Evaluation of Foróige GoVirtual

Prepared by Eemer Eivers

Funded by Rethink Ireland

Acknowledgements

This independent review could not have been completed without the help of many individuals. Particular thanks are due to Adam Leech and Tom Rickard, the Foróige Team with responsibility for GoVirtual. Their help was invaluable in enabling the review of GoVirtual, and their endless patience was much appreciated. Many thanks are also due to all participants in the research, including:

- the youth workers who completed surveys and who shared surveys with young people.
- the young people who engaged with surveys or were interviewed.
- parents who were interviewed.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Part of the broader suite of Foróige Go activities, GoVirtual was funded by Rethink Ireland and The Tomar Trust from 2023 to the end of 2025. This independent review examines the efficacy of the GoVirtual model. GoVirtual was designed to use virtual reality (VR) to engage young people, particularly those who faced difficulty accessing traditional, in-person youth development and non-formal education programs. GoVirtual's own impact data found many positive effects on young people from taking part in GoVirtual activities, including improved social connections, leadership qualities and responsible digital citizenship.

The current report was commissioned to:

- examine the robustness of impact data collected by GoVirtual.
- independently examine the extent to which positive change had occurred.
- assess GoVirtual's effectiveness, particularly in engaging with young people who experienced barriers to participation in traditional youth development.
- evaluate the relevance and sustainability of the GoVirtual approach in a youth development context.
- gather participant perspectives, including those of young people and youth workers.
- provide recommendations to enhance the delivery and scaling potential of similar initiatives.

The remainder of this chapter introduces Foróige and GoVirtual. Chapter 2 describes the research methodology, including the design and types of data collected, processes used and ethical considerations. Chapter 3 summarises outcomes from the data collected by Foróige, while chapters 4 and 5 summarise the findings from surveys of youth workers and young people, respectively. Chapter 6 describes some themes emerging from a variety of qualitative data sources, including interviews with parents/guardians[1] and young people, either as part of this review or previously collected by Foróige GoVirtual. Finally, chapter 7 summarises the main outcomes and offers recommendations.

Foróige

Foróige is Ireland's largest youth development organisation, funded by a mixture of government departments and agencies, corporate sponsors, philanthropic organisations and community groups. The 2024 Annual Report (the latest available at the time of writing) indicates that Foróige supported almost 53,000 young people in 2024, drawing on the work of over 5,000 volunteers and a staff of 626. Programmes are offered countrywide, in young people's communities, schools, homes, online and in virtual reality (VR). A large majority of users are aged between 10 and 17, but young people up to the age of 24 avail of Foróige supports. Foróige's work is based in 450 clubs and almost 200 youth projects and youth hubs. Clubs are community-based, run by young people, with the support of adult volunteers. Youth hubs can offer tiered interventions, ranging from universal access youth work to targeted intensive interventions.

Foróige activities include clubs, mentoring programmes, targeted intensive interventions, specialised projects, and education programmes targeting specific issues. Foróige education programmes are

[1] From this point forward, "parent" is used to encompass parents and/or guardians.

designed for all young people and aim to develop skills such as leadership, climate awareness, and healthy lifestyles. One such programme is Foróige Go, which targets the development of digital skills, digital citizenship, and the capacity to safely negotiate digital spaces. There are five strands to Foróige Go, of which GoVirtual is one. In contrast to universal education programmes, Foróige specialised projects and initiatives are designed for young people facing specific challenges. They provide tailored services around issues such as drugs and alcohol support, early school leaving, and diversity and integration. Two of the largest specialised targeted interventions are Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs) and UBU. YDPs are run in partnership with An Garda Síochána, and are local, multi-agency interventions targeted at young people involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, crime or anti-social behaviour. UBUs are targeted at young people facing additional challenges, and aims include building confidence, life skills, and improving educational and employment outcomes.

Despite its rural origins, and its nationwide reach, Foróige has - like youth work organisations in many countries (Şerban & Brazienė, 2021) – sometimes struggled to reach young people in remote rural areas. In the recent Joint Oireachtas review of the future of youth work the first recommendation was that all young people should be able to access local, accessible, high-quality youth work services, yet the same review noted the difficulties inherent in providing youth work to young people in rural areas. Barriers to engagement in rural areas include limited transport, sparser population, and a relative lack of youth services. To some extent, both targeted and universal access youth work tend to be perceived as urban phenomena. Yet, Eurostat data indicate that NEET (not in education, employment or training) rates tend to be higher in rural areas, and that some rural populations, such as migrants, minority ethnic or with disabilities, are at additional risk of marginalisation. The GoVirtual model was perceived to potentially address some of these barriers to participation.

Foróige Go

One of the largest disruptions to the delivery of youth work in recent years was the Covid pandemic. It necessitated a temporary move to online youth work engagement. While that shift created significant access issues for many, for others it provided their first real opportunity to engage with Foróige. Barriers of physical, geographic or social isolation often did not apply in a digital environment. From that realisation, Foróige began a reimagining of how youth work could operate. Central to this reimagined model is the emphasis on digital meeting places. This not only opens non-formal education and youth work to previously overlooked groups, but also helps equip all participants with the necessary skills to negotiate digital spaces safely and as responsible individuals.

Foróige Go represents Digital Youth Work in Foróige. As well as the development of digital skills, it targets person-centred skills such as empathy, critical thinking and digital citizenship. There are five strands within Go, each with a focus on a specific set of digital skills or use of digital spaces:

GoSafely: safe use of online spaces, social media good practice and safety guidelines.

GoBuild: digital skills such as coding, robotics and engineering.

GoLevelUp: creative digital skills such as animation, digital storyboarding.

GoSonic: digital audio production, including music creation and podcasting, using empathy education.

GoVirtual: immersive online spaces, using VR to engage young people in online clubs and e-mentoring.

The GoVirtual strand is the focus of this evaluation.

GoVirtual

GoVirtual aims to meet young people “where they are” and reduce barriers to participation. GoVirtual is not a club or project. It refers to using VR to engage young people in immersive online spaces, enabling young people who are unable to access traditional, physical youth work spaces to engage with Foróige. While VR can be used with any young person, and can be used within Foróige sites and clubs, it has a particular relevance for young people who are geographically, socially or physically isolated, or who are in an atypical living situation (such as in hospital or Direct Provision).

GoVirtual is the result of a rollout of Foróige’s pilot initiative, Vróige, which targeted those unable to engage with traditional youth development, for reasons such as disability, social anxiety, geographical isolation, being in a care setting, in hospital care, or Direct Provision. Drawing on Rethink Ireland’s Children and Youth Digital Solutions Fund, over 400 young people in over 40 sites took part in the initial phase. Participants were provided with VR headsets to meet regularly in a virtual environment, supported by a Foróige VR Development Officer, who also built organisational capacity by developing methodologies and training other staff. Initial outcomes indicated that some of the benefits included improved:

- digital skills.
- leadership, empathy, problem solving.
- digital citizenship.
- connections, friendships, social skills.

Foróige subsequently received funding from Rethink Ireland and The Tomar Trust from 2023 to the end of 2025, to scale up the model. The aim was to establish 130 VR sites nationally, reaching 2250 young people. Vróige became GoVirtual, incorporated into the broader Foróige Go Digital Youth Work strategy. Over a three-year period, the funds were used to widen and deepen the GoVirtual model. A second staff member was assigned to GoVirtual. This allowed far more staff and volunteers to be trained, which in turn facilitated access to far more young people. Alongside the expansion in size, educational methodologies and resources suited to immersive spaces were developed.

Four hundred VR headsets were provided by Meta to facilitate engagement in a VR environment. In the first year, almost 200 youth workers were upskilled to use VR as part of their youth work practices, and over 700 young people used the technology to engage with peers. The number of youth workers who have become proficient in using VR and the number of young people who have engaged with GoVirtual has steadily increased over the three years for which it has been funded. In both 2024 and 2025, GoVirtual engaged with roughly 1,500 young people in a variety of ways, as a gradually evolving model of youth work using VR was developed. Some examples of the developments enabled by GoVirtual included:

- Working with HUMAK University in Helsinki to explore how digital youth work can support isolated and marginalised young people across Ireland and Finland, and how youth workers in each country can learn from each other.
- A VR Youth Panel (The Alternate Spacers), a virtual youth group meeting weekly for an hour, supported by youth workers.
- Incorporating Dala, a VR programme designed by CAMHS HSE staff to help young people manage school-related anxiety, into Foróige-managed School Completion Programmes.

- Designing youth and cultural exchanges, piloted with young people from Scotland, India and developed with Youth Workers in South Africa and New York.
- Working with Music Generation, Tusla Family Services and GoSonic, to design a methodology for collaboratively making music in a virtual environment.
- Working with the HSE's Community Disability Network Team (CDNT) in Mayo, to enable autistic teenagers who were socially or geographically isolated to meet in VR.
- An employability and personal development programme using the Bodyswaps programme, covering topics such as conflict resolution, public speaking and interview skills.
- Using VR as part of Foróige's mentoring programmes, such as Big Brother, Big Sister. Matches could meet in VR in their respective homes if meeting in person was not always feasible. Also, some matches met in person in Foróige spaces to use VR.
- An immersive empathy project run in collaboration with Galway University, independent experts in VR filmmaking and Foróige. Two immersive films were produced by young people in DEIS schools.
- A project in Roscommon for young carers, to provide ways for them to connect and socialise with others in similar situations, using VR.

As GoVirtual has been rolled out, the team has collected quantitative data about the number of young people who have engaged, and the number of staff trained in the use of VR. They have also tracked some of the lessons learned. For example, experience has helped pre-empt some of the most common technical issues that arise, while it also became clear that many young people would benefit from a technical induction prior to engagement.

In addition, they have examined the views of parents, young people involved in the GoVirtual Youth Panel, and of Foróige staff and volunteers on the perceived effects of engagement with VR. These were overwhelmingly positive. For example:

- Two facilitators from the School Completion Programme were interviewed about their experiences of using the Dala VR programme. They discussed some of the technical issues they encountered, and noted that VR was not suitable for every young person with school-related anxiety. Nonetheless, where it was possible to engage the young person, Dala was very effective in helping to manage anxiety.
- Parents of those on the GoVirtual Youth Panel and of the group of autistic young people from Mayo were canvassed for their views about how taking part had affected their child. Views were very positive, with the social element particularly appreciated, although a sizeable number also mentioned some of the technical problems that had arisen (typically, related to headset battery and to frequent updates required for Rec Room).
- Youth workers or volunteers who had been trained in the use of VR or had received headsets were surveyed about usage of VR in their sites and its perceived effects on young people. Although not all who responded to the survey used VR, those that did identified many positives. In particular, they felt that young people enjoyed using VR and that it improved their digital skills. However, as was the case with young people, it also became apparent that some youth workers needed additional help with the technological challenges of running VR sessions, even after training.

2. Methodology

This chapter outlines the main methods used to examine the efficacy of the GoVirtual model. It describes the research design and timeline, the types of data collected and the different groups targeted.

Design and timeline

The research adopted a mixed methods approach to evaluate the impact of GoVirtual. This involved analysing both qualitative and quantitative data, including document reviews, short interviews, surveys, and video interviews previously collected by the GoVirtual team. Additionally, the study relied on two new surveys, regular informal interviews with the team, and interviews with parents and a young person with considerable experience of the Vróige and GoVirtual models.

The research began in August 2025, with a review of GoVirtual activities within the broader Foróige Go umbrella, an examination of the apps and platforms used, and the identification of youth workers trained in VR. Existing data—such as youth worker surveys, parental or referrer feedback, and video interviews with youth workers and young people—were also examined.

The familiarisation phase provided a clearer understanding of the aims and methods of GoVirtual. It highlighted strengths, such as extensive documentation of activities and pre- and post-surveys of youth workers' self-rated understanding and confidence in using VR as a youth work tool. However, it also revealed weaknesses, including limited formal collection of young people's views and a lack of recent data from youth workers about their experiences with VR. These gaps informed the focus of the current review.

During September and October 2025, surveys for youth workers and young people were developed and uploaded to the Alchemer survey platform. The youth worker survey was distributed shortly before the Halloween break, while the young person survey was distributed in early November. Each survey was accompanied by information about the research, opportunities to learn more, and options to consent to take part or to opt out.

