

The environment: am I bothered?

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The environment continues to be a hot topic. This includes macro issues, such as global warming damage to the ozone layer, as well as more localised issues such as litter. Media coverage includes television images of the shrinking Arctic ice cap and increased desertification as well as local council anti-littering advertising campaigns.

Despite the increased publicity given to these images, how important are environmental issues to our daily life? In addition, even if we feel these issues are important, can our own actions make any difference to the solution, or are we powerless to make any change?

These are questions that were included in the 2006 **Young Life and Times Survey** (YLT). Each year, the survey asks 16-year olds in Northern Ireland about a range of social issues. At the end of each year's questionnaire, respondents are asked to suggest topics for inclusion for the following year's survey. In 2005, many respondents indicated the environment as a potential topic in 2006.

Strength of importance of environmental issues

In order to gauge how important individual issues are in their lives, respondents were asked if any of nine listed environmental issues were important to them, using the scale very important, important or not important.

Firstly, by combining the responses 'very important' and 'important', Table 1 indicates that for eight out of the nine issues, at least three quarters of respondents thought that each issue was significant to them. The only exception is noise pollution, which was identified as being important by only 44% of respondents. Given the similarity of responses attached to most of these issues, it is perhaps more useful to focus solely on the 'very important' responses in order to identify a prioritisation of environmental problems by respondents.

From the third column in Table 1, we can

see that concentrating on these responses we can discern a hierarchy of importance. The issue most frequently identified as being *very important* was 'using up natural resources' (47%), followed by 'loss of plants, animals and habitats' (44%). In contrast, noise pollution was only identified by less than one in ten respondents (9%).

Responses for both males and females tended to be quite similar. However, there were two significant differences of opinion, which relate to litter and waste management. These were perceived as being very important to them by a higher proportion of females (35% and 44% respectively) than males (25% and 35% respectively).

Just under two thirds of respondents lived in urban areas (a big city, suburbs or outskirts of a big city or a small city or town), with one third living in rural areas. However, there were no significant differences between the rates of importance attached to particular issues. There were also no significant differences according to the religion of the respondent.

Respondents were asked what type of school they last attended. Analysis by type of school will only include secondary and grammar school students due to the small number of respondents attending other types of schools (for example, integrated, Irish language or special schools). For all issues, with the exception of using up natural resources, a higher proportion of those attending secondary schools than grammar schools perceived them to be very important. However, the only statistically significant differences by type of school relate to noise pollution and to damage to the ozone layer. One quarter (26%) of grammar school pupils thought that damage to the ozone layer was very important compared to 36% of those attending secondary schools. Noise pollution was very important to 13% of those attending secondary schools,

Table 1: Importance of environmental issues

	% saying very important or important	% saying very important
Litter	86	31
Using up natural resources	85	47
Loss of plants, animals and habitats	85	44
Waste management	85	40
Global warming/ climate change	83	39
Water pollution	84	32
Damage to the ozone layer	77	31
Air pollution	74	20
Noise pollution	44	9

compared with only 4% of those attending grammar schools.

These patterns are reflected in analysis by family financial background. In general, a

higher proportion of respondents whose family were not well off said that issues were very important to them, compared with those who were averagely or very well off. These differences were statistically

Table 2: Issues deemed very important, by interest in politics

	% saying very important		
	Great deal/quite a lot	Some	Not very much/none
Using up natural resources*	54	54	41
Loss of plants, animals and habitats	47	42	42
Waste management*	49	39	37
Global warming/ climate change*	47	42	34
Water pollution	36	36	28
Litter	35	33	28
Damage to the ozone layer*	37	32	28
Air pollution	25	22	16
Noise pollution	10	9	8

* $p < 0.05$ (statistically significant)

significant in relation to air pollution, noise pollution and loss of plants, animals and habitats.

