



An Evaluation of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation's Youth in Action Programme

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Youth In Action- Impact Report 2022



Foreword:

The Rio Ferdinand foundation has had a working relationship in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland since 2016, developed and enhanced through footballing connections, family links and the interests of sponsors with interests in both geographies. Until 2020 the work of the Foundation was delivered on a sporadic basis, however, primarily supporting other organisations in providing youth leadership and employability programmes.

In 2020 the Foundation developed a partnership with the UEFA Foundation to deliver a consistent programme of work across the island of Ireland, focusing on tackling racism and inequality through the empowerment and upskilling of young people to tackle issues in the heart of their communities. The Youth In Action programme has since developed to become a key project in the portfolio of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation.

Despite the challenges posed by the Covid19 pandemic, the Youth In Action project has worked with young people across Ireland to build their skills, offer opportunities to interact with other communities and organisations and deliver programmes that bring communities together to tackle racism and hate crime.

These young people have contributed to and delivered fantastic community events and film and social media content from Belfast, Portadown, Omagh, Enniskillen, Sligo, Mayo and beyond.

This research document provides a snapshot of the work of the Foundation in Northern Ireland through the Youth In Action project. This report provides us with insight into the role we can take to support young people that is relevant, impactful, and delivered without duplicating the work of other services already established.

I want to thank the UEFA Foundation for supporting us in this project. I would also like to thank partner agencies on both sides of the border who have been critical in ensuring we can deliver our work under challenging circumstances.

I would also like to recognise the foundation staff and community stakeholders who volunteered and facilitated delivery, especially the young people involved in our training, projects, and evaluation. You are all an inspiration.

Thanks also to Dr Conor Murray and Ulster University, who undertook the research interviews and made the recommendations to inform our ongoing delivery and development.

I look forward to the Foundation working with you all and new partners and supporters in the coming months and years.



Rio Ferdinand
Founder and Trustee, Rio Ferdinand Foundation



Youth In Action Summary

The Youth In Action project was developed in response to the increasing concern expressed by colleagues and partners in Northern Ireland and Ireland on the rising levels of hate crime based on race and ethnicity in those geographies.

Working with the UEFA Foundation, the project was developed to capacity build and empower young people with the skills to build community cohesion and tackle racism and xenophobia through community projects and social action.

Youth In Action delivered targeted work with migrant and refugee communities. The programme-built partnerships with organisations working within minority communities and delivered initiatives and training to young people across all disadvantaged, excluded and vulnerable communities in Ireland / Northern Ireland.

By enhancing the skills, confidence, networks, and opportunities available to young people from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds, the project enables participants to deliver a grassroots message of respect inclusion and work together to create safer, stronger and more inclusive communities.

In particular, the Youth In Action project created an environment for young people to work together to:

- Create spaces and opportunities for enhanced cultural understanding and tackle the negativity of racism and xenophobia.
- Improve young people's confidence, skills, and experiences to enable and empower them to take a lead role in delivering a message of inclusion, equality, and respect in their communities.
- Create long-lasting friendships and networks across communities and cultures to tackle social exclusion and prejudice.

The project also included an external evaluation and impact report delivered by Ulster University to identify the successes and best practices established by the project. The report also reviews the role and additionality the Rio Ferdinand Foundation can bring to this agenda in Ireland and Northern Ireland and makes recommendations on how the project and the Foundation should proceed and develop in the future.



Youth In Action- Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Community

We worked alongside young leaders trained by the Youth In Action project from the Syrian and East Timor refugee communities. We hosted a cross-community tournament and cultural event that worked with community groups, residents, youth clubs, and other migrant communities, with over 200 people attending. The event was also attended by key strategic stakeholders from the local Council supported by policing services across Northern Ireland and local sports clubs.

“That event was for all of us, even the Syrian families and all different nationalities; we had fun, and we’re all one, there’s no racism, no difference, nothing at all, we make friends.”

Omar Al Masri, Volunteer

“To get people from different ethnic backgrounds to come together to play football, it doesn’t even need to be competitive, all you need is like two teams and a football and then at the end of it just shaking hands and you know like befriending them.”

Claudio Santos, Volunteer and East Timor Football Team Coach.

See the evaluation video on the Rio Ferdinand Foundation YouTube Channel: [Watch Now](#)

Youth in Action Activity

The Youth In Action project was delivered against a backdrop of Covid19 restrictions and lockdown measures that severely impacted the ability of the project to provide face to face outreach and community activity on a year-round basis as initially planned.

These challenges were compounded by the differing restrictions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, creating a complex delivery environment in each geography that required a flexible and creative response from project staff and young people in a fluid working environment. As a result, most of the project delivery in year one of the project took place in Northern Ireland and is the focus of this report.

The revised approach adopted by the Youth In Action project in response to restrictions and lockdown measures focused on mixed online and face to face delivery, comprising of the following key activities:

- Outreach to youth groups and agencies working with minority communities, refugee and migrant representative groups, youth organisations working in areas of disadvantage and with local authorities and PSNI officers who could signpost and support engagement with key cohorts of young people.
- Delivery of online workshops, project planning and training with young people, including accredited training in Youth leadership and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion through the Open College Network.
- Face to face workshops and networking events to build networks across Northern Ireland and explore issues of racism and division from a youth perspective.
- Delivery of coaching and vocational qualifications in person through the Community Sports Leaders Award and filmmaking and social media courses.
- Youth-led sports participation events and youth-produced films brought communities together and gave a platform for youth voices.
- Engagement in significant scale events with other groups – including the Hope Cup event in Belfast with UEFA and BT Sport, on pitch representation at the UEFA Super Cup final and participation in the Hope Collective Hackathon as part of a UK-wide youth consultation on inequality.

It should be noted that during this period, the Covid lockdown and disruption in social and education networks also impacted heavily on the young people with whom we worked. Workshops and activities were broadened to include activities designed to improve participants' confidence, resilience, and mental health. Several content pieces addressed these issues alongside the anti-racism, community cohesion and tackling hate crime elements of our work.



Case Study

Youth In Action- Hope Cup, Belfast

Working alongside the UEFA Foundation, BT Sport and the Irish Football Association, the Rio Ferdinand Foundation co-delivered the Hope Cup in Belfast – a tournament that brought young people from across Northern Ireland to tackle hate crime and celebrate community cohesion through football. The project was delivered as a part of the UEFA Super Cup final in Belfast.

Our staff and volunteers recruited 16 young leaders from within our project to participate in the trial match and the full event at Crusaders FC Seaview Stadium. At the same time, our youth ambassador from Belfast and our community coaches from the Republic of Ireland formed part of the coaching teams on the day alongside football legends Joe Cole and Glenn Hoddle.

The event was the subject of an in-depth documentary screened on BT Sport presented by our Founder and Patron, Rio Ferdinand.

"This is an opportunity that the kids will remember for the rest of their lives; it's had a huge impact." Johnathan Heffernan, Rio Ferdinand Foundation Coach, Republic of Ireland

See the evaluation video on the Rio Ferdinand Foundation YouTube Channel: [Watch Now](#)

Youth In Action – Impact

Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, the Youth In Action project delivered a programme that responded to the needs of the young people it engaged and over-delivered against its initial targets. It is clear from the Ulster University evaluation that the Youth in Action programme has had a significant impact on the lives of project participants over a relatively short period.

The main benefits of the programme as part of the evaluation were reported to be:

- Increased levels of self-confidence, self-reflection and sense of empowerment.
- Promoting more positive mindsets (particularly for those with a prior lack of confidence using English)
- Relationship and friendship building
- The growth of leadership and peer-mentoring skills
- Increasing connectivity (particularly for rural participants)
- Providing a safe space to talk about sensitive issues impacting young people such as racism, hate crime, sexuality, and mental health.

