

*Findings from a Child and Youth  
Consultation Process to identify*

**CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S  
SENSE OF COVID19**



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November 2022

# Executive Summary

## **About this report**

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic has had far reaching repercussions across society and has reshaped how we experience our everyday lives. It is important therefore that we come to understand the lived experiences of children and young people, so that we can best support them as we regain a sense of normalcy within society. Their perspective will be instrumental in helping us to effectively plan for and meet their needs. The aim of the report is to highlight the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of children and young people in Counties Longford and Westmeath; and to identify the services and supports that they feel are now necessary to safeguard their wellbeing in a post-pandemic climate.

Drawing on a qualitative research framework utilising focus groups and online surveys with 112 children residing in Counties Longford and Westmeath, this report explores children's understandings of, and reflections on the impact of COVID-19 on their lives. The findings reported here highlight the resilience factors and challenges present in their lives, as well as recommendations to plan for future services and supports that the participants believe will enhance child and youth wellbeing across both counties. We begin by championing the Longford Westmeath Child and Youth Forums as safe spaces for eliciting the voice of children and young people and providing authentic opportunity for their contribution in shaping responses to youth services provision across both counties. Thereafter we detail the study approach and its main findings.

## Background to the Report

### **Longford Westmeath Children and Young People's Services Committee's (LW CYPSC)**

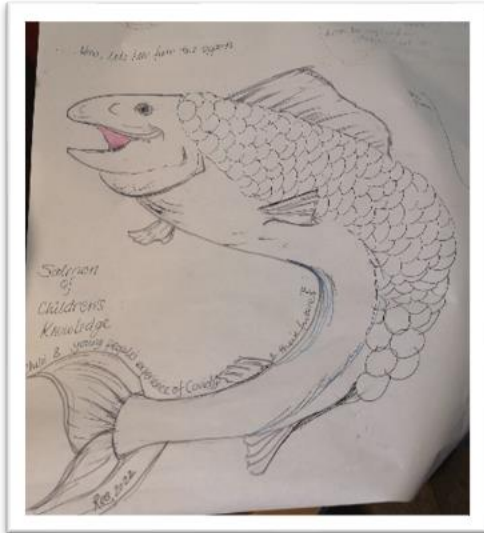
Longford Westmeath Child and Young People's Services Committee's (LW CYPSC) aim is to secure better developmental outcomes by bringing together local partners within a single framework, to provide strategic leadership, agree and implement a Children and Young People's Plan in a cohesive manner so as to enhance the delivery of services to children, young people and their families within Longford and Westmeath. The LW CYPSC support Child, Youth and Family Services in Longford and Westmeath, whilst implementing the actions as outlined below from the [LW CYPSC Children and Young People's Plan 2020 - 2022](#).

### **Our Voice Our Wellbeing**

Under the LW CYPSC Workplan for 2022 - National Outcome 1 'Active and Healthy, physical & mental wellbeing' action, the 'Our Voice Our Wellbeing' Youth Initiative was developed with a view to empower youth health champions and ambassadors in Counties Longford and Westmeath. The strategic focus for this action was to engage in a process of upskilling and awareness raising amongst LW CYPSC Youth Forum Members. This action was led out by the LW CYPSC Child and Youth Participation (CYP) Subgroup and CYPSC Youth Forums. Strategic partners for this action included: Lus na Greine FRC, Longford and Westmeath County Councils, Longford and Westmeath Comhairle na Nóg, Athlone FRC Cara Phort FRC, Bridgeways FRC, Foroige, Youth Work Ireland Midlands, Longford County Childcare Committee, Longford Womens Link, Tusla.

As we moved out of a 'State in Lockdown' in early 2022, Longford Westmeath CYPSC was open to discover the lived experience of children and young people within their local communities during and post Covid19. In agreement with the LW CYPSC strategic stakeholders relating to the Active and Healthy Subgroup, a process of consultation would be entered into with children and young people to identify their lived experience

of Covid19 and to plan effectively to meet the needs of children and young people across both counties in a Post-Covid climate. The consultation process took place from April to August 2022 with local FRC's and Youth Work providers along with Comhairle na Nóg encouraging children and young people from across both counties to have their voice heard and to help LW CYPSC plan effectively for future services to meet emerging needs.



