

# include YOUTH

**January 2024**

**Comments on the Northern Ireland Policing  
Board Thematic Review: Children and Young  
People**

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## **Include Youth**

Include Youth is a rights-based charity for children and young people in or leaving care, from disadvantaged communities, or whose rights are not being met. We work to improve their employability, personal and social development enhancing inclusion, integration and good relations. We work with over 800 young people a year aged between 14-25. Our main offices are in Belfast, Armagh, Ballymena, Derry, Enniskillen, Lisburn and Omagh.

The young people we work with and for include those from socially disadvantaged areas, those who have had poor educational experiences, those from a care background, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people, young people with mental health issues, young people who have come into contact or are at risk of coming into contact with the justice system, misusing drugs and/or alcohol, at risk or experience of CSE. We provide a range of tailored employability programmes for these young people, including programmes delivered in partnership with community-based organisations.

One of our programmes, the Give & Take Scheme, adopts a youth work approach to improving the employability and increasing the self-esteem and confidence of young people aged 16 to 24 who are not yet ready to participate in mainstream training. We work across 9 primary sites and a number of outreach locations. The core components are personal development, mentoring, training, work experience, essential skills and transitional support.

The Give and Scheme also provides a One to One specialist programme for young people who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE).

Many of the young people we work with have experienced social exclusion, poverty or have other complex challenges in their lives and therefore need additional support to overcome these barriers and positively progress their education, training or employment needs. Seventy-five per cent of young people on the Scheme are care experienced, while over a third have had contact with the youth justice system.

Include Youth also engages in policy advocacy work in a range of areas including employability, youth justice and policing. This work is informed by relevant international human rights and children's rights standards, is evidence based, including that provided by young people and practitioners and is based on high quality, critical analysis.

Our Care for Change project which started in September 2022 will employ 15 care experienced Expert By Experience (EBE) Youth Mentors over the next two years and across 6 Give and Take sites. Our current Youth Mentors are being trained and supported to mentor other young people to become change makers and policy

advocates and to contribute to consultations and policy responses, meet with decision makers and co-facilitate focus groups.

## General Comments

Include Youth welcome the Policing Board's Thematic Review of Children and Young People and the consideration and assessment of PSNIs compliance with relevant human rights and equality legislation in how it deals with children and young people.

Include Youth values the opportunity that we have to represent children and young people's experiences and voices with regard to how policing impacts on their lives. We appreciate the opportunity we have had to play an active role in various engagement bodies, including the previous Youth Advisory Panel within the NI Policing Board as well as the current PSNI Youth Champions Forum and the Youth Champions Forum Sub - Group on Stop and Search. We actively engage with relevant policy consultations on the theme of policing, including the recent development of the PSNI Children and Young People Strategy. We are always keen to facilitate discussion between young people and the PSNI and have always found these events to be productive and informative.

While Include Youth can provide the Board with the views and experiences of the young people we work with, we would also recommend that the Board engages directly with children and young people to inform this Thematic Review. We would welcome further detail on how the Board has ensured that children and young people have been consulted on the detail of the Thematic Review and if a child accessible version was produced. It is especially important that the Board have direct communication with young people who are more likely to come into contact with the justice system and who have negative experiences with the police. While this can be challenging to facilitate as more mainstream forms of participation are not usually suitable for this group of young people, it is only through understanding the views of these young people that the Board will be able to fully assess if there is 'fair, effective and efficient policing' of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Our submission has been informed by a series of relevant previous consultation responses. As well as utilising existing evidence, young people from across our programmes and geographical locations participated in a number of focus groups and one to one conversations in our Belfast, Derry, Omagh and Armagh offices during December 2023 and January 2024, specifically on the topics that the Thematic Review covers. This participative work was led by one of our Expert by Experience Youth Mentors who co-ordinated with other Youth Mentors across our offices to ensure the voices and experiences of young people were heard. The views of the young people consulted have informed our submission.

Our Expert by Experience Youth Mentor drafted a series of questions to guide discussion with young people. These questions fell under the following headings:

- Children and young people as victims, potential victims, or the children of victims
- Children and young people as people of interest, suspects, or defendants
- How the police interact with various Section 75 groups
- Children and young people's knowledge of PSNI Strategies, training and policies

Section One of the submission contains details of previous and existing work that Include Youth has gathered on specific themes relevant to the thematic review.

Section Two of the submission contains the findings from the recently conducted young people's consultation and was compiled and written by Leona Orr, our EBE Youth Mentor with lead responsibility for Include Youth's Youth Submission to the Thematic Review.

Our Policy Co-ordinator also spoke to a number of staff to learn about their views and experiences of how police interact with the young people they work with. Their views have also informed our response and are included in Section One of the submission.

We have also attached to this submission a video recording of two young people's stories (voiced by IY staff) detailing their interaction with the police and justice system from an early age. This video was shown at a conference in November 2022 on the topic of Raising the Age of Criminal Responsibility, organised by Include Youth, Children's Law Centre and VOYPIC and NIACRO. <sup>1</sup> While they are voiced by IY staff the words are directly taken from the young people's transcripts.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hiLCwZGme0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMqmZMKtf08>

## SECTION ONE

### Stop and Search

Figures reveal that PSNI use of stop and search is at a higher rate per 1000 of the population than in all but 2 other UK police services and it has one of the lowest 'outcome' rates (arrests). Between 1 July 2021 and 30 June 2022, 2,259 (11%) of those stopped and searched were aged 17 and under, 55 of whom were children aged 12 and under. Of these 2,259, only 63 were arrested – a conversion rate of 2.8%.<sup>2</sup> Most recent figures for 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023, show there has been little change with 2,561 children subjected to a stop and search, with 76 of those arrested.

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Include Youth remain concerned about the high numbers of children and young people subject to stop and search and questioning. We are also concerned that stop and search powers are being used inappropriately.

Over the years we have conducted a number of consultations<sup>4</sup> with children and young people on issues of policing. Almost of all of the young people we spoke to had negative experiences of being stopped and searched, more often than not this was on a consistent basis and was itself a factor in the level of confidence they held in the police. In some cases it was reported that negative stop and search incidents had led to additional charges for young people. Include Youth consistently raise the issue of 'stop and search' and point out that young people feel targeted and victimised as a result of the use of 'stop and search' powers. They also report inconsistent experience of Officers' communication when it comes to providing a rationale for the 'stop and search' and their rights within that process. Young people also believe that 'stop and search' powers are used against them at a much higher rate than against adults.

Include Youth are concerned about the extensive use against young people and also the experiences of those young people when they are stopped.

Include Youth would like to see the effectiveness of 'stop and search' assessed. The experiences of young people suggest that not only does the excessive use of 'stop

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<sup>2</sup> [NGO Stakeholder Report – Children's Law Centre \(childrenslawcentre.org.uk\)](#), page 28.