Discussions about how best to organise focus group interviews with a group of young people and a group of parents took place in early November, and the process of identifying appropriate interviewees via youth workers and establishing their consent and cooperation took some time to organise. As it proved very difficult to get parents to agree to participate in an online focus group, the group interview was switched to a series of phone calls with the researcher. This proved more appealing to parents, and interviews were conducted in early December. The focus group with young people was also eventually scheduled for early December, but only one of the four expected attendees took part. Some of the themes discussed in the interviews were those extracted during the analysis of the earlier surveys.

As only one young person participated in the interview and relatively few completed surveys, the qualitative component of the evaluation combined pre-existing qualitative data with that collected as part of the current review. The final report was completed between December 2025 and January 2026, with the GoVirtual team providing feedback on drafts in early December and early January.

Data sources

Most of the data presented in this report were collected in late 2025. The main sources are:

- A survey completed by a representative sample of youth workers trained in the use of the use of VR, completed during October-November 2025.
  [See Appendix A for a copy of the survey.]
- A survey completed by a sample of young people, whose youth worker had been trained in the use of VR, completed during November 2025.
  [See Appendix B for a copy of the survey.]
- Interviews with four parents whose children have engaged with GoVirtual.
- An interview with a young person who has engaged with GoVirtual.
- Feedback from two young people who had been involved in GoVirtual, provided via their parent.

Additional data collected at an earlier stage by the GoVirtual team, and drawn on for this report include:

- Surveys of youth workers, conducted pre- and post-training on the use of VR (collected 2023-2025). Some received a basic training ("Level 1"), some an advanced training in 2024 ("Level 2) while others received a hybrid level.
- A 2023 survey of Foróige youth workers who had received training in the use of VR or had received headsets.
- Collated data (interviews and phone calls) from a small number of the parents or referrers of young people on the GoVirtual Youth Panel, collected in May 2024.
- Video interviews with youth workers and young people, and two newspaper articles.
- Content from the GoDigital Spatial Hub, showcasing some of the GoDigital work, including GoVirtual.

Foróige surveys

Two types of surveys had already been conducted prior to the start of the current review. All Foróige youth workers and volunteers who had completed training on the use of VR had been asked to complete surveys prior to training and again after training was completed. Some had received a basic training ("Level 1"), some a more advanced training ("Level 2) while others had received a hybrid level. While there were many similarities in survey content, they did not always ask the same question in the same manner, in part reflecting the different "pitch" of the training material. This made it more difficult to combine the various sources, but it did permit a comparison of self-rated confidence in certain aspects of VR, pre- and post-training.

In addition, in 2023, 90 youth workers or volunteers who had been trained in the use of VR or had received headsets were surveyed about usage of VR in their sites and its perceived effects on young people. In total, 53 responses were returned, with two sites returning two surveys, meaning 51 separate sites were included.

Surveys for this review

New surveys were developed based on the intended aims and intended reach (rollout) of GoVirtual, also drawing on outcomes from survey and interview data previously collected by the GoVirtual team. Among the original aims of GoVirtual were improved digital, leadership, and problem-solving skills, increased empathy, improved connections and social skills, and active participation and creative use of a range of immersive apps and experiences.

The survey for **youth workers** asked about the extent to which they used VR, the number of young people with whom they used it, and the nature of activities engaged in. Respondents were asked if they felt VR was an appropriate tool for GoVirtual's key target groups (e.g., geographically isolated), if it helped foster GoVirtual's key target skills (e.g., creativity), and if they had observed any improvement amongst the young people they dealt with on a variety of mental health and behavioural dimensions. Those who did not use VR were asked why and what might encourage them to do so.

The survey for **young people** asked if they had used VR either in Foróige or elsewhere. Those who had not were asked why not. Those who used it were asked about the frequency and nature of their own use (e.g., to make music, manage anxiety, game). They were also asked to draw on their own experiences of VR to gauge if it could help other young people to improve aspects of their mental health, their social interactions, and skills development.

Target survey sample

After discussion with the GoVirtual team, it was agreed that the most effective approach would be to target a representative sample of the same *projects* (not sites) for surveys of both youth workers and young people. It was also agreed that the optimum sample size would be between 70-80 projects. This was to balance the need for a relatively large number of responses and a high response *rate* (i.e., many or most of those asked to respond did so) with the work needed to track responses and contact non-respondents.

The GoVirtual team shared a database of all youth workers who had been trained in the use of VR. For the purposes of the research, the database was modified to:

- *exclude* any personal details (names, email address or phone) for youth workers.
- include information about site locations and the type of project (e.g., UBU project).

The resulting file with 184 cases formed the basis for sampling. To ensure a *representative* sample was selected, the data was examined for the proportion of cases:

- working on different project types (YDPs and UBU comprised over half of all projects).
- in different geographical areas, including by county and an urban (city of Dublin, Limerick Galway, Cork, Waterford) or other classification.

In addition, GoVirtual Site ID was used as an indicator of how recently someone from a given site had received training.

The list was stratified by these variables and a sample selected. A subsequent review by the GoVirtual team meant that a small number of youth workers sampled had to be replaced (e.g., had ceased working in the selected location). The final agreed sample was a target of 75 youth workers/projects.

Focus groups and interviews

In contrast to the selection of targets for the surveys, it was not practical to randomly select attendees for interview. The attendees had to be selected drawing on the knowledge of the GoVirtual team and local youth workers. The only input from the researcher was to suggest limiting contact to youth workers who had **not** been sampled for the survey phase (to spread the work load a little more equitably). Even then, exceptions were made for the two youth workers managing GoVirtual.

"Appropriate" parents had to be identified by youth workers, on the basis that they:

- knew about their child's engagement with GoVirtual / VR (which was not always the case for parents whose children engaged with GoVirtual in person, in a Foróige site).
- had the technical capacity and resources to engage in a focus group conducted on Zoom.
- might be willing to engage and share their views.

This skewed the group towards those whose children had engaged or were engaging remotely with VR, as these parents were more aware of their child's VR activities. It also meant that the group might not be representative of parents of young people engaging with GoVirtual, more generally. Unfortunately, no parent proved willing to engage in a focus group on Zoom. Therefore, a small group of parents were asked if they would have a phone call conversation with the researcher. This proved a more attractive option for parents, and four interviews were completed. However, these parents cannot be assumed to be representative of parents as a whole.

Youth workers also identified young people for potential participation, based on the extent to which they engaged with VR, their perceived capacity to engage with a focus group hosted on Zoom. The process was managed by the central GoVirtual team, who tried to ensure that the young people represented were from different projects and with different experiences. Four young people agreed to attend the meeting, but only one attended on the day. Clearly, one young person cannot be considered representative of all young people engaging with GoVirtual, although his prolonged engagement with GoVirtual does give him considerable insights into its operation.

Ethics and data protection

Foróige deals with young people across a spectrum of ages, with most under age 18. This meant that parental as well as young person consent was required for many participants. It also meant that the information sheet, consent forms, and any communication with young people and their family needed to use plain English and age-appropriate language.

For both surveys and interviews, all prospective participants –youth workers, parents, young people – were provided with short information sheets about the reasons for the research, what it would involve, why they should take part, and how to get further information if they had any questions not answered by the information sheet. They were also assured that their personal details would not be shared, and that no individuals would be identified in any report on the research.

For the youth worker surveys, those targeted by the sampling received an email invitation from the GoVirtual team. The email included an information sheet about the research, provided options for asking questions, and included a link to the online survey. Consent or opting out was established using tick box options within the survey platform, at the start of the survey.

For young people invited to take part in the survey, information was provided on an information sheet provided via youth workers. Each youth worker discussed with potential participants what was involved, and had an opportunity to seek further information if needed. Unlike the youth worker survey, consent was *not* embedded in the survey itself. As it was anticipated that most surveys would be completed during a session with a youth worker, this meant parents had to be able to give consent separately to the survey delivery. Consequently, youth workers were provided with a separate form, on which they tracked the parental and young person's consent or opting out.

The research was designed so that the researcher obtained minimal personal data on young people, parents or youth workers. Surveys were conducted entirely anonymously. Only the GoVirtual team had access to the youth worker email addresses, and no personal data was collected during the delivery of the surveys. This meant that only the GoVirtual team knew which youth workers were invited to take part, and neither the researcher nor the team knew who did take part. In the case of the young people who were surveyed, only their youth worker knew who was invited and who had taken part.

For interviews, the researcher had no access to participant names or email addresses. Participants provided their phone number and first name (and in the case of the sole young person interviewed, his face was visible), but otherwise their identity was protected.

The data were stored in a secure, password-protected, cloud-based database, accessible only to the researcher. No identifying information has been recorded, and, other than the central GoVirtual team, it is not possible to identify any participants. The Zoom interview was recorded but once analysed, the recording was deleted.

Garda Vetting was obtained by the researcher through Foróige as part of the research process.

3. Foróige in-house reviews

This chapter briefly summarises some of the outcomes of data collected by the GoVirtual team as part of their own internal review of GoVirtual functioning. There are two main types of data:

- A 2023 survey of adults (staff and volunteers) in sites that had received training in the use of VR and/or had received VR headsets. This survey sought information about the nature and frequency of VR use, and any perceived positive effects.
- Short surveys completed immediately before and after a training session on the use of VR in youth work. Questions mainly related to self-rated confidence in use or understanding of VR in a youth work setting.

Although the 2023 survey was chronologically first, it is presented after the short training surveys, as they provide a context against which to interpret how VR was used.

Foróige surveys about VR training

This section summarises some of the responses to a variety of surveys delivered between 2023 and 2025, the main aims of which were to gauge confidence levels in aspects of VR, identify areas for future targeting, and to examine satisfaction with the training provided.

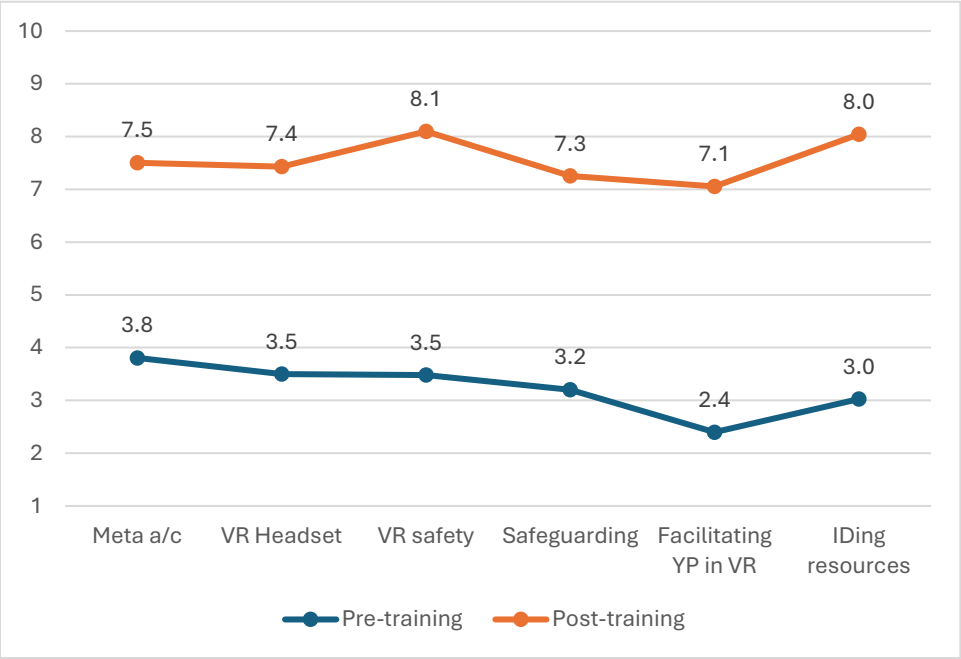
Three types of training were offered between 2023 and 2025, and a total of 277 staff and volunteers trained. Level 1 training introduced the use of VR, including how to use headsets, safety features and safeguarding, and how to facilitate young people using level 1 apps (such as First Steps). Level 2 training was provided during 2024 to those who had previously completed Level 1 or were familiar with the use of VR. Level 2 was "pitched" at a higher level and covered issues such as the use of multiplayer spaces. Finally a hybrid level was also provided in 2025, combining Levels 1 and 2. All those who completed training were asked to complete surveys, pre- and post-training, to gauge their comfort levels and confidence with aspects of VR and using VR as a tool with young people.