The approach of the Youth in Action programme was felt to be relatively unique in a Northern Irish context and a welcome development.

The programme arrived in Northern Ireland when many young people were struggling with the impact of Covid-19 and the associated lockdown on mental health, connectivity, and day-to-day life. There is a clear appetite from programme participants 'for more, and the pilot programme has ignited a desire for further work to build upon the successes.



Youth In Action- Omagh and Fermanagh

At the end of August 2021, young people from across the Omagh and Fermanagh local authority area and young people from the traveller community in the Republic of Ireland came together in the town of Enniskillen to attend a week-long training and leadership programme.

The week included workshops and team-building activities that covered confidence and resilience, coaching skills in a practical environment and finished with a cross-community football tournament involving a cross-section of the local community and groups from Mayo and Sligo.

The event was attended by the first black player for Chelsea FC, Paul Canoville, who shared his own experiences of racism and its impact on mental health, and Northern Ireland international Ashley Hutton, who shared her own experiences in football.

The evaluation video was produced by a group of young women who undertook a media and filmmaking course and who subsequently created their films addressing the issue of mental health during covid.

'It's good to feel busy again, and it's good to know I am learning something as well. This has been incredible, and I am proud of myself and proud of my peers for taking part in something like this.'

Project participant.

See the evaluation video on the Rio Ferdinand Foundation YouTube channel: [Watch Now](#)

Youth produced mental health film 1: [Watch Now](#)

Youth produced mental health film 2: [Watch Now](#)

Connectivity and Recommendations

The goals of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation generally and the Youth in Action programme more specifically link with several prominent policy positions in Northern Ireland with regards to racism, hate crime, equality, and social inclusion – most notably within The Executive Office's Together: Building a United Community (T: BUC) strategy (TEO, 2013) and the ten-year Racial Equality Strategy (TEO, 2015).

The goals of the Youth in Action programme are also intimately connected with some of the main aims of the draft Programme for Government (TEO, 2021), particularly around ensuring 'children and young people have the best start in life and promoting an 'equal and inclusive society.' The programme goals are also strongly linked to the children and Young People Strategy 2020 – 2030 (NI Executive), which acknowledges the need to promote greater social cohesion and good relations, particularly those who experience direct or indirect racism or discrimination.

Continuation of the work of the Foundation is also essential in the current context of an increase in reported hate crime in Northern Ireland between 2020 and 2021. That the work should continue and be strengthened in Northern Ireland is not in doubt.

Ulster University Recommendations

In line with the evaluation brief the Ulster University team has made a small series of recommendations from our research to enable the clear success of the project and the work of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation to be enhanced and extended beyond this pilot phase of activity. In particular the recommendations address the extension of programme content now face to face working is more feasible and Covid19 restrictions have been lifted, elements of the programme that participants and stakeholders want to see developed and extended and the clear way the Youth In Action programme meets the policy context in Northern Ireland.

The recommendations are highlighted below. For the full context and rationale for these recommendations please see section 6 of the Ulster University report on page 32-33.

1. Consideration should be given, Covid-19 permitting, as to how to facilitate face-to-face sessions as part of the programme.
2. Additional consideration should be given to how to increase sporting content/engagement as part of the programme without detriment to the invaluable non-sporting benefits the programme provides (leadership, confidence building etc.).
3. There is a need for pathways to be developed between the strands of work of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation in a Northern Irish context. This would enable young participants to progress through different stages and perhaps (re)engage in future programmes as peer mentors and 'champions' of the programme goals.

4. There is a further need for pathways to be developed relating to voluntary and employability experience. This could be achieved by embedding and signposting volunteering and employability opportunities at critical junctures throughout future programmes.

5. Consideration should be given to course length, with participant preference for longer courses to be developed (albeit perhaps within shorter sessions).

6. As is the case in England, the Rio Ferdinand Foundation should seek to develop local partnerships to help build up skills, education and employability sessions and pathways for young people.

7. The Rio Ferdinand Foundation should begin to build an evidence-based long-term evaluation. Pre- and post-survey content in-built to measure progress in knowledge/education transfer and practical utility/outcome (which would dovetail with the outcomes-based approach advocated in the latest Programme for Government consultation in 2021).

8. Consideration should be given on how to build upon the foothold in Northern Ireland and develop more substantial cross-border (north/south) and east/west relationships with young people and stakeholders. This could be achieved by cross-border and east/west initiatives, such as programmes, voluntary opportunities, and networking events.

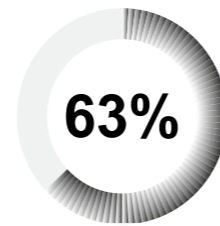
9. The Rio Ferdinand Foundation should consider engaging more in the policy context in NI. One avenue for achieving this could be by hosting a knowledge exchange event and inviting critical stakeholders involved in making policy and shaping practice with children and young people, such



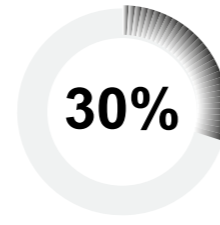
Key Statistics

348 young people engaged over 12 months

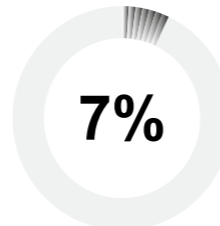
63% aged 11-15 years



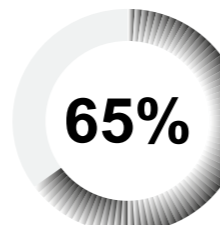
30% were aged 16-19



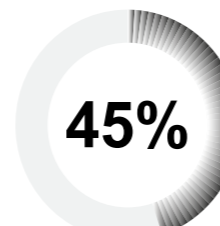
7% were 18 and over



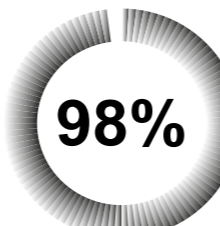
65% male / 35% female participation



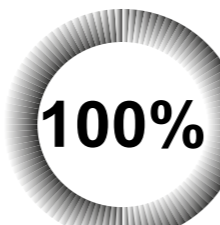
42% (146 young people) completed training courses



98% of the young people self-reported the programme had raised their awareness of racism and racist behaviour.



100% of the young people surveyed felt they had built new friendships.



An Evaluation of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation's Youth in Action Programme

January 2022

Ulster University

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Note: Throughout this report, 'Rio Ferdinand Foundation' and 'the Foundation' are used interchangeably.

1. Introduction

The Rio Ferdinand Foundation has worked on the island of Ireland on a periodic basis over the last six years and during this period the Foundation has been involved in several discussions around the issues of youth leadership, employability, tackling racism and addressing hate crime with several community organisations and stakeholders.

Following discussions with the UEFA Foundation in 2020/2021, the Rio Ferdinand Foundation put in place a pilot programme for 12 months that provided them with a consistent presence and programme to understand if, and how, they might make a consistent contribution in a Republic of Ireland/Northern Ireland context.

The Rio Ferdinand Foundation with funding and resources from UEFA Foundation have worked together to deliver a pilot programme of youth empowerment and community cohesion, with a focus on tackling inequality and racism across Northern Ireland. The resulting project, entitled Youth in Action, is very much focused on developing young people as leaders in their community, developing their skills to deliver social action projects and specifically to create networks through this approach that will help address inequality and racism at that very 'street' level.

