Evaluation of

Empowering Youth Student Wellbeing Programme

For Early Intervention Lisburn

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Part 1: Background

The Empowering Youth Student Wellbeing Programme was written by 21 year old, Ugne Girciute, to address the gap in mental health education in post-primary schools. Based on personal insights from the Connected Minds Youth Committee[1] and data showing that only 28% of students felt they received adequate mental health education[2], the programme was designed to enhance post-primary students' understanding of mental health and well-being, while raising awareness of local support services and opportunities

Early Intervention Lisburn, led by the Resurgam Trust, commissioned Stats & Stories to evaluate the programme's effectiveness in achieving these objectives and to identify areas for further development. The following sections outline the programme content, the evaluation methodology and the results.

What is the Empowering Youth Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme?

Aims and Objectives: The aim of the Empowering Youth Student Wellbeing Programme was to create a peer led project on emotional health and wellbeing to be delivered in a post-primary school setting. The objectives of the programme were to:

- Identify emotional health and wellbeing issues that matter to young people and design a programme of support to meet these needs;
- Increase participants' understanding of emotional health and wellbeing;
- Increase participants' awareness of where and when to seek help and support.

Programme Design: The programme was held over two periods (approximately 1 hour ten minutes) over the course of six weeks. From the outset, the programme was designed to give students the opportunity to choose sessions that reflected their interests and needs. While two sessions (Mental Health and Well-being and

[1] Early Intervention Lisburn would like to thank and acknowledge the young people who developed the programme particularly Ugne Girciute.
[2] Secondary Students Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI) (2023) *Let Us Learn: A Learning For Life and Work* report. Available here

Volunteering) were fixed, students were able to choose from six other sessions during the pilot phase. These sessions included:

- Anxiety in School
- Dealing with Bullying
- Dealing with Loneliness
- Self-Care
- Staying Motivated
- Voice and Participation

This approach gave participants a direct voice in what they learned, reinforcing their role in decision-making. Specifically, the programme focussed on activities that were youth-led, interactive and fun. A range of methods were used to communicate messages, encourage participation and start discussions including PowerPoint presentations, videos, group work activities and games.

Working in Partnership with Schools: The programme was piloted in two local post primary schools: Lisnagarvey High School (Year 11 pupils) and St Patrick's Academy (Year 10 pupils). Several meetings took place between Early Intervention Lisburn (EIL) and each school before the pilot programme launched. These discussions focused on how to best deliver the programme in keeping with the peer-led ethos, including access to suitable safe spaces and necessary resources such as interactive whiteboards and Wi-Fi. A memorandum of agreement was created between Early Intervention Lisburn and each school to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved. One of the outlined responsibilities was the establishment of a primary point of contact within the schools to manage safeguarding and provide ongoing feedback on the programme's delivery. While the Safeguarding Lead was the primary contact for one school, challenges arose in another as the EIL team were unable to meet with the dedicated contact which resulted in less engagement and understanding of the programme. This underscored the importance of clear, consistent communication channels between EIL and the school staff to effectively deliver the programme.

Evaluation Methodology

This evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to explore how effective the Empowering Youth Student Wellbeing Programme was in reaching its objectives as outlined below:

End of session evaluations: Short evaluation forms were completed by participants at the end of each individual session. This provided a way for young people to give immediate, session specific feedback about what worked or could have been improved. This type of evaluation also allowed facilitators to make changes or improvements for future sessions. Numbers of participants varied slightly across the weeks according to attendance and are recorded in Table 1. Due to a scheduling conflict, St Patrick's Academy was unable to attend the self-care session, which is reflected as a 0 in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of Participants Per School by Session

	Lisnagarvey High School	St Patrick's Academy	Total numbers	% rated extremely /very helpful
Self Care	13	0	13	100
Anxiety in Schools	16	17	33	79.0
Staying Motivated	15	18	33	76.0
Resurgam Day Trip	18	17	36	75.0
Mental Health Support	18	18	36	69.0

End of programme evaluation: A total of 36 participants completed a pre and post survey which sought to provide a broader view of the programme's overall impact and evaluate how well the programme met its objectives. This included changes in knowledge of mental health and wellbeing and awareness of support services in the local community.