*"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."* – Charles Darwin



## Scope of Work

The main stated aim of the consultation process was to gain an insight into children and young people's sense of Covid19 and their wants and need for their futures. In line with the CYPSC objective of '*Ensuring that the needs of children and young people are identified and addressed*', the objectives of the consultation process were:

- To provide an inclusive and safe space for the child and youth participants to reflect upon and discuss the impact of Covid19 on their wellbeing.
- To elicit young people's views on their lived experience of the Covid 19 lockdown
- To explore young people's lived experience of their sense of Covid19 as restrictions were lifted.

Participants of the consultation process were asked to examine their experience through the following research questions:

1. *What was it like as a young person living through Covid19?*
  - A. Challenges
  - B. Benefits
  - C. Impact on Wellbeing
  
2. *What do you think are the needs of young people as we emerge from Covid19?*
  - A. Health and Wellbeing?
  - B. Access to Services?
  - C. Activities and Clubs?
  
3. *What ideas do you have for projects, clubs and activities that young people could take part in?*

Adopting an ecological perspective for this consultation process raises the question of how much if any impact has occurred within children's family and wider social networks due to the Covid19 Global Pandemic. The two years of lockdown, for a number of the children participating, represents a quarter of their life span to date. What short- or medium-term affect would lockdown have subliminal or otherwise?

## Overview of the Consultation Methods

### About the consultation events

Four face-to-face consultation workshops were held with the LW CYPSC Child and Youth Forums. These took place during April 2022 within the following Family Resource Centres: Athlone FRC, Bridgeways FRC, Cara Phort FRC and Lus na Greine FRC. Additionally, Longford Comhairle Na Nóg and Westmeath Comhairle na Nóg engaged in a consultation process with their youth representatives. In an effort to reach a broad youth demographic across both counties an online consultation process was also designed utilising a Google Docs platform. This Google Docs form asked children and young people across counties Longford and Westmeath to participate anonymously in the study.

### About the children and young people

The young people who engaged in the consultation workshops ranged in ages from 6-18yrs. Participation in these workshops was a choice determined by each young person. Informed consent was gained from parents and guardians for children and young people to engage in and to utilise imagery and videography associated with the consultation process.

*Table 1. Breakdown of Participants per Youth Forum.*

Age Range	Athlone FRC	Lus na Greine FRC	Bridgeways FRC	Cara Phort FRC	Longford Comhairle Na Nóg	Westmeath Comhairle Na Nóg	Google Forms	Total
6 – 18	12	45	7	10	19	14	5	112

### Recruitment Process

Children and young people were recruited to take part in the consultation through the LW CYPSC Child and Youth Forums hosted by the Family Resource Centres based in counties Longford and Westmeath as well as an invitation to the local Comhairlí na Nóg to participate. The online consultation was circulated widely amongst the LW CYPSC

network and shared on the LW CYPSC Social Media platforms. Information on the purpose of the consultation process and how data collected would be used was provided to the parents and guardians of the children who participated in this process. To ensure informed consent, children and young people completed assent forms and parent/guardians completed consent forms.

## **Consultation Methods**

The consultation workshops actively sought out the participants perspectives, as required by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in order to enable advocacy for their inclusion in matters that affect them. For the purpose of this consultation process, stakeholders adopted the 'Lundy model of child participation (2007)'. The applications of this conceptual model for the purpose of the consultation process is as follows:

1. **Space** - A variety of consultation workshops took place within Family Resource Centre's operating in Longford and Westmeath, and through the Longford & Westmeath Comhairle Na Nóg's. For the consultation process large creative spaces were made available within local family resource centres and youth work services across the two counties. The spacious halls provided a creative quarter, a nurturing and observation station and a free the spirit, jump and stretch area when needed.
2. **Voice** - a wide variety of creative approaches were adopted to ensure that children's views were elicited for the purpose of this study. The consultation process encouraged child and youth participation through discussion, creative process and engagement with the natural environment. Participants were encouraged to craft, draw, write and verbally respond to questions put to them within the workshops and to explore the possibility of life emerging anew from something confined or sealed away, much like the experience of lockdown
3. **Audience** - all views were listened to and respected. Children and young people were encouraged to speak about the positive aspects and the challenges of their lived experience of Covid19.
4. **Influence** - The information gathered from this consultation process will help to advance the knowledge base for planning purposes relating to the LW CYPSC Workplan for 2023 and beyond.

