

Sólás na nÓg

Comhbhá, Cothú, Cumasú

An Evaluative Research Report

of Sólás na nÓg's Youth Services 2022-2023

Órla Nig Oirc B.A., M.Ed, PhD

glór na móna
Pobal & Óige

COMMUNITY FUND

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Sólás na nÓg is a ground-breaking development for the Irish Medium revival and especially for those young people with additional learning needs who struggled to access our mainstream Irish medium youth services. The programme was originally piloted by Glór na Móna in 2019 with support from the Education Authority and due to its success, the concept was further developed by securing additional funding through the National Lottery Awards for All programme in 2020-21 to keep the programme running on a part-time basis, one night a week

Due to the resounding success of the pilot scheme, and the demonstrable demand that underpinned it, the National Lottery Community Fund continued their support in 2022 by providing substantial four-year funding to further develop this programme. Sólás na nÓg project now has full-time Project Co-ordinator and six part-time youth workers. We now operate three nights per week across two sessions and cater for junior and senior members aged 8 to 18.

Our holistic programme is shaped by the project sub-title, 'Comhbhá, Cothú agus Cumasú' which simply translates to 'Compassion, Nurture and Support'. Our programmes are shaped by the unique, diverse and therapeutic needs of our young people and aim to enhance the personal, social, and emotional capacity of our young people in a nurturing, deeply pastoral and welcoming safe space that also embeds their corresponding sociolinguistic needs. This involves an engaging, participatory and wide-ranging programme of training, learning and therapeutic interventions that these young people have never had the opportunity to avail of previously.

As a product of Irish Medium Education, I attended the Glór na Móna youth club as a teenager, was trained as a volunteer leader and began working in youth project on a part-time basis 6 years ago. I later became full-time Leader in charge of the Cumann Óige Uachtar Chlunaí youth club before taking up my current role as Project Co-ordinator with Sólás na nÓg just over a year ago. I have witnessed first- hand, the influential impact this project has had on our young people, staff, parents/guardians and wider community. This project encourages and nurtures the voices and lived experience of our young people whose expertise are valued, integrated and interconnected through every aspect of the project methodology. This has allowed our young people, who often feel excluded, isolated and misunderstood, to feel a sense of belonging while also stimulating the holistic development of each individual young person.

Our youth steering group is developed for young people ages 14+ and works to ensure that young people have a voice and are central to informing and shaping every aspect of this project. This includes accredited training in areas of development such as First Aid, Level 1 Food Preparation, Level 1 Coding, CV Writing and Interview skills and OCN Level 1 in Peer Mentoring. Led by our youth steering group over the next three years, the project will measure the journey and development of our young people, highlighting the transformational impact of the project on their lives.

The findings of this research will be crucial in helping to inform and shape the project moving forward and lay a foundation for other Irish medium organisations and woking class communities to deliver valuable community projects for young people with additional needs.

Glór na Móna would like to take this opportunity also to thank Dr.Orla Nic Oirc who has come on-board to conduct this unique participatory research over the lifespan of the project which again will be led by the young people. We hope this continuous research that we are overseeing will help inform significant policy interventions which can be presented to relevant Government Departments and statutory bodies thus ensuring that these much- needed informal youth programmes are made available young people being educated through the medium of Irish, anywhere where is need.

Glór na Móna would also extend a great deal of thanks to our staff Caoimhe, Léann, Aisling, Beth, Fionnghuala, Rian and Clónagh. You and your work are invaluable. Go raibh mile maith agaibh!

Pádraigín Nic Mhathúna
Project Co-ordinator 'Sólás na nÓg'

Foreword

I warmly welcome this research report on the Sólás na nÓg project. It was incredibly uplifting to read about the pioneering work being carried out by all those involved in this project and their efforts to provide a bespoke, Irish language youth service for young people with additional learning needs. Youth work is of vital importance for those being educated in minority language contexts in creating additional language usage and engagement opportunities for young people outside of the formal education system. As explained in the report, the majority of the young people who make use of the youth services at Glór na Móna come from monolingual families, where Irish typically does not operate as the first language of the home. Additional challenges also exist regarding the inclusivity of youth work in the context of minority languages. It is acknowledged that minority language education is often avoided or eliminated as a choice of education for those with additional learning needs as a result of monolingual biases and prejudices, among other reasons. The Sólás na nÓg youth project deserves to be highly praised for its efforts in providing opportunities for young people to connect with their cultural heritage through gaining a deeper understanding of their own identities.

I commend the participatory approach which has been adopted throughout the evaluation of the project. As described in the report, it is the voices of the young people which are of paramount importance in research of this kind. The reader gains a rich, considerate and insightful understanding of the project in the report from the young people, their parents and staff members regarding the impact the project has had on them. We learn of the increased confidence and self-esteem that the young people have developed as a result of the trustworthy and pastoral relationships and rapport they have built with the staff of Sólás na nÓg. Participation in the youth service had a positive impact on the young people's mental wellbeing and also the development of their social skills. These factors contributed to enhanced employability opportunities for the young people and created opportunities for them to participate fully in life. It is of no surprise that National Lottery Funding was awarded to Sólás na nÓg to develop and support the project. The Sólás na nÓg project is an exemplary model of best practice for the kind of work which could be undertaken in Gaeltacht areas and internationally, within other minority language communities. Long may Sólás na nÓg continue to thrive.

An t-Ollamh Pádraig Ó Duibhir

September 2023



1. Introduction

Sólás na nÓg is a bespoke and innovative provision of informal education delivered, facilitated, and participated in through the medium of the Irish language which caters for young people with various additional learning, physical, social, emotional and behavioural needs. This provision was established in 2019 as a pilot scheme with support from the Education Authority's 'Inclusion Programme' as part of the emerging Irish-language youth services at Glór na Móna. This initially sought to provide for an increasing cohort of marginalised young people requiring additional support and individualised interventions both within and outside of formal education. This project, despite in its infancy, was hugely successful and was immediately over-subscribed. The project, like formal schooling and other informal youth work programmes, faced significant challenges in relation to provision as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In recognition of the demand and need for this unique provision, Glór na Móna youth practitioners continued to build on impact and engagement opportunities remotely with its young people and their guardians throughout the duration of the global Covid-19 pandemic until social distancing stipulations were relaxed and the service could operate on an in-person basis again.

In 2020, Glór na Móna applied to the National Lottery Community Fund 'Awards for All' scheme to further develop the pilot project. This application included the completion of a research scoping evaluation paper based on the service, which assessed and highlighted the gaps in provision and services in relation to Irish-medium informal education and youth work opportunities for those with additional learning needs. The findings of this paper highlighted a profound need for additional youth work services and clear demand for the increased provision of additional informal services to be delivered through the medium of Irish for young people with additional needs in the greater West Belfast area. The findings of this paper, which will be discussed later in this report, were used to provide additional evidence to supplement Glór na Móna's larger funding application to the National Lottery's Fund 'Empowering Young People' programme.

In 2021, Glór na Móna's 'Sólás na nÓg' project was successful in its bid for additional funding for programme and staffing support from the National Lottery Community Fund and increased its provision from one to three nights on a weekly basis and also acquired additional temporary accommodation at the Glór na Móna site with support from Department of Communities and Foras na Gaeilge's capital schemes to house the project. This evaluative paper will explore, identify and measure the impact of Sólás na nÓg's increased service provision as part of Glór na Móna's youth development output, located at Gaelionad Mhic Goill in the Upper Springfield Area of West Belfast.

This paper will function as a subsequent evaluation of the 'Identifying, Exploring and Evaluating Gaps in Current Provision for Irish-medium Youth Work in Belfast' (McGurk, 2020) which helped to identify the need expressed in Glór na Móna's bid for Lottery funding under the Empowering Young People programme. An update of relevant literature will be provided next, before discussing the aims of this research paper and the following research questions and qualitative research methodology which was implemented as part of the data collection portion of the study. Discussion and analysis of the findings will be laid out from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted with participants before drawing conclusions and collating the next developmental steps in order for the Sólás na nÓg provision to further flourish and expand.

2. An Update of Relevant Research and Contextual Literature on Irish-medium Education and Irish-medium Youth Services

Irish-medium Education and Reclamation Through Immersion: An Overview

The inception of Irish-medium education in the North of Ireland can be attributed to the pioneering action of Irish language activists residing in an urban Gaeltacht in West Belfast during the late 1960s (O'Baoill, 2007). In the face of statutory and political opposition and amidst a backdrop of civil unrest in Belfast and across the North, these families courageously established an immersive educational provision which laid the foundations for the burgeoning Irish-medium education sector which continues to experience continual growth and interest on an annual basis (McKendry, 2007; McAdory and Janmaat 2015). Irish-medium Education remains an increasingly popular choice for children in the North of Ireland according to recent figures published as a result of the latest Census (Conradh na Gaeilge, 2022) and also Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2022) reporting enrolment rates of c.7,500 students being in receipt of education through the medium of Irish in the year 2022. Despite the continual positive trajectory of the enrolment of children in immersion education through the medium of Irish in the North of Ireland, recent studies continue to highlight the distinct inequalities which the Irish-medium formal education sector continues to face in relation to adequate linguistic provision, resource and recognition (McGurk, 2022).