The largest variation in opinion was among those who felt that they had a high level of interest in politics and those who had little or no interest at all. For example, Table 2 shows that nearly half (47%) of those with much interest in politics thought that global warming was very important, compared with 34% of those with little interest. In relation to damage to the ozone layer, the figures were 37% and 28% respectively. Statistically significant differences were found in relation to waste management and using up natural resources.

Range of important issues

Having identified the individual issues of importance to YLT respondents, it is useful to look at the breadth of issues important to them. Figure 1 indicates that nearly one third of young people participating in the survey (31%) did not identify any issues as being very important to them. In contrast, however, one fifth of respondents identified at least five issues.

The mean number of issues that respondents felt were very important to them was just under three (2.87). The mean number of issues very important to students attending secondary schools was statistically significantly higher than for those attending grammar schools (3.13 and 2.7 respectively). Also, the mean number of very important issues to respondents with a good deal of interest in politics was significantly higher than that for those with little interest in politics (3.41 and 2.57 respectively).

Personal action

Having identified which issues were personally important, respondents were then asked if they thought that through their own actions, they could make a difference to any of these issues. As Table 3 shows, for each of the nine listed topics, at least four out of ten respondents thought that their personal actions could make a difference. In fact, more than eight out of ten respondents thought this in relation to litter (88%) and to waste management

Table 3: Can your own actions make a difference?

	%		
	Yes	No	Don't know
Litter	88	8	4
Waste management	83	13	5
Using up natural resources	56	33	11
Noise pollution	55	34	11
Air pollution	46	42	12
Damage to the ozone layer	46	40	14
Water pollution	44	44	12
Global warming/climate change	41	45	14
Loss of plants, animals and habitats	40	44	16

(83%), with very small proportions saying that they did not know. Obviously these are locally-focused concerns, and other issues were seen as less reactive to personal action. This latter group included using up natural resources (56%) to global warming/climate change (41%) and loss of plants, animals and habitats (40%), and equally, the proportion who were not sure was much higher, ranging from 11% to 16%.

There were some significant differences according to gender, in particular, relating to air pollution, litter, waste management and using up natural resources. For each of these, females were significantly more likely to say that their own actions can make a difference. However, while there was no statistically significant difference, this pattern was reversed in relation to global warming and the loss of plants, animals and habitats, wherein males were more likely than females to say yes and females were more likely than males to say that they didn't know.

As previously noted, there were no significant differences depending on whether respondents lived in rural or urban areas, or on their religion. However, in relation to the type of school respondents attended, grammar school pupils were much more likely to think that their actions can make a difference to waste management (88% and 78% respectively), while the reverse was true in relation to the loss of plants, animals and habitats (34% and 46% respectively).

Again, the level of interest in politics was associated with belief in the effect of personal action. In particular, those respondents with a strong interest in politics were generally the group most likely to agree that their own actions can make a difference, and those with the least interest in politics being most likely to say that they didn't know. These differences were significant in relation to global warming, water pollution, waste management and the loss of plants, animals and habitats.

Breadth of personal action

The mean number of issues young people felt could be affected by their actions was 4.94 – higher than the mean number of issues that young people felt were