<sup>3</sup> Use of Stop and Search Powers by the Police in Northern Ireland, 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2023.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.includeyouth.org/mgmt/resources/include-youth-comments-on-draft-psni-children-and-young-people-strategy-october-2018.pdf>

<http://www.includeyouth.org/mgmt/resources/include-youth-engagement-with-young-people-on-local-policing-review-november-2018.pdf>

<http://www.includeyouth.org/mgmt/resources/include-youth-response-to-draft-northern-ireland-policing-plan-2020-2025.pdf>

and search' damage relationships but also subsumes substantial police resources, with this in mind an analysis of the data and the effectiveness of this practice would be extremely useful. All powers to stop and search children should be exercised in compliance with human rights and in particular with key provisions on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including Article 2 (non-discrimination) and Article 3 (best interests). The use of stop and search powers should also comply with the PSNI's obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

In response to previous focus groups on the subject of policing, young people have commented:

*"They stop and search me all the time."*

*"They stop you just because you are young."*

*"They stop you depending on how you are dressed."*

*"They don't give you a reason for stopping you, they just say it's about drugs or weapons, but they don't give an actual reason."*

*"I have asked for a stop slip before, they just laughed at me and said there were none."*

*"They harass young people; I get stopped all the time."*

Young people tell us they feel targeted and demonised by the PSNI and it is clear this has an associated negative impact on their level of confidence in the police service. Almost unanimously the young people within focus groups felt their age, appearance, location and family history meant they were demonised and specifically targeted by the Officers. They believe this manifested itself as extra attention, excessive use of 'stop and search', constantly being viewed with suspicion, being looked down on by officers, being forced to disperse from public spaces and in many cases incivility. They believed the attention they receive from the police, including being questioned or searched on the street had a knock on effect on how young people are viewed by the communities in which they live.

*"They treat young people differently, we are branded."*

*"They make assumptions and judgements about young people."*

*"You are more likely to be stopped because of what you are wearing."*

*"They always stop you if you are wearing a hoodie."*

*"They treat you worse if you are from a worse area."*

*"The PSNI harass young people."*

*"Young people are treated differently."*

In a series of focus groups and one to one meetings conducted with young people from our offices in Belfast, Derry, Armagh and Omagh in December 2023 and January 2024, facilitated by our Youth Mentors, the same issues were once again highlighted.

Young people talked about the impact of being stopped and how it makes them feel at the time. They dislike the attention it draws to them on the street and also are sometimes left feeling confused about why they have been stopped. Feelings of anxiety and of *'being invaded'* are terms young people have used to describe the situation.

*'I wish they would explain why they are stopping me. It's confusing and it makes me nervous not knowing what is happening of why I'm being questioned. It's hard to stay calm when you're in the dark about the situation.'*

*'I've been stopped and searched a couple of times, and it's uncomfortable. You feel invaded, and even if you know you've done nothing wrong, it's hard not to feel anxious or scared during those moments.'*

*'These encounters affect how much I trust the police. When they're not clear or respectful, it makes it hard to believe that they're there to protect us. It's like a barrier between us and them.'*

Include Youth staff were also asked how they believe stop and search impacts on the young people they work with and what could be done to improve the situation. Their insights reveal a lot about what might be going on in a stop and search situation with a young person who has experienced trauma.

*'Understanding that trauma can make things like being stopped and questioned and especially being searched extremely distressing for a young person and that may present as aggression or non compliance and being able to identify this quickly and be more gentle, informative and calm in approach.'* (IY staff)

*'Needs to be a very clear and concrete reason why someone is stopped. PSNI need to be fully aware of whether someone is about to be stopped due to profiling either due to race, poverty, age, gender etc. and this has to be addressed by the individual officer within themselves, before contact happens.'* (IY staff)

*'I think that public encounters are naturally difficult as young people may feel the need to show frustration with the police due to their peers or their family being witness. They may feel the need to not be seen as vulnerable in front of their peers. They nearly need to be seen to be reacting to the police in a certain way in front of their peers.'* (IY staff)

*'This can increase the tension in a given situation, alongside public embarrassment. Young people care what others think of them, young people in care are aware of the stigmas that already exist around them and they are fearful that being stopped will*

*exacerbate or 'confirm' these stigmas to the general public and can feel extra humiliating for them.'* (IY staff)

*'It's important to identify that a young person is uncomfortable during a stop, maybe due to sensory issues and police need to be able to be flexible and help that young person to express themselves and be prepared to listen to them.'* (IY staff)

*'I know another young person who had an acquired brain injury and it really affected him, even in his walking, he walked with a real swagger and he was stopped by the police all the time, his appearance attracted police attention but he was a good guy, he never did anything wrong. Police can make judgements based on the appearances of some young people, prejudices definitely come into play.'* (IY staff)

*'Young people need clarity around why the police are stopping them.'* (IY Staff)

*'On the street if they are stopped, everyone stops and stares, and they (the young people) hate that.'* (IY staff)

*'Young people I talk to have been just stopped in the street because they are known to the police, they haven't done anything wrong, but are stopped more often.'* (IY staff)

*'One young person we worked with said that he was stopped all the time, but he had never been found guilty of anything.'* (IY Staff)

The use of stop and search powers on children and young people was raised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in their June 2023 Concluding Observations of UK implementation of the UNCRC.

*The Committee remains concerned about the continued use of unnecessary stop-and-search checks on children and the fact that the majority of them are conducted on children belonging to ethnic minority groups.*

*Recalling its previous recommendations, the Committee urges the State party:*

*(a) To effectively enforce the prohibition of the use of non-statutory stop-and-search checks against children, prohibit their use in Northern Ireland and remove provisions from the Public Order Act 2023 that ease restrictions on their use;*

*(b) To ensure that the statutory use of stop-and-search checks is proportionate and non-discriminatory, including by implementing the best use of the stop-and-search scheme and conducting mandatory training for law enforcement officials;*



*(c) To improve the monitoring of the use of stop-and-search checks on children, including through the collection and publication of related data, and investigate all allegations of their disproportionate or discriminatory use on children.<sup>5</sup>*

In June 2023 the Independent Reviewer of the Justice and Security Act recommended that the PSNI conduct a review of policy and practice on the use of stop and search on children aged 10-14 years old. <sup>6</sup>

Include Youth have been raising our concerns about the use and impact of stop and search on children for many years now, through jointly hosting dedicated conferences on the subject, facilitating the production of a play highlighting the issue, and contributing to numerous seminars and workshops. We are frustrated that there appears to have been little change. While there have been attempts to address how stop and searches are conducted with children, and we welcome the work that Inspector Stephen Burke is currently doing to develop a Stop and Search Information Card, the fact remains that there are too many unnecessary stop and searches of children. Include Youth supports a full and comprehensive review of the use of stop and search powers on children.