However, because the various types of training were pitched at attendees with different levels of VR skills, the surveys associated with each are not the same. For example, while Level 1 attendees were asked to rate their confidence in using introductory tools such as First Steps with young people, Level 2 attendees were asked to rate their confidence on facilitating young people in multiplayer spaces such as Rec Room. This means it is not possible to combine into a single group the responses of all those who received training. Rather than present three separate sets of feedback, this section summarises responses from the largest group - those who completed level 1 training at some point – and those who completed the more advanced Level 2 training.

Basic training

Respondents were asked to rate their confidence on six dimensions of VR, using a 10 point scale. As can be seen from Figure 3.1, there were very large differences in pre-and post-training ratings, with confidence noticeably higher after training. For example, the average confidence ratings for setting up a Meta account, setting up a VR headset, using VR safety features, safeguarding young people in VR, and knowing where to access resources for VR were all between 3 and 4 at the outset. Confidence was particularly low (2.4, on average) for facilitating young people in the Level 1 VR Apps. In contrast, average confidence ratings on all six dimensions were above 7 after training.

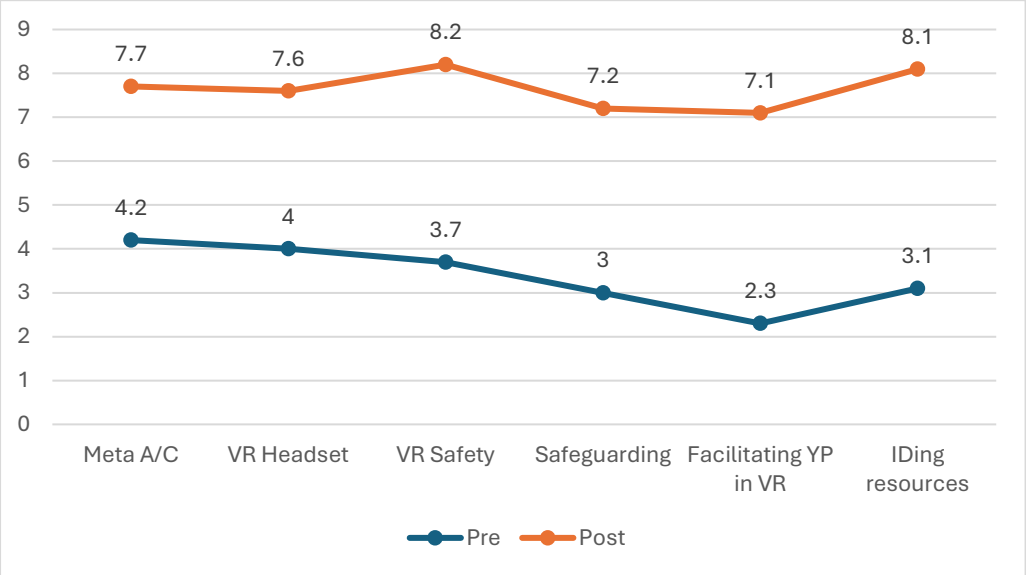
Figure 3.1: Average ratings of confidence with aspects of providing VR to young people, pre- and post-training at Level 1



Based on 108 ratings pre-training, and 91, post-training.

Figure 3.1 shows responses from all who completed a survey prior to completing a Level 1 training course and all who completed a survey after Level 1 training. However, some who completed the pre-training survey did not complete the post-training survey, and vice versa. Therefore, Figure 3.2 shows similar information, but based only on the 52 respondents who completed **both** the pre-and post-training surveys. Although there are fewer respondents, it presents a better indicator of growth, because it compares the same respondents at two time points. As was the case with Figure 3.1, there were very large increases in confidence between the two surveys. This strongly suggests that the training was successful in providing attendees with confidence in performing introductory level youth work in a VR setting.

Figure 3.2: Average ratings of confidence with aspects of providing VR to young people, pre- and post-training at Level 1, same respondents



Based on ratings from the same 52 respondents pre- and post-training

As part of the Level 1 training, participants were asked if they had any questions about VR and (post-training) if they had any other comments to make about the training they received.

Questions about using VR

Well over half of the 109 surveyed pre-training indicated that they had no questions about VR or generally commented about being open to learning more. Almost all of the remaining questions fell under one of four broad categories:

Technical: How to set up headsets or buy apps, how to connect devices, set up private rooms, deal with headset problems.

Age-related: Specific app recommendations for young people, including finding age-appropriate apps or educational apps, concerns about safety and safeguarding, especially when used in groups.

Health: How to find "VR legs" and minimise motion sickness, suitability for those with claustrophobia or other issues.

Uses: Understanding how it might be beneficial to young people, how it might fit into Foróige programmes, if there are Foróige policies on use of VR, and how to use in a group if only two headsets are available.

When asked again after training if they had any questions about VR, almost all commented that they had no more questions or that they expected to have more questions once they started to use VR. Only 11 of the 92 respondents posed a substantive question. Four asked about headsets (access, additional ones, and how to loan them out), and two asked about how to keep abreast of technological advances. Others raised issues around motion sickness, how to maintain skill levels, the extent to which VR would be rolled out, and identifying groups most suitable or unsuitable for VR.

Feedback on training

Of the 92 who completed a post-training survey, 10 had no comment to make on the training, while the vast majority of the remainder expressed very positive feedback (Figure 3.3). Words such as excellent, enthusiasm, relaxed, and knowledgeable featured prominently in descriptions of the two trainers, while enjoyable, engaging and interactive were the words that featured most in describing how attendees felt. Many indicated that they had learned a great deal, with the hands-on and practical approach used coming in for praise, while others looked forward to implementing what they had learned. The main "complaint", raised by a couple of participants, was that they would have liked a longer session, although one also noted that a proposed advanced training session would address this.

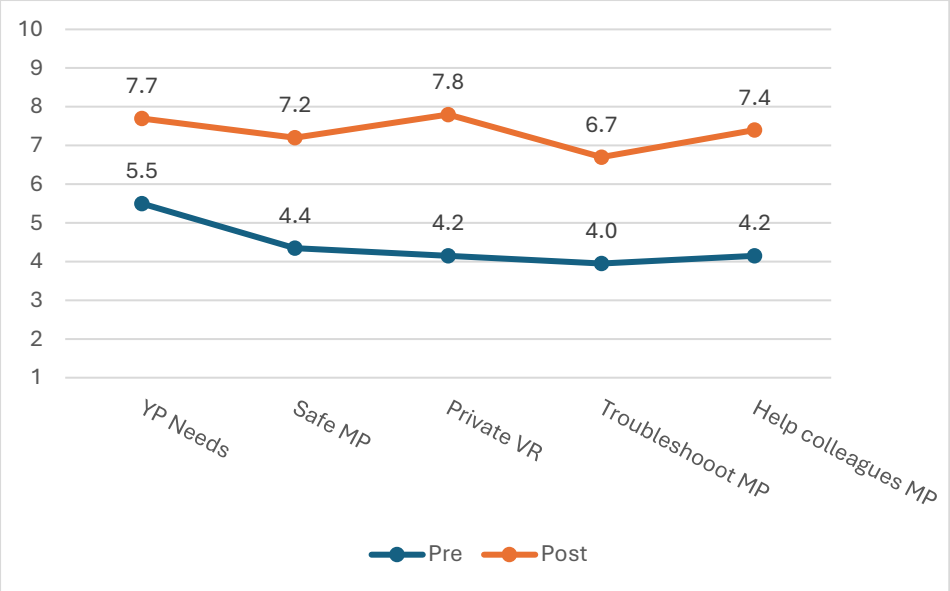
Figure 3.3: Word cloud summary of Level 1 training feedback

Advanced training

Figure 3.4 summarises confidence ratings for similar surveys delivered just before and after Level 2 training. As Level 2 was pitched at a higher level and designed to focus on multiplayer VR, the surveys asked about facilitating young people in approved multiplayer VR spaces, using private multiplayer VR, troubleshooting in multiplayer VR, and supporting colleagues in multiplayer spaces.

The highest pre-training average rating (5.5) was for confidence in using VR to meet the needs of young people. This suggests that the Level 1 training provided a basic level of confidence that at least partially persisted to the point of the Level 2 training. However, when asked about confidence levels for issues related to multiplayer VR, ratings were low prior to the training session (between 4.0-4.4). Comparing the pre- and post-training ratings, the increases in confidence levels were not as pronounced as Level 1, possibly as baseline confidence in general was slightly higher. Nonetheless, there is a clear pattern of greater confidence after training. Troubleshooting was the only topic where average confidence fell below 7 (on the 10-point scale).

Figure 3.4: Average ratings of confidence with aspects of providing VR to young people, pre- and post-training at Level 2



Based on 20 ratings pre-training, and 10, post-training

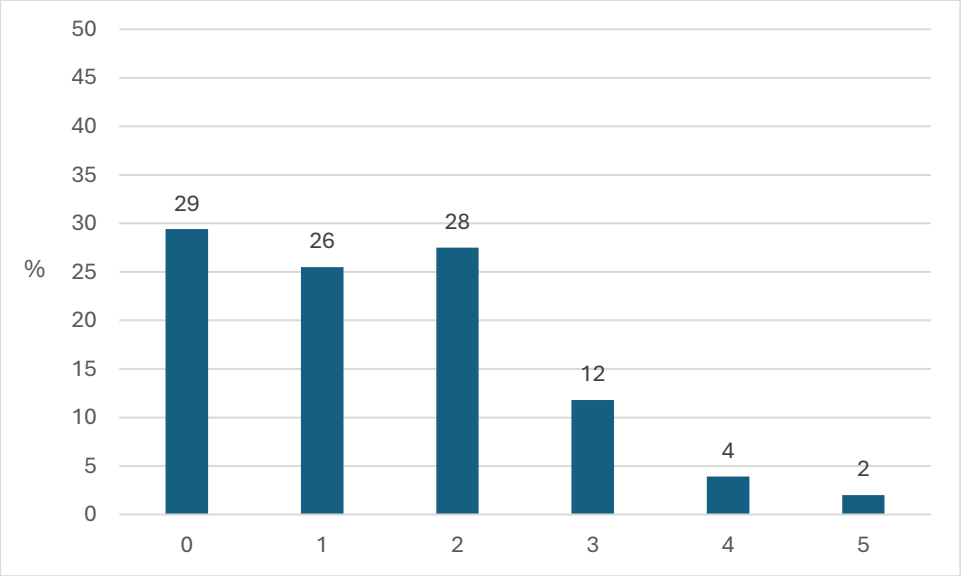
Foróige site surveys from 2023

As noted in Chapter 1, the GoVirtual model has been in development for several years, during which groups of youth workers and volunteers have been trained in the use of VR and/or received VR headsets. In 2023, surveys were sent to 90 sites known to have had access to headsets. Of the 53 responses returned, two sites returned two surveys. To avoid double-counting of young people and activities, only one response per site was included in analyses (the first response, in each case), making a total of 51 completed surveys. The surveys sought information about VR training and use within the site, including how it was used, with whom, and how often. Respondents were also presented with a long list of potential benefits to using VR and asked to tick those that they had observed.

Staff trained

As can be seen from Figure 3.5, 29% of respondents said that none of the staff or volunteers in their site had received VR Level 1 training in 2023. However, this may under-estimate those capable of using VR, as experienced users may not have felt the need for training. Over half (53%) indicated that either one or two adults in their site had been trained, while one person (2%) indicated that five adults in their site had received training.

