

# *Our* **BALBRIGGAN**

## Social Spaces and Youth Services for Young People in Balbriggan

Findings of a participatory consultation  
with the young people of Balbriggan



**Comhairle Contae  
Fhine Gall**  
Fingal County  
Council



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt  
Department of Justice



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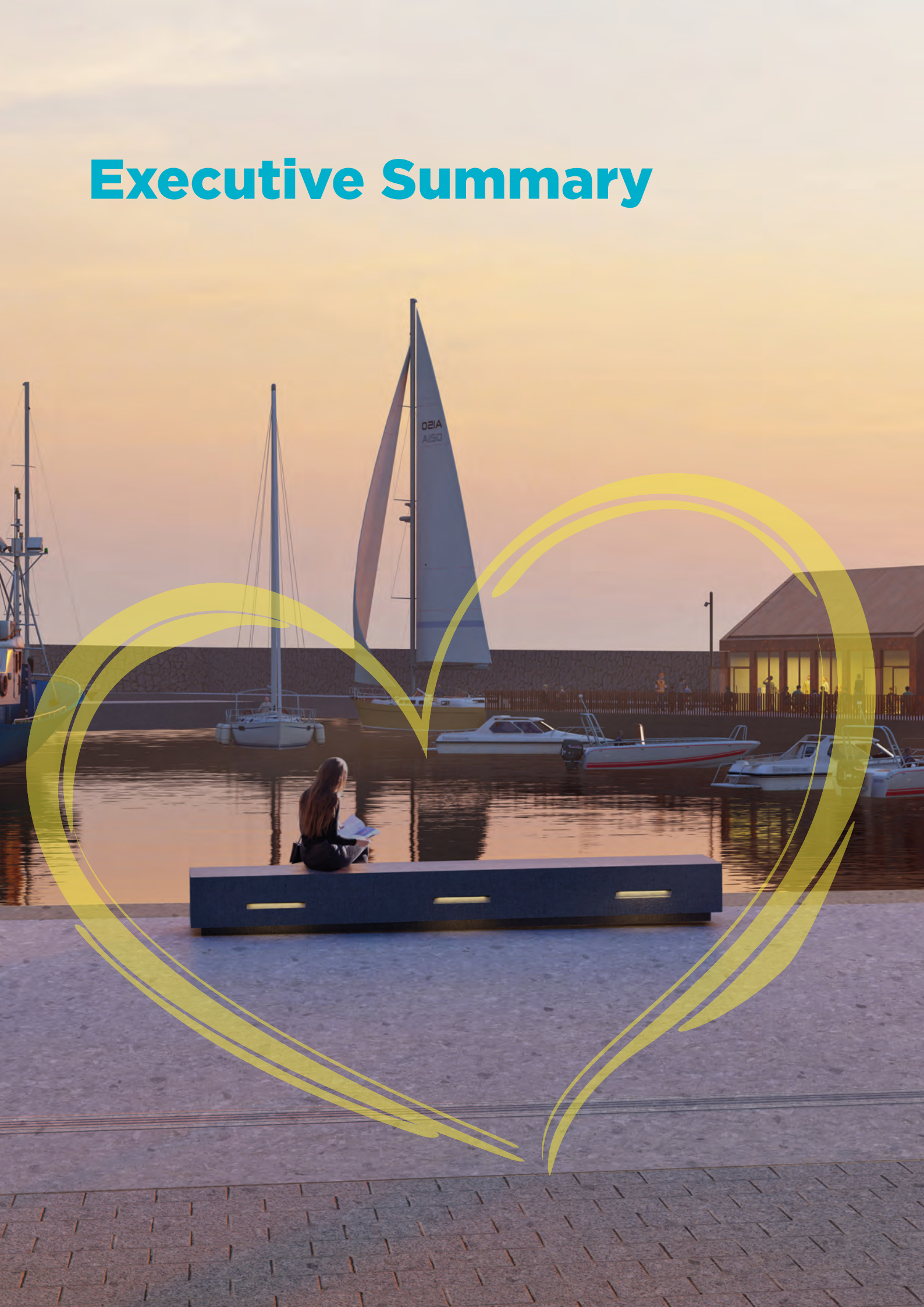
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# Executive Summary



This study was carried out on behalf of Our Balbriggan Programme in 2024 to identify the social recreational needs of teenagers growing up in Balbriggan as well as current and future youth service requirements within the town. In the 2022 Census, children and young people (0-17 years) comprised 8,338 or **32.9%** of Balbriggan's population.

The project was led by a steering group comprising members of: An Garda Síochána, Fingal County Council, Foróige and Dublin & Dun Laoghaire Education Training Board. The research was funded by the Department of Justice.

Under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), teenagers have the right to be heard on any issue which impacts their lives. In total 202 teenagers took part in the consultation process. In addition, a consultation was undertaken with a wide range of youth professionals to incorporate their unique knowledge base and experience of the needs of teenagers in Balbriggan.

The provision of recreational social spaces for younger children has received considerable attention in research, policy and planning. However, the topic has not been given the same level of consideration in relation to teenagers, who need opportunities to socialise with peers and explore their emerging independence. This is an important dimension for the development of their sense of identity and belonging.

Providing dedicated social recreational space and youth services for teenagers and engaging them in consultation and design processes helps to create stewardship, respect, a sense of confidence in their own agency and pride in their community. This has the potential to facilitate broad societal benefits including improved community relations between adults and teenagers, reduction in anti-social behaviour, and environmental and community improvements.

This research consisted primarily of a series of participatory consultation workshops with teens attending Balbriggan's secondary schools and engaging with key youth agencies in the town. A workshop was also held with professionals from a wide range of organisations and agencies working with teens in Balbriggan.

The needs expressed by the teenagers in the workshops included: improved community sports facilities, above all a public swimming pool; improvements to public infrastructure such as outdoor teen hang-out spaces; more youth-friendly cafés and other food options; a greater range of arts and cultural opportunities; a dedicated youth centre within the town; better access to health services, particularly mental health; enhanced provision for a diverse range of hobbies and free-time activities; spaces for learning and study out of school hours (potentially focused on the town's public library); and improved shopping facilities, noting that shopping centres are used by teenagers at least as much for socialising as for shopping.

Analysis of maps of teenagers' habitual movements identified 775 spaces and places in Balbriggan used by teens, the foremost of which were eateries, friends' houses, hang-out spaces, areas of the natural environment, public parks, playgrounds, schools, and shopping locations. Important gender differences were noted in the teenagers' use of public spaces.

In identifying what they saw as priority needs of teenagers in Balbriggan, the professionals prioritised a new youth centre or "youth hub" for the town, followed by better access to health services; interagency collaboration for an integrated approach to youth provision; outdoor hang-out spaces; community sports facilities; alternative learning opportunities for those not choosing the higher education route; music and dance facilities; family support services, particularly language and literacy for parents; greater access to public transport; and improved communication and awareness-raising about youth provision in the town, linked to a more positive perception of teenagers as active citizens.

The report includes the following recommendations (note that what follows is just an indication of the recommendations, and it is important to consult the full recommendations in chapter 6 of the report):

- 1 Set up a Balbriggan Youth Council with a formal role in collaborating with the local authority and its partners to influence development across the town.
- 2 All development initiatives, particularly those listed in these recommendations, should have young people involved from the start (this is also a key element of all the following recommendations).
- 3 Recognise that creating an overall youth-friendly environment in Balbriggan is just as important as the specific initiatives listed here.
- 4 Embrace and celebrate cultural diversity as a positive aspect of life in Balbriggan.
- 5 Ensure that girls and boys are equally involved in all future recreation and youth service initiatives.
- 6 Campaign to promote awareness and understanding of young people as active citizens, playing a positive role in community development and solidarity.
- 7 Establish an inter-agency youth development task force for Balbriggan to address the social, educational, health and recreational needs of the large youth population.
- 8 Balance universal and targeted youth services for maximum reach and greater community solidarity.
- 9 Explore potential for a multi-purpose youth hub in the town centre, built on multi-agency cooperation to provide a range of complementary services and opportunities for young people, with teenagers involved in its design.
- 10 Further develop a number of teen outdoor hang-out spaces, with young people involved in their location and design.
- 11 Develop the existing library building as a youth-friendly multi-purpose resource for reading, study, independent learning, sharing and socialising.
- 12 Explore the potential for a swimming pool in the town.
- 13 Use Balbriggan's new Arts Council Creative Places funding to engage with teenagers in developing new arts and cultural opportunities in the town.
- 14 Enhance the potential of the area around the Tesco superstore in the Millfield Shopping Centre for teenagers to socialise.
- 15 Develop the area around Dunnes Stores into a more welcoming multigenerational space.
- 16 In collaboration with young people, initiate programmes or initiatives to address gender inequality in the use of parks and other recreational spaces in Balbriggan.
- 17 Increase the frequency of local buses, and offer reduced or free fares to teenagers.
- 18 Actively involve teenagers in development plans for the beach, harbour area and other present and future developments e.g. Quay Street.
- 19 Explore the possibility of further development of multipurpose astro pitches.
- 20 Explore all avenues to increase local young people's access to mental health services.
- 21 In partnership with local employers, explore, develop and deliver new forms of apprenticeship and technical skills training.



# 1. Introduction



## 1.1 The origin and antecedents of this study

Balbriggan has a high youth population with children (0-17 years) numbering 8,338 or 32.9% of the population, one of the highest proportions of young people among Ireland's large towns. In addition, Balbriggan has a culturally diverse population with 33.8% being born outside of Ireland (CSO 2023) and 9% identifying as Black or Black Irish, compared with 1% nationally. Integration of this diverse community is a key driver of Balbriggan's development strategy, through the "Our Balbriggan" programme, a multi-agency town regeneration initiative being delivered by Fingal County Council.

In partnership with other organisations, local Youth Services provide a comprehensive range of youth work to meet the varied needs of young people in Balbriggan. However, in recent years, there is growing concern that lack of investment in youth services is hindering their capacity to effectively meet these needs in addition to identifying changes required in youth service provision within the town.

Teenage recreation and leisure is a part of 'normal' childhoods and is a right protected under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>1</sup> Teenagers also have the right under Article 12 to express their views on any issue which affects them, such as youth services and recreation facilities. The inclusion of children and teenagers in decision-making about issues which affect their lives is increasingly supported by the legal, policymaking and practice communities in Ireland as elsewhere.<sup>2,3</sup>

The term "teenager" is used throughout this report as that is how the teenagers identified themselves, as opposed to "young person" or "adolescent".

## 1.2 The aim and objectives of this project

This project sought to identify the views, experiences, and opinions of teenagers (12-18 years) living in Balbriggan, Co Dublin, about

the perceived need for improved youth services and their preferences for the types of social recreation opportunities within the town. The findings from this research project can be used to (a) inform the future development of youth services within the town and (b) inform the location and specific type(s) of social recreation opportunities in Balbriggan for this age cohort.