### **Use of force/ Spit and Bite Guards**

It is our view that the use of Spit and Bite Guards by the PSNI, which could include their use against children as young as 10 engages a number of domestic and international human rights standards as they apply to children, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The relevant articles include Article 3 on the child's best interests, Article 6 on the right to life, Article 19 on protection from all forms of violence and Article 37 on the prohibition of torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. General Comment No. 13: The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence and General Comment No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system are also relevant.

Prior to introducing the guards no consultation was conducted with the children's rights sector to assess the impact of their use on children and young people. We note that the NI Policing Board reviewed the police response to COVID and views on Spit and Bite Guards were included in the list of questions sent to stakeholders.

*As you will know the police have been provided with extraordinary powers, introduced quickly as part of an essential response to the coronavirus outbreak and it is essential that the PSNI's use of them is thoroughly and independently scrutinised. The Chief Constable has also provided officers with spit and bite guards to protect officers in*

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<sup>5</sup> [CRC C GBR CO 6-7-EN.pdf](#), page 9, para 28 a-c.

<sup>6</sup> Professor Marie Breen-Smyth, 'Report of the Independent Reviewer Justice and Security (NI) Act 2007 Fifteenth Report: 1 August 2021-31 July 2022' (NIO, 2023), at 54.

public. This is partly in response to recent “cough” attacks on officers by people claiming to have COVID-19. In response, the Policing Board has initiated a review of the PSNI’s response to the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>7</sup>

To inform the thematic review of policing during Covid the NI Policing Board’s Human Rights Advisor held meetings with stakeholders including members of the PSNI Youth Champions Forum, of which Include Youth is a member. Include Youth also submitted written evidence to the thematic review.<sup>8</sup>

The PSNI also held a stakeholder meeting about the use of the Spit and Bite Guards in August 2020, attended by mostly PSNI staff and a small number of NGOs (including, Include Youth, VOYPIC, Extern, Youth Work Alliance). The NGOs who attended expressed a number of concerns, including:

- The use of the Spit and Bite Guards on children and young people and the failure to assess their use in relation to S75 duties.
- Lack of evidence on the impact on children and young people.
- The contradiction between the use of the guards with PSNI safeguarding policies and the adoption of trauma informed practice.
- The lack of evidence to support why PSNI felt the need to use the guards.
- Lack of evidence on the effectiveness of the guards.

The NI Policing Board released their report on the Thematic Review of Policing during Covid, in November 2020, recommending:

*“spit and bite guards should now be phased out as soon as possible and officers who have been provided with spit and bite guards should, instead, be provided with the necessary Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) or other alternative. The PPE provided should be of sufficient quality to protect these officers from contamination from spitting, aerosol droplets and other bodily fluids reducing the risk of transmission of COVID-19 and other diseases. The use of spit and bite guards should, regardless, cease by 31st December 2020.”*

The NI Commissioner for Children and Young People and the children’s rights sector have repeatedly expressed concerns and raised their opposition to the use of Spit and Bite Guards to the PSNI and the NI Policing Board. Amnesty International, CAJ and the Children’s Law Centre have also lobbied against their use<sup>9</sup>. In a joint press release

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<sup>7</sup> Extract from letter sent to members of Youth Champions Forum from John Wadham, NIPB Human Rights Advisor, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2020

<sup>8</sup> Include Youth, Young People’s Views on Policing During Covid, August 2020

<sup>9</sup> [Northern Ireland: Chief Constable criticised for spit hoods roll-out in defiance of policing board | Amnesty International UK](#)

on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2021 from Amnesty International, CAJ, Include Youth and Children's Law Centre, it was stated:

*“The decision to roll out spit hoods, rather than withdraw them from use as advised by the Policing Board, is shocking. It is disturbing that in more than eight out of ten incidents, the PSNI has used spit hoods on people with disabilities and, on eight occasions, on children. The Chief Constable rushed to deploy spit hoods without evidence that they are effective in preventing the transmission of Covid-19. Now he is doubling down on that flawed decision, in outright defiance of the Policing Board. Placing a hood over someone's head is a significant use of force and one that raises key concerns over cruel and degrading treatment, as well as serious potential health risks. These devices must be withdrawn from use, as called for by the Policing Board.”*

Questions in relation to the use, effectiveness and proportionality of Spit and Bite Guards have also been raised at NIPB meetings by political members.<sup>10</sup>

The NI NGO Stakeholder Report<sup>11</sup> submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in December 2022 noted the concerns raised regarding Guards by NICCY, Amnesty, Children's Law Centre, CAJ, Include Youth and other organisations:

- Non-compliance with the UNCRC and ECHR
- Failure to impact assess their use
- Contradiction with PSNI safeguarding policies and trauma-informed practice
- Lack of evidence to support need for/ effectiveness of their use
- Potential dangers and adverse effects

#### Young People's Views:

A small number of young people (6 young people) from Include Youth met with PSNI officers on 17th November 2020 to discuss their views on the use of Spit and Bite Guards on children and young people. The young people were not supportive of the use of the guards on children and young people and expressed their concerns on the damaging impact having a guard placed on a vulnerable young person's head would have, especially those young people experiencing mental health problems or with additional vulnerabilities that are not visible to the eye. Young people are concerned that the use of guards will only serve to further damage an already fragile relationship between young people and the police. They were not convinced that officers would be able to correctly identify those children and young people for whom the use of the guard could be severely damaging.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/questions/use-spit-and-bite-guards-during-covid-19>

<sup>11</sup> [NGO Stakeholder Report – Children's Law Centre \(childrenslawcentre.org.uk\)](#)

*“The thought of it is frightening. I see how police can act with young people and the thought of them having another thing to use on us, it’s not good, I don’t see how it could help”.*

*“It looks like a dog muzzle, it’s not fair, treating us like animals”.*

*“We think it will confine breathing and bring on stress and panic, it wouldn’t de-escalate things.”*

*“You should put money into training and how to de-escalate, not into this.”*

*“For those who don’t like the PSNI, it will only make it worse”.*

One of our youth workers had spent time discussing the use of Spit and Bite Guards with a group of young people, in preparation for taking part in the group discussion with PSNI staff. He fed in young people’s views at the group discussion:

*“A small minority of police use power over young people wrongly and young people are afraid it will be used against them in an abusive way.”*

The young people also referred to the low age of criminal responsibility in NI and were worried that a Spit and Bite Guard could potentially be used on a child as young as 10.

*“10 is quite low age – that’s primary school.”*

At the November 2020 meeting young people questioned if the use of the guards would only be on a temporary basis.