Focus Groups: One focus group in each of the participating schools was held with a total of 25 young people around one month after the programme finished. This provided the opportunity for young people to reflect their thoughts on the programme

to an independent evaluator. Both focus groups were recorded with consent and the content thematically analysed.

Staff Interviews: Two short interviews with staff in each school was held to capture staff's views about the programme and the impact it had on the pupils in their school.

The results presented in Part 2 draws together evaluation data with the themes emerging from the qualitative data.

Part 2: Results

Results will be presented in two sections. The first section will represent the results based on the end of session evaluations to explore the effectiveness and engagement of specific activities or topics covered during a session. The second results section will explore the overall impact of the programme. These results are drawn from the data captured in both pre/post evaluations and the end of programme evaluations. In addition, insights gained from the qualitative data collected by the focus groups and interviews are used throughout.

Overview of Key Results

- 88.9% of young people self-assessed their knowledge of mental health and wellbeing as excellent or good after the programme;
- 77.8% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that they have developed skills that will be useful in other aspects of their lives;
- 77.8% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that their understanding of mental health had improved;
- 58.3% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that they feel more inclined to take up volunteering opportunities;
- 52.8% of young people rated their awareness of local support services as excellent or good after the programme.

Section 1: End of Session Evaluations

As outline previously, the programme consisted of six sessions. This included an Induction Day in each school which provided the opportunity to meet the young people, introduce them to the work of the Empowering Youth project and Connected Minds

youth committee and explore their expectations for the coming programme. This first session also recorded participants' expectations for the programme. Many participants expressed a strong desire to learn more about mental health including increasing their understanding of mental health, gaining awareness about mental health issues and learning how to manage or overcome mental health challenges. Not only did participants want a programme to educate them about mental health and wellbeing but also sessions that were fun and interactive. The following section presents the results from the end of session evaluations.

Mental Health Supports: This session explored mental health and well-being by defining mental health and identifying qualities of good and poor mental health. Students used the circles of support activity to identify the mental health support systems available to them in their own community. Young people also participated in conversations about mental health through a focus group on the young people's directory of services booklet. The majority of young people rated this session as very or extremely helpful (69.0%) with 27.8% rating the session as somewhat helpful. Key areas of learning from the session reported by participants included understanding what mental health is, recognising the importance of mental health and identifying sources of support and resources available. While 94% of participants enjoyed the session, a small number of comments indicated that this session could be improved by more interaction and group work activities.

Anxiety in School: Both schools took part in this session which identified different types of anxiety and explored particular scenarios in groups. In Lisnagarvey High School, young people explored different tools to reduce anxiety. This included breathing, grounding techniques and headspace meditation. In St. Patrick's Academy, an external person led a session on meditation and anxiety, with a focus on gratitude. In total, 79.0% of the participants reported this session as extremely helpful or very helpful and commented that they learnt techniques and strategies to manage anxiety and foster a positive mindset:

"Techniques to calm your anxiety."

Male, Year 11

"I'm not the only person who experiences it and how I can help myself when anxious."

Female, Year 11

"That it's ok to have anxiety."

Female, Year 10

This session was rated as enjoyable by 97.0% of participants. Comments suggest that not all pupils enjoyed the meditation activity in the St. Patrick's Academy session.

Staying Motivated: This session sought to inform young people about motivation, including what it is and where it comes from. Young people were supported to understand their own motivators and barriers to motivation. Strategies to combat low motivation, such as SMART goal tools, were introduced to the groups. A total of 76.0% of young people rated the session as very helpful or extremely helpful. All participants reported that they enjoyed this session. In the end of session evaluation, participants reported that they learnt about motivation including the types of motivation, strategies to stay motivated and increasing their self belief:

"I learnt you can achieve anything if you put your mind to it."

Female, Year 10

"To stay motivated think of someone who inspires you."

Male, Year 10

"To keep motivated even when you want to give up."