The support of Department of Education (DENI) funding for Irish-medium youth work in the north of Ireland and groups such as Glór na Móna arose from the Review of Irish-medium Education (2008) which was fortified by the commitment to support the Irish Language as stated in the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). This legislation promised that the language would be 'encouraged and facilitated in public and private life' (Muller, 2010 p.70). Most notably, at policy level, the GFA legislation included an Education Order (NI) which placed a statutory duty upon the Department of Education to support and facilitate Irish-medium education. The 2008 Review of Irish-medium Education made proposals such as recommendation 18 which highlighted the need for the Department to support 'informal opportunities for young people' through the medium of Irish as well as Recommendation 17 which proposed adequate support for children with additional learning needs, which will be discussed later in this section. In addition, the Department of Education's more recent policy framework for the delivery of youth services, 'Priorities for Youth' (2013), specifically references the implementation of Recommendation 18. The policy framework notes that the Education and Skills Authority

in its planning, will reflect 'key actions for youth work as set out in other relevant DE policies such as Recommendation 18 of the Review of IM Education' (DENI, 2013, p.20).

Despite these statutory commitments, Irish-medium youth clubs, like Irish-medium schools in the formal education sector, have faced 'ill-disguised sectarianism and anti-Irish bias' (McVeigh, 2022, p.46) from education authorities in the North of Ireland as informed by a recently commissioned research report by Conradh na Gaeilge and the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ). The core findings of the report have uncovered that Irish-medium education practitioners and school attendees have been limited by the Department of Education's deficient and restrained interpretation of the statutory duty in relation to the language, as stipulated in the GFA, and the failure of its implementation and fulfilment. These findings echo the experiences of Irish-medium youth work practitioners who have often had to campaign for funding and resources, as will be referenced in the next section.

Irish-medium youth clubs, like Irish-medium schools follow an immersive pedagogical model which provides children and young people with daily linguistic exposure and experience in an environment solely focused on the inculcation of Irish language and culture. Immersion education offers numerous benefits, as noted by Cummins (1998; 2014) and Bialystok (2018) which suggests that bilingual children demonstrate heightened linguistic sensitivity and increased cognitive flexibility compared to their monolingual peers. The acquisition of language through immersion education aims to enhance children's communication, interpersonal skills, confidence, and foster a sense of identity by developing their cultural awareness and participation in language revival efforts (McCarty, 2021). Nevertheless, there have been notable difficulties encountered in global endeavours to revive and reclaim minoritised languages, which encompass insufficient funding, restricted resources, limited training prospects, and a scarcity of environments for language usage (Fishman, 1991; McCarty, 2003). Immersion schools and services play a pivotal role in reinstating linguistic competency among younger cohorts of minoritised language communities who are lacking in opportunities to engage with their language on a daily basis (Ó Baoill, 2007; Kipp, 2009; Hinton, 2011; McCarty and Nicholas, 2014).This is particularly relevant to the Irish-medium sector, as a sizable proportion of students attending these schools and services come from households where Irish is not their parents' or guardians' first language, as is common with linguistic revitalisation populations. Therefore, both formal and informal immersion programs and services play an intrinsic role in supporting students whose language of the home differs from their language of tuition. Similarly, emerging legal and rights-based literature advocating on behalf of children on a global scale notes the integral need for children and young people to have access to informal education services and social spaces in which they participate in indigenous and cultural practices (Collins et. al, 2021; Hart, 2013; Percy-Smyth and Thomas, 2009). These rights are central to the indigenous language and youth work model which has been recently conceptualised, developed and implemented by Foram na nÓg[1], initially in the youth services at Glór na Móna and is currently being rolled-out on a regional level across Irish language youth clubs throughout the North of Ireland.

As the largest, locally-based, Irish-medium youth club in the North of Ireland who have pioneered on the development of Irish-medium youth work practice in Belfast for

1 Fóram na nÓg is a Regional Voluntary Youth Organisation (RVYO) for the Irish Medium Youth Sector which aims to promote and strengthen IM Youth Work, to increase informal learning opportunities for young people through the medium of Irish. In 2021, Fóram na nÓg was officially recognised by the Education Authority and given core strategic funding and project funding to develop the Irish medium youth sector.



a decade, the youth services provided by Glór na Móna, which are now strategically supported by Fóram na nÓg, hold a central position in consolidating informal learning and developmental opportunities for young people within the Irish-medium education sector in Belfast, which will now be discussed.

Glór na Móna's Role in Irish-language Informal Youth Services

Glór na Móna serves as a vibrant Irish-language community hub, offering an array of community programmes and services to families, Irish-medium students, and members of the community in the surrounding area. In addition to Irish-medium youth work, Glór na Móna also places an emphasis on community education and regeneration, participatory democracy practices centred on community festivals and political education, projects focussing on inter-generational family language transmission and social language use, and local community history and heritage recovery. All activities utilise the Irish language, the unique community resources, and local environmental amenities to challenge socio-economic inequalities by targeting poverty and social exclusion of local Irish language and community activists.

Glór na Mona's youth programmes facilitate youth work, youth support, and youth activities with the aim to actively engage young people in the Upper Springfield area in the revitalisation and reclamation of the Irish language as a means of community empowerment. Within this context, youth work serves not only as a means for personal, social, and educational development for young individuals (Devlin and Gunning, 2009), but also plays a pivotal role in the revival movement of the Irish language and the rejuvenation and empowerment of disadvantaged communities, such as that of the Upper Springfield. Glór na Mona stands at the forefront of this vital provision, whose work encompasses locally based youth programmes and youth empowerment projects aimed at developing emerging young leaders and delivering an innovative and pioneering service for children and young people from local Irish-medium schools. Since



acquiring its own community hub, Gaelionad Mhic Goill in 2016, Glór na Móna's projects have experienced rapid growth, resulting in an expansion of the number and diversity of programmes offered, the management of a larger budget, an increase in community project output and a substantial rise in employed staff members. Initially, Glór na Móna operated with four youth club services on a part-time basis, consisting of four-hour sessions. However, this has now evolved with the organisation operating as a local part-time centre on a four night per week basis for two cohorts, a junior and teenage provision. Given the yearly increase in school enrolments and interest within the Irish-medium formal education sector (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, 2022) the demand for youth work services is poised to expand further.

Despite its growth and popularity, both formal and informal education through the medium of Irish in the North of Ireland have not received commensurate levels of state support and funding (McGurk, 2022; Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 2021) particularly from the Department of Education and statutory bodies advocating for educational provision, in comparison to heritage language education in similar, nearby contexts where indigenous language reclamation efforts are also to be noted, namely in Scotland and Wales.

In support of the growth of Irish-medium youth work, recent research conducted by Ulster University '*Squeezed in and Squeezed out- Lessons from Irish-medium Youth*'[2] (Mc Ardle and Neill, 2022) argued that it is imperative that the Department of Education addresses existing challenges concerning funding, training, accommodation, resources, and facilities facing the Irish-medium youth work sector. Irish-medium informal education remains largely dependent on arbitrary and variable funding schemes which have the capacity to curtail or diminish provision (Mc Cann, 2022) leading to funding and service cuts thus a knock-on effect for children and young people wishing to access youth work services. These funding cuts to youth provision also detrimentally impacted on Glór na Móna youth services in 2017 when four local Irish-medium clubs were forced to close overnight, and the services only restored following a youth-led public campaign which formed part of the overall An Dream Dearg campaign for language rights in the North of Ireland (Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 2021). Glór na Móna's youth provision was subjected to a similar upheaval in February 2022 when the Education Authority indicted that all youth funding for the programmes would terminate on 31st March 2022. A similarly vibrant 10-week campaign ensued, again, led by young people and supported by various political parties, which resulted in a positive resolution and the extension of funding for youth

2 Full press release and video from the research report launch in Glór na Móna available at: https://www.glornamona.com/youth/squeezed-in-and-squeezed-out-lessons-from-irish-medium-youth-work/?lang=en

services.[3]

This tendency towards radical self-organising and grassroots campaigning as a defining aspect of Irish-medium youth work was also attested to by McArdle and Neill (2022) who argued that political campaigning and youth empowerment were concurrent for Irish-medium youth organisations such as Glór na Móna. Key findings from McArdle and Neil's report were explored further in their recent publication, *'The Making and Shaping of the Young Gael: Irish-medium Youth Work for Developing Indigenous Identities' (*2023). They describe the methodology of Irish-medium youth work as 'fearless' which uses examples of injustice and prejudice facing young Irish linguists, in turn enabling them to challenge 'the structures and systems that exclude them' (2023, p.229). McArdle and Neil argue that confronting such issues fosters a:

> *'Politically engaged population with activism burgeoning from their own self-interest into acting for wider social justice issues' through an approach that runs 'counter to current neo-liberal individualistic hegemony and lifestyles'* (McArdle and Neil, 2023, p.229).