Figure 3.5: Numbers of staff and volunteers who completed VR Level 1 training in 2023

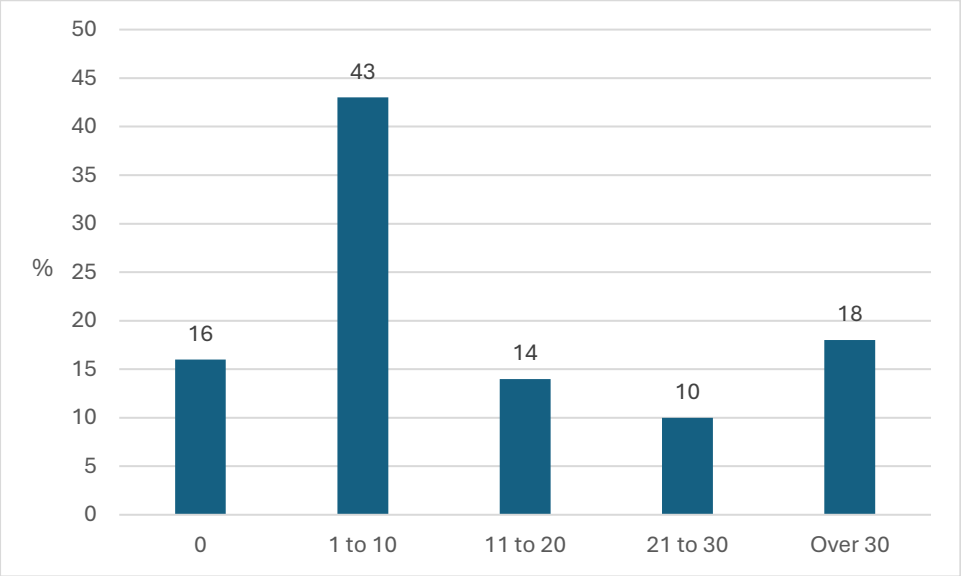


Based on 51 responses.

Use by young people

Regarding the number of young people using VR, 16% of respondents indicated that no young person in their site used VR, while close to half (43%) said between one and 10 did so (Figure 3.6). A further 18% indicated that over 30 of the young people with whom their site engaged used VR. Collating numbers from all sites, 754 young people had used VR in a Foróige location in 2023. Of the 15 sites where no staff or volunteers had been trained in VR during 2023, only one did not have any young people using VR. This may reflect a situation where those already familiar with VR did not feel a need for training.

Figure 3.6: Numbers of young people who used VR in 2023



Based on 51 responses.

How VR was used

One third of respondents (33%) indicated that they used VR for groupwork and for one-to-one work, with a further 31% using it only for groupwork, with 14% using it only for one-to-one work. Sixteen percent also used VR for team meetings and engaging in technical upskilling. Although a key aim of GoVirtual is to provide access to youth services to those who are unable to otherwise access them, the survey revealed that VR was mainly used for in-person activities. Of those who used VR, almost three-quarters (73%) said it was used only in person, 9% said it was used only remotely, and 18% said both remote and in-person use occurred.

Respondents were also asked about the frequency with which VR was used in their project, club or service. As can be seen from Table 3.1 , the most common response (45%) was that it was used less than once a week, with only 12% indicating it was never used. Thus, two of those who indicated that no young people used VR nonetheless indicated a frequency of use of less than once a week.

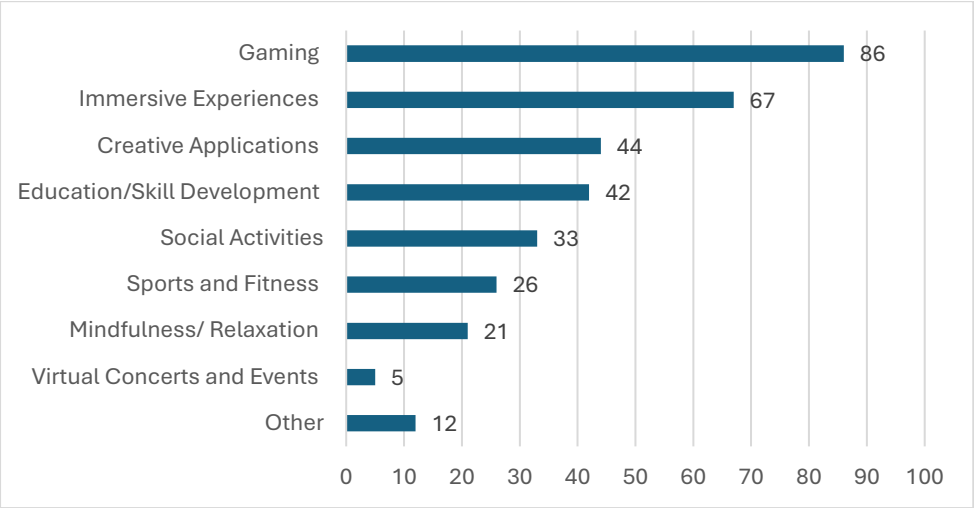
Table 3.1: Frequency with which sites, projects, clubs used VR, 2023

	N	%
Every day	1	2
2-4 times a week	7	13.7
1-2 times a week	14	27.5
Less than once a week	23	45.1
Never	6	11.8
Total	*51*	*100.0*

In terms of specific activities, gaming was by far the most common way in which VR was used (86% of cases), followed by immersive experiences (67%) (Figure 3.7). Slightly less than half indicated creative applications or education/skills development were VR activities with which their young people

engaged. Social, sports and mindfulness activities were engaged in by a reasonable minority but attending events virtually was rare (only 5% reported doing so). Other activities (described in open text responses) for which VR was used included using VR as an icebreaker activity, giving young people structure, and using it to develop mobility.

Figure 3.7: Percentage of respondents indicating ways in which VR was used, 2023



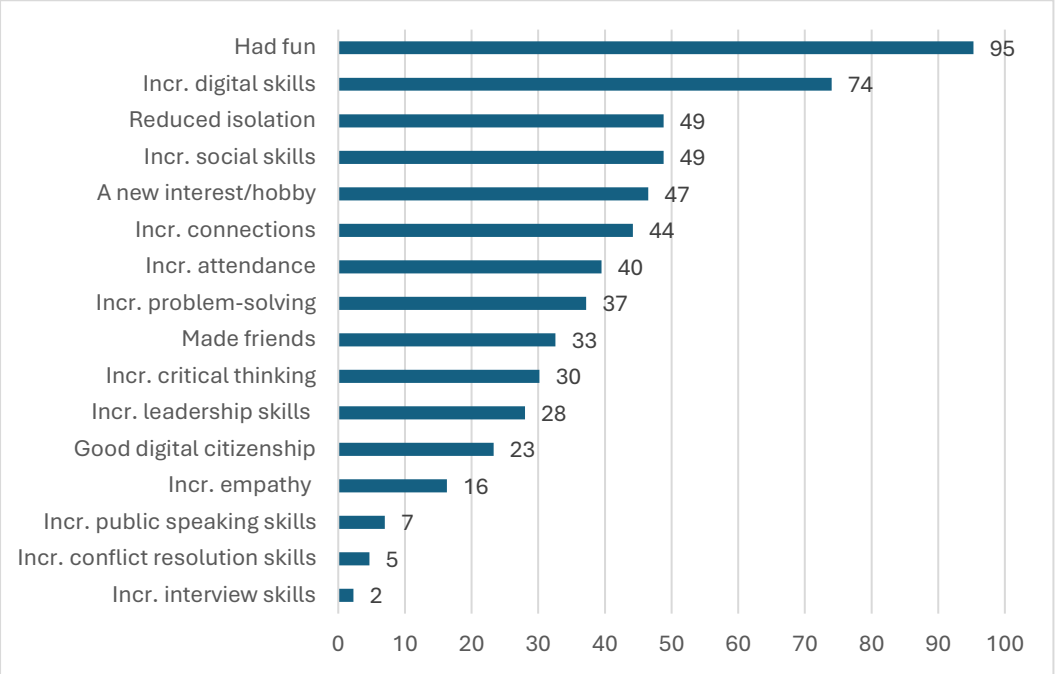
Based on responses from 43 respondents who used VR with young people.

Perceived effects of VR

Respondents were presented with a list of 16 potential benefits from engaging in VR and asked if VR had affected the young people they worked with. Unfortunately, the questions were positively skewed. Respondents could use a tick to indicate a positive effect or do nothing to indicate no effect, but had no option to indicate a negative effect on some or all of the young people involved. Thus, Figure 3.8 possibly presents an overly positive view of the effects of VR, especially as it is not possible to tell if a perceived positive effect was for all, most or only some young people.

That noted, almost all (95%) felt that the young people engaged in VR had fun doing so, a large majority (74%) felt they had developed digital skills, and almost half felt that VR had reduced isolation, developed social skills in at least some of the participants, had provided them with a new interest or hobby and increased connections. Roughly one third felt VR had increased capacity to problem-solve, to make friends, and think critically. The areas where benefits were least like to be observed were increased empathy (only 16% saw change) and development of public speaking, conflict resolution and interview skills.

Figure 3.8: Percentage of respondents indicating positive effects of VR, 2023



Based on responses from 43 respondents who used VR with young people.

In addition to ticking options, respondents were asked if they had any examples or stories of VR having a positive impact on a young person they were working with. Sixteen (31%) either indicated that they had no examples or that they had not used VR sufficiently to provide examples. Of the remainder, the most frequently mentioned examples referred to benefits for young people who struggled to engage socially, either due to anxiety, autism or poor social skills. VR was seen to help them engage, interact and build friendships. Other benefits were increased confidence, enjoyment and engagement in many young people, while young people with mobility issues could be perceived the same way as those without. The novelty of VR meant it could be harnessed as a carrot, to encourage positive behaviours among those whose behaviours were not conducive to a positive group dynamic. Finally, some reported that it facilitated engagement in mentoring programmes, where they young person had been slow to engage.

Illustrative examples of responses provided by youth workers include:

YP referred to us. Wasn't sharing with us at all until we put the headset on and he start yapping away. VR headset removing that barrier to talk candidly to youth worker. What you might achieve over 6 weeks trying to get a young person out of their shell you might achieve in a shorter time putting a vr headset on their head. They feel like they've escaped the 1-1 environment. They build a connection with the youth worker much faster and look forward coming into the project.

Introverts, lack of eye contact; using VR allows them to become more comfortable in the space and opens up their communication skills.

BBBS matches were not engaging with the programme. Figured out they liked technology, we brought them into the digital hub. They increased engagement and participation.

Nice to see YPs come in specifically for Rec Room and group working together.

I ran pilot programmes with young people with ASD who couldn't/didn't interact with young people outside of their homes. Young people met weekly online as a group for 6 sessions Young people experienced group youth work for the 1st time

We have some participants with ADHD … VR is a great tool to help focus them between manualised programmes or separate activities - as it can be a struggle to stay engaged for long periods of time.

Intention to use in the future

All but one of the respondents indicated that they intended to include VR in their work on their local site. The one who did not plan to do so had experienced connectivity issues that had not been resolved, making VR sessions difficult to organise.

4. Surveys of youth workers (2025)

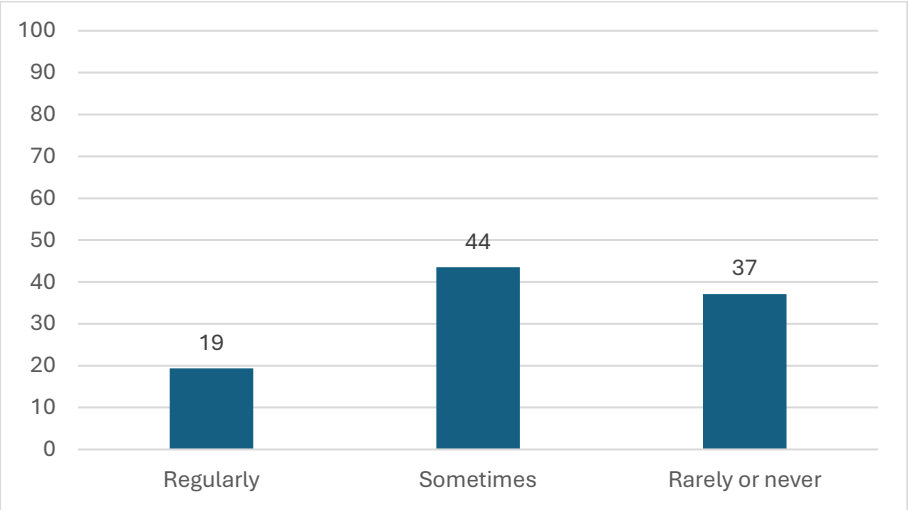
This section describes the design, delivery and outcomes of a survey distributed to a representative sample of projects where one or more youth workers had received training on the use of VR in youth work. Survey links were sent to 75 youth workers, of whom 64 opened the link and started the survey. However, 11 did not progress beyond the first two or three questions. A further 23 who indicated that they rarely or never used VR as part of their work were directed to questions asking *why* this was the case. The remaining 30 youth workers were asked a series of questions about *how* they used VR and its perceived effects. Thus, depending on the nature of the question, most of what is shown in this section is based on up to 23 or up to 30 responses.