Male, Year 11

Self-care: Only young people from Lisnagarvey High School participated in this session (n = 13). This session taught students about physical, social, mental, spiritual and emotional self-care. Participants were supported to create their own self-care jar/box to use at home and encouraged to try independent self-care activities such as journaling. All participants rated this session as very or extremely helpful and reported that they enjoyed this session. Young people reported that they learnt a greater understanding of self-care including different types and methods of self-care and practical strategies to implement self-care.

"New ways to care for myself when times are stressful."

Male, Year 11

"Different methods of self-care that I did not know was self-care."

Female, Year 11

Resurgam Day Trip: Both groups attended this all-day event together at Resurgam Youth Centre. A range of activities such as a guided meditation session, circuits fitness session and Laughter Yoga were provided by local community organisations. Young people also heard about volunteering opportunities and were able to visit stalls set up in the hall to learn of the support that is available in their local area. A total of 75.0% of participants rated this session as extremely or very helpful. Young people were able to identify a range of lessons they learnt during their trip related to mental health support, volunteering and local organisations:

"All the different types of people who can help you / programmes that are available."

Female, Year 11

"Things that you do can help people."

Male, Year 10

"What all the organisations do for young people."

Male, Year 11

All participants reported that they enjoyed this session. This was corroborated in the written feedback in the end of programme evaluation and in the focus groups in both schools with most young people reflecting that this was their favourite session and highlighting how much they enjoyed being out of school, the food and meeting new people. While recognising the trip as positive for young people, it should be noted that staff from both schools felt that more preparation work was needed with pupils who felt anxious in new situations in order to support their participation in the day trip.

As shown above, each session was rated by the majority of young people as both extremely or very helpful as well as enjoyable. A key strength of the programme delivery identified by both young people and staff in the qualitative work was the peer-led approach, which fostered strong engagement and made the programme more

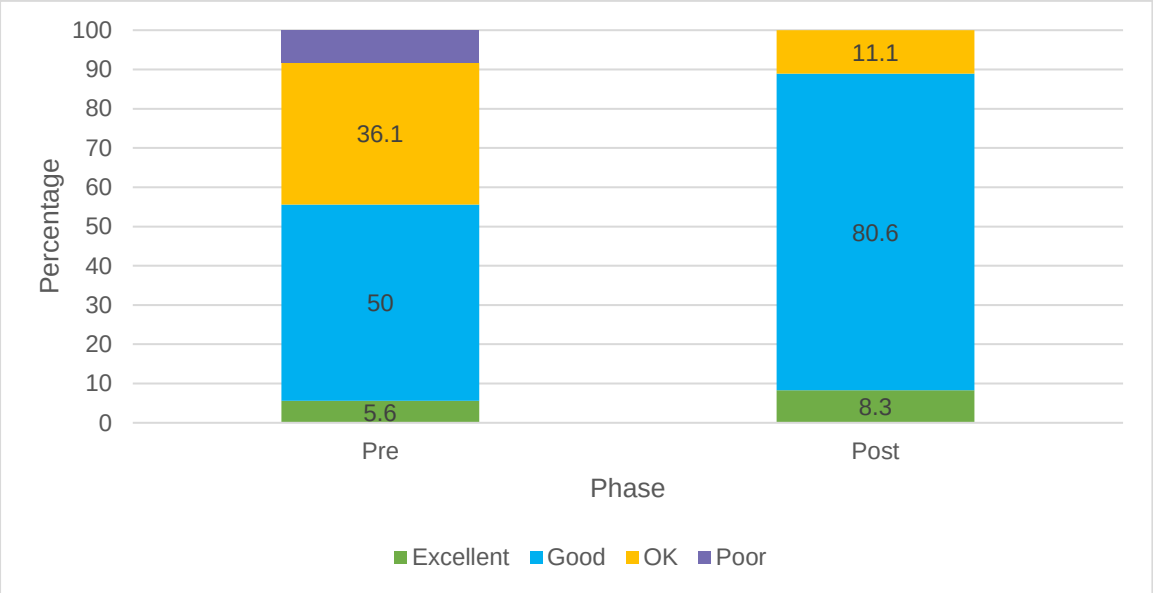
relatable. The interactive elements of the content were also praised, with a strong recommendation for more group work activities in future sessions. Young people also suggested that the programme could be improved by extending the duration and frequency of sessions and avoiding early morning timings.

