as a barrier to attending political events, protests, or meetings, particularly in rural areas with limited transport options. This limitation forces reliance on parents or leads to missed opportunities. Broadband and connectivity issues further impede participation in online meetings. Increased funding for youth organisations could enhance accessibility to events for rural youth. Participants called for improved public transport and rural accessibility through safe, reliable, and affordable infrastructure to boost young people's political engagement in their communities.

From these discussion groups each of the three priority areas, in this section, political engagement, with six recommendations were identified and these are set out in the tables below.

Recommendation 1	17 votes
Situation	Work being done
Young people are old enough to pay tax and drop out of school but aren't allowed to vote.	Other countries have already implemented a lower voting age (e.g., local elections in Scotland from age 16) and several Bills have been debated in the Dáil and Seanad.
Action	Recommendation
We want more young people to have political autonomy and to be more politically engaged, especially for our futures.	Lower the voting age to 16 - especially when it has something to do with things like education, climate, and housing.

Recommendation 2	49 votes
Situation	Work being done
Lack of information available on political opportunities/volunteering/etc. For young people.	Reform for youth information centres
Action	Recommendation
An educated population who know what's happening in politics, who know who their politicians are and what they're doing, and how you can get involved in politics	Spread of information in schools. Reform of CSPE curriculum - more serious and relevant. More accessible online information - layman's terms, definitions, etc.

Recommendation 3	20 votes
Situation	Work being done
Not enough young people are aware of youth groups and opportunities for political engagement in rural and island communities	Not very much, through some school councils and word of mouth
Action	Recommendation
Information shared in school and also social media; what's involved, how to get involved, benefits. Host workshops, interactive CSPE - engagement with groups.	Central and local government and educational bodies to raise awareness and opportunities for political engagement through workshops, information sharing in schools, and social media campaigns.

Recommendation 4	4 votes
Situation	Work being done
Hard for young people to get their voice heard in a way that initiates action in rural and island communities	Limited youth groups, centred around urban areas. Lack of awareness and reach of Comhairle and youth organisations on islands and rural areas.
Action	Recommendation
Improve representation for young people in rural and island communities so their voices are heard and more action is taken.	Provide every rural area and island community with a dedicated youth officer who is employed and funded by the local county council.

Recommendation 5	34 votes
Situation	Work being done
There is a lack of accessible opportunities for political engagement for young people, especially those from low income backgrounds. Young people lack the opportunity to join political groups and movements.	Youth wings for each political party. Example: Comhairle is accessible to many young people
Action	Recommendation
Normalise young people getting involved in politics. More accessible opportunities for political engagement to be provided to young people particularly those in low income backgrounds.	Mention opportunities in schools, fund awareness campaigns in schools and elsewhere. Provide resources and funding for organisations to expand. Normalise organisations covering transport costs as transport can be a main reason young people cannot attend meetings.

Recommendation 6	4 votes
Situation	Work being done
Lack of information about political parties	Youth wings, ISSU voting education, websites, social media, Spunout has a list of political youth wings to join.
Action	Recommendation
More targeted and accessible resources centred towards young people. This may be more effective on social media. Incorporate this information into CSPE	Provide and promote unbiased sources of information about voting, parties, etc. for young voters which could be adapted to various forms of media, e.g., booklets, videos, classes, etc.



After the Assembly, nominated representatives from each of the groups met with members of the Youth Advisory Group to review and revise the recommendations for clarity. The three final recommendations for the topic area of political engagement are as follows:

### **Final Recommendations after voting and review**

**Recommendation 1:** Lower the voting age to 16 especially in matters which affect young people in Ireland.

**Recommendation 2:** Provide every rural area and island community with a dedicated youth officer who is employed and funded by the local county council.

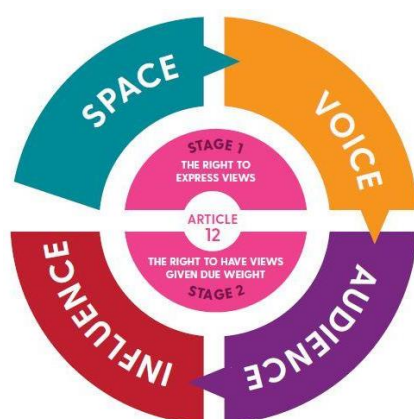
**Recommendation 3:** Increase accessible opportunities for political engagement to young people. This could be achieved through awareness raising campaigns and funding transport costs.