*“Will you just use them forever? it’s abusing authority and using it just because they can”.*

One of the young people who has an ambition to join the PSNI stated that she would not be happy to use the guards:

*“I volunteer at church and I know the people who get into trouble with the police. I don’t ever want to use one of these (spit and bite guard), ever.”*

The young people were disappointed that the then Chief Constable appeared to have ignored their views when on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2021, he announced his intention to extend the provision of the guards to all frontline PSNI officers. While the young people appreciated and welcomed the opportunity to speak to PSNI officers, who were extremely open and attentive to the young people, they ultimately felt that taking part in the discussion had made no impact whatsoever on the then Chief Constable’s decision around the continued use of Spit and Bite Guards.

In a briefing by the Children’s Rights Alliance England on Spit and Bite Guards <sup>12</sup>it has been found that:

“Recent developments in neuroscience have also identified that the brain development and specifically the frontal lobes (the area of the brain that helps regulate decision-making and the control of impulses that underpin behaviour) are still developing into a human’s 20s. This will affect a child’s ability to cope in a stressful situation with the police. Using a spit-hood risks not only heightening their fight or flight mood but also risks subsequent psychological damage. This is compounded by the fact that children who come into contact with the police are some of the most vulnerable in society – many have experienced abuse or violence, are victims of criminal exploitation, and have Special Educational Needs (SEN) or serious mental health conditions.”

We acknowledge that the section on Spit and Bite Guards in the PSNI Manual of Policy, Procedure and Guidance on Conflict Management<sup>13</sup> includes a dedicated set of guidance with regards to the use of Spit and Bite Guards on children, referring to Article 3 of UNCRC best interests principles; heightened vulnerabilities of young people; brain development; potential de-escalation options; follow up procedures; and the role of the Police Ombudsman for NI in reviewing deployments.

While we welcome these child specific additions to the Spit and Bite Guard Procedures and Guidance, we remain concerned that Spit and Bite Guards can still be used on children in any situation.

Despite the recommendation from the Policing Board’s Human Rights Advisor<sup>14</sup>, that if an officer is aware a child is under 18 years of age that the Guard should not be used in any circumstances, the PSNI refused to accept this recommendation. Include Youth are disappointed with this response and PSNI’s statement that:

‘We continue to examine the use of Spit and Bite Guards on children however, policy still allows for the use of the tactic on under 18s in certain circumstances.’ <sup>15</sup>

The NI Human Rights Commission in the Annual Statement 2023 noted that the use of spit and bite guards on children, with regards to human rights compliance, requires further action. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [https://yjlc.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CRAE\\_POLICING-SPITHOODS\\_PRINT.pdf](https://yjlc.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CRAE_POLICING-SPITHOODS_PRINT.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.psni.police.uk/sites/default/files/2023-07/Chapter%2016%20Spit%20and%20Bite%20Guards.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> [A Review of PSNI’s Use of Spit and Bite Guards by the NI Policing Board’s Human Rights Advisor](#)

<sup>15</sup> [PSNI Response to the Recommendations of the NIPB Human Rights Advisor on the Use of Spit and Bite Guards](#)

<sup>16</sup> <https://nihrc.org/publication/detail/annual-statement-2023>

## Strip searching

We welcomed the publication of the Policing Board Review and 10 recommendations in relation to the use of Strip Searching in custody in June 2023.<sup>17</sup>

Include Youth flagged up a number of issues relevant to the review:

- **Rationale and justification for completing a strip search:** we would like to know the detailed reasoning for why a search is undertaken and how it is recorded. In particular, we are concerned that the justification for such searches is often derived from ‘flagging’ information already held by PSNI systems on the person subject to the search. We would require further information on how that ‘flag’ is interpreted and used in a decision to undertake a search.
- **Vulnerable young people:** what prior assessment is made to ensure that young people would not ‘triggered’ by a strip search, in particular young people who may have been victims of sexual abuse or exploitation. How is the sensitivity and vulnerability of young people assessed? Is a record taken and information shared with necessary authorities if a young person in care has been subject to a strip search?
- **Governance:** what steps are taken to ensure there is appropriate governance of the arrangements and decision making processes.
- **Appropriate Adult:** It is concerning that a considerable number of searches have taken place without an Appropriate Adult being present. How are young people consulted on who they would like to be present during the search and are young people given every opportunity to request who they want present?

*‘Having no appropriate adult for children subjected to a strip search is a total human rights abuse. If they are in care, they don’t have a parent looking out for them like there would be in a private home. It should never be done without an appropriate adult there, it’s such an abuse, it wouldn’t happen in another context.’ (IY staff)*

- **How was the search conducted:** an examination and record of what levels of restraint were used during the search, and the justification of that level of restraint/ force.
- **Where the search was conducted:** a review of the location of the search and clarity about any searches that were conducted outside custody setting.
- **Follow up to search/safeguarding referrals:** what was the outcome of the search and was there a follow up in terms of a safeguarding referral if it was

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<sup>17</sup> [Human Rights Review | Children and Young People: Strip Searching in Police Custody \(nipoicingboard.org.uk\)](https://nipoicingboard.org.uk)

deemed necessary? If young people were ‘triggered’ by the search, what attempts were made to provide follow up support?

- **What evidence is there of a trauma informed approach to strip searching of children and young people?**

Despite welcoming the Policing Board’s review report, the spotlight that it brought to the strip searching of children and the need to improve record keeping and address the need for an Appropriate Adult, we are disappointed that the report did not go far enough. In June 2023 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a recommendation that the UK government and NI Executive should:

*‘take legislative measures to explicitly prohibit, without exception ... the use of strip searches on children.’<sup>18</sup>*

### **Use of acoustic devices to disperse public gatherings of children:**

The use of ‘mosquito devices’ to disperse groups of children and young people in spaces where they are fully entitled to be has not been prohibited.<sup>19</sup> The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in their Concluding Observations on the report of UK’s implementation of the UNCRC, made the following recommendation:

*‘Strengthen measures to prevent the use of acoustic devices to disperse public gatherings of children, in line with the Committee’s previous recommendations.’<sup>20</sup>*

### **Arrest, custody and bail**

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is clear about the use of police custody for children, advising the UK State Party to:

*‘Repeal the process of remanding children into police custody, ensure that no child is held in police custody overnight and avoid the use and reduce the maximum duration of pre trial detention.’<sup>21</sup>*

We remain concerned about the inappropriate use of custodial detention for children. Some young people continue to be held in custody because of the lack of suitable alternative accommodation or they do not have an appropriate suitable bail address. It is a matter of concern that latest figures from the Youth Justice Agency reveal that almost half of the children held in the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre were care

<sup>18</sup> CRC/C/GBR/CO/6-7, ‘UN CRC Committee Concluding Observations on the Sixth and Seventh Periodic Reports of the UK of Great Britain and NI’, 2 June 2023, at para 30(a)(ii).

<sup>19</sup> [NGO Stakeholder Report – Children’s Law Centre \(childrenslawcentre.org.uk\)](https://www.childrenslawcentre.org.uk), page 27.