## Findings from the Consultation Process

### What was it like as a young person living through Covid 19?

#### CHALLENGES?

**“Though not seeing my friends was lonely”**

Not seeing family

Becoming / feeling lazy / sleeping

Not being able to socialise

Too much time online/phone/TV

Contracting Covid-19

Feeling isolated and lonely

On-line school

Wearing Masks

Lack of physical interaction

Lost fitness because of no sports

**“Really worsened my social skills”**



#### BENEFITS?

**“Ma had more money – nothing to spend it on!”**

“Eating ice-cream all day”

Home schooling –

Homework can be done anytime

Bonding with family more

Seeing more of some family

Better understanding of how to protect against

Covid-19

Zoom calls and TickToc were good

**“Not having to socialise and have constant anxiety”**





## IMPACT ON WELLBEING?

**“Not good it made my mental health and wellbeing worse”**

Starting new hobbies – positive

Lower school stress

Being bored

Handwashing

Going for more walks

Not going for walks – negative – got lazy

Contracting Covid-19 – headaches every day

Mental Health affected

Feelings of isolation

**“If you don’t want to go out with your friends you don’t have to”**



**“Time to recover from too many activities (GAA, Soccer, Clubs, Hurling)”**

Westmeath Comhairle Na Nóg  
Member

**What do you think are the needs of young people as we emerge from Covid19?**

## HEALTH AND WELLBEING?

**“Plant more trees & flowers”**

Going outside more

Getting more active

School - attending in person

Happiness with friends

Support for mental health

Support for anxiety

Address Climate Change

**“We need places to go and interact with people”**



## ACCESS TO SERVICES?

**“It is hard to get into services – wait lists”**

Access to more activities like summer camps and youth groups

More exercise

Free play – parks and events

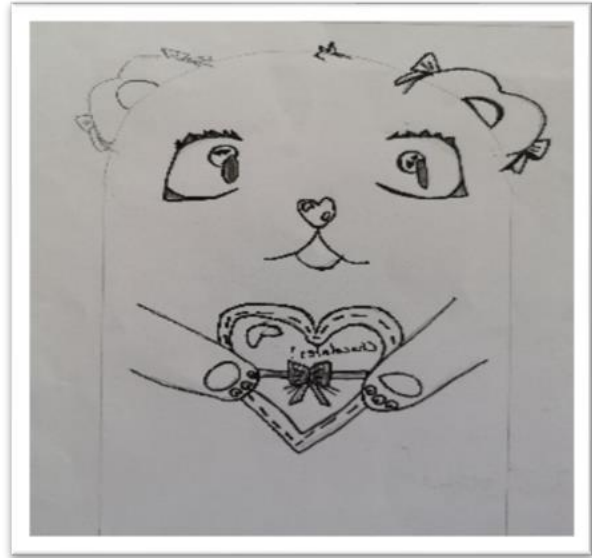
Access to visit people

We need good footpaths

Do more out-doors

Mindfulness

**“Having workshops and people to talk to so they know they are safe”**



## ACTIVITIES AND CLUBS?

**“Clubs are needed for wellbeing”**

Knitting

Books and other clubs

Bird Watching

Outdoor Children Gyms – no cost

More youth groups like Comharile, Youth Work Ireland and Foroige

**“Having a play park that is all weather proof, like a park with some covered areas to shelter from the rain / wind or sun”.**

**“Only for the group I would have nothing to keep going”**

**Longford Comhairle Na Nóg  
Member**

**What ideas do you have for projects, clubs and activities that young people could take part in?**

<b>PHYSICAL EXERCISE</b>	<b>ACTIVITIES</b>	<b>SOCIAL CITIZENSHIP</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Gymnastics</li> <li>○ Swimming</li> <li>○ Running</li> <li>○ Cycling</li> <li>○ Karate</li> <li>○ Kickboxing</li> <li>○ Rowing</li> <li>○ Walking</li> <li>○ Pool</li> <li>○ Bowling</li> <li>○ Water sports</li> <li>○ Boat trips</li> <li>○ Camogie</li> <li>○ Football</li> <li>○ Horse riding</li> <li>○ Roller skates</li> <li>○ Ballet</li> <li>○ Music</li> <li>○ Acting</li> <li>○ Drama</li> <li>○ Dancing</li> <li>○ Salsa</li> <li>○ Singing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Book</li> <li>○ Arts and crafts</li> <li>○ Drawing</li> <li>○ Balloon club</li> <li>○ Papier Mache</li> <li>○ Gaming</li> <li>○ Building</li> <li>○ Making carpets</li> <li>○ Sewing</li> <li>○ Designers</li> <li>○ Chess</li> <li>○ Draughts</li> <li>○ Fun games</li> <li>○ Water fights</li> <li>○ Day trips away</li> <li>○ More Youth Groups in different areas of the county for children and young people to take part in.</li> <li>○ Free Summer programmes</li> <li>○ Mindfulness</li> <li>○ Wellbeing activities</li> <li>○ Discos</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Cooking</li> <li>○ Smoothie</li> <li>○ Lemonade club</li> <li>○ Cupán Tae</li> <li>○ Crafting club</li> <li>○ Language club</li> <li>○ Party planning</li> <li>○ Meeting youth club</li> <li>○ Little helper clubs</li> <li>○ Fundraiser club</li> <li>○ Parks with cover</li> <li>○ Tidy Towns</li> <li>○ Do something for Pride month</li> <li>○ Experience for a Job</li> <li>○ Safe spaces to meet friends</li> <li>○ Anything that is local to help meet new people</li> <li>○ Youth groups like Foroige, Youth Work Ireland, and Comhairle could get involved in podcasting.</li> </ul>