## 1.3 The Research Team

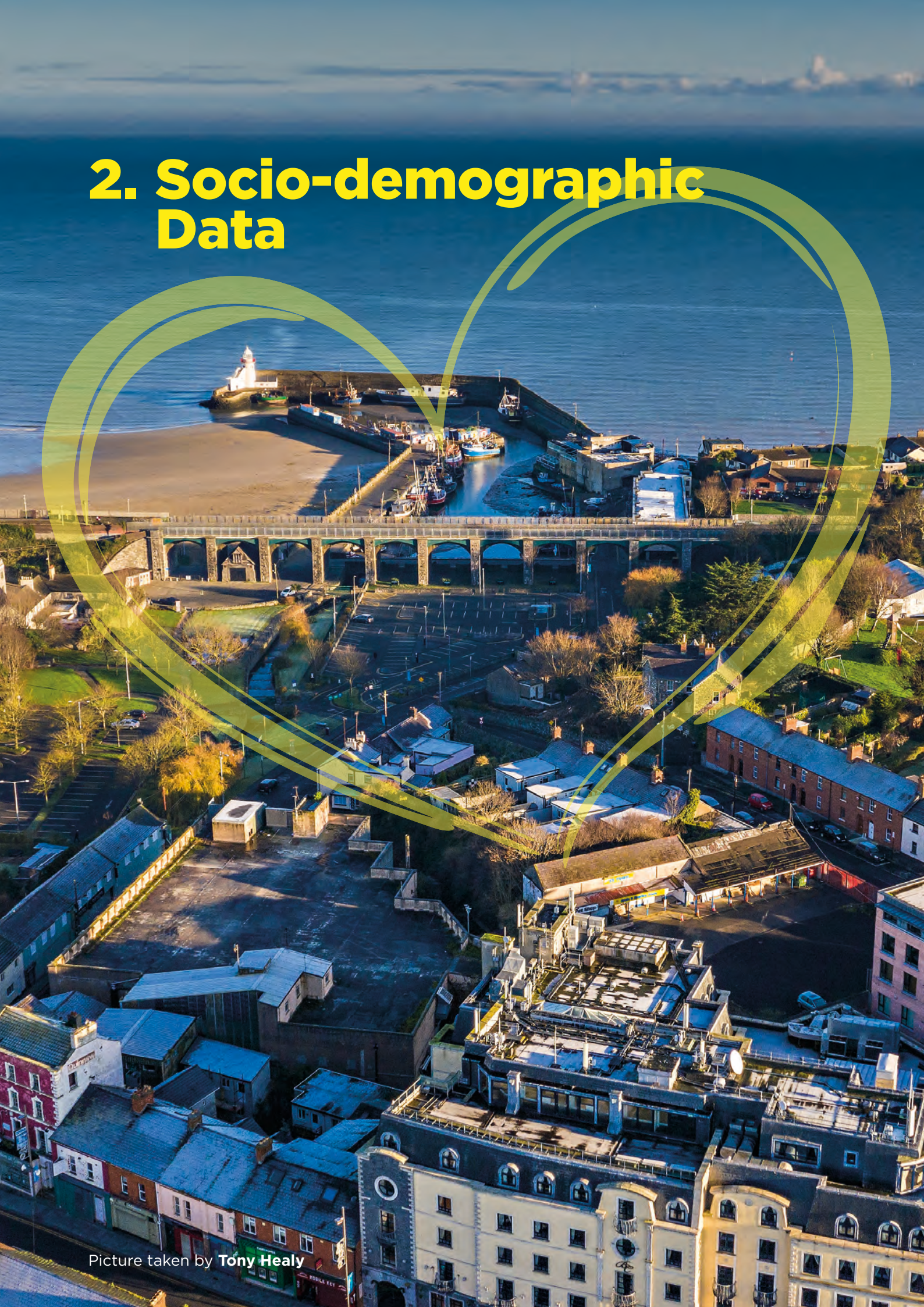
This research was undertaken by Dr Carol Barron and Dr Harry Shier from the School of Nursing, Psychotherapy and Community Health in Dublin City University. Dr Barron is an expert in children's play and recreation and Dr Shier is an expert in child and youth participation.

We would like to thank and acknowledge the two research assistants on the project, Vanessa Nnoli and Roisin Cristea.

## 1.4 The structure of this report

This report contains six chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 summarises the latest census data on the population of Balbriggan with an emphasis on teenagers and relevant socio-economic information. Chapter 3 considers current thinking on urban design for teenagers and youth services focusing on best-practice standards and established benchmarks, incorporating a gender perspective. Chapter 4 describes our research methodology including information about the teenage and adult participants. Chapter 5 sets out our findings, covering both the data provided by teenagers themselves, and that provided by adult professionals across a range of youth-related agencies and public authorities. Finally Chapter 6 presents our recommendations, which encompass both general and specific recommendations. This is followed by a complete bibliography showing all the sources of information referred to in the report.

## 2. Socio-demographic Data



This chapter sets out the relevant socio-demographic details for Balbriggan, drawing primarily on published data from the 2022 census data. A detailed population breakdown is given for Balbriggan which includes ethnic background and immigration into the town. Also included is an overview of the Balbriggan Pobal HP indices, employment, housing stock and health.

## 2.1 Population within Fingal County

According to the 2022 Census, Ireland's population reached 5,149,139 in April 2022, representing growth of 8.1% from the previous Census in 2016. Fingal's population stood at 330,506 at the time, an increase from 2016 of 11.6%, or just over 34,000 people. Fingal's population is expected to continue to grow with the Fingal Development Plan 2023 - 2029 forecasting that the county's population will increase by approximately 73,000 by 2031, an increase of 22.1% compared to 2022.

## 2.2 Population Breakdown in Balbriggan

Children and teenagers (0-17 years) comprised 8,338 or **32.9%** of Balbriggan's population in the 2022 Census, in comparison to the 65+ population of 2,254 or 8.21%. In other words, 3 of every 10 people in Balbriggan are under 18. Overall, in Fingal, 26.7% of the population was under 18 in 2022, compared to 28.3% under 18 in 2016. This research is an ideal opportunity to identify and prioritise regeneration funding for this very significant cohort of Balbriggan's population. (see Table 1)

## 2.3 Families by age of youngest child

As evidenced in table 2, there were 2,450 families with young children (0-4 and 5-9 years) in Balbriggan, and 1,687 families with children aged 10-14 and 15-19 years). The evidence that Balbriggan's teenage population is set to increase significantly in the coming years demonstrates the importance and timeliness of this study. (see Table 2)

**Table 1:** Population Breakdown in Balbriggan by Age Groups

Age Group	Rural	Urban	Total
0-17 years	6,391	1,947	8,338
18-19 years	652	246	898
20-29 years	1,912	880	2,792
30-39 years	2,820	1,022	3,842
40-49 years	3,971	1,342	5,313
50-59 years	2,028	1,043	3,071
60-64 years	570	371	941
65-69 years	410	426	836
70-74 years	286	376	662
75-79 years	158	225	383
80-84 years	84	126	210
> 85 years	65	98	163
<b>Total</b>	<b>19,347</b>	<b>8,102</b>	<b>27,449</b>

Source: Census 2022 data

**Table 2:** Families by age of youngest child

Age of Youngest Child	Number of families	Number of persons
0-4 years	1,252	4,886
5 - 9 years	1,148	4,577
10 - 14 years	1,008	3,809
15- 19 years	679	2,371
20 years and over	865	2,463
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,952</b>	<b>18,106</b>

Source: Census 2022 data

## 2.4 Balbriggan, youngest town in Ireland

According to the 2022 census, there were 49 towns in Ireland with a population over 10,000. Of these, 10 had an average age under 36 years, and eight of them were in Co. Dublin. Balbriggan with an average age of 33.6 years, was the youngest large town in the country.

## 2.5 Citizenship

In April 2022, there were 631,785 non-Irish citizens living in Ireland, accounting for 12% of the usually resident population. This was an increase from 11% of the population in Census 2016. Census 2022 results show that the number of UK citizens residing in the State continued to decline, down by more than 19% from 103,113 in 2016, following a fall of 8% between 2011 and 2016. There was a noticeable growth in the number of citizens from European countries outside of the EU (131%) to more than 25,000, but this was largely driven by the crisis in Ukraine. Citizens of Asian countries made up some 16% of the non-Irish population, up 98% since 2016.

## 2.6 Immigration

Of the 89,512 people who immigrated in the year leading up to the 2022 census, more than 22,000 were Irish citizens. This was a 21% reduction from Census 2016 despite an increase of 9% in the number of people who came to live in the State in the year prior to Census 2022. The most common countries of origin for Irish citizens were the UK, Australia, and USA, while India, Brazil, and Spain were the top three countries of origin for non-Irish citizens coming to live in the State in the year to Census 2022.

80% of households headed by a non-Irish citizen who came to live in the State in the year prior to the census were renting their home from a private landlord, paying an average weekly rent of €372. This compares with under 42% of private rentals with an average weekly rent of €360 where the head of the household was Irish.

## 2.7 Ethnic Background of Balbriggan's population

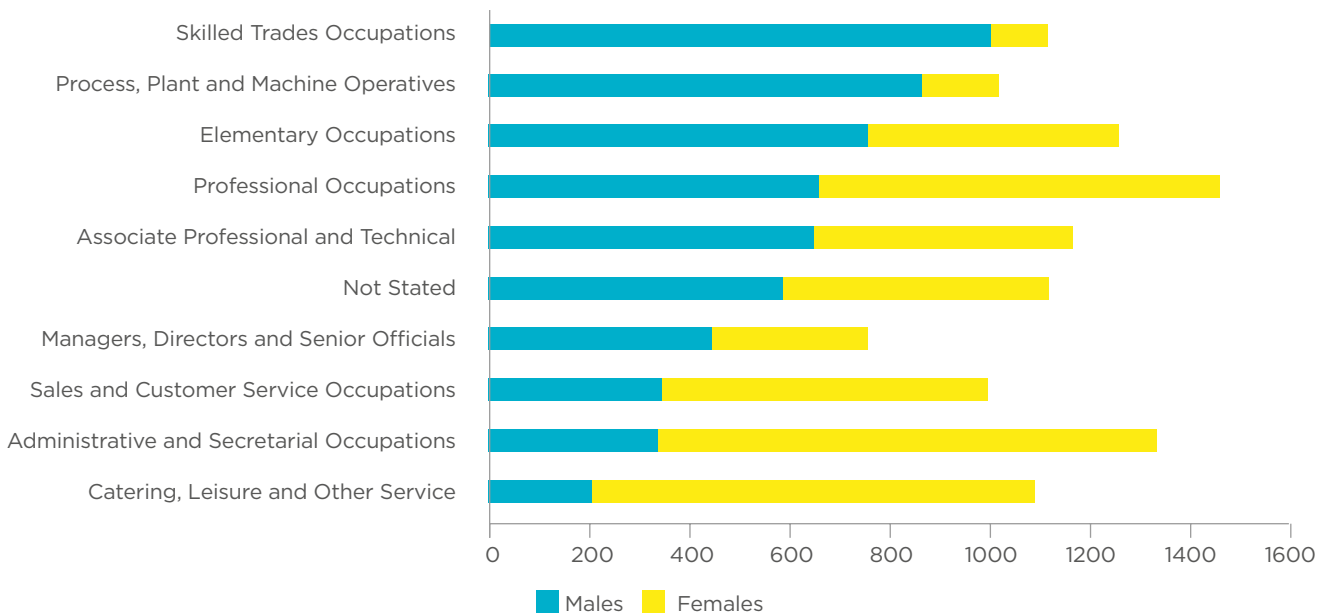
Between 2016 and 2022, there was a 17% increase in the number of people who identified as Black or Black Irish: African and a 28% growth in the number of people who identified as Black or Black Irish: any other Black background. In Balbriggan on census night 2022, 13,725 people (57%) identified themselves as White Irish, 4,642 (19.2%) as any other white background, 2,235 (9.2%) as Black or Black Irish: African. 786 people (3.2%) identified as Asian or Asian Irish: Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi, and 242 (1%) identified as Asian or Asian Irish: Chinese. Apart from 1,273 (5%) of the population who did not state their ethnic background, all other categories were less than 1% of Balbriggan's population.