<sup>20</sup> [CRC C GBR CO 6-7-EN.pdf](#), page 8, para 27 (b).

<sup>21</sup> CRC/C/GBR/CO para 54

experienced children.<sup>22</sup> With just 1.3% of admissions to the JJC in that period being as a result of sentence, with the rest of the admissions being PACE and remand, it is clear that detention is not being used as a last resort.

## Section 75 groups

### Care experienced young people/ vulnerable young people:

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, 3,801 children and young people were in care in NI, the highest number recorded since the Children's (NI) Order came into force in 1995. Unfortunately, young people in care are more likely to come into contact with the police than their non care experienced counterparts.

Include Youth remain concerned about the criminalisation of care experienced young people.

Care experienced children are likely to be more vulnerable, placing them at increased risk of criminalisation and/or exploitation and harm. 42% of children in custody in NI are in care, and 29% of children in residential homes have a caution or conviction.<sup>23</sup> Barriers between police and those with care experience are frequently raised by Include Youth young people.

This interaction can be in connection with children's residential care homes. In 2022/2023, the PSNI received 5,240 reports of children/young people going missing from care in NI, which involved 1,171 individuals. Of these occurrences, 2,923 reports were from residential children's homes, relating to 166 individuals.<sup>24</sup> There are clear risks for children who are missing from care, one of which is risk of sexual exploitation. We welcome the revised protocol between PSNI and Health and Social Care Trusts on Children Missing From Care.<sup>25</sup>

Our staff member who specialises in supporting young people who have experienced or are at risk of CSE is concerned about inconsistent police reaction to care experienced young people who are at risk of CSE versus non care experienced young people.

*'I think there is different approach taken for young people who are at risk of CSE who reside in children's homes and those who don't. If they are seen as someone who has ran away before, then that is just how they are seen. But they should be asking why*

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<sup>22</sup> Youth Justice Agency Annual Workload Statistics 2022-2023

<sup>23</sup> [Children in care in Northern Ireland 2021/22 | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/children-in-care-in-northern-ireland-2021-22)

<sup>24</sup> Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission Annual Report 2023, page 145

<sup>25</sup> Interface Protocol Between Health and Social Care Trusts and PSNI: Where a child is reported missing and other police interactions with Children's Residential Homes, PSNI:DoH, 2023. [New joint protocol for missing children launched - DOH/HSCNI Strategic Planning and Performance Group \(SPPG\)](#)



*is the young person running away in the first place and who are they running to. They are running away for a reason, maybe perhaps they are being exploited and someone is buying them something and then they have to give something in return. That needs seriously looked at, rather than just seeing her as someone who always runs away.'* (IY Staff)

Unfortunately, some of the young people Include Youth provide services to have not had positive experiences in their relationship with the PSNI and often say that they feel they can be branded as troublemakers. They are of the belief that care experienced young people can be treated differently than their non care experienced counterparts and may not receive the same quality of policing that other young people receive.

As one staff member said:

*'I would say I've seen young people being unfairly treated due to being in care and maybe a perception that they wouldn't make a complaint or would have anyone to hand who could advocate on their behalf.'* (IY Staff)

Another staff member commented that a different approach needs to be taken with care experienced young people, and more understanding shown for the reasons behind challenging behaviour.

*'I know a young person who lifted his file out of an office and burned it in a car park outside his supported accommodation, and police were called and he was charged with arson, which resulted in that young person not being able to access certain types of accommodation. It had a massive impact on his life then. Discretion is needed in how things are taken forward and understanding the long term impact of police action on the lives of young people.'* (IY Staff)

Staff suggested that police could be trained to take a more supportive role to calm a situation and not to quickly jump to criminalising.

*'The police need to understand the realities for young people in some of these homes.'*

*'The police need to be more approachable, before things become more of an issue, they need to have a better attitude when dealing with vulnerable young people, and be more empathetic and professional.'* (IY Staff)

The knock- on impact of young people's poor relationship with police is that they are less likely to then report when they have been victims of crime themselves. Young people are more likely to be victims of crime than perpetrators but there is a risk that they are perceived less as victims and more as 'troublemakers'. Our staff know that many of the young people who may come to the attention of the police have been victims themselves and can have a complicated and traumatic back story.

*‘Victims can look a lot of different ways, police have to maintain an open mind, so that bridges aren’t burned and that someone can come to light as being vulnerable and exploited rather than just for engaging in anti-social behaviour.’ (IY Staff)*

A member of staff acknowledged that they had witnessed good practice by some officers but this was not consistent across the board in all interactions between young people in care and the police. One staff member who had previous experience of working in supported accommodation said:

*‘I have seen genuine empathy in how the police deal with some of the young people, but I’ve also in seen really poor policing. Some have a good attitude and some others don’t. I have witnessed multiple times in my career police slagging young people, calling young people names, using derogatory nicknames for young people, going into homes and commenting on the conditions, saying to young people “you’re disgusting, living like this”, going through their cupboards when there has been no justification for doing so. They are nearly inciting the young person to give a reaction. The young people then react to this intrusion to their privacy and the slagging and end up getting additional charges. The most upsetting thing is when they (the police) expect me to join in on the slagging and are completely thrown when I don’t do it. I pulled them up on it, but I felt unsure of my grounds to grant them access to supported accommodation because I was unhappy with their attitude.’ (IY Staff)*

This behaviour is clearly cause for concern and would indicate that much needs to be done to address inappropriate and discriminatory actions by some officers.

Some of the young people expressed their disappointment that police were not understanding of individual vulnerabilities or aware of the impact of how they reacted to some young people. Our Youth Mentor explained how:

*‘One of the individuals discussed how she had been experiencing a mental health crisis and the police had to be contacted as a result. During this encounter, she expressed how this was handled negatively as they weren’t as understanding regarding her situation, and she explained how they handled her roughly and left her with bruises.’ (Youth Mentor)*

*‘One of the young people in the group discussed how they feel that the police often provoke young people to behave negatively or make the situation worse.’ (Youth Mentor)*

*‘Young people in care really feel the stigma around being in care.’ (IY Staff)*

## **Unaccompanied Minors:**

Staff are particularly aware of the needs of unaccompanied minors and are keen to emphasize the need for the police to be made aware of the situations that many of these young people have fled from. This background learning would increase awareness of how unaccompanied minors may interact with authority figures, such as the police.

*‘The young people who are unaccompanied minors have been reluctant to engage with the police here because of their negative experiences of police in their own countries.’ (IY Staff)*

*‘Police need to understand the needs of such unaccompanied young people, they need to have a very gentle approach in respect of trauma they have experienced and what experience they have had of policing in the countries they have fled from.’ (IY Staff)*

Additionally, staff working in our offices where there are unaccompanied minors on the programme, expressed their concern about young people’s experience of racism and the fear they talked about when there have been anti -immigration protests in the communities in which they have been placed or there have been direct attacks on Halal supermarkets. Despite our Youth Worker raising concerns with the PSNI about the safety of these young women, no action was taken to assuage their fears.