**“To have a place to relax and catch up with people”**

**Longford Comhairle Na Nóg  
Member**

# Deconstructing Children and Young People's Sense of Covid-19

## Understanding of Pandemics Impact

Finding from recent research on the effects of restrictions on society, including those on children and young people are slowly filtering through into governmental and academic domains and suggest that pre-existing inequalities have been amplified as a direct result of the pandemic (Darmody, Smyth and Russell, 2020). In an interview with David Robson for BBC FUTURE, Dalton and Rapa from the department of psychiatry at the University of Oxford “[Children] are now experts on viral transmission, but they're not being taught how we can talk about this and deal with such important things.” It was clear that for some participants of this consultation process, the close attention to media throughout the lockdown and beyond had enabled an understanding of the deeper implication of a pandemic. Some had a sophisticated understanding of the biological impact of the virus and the need for ‘masks’ and ‘lots of handwashing’. Others were aware of the need to reduce physical contact with those who might be more vulnerable to Covid-19: “*couldn't visit my granny or grandad*”. Interestingly one young person noted that the pandemic brought financial benefits: ‘*ma had more money, she had nothing to spend it on*’. However, this was not a common response. A number of other children and young people cited money concerns from job loss within the household and expressed an awareness of the contactless payment increased to €50.

## Impact on Health and Wellbeing

‘No Filter’, a survey conducted by the Ombudsman for Children’s Office (OCO) and Amárach Research in February 2022, highlighted for the first time the views and experiences of children and young people over the life-course of the two-year pandemic. 48% of school children surveyed in the ‘No Filter’ study said the Covid-19 pandemic has changed their life a lot.

Significantly, many of the findings from this study align to the experiences expressed by the children and young people who participated in this consultation process. Young

people of this consultation process noted that the initial impact of the pandemic on their mental health was positive. Some noted that they had *'time to relax'* and that there was *'a lot less stress'*. Significantly for one young person the pandemic provided welcome relief from the pressures of *'having to socialise with others'*. However, it was noted that as the pandemic endured, this sense of respite and wellbeing declined. Some young people noted that over time they *'felt more depressed'* and experienced *'loneliness'*; others noted that they *'got lazy'* and *'ate ice-cream all day'*. In an effort to cope with the restrictions more time was spent *'on the internet playing games'* and less time was spent exercising and being outdoors.

### **Impact on Social Support Networks**

The effects of social restrictions on children and young people's behaviours during the pandemic have been cited by Bahkir and Grandee (2020) as lower engagement in physical activity levels, higher sedentary behaviour that included screen time and increased sleep levels. Findings from this consultation process demonstrate that opportunity for participants to remain engaged in the wider aspects of community life was compromised. All children and young people agreed that access to social and recreational opportunities ceased. Children and young people who would have engaged with youth work services and sports clubs noted that they felt disconnected from their friends and became *'lazy'* or were *'sleeping lots'*.

Findings of a recent study noted that "Restricted social interactions imposed by the pandemic aggravated the over-use of digital devices for socializing which included virtual dates, virtual tourism, virtual parties, and family conferences" (Pandey and Pal, 2020). Many participants of this consultation believed that the pandemic provided opportunity to spend more time with their parents, guardians and siblings and *'bond'*. Family bonding behaviours were cited as *"relaxing"*, *"playing lots of games"* and *"watch lots of films and tv"* with members of their immediate family unit. This increase in the use of digital devices as a means of bonding was seen as a positive development among children and young people. The ability to spend time with extended family members grandparents and friends was noted as being significantly restricted. This created a sense of *'isolation'*, *'loneliness'* and some noted that they *'missed friends and family'*. Some highlighted that

platforms with video features such as 'Zoom' and 'WhatsApp' helped to lessen the feeling of disconnection from their extended peer and family networks.