In the 2022 census, a growing number of Balbriggan's population were born outside of Ireland. 8,134 people living in Balbriggan (33.8%) stated that they were born outside of Ireland. (see Table 3)

**Table 3: Ethnicity Breakdown of Balbriggan Population**

Ethnicity Breakdown of Balbriggan Population	Numbers	%
White Irish	13,725	57.0
Any other White background	4,642	19.2
Black or Black Irish - African	2,235	9.2
Not stated	1,273	5.0
Asian or Asian Irish - Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi	786	3.2
Other including mixed background	517	2.1
Asian or Asian Irish - Chinese	242	1.0
Roma	226	0.9
Asian or Asian Irish - any other Asian background	178	0.7
White Irish Traveller	155	0.6
Arab	136	0.6
Black or Black Irish - any other Black background	94	0.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>24,209</b>	<b>99.9</b>

Source: Data calculated using Table F5082 - Population usually resident and present in the State Census 2022

**Table 4:** Persons at Work or Unemployed by Occupation and Sex

## 2.8 Employment, education and industry

There are a wide variety of occupations within the town, with females dominating in the caring, leisure services and administration occupations and men in the skilled trades occupations and process, plant and machine operatives. There is a fairly even gender balance in relation to professional occupations. 6484 men and women work in managerial and technical roles followed by 4,616 men and women working in non-manual roles. 3,478 men and women work in skilled manual labour posts and 3,453 working in unskilled positions. See Table 4 for a detailed breakdown of the adult work force in Balbriggan by occupation and gender.

## 2.9 Disability, carers and general health

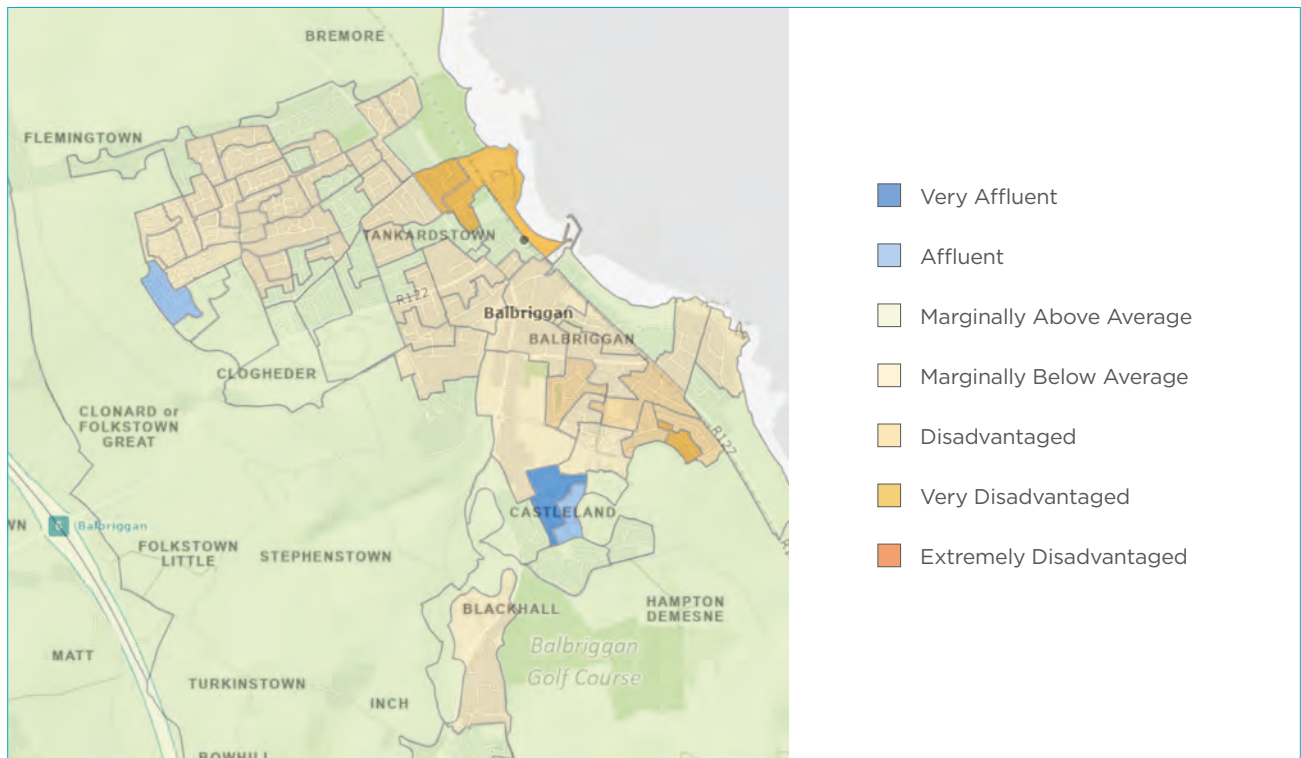
In the 2022 census, 5,224 people living in Balbriggan stated they had a disability (female 2,788 / male 2436), and 1,227 identified themselves as a carer (female 752 / male 475). When reporting on their general health, 20,243 people reported their health as good or very good. 2,185 reported their health as fair, whilst 446 said their health was bad or very bad. These low figures are unsurprising bearing

in mind the young age of the population. However, this does not address or identify the mental health and physical health needs for teenagers within the town.

## 2.10 Affluence and deprivation

The Pobal HP Deprivation index is Ireland's most widely used social gradient metric, which scores each small area (circa 100 households) in terms of affluence or disadvantage. The index is calculated from census data, such as employment, age profile and educational attainment. There are considerable differences in the relative affluence and deprivation between various parts of the county. Of the 42 Electoral Divisions in Fingal, 35 were classed as affluent in 2016. The most affluent areas were Balgriffin and Castleknock Park. The most disadvantaged were more urban areas of Blanchardstown and Balbriggan. The deprivation index for Balbriggan rural is -0.17, which is marginally below average, and the deprivation index for Balbriggan urban is -4.70 which again is marginally below average (see Figure 1 for a breakdown of the Pobal HP Deprivation Indices).

**Figure 1:** Pobal HP Deprivation Indices



There are significant disparities in the Pobal HP Deprivation Indices across Balbriggan Urban and rural (see Figure 1). For example, the Lambeecheer and Bath Road areas have a Pobal index of -22.85 being classified as very disadvantaged with a lone parent rate of 47.83%, a male unemployment rate of 20.34%, and female unemployment of 15.91%. In

contrast, Castleland has a Pobal HP calculate this score index of 21.88 and is classified as very affluent. The unemployment rate amongst males is 0.0% and 4.63% in females (see Table 5 for a more detailed comparison of very disadvantaged, disadvantaged, affluent and very affluent areas within Balbriggan). (see Table 5)

**Table 5:** Pobal HP Deprivation Indices 2022: Examples of Variation in Pobal HP Deprivation Indices (2022) across Balbriggan

	Lambeecheer & Bath Road	Pinewood Green Court	Taylor Hill Grange	Castleland
Pobal HP Index	-22.85	-17.95	11.38	21.88
Pobal HP Description	Very disadvantaged	Disadvantaged	Affluent	Very affluent
Lone parent ratio (%)	47.83	30.77	16.88	3.85
Percentage with primary school education only	30.06	27.05	2.75	2.30
Percentage with 3rd level education	15.95	12.08	58.79	63.13
Unemployment rate: Male (%)	20.34	21.43	6.42	0.00
Unemployment rate: Female (%)	15.91	10.00	8.33	4.63

Source: Census 2022 data

## 2.11 Population density

In Census 2022, Dublin City and suburbs had 3,659 people for every square kilometre. Of all the towns with a population of 1,500 people or over, Kinsealy-Drinan in Dublin was the most densely populated, with 8,401 people per km<sup>2</sup>, followed by Balbriggan with 5,481 people per km<sup>2</sup>. (see Table 6)

**Table 6:** Population Density and Area Size

	Balbriggan Rural	Balbriggan Urban
Population - 2022	19,347	8,102
Population density (persons per sq. km)	751	3,681
Area (sq. km)	26	2

Source: Census 2022 data

## 2.12 Housing in Balbriggan

According to the 2022 census, the number of private households in Fingal reached 107,846, an increase of 11.4% from 2016. This rate of growth was higher than the national average rate over the period (+8.2%).

### 2.12.1 Permanent private households by year built

2001-2010 saw the largest housing increase in Balbriggan with 3,628 private households built in this period. This was a significant increase on 1991-2020 which saw the beginning of the growth in private household builds with 1,175 new builds. 2011-2016 or later had 966 private households built.

### 2.12.2 Private Households by Size

Two-person households are the most common household size in Balbriggan (2035) followed by 3 person households (1,731), 4 person households (1,699), 1 person households (1,429) then 5 person households (808).





### 3. Urban design and youth services for teenagers



The WHO supports the provision of spaces where teenagers can meet in safety and socialise with their peers.<sup>4,5</sup> This calls for providing teenagers with legitimate public space, designed in such a way as to make them feel welcome to congregate with their friends, and where they can have access to play and recreational opportunities. It has been highlighted that one of the most important factors in the provision of dedicated spaces for teenage play and recreation is the need for societal change and greater recognition of their right to occupy the public domain.<sup>1,6</sup>

### 3.1 Design considerations for teenage space

The guidelines developed by the London Legacy Development Corporation for the provision of teen space in and around the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park<sup>7</sup> can be used to identify good practice in the development of spaces for teens, as they were measured against the experience of local teenagers during a process of consultation. The guidelines recommend that teen space should be located a safe walking distance from residential units and also near to retail, educational or leisure property, or main routes through open space; some privacy will be valued by teenagers; however, a teen space should not be isolated by large expanses of open space or severed from the rest of a neighbourhood by physical barriers such as busy roads; there should also be a degree of natural/passive surveillance to discourage anti-social behaviour but no physical barriers are needed, and there should be a permeable boundary to the space.

There should be opportunities for risk-taking, as play that encourages teenagers to take risks means they will be less likely to seek risk-taking activities elsewhere; the separation of different age groups should be blurred, but not rigid; also, teenagers benefit from being able to engage in play and recreation in natural/outdoor environments as they tend to be more active, which supports positive mental health.

Fields in Trust's benchmark standards, or local guidance derived from them, are widely used by local authorities in the United Kingdom and are used here for information purposes. The most recent Fields in Trust guidance<sup>8</sup> includes new recommendations for accessibility, the application of standards and the minimum dimensions of formal outdoor space. The standards no longer differentiate between urban and rural areas; thus, the following information can be applied to both.