*‘The young people felt scared and intimidated, these things were happening a few streets away from where they lived. They didn’t want to report anything themselves to the police because they didn’t want to cause trouble in their local community. We (IY Youth Worker) did make contact with the police to inform them of the fears for personal safety, but we didn’t think this was taken seriously, the young people’s concerns were not taken seriously and there was no follow up.’ (IY Staff)*

## **Addressing Challenges**

There are a number of suggestions provided by both staff and young people on how PSNI could address the challenges:

### Specialist Training:

There is clearly a need for better awareness, understanding and training for PSNI officers to improve the nature of any interaction they might have with care experienced young people. And this could extend to include awareness training on the needs of especially vulnerable young people, such as those with addiction issues, experiencing trauma, mental health concerns, learning disabilities, refugees and unaccompanied asylum seekers.

*‘Greater empathy and confidence in displaying empathy by the police is needed, particularly for care and unaccompanied young people. Alongside this there should be specialist training provided and an increased awareness of the challenges and needs of young people with these experiences and how that can impact on their ability to interact with figures of authority and especially enforcers of authority.’ (IY Staff)*

*‘Training to equip officers with the necessary skills to engage with children and to understand individual factors.’ (IY Staff)*

*‘We need real trauma informed policing practice when it comes to children and young people.’ (IY Staff)*

*‘More understanding that some young people will have different needs and appearances can be deceiving. Active work needs to be done to address personal judgements and prejudices of some police officers.’ (IY Staff)*

Staff are not oblivious to the pressures that come with frontline policing and the need for officers to be supported to modify their reactions.

*‘There are clearly staff support needs there to acknowledge how officers are reacting when they are already under pressure. But the willingness to change has to be there. There will be resistance from some officers but they have to push through because change is definitely needed.’ (IY staff)*

Include Youth are currently in discussion with a Superintendent in one policing district about providing possible training for frontline officers on the specific needs of care experienced young people. We were approached by this Superintendent who became concerned about the number of times care experienced young people were coming to the attention of her team and the obvious vulnerability of the young people involved. We welcome this recognition of the specific needs of care experienced young people and the desire for police interaction not to further increase risk factors or result in possible criminalisation.

#### Partnership and collaboration:

Recognising that specific skills are required to work with particular groups of young people, there could be a more multi-disciplinary and partnership between the police and community/ voluntary sector.

*‘A much tighter, joined up approach is needed, like having Youth Workers attached to policing units to provide specialist support in moments of crisis and to give a more non uniformed and more approachable line of communication.’ (IY staff)*

*'They could seek out more opportunities to interact in youth and community settings. They could direct young people to local youth services, give them information and signposting rather than moving them on for 'loitering'. It would be important for them to build relationships with staff in youth services and lift the phone for guidance and support from specialist youth workers.'* (IY staff)

There is shared learning in collaborating with the youth sector, which would be valuable to PSNI. The youth sector could advice on good practice in how to approach vulnerable young people who are displaying challenging behaviour.

*'It would be good for PSNI to understand the role of youth workers and why many of us are always trying to tread the line, to try and work out when police might be needed to be called, but at the same time not criminalising young people who are acting out trauma/ grief/ addiction.'* (IY Staff)

The IY staff team combined have years of experience of working with young people who are in the care system and are familiar with incidences when some of these young people come into contact with the police and wider justice system. They are able to identify the reasons behind challenging behaviour and are clear that much of it is displayed as a symptom to unmet need and past trauma. Beneath the anger and aggression is often a child who is unable to express how they are feeling or even understand why they are feeling the way they are.

*'I know with our young people their behaviour can be seen in a certain way but really it is a cry for help and if you sit down with them and try and understand why they are doing what they are doing, that's a better approach. There was a young person who caused massive damage in one of the children's homes and I asked them later, why did you do that, and they said later on when they got to know me, I regret it, but it was a cry for help.'* (IY staff)

*'I think police need to be more understanding of the situation, and not think that all care young people are there to cause harm, there are reasons why young people are behaving the way they are behaving. Also, young people come to the attention of the police because they are in a children's home. If it was happening in a private home, the police most likely wouldn't be contacted.'* (IY Staff)

#### Direct engagement with young people:

The PSNI Children and Young People Strategy (2023) commits to *'engaging positively with children and young people across all sectors of our communities ... our engagement with children and young people has the potential to improve service delivery and ensure high risk issues are dealt with effectively.'*

Include Youth would welcome increased engagement directly between young people and PSNI. This engagement should not be tokenistic and should be developed in partnership with the hardest to reach groups.

*'PSNI need to continue to engage with young people, particularly those who have come into contact with police regularly or who are over represented in the justice system and those who are harder to reach in order to get their feedback and then really listen to them and take what they say on board.'* (IY staff)

*'Police should work with us and directly with young people and ask them how they feel they are treated by the police. You miss that authenticity if you don't have that first person perspective.'* (IY Staff)

*'Children's voices have to be heard, they need to represent themselves, and not always be heard through representatives from organisations like ours, because young people can best explain the impact that policing has had on them.'* (IY staff)

## SECTION TWO

### INCLUDE YOUTH'S YOUTH SUBMISSION TO THE THEMATIC REVIEW

**This an overview of the feedback from youth led focus groups and one to one consultations with young people in Include Youth's offices in Belfast, Derry, Armagh and Omagh, which took place in December 2023 and January 2024. The summary of findings has been written by Leona Orr, Expert by Experience Youth Mentor.**

As victims, potential victims, or the children of victims:

#### **Have you ever felt unsafe or vulnerable in your community? If so, what made you feel that way?**

I've heard from young people about their concerns regarding safety, especially during nighttime activities in the town centre. Many choose to stay indoors at night due to the prevalence of drinking and drug-related activities, creating an environment they find unsafe. This decision is driven by a desire to avoid potential risks and harm.

Some individuals avoid going out at night due to the amount of drinking and drug-related activities in town centre streets after dark. This behaviour creates an environment that feels unsafe for them, prompting a decision to stay indoors to avoid potential risks or harm.

Young people expressed feeling unsafe within their own homes due to factors like residing in communities marked by abuse, high drug activity, or elevated crime rates. These conditions create a constant state of worry and unease, affecting their sense of security within their living environment.

Being approached by three police officers randomly and asked for their name and address late at night generated feelings of anxiety and intimidation. This unexpected interaction in a nighttime setting, where they were questioned by authorities without clear context, made them feel uneasy.

Another experience involved a distressing situation at home where they were shouted at and coerced into engaging with the police. This encounter within their own residence, where they felt pressured or uncomfortable while interacting with law enforcement, added to their feelings of vulnerability.