Training and use of VR

Just over half (52%) of respondents had received Level 1 VR training, 11% had been trained at Level 2 and a further 30% were unsure of the Level of their training. Finally, 8% indicated that they had not received training as they were already familiar with using VR. Most (77%) also worked with someone who had been trained in VR use, with only 8% indicating this was not the case, and 14% unsure if any colleague had received VR training.

While 37% indicated that they rarely or never used VR, 19% did so regularly and 44% sometimes did so (Figure 4.1). Those with colleagues who had also been trained in using VR and those who were more experienced (Level 2 training or felt they did not need training due to existing familiarity) were a little more likely to use VR.

Figure 4.1: Frequency of VR usage by youth workers, percentages



Based on 62 responses.

Table 4.1 compares distribution by project type, within the original full sample of 75 youth workers and within the 32 respondents who indicated that they used VR in their work. Although YDPs and UBU each comprised 29% of the full sample, UBU comprised 47% of the projects on which VR was being used, while YDPs comprised 22%. In contrast, none of the respondents using VR worked on a Child & Family Support Network project, and only one (3%) worked on a mentoring project.

Table 4.1: Project types sampled and project types in which VR was used

	% sample (N=75)	% VR users (N=32)
YDP	29.3	21.9
UBU	29.3	46.9
School Completion Programme	9.3	6.3
BBBS / Mentoring	6.7	3.1
Child & Family Support Network	6.7	0
Neighbourhood Youth Project	4.0	6.3
Other	14.7	15.6

Focus on non-users

Those who rarely or never used VR in their work were asked why, and what might make them more likely to do so. From a list of eight possible reasons, the most chosen option related to confidence, with 30% of non-users citing a lack of confidence (Figure 4.2). The next most common reasons for not using VR were technical problems and their own motion sickness when using VR, each chosen by 26% of non-users. By comparison, only 4% indicated that VR motion sickness in young people they dealt with was the reason they did not use VR.

Two of those who indicated that technical problems were one of the reasons they did not use VR elaborated on the reasons, as follows:

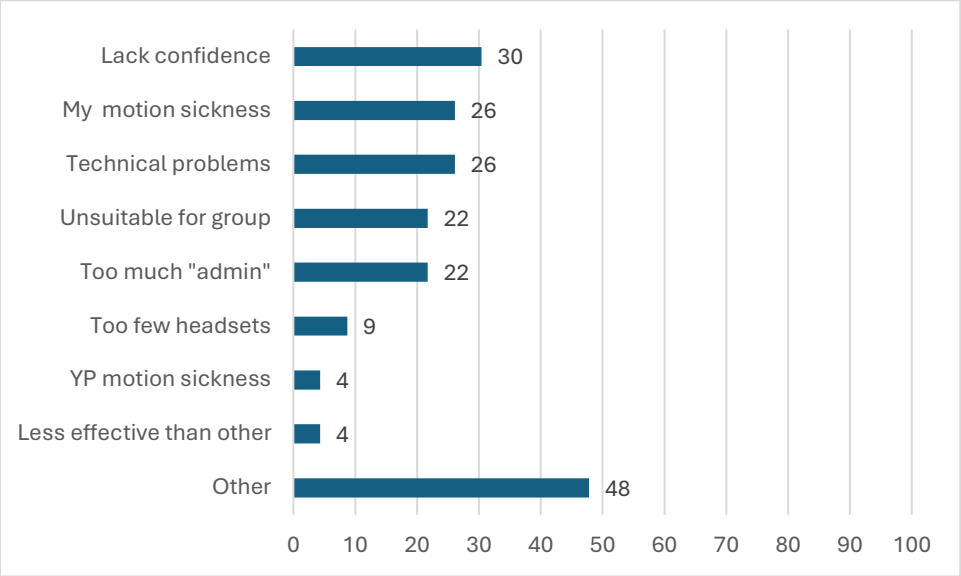
cannot use multiple headsets at the same time. We have very slow internet and this make connecting the headsets challenging

The headsets stop working in various different ways and I don't have the time to problem solve each issue, also some need to be sent away for repairs but I have no idea where to send them.

Other obstacles commonly selected included VR being unsuitable for the group they were currently working with (for example, too young), or a perception that there was too much associated "admin" work, such as keeping the headsets charged and apps updated. Only one respondent (4%) indicated they did not use VR because they felt it was not as effective as other forms of practice.

Respondents also used the "other" option to describe obstacles not already listed. Four (17%) reiterated how technical issues made it difficult to use VR, while three (13%) indicated that they no longer worked directly with young people. Two cited lack of interest from young people, two felt it was not the best way to meet their group's particular needs. Other issues raised included a lack of appropriate physical space, other projects not maintaining headsets, and some young people becoming over-stimulated in VR.

Figure 4.2: Reasons VR was not used by youth workers, percentages



Based on 23 responses.

As well as identifying obstacles, those who did not use VR were asked what would make them more likely to use it. Five of the 19 who responded felt they needed additional training, either a refresher course to remind them of how VR worked at the point they wanted to use it, or more in-depth training. Examples of some responses include:

Refresher training for when we want to use VR. I often forget info from previous training if we are not actively using VR.

A refresher on using would be great for when the opportunity arises again.

Technical issues were cited by five respondents. This included device access, problems using headsets and keeping devices updated, and a need for a way to control which apps were being downloaded:

If we had headsets and access to WiFi in schools.

Better controls on downloading apps (no card joined to headsets but young people download demos.)

Four respondents indicated they would be more comfortable using VR if they had colleagues also using it or familiar with it and able to advise them.

I would find it easier if another staff was trained and present to support.

haven't had an opportunity to shadow another staff to get an idea of possible uses.

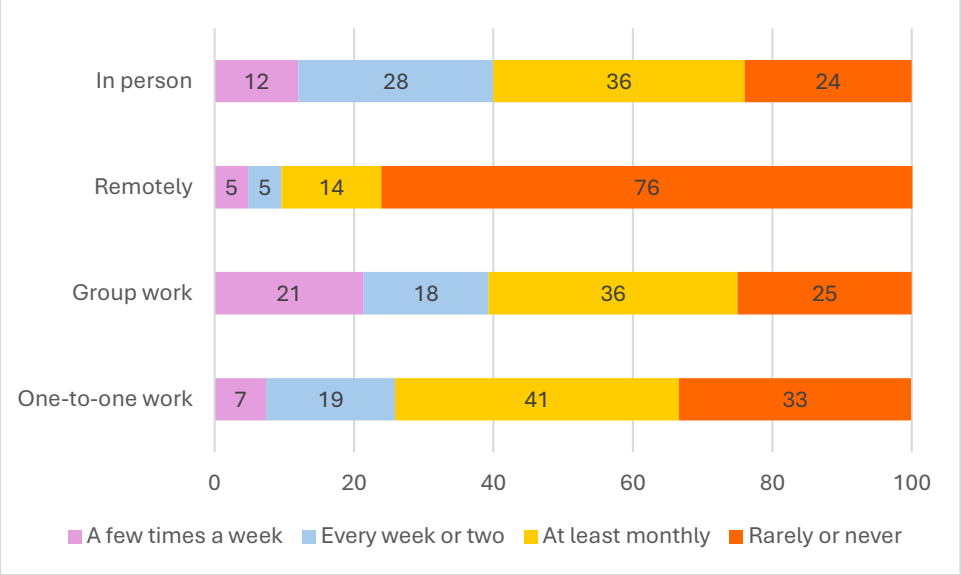
Other issues raised included the need to find time to practice using VR and different platforms, working with an age group for whom VR is not appropriate, and a general comment that making practical changes such as incorporating VR into practice can be difficult:

I love the idea but the practical change is hard.

How VR was used

VR was far more commonly used in-person than remotely (Figure 4.3). Only 10% of those using VR did so remotely on a regular basis (at least every week or two), while 76% never used it remotely. In contrast, 40% regularly engaged in VR in-person. VR was also a little more likely to be used for group work than for one-to-one work, with almost 40% of respondents indicating they used VR for group work at least every week or two, compared to 26% for one-to-one work.

Figure 4.3: Frequency with which VR used in different formats, percentages



Based on 21-28 responses, depending on the question.[2]

Respondents were asked with how many young people they were using VR, currently, and in the previous three years. The 30 youth workers who answered the question were using VR with a total of 182 young people at the time of the survey, and had used it with 1,142 young people over the previous three years.

Readers should bear in mind that this does not represent the total "reach" of GoVirtual, but simply the numbers reached by most of the sample of youth workers targeted by the survey. The total number of young people who were engaged in VR via GoVirtual will be at least two to three times that amount.

Table 4.2 gives an indication of the variation in the extent to which VR was used. Current numbers ranged from zero to 20 young people, with 23% not using VR with any young people at the time of the survey. Over the previous three years, only 6% had not used VR with young people, and numbers involved ranged from 10 or fewer (26%) to between 50 and 200 (13%).

[2] In Figures showing responses to multiple questions, the "Based on" range shows the questions with the fewest and the most responses.

Table 4.2: Number of young people with whom VR was being used or had been used

With how many YP	% currently	% last 3 years
0	23.3	6.5
1 to 10	50	25.8
11 to 20	26.7	19.3
21 to 50	0.0	35.5
51-200	0.0	12.8

Views on suitable targets for VR

Youth workers were asked to draw on their own experiences to indicate how useful they thought VR might be for engaging with young people experiencing eight listed issues, with the option to flag as *Not applicable* if the issue was not relevant to the young people with whom they had used VR. Table 4.3 shows the percentage of youth workers indicating which of the issues were not applicable (N/A) to the young people with whom they worked, while Figure 4.4 shows ratings for each issue, with the N/A responses removed, for ease of comparison and presentation.

As can be seen, while at least one in five youth workers indicated that none of substance misuse, an atypical living situation (such as homelessness, Direct Provision), or physical disability had been an issue with their groups of young people, all or almost all had dealt with young people for whom social isolation, emotional dysregulation, and anxiety were issues.

Table 4.3: Percentages of youth workers indicating that an issue was *N/A* to the young people with whom they had engaged with using VR

Issue	% N/A
Substance misuse (N=27)	25.9
Atypical living situation (N=29)	24.1
Physical disability (N=29)	20.7
Geographic isolation (N=27)	11.1
Mental health issues (N=29)	10.3
School avoidance (N=29)	6.9
Social isolation (N=29)	3.3
Emotional dysregulation (N=30)	3.3
Anxiety (N=30)	0.0

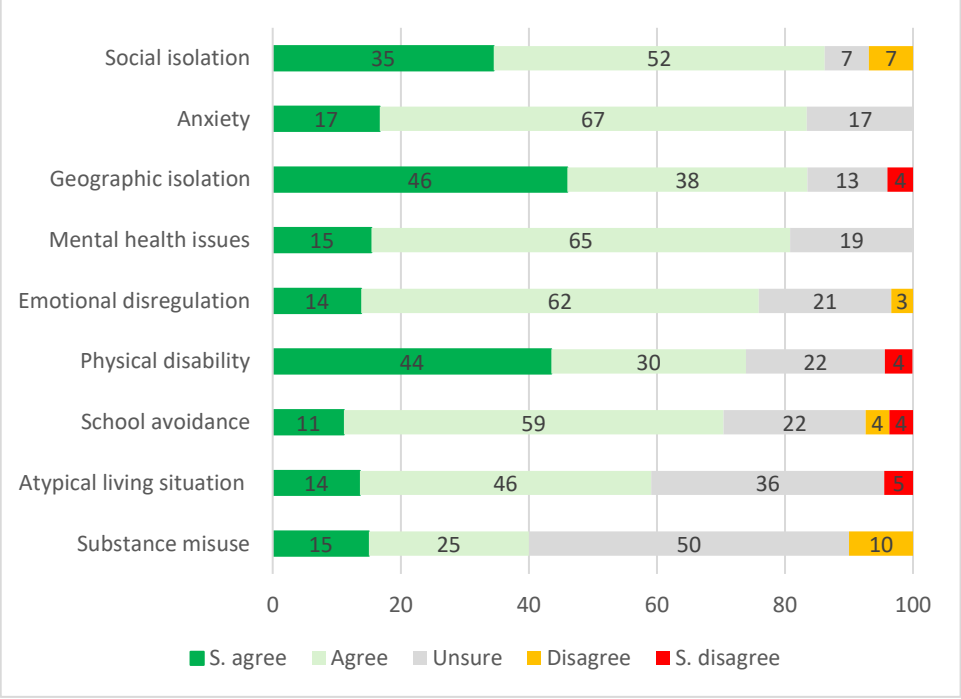
Figure 4.4 shows, for those youth workers who had dealt with young people experiencing these issues, the extent of agreement that VR could be a useful tool for engaging with them. As it excludes those who chose N/A, the percentages shown are based on the remainder of responses from between 20 (substance misuse) and 30 (anxiety) youth workers. Responses are sorted in descending

order by the percentage either agreeing or strongly agreeing, with positive responses shown in green and negative responses in amber or red.