Section 2: Impact of the Empowering Youth Student Wellbeing Programme

This section explores the impact of the Empowering Youth Student Wellbeing Programme on participants. The analysis focuses on key areas such as increased knowledge of mental health, awareness of local support services, comfort in discussing mental health and the role of young people in shaping mental health services. In addition, this section reports on participants' understanding of mental health care, confidence in addressing mental health issues, skills development and willingness to engage in volunteering. The findings highlight the programme's successes while also identifying areas where further improvements could enhance its effectiveness

Increased Knowledge on Mental Health: Participants were asked to rate their knowledge on mental health and wellbeing before and after the programme. A total of 36 participants completed this question. The programme appears to have a positive impact on participants' knowledge of mental health and wellbeing as shown in Figure 1. Results show that nearly ninety percent (88.9%) self-assessed their knowledge of mental health and wellbeing as excellent or good after the programme which was a significant rise from 55.6% before the programme.

Figure 1: Participants' Knowledge of Mental Health and Wellbeing Before and After the Programme

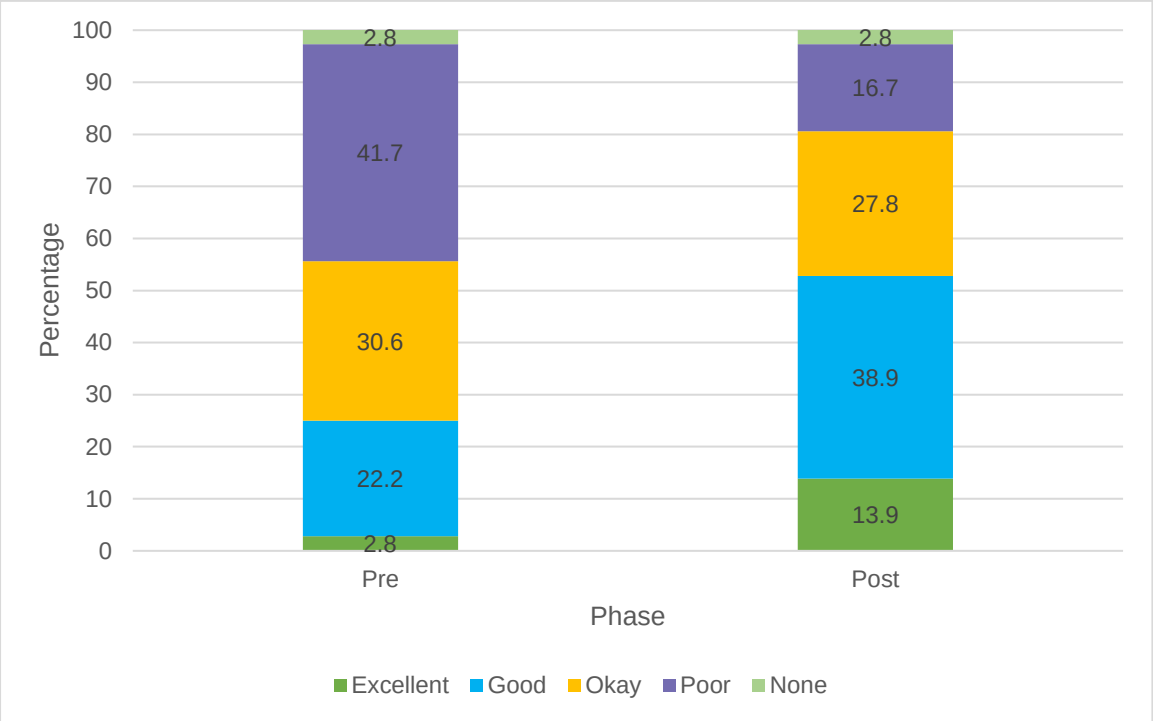


(N = 36)

It is also notable that no participants rated their knowledge of mental health and wellbeing as poor after the programme.