The following tables refer to Fields in Trust's designations for equipped play areas:

- Local Equipped Areas for Play (LEAPs) are aimed at children who can go out to play independently.
- Neighbourhood Equipped Areas for Play (NEAPs) are aimed at older children. These can be complemented by other facilities including MUGAs (Multi-Use Games Areas) and skateboard parks etc.

Table 7 sets out Fields in Trust's Benchmark Guidelines for a variety of open space and equipped play areas. Accessibility guidelines are also provided as walking distance from dwellings. Walking times can be estimated as follows:

250m = 2-3 minutes' walk

400m = 5 minutes' walk

800m = 10 minutes' walk

1,200m = 15 minutes' walk

1,600m = 20 minutes' walk



**Table 7:** Fields in Trust benchmark guidelines for formal outdoor space

Open space typology	Quality Guideline (hectares per 1,000 population)	Walking Guideline (walking distance: metres from dwellings)
Playing pitches	1.20	1,200m
All outdoor sports	1.60	1,200m
Equipped/ designated play areas	0.25	LEAPs - 400m NEAPs - 1,000m
Other outdoor provision (MUGAs and skateboard parks)	0.30	700m

#### Quality Guidelines

- Quality appropriate to the intended level of performance, designed to appropriate technical standards.
- Located where they are of most value to the community to be served.
- Sufficiently diverse recreational use for the whole community.
- Appropriately landscaped.
- Maintained safely and to the highest possible condition with available finance.
- Positively managed taking account of the need for repair and replacement over time as necessary.
- Provision of appropriate ancillary facilities and equipment.
- Provision of footpaths.
- Designed so as to be free of the fear of harm or crime.
- Local authorities can set their own quality benchmark standards for playing pitches, taking into account the level of play, topography, necessary safety margins and optimal orientation.
- Local authorities can set their own quality benchmark standards for play areas using the Children's Play Council's Quality Assessment Tool.

Source: Fields in Trust

The guidelines are recommended to relate to residential and mixed-use developments involving non-specialist residential use (i.e. the standards should be reviewed where there are high levels of student housing, or sheltered accommodation) using average household sizes for the relevant local planning authority.

High quality green spaces go a long way to encouraging people to use facilities positively and actively. Fields in Trust favours the use of durable equipment to reduce the burden and cost of maintaining open spaces and recommends that management and maintenance regimes be put in place to ensure repair and replacement can be facilitated over time as necessary to maintain the standard of quality.<sup>8</sup>

- Quantity guidelines should not be interpreted as either a maximum or minimum level of provision; rather they are benchmark standards that can be adjusted to take account of local circumstances.

- Buffer Zones - A suitable relationship can be created by using the minimum buffer zones for specific facilities. These off-set distances ensure that facilities do not enable users to overlook neighbouring properties, reducing the possibility of conflict between local residents and those at play. (see Table 8)



**Table 8:** Recommended minimum sizes – formal outdoor space

Open space typology	Minimum sizes	Minimum dimensions	Buffer zones
LEAP	0.04ha	20 x 20 metres (minimum activity zone of 400sqm)	20m minimum separation between activity zone and the habitable room façade of dwellings
NEAP	0.1ha	31.6 x 31.6 metres (minimum activity zone of 1,000sqm comprising an area for play equipment and structures & a hard surfaced area of at least 465sqm (the minimum needed to play five-a-side football))	30m minimum separation between activity zone and the boundary of dwellings
Other outdoor provision (MUGAs and skateboard parks)	0.1ha	40 x 20 metres	30m minimum separation between activity zone and the boundary of dwellings

Source: Fields in Trust

It is important to reiterate that outdoor spaces should support teenagers' sense of belonging and their healthy development by providing for their social activities and the ways in which they engage in play and recreation.<sup>9</sup> Provisions that can support this include stages and pavilions to provide the opportunities to perform (e.g. dance, play music) as well as space to retreat; structures that support risk-taking or physically challenging forms of play (e.g. climbing, acrobatics, parkour); multiple seating options so teenagers can hang out with friends; different topographies to support activities like skating and parkour and, for younger teenagers, imaginative play; age-appropriate play equipment (e.g. swings, see-saws) including equipment that is large enough to share (e.g. basket and snake swings); space for and permission to play informal sports and games (e.g. public outdoor chess boards or table tennis). These common aspects of teenage play and recreation also hold appeal to other ages. Therefore, designing for teenagers as a primary concern can have broader benefits for the wider community.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2 Gender differences in teenage recreation

The provision of public outdoor space for teenage play and recreation tends to be dominated by wheeled play (e.g. skate parks, BMX tracks) and ball game areas (e.g.

football pitches, MUGAs). Though popular, these spaces are dominated by boys.<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that there are plenty of girls who do want to play football or skateboard; however, they are excluded for numerous reasons, including the design of the space and the behaviour of the boys,<sup>11</sup> and similar findings arose in this research project.

There is a growing design movement that seeks to provide outdoor spaces that meet the unique needs of teenage girls. A small number of outdoor spaces designed in the UK and Europe, have reported common themes in relation to making outdoor spaces more welcoming to teenage girls (for example, Hayburn Park in Glasgow; Rösens Rodda Matta in Malmö, Sweden; Einsiedler Park, Vienna). These include offering a range of smaller spaces, social seating, exercise bars and swings; improving safety with better lighting, and good sightlines, making sure paths have no dead-ends and putting facilities for teenage girls in well-frequented areas; and providing facilities, such as public toilets and free sanitary products.<sup>11</sup> The key recommendation to improve inclusivity in outdoor spaces however is to ask teenage girls themselves what they want from the places in which they live.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.3 Hang-out shelters

'Hang out' or 'teen' shelters are also widely used as provision of public outdoor space for teenagers. These work best when located and close to other facilities, rather than being placed in isolated or exposed positions, and also when designed with the teenagers who will use them.<sup>10</sup> Experts in developing play opportunities for teenage play and recreation have cautioned that many shelters are a quick or 'lazy' fix, with suppliers in effect providing a token offer that supposedly meets teenagers' needs.<sup>12</sup> For instance, most hang out/teen shelters are part of a fixed equipment playground catalogue range, rather than bespoke and unique. A key principle for designing more inclusively is to think about shelter, rather than 'a shelter' – or a separate facility, which is more than likely to be claimed by the most dominant group.<sup>11</sup> Bredäng Park, Stockholm, Superkilen Park, Copenhagen and Fremantle Esplanade Youth Plaza, Western Australia provide good examples of outdoor youth facilities where shelter is integrated, and where a range of spaces for different groups are provided for.



### 3.4 Understanding “Youth Services”

In this research, young people were asked what kinds of youth services would be most desirable for them or would be seen as priorities for public investment. It was therefore important for both researchers and young people to have a clear understanding of what was meant by the term “youth services”. Though the term is used in many different ways, in the context of this research, the widest possible definition was preferred, following this depiction of youth work in Ireland from Kevin Lalor and colleagues.<sup>13</sup>

Youth work's methods and activities vary widely, and include recreational and sporting activities, indoor and outdoor pursuits, artistic and cultural programmes, spiritual development, health promotion, issue-based activities (for example, social justice, the environment) and intercultural and international programmes and exchanges. (p. 269)

In the literature on youth services, a key distinction is made between universal and targeted services. Universal youth services are intended to be available to all young people without distinction, on a more-or-less open access basis, while targeted services are aimed at young people seen to be vulnerable, at risk or in various kinds of special circumstances.<sup>14,15</sup> Examples of such targeted youth services include mental health services,<sup>16</sup> services targeted at young people with behavioural issues<sup>15</sup> and, in the Northern Ireland context, services targeted at young people “at elevated risk of paramilitary related harms”.<sup>17</sup>

Youth services are often said to be concerned with the control and containment of problematic, turbulent and even deviant young people.<sup>15,18-20</sup> An alternative approach, is to prioritise services focused on youth emancipation, promoting the passions, interests, concerns, and views of young people,<sup>21</sup> and defending their human rights.<sup>22</sup>

# 4. Research Methodology



### 4.1 Conceptual framework

Under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, teenagers have the right to be consulted on any issue which affects them, such as youth services and recreation facilities. Article 12.1 provides:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.<sup>1</sup>

The inclusion of children and teenagers in decision-making about issues that affect their lives is supported in Ireland from national Government to the local setting. The use of participatory methodologies has been foregrounded as key to unlocking their potential to contribute rich and useful perspectives to inform research into their lives.<sup>23</sup> The participatory methodologies used in this research are well established,<sup>24-26</sup> and followed Lundy and McEvoy’s guidelines<sup>27</sup>

to ensure that teenagers’ participation in research adheres to the following principles: be voluntary and safe; be creative and child-centred; ensure children’s views are carefully listened to and acted upon; ensure that children receive feedback and are engaged in research outcomes.

### 4.2 Consultation workshops

#### 4.2.1 Teenager Involvement

202 teenagers took part in consultation workshops, all of which were delivered face-to-face in post primary schools as well as Foróige and Youth Outreach centres in 2024. Of these teenagers, 110 identified as males, 88 as females, 2 as Gender fluid, 1 as non-binary and 1 as queer. A unique challenge encountered with this research was the imbalance of males to females in all Balbriggan’s post primary schools as many of the females attend a single sex post primary school within the town. (see table 9)

**Table 9:** Age and Gender Composition of Teenage Participants

	Aged 12 Yrs	Aged 13 Yrs	Aged 14 Yrs	Aged 15 Yrs	Aged 16 Yrs	Aged 17 Yrs	Aged 18 Yrs	Totals
Girls	6	21	12	5	18	16	10	<b>88</b>
Boys	4	18	21	9	33	13	12	<b>110</b>
Non-Binary					1			<b>1</b>
Gender Fluid					1	1		<b>2</b>
Queer					1			<b>1</b>
	10	39	33	14	54	30	22	<b>202</b>

Please note the Gender terms are recorded as reported by the teenagers themselves



We ran 14 separate participatory consultation workshops with teenagers, lasting on average, 60 minutes (in total, 14 hours of face-to-face workshop time). Within each workshop the teenagers were divided into smaller groups of 3 – 5 with an average of 4 per group, and 2 or 3 researchers were present in every workshop, plus at least one educator from the host organisation. A range of participatory methodologies were employed to elicit first-hand data from teenagers on their perspectives and views about social and outdoor teen facilities for Balbriggan, as well as eliciting their views on the need for current and new youth services.