Instances where the police did not intervene during fights occurring nearby contributed to their sense of insecurity. Feeling ignored or overlooked by law

enforcement when potentially dangerous situations unfold around them diminishes their confidence in the police's ability to ensure community safety.

Overall, there's a pervasive feeling of fear and unease within the communities where the young people particularly when the police approach unexpectedly. According to their experiences, these sudden encounters evoke a sense of anxiety and uncertainty due to the lack of warning or explanation. It is crucial to address these concerns and advocate for environments where young people feel safe, supported, and understood.

### **How do you think the police could better support young people who might be at risk of exploitation or abuse?**

The police can improve accessibility and confidentiality by establishing safe spaces where young individuals can comfortably share their concerns without fear of judgment or reprisal. This initiative would foster an atmosphere of trust and openness, crucial for effective communication.

Providing specialised training for officers to comprehend the unique experiences of young people and respond empathetically can make a substantial difference.

Consideration could be given to designating specially trained officers for cases involving young individuals, ensuring a more understanding approach.

To proactively address issues, the police could implement outreach programs in schools and youth centres. These programs would educate young people about their rights and provide guidance on what to do if they feel unsafe. This preventative measure aims to empower young individuals with knowledge and resources to navigate potentially challenging situations.

Effective communication is key. Young people express a preference for police communication that is calm, avoids complex language, and ensures that explanations are easily understandable. This approach fosters a more comfortable and engaged atmosphere during discussions.

Recognising the vulnerability of young witnesses to crimes, it is crucial to provide additional support. Fair treatment and avoiding assumptions about their involvement in incidents contribute to building trust and ensuring their cooperation.

Building connections with non-statutory services adds another layer of support. This collaboration enables the police to refer young individuals to support networks when direct police assistance may not be the most suitable or needed solution.



Respecting the agency of young people is fundamental. Offering them the opportunity to have a say in whether they receive help allows for a more inclusive and respectful approach. This approach empowers young individuals to express their preferences, contributing to a more collaborative and supportive process.

In summary, a comprehensive approach involving enhanced accessibility, specialized training, educational outreach, clear communication, additional support for witnesses, and collaboration with non-statutory services can significantly strengthen the police's support for young people at risk of exploitation or abuse.

**What kind of help or resources do you believe are necessary for children who have experienced or witnessed crime or abuse?**

Access to professional counselling services tailored to the specific needs of young individuals affected by crime or abuse.

Establishing safe spaces where they can connect with peers who have undergone similar experiences, fostering a sense of community and understanding.

Providing informative sessions in schools or community settings to educate them about their rights, how to cope with trauma, and where to seek help.

Establishing confidential and easily accessible helplines or hotlines that young people can reach out to for immediate support or guidance.

Ensuring collaboration between the police and social services to offer holistic support, including access to housing support, legal guidance, or family assistance if needed.

Implementing ongoing programs or initiatives that provide consistent support rather than short-term interventions.

Ensuring that all support services are trauma-informed, recognizing the impact of trauma on young individuals and tailoring interventions accordingly.

Opportunities for young individuals to advocate for themselves, empowering them to voice their needs and concerns in various settings, including legal proceedings if necessary.

A comprehensive support system for children who have experienced or witnessed crime or abuse involves a combination of counselling services, community spaces, educational sessions, accessible helplines, collaborative efforts, consistent support programs, trauma-informed services, and avenues for self-advocacy. This holistic approach aims to address the diverse needs of these young individuals and promote their well-being.

As people of interest, suspects, or defendants:

**Can you describe any encounters you've had with the police? How did you feel during those interactions?**

Young individuals commonly experience heightened anxiety and nervousness during these encounters. The authority and uncertainty surrounding the interaction can lead to a sense of unease and apprehension. The presence of law enforcement, especially in situations where there's questioning or searches, can be intimidating. The uniform, authority, and the potential consequences of the encounter can instil fear, creating an atmosphere of intimidation. When young people feel unfairly targeted or judged without a clear reason, it often leads to frustration and a sense of being misunderstood. The lack of clarity or communication heightens this feeling.

Instances of being searched or questioned without a clear explanation can make young individuals feel uncomfortable. It can create a sense of invasion of privacy, even if they know they haven't done anything wrong. These encounters can impact the level of trust young people have in law enforcement. When interactions lack clarity, respect, or understanding, it can contribute to a decline in trust, creating a barrier between them and the police. Here are some things our young people said:

*"There was this time when the police assumed I was involved in something just because I was in the area. It made me frustrated because I felt misunderstood and judged. I wanted to explain, but I was afraid they wouldn't listen."*

*"At times, interactions with the police have left me feeling uneasy and nervous. Once, I was stopped and questioned in public, which made me quite anxious because I couldn't understand the reason behind it. These encounters can feel intimidating even when I haven't done anything wrong, mainly because of the authority they hold. It's like being on edge without knowing their intentions."*

*"When the police approach, especially in groups, it's scary. Even if they're just doing their job, the uniform and authority make it feel really intimidating. You start second-guessing everything you say or do."*

*"I wish they would explain why they're stopping me. It's confusing and makes me nervous not knowing what's happening or why I'm being questioned. It's hard to stay calm when you're in the dark about the situation."*

*"I've been stopped for searches a couple of times, and it's uncomfortable. You feel invaded, and even if you know you've done nothing wrong, it's hard not to feel anxious or scared during those moments."*

*"These encounters affect how much I trust the police. When they're not clear or respectful, it makes it hard to believe they're there to protect us. It's like a barrier between us and them."*

**What do you think could improve communication and understanding between young people and the police during street encounters or questioning in public places?**

**Clear Communication:** Using straightforward and easily understandable language is fundamental. Clear communication ensures that young people can comprehend the information provided by the police during street encounters, reducing potential misunderstandings.

**Explanation:** The police should offer comprehensive explanations for stopping or questioning young individuals in public places. This transparency not only minimises confusion but also helps build a sense of trust by providing context for their actions.

**Listening:** Actively listening to the concerns and perspectives of young people during encounters is crucial. Demonstrating empathy shows a genuine interest in their feelings, contributing to a more positive interaction and fostering a sense of mutual understanding.

**Community Involvement:** The police can actively engage in community events that involve young people, creating a more approachable image. Participation in such events establishes a connection beyond enforcement situations, making interactions feel less intimidating.

**Building Trust and Preventing Escalation:** Building trust is foundational for positive interactions. By consistently demonstrating fairness, respect, and understanding, the police can prevent situations from escalating unnecessarily. Young people are more likely to cooperate when they feel a sense of trust and respect from law enforcement.

**Education on Rights and Procedures:** Providing educational sessions or materials in schools and community settings can inform young people about their rights and the procedures followed during police encounters. This knowledge empowers them and contributes to a more informed and cooperative interaction.