Increased Awareness of Local Support Services: Young people were also asked to rate their awareness of mental health support services in the local area before and after the programme. Results displayed in Figure 2 shows the programme positively impacted participants' awareness of local mental health support services. Young people's awareness of local support services as excellent or good more than doubled from 25.0% to 52.8% after the programme. Similarly, there was also a substantial decrease in the percentage of participants rating their awareness of local mental health support services as poor from 41.7% to 16.7% after the programme.

Figure 2: Participants' Awareness of Local Mental Health Support Services Before and After the Programme

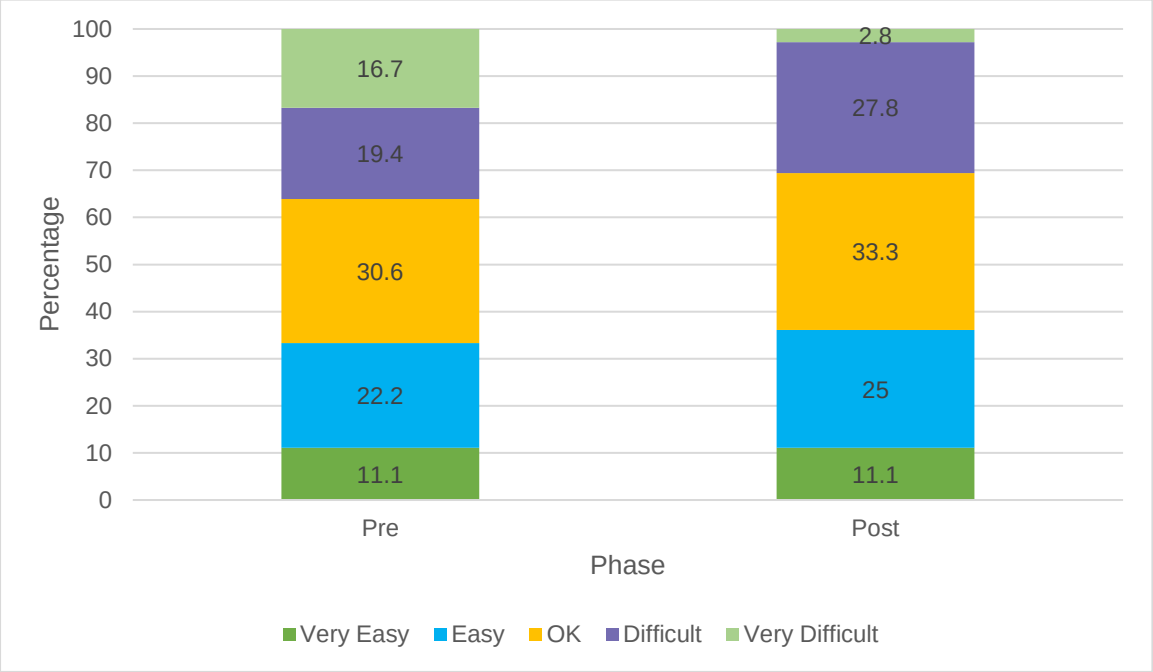


(N = 36)

However, it should be noted that nearly one fifth of participants still rated their knowledge of local support services as poor or none after the programme (19.5%).

Talking about Mental Health: Participants were asked how easy do you find talking about mental health before and after the programme. The overall trend suggests a positive impact of the programme on participants' ability to talk about mental health. The most notable improvement is the reduction in those who found it very difficult which dropped from 16.7% to 2.8% after the programme as shown in Figure 3. The percentage of participants who found it very easy to talk about mental health remained constant at 11.1% indicating that those who were already comfortable maintained their comfort level. The slight percentage increases in young people indicating they found it ok or easy to talk about mental health after the programme may indicate that some participants became more comfortable discussing mental health issues.