This interpretation is synonymous with the work of Mac Ionnrachtaigh (2013; 2021) who argues that the Irish language revival movement in the north of Ireland at all levels should be understood as a grassroots expression of contemporary movement towards the overall aims of decolonisation[4].

Indigenous Language Youth Work

Youth work is characterised as an educational process which takes place in a non-formal setting. Youth clubs and youth workers have long been identified as significant sources of support, and sites of neutral refuge away from home and school, for economically and socially marginalised young people (Morgan et. al, 2020). Youth work aims to broaden horizons, promote active participation, and fosters social engagement amongst young people. This is accomplished by encouraging critical and creative responses to personal experiences and the surrounding world (National Occupational Standards, cited in Youth Work NI, 2014). Participating and attending youth work yields a range of advantages, including the exploration of personal values and beliefs, the development and expression of young people's voice and identity in society, and the acquisition of diverse skills and competencies that facilitate their realisation of full potential (National Youth Agency, 2020).

Indigenous practices involved in youth work for young people of language revitalisation communities offer numerous benefits which contribute to their social, emotional, and personal development, their connection to place and formation of identity. In addition to these benefits, Glór na Móna's provision of youth work services through the medium

3 Media coverage of campaign available at: - https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2022/02/26/news/protest-against-irish-language-youth-services-funding-cuts-to-take-place-in-belfast-2598955/ https://www.irishnews.com/paywall/tsb/irishnews/irishnews/irishnews/news/northernirelandnews/2022/03/02/news/protest-in-belfast-against-funding-cuts-to-irish-language-youth-services-2603052/content.html

4 The theoretical praxis of decolonisation is one which permeates the community empowerment ethos on which programmes and services at Glór na Móna are based, with the wider aims of cultural, psychological and economic freedom from ingrained colonial conditions at the core of the burgeoning Irish language reclamation movement in the North of Ireland. Glór na Móna have recently created space, in collaboration with Queen's University Belfast, for both community activists and academics to come together to showcase ground-breaking research and work at the first international conference held between Queen's and a local community organisation on the subject of decolonisation. See link for the event's press release and video: https://www.glornamona.com/irish-language-classes/comhdhail-idirnaisiunta-chomhoibrithe-phobail-ar-an-dichoiliniu-i-naomh-comhghall-ar-bhothar-na-bhfal/

of Irish contributes to enhancing the cultural identity and political awareness of the young individuals who avail of these services (McArdle and Neill, 2022) in their efforts of becoming agents of language revitalisation and reclamation. Notably, Glór na Móna's services have played a pivotal role in supporting and motivating past service users to assume leadership and activism within the Irish-speaking community, particularly in the field of youth work (Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta, 2018; McArdle and Neill 2022, 2023).

Glór na Móna's youth work practice is reinforced by the model for Irish-medium Youth Work which was developed in conjunction with Ulster University in 2016 and updated in the aforementioned 2022 research report. Over the past 18 months, this model has been updated by Fóram na nÓg as a form of praxis titled 'Obair Óige Dhúchasach' (Appendix C) which roughly translates as 'Indigenous Youth Work' which incorporates a more explicit decolonial lense as a framework for minoritised language youth work. Whilst the original model outlined a conceptual framework for Irish-medium youth work which incorporated distinct 'pillars' of youth work; Space, Approach, language, Belonging, Ownership, the updated Fóram na nÓg 'Obair Óige Dhúchasach' praxis-based model added; community, relationships, politics, and participation through the image of a tree which embeds the concept of the connected roots of a native Irish tree. This model was conceptualised, reframed, and developed following an extensive audit carried out by Fóram na nÓg with locally based Irish-medium clubs from across the North of Ireland in 2021[5] and has since been used as a model for training, implementation and evaluation throughout the North of Ireland.

The inclusion of young people with additional educational and behavioural needs within Glór na Móna's services signifies a positive and arguably a transformational shift, similar to that of the development of the Irish-medium indigenous youth work model, that provides hope, social mobility, and opportunities for participation for those who face exclusion and marginalisation due to their unique needs. This approach enables these individuals to develop social and practical skills, express their beliefs, participate in leadership and voluntary roles, and find their voice and purpose within society in an environment which attends to and supports their individuality. These attributes which have been framed under the praxis of the Indigenous Youth Work model in relation to participation in particular, will be further developed next.

Additional Needs Informal Education and Sólás na nÓg

Indigenous language youth work as a subject matter is gaining growing interest among educational and sociology scholars (Mc Pherson, 2020; Sumida Huaman, 2014; McCarty and Wyman, 2009) which offers numerous benefits for children and young people, especially for those with additional learning needs. Irish-medium Youth Work provides a platform for these individuals to connect with their cultural heritage and develop a strong sense of identity and belonging. By engaging in activities conducted in their heritage language, young people are enabled to enhance their language skills, vocabulary, and fluency, which can contribute to their overall communication abilities. Moreover, indigenous language youth work creates an inclusive and supportive environment, promoting acceptance and understanding among participants whilst also fostering critical thinking and decoloniality. This fosters social interaction, teamwork, and cooperation, enabling children and young people with additional learning needs to develop vital

5 Fóram na nÓg Irish-medium youth work audit available at: https://www.foramnanog.com/youth-work-resources/research/.

personal and social skills. Additionally, such programmes offer a space for self-expression, creativity, and individual growth, boosting self-esteem, self-compassion, and confidence. Through indigenous language youth work, these individuals can develop a positive self-image, build meaningful relationships, and acquire essential life skills which contribute to their holistic development and well-being.

Indigenous language youth work for children and young people with additional learning needs aligns with international rights-based literature, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2023) The UNCRC emphasises the importance of promoting and protecting the rights of every child, regardless of their abilities or linguistic background. Indigenous language youth work embodies several key principles of the UNCRC, such as the right to participate in cultural life (Article 29) and the right to education (Article 28). By providing opportunities for children and young people with additional learning needs to engage in activities conducted in their indigenous language, these programmes promote cultural preservation and support their right to maintain their linguistic and cultural identity.

Moreover, the UNCRC emphasises the rights to non-discrimination and inclusion (Browne and Millar, 2016). Indigenous language youth work embraces these principles by creating an inclusive environment where every participant, including those with additional learning needs, is valued, respected, and given equal opportunities for participation. These programmes strive to remove barriers and ensure that all children and young people can fully engage in activities, contribute their unique perspectives, and enjoy their rights to social interaction, personal development, and cultural expression. By incorporating the principles of the UNCRC into indigenous language youth work, children and young people with additional learning needs are empowered to exercise their rights, experience a sense of belonging,



and contribute to the preservation of their language and culture. These programs foster an inclusive and rights-based approach that recognises the inherent dignity and worth of every child, promoting their overall well-being and development.

In relation to a more domestic context, the previously cited Review of Irish-medium Education (2008) highlighted the pressing need for additional support for those young people with Additional Educational needs through Recommendation 17. The recommendation referenced the need to 'appropriately skill SEN support staff with high-quality language skills' through the development of 'infrastructure and resources' that was 'sensitive to the needs of the children learning through Irish'. It also stated that the need to share 'existing best practice' which draws on an All-Ireland and East-West basis whilst also highlighting the need for high-level diagnostic tools for the Irish Medium sector.

Additionally, in the informal education sector, there has been an upsurge in research interest on the positive impact of informal youth work intervention for those young

people with additional learning needs. Friel et. al (2020) argues that the methodological shift from that of pathologizing special needs to a more social model (Shakespeare, 2018), that which incorporates inclusive and holistic models of intervention particularly in relation to autism, has had an overwhelming impact on the dignity and inclusion of young people with additional needs. This approach, Friel et. al (2020, p.3) argues encourages social agents in the creation of 'an inclusive community which enables all people, rather than some'. Through this inclusive, social model, difference should be accepted as a 'way of being' – as a diversity rather than a deficit' (Den Houting, 2018). Through the implementation of reflective practice as part of this social model of supporting neurodiversity, youth work practitioners are in turn encouraged to challenge their own perception of ability, inclusion, and participation: 'inclusive community youth work practice must go beyond traditional approaches to strive for opportunities that aim towards optimal well-being' (Friel et. al, 2020, p.4). This research also highlighted the urgent need for training, research, and policy to be developed in equivalence to youth work practice. These recommendations along with the findings of the initial pilot scheme evaluation of Sólás na nÓg as well as the findings of this report will be discussed later.