The Youth in Action programme was implemented throughout 2021 and included accredited leadership training, vocational training and skills and support for young people to deliver social action projects and events that promote equality and inclusion in their own communities. The Youth in Action curriculum includes:

- Community Sports Leaders Award: Young people undertaking a Community Sports Leadership Award (CSLA) learn and demonstrate important life skills such as effective communication and organisation whilst learning to lead basic physical activities to younger people, their peers, older generations and within the community.
- Digital Campaigning: Delivered by professional filmmakers and social action specialists, participants are guided through the steps involved in creating an effective 'call to action' and the digital platforms available to them to promote their campaign message.
- Smartphone Film-making: Young people can discover the power of film to creatively communicate their ideas and explore the world around them. Using a Smartphone, each week young people are set small project tasks around making their own short Smartphone film.
- Spoken Word, Lyrics and MCing: Young people learn to express themselves via writing lyrics, performing spoken word and MCing. The sessions are aimed at helping participants to use their voices creatively to create and produce impactful tracks and spoken word pieces raising awareness and tackling issues that are important to them.
- Start your own Podcast: Young people learn how to make their voice heard on their chosen social issues by setting up their own podcast. Interactive skills sessions teach young people how to set up their own podcast from home from the technical side and publishing their podcast, right through to the art of interviews and choosing discussion topics.
- Influencer Inspiration: Free online events are hosted by the Rio Ferdinand Foundation who run live Q&As with well-known 'influencers' and social activists who are inspiring role models for young people. Each Q&A explores a different theme and social action topic, giving young people the confidence and networks to make their own impactful social media output and generate an online following

- Community Events: A series of community events including community football tournaments, youth performance events, and open days with a range of partners, education providers and employers. These events were to be held at local community venues, but like many other areas of day to life in 2020/2021, they were subject to Covid-19 restrictions and regulations (as shall be discussed later in the report.)

The following report documents the findings of an evaluation of the Youth in Action programme conducted by a research team from Ulster University between September 2021 and January 2022. Ethical approval for the project was secured in advance via the Ulster University Research and Ethics Committee. Data has been anonymised and held at the University under the parameters of the Data Protection Act (2018) and Ulster University's General Data Protection Policy (2019).

The focus was upon a qualitative research methodology which could best capture the lived experience of project participants and organisers. It is often something of a misnomer in qualitative research to discuss 'sampling' with regards to how participants were recruited; it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of 'selection', given that interviewees are usually invited to take part in research based upon their membership and knowledge of the practices of the particular group under study (Reybold et al., 2012). Thus, the selection strategy underpinning this evaluation was 'purposive' and of a non-probability nature (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Purposive 'sampling' is the optimum strategy to adopt when seeking qualitative and detailed information about a specific topic which only a select number of people can provide (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Participants were therefore required to have had some stake in the programme – either as organisers/facilitators or participants. Participants were required to have completed 75% of the programme to be interviewed as part of the evaluation.

Interviewees were asked to consider the following:

- The most positive aspects of the programme;
- What parts of the programme could work better;
- Their thoughts on the online parts of the programme; and
- What some of their opportunities are after taking part in the programme.

Two focus groups with young people that participated in the programme, and seven interview sessions with individuals that organised and/or facilitated the programme were held – in total 17 individuals participated in this evaluation. Given that a significant number of Youth in Action programme participants come from new community backgrounds, a translator was present during those sessions where it was felt translation may be required.

It should be noted that as a result of the government regulations and public health advice surrounding Covid-19, the focus groups and interviews were conducted using the online platform Zoom, with password protected sign-in to ensure only those invited to take part in the evaluation would be part of the discussions.

The research was based upon the principle of 'informed consent' and interviewees were reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any point. Any interviewees under the age of 18 who participated in one of the two focus groups were required to have a parent/guardian complete a consent form on their behalf. Interviewees were guaranteed that their anonymity would be protected and therefore throughout this report any verbatim quotations used are not attributable to any identified individuals (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

The following report documents the findings of an independent, external evaluation of the Youth in Action programme conducted by a research team from Ulster University between September 2021 and January 2022. The views included in this report are not necessarily representative of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation. The core research team consisted of Dr Conor Murray (Principal Investigator; correspondence to c.murray4@ulster.ac.uk), Dr Philip McCready, Dr John Bell, and Dr Alexandra Chapman.

Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis software (CAQDAS) in the form of NVivo 12 was utilised to code, organise and analyse the interview transcripts (Bazeley and Jackson, 2014). While it is still up to the researcher to input, interpret and analyse the data themselves (Silverman, 2013), the software allows for a more efficient coding of themes into differing categories ('nodes') which can then be analysed vis-à-vis one another to explore possible connections between the data (Bazeley and Jackson, 2014).

This concept of 'coding' and exploring linkages between emerging themes via 'constant comparison' is a key concept within 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and helps guard against an overly prescriptive and deductive approach wherein the researcher is 'imposing' themes upon the data rather than 'listening' to it (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

The following report is divided into six sections. Sections 2 – 4 document the main benefits of the Youth in Action programme thus far for participants (with section 4 highlighting the uniqueness of the project in a Northern Irish context). Section 5 documents some of the challenges encountered and lessons learned through the pilot programme thus far. Section 6 concludes the report with a small number of recommendations to assist in the delivery of future programmes.

2. Sports Based Interventions and areas of best practice

The Youth in Action programme utilised sport, and specifically association football, to engage young people in positive activities. In this regard, the programme was most explicitly developmental in origin and has built upon the core principle of 'Sport for Development' which has been defined as, 'the use of sport, or any form of physical activity, to provide both children and adults with the opportunity to achieve their full potential through initiatives that promote personal and social development' (UNICEF, 2019: 3).

However, it is important to note that the project involved a wide range of associated careers and skills involved in the sports and football industries including coaching skills, media and broadcast training, event planning and campaigning to upskill and empower young people to deliver their own projects:

'We've delivered accredited training pathways and youth leadership, community sports leaders awards, delivered film making workshops, we've gotten young people to make films that respond to issues that affect them and in some cases they have addressed issues of mental health, in others it the addressed community cohesion and tackling racism, in some areas it was around youth leadership thing and potential careers in sports. It really depended on the individuals that came through from young people attending, but those would probably be the key areas that translated into Youth in Action and we developed projects around those issues and themes.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated Government restrictions on face-to-face meetings, many aspects of the course were delivered online. All online workshops were run via closed Zoom groups with Rio Ferdinand Foundation youth workers, arts practitioners and experienced industry professionals trained in digital safeguarding. The movement to online delivery limited the Foundation's ability to engage a wider network of strategic stakeholders, policy makers and funders – particularly those in the Republic of Ireland, where restrictions differed to those in Northern Ireland:

The benefits of semi-structured interviews are that they retain enough 'structure' to allow comparison across the data, while at the same time are flexible enough to allow interviewees' to steer the conversation towards topics that they believe to be relevant, as opposed to solely discussing what the interviewer feels is important (Sarantakos, 2013). 18

'COVID obviously derailed our initial approach, which was based on a practice model, so we had to think very quickly on how we might be able to engage and drive the programme forward. I think it went well, but obviously that proved to be a bit of a challenge for us in the first instance.'