Figure 3: Talking about Mental Health Before and After the Programme

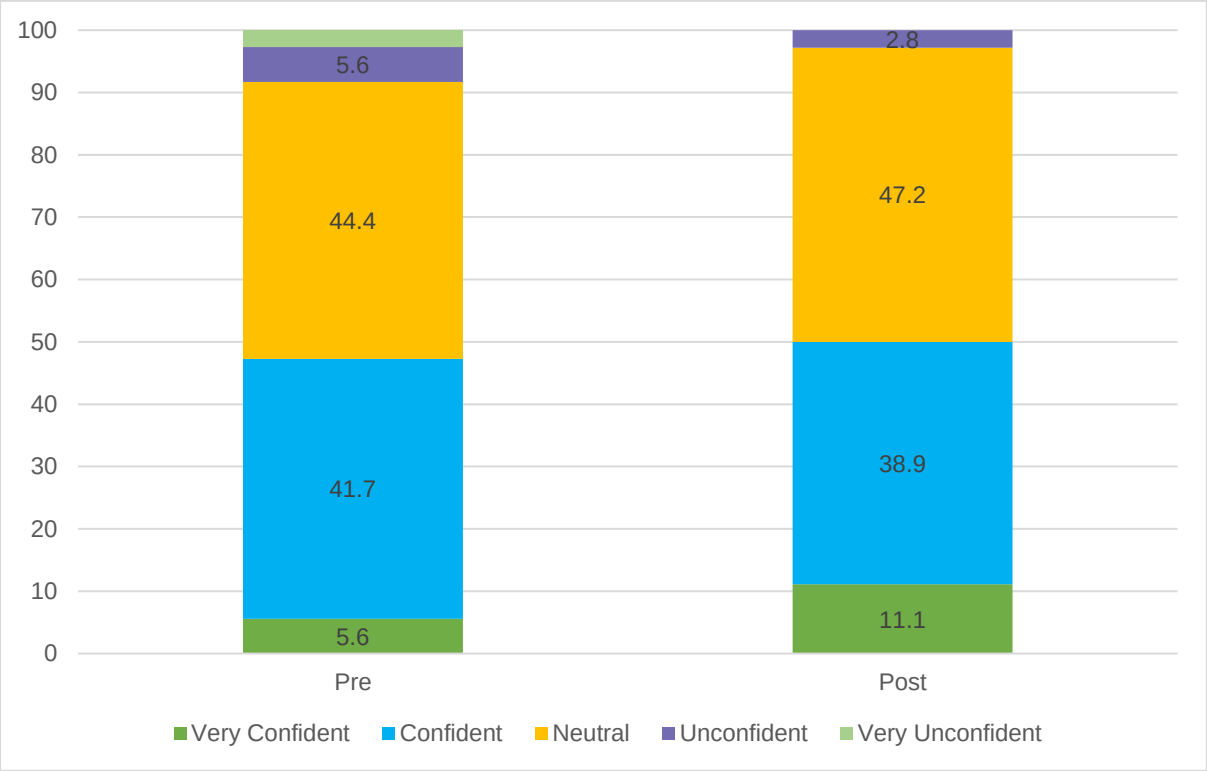


(N = 36)

However, the rise in young people who found it difficult to talk about mental health increased post-programme from 19.4% to 27.8% indicates that there are still challenges to be addressed to support young people feel more confident to talk about mental health.

Young People's Role in Shaping Mental Health Services: Young people were asked how confident they feel that young people have a voice in shaping mental health services in their community. Results show a reduction in the number of participants feeling unconfident or very unconfident about young people's role in shaping mental health services from 8.4% to 2.8%. A modest increase in young people feeling very confident or confident in this area from 47.3% to 50.0% can also be shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Participants Confidence in Young People Shaping Mental Health Services in the Community Before and After the Programme



(N= 36)

The higher proportion of participants who hold a neutral stance from 44.4% to 47.2% after the programme may be due to a better understanding or reassessment of their views.