Despite surging interest in the relationality of additional needs provision and informal education opportunities, a dearth of relevant research literature persists in relation to that of additional needs informal education opportunities for young people of minority language communities. This paper seeks to provide pioneering evidence of good practice along with rich accounts of the experiences of young people, their parents and Irish-medium youth work practitioners as part of the Sólás na nÓg programme, to better understand and advocate on behalf of Irish-medium indigenous youth work for young people with additional needs. The aims of this research report will now be discussed.

3.Aims of Research and Ongoing Evaluation of Sólás na nÓg Project

This research report operates as a metric of ongoing evaluation as part of the Sólás na nÓg Youth Services at Glór na Móna. This project is an innovative and pioneering service and the first of its kind on the island of Ireland. It attends to, includes, and empowers young people with additional needs in their access to informal Irish-medium education opportunities. Ongoing research and evaluation of the services will be used as a tool to develop, reflect upon, and enhance the youth service programme and facilities over the 4-year lifespan of the current project. We have taken this opportunity to conduct this research not only in fulfilment of funding criteria of the project but also to produce relevant research data contributing to sectoral knowledge and further enhancing best practice within the Irish-medium informal education sector on an island wide basis and perhaps, further afield in other contexts where indigenous language reclamation practices are being carried out. This research has also adopted a participatory approach in its methodology which aims to empower and engage young people and the local community in critical thinking and participation in discussions and engagement which strives to make positive social change for those individuals and groups who tend to be marginalised within society. This participatory approach will be further discussed in the research methodology section of this report. Firstly, the results of the initial research report carried out in relation to the Sólás na nÓg pilot scheme will be discussed below.

4. Discussion of Results from Initial Report

An initial report titled 'Identifying, Exploring and Evaluating Gaps in Current Provision for Irish-medium Youth Work in Belfast' carried out by McGurk (2020) was a scoping paper which sought to evaluate and identify the gaps and limitations regarding the capacity of the first year Sólas na nÓg pilot scheme in meetings the needs of young people with additional learning needs., These research report sought to provide a robust evidence base that could support a funding bid which would allow for increased provision from one to three nights per week and additional staffing provision. The initial report emphasised unwavering support for the Sólás na nÓg service from participants and their parents; however, feedback from research participants helped to unearth potential opportunities for development as per additional resource acquisition. Below are the findings and recommendations for further development of the programme from the initial study along with the developments which have taken place since the first year of the programme to further enhance provision:

GAP/NEED IDENTIFIED	DEVELOPMENT
Spatial limitations by having to share accommodation with mainstream youth service with no additional onsite accommodation for Sólás provision to increase from a 1 to 3 night per week basis.	Additional temporary accommodation procured and installed to house bespoke Irish-medium youth service for young people with additional needs on a 3 night per week basis. A space which allows young people to take ownership and feel a sense of belonging. Despite the acquisition of additional accommodation, a more sustainable and long-term solution is required along with additional space to house particular facilities such as sensory spaces.
A need to introduce volunteering and work experience opportunities for young people with additional learning needs	Connections established with Gaelchúrsaí and work experience/vocational courses as part of the youth work programme undertaken. Programme development in relation to volunteering opportunities underway.
Service withdrawal as a result of the Covid-19 health pandemic was detrimental to the development of young people with additional needs.	Further justification of and emphasis on the need and demand for a bespoke Irish-medium youth service for young people with additional needs.
Frequency of provision needs to be increased - parents and participants found one session a week was not enough	3 night per week youth service established and operating as a result of acquisition of additional accommodation and recruitment of additional staff.
Programme development to include more resources, trips and inclusion of physical activity in youth work model	Programme developed in line with additional staff and funding provision to include promotion of healthier lifestyles, new additional needs focused resources and facilities and summer scheme provision.



5. Research Questions

The following research questions were designed in order to assess and evaluate the impact of increased provision of the Sólás na nÓg services for participants, their families and staff members and to seek out recommendations for further development of the programme in the future. Interview questions were centred around the following primary research questions:

1. What impact, if any, have the services and projects provided by Sólas na nÓg had on service users?

2. What additional facilities, resources or services would service users and guardians like to see be brought to Sólas na nÓg in the future?

6. Methodology

The research questions presented in this study were formulated in line with the evaluative framework and continuous participatory research methodology developed as an ongoing part of the Sólás na nÓg project. These questions were an extension of those formulated for the initial pilot scheme report which were informed by a previous evaluative exercise on youth service provision conducted by the youth-led steering group at Glór na Móna. The research questions will guide the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, which serve as the data collection methods for this report. In selecting a specific research design for data collection aligned with the subject-specific research questions, Cohen et al. (2011, p.1) emphasise the importance of ensuring 'fitness for purpose'.

This research adopts a participatory approach to actively involve the voices of young people, their parents, and other relevant stakeholders who utilise and are associated with the community programme at Glór na Móna. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a systematic, strategic, and collaborative research approach which involves the exploration of an issue by the individuals affected by it (Baum, MacDougal & Smith, 2006). Furthermore, PAR empowers marginalised groups, enables agency assertion, and provides a platform for those who face discrimination to have their voices heard (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2007). Given that Irish-medium communities are predominantly located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas and experience persistent inequality in relation to linguistic rights, resource and provision, the decision to involve the marginalised voices of the Irish-medium informal education sector is crucial for highlighting the inequalities experienced by these young people in terms of youth work provision.



A total of 5 different data sets were collected during the data collection period of this research study involving semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with staff members of Sólás na nÓg, parents of both junior and teenage cohorts of and also with young people themselves. All data sets were translated as necessary and transcribed before undergoing thematic processing by way of Word Cloud and analysis, which will be outlined in the section below. In order to assist young people in critical thinking regarding the evaluation of the programme, an assessment circle was used as an inclusive tool to help unearth testimonies and feedback in relation to the young people's experiences during the course of the programme (Appendix B). Assessment circles are tools which are commonly used in indigenous language research (McIvor and Jacobs, 2015) and decolonial research methodologies which offer key words and discussion points which aid the interviewee in discussing their experiences, offering rich and insightful data for analysis. This draws on the work of Maori scholar Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p.5) who highlights that 'research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that which occurs is a set of political and social conditions'.

Next, I will discuss the data presented by each participant group in the research before presenting concluding findings on the research and making recommendations for further development and enhancement of practice for the Sólás na nÓg youth programme at Glór na Móna.

7.Discussion of Findings

Young People

The junior cohort of Sólás na nÓg gave insightful descriptions of their experiences at the youth club stating that they feel as if the club provides a 'safe space' which is fun and engaging where they can meet and play with their peers. Some of the participants spoke about how the club has enabled them to become more confident and has enabled them to make friends with others:

> *'I feel quite shy speaking to new people, but I feel confident playing with young people in the club'.*

Many of the young people spoke about the strong personal connections they have made with the staff team at Sólás na nÓg and how they are able to approach the staff with any worries or issues they may have. Participants spoke positively in relation to the programme increase and praised the new facilities which have included the installation, for example, the sensory room and dark den which provides areas of calm and solace for the young people experiencing anxiety or overwhelm. The young people also made recommendations for further development of the service such as a new football pitch, establishing a football team for the service, more space and more opportunities to go on trips.

The teenage cohort of the youth club echoed how the club has created an opportunity for the young people to forge new friendships and connections with peers who they may not necessarily have met without attending the youth club. They spoke about how they have maintained these connections with friends in school and now outside of the youth club space:

> *'We meet up at lunchtime and meet at the same place with our friends from the club... We meet up outside of the club now too, like*



> *we go to the town at the weekend and stay in touch through group chats'.*

The young people also spoke about how they have engendered relationships of trust and understanding with the staff team at Sólás na nÓg and how they feel supported by the staff in relation to any anxieties or issues they may have:

> *'I feel so much more comfortable here, even with the school counsellor, I would trust the workers here more that the counsellor, I see the workers more and I think I have a better relationship with the workers'*

They also gave insight into their positive inclination to use Irish in the club which would supersede their willingness to use Irish in the formal school setting as a result of the relaxed, inclusive and safe atmosphere which creates a unique sense of belonging in the club. They reported that because of the basis of mutual trust and respect which has been built between the young people and the staff team that they would rather use Irish in their responses, as a result of a more 'relaxed' environment within the youth club



that ensures no one feels judged or anxious in this safe setting. This was also echoed in the young people's explanation of mutual understanding and trust which has developed and been supported also by the smaller group numbers enrolled in the Sólás na nÓg programmes as opposed to the mainstream youth project at Glór na Móna which is known as Cumann Óige Uachtar Chluanaí and has much larger numbers.