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## Assembly Proceedings

Delegates to the National Rural Assembly of Ireland are aged between 12 and 24, hailing from various regions and representing diverse youth and community organisations and Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils).<sup>5</sup>

The 2023 Assembly comprised 60 young individuals: 41 sitting delegates and 19 guest delegates. The delegates represented 24 Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils) and 21 youth and community organisations. The representation spanned 23 counties, including Carlow, Cavan, Cork, Donegal, Dublin, Galway, Kerry, Kildare, Kilkenney, Laois, Leitrim, Limerick, Longford, Louth, Mayo, Meath, Monaghan, Offaly, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary, and Wexford.



The National Youth Assembly of Ireland is convened according to rights-based, best practice in child and youth participation, as set out in the [National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making](#).

This involves the principle of participation with purpose, so that the views of children and young people are listened to, taken seriously and given due weight by decision-makers with the intention that these views will influence an outcome in relation to policymaking.

It also conforms to the nine key principles of participation<sup>6</sup>, which require that processes to include the views of children and young people are transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, and accountable.

The key approach adopts the Lundy Model, which conceptualises Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in terms of Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence.

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<sup>5</sup> Information on the National Youth Assembly of Ireland is available [here](#). Full details of the Comhairlí and the youth organisations represented, along with a list of organisations that were represented by guest delegates at the National Rural Youth Assembly are available on request from DCEDIY.

<sup>6</sup> These principles are outlined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child set out at para 134 of its [General Comment no. 12](#)

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## Space

Children and young people must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views.

The National Rural Youth Assembly arose from a consultation process in 2019 for *Our Rural Future*, which is Ireland's Rural Development Policy for 2021-2025. During this consultation process, DRCD held two events to obtain the views of young people living in rural Ireland. The idea for the Assembly was proposed by youth groups during the consultations, and the establishment of the Rural Youth Assembly became a key commitment in the policy. The Rural Youth Assembly is jointly convened by DRCD and DCEDIY, with facilitation by the National Participation Office.



*Delegates at the Rural Youth Assembly 2023*

The involvement of young people is sustained annually to allow young people living, working, studying, and socialising in rural Ireland to make an on-going contribution to identifying and influencing policy issues that impact on them and their future. The broad range of Youth and Community organisations and Comhairlí who nominate delegates ensures inclusivity and engagement by those directly affected. From early planning stages, all delegates were engaged in some decisions on planning the Assembly proceedings through ongoing contact, polls, and email input.

A Youth Advisory Group (YAG) co-designed the Assembly, with six planning meetings. YAG members volunteered for roles, included hosting, running, and reviewing both the Preparation Session and the Assembly, with group briefings and individual support sessions provided. Nominated delegates and YAG members attended the review session of the recommendations, in the week after the Assembly convened. The Assembly was evaluated through an anonymous online evaluation form distributed to all delegates, some of whom opted to attend a follow up evaluation session, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2023 to discuss any issues that arose from the evaluation forms or the Assembly itself.

The 60 delegates ranged in ages from 12 to 24 years and came from Carlow, Cavan, Cork, Donegal, Dublin, Galway, Kerry, Kildare, Kilkenny, Laois, Leitrim, Limerick, Longford, Louth, Mayo, Meath, Monaghan, Offaly, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary, and Wexford. These delegates are nominated from Comhairle na nÓg (youth councils) and a broad range of different Youth and Community organisations to represent different perspectives. Delegates are selected through a fair and transparent process with clear selection criteria, and they have support from staff from their Comhairle or youth and community organisations. All materials designed using the Dyslexia Association of Ireland guidelines were available printed, online and, where possible, videos had subtitles.



*Delegates at the Rural Youth Assembly 2023*



The National Rural Youth Assembly 2023 was convened in person with accompanying meetings online, requests for assistance were met and staff were available to assist with any issues. Any measure requested to ensure accessibility for delegates was met. Accommodations for sensory issues were made and period products were available in all bathrooms. Independent observers were there to verify that best practice was met.

A Code of Conduct was circulated to all delegates ahead of all events and delegates were reminded to abide by this code. Facilitators were trained in youth participation, and all attended a briefing in advance of events. Young people were encouraged and supported to feel relaxed and get to know the others there, with name tags and icebreakers, a quiet space and availability of dedicated staff for support. Young people could provide their views through a variety of means.

The space was evaluated positively by the delegates with 96.3% feeling very comfortable giving their view. *“Being able to give my opinion and making new friends”* was one of the highlights of the day for a delegate.



*Delegates at the Rural Youth Assembly 2023*

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## Voice: Facilitation

Children and young people must be facilitated to express their views.

The National Rural Youth Assembly is an annual Assembly which identifies areas of priority for young people and makes recommendations on actions for Government focus over the coming year.