Figure 1: Mean number of issues of importance

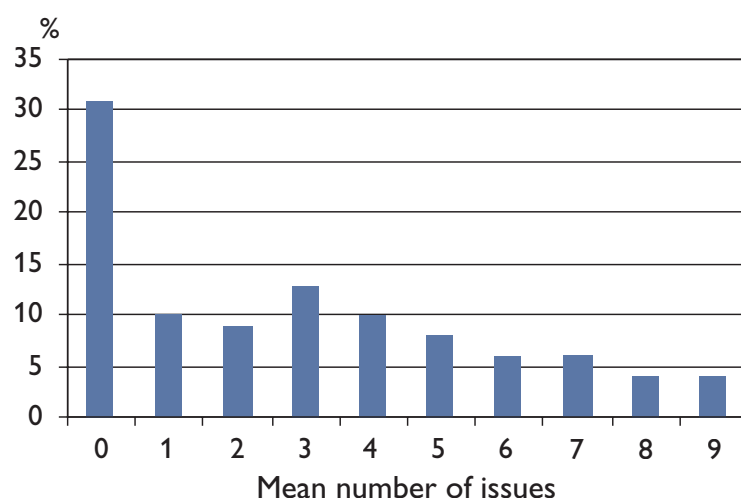
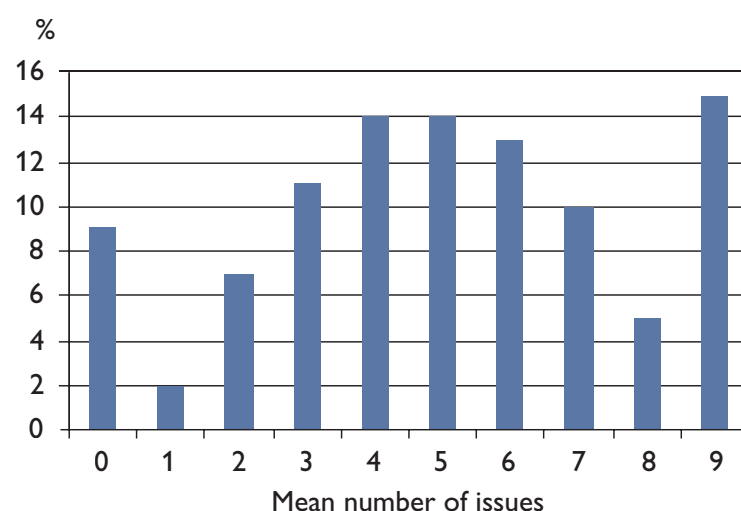


Figure 2: Mean number of issues affected by personal action



important to them. Fewer than one in ten young people (9%) thought that their actions could not make a difference to any of these issues, and in fact, a higher proportion (15%) thought that their actions could affect all of the issues listed. As in the previous section, there were significantly higher differences in the mean number of issues identified by females compared with males, and for those with a good deal of interest in politics compared with those who are less interested in politics.

Conclusion

So, to quote from the Catherine Tate character, 'am I bovvered?'. The answer seems to be yes. The data from the 2006

YLT survey indicate that all of the listed issues were seen as important to some degree. The only exception was noise pollution, which was very important to only 9% of respondents. However, there was some degree of mismatch between what was important to respondents and how they could make a difference. For example, despite noise pollution only being very important to 9% of respondents, this was a topic that just over half of respondents (55%) felt they could personally affect. However, a similar proportion of respondents (56%) felt they could personally affect using up natural resources, even though this was the issue that was seen as very important by the highest proportion of respondents (47%). Global issues, such as global warming/

climate change and the loss of plants, animals and habitats, were also very important to a fairly large proportion of respondents (39% and 44% respectively), although these were the issues that respondents felt least likely to be able to affect. Despite recent messages and warnings about the need to take personal responsibility for our actions in relation to global warming, these figures suggest a certain degree of powerlessness, or else non-acceptance of responsibility, among young people.

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Key Points

- The issues of most importance to young people were using up natural resources (47%), the loss of plants, animals and habitats (44%), and waste management (40%).
- Noise pollution was very important to only 9% of respondents.
- A higher proportion of students attending secondary schools felt each issue was important to them compared with grammar school students.
- Most respondents with a high level of interest in politics felt these issues were very important than those with a lower level of interest.
- Most respondents felt their actions could make a difference to locally-based issues such as litter (88%) and waste management (83%).
- Despite being some of the most important issues to respondents, only 41% felt they could make a difference to global warming/climate change or to the loss of plants, animals and habitats (40%).

The **Young Life and Times Survey** is carried out annually and records the attitudes and experiences of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland.

The **Young Life and Times Survey** is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the young people think about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3947 with any queries.

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