### **Experience of Remote Learning**

The initial response to the emerging pandemic was guided by the professional decision making of policy makers, medical consultants and professionals who advised Government to adopt a 'lockdown' approach to 'breaking the chain of transmission' and 'protecting the most vulnerable within society'. The state responses to the pandemic required industry and educational institutions to pivot toward online presences. Nationwide children and young people were required to enter into a period of remote learning, parents and guardians were faced with the prospect of home-schooling.

Key findings from the Growing Up in Ireland 'Special Covid-19 Survey (2021) highlighted that more than half of all 12-year-olds and 22-year-old students reported difficulties adjusting to home schooling and remote working. Significant numbers of children from low-income families cited that the lack of quiet space to study and inadequate internet connection were barriers to learning. When asked to engage in retrospective reflection on the challenges and benefits associated with Covid-19, the children and young people of this consultation process identified varying attitudes toward the remote learning culture which emerged during the pandemic. While some noted the difficulties with online schooling: *"internet was bad and hard for home-schooling"* and *"I found it difficult and missed the classroom"* and *"it really worsened my social skills"*; others highlighted this as a positive experience: *"enjoyed having time alone and getting away from the stress of school"*.



# Reconstructing Life after the Pandemic

## Accessing Safe Indoor and Outdoor Youth Work & Recreational Spaces

The Youth Work Act 2002, has given formal statutory recognition to Youth Work as:

*“A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement, and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations”*

Youth work enables young people to develop their voice and position within society; and through “non-formal education”, facilitates their personal, emotional and social development. Young people and youth workers become partners in the learning process which is based on voluntary participation. This consultation process identified the significant role of youth work in the lives of some young people: *“Only for the group I would have nothing to keep going”* (Longford Comhairle Na Nóg Member). The role of youth work in supporting wellbeing was noted: *“we need clubs for wellbeing”*.

Furthermore, a common theme emerged to demonstrate that the children and young people felt there should be an extension of Youth Work services into communities where young people have no access to services: *“we need more youth groups like Comhairle, Youth Work Ireland and Foroige”*. It was noted that *“Having workshops and people to talk to so they (children and young people) know they are safe”* would be beneficial.

Healthy childhood development is facilitated through the limitation of sedentary behaviours, adequate sleep and sufficient opportunities to engage in physical activity. Findings relating to a national Canadian survey into the impact of Covid-19 on the play and movement behaviours of children and young people identified that 4.8% (2.8% girls, 6.5% boys) of children and 0.6% (0.8% girls, 0.5% boys) of youth were meeting combined movement behaviour guidelines during COVID-19 restrictions (Moore, Faulkner, Rhodes et al, 2020). The participants of this consultation process also confirmed that movement behaviours had been impacted upon by Covid-19. Several cited having *“no routine”* and *‘being lazy’*, others noted they were *“sleeping more”*. It is interesting to note that when asked what services and supports were necessary in a post-Covid19 climate, the need to

create safe indoor and outdoor recreational spaces was acknowledged. The participants believed that *“having a play park that is all weather proof, like a park with some covered areas to shelter from the rain, wind or sun”* would be beneficial. Additionally, *“access to more activities like summer camps”, “day trips away”* and *“getting outside more”* were identified as a priority. A plethora of suggestions relating to physical activities and play opportunities were offered that ranged from physical based activities such as bowling and dancing, to craft based activities such as knitting. The financial costings associated with engaging with services and supports for young people was acknowledged. The children of one Family Resource Centre suggested setting up a children’s charity to help with the cost of joining extra-curricular and youth work activities.

### **Accessing Mental Health Supports**

At present there are worrying trends in relation to the waiting list times for children and young people accessing mental health supports in Ireland. Figures released from the Health Service Executive in response to a parliamentary raised in September 2022, noted that 1,124 children are currently waiting longer than six months but less than one year for help. Of that cohort there are now 521 children waiting more than one year to be seen by mental health services, up from 508 in mid-July. A systematic review of 35 surveys studied identified the significant impact that the pandemic had on over 65,508 participants age ranging from 4 to 19 years of age (Theberath, Bauer, Chen, Salinas, Mohabbat, Yang, Chon, Bauer and Whaner-Roedle, 2020). Evidence demonstrated that the pandemic was directly linked with higher instances of Anxiety (28%), depression (23%), loneliness (5%), stress (5%), fear (5%), tension (3%), anger (3%), fatigue (3%), confusion (3%), and worry (3%). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health of children and adolescents is therefore multifaceted and substantial.