> *'I feel like in school people are always looking at me, but I feel like I can be myself here...I feel like in this club you don't get judged as much...There's a lot less people, it's not as overwhelming.'*

The teenage cohort of Sólás na nÓg also spoke at length about how the youth club has created unique training opportunities for them to think about employability and what they would like to do when they leave formal education. They praised these vocational courses and training programmes which have formed part of their youth development programme and are looking forward to furthering the skills and experience they have gained through these opportunities.

Staff Members

Staff members of the Sólás na nÓg project gave insightful and detailed accounts of the progress which they have seen occur in the behaviour, relationships, confidence and connection of the young people who attend the club. One staff member gave a detailed account on the positive impact they have noticed on the young people in relation to building trust and forging authentic relationships with the workers as a result of the increase of service provision:

> *'I have really noticed the relationships forged between the young people, - I wasn't working here when the project was in it's pilot stage but I just feel like and especially this year, despite the fact that they all have their own individual interests and like to do their own thing, but they are far better at playing and getting along with one another now. And I feel they have a much better relationship with us workers, it's as if they have confidence and trust in us as well, and they are able to speak with us in relation to their safety and emotions, how they are feeling much more openly'.*

Staff members also alluded to the benefits of the youth club operating as a safe and comfortable sanctuary where the young people feel empowered to take ownership of the space and where they feel like they belong. Staff also mentioned the reassurance and relief this provides for parents and families of the young people, which in turn allows them to gain crucial independence skills thus enabling greater opportunities for social interaction and communal connection:

'I think the development of the young people is just amazing, and especially now with the provision over 3 nights a week it's brilliant for them. It's a safe space for them to be, it's a provision which is available for those being educated through the medium of English which is provided several times a week, now we have that here.'

'it's an opportunity to provide respite for parents, they get a break when their children are with us, they are reassured that they are in a safe space, they have their own space now that we have the mobile for the provision as well kitted out with lots of new resources and equipment'

Staff members also commented on the youth centred approach which has been adapted by the programme which grants autonomy and prioritises the voice of the young people in the development of the overall programme. This participatory approach has been rooted in the aims of the project that correspond with the more horizontally organised indigenous youth work model and its commitment to decoloniality. Therefore, from the outset, this participatory methodology further helps to enhance a sense of ownership and agency amongst service users:

'the young people feel as if they have ownership of the project, anything that the young people raise or anything that they would like to see be brought to the service, we really try our best to put their needs and ideas to the fore, and think this a key element of our provision and is testimony to every member of staff here, that we do our very best to meet the needs of our young people'

An additional advantage of the programme is that many of the staff members of Sólás na nÓg also working as teaching assistants and also in teaching roles in local Irish-medium schools. This has fostered a collaborative partnership approach between school and youth club. The team alluded to many examples of development of specific young people in relation to their behaviour and confidence both in and outside of school. The development and growth of these young people has been attributed to the informal Sólás na nÓg youth programme at Glór na Móna:

'our service as well goes hand in hand with the formal education that our young people receive, even in relation to the element of relationship building with our young people, there were some of the young people who we work with in school that we were able to encourage to attend the youth club, even those who maybe were school refusers, they wouldn't have missed a day of the club. But I think the provision at Sólás has really helped them settle in school as well and become more comfortable. When I think back, you know there were some children attending our services who wouldn't have spoken to us in school but now, we have a great relationship with them, but I think it is a result of the informal relationship we have developed with them in the youth club.'

'I think we would all agree about a particular attendee whose parent told us all that before coming to Sólás, they wouldn't have left their bedroom, they're a teenager, they wouldn't have went anywhere apart from home and school, but now, they wouldn't miss the youth club for the world... he knows us all by name, he speaks directly to us, something that used to never happen at the start of the programme, he came here for one year, and wouldn't speak to us but now, he socialises, he's made friends, he's involved in all the group chats, the development of this young person have been monumental and I really think it has been because of the time and space and increase of provision, he's just been given the space to develop'



These are the children you see by themselves, these are the young people who are always by themselves. Through time, you really see how badly this impacts on their mental health; and to see them actually make connections and socialise with other young people has in turn had a huge impact on their ability to attend school. They are now happy at school; they go to school now with friends.'

Staff members also referred to the understanding and empathy that young people have developed and continue to display amongst their peers in the youth service. They understand that at times their friends can become overwhelmed and need time and space to themselves to self-regulate. Young people have shown compassion and respect for their peers. Staff attest to the fact that the inclusive youth club space has allowed them to build on social skills with others:

'I think it's also just being given the opportunity to be social and to socialise - this space is for them. It's safe, it can be quiet when it needs to be for them, they can leave the room and find their own space, it's the understanding, even the mutual understanding amongst the service users of when they need time out and when they feel overwhelmed.

Staff members also made reference to their observation of the increase in Irish language usage amongst young people. The staff explained the non-judgemental methodology taken in the club in relation to language policy which takes the form of a more relaxed approach where staff will gently encourage service users to use their language by always answering in Irish. They feel that this has generated a higher inclination and motivation to use Irish in the youth space:

'I think I have seen a more natural usage of Irish from our young people, throughout the past year and a half. A more natural inclination to use the language because of the informality of the youth club, they seem more at ease when using the language to communicate with us.'

'We have noticed as well with the approach that we take, we will speak to them in Irish, even when they reply to us in English, we'll reply back to them in Irish and I think that encourages them to use the language more.'

Staff members also voiced their opinions in relation to Glór na Móna's capital development of the project which included the procurement of a temporary space and new resources to house the project[6]. Despite welcoming the development in relation to space and resource, the staff did also voice concerns about the sustainability of the growth of the project in relation to the temporary space:

> *'With the acquisition of our own space for the project it has been a real life line to the service provision and has allowed for growth and expansion of the club, however, when we are trying to implement interventions and maybe attend to the needs of a young person who is over stimulated, doing so in the confines of one room with a sensory room in a storage cupboard, it really is challenging and it's unfair on the young person...The space we have, whilst it is exclusive to the service, it's substandard and not sustainable'.*

The staff members highlighted the need for additional funding and resources to be put in place in order to further enhance the quality of resources which are to be made fit for purpose for young people accessing informal education services through the medium of Irish:

> *'We're buying resources which are all produced through the medium of English and it always seems to be that we are having to take the 'makeshift' approach for our young people accessing services through Irish'.*

They also spoke of the potential to enhance capacity building, work experience and volunteering opportunities in order to empower and equip young people with additional needs for employment in the future.

Parents

Data was collected from two groups of parents; the junior and teenage cohort of service users at Sólás na nÓg. Themes such as confidence and socialisation, school performance, willingness to participate, attendance at the club, demand for vocational courses and trips and recommendations in order to further enhance the service were discussed. Parents offered unequivocal support for the service and praised the team for their professionalism and attention to detail in their interventions with the young people. Discussion began with parents making comment in relation to the willingness of their children to attend the service:

> *'Even if we have things planned as a family, they'll say 'does that mean I have to miss the club?!'*

> *'It's getting to the point now if my son misses the club, or there's something else that we have to attend, it causes an absolute explosion! He really hates missing out on the social time that he gets with his friends'*

> *'My son was deliberating whether to go to his mummy's 40th birthday party which fell on a Wednesday night or miss out on the club... My daughter also missed out on her granny's birthday when she found out that the Zoo were coming to visit the youth club, she wouldn't miss it!'*

Parents then gave insightful testimonials in relation to the social and behavioural development of their children in relation to the youth programme. They referred to the friendships and connections they have made with other young people within the youth club but also referenced their development in communicating with strangers:

6 Glór na Móna are currently developing a capital project called 'Croí na Carraige' which aims to build a multi-purpose youth, community, family and heritage hub on the adjacent Belfast City council land adjacent to their current Gaelionad Mhic Goill building. They plan to house Sólás na nÓg in this new facility. Press release for further information and coverage on the Belfast Media Group available at: https://www.glornamona.com/general/croi-na-carraige-open-day/?lang=en/ https://belfastmedia.com/croi-na-carraige-development



'It's really just given my son a new lease of independence from me, and even in school you know he has an assistant, he has his teacher who is very supportive, and the school has been fabulous, but here I think he can just do his own thing. Ok the staff here are looking out for him, but he can do without being told 'don't do this don't do that', in the house and at schools there are more rules.'