'While we had quite a few networks in Belfast, the other areas that we worked in across Northern Ireland were less established. That was a challenge in terms of accessing the young people – which I think we combatted well in the North. However, it was more difficult in the Republic. As you know, the lockdown was a lot harder, deeper and longer than it was in in the North – so we probably ended up putting more resources into NI.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

Despite the limits the public health restrictions placed on the programme, it was evident that participants very much appreciated that the project was able to run at all during Covid:

'I think there was a real sense that we gave them the focus and we gave him a real uplift (specific participant) coming out of Covid that there was something positive and something that he could aim towards and something that was achievable. So, I think an unexpected impact was that during lockdown and the Covid pandemic, and the way that young people have been the starting to feel marginalised and mental health was suffering... programmes like this being able to hit the ground running and do something positive even online clearly gave him a massive lift... that came out with the interviews with young people when we returned to face-to-face sessions, which was great feedback.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

The impact of Covid-19 was felt not only in terms of how the courses were delivered but also from the outset in relation to how young people were identified and recruited to take part in the first instance (also see Coyle et al., 2022). It is important to recognise that the success of the programme in recruiting, engaging with and completing courses with young people during a global pandemic is down to the networking skills of instructors, alongside flexible practice delivery:

'So, the initial approach was going to be very much around outreach working, putting people on the ground, going and talking to young people, building relationships with communities and building out from there. Clearly that couldn't happen when we went into complete lockdown again from Christmas onwards so we had to think on our feet very carefully. So, through our stakeholder networks we built up relationships with organisations that were on the ground that already work in in this space and who we felt would be able to engage the kind of young people that we worked with, so our outreach shifted from "boots on the ground to meet young people" to basically me jumping onto a series of telephone calls and introductory zoom calls building relationships with organisations and people that would reach the kind of young people we wanted to. As the programme grew we found that has moved somewhat and now people are starting to approach us about how they can get involved.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

'Fun' emerged as a critical reason why participant engagement was so high. It was felt that the enjoyment element created an environment for more meaningful and deep conversation around important societal and cultural issues. However, whilst enjoying the programme and being appreciative that the course was able to take place at all, participants felt that the programme would have been even more 'fun' if it had been conducted and delivered in person:

'I think it should be like face-to-face because it's easier, I think there was some work that was actually hard to do, because you do all the work and then there is a chance of it all just crashing and it all disappearing. So you'd have to just do it again. It wasn't that it was impossible to do, but if I was doing it [remotely] on my own, then sometimes I could find it hard.' (Young Person 2)

'I would recommend to do the next one in person, even though remotely is good because you don't have to get all the participants to travel all over the place to get there, but like if you do like two sessions in person, two sessions online it kind of makes it a bit more fun, because only getting the knowledge from the screen can sometimes be a bit boring. You know what I mean?' (Young Person 3)

It is worth reiterating that the Rio Ferdinand Foundation initially intended, and would have preferred, to deliver this course in a face-to-face capacity. Indeed, the facilitators/organisers recognised that engagement at a community level would have produced deeper relationships and a greater depth of programme content – however the public health restrictions prohibited this form of delivery. Despite this, several participants highlighted that they were surprised and impressed by the course content. There appeared to be an assumption that given the organisation is called 'The Rio Ferdinand Foundation' that there would be an explicit focus on football within the programmes. However, participants welcomed the opportunity to engage in a challenging and wide-ranging curriculum:

'I think it was the sessions, the two-hour sessions on a Monday provided the young people, it just kind of challenged them a little bit to think outside the box. It gave them examples of other young leaders and programmes and in particular some of the things that we ask them... you know 'What's important to you' and then all coming around and basically identifying some of the same issues and then bonding over that. That kind of thinking out of the box to what our next steps what actions can we do next to affect those areas.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 2)

'But it was funny because two of the girls in particular came on the first week totally in their football kit, because they thought they were playing football, nobody had explained to them that it was a leadership programme. So, that was a bit... 'Oh will they come back?' But they did and they were actually really good, and both of them were involved in the Hope match. So, they saw it right through to the end and enjoyed it.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 6)

'I mean like Rio brings the football. It was 50/60% of what we do in general I would say probably 50% you know, because a lot of it's around pod-casting and you know that the bit with Warner Brothers as well as we move forward gets us more of an opportunity to enter that field you know? Into the arts and crafts areas. Which for me, it's about what young people like, what young people want to work around, and then for us to develop new partnerships and new skills. And Rio, you know, the Foundation itself isn't just around football and football development, it's about that employability stuff and that is around other skills that young people need to actually find employment.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 3)

One participant succinctly captured the fusion between sport as a reason why some people decide to join and the outcome of engaging in a programme in which sport is not the sole component. It was felt that the opportunity to participate in a diverse group brought many benefits, both personally and collectively. These benefits will be discussed in greater detail in the next section of this report. However, at this juncture it is important to recognise that whilst the label of sports-based interventions may be, in part, a misnomer in relation to the Youth in Action programme, this is actually a strength for many participants:

'Programme' and 'project' are terms which are used interchangeably in this report when referring to the work of Youth in Action.

Petitpas et al. (2005: 65) established that developmental programmes focus on participant development of skills and individual growth. Intervention programmes are designed to stop or reduce negative behaviours. Prevention programmes are focused on deterring young people from becoming involved with negative behaviours.

'We do as well through education. Obviously, the Arabic classes and the English classes. We do dissemination of information as well. We do information awareness sessions. So, people have already sessions with the Law Centre, with Social Security, with the topics they are interested in – with access to health for example. So, there are a number of - education seems to be one of the main areas that we are developing initiatives in at the minute but sport is a thing that came across very strongly especially from the young people. They wanted to get together. They wanted a football team. They wanted to have a catalyst that they could get together and promote well-being and exercise and mix with other people. I think that was one of the main reasons as well playing with other teams and get to know other young people from different backgrounds. Especially during Covid, they felt very isolated and they would be quite vocal in relation to that. They want a catalyst ...' (Organiser/Stakeholder 4)

The timing of the programme delivery was also seen as being well-considered and generally participants spoke very favourably of the structure and organisation of the course:

'Speaking the truth, at the beginning I just thought it is not going to happen remotely - but it happened and it was quite fun, we thought if it's in person it would be better for everybody but it happened it wasn't really heavy on the students, you know? For the participants, it was fun, and it was on Saturdays - which everybody was off - on that day like, you know the weekend and it wasn't like you know educational heavy stuff it was just for fun and I came to meet others and get new information and knowledge about leadership. So yes, I would say was quite good remotely.' (Young Person 3)

3. Benefits to Young People

The Rio Ferdinand Foundation aims to support young people between the ages of 10-25 to tackle the inequalities they face in their lives. Through programmes such as Youth in Action, the Foundation creates opportunities and pathways for young people to 'take control of their lives, become socially mobile and drive social change in their communities.' The Foundation provides support and pathways under four main strategic themes: Safe Spaces; Health and Wellbeing; Strong, Safe and Inclusive communities; and Progression, Skills and Employability:

'The first pillar of our work is to create safe spaces for young people, so that is really about finding a place where young people can feel safe, can talk about themselves, can talk about their issues, so that's not just about a physical space or an online space, it's about a place where young people can feel that they can be themselves and express themselves. So, that's obviously an element we wanted to cover given the groups we have been trying to engage. The second one is all about physical and emotional wellbeing. Supporting young people to think about their mental health, to think about their physical fitness, providing programmes that help increase their confidence, help increase their resilience, help them to build relationships and communications. I guess it's about personal and social development in a non-accredited, informal way so young people can build their soft skills and their health and wellbeing.'

'The third element of our approach which applies very much to this piece of work is about creating stronger inclusive communities. I think those three elements have all surfaced in Youth in Action as the projects progressed. The additional pillar of work that we deliver in England is focused on progression pathways around education, training and employment. We haven't really focused on that in Youth in Action, we don't think we're there yet... this is a pilot programme and I would hope that this element of our work will emerge in the future.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

The Foundation has developed five core values that underpin all the work they do. These core values are:

YOUTH-LED: Young people are the heart of everything ‘we do,’ inspiring us to evolve and adapt, so we can support them to realise their full potential.

EMPOWERING: Enabling young people to recognise their skills, giving them ownership to achieve their individual goals.

A CONNECTOR: Bringing young people, their communities and our partnership network together; valuing diversity and creating a shared sense of belonging.

RESILIENT: Bouncing back with enthusiasm and fresh solutions, continually learning and taking the time to actively ‘listen’ and respond to the world in which we work.