As can be seen, well over 80% either agreed or strongly agreed that VR could be used as a tool to address social isolation, anxiety, geographic isolation, and mental health issues. Regarding the use of VR for anxiety and mental health issues, while some respondents were unsure if VR could be a useful tool, none disagreed or strongly disagreed. Regarding VR use with social or geographic isolation, only 7% and 4%, respectively, disagreed to at least some extent about its usefulness. Roughly three-quarters agreed to at least some extent that VR could be useful for young people experiencing emotional dysregulation or physical disability, while 70% agreed it could be useful for issues of school avoidance.

Responses were slightly less positive (although still extremely positively skewed) for dealing with young people in atypical living situations or engaged in substance misuse. Half were unsure if VR was a useful tool for dealing with substance misuse, and a further 10% disagreed that it would be a useful tool.

Figure 4.4: Youth worker views on the usefulness of VR for young people facing a range of issues



Based on 20 to 30 responses.

Using VR for skills development

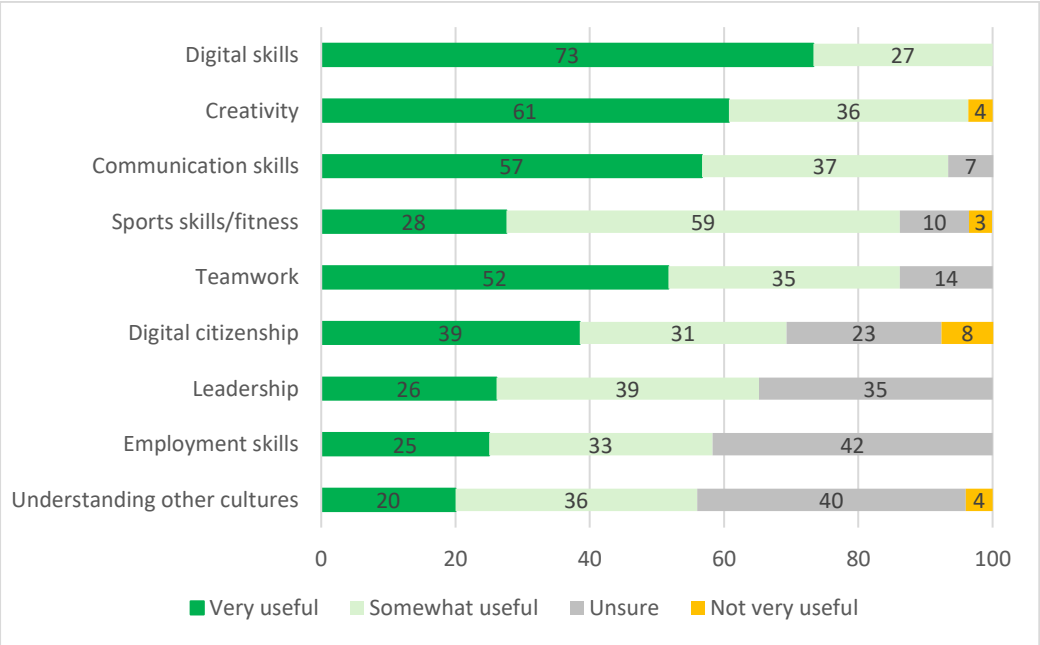
Next, youth workers were asked if they had found VR a useful tool in helping to foster a variety of skills in young people, again with the option to tick N/A if they had not tried to use VR to foster a particular skill. All respondents had used VR to foster digital and communication skills, and almost all had used it to foster sports skills, teamwork, creativity and digital citizenship (Table 4.4). In contrast, between 14-18% had not used VR to foster cultural understanding, or to develop employment or leadership skills.

Table 4.4: Percentages of youth workers indicating that they had *not* used VR to foster specific skills in young people

Issue	% N/A
Leadership (N=28)	17.9
Employment skills (N=28)	14.3
Understanding other cultures (N=29)	13.8
Digital citizenship (N=29)	10.3
Creativity (N=30)	6.7
Teamwork (N=30)	3.3
Sports skills/fitness (N=30)	3.3
Digital skills (N=30)	0
Communication skills 30)	0

Figure 4.5 shows how useful youth workers felt VR was for skills development, but **only** in the areas they had used it (i.e., excluding N/A). Readers should note that respondents were presented with one extra response option (Not at all useful) which does not feature in the Figure because it was not chosen by any respondent. Every youth worker surveyed indicated that they had found VR to be very or somewhat useful when trying to develop young people's digital skills, as had 96% for developing creative skills. Likewise, very large majorities had found it very or somewhat useful in developing communication skills, sports skills and teamwork. Over half of all respondents also found it had been very or somewhat useful in developing digital citizenship, leadership, employment skills and in understanding other cultures, but for these four skills areas, sizeable minorities of youth workers were unsure how useful VR had been.

Figure 4.5: Youth workers' ratings of how useful they had found VR for various types of skills development

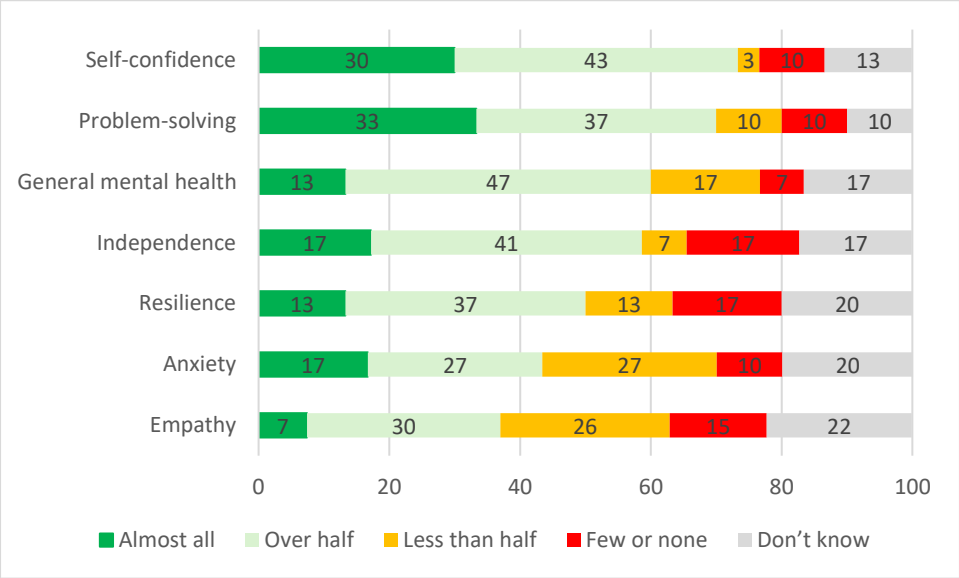


Based on 23 to 30 responses, depending on the number of (excluded here) respondents choosing N/A.

Observed changes in young people

Youth workers were presented with a list of seven personal attributes, and asked about the proportion of young people for whom they had observed a noticeable improvement related to the use of VR. They were most likely to have observed improvement in young people's self-confidence and problem-solving (Figure 4.6). At least 70% indicated that a majority of the young people they worked with using VR had shown noticeable improvements in self-confidence and their problem-solving capabilities, with only 10% indicating that few or none had shown improvement. Roughly 60% of respondents felt a majority had noticeably improved on their general mental health and their independence, although 17% also felt that few or none had shown improvement in independence. Change was least likely to have been observed for anxiety and for empathy, with 10-15% of youth workers indicating that few or none of the young people had shown noticeable improvement. That noted, a sizeable percentage of youth workers felt that positive change had occurred in a majority of young people.

Figure 4.6: Youth workers' perceptions of the proportion of young people using VR who showed a noticeable improvement in various attributes



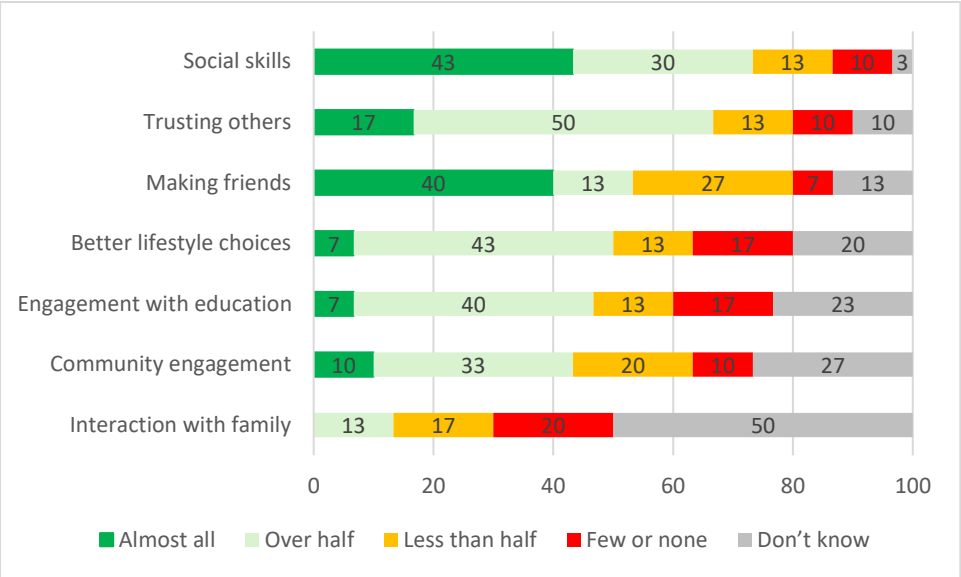
Based on 27 to 30 responses.

Youth workers were also asked if they had observed any noticeable improvement on a range of interactions and behaviours. As can be seen from Figure 4.7, youth workers often did not know if change had occurred. For example, half indicated that they did not know if young people's interaction with their family had changed, while 27% did not know if community engagement had improved. However, almost all were able to offer opinions about change in social skills, trusting others and making friends. As might be expected, the "don't know" responses varied slightly by project type. For example, all of those working on YDP and the School Completion Programme felt able to comment about change in engagement with education, while all working on YDP projects were able to comment about lifestyle choices.

The largest shift observed was for social skills, with 43% of youth workers indicating that almost all the young people they worked with in VR had shown noticeable improvements, and a further 30% indicating this was true for over half. For trusting others, making friends and making better lifestyle choices, at least half of youth workers felt that a majority of young people had shown noticeable

improvement. Looking at the other side of the Figure, a maximum of 10% of youth workers thought that few or no young people had shown noticeable improvement on social skills, trusting others, making friends, and community engagement. In sum, putting the "don't know" responses aside, most respondents felt most young people benefited in most of the areas shown, and few felt that only a few young people benefited. A possible exception to these very positive responses is for interaction with family. As well as a very large "don't know" group, 20% of youth workers thought that few or none of the young people they worked with had shown improved family interactions.

Figure 4.7: Youth workers' perceptions of the proportion of young people using VR who showed a noticeable improvement in various interactions or behaviours



Suitability of VR for different groups

Respondents with VR experience were asked if there were target groups of young people for which VR and the GoVirtual model were **especially appropriate**, and if there were groups for whom it was **not appropriate**.

Twenty-eight youth workers identified at least one target group of young people (several identified two or three) for whom VR and the GoVirtual model were especially appropriate. The target group most frequently mentioned was those who were socially isolated, with 14 suggesting that VR was especially appropriate for them. Examples of responses include:

Those who are socially isolated within their community and feeling alone.

Young people who struggle to engage socially.