'Socially our child has come on leaps and bounds, he still won't go out in the street but won't miss a night here, going from 1 night to 3 nights has really changed him, he's involved in everything that we do as a family, it's opened him up so much.'

'Before, even if we were out for dinner we had to order for him, but now he's able to order for himself, go to the shop on his own and I contribute that all to him attending the youth club.'

'Our child sees this as a real social event, he even makes a bit of an effort in the clothes he wears to the club.'

Parents went on to give insight into the young people's enthusiasm to organise trips and social events outside of the youth club setting, especially that of the teenage cohort. Parents were genuinely astounded by the changes in their own children's disposition in wanting to socialise more often, seeing them gaining confidence and trust in their peers and also independence skills:

'It seemed to be that at primary level and junior school, the parents had to organise social events and trips out with other parents and friends to try and encourage them to socialise outside of school, anything we proposed they probably would have said no too, but now it seems they are taking control and organising their own social life, telling us that they have arranged to go to the cinema or go into town, it still amazes me'

'Our son is going out on his own now too, he would come in and say 'I'm going out into town here' and we are looking at each other saying 'is this our son?!'

Parents also mentioned the benefits that have transpired as a result of the increase in youth programme provision from one to three nights per week. Interestingly, some parents had initial concerns in relation to a change in programming and structure of the youth club as it could have potentially generated anxiety for their children. However, parents were unanimously supportive of the shift from one to three nights a week and mentioned how the increase in access to the clubs have had a positive impact on their children:

'My son has just been able to make friends, he really struggles to make friends, but I think that has been one of the best things that has come out of the extra nights that he has had more opportunities to be social. Now sometimes it might come round to Friday night where he will just say, mummy I'm exhausted, and that's ok too, we just take it as it comes and there's no pressure on him.'

'When there was the transition from 1 night to 3 nights I was concerned as to whether my child would ever attend the Friday session as by the time the end of the week comes and he is counting down the days to the end of the school week I thought he'll never make the Friday, but he doesn't miss it! Which to me, really tells you what's going on.'

Parents gave extensive recommendation to the staff team and coordination of the programme at Sólás na nÓg with particular praise given to the open lines of communication between parents and the staff. This inclusive communication strategy sought and received clear buy-in in relation to programme outline, upcoming trips and any worries or queries the parents may have so that the staff could implement individualised interventions in order for the young people to be able to participate fully and be included in the activities which were planned:

'The team is brilliant, they just go over and above, each child is seen and heard and understood, they are welcomed and addressed by name as they come in, in school that is just unrealistic...it's very hard to happen in a formal school setting.'

'If I know something's going to happen, say they are going on a trip to the zoo, my child hates spiders and snakes and she will freak out about it, although the way we are foretold, I am able to talk to the team about it and so firstly they will be able to understand how she might react, they'll be able to take action and make the experience more comfortable for her, other people who don't regularly work with children with autism wouldn't have that understanding.'

'You actually have individual interventions here; they attend to the individual needs of the children without secluding them but also through bringing them together socially.'

Parents were asked to describe the kinds of characteristics and developments they have seen in the children in relation to the impact the programme has had on their children. They mentioned how the youth club is a relaxed and comfortable space where they are able to socialise and be themselves without feeling judged or insecure. A few parents also gave valuable and emotional insights into past experiences where they tried to encourage their children to join other social groups and programmes which they stated were too overwhelming for their child:

'It's a relaxing environment here, they get to do what they're interested in, you look around and see all the equipment and I just feel like, they don't have to be 'on' in here. My child would be a 'masker', like most girls are, she just gets to be herself here, she's relaxed and I think it's to do with the environment, she feels she has more in common with the other kids.'



'We've tried my son at other groups, he really just couldn't cope. Whereas here, he just feels like, 'They are all the same as me, they understand me' it brings such relief to him that they don't have to...there's none of this trying to pretend to be normal, and this is something that all our children face on the daily in school.'

Parents also spoke about how the language element of the club has enhanced the young people's experience of school and how the club has provided an opportunity for the young people to gain confidence in the language. One parent alluded to an idea of 'informal peer learning' in operation at the youth club, where they not only acquire linguistic skills but also gain skills in relation to speaking and presenting in front of others, group work and their overall confidence:

'You are definitely seeing the impact of the increase of exposure to the language. I think the group stuff that they do in the club, learning how to be in a group, learning how to wait your turn, learning to share, I think that has really enhanced his ability to cope in school.'

'It's a common thing now to hear him speak Irish in the house, before that was never a thing for him but now he thinks it's so funny that I don't understand what he is saying.'

'I think also with preparation for his GCSE presentations, he is building his confidence and meeting other people here at the youth club and in turn can perform better in the classroom.'

Before moving on to parents' recommendations for the service, one parent gave profound insight into how the youth service has operated as a means of comfort and positive distraction for their child as a result of a recent family bereavement. This parent in turn called for more attention and facilitation being provided for young people with additional needs in helping them deal with grief. This parent recommended that bespoke and needs-specific counselling be made available for young people availing of informal educational services so that they receive help in processing and understanding grief and trauma.

'I lost my daddy this time last year, my child hasn't been at the club a great lot ever since he passed, but in the times he has attended, it has really been a major distraction for him... he's using this club as a positive distraction as opposed to being destructive and allowing all the pain he feels to build up inside him ... we need ASD counselling, there is no special needs counsellor, my daddy would have been like his daddy, he won't even say his name as it hurts him too much that he is gone, grief counsellors, I managed to get him to speak with a girl who was great but even she admitted that her skillset was limited for the needs of my son. I imagine he feels how I feel, but even getting him to open up or speak, it's just very difficult. Kids as well, don't like speaking to their parents.'

The discussion with parents concluded with them making recommendations for further development of the Sólás na nÓg services. Parents admitted that it was extremely hard to fault the current provision and expressed their gratitude and satisfaction once again with the team and programme of the youth service. Some recommendations which were put forward were in relation to an increase in space and the addition of more physical activities to the programme. Parents also recommended that further volunteering opportunities be sought out, especially for those service users who are of school leavers age and to encourage them in their development for employment.

After reaching the point of saturation in discussion of the data, some overarching themes regarding the data will be discussed below in the evaluation of the Sólás na nÓg project before laying out the next steps for progression of the programme.



8.Evaluation of Project

The data collected as part of this evaluative research paper unearthed rich, diverse and insightful accounts from various stakeholders of the Sólás na nÓg's project's first year of operation under a new funding specification and strategic direction. The following themes were noted as common points of discussion amongst parents, staff team members and young people;

- **Trust and Understanding**
- **Confidence**
- **Relationship building and connection**
- **Participation**
- **Employability and Capacity building**

Staff members and young people both voiced a sense of mutual understanding based on the time and care given to building a positive and safe environment which has allowed for the nurturing of trustworthy, dependable connections and relationships between youth workers and young people in the youth programme. The young people stated that they would not hesitate in approaching a youth worker with any worries or concerns they may have and many felt them more accessible and approachable when compared to counsellors or teachers in formal education settings. Staff members of the service also stated that they have developed a deep awareness of need by working closely with the young people and are conscious of the times in which they need additional support and specific strategies to help them self-soothe and find calm when they are feeling overwhelmed. The staff also said that this understanding approach has transferred over to the young people as well who are supportive, understanding and respectful of each other's needs and space within the confines of the youth club. Parents also articulated a trust in the deep understanding

provided by the staff members, who are able to keep parents and young people informed in advance of the various trips and activities. This allows parents to help in the young people's preparations for participation through diffusing any worries and anxieties they may have about upcoming activities in the youth club. Parents of young people praised the communication strategies implemented by the youth club staff and also the attention to detail given to specific individual interventions for each young person who participates in the programme.

A recurrent theme which emerged from the data was the development and growth of the young people's' confidence and self-esteem as noted by their parents, the staff, and the young people themselves. Most parents highlighted the fact that this service alone operated as the sole means for social engagement for their children. Many recounted harrowing personal accounts of how their children were isolated, suffered from poor mental health in particular as a consequence of the additional isolation imposed as a result of the pandemic. Focus groups brought attention to the fact that many young people struggled with making and retaining friends in school and thus confined themselves to their rooms at home. Parents stated that their children see the youth club as a social event where they come to relax, play, connect, learn and develop alongside their peers in an environment which is suited to their particular individual needs. Parents unanimously agreed that their young people are reluctant to miss the youth club and are willing to miss out on familial arrangements or engagements in order to participate in Sólás na nÓg.