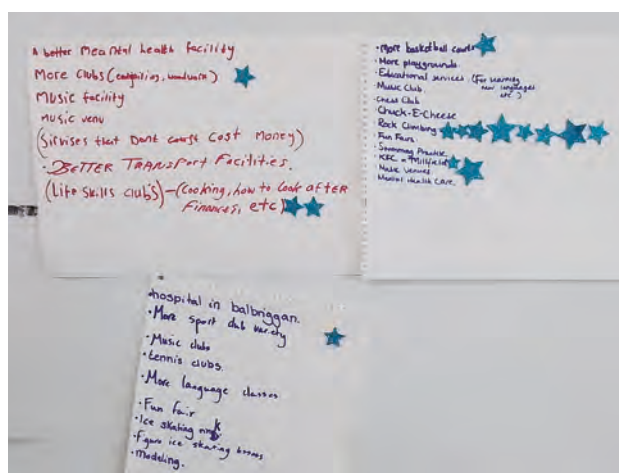
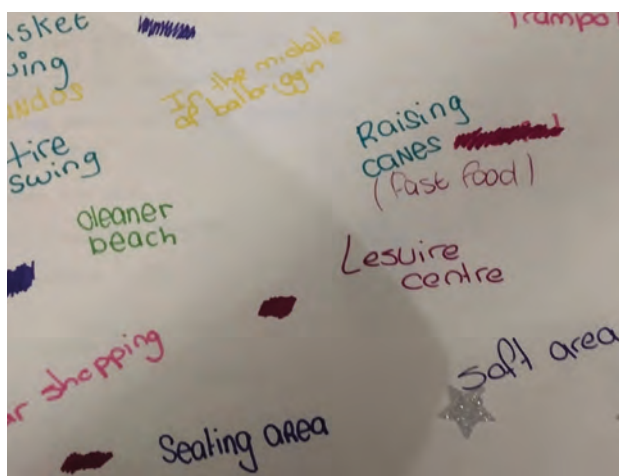
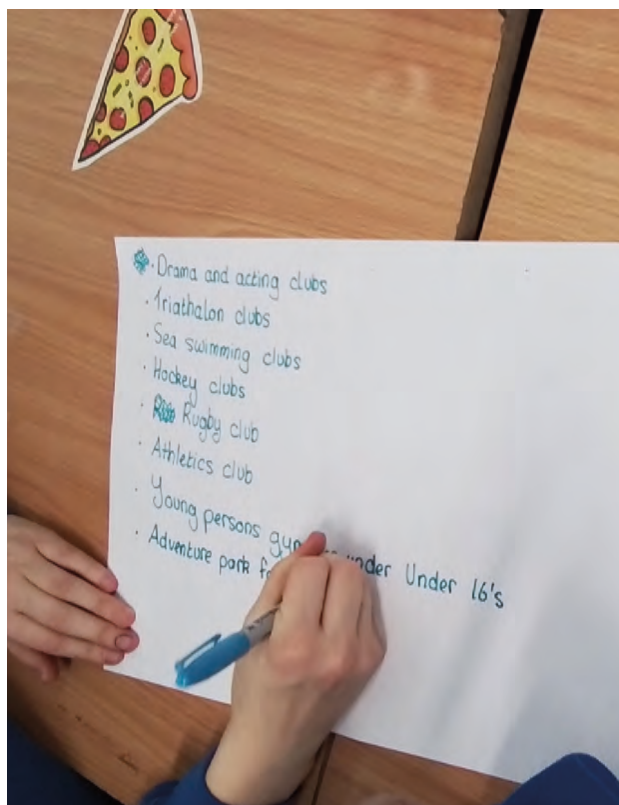
#### 4.2.2 The Wheel Exercise

The project team introduced the concept of 'the Pizza slice' which is a large image of a circle divided into quarters with one question per quarter (see Figure 2). Working in small groups, the teenagers discussed and recorded their written answers to the following questions:

1. What would most teenagers in Balbriggan want in outdoor and indoor recreational spaces and why?
2. Apart from recreational, what other youth services do you think are needed in Balbriggan?
3. What already exists in Balbriggan that you believe would be beneficial to keep / expand and why?
4. Currently what are the problems faced by teenagers in Balbriggan when it comes to going out to enjoy themselves in their spare time?

The teenagers were then given the opportunity to vote on the most popular and realistic answers to each question, thus generating consensus on the most preferred facilities and recreational spaces. The teenagers enjoyed this voting process, as it allowed them to see everyone else's thoughts, opinions, and views (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Completing the Wheel Exercise





#### 4.2.3 Mapping Exercise

In the same small groups, teenagers were individually given an A2-sized open street map of Balbriggan and a set of coloured markers. Teenagers were then asked to “map” the spaces and places they currently frequent for “hanging out” to identify their independent mobility and the main teenage “routes” throughout the town of Balbriggan. 184 teenagers took part in the mapping exercise. (see Figure 3)

#### 4.2.4 Open discussion

Each consultation workshop also included open discussion, which allowed us to gather more in-depth information about teenagers’ thoughts and opinions in regard to leisure-time activities and youth services in Balbriggan.

### 4.3 Consultation with professionals working with teenagers in Balbriggan

A consultation workshop was held with professionals working with and for teenagers in a wide range of policy and service agencies in Balbriggan. (see Figure 4)

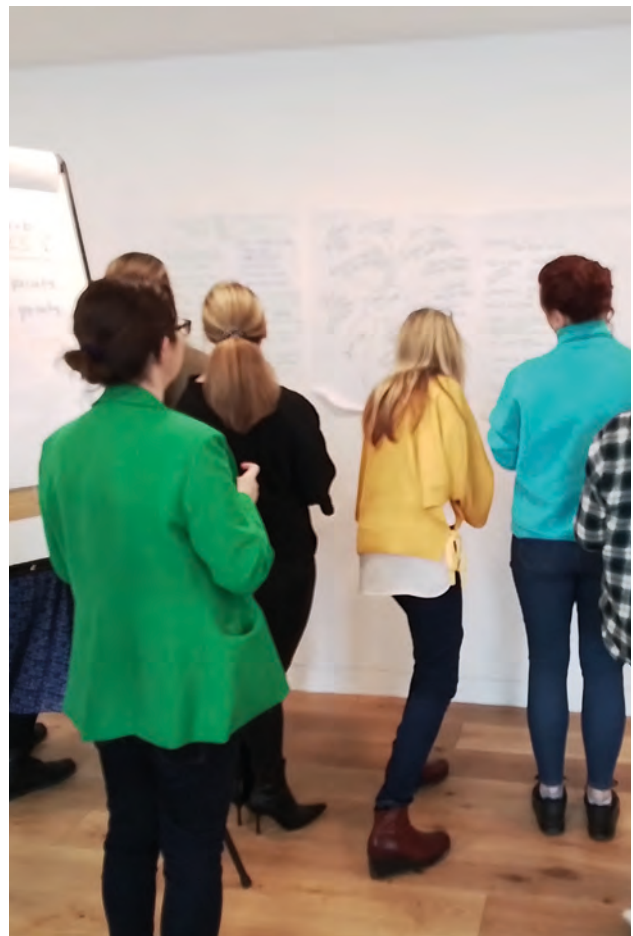
The workshop was held at the Lark Centre in Balbriggan, where the following organisations and services were represented:

- An Garda Síochána, Balbriggan
- Foróige
- Ardgillan Community College
- Jigsaw
- Balbriggan Community College
- North Dublin Regional Drugs & Alcohol
- Daughters of Charity
- Our Balbriggan
- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB
- TUSLA
- Empower
- Youth Reach
- Fingal County Council

Figure 3: Mobility Mapping



Figure 4: Youth Professionals Workshop



#### 4.4 Data analysis

All the data collected during the workshops was transcribed and compiled in a series of Excel spreadsheets. A qualitative coding process was used to order and group the data under thematic headings.<sup>28,29</sup> This was done separately for both the teenage and adult participant groups, with coding decisions checked and validated by two researchers. In addition, data from the prioritisation (scoring) activities was used to identify and order priorities from both teenager and adult perspectives. Having the data grouped, ordered, themed and prioritised in this way enabled us to produce a narrative description of each thematic area, as can be seen in the following chapter.

The mapping from home location to the various hang out spots within the town was inputted into Excel and descriptive statistics were used. In addition, the routes and mobility patterns of the teenagers were overlaid/transcribed into an electronic version of the Ordnance Survey Map of Balbriggan to identify patterns and trends in mobility.



# 5. Findings



## 5.1 Teenagers: Priorities

The teenagers identified a variety of needs specific to their age cohort within the town of Balbriggan, all of which are discussed in more depth in this chapter. See Table 10 below for a thematic breakdown of their priorities.

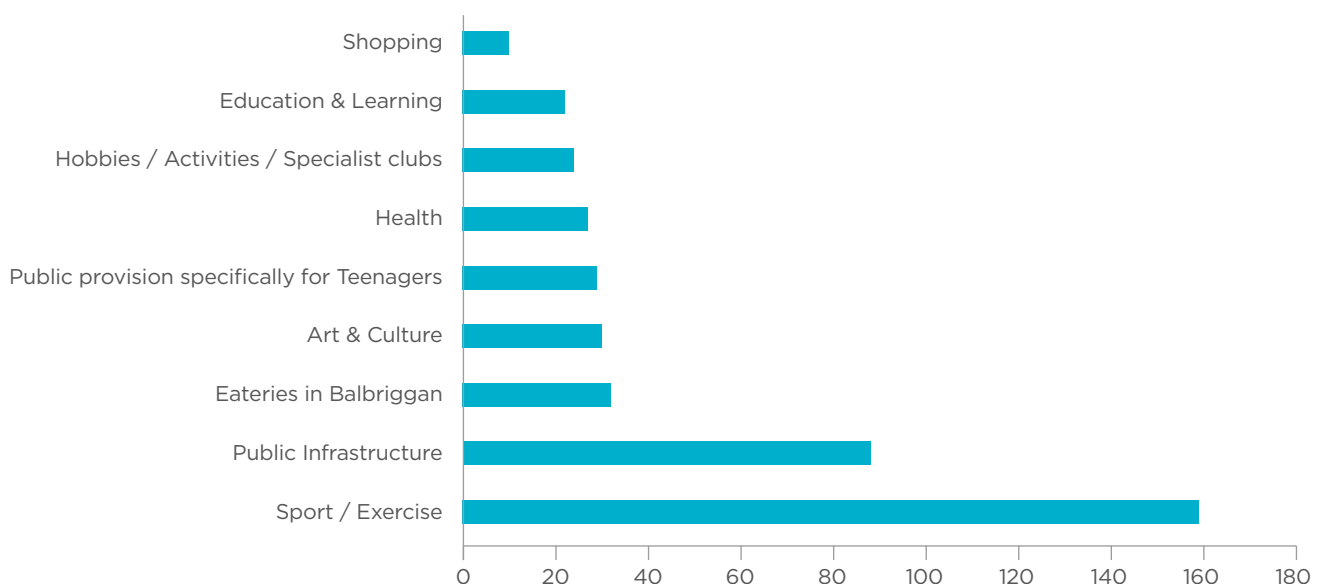
### 5.1.1 Exercise / Sport

This category received the largest number of comments, which is not surprising given the gender breakdown and ages of the participants. The request for a swimming pool dominated this category, and it is important to note here that, while the beach was identified as a recreational resource, very few teenagers said that they swam in the sea. This was due to several issues including antisocial behaviour, pollution, dogs, and the weather. This is also mirrored in the paucity of teenagers interested in sea-based activities. Whilst the schools provide a lot of resources and opportunities for sport, it is clear that teenagers want access to sports facilities and resources within the community beyond the school; specifically, a free public astro pitch which does not need to be pre-booked.