Those *geographically* isolated were cited by seven as an appropriate target, with some citing both geographic and social isolation:

Young people in the country side with no youth projects within reach.

Young people geographically or socially isolated.

Mental health issues (typically, anxiety) and neurodiversity (typically, autism/ADHD) were each mentioned by six respondents:

Using mindfulness apps with YP experiencing poor mental health.

CAMHS, YP with Anxiety.

participants with ADHD find it useful as they can get work done and move at the same time.

Four responses fell under a general category of being able to present in a different "physical" form, including young people who had a physical disability or body dysmorphia, while four referred to those not successfully engaging with school:

members of the LGBTQI+ community experiencing body dysmorphia or transitioning.

Young People presenting with mobility challenges (it has created agency to their engagement).

School avoidance.

Other target groups identified included those interested in technology, young people in care, male members of the Traveller community, and those lacking confidence or communication skills.

In contrast, respondents were far less likely to identify groups for whom VR was not appropriate. Most responses indicated that there were no such groups. Only 12 provided a substantive response, with four referring to physical issues (e.g., vertigo, balance problems, limited motor control):

From experience I would say young people who have conditions such as vertigo.

Some young people with a physical deformity in their hand.

Two suggested that VR would not suit some young people because they did not have appropriate supervision to monitor and support their engagement, while another two referred to young people with poor self-regulation, with one noting they might engage in obsessive use of VR. Other groups deemed unsuitable included younger aged groups, those with previous traumatic experience, and those with sensory processing issues:

Some people on the Autism spectrum who may have sensory processing issues may find it overwhelming.

Training needs

When asked if there was any aspect of using VR with which they would like more training or advice, 28 youth workers provided a response, of whom six merely noted that they did not need training, while another two noted that training was always welcome. The remaining 20 provided a very broad range of responses. Four noted that it was difficult to keep up to date with VR developments and with apps, four identified specific apps or types of apps for which they wanted to improve their knowledge, and four referenced issues of time (either to familiarise themselves or the time needed to prepare for using VR):

Staying up to date with newer apps is challenging and time consuming

Employability skills on VR

The biggest challenge is how much time it takes to prep the VRs & for one staff to take headsets on.

I definitely need more training and advice, but more than anything, time to develop my own skills.

Three wanted better supports among Foróige staff using VR, akin to a community of practice[3], while three wanted advice on working with larger groups or using multiplayer spaces:

I would definitely like to receive more training as I don't often use VR's much, I think my personal feedback would be, it would be great to see more Foroige staff VR events which we can network with staff across Ireland as well as explore & strengthen our skills together

Other issues raised related to training included how to deal with specific groups, such as neurodivergent young people or how to bridge the digital divide, where young people had limited access to technology, while one respondent wanted to know more about building your own interactive immersive spaces.

Most useful tools

When asked which tools or apps they found most useful, respondents gave quite comprehensive answers, with many listing multiple tools. Some of the responses were hard to link to a specific app. For example, "graffiti sketch" could be either the Gravity sketch or Graffiti apps, while others described the general type of app used ("arts and creative apps"). For these reasons, responses were grouped under broad headings such as sports, music, job simulation. Even within the broad categories, some apps were a little difficult to categorise because they serve multiple purposes. For example, Beat Saber is a rhythm game that also serves as a workout tool, while Gorilla Tag incorporates teamwork but could be classed mainly under exercise. Thus, Table 4.5 uses broad categories but also lists some of the apps that were classified under that category to give an indication of "crossover" functions. Combined with Figure 4.8, it gives an indication of the breadth of responses.

Figure 4.8: Word cloud summary of tools and apps identified as most useful

[3] A form of community of practice already exists. There is a weekly open Google call for any youth worker interested in VR. Discussions involve new apps and ideas, troubleshooting and a variety of other issues related to the use of VR with groups of young people.

Sports and exercise apps were those most likely to be listed as very useful, with 13 youth workers referring to these types of apps. Boxing apps were most likely to be mentioned, although general exercise apps, Golf+ and Gorilla Tag were also mentioned. Twelve respondents referenced art and design apps, including Gravity Sketch and King Spray. Rec Room, mentioned by 10 respondents, is in a category of its own, because it can be used in a variety of ways and does not neatly fit under the other broad categories. Nine respondents found music apps very useful, with one flagging Tribe XR DJ as useful for older teens and hard to reach young people. Five mentioned apps that help to develop teamwork or problem-solving skills, including Among Us, five mentioned tools that enabled exploration, such as Woorld, while four had found the job simulator very useful. Other than First Steps, with three mentions and described as useful for beginners, other tools and apps were cited by only one or two respondents. These ranged from a virtual visit to the Anne Frank house to learning driving skills using the Street Sense app.

Table 4.5: Summary of the most useful types of tools and apps, based on youth workers' replies

Type of activity/skills targeted	Frequency
Sports and exercise Specific apps: Creed, Golf+, Gorilla tag	13
Art & design Specific apps: "graffiti sketch", Kingspray, Gravity Sketch, Multibrush	12
Rec room	10
Music Specific apps: Beat Saber, Tribe, PatchWorld	9
Teamwork, communication, problem-solving Specific apps: Among us	5
Exploration Specific apps: Woorld, Google Earth, Earth 3D	5
Job simulator	4
First steps	3
Others (e.g., Anne Frank house, Dala, digital skills apps, Gun Raiders, Meta tv, Street Sense, Tripp, Rollercoaster, Youtube)	12

5. Survey of young people (2025)

This section describes the design, delivery and outcomes of a young people's survey distributed to a representative sample of projects where one or more youth workers had received training on the use of VR in youth work. Survey links were sent by the GoVirtual team to 75 youth workers, who were asked to share it with appropriate young people (i.e., those who had engaged in VR). Survey content was developed by the researcher in consultation with the GoVirtual team, with a strong emphasis on keeping language simple and relevant, and keeping the survey short.

Despite this, and despite considerable efforts by the central team to encourage responses, only 19 responses were recorded. Further, seven of the 19 indicated that they had never used VR with a Foróige youth worker or as part of Foróige activities or clubs, and only two of those seven had used VR in settings other than Foróige. Consequently, while the remainder of this section summarises the main results of the survey, it must be noted that the respondents may not be representative of GoVirtual's target group of young people. Their views are of interest, but it is not possible to say that they represent the views, more generally, of those engaging with GoVirtual.

Who responded?

Of the 19 who completed the survey, a large majority (68%) were male, with 21% describing themselves as female. One respondent preferred not to say how they described themselves, and one selected the transgender or non-binary option, but did not further specify. Although Big Brother Big Sister and other mentoring programmes formed a relatively small proportion of the projects sampled, 26% of respondents were engaged in a mentoring programme. Conversely, while UBUs were well represented amongst the projects sampled, only two responses came from young people involved in UBU. YDPs were well represented among the projects sampled and among the respondents.

Table 5.1: Types of Foróige projects with which young respondents were involved

	N	%
BBBS / Mentoring	5	26.3
Youth Diversion Programme	5	26.3
Alternate Spacers	2	10.5
Don't know the name	2	10.5
Other	2	10.5
UBU	2	10.5
Neighbourhood Youth Project	1	5.3
Total	*19*	*100*

Twelve respondents, all male, had used VR as part of their engagement with Foróige. Of the remaining seven respondents, five had never used VR and two had used it occasionally. Of the five who had never used VR, three were female. Those who had rarely or never used VR in any context were asked why this was the case. Of six possible reasons, not having access to the appropriate equipment was selected by one male and two females, and two (both female) indicated that they had no interest in using VR. Other responses, each offered by one female, included experiencing motion sickness, never having thought about using VR, and a lack of confidence in their VR skills.

How VR was used

Those who had engaged with VR were asked how long they spent in a typical session. Responses were quite varied, with three indicating they spent fewer than 30 minutes. The most common response, offered by eight, was that they spent between 30 minutes and one hour in a session, with two respondents indicating that they spent several hours in a typical session.

When asked if they would prefer to meet their Foróige youth worker in VR or in real life, none of the 13 young people who answered the question how VR was used indicated that they would mainly prefer to meet them in VR. Five (38%) said it would depend on what activities they were engaged in, with the remaining 62% indicating they would prefer to meet in real life. Responses were a little more mixed when asked if it was easier to meet new people in real life or in VR (Table 5.2). While 54% felt meeting in real life was definitely easier than in VR, 15% thought VR was definitely easier.

Table 5.2: Young people's views on whether meeting new people was easier in real life or VR

Definitely easier in VR	A bit easier in VR	Not sure	A bit easier in real life	Definitely easier in real life
15.4	15.4	7.7	7.7	53.8

Table 5.3 shows percentages engaging in multiplayer groups of different sizes. Almost one quarter (23%) did not use multiplayer VR, while 21% usually had no more than two or three people in their group. Almost all others had 10 or fewer in their multiplayer groups, with only one respondent indicating larger groups (of 16 to 17).

Table 5.3: Young people's reports on number of people usually in their multiplayer VR groups

Ranges	N	%
Don't use multiplayer	3	23.1
1 to 3	4	30.8
4 to 10	5	38.5
16 to 17	1	7.7
Total	*13*	*100.0*

Almost three-quarters of respondents said that they hardly ever or never used VR in a group in a remote environment (Table 5.4). Using VR on their own or as part of an in-person group was a little more common, with over two-thirds doing so weekly or a few times a week.

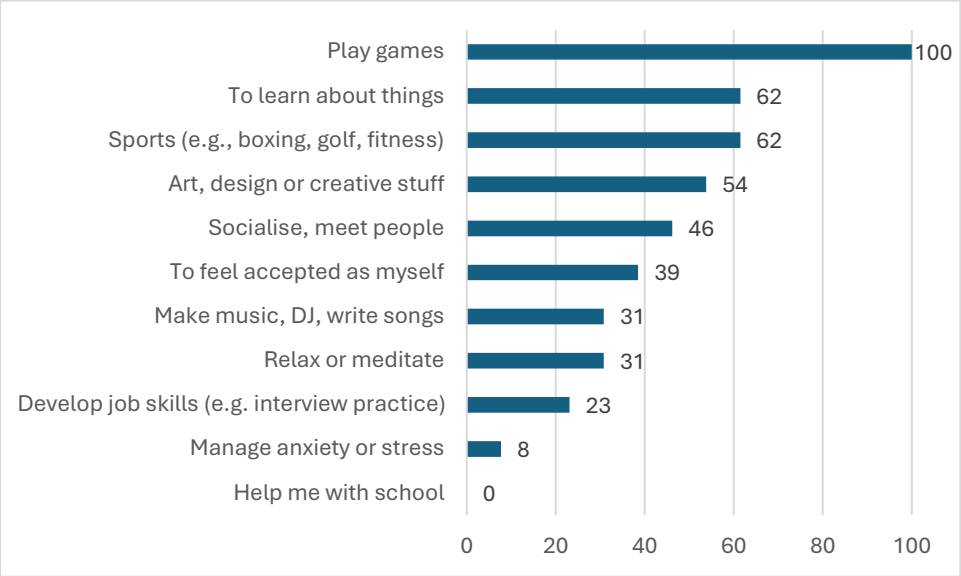
Table 5.4: Frequency with which VR was used solo and in groups by young people

	N	%			
		Most days	At least once a week	At least once a month	Hardly ever or never
On your own	11	18.2	18.2	9.1	54.5
In a group, in person	13	0	38.5	15.4	46.2
In a group, remotely	11	0	18.2	9.1	72.7

Respondents were presented with a list of 11 different activities and asked if they had ever used VR to engage in them, or if they had not, would they like to do so. Figure 5.1 shows that by far the most common activity in VR was playing games (done by all respondents who had used VR). Roughly two-thirds had used VR to learn about things or to play sport, while roughly half had used VR for more

creative or social activities. None of those surveyed had used it to help them with school and only one young person (8%) had used to manage anxiety or stress, although four (31%) had used it to relax and meditate.