The three topic areas for priority at the Assembly were:

1. **Volunteering:** This included volunteering with any club or group (sports and non-sports), as well as raising money for charities.
2. **Community:** This included school, local community, county, and online communities.
3. **Political Engagement:** This included deliberative forums, youth organising and activism and being part of political groups.

Delegates were provided with information and attended an online preparation session on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 2023, to ensure they had sufficient information to form their views in advance of the Assembly. The session was facilitated by Youth Participation Officers from the National Participation Office and two members of the YAG. Cllr Ben Dalton O'Sullivan, Independent member of Cork County Council and Professor Emer Smyth, Research Professor, from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) presented information on the topic of civic and political engagement and Niamh Farrell, presented on her experience volunteering with Macra na Feirme. She spoke about young people in rural Ireland engaging in organisations such as Macra na Feirme, what the challenges were and what the benefits are to the person themselves and the community. Interactive discussions allowed delegates to ask questions and gain further insights into the areas being considered.

Young people were supported to give their own views by facilitation from experienced and trained facilitators provided by the National Participation Office. There were a range of ways in which young people could give their views. Workshops in the morning allowed in depth exploration of the themes and allowed peer to peer sharing of ideas and room to seek information from experts. After lunch, World Café discussions at tables, where delegates moved around in small groups of six to seven, between nine tables, identified the key issues and proposed solutions. In groups, delegates then agreed which of these solutions would be put forward as a recommendation for a vote. Six recommendations within each theme were written onto posters. Each delegate was given different coloured sticky-dots to place their final vote on the three recommendations of their choice.

Requirements for additional needs in giving views were accommodated. Voluntary participation was made clear in the Code of Conduct and was explicitly stated at the beginning of the preparation session, the Assembly itself and the Evaluation session. It was also highlighted as part of the briefing session for facilitators, so that they could facilitate delegates' withdrawal if needed.

Voice was evaluated positively by delegates with 92.6% of the delegates feeling strongly they had a chance to voice their opinions during the day. Meeting others from many different places and opinions and working together to make one recommendation was highlighted as a significant positive, and having their opinions heard was described as *'fulfilling'*.

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## Audience

The views must be listened to.

The views of the young people will be brought forward by officials at DRCD, with recommendations proposed for consideration by the relevant Departments during the annual Our Rural Future Work Programme development process.

A number of officials attended the Assembly, including Minister Joe O' Brien, Minister of State at DRCD, DCEDIY and DSP, Kevin McCarthy, Secretary General of DCEDIY, Carol Baxter, Assistant Secretary of the Equality, Youth and Participation Division in DCEDIY and Robert Nicholson, Head of the Rural Strategy and Social Enterprise Unit at DRCD.



*Joe O'Brien T.D., Minister of State with responsibility for Community Development and Charities, and Minister of State with responsibility for Integration, opening the 2023 Rural Youth Assembly, Dublin Castle.*

The scope for young people to influence policy actions in relation to rural Ireland was set out in information material in advance of the Assembly. The influence of the Assembly was also described at the preparation session and at the Assembly, in the remarks by Sinéad Quinn, from DRCD. A short, informal video was circulated to all delegates setting out the proceedings of the National Rural Youth Assembly 2023. This video was intended to provide a shorter description for delegates as an alternative to the written material circulated to all delegates.

Follow up on how the previous annual Assembly's recommendations have influenced the implementation of Our Rural Future work programme is collated by DRCD and provided to the young people each year (refer to Appendix 1).

The YAG was evaluated separately by both facilitators and young people. The Assembly was evaluated via an anonymous evaluation form plus an evaluation session with members who chose to attend. The preparation session was also evaluated during the in-person evaluation session. Young people were also encouraged to send any feedback or suggestions to a Participation Officer. All evaluation input by delegates feeds into future planning for the National Youth Assembly of Ireland. Evaluation outcomes are available on request from DCEDIY.

Audience was evaluated positively by delegates, 81.4% reported that they felt strongly that they knew who was asking for their opinions and why their views and recommendations were being sought. Being able to make recommendations to the government was highlighted in the comments.



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## Influence: Impact and feedback

The views must be acted upon, as appropriate.

The young people's recommendations will be proposed for consideration as part of discussions within DRCD and with other departments that focus on developing the annual Work Programmes under the Our Rural Future policy. DRCD will use every opportunity to communicate young people's views and concerns and to encourage all Departments to consider inclusion of actions that relate to addressing issues of importance to young people.