COURAGEOUS: With a ‘can-do’, open, supportive and honest approach – ‘we’ are not afraid to do things differently.

It was evident from participant responses that the aforementioned aims and values of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation had been delivered to participants of the Youth in Action programme. However, it should be noted that due to the small sample size it cannot be extrapolated that the aims have been successfully met for all participants on the range of programmes delivered by the Youth in Action/Rio Ferdinand Foundation. As outlined above, the Foundation aims to act as a connector to bring young people together. One participant identified how the need for such approaches was heightened by the COVID pandemic, particularly for young people from minority communities:

‘All the participants [in one cohort of the Youth in Action programme] came through the ‘Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme’ which is a UK Government scheme in partnership with IOM and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. It was a programme that ran from 2015 to 2020; so that scheme is now finished for 5 years. All the families of the children who took part in it [the Youth in Action programme] came as refugees as part of that scheme – so they are very much new to the country and were learning the language. They were trying to integrate and Covid came as a ton of bricks especially for the young children. They felt very isolated. They felt they needed something to do especially when all the schools were not effectively operational. So, the programme gave them hope and gave them a way of getting together and feel that they were being heard and they were developing and doing something.’

Another participant highlighted that purely from a geographical perspective Northern Ireland is isolated from the rest of the United Kingdom and then within Northern Ireland itself, as a result many rural communities feel isolated from the larger cities of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry:

‘I think it does affect young people because Northern Ireland/Ireland is not included a lot in the UK. So, this can result to be a negative, because we feel isolated leaving us feeling we don’t have a connection or feel accepted. Being a young person in Northern Ireland, I feel we are at a different level compared to in the UK. Being a part of Omagh’s community, you will not get a lot of programmes like this, so when we do, it becomes very popular. But unfortunately, we do not get enough of these programmes and not everyone gets to participate. So maybe Omagh can work on making more programmes like this to help and support the youth.’ (Young Person 10)

Several participants identified the opportunity to discuss challenging issues that directly impact on their lives in a safe, inclusive space as being a significant personal benefit to their participation on the programme. In particular, a participant regarded the opportunity created during a course on leadership to problem-solve a live issue affecting them with other participants as especially beneficial:

‘The teachers who were teaching us about the leadership were lovely and the translator was amazing, and then especially if you asked for help anyone would help you and then, a certain thing we did was the problem-solving thing. Where there was a problem and we had to solve it as a team, my problem was bullying in school, and I was saying that you should have more teachers outside in the playground but whenever someone was getting bullied, the teacher just caught them and then gives a detention, or something. That was really enjoyable because we got to do it with our friends.’ (Young Person 3)

Being given the space to feel comfortable discussing such issues was welcomed given the impact that COVID had on many young people’s mental health and wellbeing (also see Cowie and Myers, 2021):

‘[We did a project] about mental health and seeing other peoples’ opinions from the group and the public about how they’ve coped with lockdown... I’d say like since lockdown for sure, mental health has affected us all, and doing that course has really opened my eyes about it and it’s made me realise that I should check up on my friends if I haven’t spoken to them in a while and same for my family and anyone else really... it really was nice to get going out and mixing with new people from different backgrounds, seeing as I’d been locked in the house for a while. It was good.’

Many participants identified empowerment as a benefit they had taken from their participation in the programme. All participants stated that they felt more confident as a result of the leadership training component of the programme:

‘The course helped me a lot with confidence, talking out loud - before I wasn’t a very good person with confidence, but when I did that course, my confidence rose, so that course was kind of changing something and that something had never changed before. It made my confidence grow.’ (Young Person 6)

‘Yes, it’s changed my mindset a lot because when I’m in a team and I’m working with them, I usually just sit there and do nothing while they do all the work, but now I do my best to be the leader and get them to follow me, and especially during Zoom meetings, before I used to always have my mic on mute and I would just sit there and never unmute myself, but after the course, yeah I just like to speak and be confident, and especially what (name removed) said, it boosts your confidence a lot.’ (Young Person 2)

To also learn about anxiety, because I feel that I sometimes struggle with that, since lockdown and everything, so I felt like I got help and support from the programme for that.’ (Young Person 7)

One participant noted that through the leadership course they were able to self-reflect on their own skills and actions. This participant was at the upper end of the age range that the Rio Ferdinand Foundation works with and felt it was important, given their own experiences, to maintain a wide age range across all programmes:

‘Like, for me I was one of the older participants in the leadership programme, I’m 24 at the moment, I thought I had all the ideas and thoughts and all the concepts about how to be a good leader.’

I thought that I was a perfect leader, that's what I thought, even as I'm 24 and had all this knowledge about, because I am doing it at the moment, I am trying my best to be a leader for my community, but I get a lot of information a lot of new knowledge, I mean the course might seem like it is for young people, but it is for people under 25, which is quite good. I would say just keep going with that because we had different groups of ages and we had people over 20 and people below 20, so we kind of had those different minds and different thoughts, which really helped a lot, so I would encourage you to just keep going with different ages.' (Young Person 3)

The challenging nature of the curriculum provided participants with the opportunity to discuss topics and issues that they may not otherwise have had. In cultivating a friendship between participants, it was felt that this created a safe space for detailed discussions that took participants 'out of their comfort zone'. In doing so, participants stated that they developed a confidence within themselves to articulate their thoughts and feelings on challenging topics when previously they would not have felt able to do so:

'I would say, leadership, just pushing me out of my comfort zone because sometimes I think about my work a lot I would think about what I have to do a lot and sometimes the course pushed me out of my comfort zone and made me want to talk to other people and be confident and whatever I say is alright because sometimes I'll worry that my words are not perfect, my sentence is not perfect. I would think a lot about how I say something, but after this leadership course I just realise that whatever I say, it's not going to be wrong because I used to be worried even about the simple things I'd say, and that had the biggest impact on me, pushing me out of my comfort zone.' (Young Person 6)

'If I put my hand up in school, I'd have to think about every single word I was going to say and now I just put my hand up and I can have the confidence to think on the spot, so it does actually push you out of your comfort zone and that helps a lot with your life.' (Young Person 2)

'I think, well one is that community cohesion, it's to give young people a voice around serious issues and terms like, serious youth violence and other labels that we give young people. They're not always given a voice to actually do that, for me it's about giving them an opportunity to develop skills, to create young mentors for other young people to aspire to become, you know it's all of those skills from end to end, their employability skills but then reading up the teamwork and all those other skills that really will help them in their future.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 3)

Bringing together such a diverse group of young people provided an inherent challenge for the young people themselves to engage and work with people from very different cultural, sexual and religious backgrounds to themselves:

'Tackling inequality, empowering young people, giving them a voice and giving the platform to develop as well as young leaders and promote diversity – to get to know each other and understand each other's perspectives as well in every sense not only in relation to racism but also not only race, but gender and sexual orientation and all the other differences between them. You can see very much upfront that this is one of the areas that they tackle and try to make sure there is a shared experience platform and try to make sure it is a safe environment that they can talk and that they can express themselves – they can feel valued.' (Organiser/Stakeholder4)

It should be noted that part of the programme included engagement with the PSNI and the Garda in the Republic of Ireland, and a participant regarded this engagement as being critical in fostering a relationship with police. The participant felt it was important to recognise that culturally some participants would have had a difficult relationship with police and other statutory authority figures based on their experiences before moving to Northern Ireland.