While positive coping strategies with family, peers and extended social support networks may help to achieve better outcomes, there is still a cohort of children and young people who will remain vulnerable to the psychological impact of the pandemic on the psycho-social wellbeing. This is a worrying factor that was also communicated by the consultation groups. Notably, the need to access *“mindfulness”, “support for mental health”, “support for anxiety”* and *“address climate change”* were all areas that children



and young people felt could contribute to an improved sense of wellbeing. Additionally, it was agreed by some young people that “*access to services is difficult*” because of “*waiting lists*”. There will be a need therefore to consider how to invest in and provide children and young people with access to low level therapeutic supports such as wellbeing workshops and mindfulness programmes. Additionally, where more complex need presents investment in and planning for access to play therapy, expressive arts therapy and adolescent counselling will need to be priorities.

### **Opportunities for Youth Development & Civic Engagement**

Findings from studies in relation to youth development and civic engagement in Finland have identified that young people who participate in educational opportunities that promote a sense of social responsibility are more likely to engage with volunteer work due to their concern for the welfare of others (Haski-Leventhal, Cnaan, Handy, Brudney, Holmes, Hustinx, & Zrinscak, 2008). Involving youth in the design and delivery of youth-oriented and youth-serving developmental opportunities, can therefore build knowledge, morals, values and a sense of civic duty through experiential education opportunities. Engagement in local ‘*tidy towns*’ initiatives, ‘*fundraisers*’ and “doing something for Pride month” all demonstrated the eagerness of young people to contribute positively to their local community. A consideration for future service planning should be directed toward LW CYPSC and the strategic partners recognising and rewarding youth development and civic engagement across the Youth Forums. ‘*Celebration days*’ were a suggestion offered by one young person as a means of acknowledging the contribution of children and young people to society; this may serve as a useful initial engagement strategy to create *communitas* and cohesion across Counties Longford and Westmeath Youth Forums.



## Next Steps

*“The views expressed by children and young people must be acted upon, as appropriate”  
(Lundy Model on Child Participation, 2007).*

This consultation process has been an opportunity to listen directly to the experiences of children and young people as it related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Young people have been explicit in communicating the impact of the pandemic on their health and wellbeing. There is a need therefore to take their views and opinions seriously. Furthermore, there is a responsibility of LW CYPSC and additional stakeholders to act upon this information. Implementing the following approaches will demonstrate a commitment to acting upon the recommendations offered by the young participants of this consultation process.

### **Supporting Agency and Dialogue**

Children and young people should be provided with as much choice and opportunity as is reasonably possible to shape how their Youth Forum operates. There should be open dialogue with children and young people as to the frequency, duration and location of their Youth Forum. Engagement strategies for children and young people should be flexible and varied. Where possible children and young people should be supported to develop their own activity and action plan which they can take ownership of. These activity and action plans should reflect the needs and desires of children and young people as they experience them. This will ensure that children and young people are valid contributors to the design and delivery of the Youth Forums across both counties.

### **Engagement and Inclusivity**

All children and young people should have equal opportunity to engage with and become a member of the LW CYPSC Youth Forum structures. This will require commitment from the LW CYPSC and strategic partners to promote the purpose and work of the Youth Forum in order to enhance awareness and ensure the widest possible engagement. Information should be disseminated in child friendly language which explains how decisions are made and how change has occurred as a result of the young person's

participation in the forum. This will help to encourage new membership to the Forums and will create opportunity for enhancing the existing social networks of children and young people across both counties.

### **Scope of Influence**

LW CYPSC and its strategic partnership should seek to secure annual funding to ensure the sustainability of the Youth Forum structures across both counties. Designated funding would enable each Youth Forum to progress individual pieces of work that reflect the needs and interests of their geographical region; and responds to their requests for additional services and supports in a post-Covid climate. Where opportunities permit to do so, children and young people should be informed as to how their recommendations have influenced the development of strategic work plans, targeted actions or securing of funding for service provision within their host Youth Forum organisation and wider LW CYPSC network. Attention should now be directed toward opportunities for integration and celebration of the various Youth Forums activities across both counties. It is important that collective events are planned to provide opportunity for children and young people to acknowledge and celebrate the work of and participation in not just their local Youth Forum events, but the wider social network of their peer counterparts and its associated activities.



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