Delegates received information on how their views would be communicated to decision-makers and were introduced to the representatives from the DRCD and other departments who attended the Assembly. Nominees from group discussions, YAG members, and independent observers reviewed recommendations for clarity and impact. Delegates directly presented their views to Sinéad Quinn. The reporting outline was clearly explained and approved by the YAG, with the reporting approach made explicit to Assembly delegates. The report underwent review by the YAG and independent observers before publication, with circulation to all delegates and availability online.



*Minister of State Joe O'Brien with delegates at the Rural Youth Assembly 2023*

Additional updates on outcomes or influence are provided as appropriate, and an annual newsletter offers updates on any follow-up activities stemming from the Assembly. A summary of the previous year's outcomes is also available after each Assembly. Delegates are invited to attend meetings, forums, or other events to represent the discussions that occurred at the Assembly and play a role in communicating their perspectives.

Delegates were asked to evaluate their influence at the National Rural Youth Assembly 2023, with 81.4% strongly expressing confidence that their opinions would be taken seriously. However, 7.4% were less certain about this.



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## Appendix 1 - Update on Actions relating to the 2022 RYA Recommendations

### Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 1
By 2040, we expect the Government to support established farms to achieve a just transition with provision of financial aid for the gradual elimination of unsustainable practices.
Update on Action
<b>The Programme for Government:</b> pg.65-commitments, DAFM is working with Bord Bia to advance these actions. <b>Teagasc:</b> developed resources for primary/secondary students. <a href="#">Food Vision 2030- A World Leader in Sustainable Food Systems</a> potential to transform agriculture, food, forestry and marine sectors.

### Department of Health

Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 1
Youth participation on local HSE boards to ensure their voices are heard on healthcare issues.
Update on Action
<b>National Patient Forum:</b> HSE primary reference point for national division and clinical programs that seek patients' input on national policy and program development. <b>Patients for Patient Safety Ireland:</b> improving patient safety in healthcare. <b>National Patient Representative Panel:</b> actively seeks input from patients, carers, members of local patient councils, and other stakeholders interested in contributing to the planning, design, and improvement of services.

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 2</b>
Increasing pay and reduction hours of work for junior doctors and nurses will provide them with an incentive not to leave Ireland and work in another country. It will also provide more healthcare services in rural areas.
<b>Update on Action</b>
<p><b>Building Momentum agreement:</b> Government recognizes the challenges due to inflation over the past 18 months. The Building Momentum pay agreement saw a rise in salaries in average of 6.5% during 2022/3.</p> <p>A taskforce was established for sustainable workforce planning strategies and policies to improve the Non-Consultant Hospital Doctor (NCHD) experience.</p> <p>Last year an agreement was reached to improve the working conditions of NCHDs, to support a reduction in their working hours, including new rosters, compensatory rest arrangements and the abolition of 24 hour shifts by 2024; to ensure they receive their annual and study leave in a timely manner and the development of a centralized payroll system.</p>

## **Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage**

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 1</b>
Introduce voting for 16 year olds in local elections. Publish (in accessible language) information about voting systems and how to vote. Begin a referendum to allow 16 year olds to vote in all elections (full representation). Young people need a say in how the Leaving Certificate is structured, processed and delivery of 3rd level options.
<b>Update on Action</b>
<p><b>The Programme for Government:</b> includes commitment to examine Scottish experience-established An Coimisiún Toghcháin to research and consider lowering voting age.</p> <p><b>Electoral Reform Act 2022</b> which enables pre-registration for 16 and 17 year olds who will then be automatically added to the electoral register when they turn 18.</p>

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 2</b>
Cheaper student accommodation / designated student accommodation.
<b>Update on Action</b>
<p><b>Purpose built student accommodation (PBSA):</b> alleviate pressure on the private rental market, and for on-campus developments, open up the development of accommodation.</p> <p>Minister Harris secured approval to develop both <b>short and medium term</b> policy responses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short term Activation: developments to be supported will contribute up to 667 beds overall, of which at least 30% will be made available at discounted rates.</li> <li>• Medium Term Strategy: “Develop policy and methodology for potential long-term state support for the construction of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation to provide additionally for targeted cohorts”</li> </ul>

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 3</b>
Calling on Government of Ireland to provide 100% redress for all houses affected by Pyrite/Mica before it is too dangerous to live in these homes.
<b>Update on Action</b>
<p><b>The Pyrite Resolution Act 2013:</b> established the pyrite remediation scheme to remediate dwellings affected by significant damage attributable to pyritic heave.</p> <p><b>Mica:</b> Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, made Regulations to provide for a grant scheme to support affected homeowners in Donegal and Mayo.</p> <p><a href="#"><u>Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Regulations 2023</u></a></p>