At the end of the programme, young people were asked to reflect on what, if any, impact the programme had in terms of having a better understanding of how to take care of their mental health, feeling more confident using their voice to address mental health issues and gaining skills that will be useful in other parts of their life. Participants were also asked to consider if they were more likely to take up volunteering opportunities in the future. Results are outlined below:

1. **Better Understanding of Mental Health Care:** Results indicate that the majority of young people have gained a better understanding of how to take care of their mental health at the end of the programme. Over three quarters of young people (77.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that their understanding of mental health had improved.

2. **Confidence in Addressing Mental Health Issues:** Over half of participants (52.8%) were neutral on the statement ‘I feel more confident using my voice to address mental health issues’ after the programme. A total of 38.9% agreed or strongly agreed. A smaller number disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt more confident using their voice to address mental health issues (8.3%).
3. **Skills Development:** Most young people (77.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that they have developed skills that will be useful in other aspects of their lives. This suggests that the programme was effective in equipping young people with transferable skills that extend beyond the immediate context of the programme.
4. **Volunteering Opportunities:** Participants were asked if they would be more likely to take up volunteer opportunities after the programme. Over half of participants (58.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel more inclined to take up volunteering opportunities with a third of participants remaining neutral on this (33.3%).

Overall, results indicate that the programme effectively improved participants' understanding and skills to support their own mental health care and enhanced participants' motivation to engage in volunteer work. Findings also suggest there may still be room for improvement in building confidence among all participants to talk about mental health and to use their voice to address mental health issues.

Part 3: Areas for Future Development

Results from this evaluation demonstrate that the Empowering Youth Student Wellbeing Programme has been highly successful in achieving its objectives. The programme, which was designed to be youth-led, proved effective across two different school settings and year groups. It supported young people in key areas such as self-care, coping with anxiety and staying motivated. The majority of participants found all sessions both helpful and enjoyable. Results show that the programme significantly enhanced young people's knowledge and understanding of mental health and there was a noticeable increase in their awareness of local support services. Furthermore, participants also indicated that they developed useful skills and felt more inclined towards volunteering after the programme.

While high levels of satisfaction have been found with the programme, this evaluation has identified a number of ways the programme could be further developed as outlined below:

1. **Increase Interactive Activities:** Both young people and staff have highlighted the interactive group work activities as contributing positively to engagement and learning. Consider how to further incorporate more interactive elements and group work activities in future sessions. This could involve more collaborative exercises and discussions to enhance participation and increase participants' confidence in talking about mental health.

2. **Duration of Programme:** Consider developing more sessions on wellbeing and mental health to extend the length of the programme. This would provide the opportunity to have more time to build relationships with young people, cover topics in greater depth and support young people's confidence in talking about mental health with others.

3. **Partnership with Schools:** Seek to strengthen partnerships with schools by designating a specific contact in a pastoral role to coordinate with the project worker for effective communication. Before the programme begins, it is crucial to discuss how a youth work approach can be integrated and facilitated within

the school environment and how to best create safe spaces for students to discuss sensitive issues such as mental health.

4. **Timing of Programme:** Work with schools to avoid scheduling sessions early in the morning to accommodate young people's preferences.

5. **Expand the Peer-Led Approach:** The peer-led approach taken by the programme was well-received by both young people and staff. Consider expanding this model to train peer facilitators within the school who could signpost others to local services or through developing a mental health committee within schools to advocate for students.

6. **Supporting Young People with Anxiety:** Consider what supports young people who may experience anxiety in unfamiliar settings or when meeting new people may need to participate in sessions such as the Resurgam Day Trip. This could involve organising pre-event briefings or smaller preparatory sessions to build confidence and alleviate anxiety.

7. **Increase Opportunities for Volunteering:** Given the positive response towards volunteering, explore providing more structured opportunities for young people to engage in volunteer work. Collaborate with local organisations to offer meaningful volunteering options and facilitate these opportunities as part of the programme which raises awareness about local support services.

8. **Training Opportunities:** Early Intervention Lisburn should offer a range of regular training opportunities to both school staff and students. This training should focus on supporting young people's mental health and increasing awareness of additional local resources. In addition, Early Intervention Lisburn should raise awareness of training opportunities related to mental health and wellbeing from other local providers.