Staff members also noted the increasing confidence of the young people within the club and noted this as a result of the increase of provision; through gaining more time throughout the week to be involved in dedicated social interaction. Many accounts were provided of individual cases where they have seen young people thrive through participating in the programme which has also had a positive impact on their performance, their personal development and also their ability to socialise and build meaningful relationships with others in school.

Parents, young people and staff members also alluded to the development of the service's enhanced programme, paying particular reference to the capacity building and employability opportunities afforded to previously excluded and marginalised young people with additional learning needs. Parents were fully supportive of this element of programme provision and expressed gratitude to the team in their pursuit of empowering and engaging the young people in planning for their futures. Parents attributed the opportunities granted to the young people by way of capacity building and the development of their confidence, self-compassion, and self-esteem; that enabled them to actively participate and contribute rather than feeling excluded and marginalised as a result of their additional learning and developmental needs. The young people gave voice to how beneficial and enjoyable these employability and vocational training courses are as part of the youth work programme and expressed their willingness in partaking in further voluntary and vocational training programmes in the time ahead.

After summarising the apparent themes from the research data collected as part of this evaluation, the next section will discuss opportunities for further development of the Sólás na nÓg programme and recommendations to enhance the service before offering concluding observations.



9.Recommendations and Next Steps

The following recommendations were highlighted by stakeholders of the Sólás na nÓg youth service and require attention and implementation in order for the service to be enhanced and made sustainable for future generations of service users with additional needs:

- **Need for appropriate and fit-for-purpose accommodation**
- **Adequate resources to be created and accessible for Irish language speakers**
- **Creating more opportunities for volunteering**
- **Follow on service for young people of post school age**
- **Continuous service user engagement and influence on programme details**
- **Bespoke ASD specific counselling services**

The findings would suggest that the services at Sólás na nÓg have had a profound and transformative impact on marginalised young people and their families ever since the establishment of the needs specific Irish-medium youth club service and throughout the initial year of increased provision of Sólás na nÓg. Both young people and their parents have expressed astounding praise and positive, reflective commentary on the increasing benefits of the service which promotes personal, emotional, social and sociolinguistic development of young people with additional learning needs. The programme has created a normalised, inclusive, safe and encouraging space for young people who were otherwise struggling to forge connections and social relationships with their peers.

The unique and ground-breaking nature of the programme was evident in the public launch of the project[7] in November 2022 when National Lottery Community Fund Chairperson, Paul Sweeney, described Sólás na nÓg as 'a path finder in terms of policy making' that was 'built around the needs of

7 Press release of launch event available at: https://www.glornamona.com/youth/groundbreaking-new-irish-medium-youth-project-launched-in-west-belfast/?lang=en and local media coverage available at: https://www.irishnews.com/paywall/tsb/irishnews/news/northernirelandnews/2022/12/07/news/new_irish_medium_youth_project_launched_in_west_belfast-2931696/content.html

young people and it's empowering a whole new generation of local community-based youth workers'. The funders noted that they had been captivated by the extensive research element which has formed an integral part of the evaluative framework built into the project which in turn will produce solid policy recommendations and will contribute to the overall research literature output on the subject of Irish-medium Youth Work. The clear evidence in the above data corresponds emphatically with Sweeney's view that the project is 'breaking new ground' by linking 'local schools and good youth work' which Is led by local people, thereby ensuring *'a tremendous impact on the education, empowerment, confidence building and resilience of young people'.*

In order to enhance and embed these essential youth services as part of the Sólás na nÓg project, adequate funding and mainstreamed statutory support is required in order for the project to be appropriately housed in accommodation which is fit for purpose and provides enough space for vulnerable young people to access bespoke sensory interventions as per their individual needs. This core argument was also echoed at the November 2022 launch of the project by former Children's Commissioner, Koulla Yiasouma who pointed out that Irish-medium Education has 22% of children with special educational needs which disproportionately higher than the mainstream English medium sector. Yiasouma stated;

> *'what does it mean to respect the rights of young people? It means that we don't discriminate, it means that we are centred on their survival and development and it means that we hear their voices. I can see children's rights being lived and experienced in this place and I really hope to see youth projects like Sólas na nÓg scaled up across the north, wherever there is a school, there should be a youth service nearby for those children with additional learning needs who need it.'*

Moreover, our engagement with Glór na Móna's youth practitioners uncovered the urgent need, as clearly enshrined in recommendation 17 of the Review of Irish Medium Education for language appropriate resources and training materials to be made available for youth workers engaging with young people through the medium of Irish with additional learning and behavioural needs as opposed to relying on project co-ordinators having to translate materials required to deliver Irish-medium youth work programmes. Further avenues to explore additional follow-on services for post-school age young people with additional needs requires attention along with a clear requirement for bespoke additional needs informed counselling services for young people. The need to skilfully utilise the unique relationship between those project staff members and the local Irish medium schools to develop a more comprehensive, evidenced-based, collaborative learning and development model between school and youth club has also emerged in the data regarding potential improvements in the programme. Such a collaborative learning model would also need to be comprehensively monitored and researched with huge potential for shared, inter-disciplinary learning opportunities. These recommendations along with persistent collaborative practice and communication with all stakeholders of the Sólás na nÓg service will undoubtedly contribute to enhancing and sustaining a necessary, pioneering, youth-centred, informal service for generations of young Gaels to come.

Although this research paper has also been limited in terms of scope, timespan, and resources, it has nevertheless uncovered the need for a much deeper and rigorous research inquiry on the significance of bespoke informal Irish-medium youth provision for increasingly marginalised and vulnerable young people. Whilst there is an emerging and diverse body of research literature on the advantages and benefits of informal youth programmes for those young

people who struggle to access mainstream youth provision as a result of their marginalisation (Driskell, 2017; DENI, 2015; Head 2011), research in relation to indigenous language communities and additional needs informal learning opportunities remains relatively unearthed. An absence of research literature exists on the unique and positive socio-psychological and socio-cultural benefits of immersive, indigenous youth programmes for young neurodiverse Irish-speakers. Growing scholarship on indigenous youth work explains the transmission of social knowledge in indigenous communities whereby 'elders and other community members work holistically...using traditional methods for cultural transmission and human development' (Cooper, 2018, p.13). Baxter et. al (2015) notes that engaging with youths of indigenous language communities is imperative in inducing opportunities for youth voice and participation in policy discussions in relation to 'adult-dominated' affairs such as education and politics, from which young people are usually excluded. The inclusion of young Gaels in similar discussions, not only in relation to linguistic provision and rights but also in their access of adequate, needs specific informal learning opportunities and parity of provision in relation to that of the English-medium youth work sector is essential to the holistic development and empowerment of Irish speaking youths of today and for the generations which follow.

In addition, no such service or programme has been conceptualised or developed in the Gaeltacht speaking regions in the Republic of Ireland for those young people raised as native speakers. This dearth of comparative research literature seems to be paralleled in the international context where the extensive therapeutic and pastoral care benefits of providing informal, immersive, minoritised language youth sanctuaries for young people with additional learning needs seems to be relatively unexplored. The fact that Glór na Móna intend to fluidly continue using this participatory research model to gather evidence and testimonials throughout the duration of the Sólás na nÓg project is a wholly positive development in terms of fostering shared learning and potentially, ground-breaking policy interventions for the benefit of the Irish-medium Youth Work sector.

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Appendix A

Interview Sample Transcription

Focus Group with Youth Workers

27/03/23 (5 females, 1 male)

1. What is the impact you have seen on the young people from this project's inception up until now with the service operating for 3 nights per week?

I think the most noticeable thing is the children's confidence, you can see a huge difference from we began the project until now over a year in, in relation to their skills, the way they are behaving and relating to us as youth workers and with their peers, it's just brilliant to see, the development and growth of these young people, even though they are all developing (in relation to their social skills and understanding their emotions) and are at different stages in their journeys, the majority of them have just come on leaps and bounds.

I have really noticed the relationships forged between the young people, - I wasn't working here when the project was in it's pilot stage but I just feel like and especially this year, despite the fact that they all have their own individual interests and like to do their own thing, but they are far better at playing and getting along with one another now. And I feel they have a much better relationship with us workers, it's as if they have confidence and trust in us as well, and they are able to speak with us in relation to their safety and emotions, how they are feeling much more openly.

I was here at the beginning the pilot for a short while, and I think the development of the young people is just amazing, and especially now with the provision over 3 nights a week it's brilliant for them. It's a safe space for them to be, it's a provision which is available for those being educated through the medium of English which is provided several times a week, now we have that here.