Engagement with police through the Youth in Action programme enabled participants to understand the community-oriented approach of the PSNI:

'I think they were very happy to work with the police. They actually felt quite safe in a sense. Even though, culturally this community would have issues with authority and with the figure of government authority but I think the approach from the PSNI gave to this programme on a friendly, more community orientated basis and very much as a support instead of as a regulator, an authority as such. It made them feel safe; "We are doing something that is right because the Police are backing us up here." So, "They seem good people, they seem approachable, they seem they want to support us." They see the police in a very different light now than they did before they came to Northern Ireland. It is a different approach and it works well especially with the young people.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 4)

For some, the friendships developed during the programmes were the most significant benefit:

'Like the whole programme in general, it brought the whole community together and one of the things I really loved about it – the tournament we had, we just brought people from different communities and nationalities and backgrounds, and they all had fun and formed a relationship and a friendship, that's the first main thing that I keep saying I love Rio's stuff and the stuff they've done with us. The second one is the chances and the opportunities that Rio's Foundation gave our young people. It touched me, they had the chance to meet really high-quality people, like Rio in person and other famous people...' (Young Person 3)

'It is what they really needed – getting out, meeting each other, interacting. It really broke down barriers, you know? In the sense of taking them out of the isolation, feeling that they had being in a house. They had something to look forward to for the summer. Getting to know the Timorese was amazing. The way they interacted was like one big family and everybody ... it didn't matter where they were from or what background, or language they spoke – they were all the same, they were all at the same level. It was lovely to see and the team that was from here as well. It was all just a big group of kids – they were all very similar, there was no barriers and no difference really. This was what made it so special.' (Organiser /Stakeholder 4)

4. The uniqueness of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation within the context of Northern Ireland

Given the prevalence of youth-based intervention programmes across the community and voluntary sector, in addition to statutory based youth provision in Northern Ireland, it is important to consider what is unique about the approach taken by the Rio Ferdinand Foundation within the context of Northern Ireland. Firstly, as noted above, the Rio Ferdinand Foundation is grounded in a youth-led approach characterised by four strategic pillars, namely: safe spaces; health and wellbeing; strong, safe and inclusive communities; and progression, skills and employability. It must be recognised that the overall methodology was derived from the approaches taken by the Rio Ferdinand Foundation in its work in England:

'Our methodology is based on what we are doing and what has worked in England (London and Manchester) and around 3 or, well 4, pillars of work really.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

With specific regard to Northern Ireland the Rio Ferdinand Foundation felt that for a pilot initiative the third pillar of 'strong, safe and inclusive communities' was particularly apt for targeting their engagement in Northern Ireland:

'The third element of the programme which I think applies here is about building stronger and more inclusive communities with young people in the lead. So within this we work with young people to build their accredited skills as the next step after the workshops and their personal development, to build young people's leadership skills and their understanding of that, we also deliver vocational programmes around filmmaking, music, sports and then encourage young people to work in their communities, I guess on the one hand build their work experience and practical experience in using those skills in a project setting, but also its around bringing young people together to work on these projects that benefit their community at large.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

The most unique aspect of the Youth in Action programme run by the Rio Ferdinand Foundation in Northern Ireland that set it apart from more traditional youth-based interventions in Northern Ireland is that it specifically set out to respond to the issue of hate crime. It must be noted that other organisations in Northern Ireland do work with young people in response to hate crimes, but participants suggested to researchers that such organisations did so as part of a broader youth provision remit whereas the Youth in Action programme was specifically focused on the issue:

'From research and our own networks we were aware that there are issues around racism and hate crime that have been emerging for a few years in Northern Ireland and Ireland ... and there was a feeling and feedback that young people from those new and vulnerable communities weren't being invested in, weren't being supported and they didn't have the same opportunities as their peers, so that was a starting point for us. So with that background and we put together a programme that said, 'Well, let's look to invest in places where we can work with these young people, bring them together in small groups, try and sort of build their understanding and relationships, and build relationships with the wider community' not through workshops that were almost lectures, but through an organic process that allowed them to be themselves.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

'This is filling that gap this is really looking at the anti-racism message, there's a lot of big organisations trying to almost extend what they're already doing, but because they're only extending it across a lot of their costs are getting absorbed in the staff costs, and they're not actually delivering.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 3)

In relation to sports-based youth programmes, the Rio Ferdinand Foundation was seen as being distinct from other sport-based programmes in that sport was not the sole component of the programmes. Instead, sport was seen more as a conduit for engagement with outcomes around employability, training skills and increased confidence and empowerment for young people being seen as the core aims:

'The difference with the Rio Ferdinand Foundation, they look at more around football as being the conduit to get people in, and they're driving things out and looking to upskill young people around employment and around training skills, and things like that... [whenever other organisations are] looking at employment, they're looking at it solely within football so they are looking always to see how they can increase their stuff, because again I guess that their whole remit is around increasing the football stuff and using football to make better communities as well, but they don't do the employment bit just the same as what I've found.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 3)

Mindful of being seen as an organisation that was not originally from Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, the Youth in Action programme consciously did not seek to tackle the issue of sectarianism. Instead, the approach was to focus on the issues of racism, equality and diversity:

'We did deliberately focus on racism, equality and diversity and steered very clear from any language around the whole sort of sectarian agenda and the 'green' and the 'orange'. We definitely found during our work of course that we were addressing, or not addressing, those issues as young people brought them up – but our focus is on engaging and then bringing young people together from all sorts of backgrounds to tackle racism and inequality. We aren't originally from Northern Ireland and the Rio Ferdinand Foundation wouldn't be able to claim any real expertise or lived experience around that area of work - and we also know that there are a lot of organisations who have been set up specifically to address those issues or are doing great work within their own communities. Our expertise and experience as an organisation is around tackling racism and xenophobia through education, training and empowerment initiatives.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

Several participants felt that being an outside organisation coming into Northern Ireland provided a platform for the Youth in Action/Rio Ferdinand Foundation to be seen as a neutral body. This position then enabled the Foundation to focus on the issues such as racism and inequality without the 'baggage' of sectarianism to dominate the discursive narrative:

'I think a neutral body coming on in Ireland to just to facilitate a programme, and in this instance I think it was definitely a positive, it was something that people... just, it was something new that they hadn't had the chance to take part in before, and like I mentioned before, the name was a big motivator as well as just the resources that seemed to be behind the organisation.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 2)

'Rio coming in from outside, not coming in from a sectarian viewpoint coming in with almost a message that he's pushing that anti-racism message, communication/young people and deprivation, all of those things that has almost allowed others to galvanise around it and it's also, I think for me it's actually lifting things beyond our usual piece because, I said even with the IFA and GAA - whilst they're doing a lot of work around sectarianism which is really positive, I think with racism there's big threats with it as the population becomes more diverse in Northern Ireland.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 3)

That is not to say sectarianism was not a topic for discussion generally. One participant felt the underlying issue with both racism and sectarianism is misinformation and that by confronting the issue of racism through the Youth in Action programme, sectarianism naturally emerged as a concomitant topic for discussion between participants:

'Because the foundations are the same, foundations for sectarianism and racism are the exact same, it is lack of exposure to people from different backgrounds, misinformed stereotypes, misinformation and I think when we start talking about racism and how that impacts people, that then allows you to look a little bit more insular and on "Look at what's happening to us" on a local level, with sectarianism.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 3)

Providing a voice for young people from a minority ethnic background in Northern Ireland was seen as being a unique factor provided by the Rio Ferdinand Foundation. In particular, one participant felt that within the overall context of Northern Ireland there was more opportunity for people from traditional communities to discuss issues like sectarianism and that the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in local and national politics resulted in less opportunity for minority communities to discuss issues like hate crimes:

'There's a lot more opportunities for those communities because they don't have the same place and or protections in society, there's no real elected representatives and executive there's nobody in the policing board who really represents their views, the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships at the district level there's nobody there speaking on their behalf, so for me, that's a real threat of exploitation, the threat of coercion.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 5)

5. Challenges and lessons learned

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been keenly felt by all parts of society and the delivery of the Youth in Action programme was no different. The Covid-19 pandemic ensured that for large parts of the pilot programme there were restrictions on social gatherings that meant face-to-face meetings and activities were not possible. As such, most elements of the Youth in Action programme were delivered online. The challenges highlighted by participants can be distilled into two categories.