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 4</b>
We want affordable rent for low-income families/young adults within the next five years.
<b>Update on Action</b>
<p><b>Cost Rental:</b> Under the Cost Rental model, rents for homes are set at least 25% below market norms. 18,000 Cost Rental homes are targeted between now and 2030, to be delivered by Local Authorities, Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) and the Land Development Agency (LDA).</p> <p><b>Rental Market: The Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016-</b> Rent Predictability Measure to moderate rent increase.</p> <p><b>The Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Act 2021-</b> extend the operation of Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs) until the end of 2024.</p> <p><b>Vacant property grant:</b> expanded to build on the success of the scheme to date and increase the support being provided to bring vacant and derelict properties brought back into use.</p> <p><b>Investment:</b> Government does not support the bulk purchase of residential houses by institutional investors. Government introduced a new 10% rate of Stamp Duty on such purchases.</p> <p><b>Affordable homes:</b> Under Housing for All, the Government will deliver 54,000 affordable homes by 2030.</p>

## **Department of Transport**

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 1</b>
Government funding for investment in public transport links between rural towns and local communities within one year to make travel more accessible to young people.
<b>Update on Action</b>
<p><b>The Rural Transport Programme:</b> increase in funding allocated for TFI Local Link services since 2016, going from €12.2 million in 2016 to €43m in 2023, enabling the introduction of over 100 new Rural Regular Service routes.</p> <p><b>The Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan:</b> national public transport initiative with the aim of increasing public transport connectivity- 100 rural villages will benefit- plan will also see a 25% overall increase in rural bus services.</p> <p><b>Connecting Ireland:</b> 67 new and enhanced services are proposed in 2023 which represents Year Two of a five-year programme of work.</p>

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 2</b>
More consultation opportunities with T.D.'s and Ministers about public transportation issues. Tractor license should be brought down to age 15 years.
<b>Update on Action</b>
As set out in Regulation 9 of the Road Traffic (Licensing of Drivers) Regulations 2006 (S.I. 537 of 2006), the minimum age to hold a tractor driving licence is 16 years. There is no proposal to change this minimum age.

## **Department of Children, Equality, Diversity, Integration and Youth**

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 1</b>
Government investment in promoting and raising awareness of youth organisations to increase youth participation and voice.
<b>Update on Action</b>
DCEDIY provides annual funding (€75 Million in 2023) to youth organisations. Measures to increase the visibility of youth service opportunities are under consideration as part of the development of a new <b>Action Plan for Youth Services</b> .

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 3</b>
More opportunities to engage with officials, T.D.s and Ministers.
<b>Update on Action</b>
<p>DCEDIY supports Government Departments in seeking the views of children and young people to inform Government policy on issues of national importance. Some recent examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 2023, DCEDIY set out a series of consultations with young people about the impact of drug use on their lives, their families and communities that took place during the period November 2022 – March 2023.</li> <li>• In 2023, the National Social and Economic Council (NESC) is consulting with young people from Comhairle na nÓg on how to involve young people in its work.</li> <li>• In 2022, DCEDIY supported the Department of Education in consulting primary school age children and secondary school age young people on their views of the Anti-Bullying Action Plan.</li> </ul>

## **Department of Education**

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 1</b>
Comhairle na nÓg education is introduced to schools through CSPE or other subjects.
<b>Update on Action</b>
<b>Junior Cycle Framework in Ireland:</b> Schools can introduce local youth councils and Comhairle na nÓg to students studying CSPE under a number of its learning outcomes. <b>Student Participation Unit</b> - promotes and supports the participation of CYP in the development of DE policy.

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 2</b>
Comhairle na nÓg education is introduced to schools through CSPE or other subjects.
<b>Update on Action</b>
The CSPE short course is built around three strands, rights and responsibilities, global citizenship and exploring democracy. There is a strong focus on student action aimed at giving students an experience of active citizenship. Schools can introduce local youth councils and Comhairle na nÓg to students studying CSPE under a number of its learning outcomes.

## **Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD)**

<b>Rural Youth Assembly 2022 Recommendation 1</b>
Community Liaison Person who would facilitate contact between the youth in the community and the action/ Government bodies.
<b>Update on Action</b>
<b>A Public Participation Network (PPN):</b> is a network that allows local authorities to connect with community groups around the country. Minister of State Joe O'Brien TD has expressed his support for increasing youth participation in PPNs. DRCD, in collaboration with a Working Group of PPN stakeholders, has been working to develop an Implementation Roadmap for future actions.