I think as well it is a opportunity to provide respite for parents, they get a break when their children are with us, they are reassured that they are in a safe space, they have their own space now that we have the mobile for the provision as well kitted out with lots of new resources and equipment, and I just think this development will continue on as we continue to grow.

I think as well that the young people feel as if they have ownership of the project, anything that the young people raise or anything that they would like to see be brought to the service, we really try our best to put their needs and ideas to the fore, and think this a key element of our provision and is testimony to every member of staff here, that we do our very best to satisfy the needs of our young people.

I think that our service as well goes hand in hand with the formal education that our young people receive, even in relation to the element of relationship building with our young people, there were some of the young people who we work with in school that we were able to encourage to attend the youth club, even those who maybe were school refusers, they wouldn't have missed a day of the club. But I think the provision at Solas has really helped them settle in school as well and become more comfortable. When I think back, you know there were some children attending our services who wouldn't have spoken to us in school but now, we have a great relationship with them, but I think it is a result of the informal relationship we have developed with them in the youth club.

2. Are you able to think of a particular case in relation to any of the young people where you have seen a remarkable change in as a result of the service?

I think we would all agree about a particular attendee whose parent told us all that before coming to Sólás, they wouldn't have left their bedroom, they're a teenager, they wouldn't have went anywhere apart from home and school, but now, they wouldn't miss the youth club for the world, they love it, they participate, now sometimes they need their own space and we're used to that, but he knows us all by name, he speaks directly to us, something that used to never happen at the start of the programme, he came here for one year, and wouldn't speak to us but now, he socialises, he's made friends, he's involved in all the group chats, the development of this young person have been monumental and I really think it has been because of the time and space and increase of provision, he's just been given the space to develop .

I think it's also just being given the opportunity to be social and to socialise - this space is for them. It's safe, it can be quiet when it needs to be for them, they can leave the room and find their own space, it's the understanding, even the mutual understanding amongst the service users of when they need time out and when they feel overwhelmed.

I see even the impact the service has on young people when they are in school especially with the teenagers, even at lunchtime, they are now eating together and sitting chatting with each other about things that happened in the youth club and their common interests, it's just another thing that the young people have in common, in school they are engaging with their friends they have made because of the youth service.

These are the children you see by themselves, these are the young people who are always by themselves. Through time, you really see how badly this impacts on their mental health; and to see them actually make connections and socialise with other young people has in turn had a huge impact on their ability to attend school they are now happy at school, they go to school now with friends, it's really lovely to see.

3. Any improvement on the young people's usage of Irish in the club?

It comes with age I think, we have some children here who will just refuse to speak Irish despite them understanding every word that we say to them, there are some students in school who do struggle with comprehension and we have to realise that.

I think I have seen a more natural usage of Irish from our young people, throughout the past year and a half. A more natural inclination to use the language because of the informality of the youth club, they seem more at ease when using the language to communicate with us.

We have noticed as well with the approach that we take, we will speak to them in Irish, even when they reply to us in english, we'll reply back to them in Irish and I think that encourages them to use the language more

We have one young person who always tries so hard with their Irish and they have really beautiful Irish, so that encourages the other young people to use their language as well

It's also interesting to see while they play with one another, when one speaks in Irish, it encourages them to use their language more in their peer groups rather than specifically using Irish when speaking to older people

I think when they refuse to speak Irish it's because of the rules attached to speaking Irish when they are in school, maybe it's something to do with being out of routine as well they know that Irish is the language of the school but it also as said earlier, comes with age.

Especially the 'I don't understand what that is?' you don't hear that as often the older the young people get.

It takes them a while to get used to the two different spaces, this is an informal space but when young people join the club they will call us teacher and it takes a while to get through to them that we are youth workers, the same rules in school don't apply here, they own the space, we are here for them.

Definitely with the frequency of the club opening 3 nights a week we can see an increase in the usage of Irish.

4. Anything you would like to see brought to the club over the next few years to enhance the service?

With the acquisition of our own space for the project it has been a real life line to the service provision and has allowed for growth and expansion of the club, however, when we are trying to implement interventions and maybe attend to the needs of a young person who is over stimulated, doing so in the confines of one room with a sensory room in a storage cupboard, it really is challenging and it's unfair on the young person.

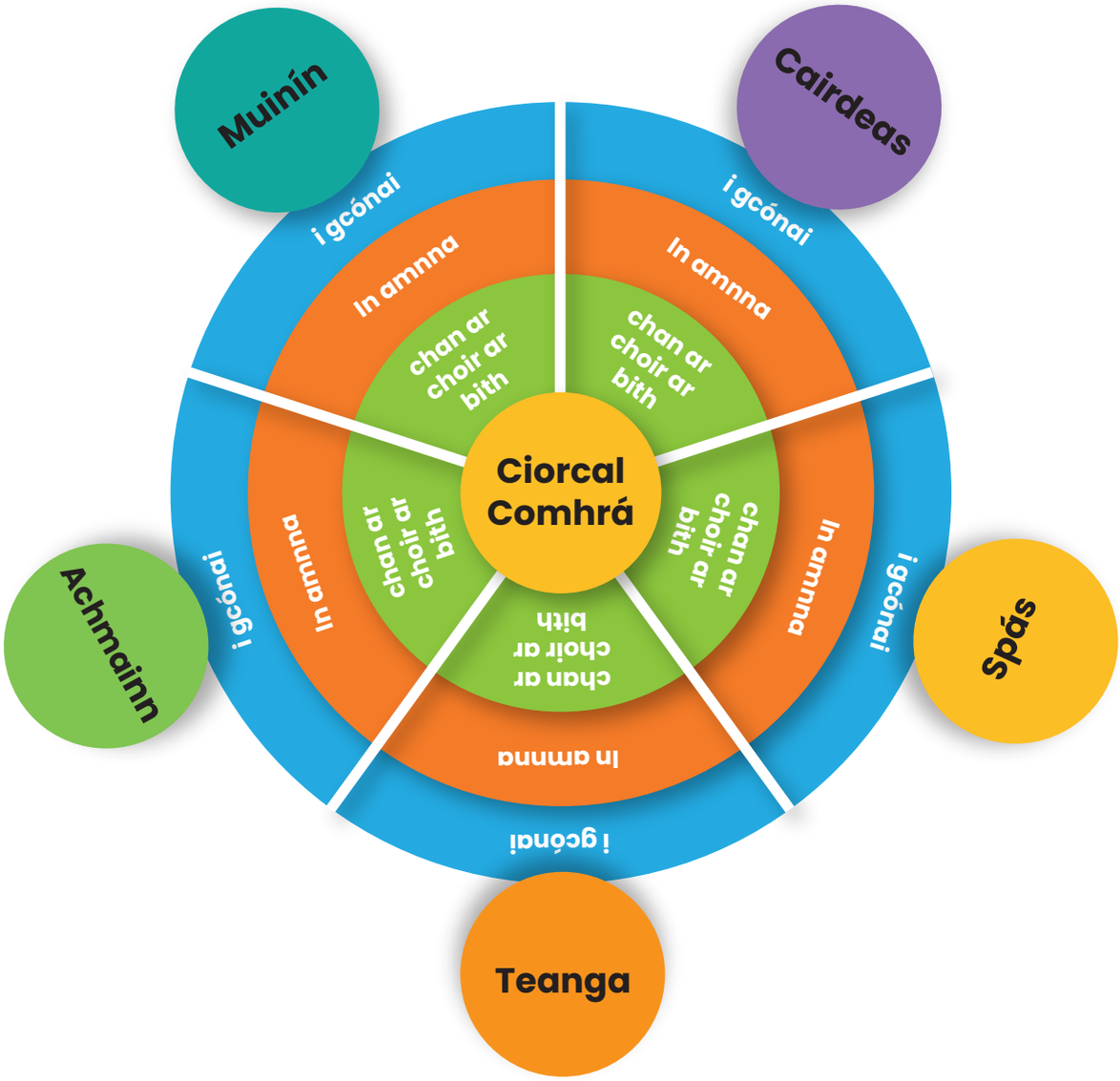
We're buying resources which are all produced through the medium of English and it always seems to be that we are having to take the 'make shift' approach for our young people accessing services through Irish.

The space we have, whilst it is exclusive to the service, it's substandard and not sustainable.

We are looking to develop voluntary workers for the service itself by implementing a programme 'ag cumasú an aosa óig' to create employment and work experience opportunities.

Appendix B

Data Collection Assessment Circle



Appendix C

Creatlach Obair Óige Dhúchasach
Indigenous Youth Work Model






glór na móna
Pobal & Óige
02890 234442
@glornamona.com
@glornamona






glór na móna
Pobal & Óig











adidas

Campus 2
Royale High