### 5.1.2 Public Infrastructure

Teenagers would like to see teen hangout spaces which should provide seating, charging ports, lighting and shelter. Although teenagers are aware of the beach as a resource within their community, it is little used as a socialising space due to the issues identified above. To make the beach a more desirable social space for teens, they suggested the installation of volley-ball nets, bins and additional toilet facilities, as well as regular clear-ups along the beachfront. Some younger teens (12-14) mentioned the need for playgrounds. However, it is worth noting that they view the town's existing playgrounds as catering to the needs of parents with younger children (under 12s) and are looking for more "adventurous" playgrounds that provide more challenge and fun for their age-group. The playground at Ardgillan Castle is an example, but, being some kilometres outside the town, this is more of a destination for family outings than a local community resource.

**Table 10:** Youth needs in Balbriggan as identified by teenagers themselves



**5.1.3 Eateries in Balbriggan**

Teenagers identified the need for more food options and eateries within the town, as these provide valuable socialising spaces. Some mentioned the need for cafes with late opening hours to accommodate the older teens. Here it is worth noting that for many adults, the prevailing pub culture meets these needs, but the under-18s participating in this study wanted something different for their own age group. From the mapping exercise it was possible to identify the most frequently visited eateries by teenagers in the town as seen in Figure 5 below.

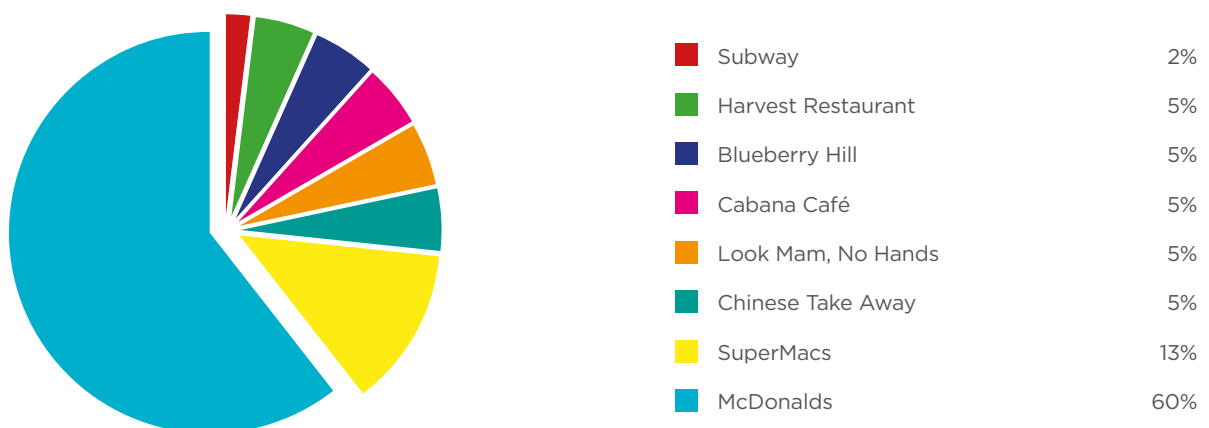
**5.1.4 Art and Culture**

Music is important to teenagers, and it is not surprising that opportunities to make and listen to music heads their list of preferred arts and cultural opportunities. This was followed by the desire for library/reading facilities including book clubs. While reading can often be an individual activity, many participants wanted to see a collective or social component to this, thus turning a solitary pastime into a social event. Teenagers would like to see more ‘teen-friendly’ cultural spaces; for example involving them in the recently received Arts Council funding under the Creative Places programme.

**5.1.5 Public provision specifically for teenagers**

As well as access to outdoor spaces and shared community spaces, teens wanted to see specific indoor spaces, sometimes identified as “youth centres” or “youth clubs”. In relation to these, one of their principal requests was to “let teenagers design it”. Important components of such a space should include a hang-out space or drop-in centre, and a cooking and eating area. It could also house a youth disco/nightclub, which would be age-appropriate, alcohol-free and secure. Teens stressed the importance of such a dedicated space designed specifically by and for them, as they argued that “there are no real places to go for teens” in Balbriggan, and they are often made to feel unwelcome in the public communal areas in the town. Moreover, they called for a change in adults’ attitudes towards teenagers. Teens want to feel safe and welcome, not just in limited youth provision spaces, but in all the communal spaces within the town, including streets, parks, shopping centres and public buildings. Some also said they would like to see an extension of the youth facilities currently provided by Foróige. Finally, they saw the need for more space for existing clubs (e.g. the scout hall) as the teen population has increased.

**Figure 5:** Teenagers and Restaurants / Cafes within Balbriggan



### 5.1.6 Health

Health was identified as a concern to teenagers, particularly the lack of mental health services within Balbriggan, however it was not a priority need for them, which is perhaps reflective of their chronological age and developmental stage. This was followed by concerns about the lack of general health services such as GPs and dentists. Other issues identified by a small number were drug and alcohol services and contraception services.

### 5.1.7 Hobbies and specialist activities

Young people identified a wide variety of hobbies and free-time activities including chess and board-game clubs, cooking, woodwork, gardening, sewing and knitting clubs. Some of these may be available within the school environment, but again teenagers would like to pursue these hobbies/activities outside the school gates in a community context. Many of these free-time activities could be hosted within a specific youth Hub or youth space within the town (see also 5.3.1 below).

### 5.1.8 Education and learning

It was noticeable that the older teenagers in the leaving cert cycle expressed the need for additional study spaces outside of school hours and identified the library as the appropriate location for this. As the library was previously mentioned in relation to reading and cultural space for young people, this highlights the view of a library as a multi-use space for teenagers within the community. Teenagers also discussed an expectation for them to go from school to university, but if they wish to follow any other path there is minimal provision or support. They see the whole area of apprenticeship, learning a trade or a technical career and life skills training as being under-developed with scarce opportunities within Balbriggan.

### 5.1.9 Shopping

Teens wanted to see more shops; specifically sports shops, clothes and shoe shops. This is only partially for the purpose of shopping, as to a large extent, teens use shopping areas as social or hang-out spaces. For example, the area around the Tesco superstore was by far the most often-mentioned hang-out spaces for Balbriggan teens, but this was for the purpose of meeting and socialising rather than shopping. It is also worth noting here that, by contrast, the area around Dunnes Stores was frequently mentioned as one of the most unpleasant and unsafe areas in town, generally to be avoided; however, on the mapping exercise it still remains a destination for many teens.

## 5.2 Teenagers: Mapping movements

Teenagers mapped the places they visit on a regular basis within Balbriggan. The spaces and places identified on the map of Balbriggan were inputted into Excel along with relevant demographic details. Several differing categories of spaces, places and functions emerged from the coding and analysis which included: eateries, visiting friends' houses, hang-out spaces, spaces and places within the natural environment, public parks, playgrounds, schools and shopping locations. In total 184 teenagers identified 775 spaces and places that they occupy within Balbriggan. (See Figure 6).

Figure 6: Mapping Mobility through Balbriggan



**5.2.1 Transport**

It was noticeable that 12- and 13-year-old boys and girls rarely identified the train station as a space visited. Unsurprisingly the use of public transport (buses and trains) increased significantly for both genders with age. Of interest was the almost total lack of any independent mobility throughout the town using bicycles, which mirrors the apparent lack of interest in cycling, cycle lanes and so forth by both genders evidenced in the consultation discussions.

**5.2.2 “Hang-out” spaces**

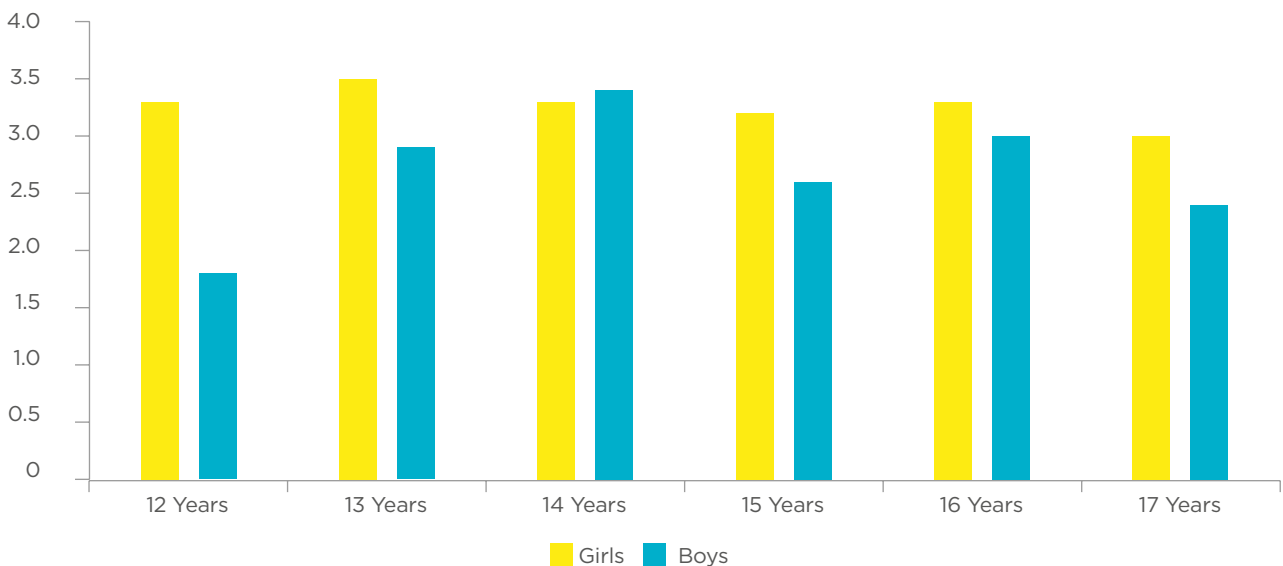
One area of significant agreement between boys and girls (75%), evidenced across all age bands irrespective of where they live or go to school in Balbriggan, was the choice of “Tesco’s” or the Millfield Shopping Centre as the number one site for teen socialising (as opposed to shopping) with their peers and having the most facilities and resources which attracts them to recurrent use of the space. There is a gender difference here with 81% of all teen girls and 68 % of teen boys identifying Tesco as the main hang-out space in Balbriggan. This lends further evidence to other findings

from this project, in addition to the published research, that shopping centres are significant sites for teenage socialisation. Consideration should be given to enhancing this site and its surroundings for teenagers, considering it is the number one socialising place within the town.

**5.2.3 Gender differences in teenagers’ occupation of space**

Excluding schools, boys tell us they visit just under 3 venues and girls visit 3.3 venues. It is noticeable in the analysis that younger boys (12 and 13 Years) visit significantly less places and have less independent mobility that the girls of the same age (see Table 11). By the age of 14 years however, the number of places visited is almost equal. From the age of 15 years onwards the boys consistently visit less places within the town than girls of the same age. It is also noteworthy that from the age of 16 years onwards both boys and girls identified the train station as a place visited to travel outside of Balbriggan for socialising and recreation. By the age of 17 years, this site is visited by significantly more by girls than boys.