Firstly, organisational challenges faced by the Rio Ferdinand Foundation. Secondly, personal issues encountered by participants and instructors on the Youth in Action Programme:

5.1 Organisational Challenges

As an organisation, the Rio Ferdinand Foundation encountered a number of difficulties in establishing themselves within Northern Ireland. From the outset, there appeared to be some scepticism in some quarters towards the Foundation owing to a perception that they were an external organisation parachuting themselves into Northern Ireland to work in a field that was already

well-populated with service providers:

'I think that some people maybe took a little bit longer to come on board because of their thought that we were this English based organisation parachuting in on a particular issue. I think we probably faced a little bit of a... not pronounced, but I think there was probably a little bit of scepticism in some of our conversations. Then the other side is that, because of the name Rio Ferdinand was attached, I think that a few people were seeing us as arriving in Northern Ireland with funding, and you've got unlimited resources ... so I think that we had a few issues around perceptions of our organisation, more from other organisations that work in the community, organisations we were trying to engage with to support young people.'

Fortunately most people we approached with got on board with us and we created some fantastic and longstanding partnerships once we started delivering services.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

Connected to this perceived scepticism was a need for the Foundation to establish their credentials and garner a reputation across Northern Ireland as a deliverer of quality services rooted in local communities. This need to develop a recognition for their work was made all the more acute by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the restrictions prohibiting face-to-face engagement, the Foundation had to quickly revise the intended recruitment process for the Youth in Action programme. In order to ensure that the most appropriate young people to benefit from the programme were selected, the Foundation had to rely on establishing a network of community groups and stakeholders in the first instance to then utilise to identify young people to participate on the programme:

'I think the challenge is, this is for us as an organisation, have been more around on the one hand establishing our credentials in Northern Ireland and Ireland in the right way, and the other challenge has been more logistical, because we're trying to do things with Covid and as a result with delivering in a slightly different way with partner organisations. So, when we are under pressure to deliver, we have had to lean quite heavily on a volunteer network of young leaders and partners rather than having enough staff on the ground to do everything in the way we would want to. I think it went well but obviously that proved to be a bit of a challenge for us in the first instance because while we had quite a few networks in Belfast, the other areas that we worked in across Northern Ireland were... well, we were less established there early in the project.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

Several participants expressed frustration that due to having to revise how the programme was delivered and move to an online delivery, there was a concern that it wasn't possible within existing resources to involve all young people that came forward or were identified to take part in the programme:

'One of the biggest challenges was actually tapping into... we had quite a few, we had a lot of names this first programme, we wanted to start with 16 young people so one of the challenges was kind of narrowing it down and hoping you know we'll be able to get to all of the young people the next time. But also tapping into that specific, demographic was a little bit challenging, especially bringing young people of colour to the programme. After the programme finishes you know you make those contacts and your like, "Gosh dang it, where you two months ago you know?"' (Organiser/Stakeholder 2)

'I would absolutely say that, personally speaking, I was actually very surprised on how smoothly we were able to shift to online, engage young people, get partners around and at the end just the overwhelmingly positive response of the young people. I suppose the big challenge for me if I'm brutally honest moving forward is meeting demand with our resources - that's probably our biggest challenge.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

A final organisational challenge faced by the Rio Ferdinand Foundation during this pilot programme centred upon identifying which young people to work with in certain areas where there was a concern that there was an abundance of well-established youth provision already running youth-led programmes:

'Particularly in Belfast there's a crowded landscape, outside of it you know we're working in the border area... that's where you're probably getting more people and young people involved so the crowded landscape is one, there's a lot of people pushing about for funding in the same space, like again not always delivering what they should.'

So, I think it's making sure we engage the right people, it is the key bit because you know anybody can just get 30 young people together, tick a box and move on. other areas.

It's more working with smaller cohorts on developing them in a more intensive level I think that's the key bit, but making sure we get the right ones and that need is there, we don't want to be developing the people that are probably already getting all their development and so, as I say it is filling those gaps, but we need to identify the gaps initially.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 3)

5.2 Challenges for Participants and Instructors

The delivery online brought several challenges for both participants. Some participants experienced connectivity issues due to unstable internet connections and a lack of access to computers:

'It did work, but we did still have some challenges through the Zoom, sometimes it doesn't let you in, sometimes it crashes suddenly. But still the course was amazing and it was so nice to be in that course.' (Young Person 6)

'I think it was a massive impact on the families – they have no extended family here. You are talking about people there on their own. Nobody to ask for favours or to interact with. It was very, very difficult with access to devices as well, to be connected online. It took a while to for them to be able to catch up with 'Zoom'. (Organiser/Stakeholder 4)

Most participants identified language difficulties as a major challenge. Participants felt the online format added to the difficulty for people in communicating with each other. The presence of an interpreter was welcomed and appreciated by participants; however, the nature of interpretation meant that participants felt nuance was lost and capacity for learning was not fully realised amongst some participants. In addition, the process of interpretation naturally stymied the flow and pace of content delivery online:

'The language barrier, I think was a massive issue, even they could express themselves but maybe not fully because they lack some of the expressions and some of the words and the vocabulary to be able to say what they wanted to say and having the interpreter delayed the process. It took a while to for them to be able to catch up with 'Zoom' and not speaking the language We had an interpreter doing the sessions but with the interpreter it takes longer... it takes longer and it does not give as much opportunity for input.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 4)

One participant highlighted the impact of cultural and societal norms as a challenge encountered by, in particular, female participants. It was suggested this may have contributed to a disparity in learning outcomes realised by male and female participants:

'I think the engagement online was slightly slow at the start because obviously they were coming from a culture, especially the girls. I felt for the girls, coming from a culture that is very traditional, they didn't want to put their cameras on because they don't like sharing their image and the boys would but they girls wouldn't. So, there was a little bit of difference between the interaction of boys and girls and how much they have taken out of the programme.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 4)

Several participants with a responsibility for coordinating or delivering elements of the Youth in Action programme highlighted a small number of logistical challenges they faced during the pilot programme. Firstly, one participant found it difficult to contact some of the young people, and in order to do so, had to go through the parents of the young person:

'The challenge was dealing with a certain age of people who are sometimes hard to catch and some do not have mobile phones or something. Even if they have mobile phones, you cannot contact them, so you call with the mum or dad – the parents – just to make sure they are good to attend or not. So, it was a good experience and I learned a lot being an organiser for the sessions.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 5)

Another participant found it a challenge to ensure that all young people attended each session. It should be noted that this particular part of the programme was delivered in a classroom with social distancing in line with Government regulations being adhered to at all times:

'Well, it's always a challenge to get the young people there, once they're there, they do enjoy it, so, obviously it was a Monday night, it was in term 3, it was very warm at that particular stage of the year and we were in a particularly stuffy room... but that was more just logistical problems, but in terms of getting them to commit, I think we only had one boy who went and then didn't come back but the rest or maybe two girls who missed one week. But other than that, they gave it their all and they stayed committed to the programme. Which was good, considering it was between 6-8pm on a Monday night.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 6)

6. Policy Considerations and Recommendations

As part of the research process, participants were asked to reflect on the successes of the Youth in Action programme as well as consider how the programme could be enhanced or improved. Participants focused on practical steps that they felt would improve the overall experience for future young people engaged on the programme. One participant expressed a desire for more football tournaments and football training leading up to each tournament:

'The football match, I hope if there was maybe more training before the match - so more training. So, more football involvement because we only had one tournament and one match during the Youth in Action.' (Young Person 1)

Most participants stated that they would have preferred face-to-face events rather than the online delivery. Although, they did acknowledge that the online approach did enable more people to take part, it was suggested that the cost of transport would need to be considered if the next Youth in Action programme was delivered in person:

'Well, you know I would say that a face-to-face course once in a week would be much better to see the person you're talking to and then everything would be perfect. When you just meet face-to-face, when you work in a group, people like work much better than on Zoom because sometimes on Zoom people can just sit back and do nothing, but face-to-face you have to take part.' (Young Person 6)

'At the same time if you want to look at the other side of it you'll be saying that the travel and transport would be a problem because some of the guys are from Newry and some of them from Craigavon, from Lurgan so you just looking about like two different sides of the map here; so to get them regularly meeting at one location or place would be kind of a problem too, or not an issue but it won't be as easy as remotely. So remote was the solution, but if we can provide transport for them and provide the time for the course like the perfect time for the course, for the whole boys you know or the ladies then that would be amazing.' (Young Person 3)

Having successfully completed the programme, several participants expressed firstly, a dissatisfaction that the programmes were not longer, and secondly that there weren't other programmes in place that they could automatically embark upon on completion of the initial Youth in Action programme:

'When I just think about something I didn't like about the course, there was only one thing that I didn't like which is the course was too short, I think it was only like four sessions... yeah, so I would say if you do like another course or something like that it will be better cause it was only like four sessions and then I think I don't remember how long it was, but I remember everyone thinking like it was too short. Maybe more sessions for less hours?' (Young Person 2)

This ambition to further knowledge and skills through additional employment and training courses is shared by representatives of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation:

'I think in the future what I wanna (sic) see is the Rio Ferdinand Foundation working with other partners to engage as many young people from different backgrounds, help develop skills, employability, pathways, bring more partners on board you know? With Rio, he definitely brings in more corporate sponsors which will allow us to create apprenticeships in different ways that they can start getting, putting some of the skills that we helped develop into action, which is obviously what Youth in Action is all about.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 3)

It is important to highlight here that this is aligned with the overall strategic vision of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation in seeking to empower young people to be a catalyst for change within their own lives and their communities too:

'My ambition is that the young people that are working through the programmes now become part of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation infrastructure around Youth in Action, through leadership groups potentially taking on roles within that, driving it forward so that it becomes very locally-led, locally-responsive and locally-reflective and by doing that, I would hope that we can start to create an evidence base and work with stakeholders - so that the work we're doing actually influences long term transformation and change in terms of the way that people invest support and deliver policy around those communities.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

From a distinct organisational policy perspective, it was suggested that the next phase of the programme should enhance the cross-border element of its work. It was stated that due to the difference in Covid-19 restrictions between Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland, more attention through resources and finance than originally intended was given to Northern Ireland during the pilot phase of the programme:

'I think the two areas that we need to think about quite clearly, we haven't been able to invest as much in the cross-border relationship as I would have liked, because of lockdown and the restrictions. There is clearly an appetite for that from the communities that we have been talking to, and we delivered some great pilot work and training in Omagh and Fermanagh with groups from Sligo and Mayo, and there's an appetite for it on a sort of strategic stakeholder level, but there's a lot of challenges that I hope will ease as we come out of the pandemic.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 1)

'I think there's a big opportunity in cross-border working as well, you know we've touched into that, across some of the work we were doing in Fermanagh and Dungannon and, well not so much Dungannon, but Fermanagh and Omagh into Portadown and Craigavon direction. You know, for me doing that cross-border piece it strengthens relationships with the EU exit, so it does kind of strengthen relationships across the board, it helps with integration of new communities with Afghan refugees coming in now as well, Syrian refugees I think we can build an infrastructure that's there to meet their needs as well, and that are going to meet it bespoke to the community.' (Organiser/Stakeholder 3)

It is clear from this evaluation that the Youth in Action programme has had a significant impact on the lives of project participants over a relatively short period of time. The main benefits of the programme were:

- Increased levels of self-confidence, self-reflection and sense of empowerment;
- Promoting more positive mindsets (particularly for those with a prior lack of confidence using English);
- Relationship and friendship building;
- The growth of leadership and peer-mentoring skills;
- Increasing connectivity (particularly for rural participants); and
- Providing a safe space to talk about sensitive issues impacting upon young people such as racism, hate crime, sexuality and mental health.

The approach of the Youth in Action programme was felt to be relatively unique in a Northern Irish context and it is a welcome development that the programme arrived in Northern Ireland when many young people were struggling with the impact of Covid-19 and the associated lockdown on mental health, connectivity and day-to-day life. There is a clear appetite from programme participants 'for more' and the pilot programme has ignited a desire for further work to build upon the successes to date.

The goals of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation generally and the Youth in Action programme more specifically clearly link with a number of major policy positions in Northern Ireland with regards to racism, hate crime, equality and social inclusion – most notably within The Executive Office's Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy (TEO, 2013) and the ten-year Racial Equality Strategy (TEO, 2015). The goals of the Youth in Action programme are also intimately connected with some of the main aims of the draft Programme for Government (TEO, 2021), particularly around ensuring 'children and young people have the best start in life' and promoting an 'equal and inclusive society.'

The programme goals are also strongly linked to the children and Young People Strategy 2020 – 2030 (NI Executive) which acknowledges the need to promote greater social cohesion and good relations, particularly for those who experience direct or indirect racism or discrimination. Continuation of the work of the Foundation is also particularly important in the current context of an increase in reported hate crime in Northern Ireland between 2020 and 2021. That the work should continue, and indeed be strengthened in Northern Ireland, is not in doubt. With this in mind, we offer here a small series of recommendations which aim to inform the work of Youth in Action or similar youth developmental programmes moving forwards.

R.1 Consideration should be given, Covid-19 permitting, as to how to facilitate face-to-face sessions as part of the programme.

R.2 Additional consideration should be given on how to increase sporting content/engagement as part of the programme without detriment to the invaluable non-sporting benefits the programme provides (leadership, confidence building etc).

R.3 There is a need for pathways to be developed between the strands of work of the Rio Ferdinand Foundation in a Northern Irish context. This would enable young participants to progress through differing stages and perhaps (re)engage in future programmes as peer mentors and 'champions' of the programme goals.

R.4 There is further need for pathways to be developed relating to voluntary and employability experience. This could be achieved by embedding and signposting volunteering and employability opportunities at key junctures over the course of future programmes.

R.5 Consideration should be given to course length, with participant preference for longer courses to be developed (albeit perhaps within shorter sessions).

R.6 As is the case in England, the Rio Ferdinand Foundation should seek to develop local partnerships to help build up skills, education and employability sessions and pathways for young people.

R.7 The Rio Ferdinand Foundation should begin to build an evidence-base with regards to longer-term evaluation with pre and post survey content in-built to measure progress in both knowledge/education transfer and also practical utility/outcome (which would dovetail with the outcomes-based approach advocated in the latest Programme for Government consultation in 2021).

R.8 Consideration should be given on how to build upon the foothold in Northern Ireland and develop stronger cross-border (north/south) and east/west relationships with young people and stakeholders. This could be achieved by cross-border and east/west initiatives, such as, programmes, voluntary opportunities, and networking events.

R.9 The Rio Ferdinand Foundation should consider engaging more in the policy context in NI. One avenue for achieving this could be by hosting a knowledge exchange event and inviting key stakeholders involved in making policy and shaping practice with children and young people, such as: Youth Work Alliance, Department for Communities, CYPSP, NICCY, Education Authority, Department of Education and so on.

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