**Diverse representation in the Police Force:** Promoting diversity within the police force is essential for fostering understanding. A diverse representation can help bridge cultural gaps, making interactions more relatable and minimizing biases in street encounters.

**Do you have any thoughts on how the police could approach situations involving young people differently to build trust and avoid unnecessary escalation?**

**Commitment to Respectful Conduct:** Emphasising a commitment to treating young individuals with respect is foundational. Regardless of the circumstances, adopting a

respectful approach establishes a positive tone for interactions, promoting a sense of dignity and fairness.

**Comprehensive Training Programs:** Implementing comprehensive training programs for officers is crucial. These programs should focus on effective communication techniques and equip officers with a nuanced understanding of young people's perspectives. This training contributes to officers' ability to navigate situations with empathy and cultural competence.

**Positive Community Engagement Programs:** Actively organising events that facilitate positive interactions between police and young people is essential. Community engagement programs, such as sports events, workshops, or mentorship initiatives, provide opportunities for officers and young individuals to connect on a personal level. These positive interactions contribute to building trust over time.

**Enhanced Transparency in Procedures:** Transparency is key to building trust. Clearly communicating procedures and policies related to interactions with young people ensures that everyone involved understands the expectations. This openness fosters a sense of fairness and predictability, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings.

**Community Policing Initiatives:** Embracing community policing initiatives establishes a collaborative approach. Officers actively engage with the community, including young individuals, to understand their needs and concerns. This involvement helps build relationships based on mutual understanding, reducing the potential for tension.

**Youth Advisory Boards:** Establishing youth advisory boards can provide a platform for young people to express their opinions and concerns directly to the police. This two-way communication channel ensures that the voices of young individuals are heard, fostering a sense of inclusion and participation in decisions that affect them.

Various section 75 groups:

**Have you or anyone you know faced discrimination or unequal treatment from the police because of your ethnicity, gender identity, disability, or other characteristics?**

*"I haven't personally faced discrimination from the PSNI, but I know a friend who felt unfairly treated because of their ethnicity. They were stopped more often than others in our group, and it seemed like it was because of their background. It made them uncomfortable and kind of singled out. I've heard stories from others too, where they felt judged because of how they looked or where they were from. It's frustrating because it shouldn't matter what you look like or where you're from when it comes to being treated fairly."*

**What changes or support do you believe are needed to ensure fair and respectful treatment of all young people, regardless of their background or identity?**

Implementation of policies ensuring uniform treatment for everyone, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or other identities, is essential. Holding officers accountable for fair practices in all interactions establishes a framework for equitable treatment.

Equipping police officers with comprehensive training on cultural sensitivity, diversity, and inclusion is imperative. This education enables officers to understand diverse backgrounds and minimises biases in their interactions with young people.

Encouraging active involvement of police in community activities is vital for building trust and understanding between law enforcement and diverse communities. Such engagement promotes mutual respect and facilitates positive relationships.

Creating accessible and safe channels for reporting discrimination or unfair treatment is crucial. Young people must feel confident in reporting incidents without fearing reprisals, ensuring accountability, and addressing issues promptly.

Ensuring transparency in police procedures and policies related to interactions with young individuals is a cornerstone of building trust. Transparency fosters confidence in law enforcement practices and enhances community understanding.

Implementing educational programs in schools or community centres that focus on rights, diversity, and understanding different perspectives is empowering. These programs equip young people with knowledge about their rights and guide them on how to navigate interactions with law enforcement respectfully.

A comprehensive approach involves establishing and enforcing robust policies, providing cultural sensitivity training, encouraging community engagement, creating accessible reporting channels, involving youth in decision-making, ensuring transparency in procedures, and implementing educational programs. These measures collectively contribute to creating an environment where all young people receive fair and respectful treatment, regardless of their background or identity.

**How could the police work better with schools or educational settings to create a safer and more inclusive environment for young people?**

Positive Engagement Programs: Implementing initiatives where officers positively engage with students is pivotal. These can include school talks focusing on safety, community policing workshops, or sessions providing career guidance. Such programs foster constructive relationships between students and the police, creating a sense of trust and understanding.

**Integration of Community Policing in Schools:** Introducing community policing initiatives within school environments is beneficial. This involves active participation of officers in school events, offering support, and serving as mentors or resources for students. This integration not only enhances safety but also establishes a sense of community and cooperation.

**Training for School Staff:** Providing training for school staff is essential to ensure effective engagement with law enforcement. This training should cover strategies for handling safety concerns, promoting a trusting relationship between students and the police, and creating an environment where both parties feel comfortable and respected.

**Collaborative Safety Programs:** Collaboratively developing and implementing safety programs that involve both law enforcement and school staff contributes to a comprehensive approach. These programs can address issues such as bullying, substance abuse, and conflict resolution, fostering a secure and inclusive educational environment.

**Student Advisory Boards:** Establishing student advisory boards provides a platform for young people to express their perspectives on safety, inclusivity, and their relationship with the police. Involving students in decision-making processes ensures their voices are heard and considered in initiatives aimed at creating a safer environment.

**Deployment of School Resource Officers:** Assigning officers as school resource officers is a strategic move to cultivate trust and establish reliable points of contact for students. These officers play a crucial role in addressing safety concerns within the educational environment, fostering a secure and collaborative atmosphere.

**Confidential Channels for Student Assistance:** Establishing secure channels through which students can voice concerns or seek assistance from law enforcement, in this case, the PSNI, is paramount. These channels provide a confidential and safe avenue for students to express themselves, fostering a sense of safety and security within the school community.

A collaborative effort involving positive engagement programs, community policing initiatives, training for school staff, collaborative safety programs, student advisory boards, cultural competency training, and regular communication channels creates a holistic approach. This approach aims to build a safer and more inclusive environment for young people within educational settings.

PSNI Strategies, training, and policies:

**Are you aware of any initiatives or strategies the police have in place for children and young people? What do you think about them?**

*"As a young person, I've seen a few initiatives by the police aimed at us. Some are pretty good, like the talks they give in schools about staying safe online or dealing with bullying. It's cool when they come to our community events too, makes them seem more approachable."*

*"I feel like they miss some important stuff. Like, they talk about online safety, but not much about discrimination or mental health".*

*"It would be better if they asked us what we really need help with and then made their strategies based on that."*

*"They should have more awareness raising about what they are doing in schools".*

## **Concluding Comments**

Include Youth and the young people we work with believe that there remains much work to be done to build children and young people's confidence in policing. Include Youth's experience through our direct participation and service-delivery work with young people in Northern Ireland over many years, has shown that there are many issues relating to policing which still need to be resolved.

We hope that our submission is helpful to the Policing Board and we are more than happy to discuss any of the issues raised. We are especially keen for the Board to communicate directly with children and young people.