**Table 11:** No. of Places visited by Age & Gender



#### 5.2.4 Sports venues

There are marked differences in the frequency of girls' and boys' use of spaces within Balbriggan, specifically public parks and sports venues. Boys were much more likely than girls to identify sports venues such as the Glebe North Football Club, O'Dwyers GAA Club, and the Astro Pitch. When boys said they visit public parks within the town, this was overwhelmingly to access playing pitches. Girls were much less likely to visit public parks, with 57% of teen boys telling us they visit a sports venue or park to access sports facilities specifically as opposed to 27.5% of teen girls.

#### 5.2.5 Public parks

When we focus on parks alone as a recreational space, there is a very significant gender difference with 0.05% of teenage girls identifying any Park in Balbriggan as a place they spend any time as opposed to 17.3% of teenage boys. The public parks in Balbriggan currently appear to attract teenage boys who play sports whilst there does not appear to be any facility or resource to attract the girls.

#### 5.2.6 Gender differences in teenagers' occupation of space

Balbriggan is rich in natural resources which already serve as recreational and socialising spaces for the entire population. 41.25% of teen girls identified the beach and or harbour as a recreational and or socialising space as opposed to 34% of teen boys.

We know that girls have less access to recreational spaces than boys which is a current focus of attention for the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, as well as the responsible government department in Ireland (DCEDIY).

Girls tended to visit more green areas within housing estates to meet and socialise with their peers, although they did call these spaces 'parks' at times. Boys were much less likely to identify this form of space as a location they visit. Interestingly the one sports space girls did identify with was gyms, as did the boys.

Other spaces and places visited within the town, listed alphabetically, include: Apple Green Stations, Balrothery, Band Stand, Boat House, Boxing club, Bremore Castle, Brick Room, Castlelands Community Centre, Charity Shops, Church (school pick up), Cinema, Field off Flemington Lane, Flemington Community Centre, Foroige, Gael Scoil, Golf club, Graveyard, Green area on Dun Saithne Crescent, Green at Taylor Hill View, Green at Tesco's, Library, Lighthouse, Main Street, Martello Tower, Mosque, Scouts, Square on the High Street, The Lark and Train Station.

#### 5.2.7 Recreational resources

Unsurprisingly, younger teens (12 and 13 Years) indicated that they visited playgrounds in Balbriggan, though these were not visited by older teenagers. Of the 775 places and spaces identified, the Balbriggan skate park was only identified by one participant as a recreational space frequently visited. This is in contradiction to when the teenagers were working in small groups together to identify current and needed recreational spaces, where skateparks received a considerable amount of discussion. Whilst the beach and harbour are popular places to walk to, next to no participant went to the beach or harbour to swim.



### 5.2.8 Visiting

Both boys and girls mapped their visits to their friends' houses and mapped their routes to visit one to five friends. Bearing in mind that socialising with their peers is the most common activity of adolescence, this is unsurprising. 31.25% of teen girls and 19.4% of teen boys identified their friends' homes as a place they visit within the town. Very few teenagers appeared to have extended family in Balbriggan as only a handful had a cousin, granny or brother to visit.

### 5.2.9 Teen mobility within the town

During the consultation sessions, numerous teenagers informed us that Balbriggan was "too big" from one end to the other and they used buses to traverse the town. Through the mapping exercise it was possible to identify the walking mobility of Balbriggan's teenagers. A total of 84 teenagers identified 49 differing home locations and that "Tesco" was their main "hang-out" space. Home locations were plotted in Excel using Google Maps for time and distance using the shortest walking route from each location to the Tesco in Millfield Shopping Centre, which was the single most common 'hang-out' space

for teenagers in Balbriggan. Teenagers walked between 4 to 41 minutes (280 to 3000 metres) to socialise with their peers in this space with an average of 22.8 minutes walking time and an average 1639 metres travel between both points.

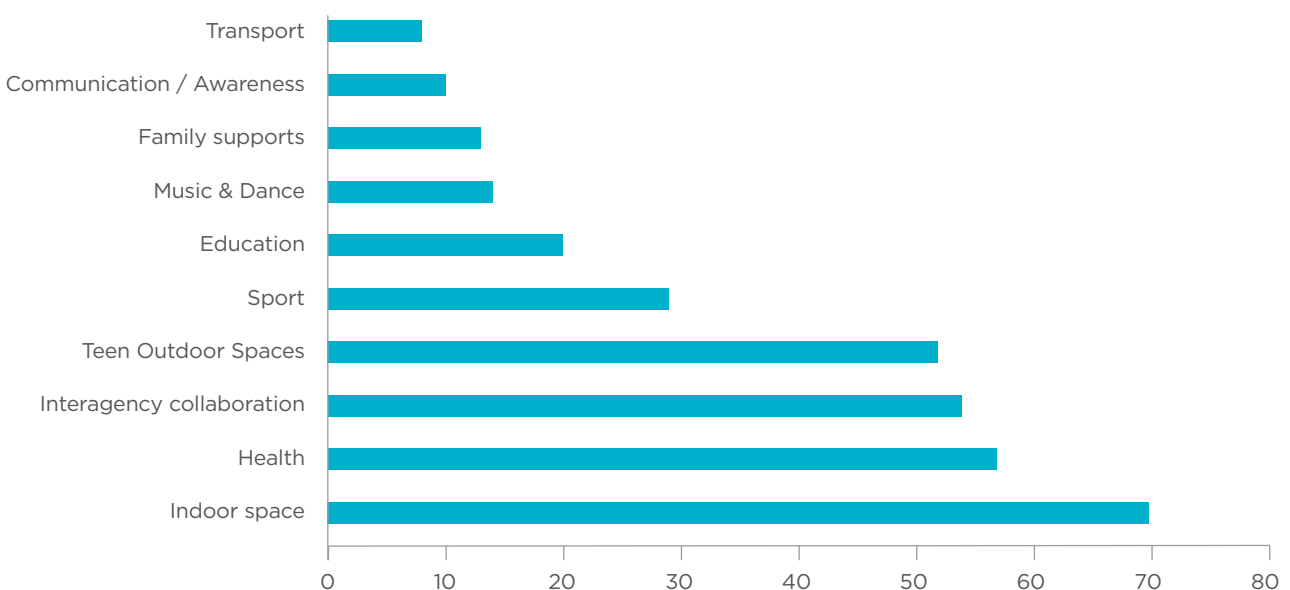
## 5.3 Professionals

The professionals identified a variety of needs specific to teenagers in Balbriggan, as shown in Table 12 and discussed further below.

### 5.3.1 Indoor spaces

The top priority for the professional group was the need for a drop-in space dedicated to teenagers in Balbriggan, referred to as a "Hub", drop-in space or hang-out. It was seen as important that young people should be involved in the planning, design and organisation of this space. Potential elements of the indoor hub might include a youth cafe and/or kitchen, arts and cultural workshops, as well as unstructured space that young people can adapt to their own needs. Various agencies might collaborate in providing targeted services within this space as discussed further below.

**Table 12: Priorities Identified by Youth Professionals for Balbriggans Youth**



### 5.3.2 Health

As second priority, this category focused almost exclusively on mental health and related issues, and was a concern shared by the many organisations represented at the workshop. Specific concerns focused on the lack of psychological support services for teenagers in Balbriggan, including CAMHS. As mentioned above, there was significant support for the idea of a central hub facilitating access to mental health services such as counselling, and mental health support workers for teenagers within the town.

### 5.3.3 Interagency collaboration

The third priority for the professional group was improving collaboration and partnership between service providers and strategic agencies for the development and management of integrated youth services. As mentioned above, this could include different agencies sharing space to provide diverse services within a single integrated youth hub. There also needs to be greater inter-agency support for professionals working with young people with additional needs, e.g. ASD. Greater levels of support for workers may also improve retention of experienced staff and so enhance relationships with young people.

### 5.3.4 Teen outdoor spaces

The fourth priority for the professional group was outdoor recreation spaces for teens, referred to as unstructured or informal hang-out spaces. Important features of these spaces were seating, free WiFi, charging ports and shelter. The findings of this workshop reflect earlier findings from the Balbriggan Rejuvenation Strategy online consultation survey in 2019<sup>30</sup> (outdoor sports facilities are also considered important and are covered separately in next sub-section).

### 5.3.5 Sport

The importance of sport in the lives of teenagers was acknowledged, specifically the need for a swimming pool in Balbriggan, which accurately mirrors the wishes of the teenagers themselves. The popularity of basketball was reflected in the high priority given to community-based outdoor basketball courts. The professionals identified the need for “dome pitches” and all-weather pitches (in that order) to allow for outdoor sports in all weathers. However the teenagers prioritised a public astro pitch as opposed to domed pitches.

### 5.3.6 Education

The need for alternative learning opportunities for those seeking alternatives to higher education, such as apprenticeships, was highlighted by the professionals. Again this echoes the views from the teenagers themselves, who insisted that, if they choose not to go on to university after post-primary education, there are minimal supports, resources or opportunities available in Balbriggan. In addition the importance of outdoor learning, utilising natural resources within the community, was highlighted by the professionals, though not by the teenagers themselves.

### 5.3.7 Music and Dance

The professionals feel there is a need for services related to music and dance for teenagers in the town, particularly access to recording studio facilities, although this was less strongly reflected in the consultations with teenagers.

### 5.3.8 Family Supports

The need for additional family-level supports was identified by youth professionals. In particular, specialist supports were needed for some parents, such as language and literacy support.

### 5.3.9 Communication and Awareness

The professionals recognised the importance of communicating information about youth provision to young people and their families, as teens themselves recognised they are not always made aware of services and opportunities within the community. They also felt efforts must be made to engender more positive attitudes to young people in the wider community, described as “changing the narrative about young people”.

### 5.3.10 Transport

Finally, the professionals recognised the need for better transport opportunities for young people, both within Balbriggan, and connecting Balbriggan to other areas. Again, this was mirrored by the teenagers, who identified the need for more frequent bus services throughout Balbriggan in order to increase their mobility.



# 6. Recommendations



## 6.1 Overarching Recommendations

### 1. Teenagers right to be heard: Balbriggan Youth Council

In February 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published its Concluding Observations on Ireland's Fifth and Sixth Report,<sup>31</sup> which contains the UN's recommendations on what the Irish government needs to do to guarantee children and young people's rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Committee recommends that Ireland: *"fully involve children in planning, designing and monitoring the implementation of relevant policies and programmes"*. (Para. 39.c).

Therefore, we recommend the establishment of a Balbriggan Youth Council with a formal role in collaborating with the local authority and its partners to influence development across the town, and to have a voice in all policies or programmes that impact on youth. All development initiatives (particularly those listed in these recommendations) should therefore have young people involved from the start. This could be through the Youth Council or through linked project-specific youth advisory groups. This youth involvement should be built-in as a key element of all the recommendations in this report.

As well as giving a strong voice to Balbriggan's youth, the implementation of this recommendation would help the Irish government meet its international obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### 2. Primacy of youth voice

In these recommendations we give primacy to the views expressed by the teenagers themselves, while also taking into account the findings of our consultation with youth professionals. In many cases both groups expressed similar views. However, in some areas there were important differences, for example: the professionals gave greater priority to

mental health; the teenagers stressed the need for a free public astro pitch, whilst the professionals focused on domed sports pitches; professionals focused on the importance of outdoor learning which was not identified by the teenagers; the need for a recording studio was promoted by the professionals but not by the teenagers. Areas of agreement between the professionals and the teenagers included the need for a swimming pool, outdoor hang-out spaces, better public transport, and alternative learning opportunities. This gives added weight to the above recommendation that young people themselves must be engaged and consulted on all public initiatives that impact them.

### 3. Balbriggan: A youth-friendly environment

While this report includes many recommendations for specific improvements in the provision of services for teenagers in the town, it must be recognised that creating an overall youth-friendly environment in Balbriggan is just as important as these specific initiatives, and may present a greater challenge.

### 4. Multicultural Balbriggan

This research found very positive attitudes towards multiculturalism from teenagers in Balbriggan. In contrast to the concerns expressed by youth professionals, young people did not see diversity as a challenge, but want to encourage awareness and bring people together. We recommend that the teenagers' ideas of additional supports like language and literacy support, and support groups for minorities be implemented. Cultural diversity should be embraced as a positive aspect of life in Balbriggan, to be acknowledged and celebrated.

### 5. Gender equity

Wider research shows that boys and girls have differing recreational needs and experience public spaces differently. In our study, this was clearly seen in the prevalence of sporting facilities and resources in the priorities of male teenagers. The differing needs of girls

and boys need to be acknowledged and equitably provided for. We recommend therefore that girls must be equally involved in all future recreation and youth service initiatives. Where appropriate, this should include engagement which is single sex and age-cohort specific.

We further recommend a stronger focus in future on teenage girls' recreation and youth service needs. This is in line with the Concluding Observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child referred to above,<sup>31</sup> which urges the Irish state to: *“Ensure that such activities are available and accessible for girls, children with disabilities, asylum-seeking and migrant children and socioeconomically disadvantaged children”* (Para. 37.c).

#### 6. Attitudes towards teenagers

Teenagers across Balbriggan reported being “moved on” and “kicked out” of public spaces by adults. We therefore recommend that Balbriggan consider a campaign to promote awareness and understanding of young people as active citizens, playing a positive role in community development and solidarity, thus “changing the narrative” of youth as a problem. “Youth” is not a problem to be solved; rather, young people are at the heart of both the present and the future of our communities, with many positive roles to play in their development.

#### 7. Attitudes towards teenagers

The youth professionals prioritised the need for improved communication, collaboration and partnership between service providers and strategic agencies for the development and management of integrated services for young people. We therefore recommend the establishment of an inter-agency youth development task force for Balbriggan to address the social, educational, health and recreational needs of the large teen population within this rapidly growing town. This could include different agencies sharing space to provide diverse services within a single integrated youth hub (see rec. 8).

#### 8. Universal and targeted youth services

The distinction between universal and targeted youth services was discussed earlier (see section 3.4 above). While universal youth services are intended to be available to all young people without distinction, targeted services are aimed at those seen to be vulnerable, at risk or in various kinds of special circumstances, such as mental health services or supports for those in trouble. In developing youth services for Balbriggan's teenagers, it is vital to balance these different needs. While targeted services help troubled young people face challenges and solve problems, it is universal services, open and accessible to all, that will meet the needs of the great majority of Balbriggan's teenagers, bringing young people together and enhancing community solidarity.

### 6.2 Specific recommendations

#### 9. Multi-Purpose Teen Hub

Teenagers across the town identified the need for an indoor space in the Town centre, specifically designed for and dedicated to their use. This hub should include social space with a café and kitchen areas, seating and WiFi. Importantly, such a hub could be an access point for a whole range of services for young people offered by partner agencies, such as mental health services, educational and life skills, and legal advice.

#### 10. Teenage “Hang-out spaces”

One of the most often mentioned recreational needs was for informal outdoor teen spaces across the town referred to as “hang-out spaces”. We therefore recommend the installation of several teen hang-out spaces, to incorporate the key components suggested by the teenagers: seating, charging ports, lighting and shelter. Involving young people in the location and design of these spaces is particularly important.

**11. Library building development**

Young people perceived their local library as an important community resource with multiple uses, such as a space for individual reading, a venue for book clubs, a study space, a café, and a social space. Older teenagers (16-18) highlighted the need for additional study space outside of school hours for teenagers studying for the Leaving Cert examination. Balbriggan Library was identified as the ideal location for these study spaces by the teenagers. It is therefore recommended that the Balbriggan Library building be further developed as a youth-friendly multi-purpose resource for reading, study, independent learning, sharing and socialising.

**12. Swimming pool**

One of the main requests by the teenagers living in Balbriggan is for a public swimming pool. Balbriggan has the youngest population in the country, with an average age of 33.6 years. We recommend that the feasibility of a public swimming pool is explored with all potential partners.

**13. Arts and cultural opportunities**

Teenagers want to see more artistic and cultural opportunities in Balbriggan. The town recently received Arts Council funding of €330,000 over three years, under the Creative Places programme, to provide local people access to the arts in their own community. Creative Places funding allows towns build local arts programmes for the benefit of all, building on existing cultural strengths and enabling local artists to lead a programme rooted in socially engaged practice and community development e.g Scéal Collective. This is an ideal opportunity to involve Balbriggan's teenagers in art and cultural opportunities.

**14. Millfield Shopping Centre (Tesco Extra)**

The “hang-out” space most frequently mentioned by teenagers across Balbriggan is the area in and around the Tesco Extra store in Millfield Shopping Centre. Teenagers from all areas in Balbriggan identified this as a favourite “hang-out” or socialising location. We therefore recommend that the Council, in partnership with other key organisations, investigate the feasibility of enhancing the potential of the area for teenagers to socialise, taking into account the key features of such spaces referred to above: seating, shelter, WiFi, charging points etc.

**15. Dunnes Stores**

In contrast to the Tesco site, the area surrounding Dunnes Stores was branded by many teenagers as a “no go” area. They specifically identified problems with drugs and anti-social behaviour as barriers to their use of this space. We recommend that options be explored to make this area into a more welcoming multigenerational space.

**16. Public parks**

Apart from boys who access public parks for the sports pitches, there appears to be minimal use of existing public parks by teenagers within the town. We recommend the council consider programmes or initiatives to address this gender inequality in park usage in Balbriggan, and, in partnership with teenagers themselves, to consider new types of facilities to attract both boys and girls to use public parks.

**17. Transport**

Teenagers frequently use public transport to access resources and facilities within the town. Many of them, however, identified the scarcity and cost of transport, both within Balbriggan and linking Balbriggan to other areas such as Swords and Dublin, as a problem which limits their mobility. Cycling was seldom mentioned, and does not currently appear

to play any role in Balbriggan teenagers' mobility. We recommend that Fingal County Council work with Bus Eireann on increasing the frequency of local buses, and offering reduced or free fares to teenagers. We further recommend that teenagers be consulted on any plans to develop cycling and active travel within the town and that the Active Travel Department of Fingal County Council explore the reasons why cycling is so low and seek to address this especially amongst young people in the town.

#### 18. Beach and Harbour

It appears that the Beach is not used frequently by teenagers for swimming, and many expressed concerns about its cleanliness, safety and lack of facilities. Therefore we recommend that teenagers should be actively involved in development plans for the beach, harbour area and other present and future developments e.g Quay Street. to ensure all generations benefit from one of Balbriggan's most important resources.

#### 19. Public Astro Pitch

Boys consistently requested a public astro pitch within the town which is free to use and does not need to be pre-booked. Whilst this resource is

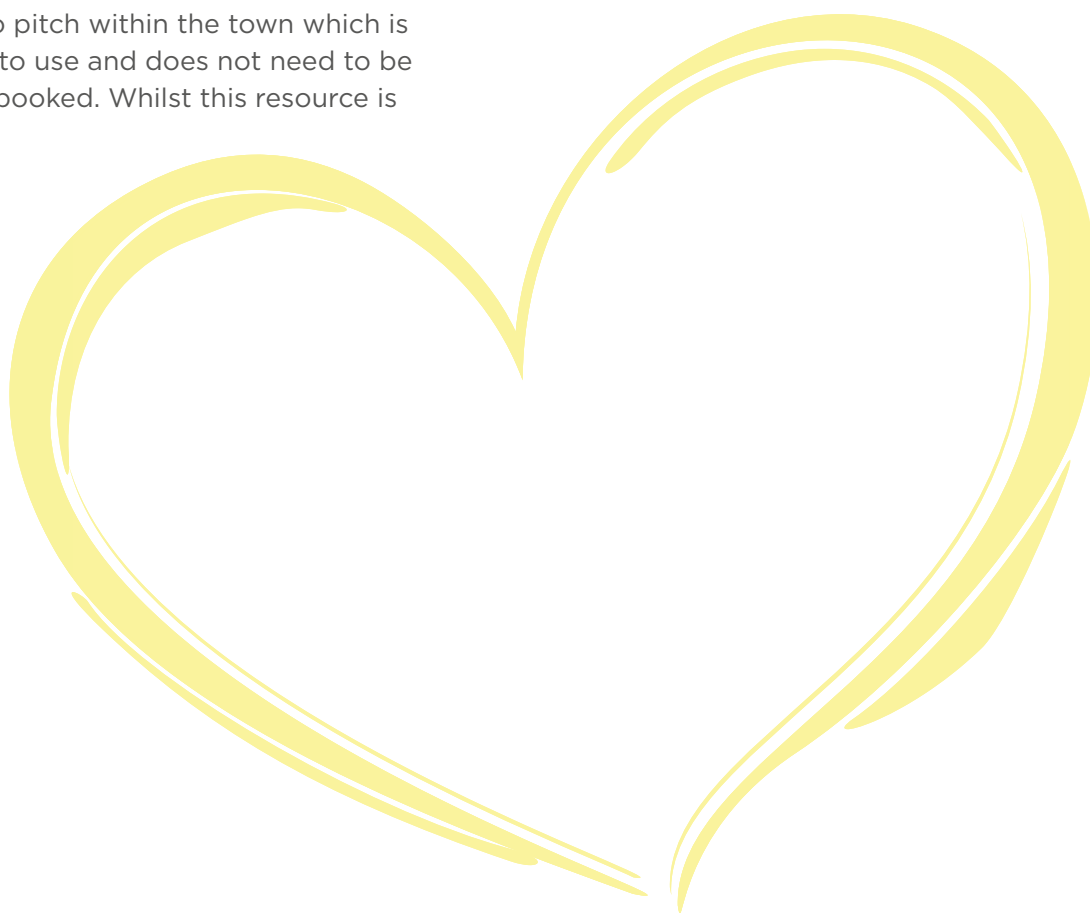
gender-specific, we recommend exploring the possibility of further developing the availability of multipurpose astro pitches within Balbriggan.

#### 20. Mental health

Lack of mental health services was prioritised by youth professionals and to a lesser degree by teenagers. We therefore recommend that all avenues are explored to increase access to mental health services within the town, with the possibility of the proposed Teen Hub becoming an access route for these services.

#### 21. Apprenticeships

Teenagers emphasised lack of support and opportunities for those choosing not to follow third level education after their Leaving Certificate. We recommend that Education services along with Youth services work in partnership with local employers to explore, develop and deliver new forms of apprenticeship and technical skills training for this section of the teen population.





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