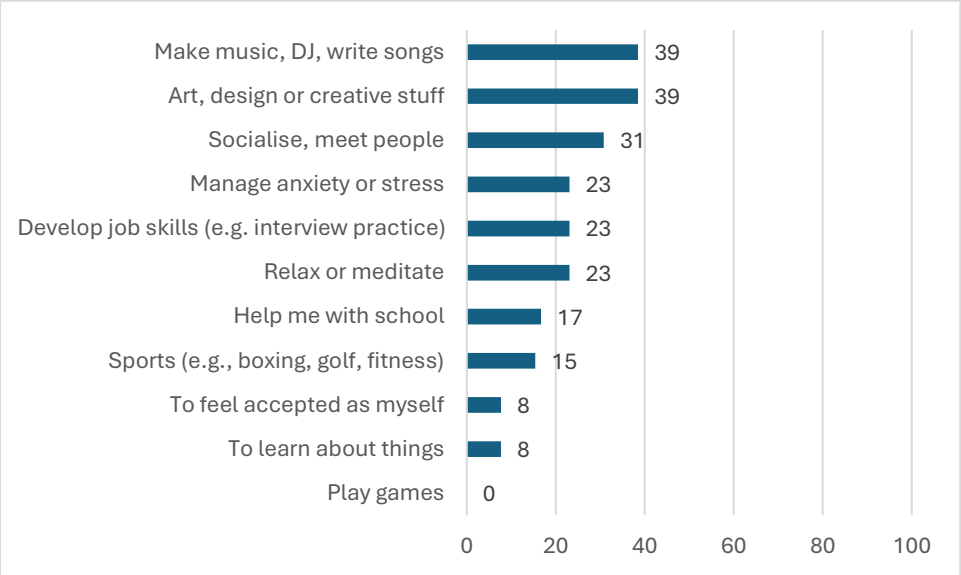
Figure 5.1: Types of activities young people engaged in using VR



Based on 12 to 13 responses.

Figure 5.2 should be read in conjunction with Figure 5.1, as it shows the percentage of young people who would like to do something in VR that they have **not** already done. Thus for example none of those surveyed selected "play games" as something they would like to do because all already did so. Bearing that in mind, the two types of new activities that appealed most were related to making music or DJing, and art or creative activities (each selected by 39%), followed by using VR to socialise and meet people. Twenty-three percent (i.e., three young people) were interested in using VR to manage anxiety or stress, to relax and meditate, or to help develop job skills. No other options were chosen by more than two young people.

Figure 5.2: Types of new activities in which young people would like to engage using VR

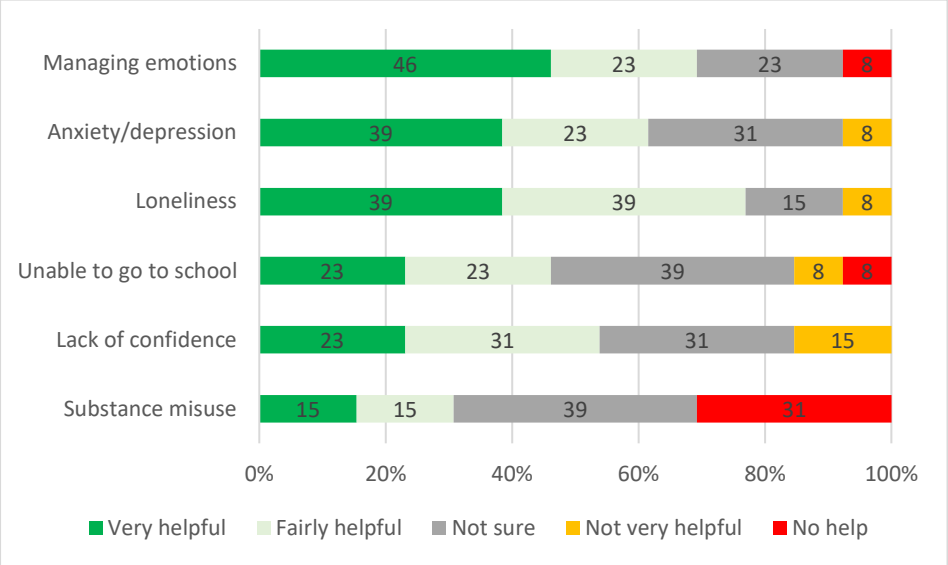


Based on 12 to 13 responses.

Views on VR as a tool

Respondents were asked to draw on their own experiences of VR to gauge if it could help other young people with a variety of issues. Managing emotions, dealing with anxiety or depression, or dealing with loneliness were the three areas where large majorities of respondents felt that VR would be very or fairly helpful (Figure 5.3). With the exception of substance misuse, relatively few felt that VR would *not* be helpful in dealing with issues.

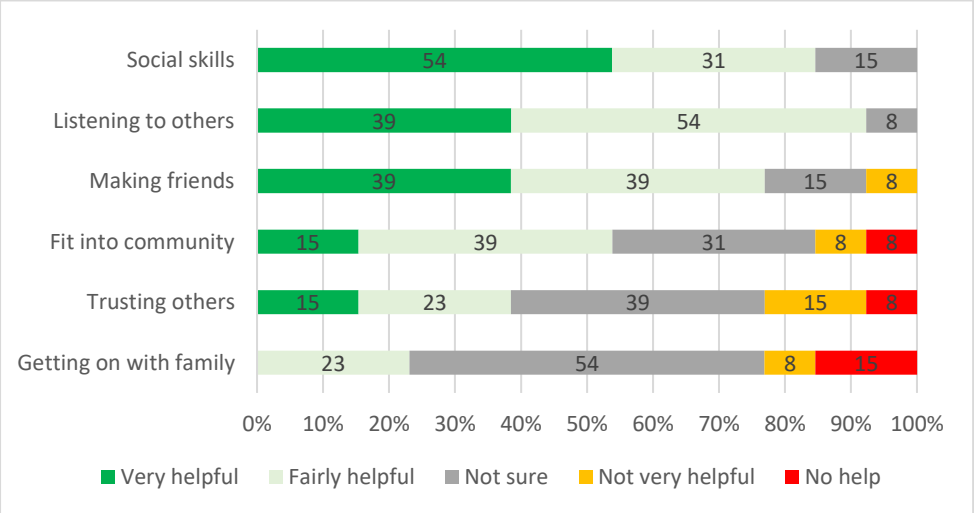
Figure 5.3: Young people's views on how helpful VR could be for other young people dealing with a range of issues



Each question is based on 13 responses.

Almost all (92%) felt that VR could help other young people improve their listening skills, and most felt that VR could be very or fairly helpful to young people in developing social skills and making friends (Figure 5.4). While over half felt it could help other young people fit into their community, views were more mixed on how VR might help other young people to trust others or to get along with their family, with none feeling it would be very helpful in improving interaction with family.

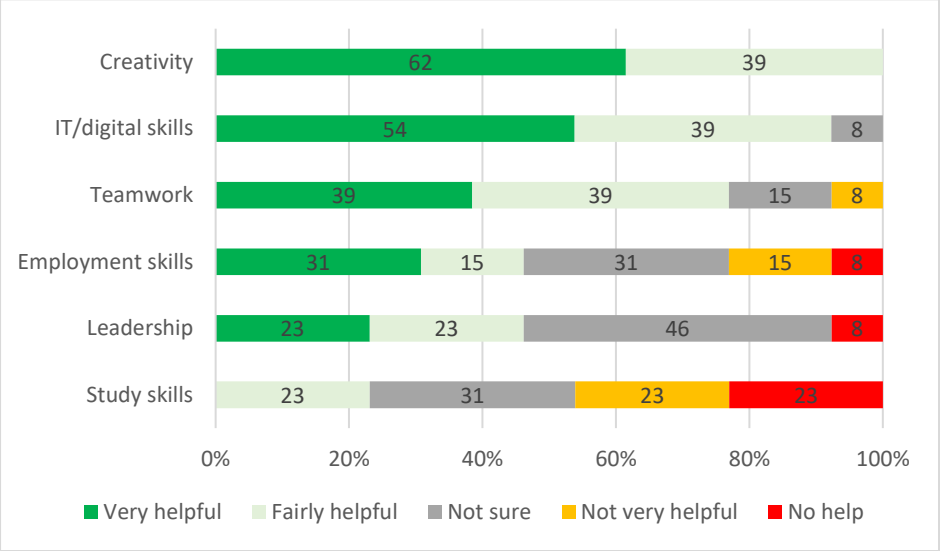
Figure 5.4: Young people's views on how VR could help young people engage with others



Each question is based on 13 responses.

When asked if VR could facilitate various forms of skills development in young people like themselves, all respondents agreed that VR could be very or fairly helpful in developing creativity, and almost all (92%) agreed it could help develop IT or digital skills (Figure 5.5). A large majority agreed VR could help to develop teamwork sills, while just under half (46%) agreed that it could be helpful in developing employment and leadership skills. However, it was not seen as a particularly helpful tool for study skills, as 46% indicated it will be not very helpful or of no help.

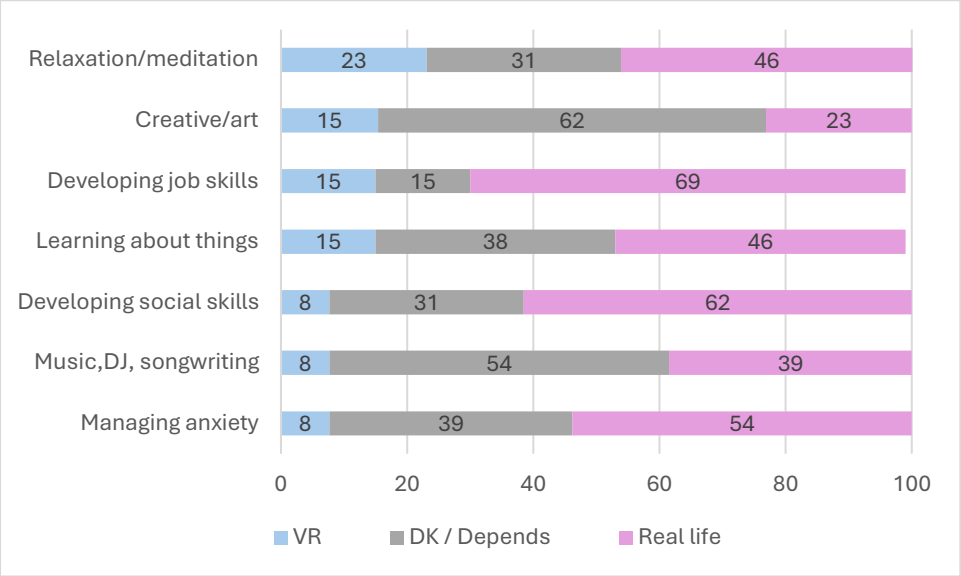
Figure 5.5: Young people's views on the extent to which VR could help young people's skills development



Each question is based on 13 responses.

Young people were presented with a list of seven types of activities and asked if they worked best in VR or real life. In almost all cases, the respondents were noticeably more likely to indicate that activities worked better in real life than in VR, although a large proportion also felt that whether it worked better in real life or VR depended on the situation. Engaging in relaxation or meditation was the only activity for which more than 20% felt it would work better in VR than real life. Engaging in creative or art-related activities had relatively even balance between those who thought it best in VR and those who thought it worked best in real life, with roughly two-thirds of replies indicating that it depended on context. Only one young person (the same person in each case) felt that developing social skills, engaging in music-related activity, or managing anxiety worked best in VR.

Figure 5.5: Young people's preferences for engaging in activities in VR or real life



Each question is based on 13 responses.

Young people were also asked an open-ended question about what types of young person they thought would benefit from being able to access youth work remotely using VR. Ten provided an answer, some identifying more than one target group. Two referred to geographic remoteness, two mentioned physical mobility issues, two referenced social anxiety, while a further two referred to young people who are unable to attend a group physically, but for unspecified reasons. Examples of responses include:

People in the countryside

Young people with limited mobility

People that can't access youth spaces

Someone with social anxiety or can't meet with the group

Other types of young people identified were those who could not afford headsets, those who need to talk about their feelings, and those interested in the benefits of VR.

Having described what they saw as the uses of VR and what types of people they felt would benefit from VR, respondents were asked if they could create an app, what it would do. Four indicated that they would develop a sports-related app, a further four wanted to develop an app to help young people socialise or team build:

Be able to play games, hang out and socialise

Foroige interactive team building games

Sports app to make people stay fit

Other responses included a creativity app, GMOD, and an app that would be inclusive of all abilities.

Most and least liked aspects

The final section of the survey was comprised of three open ended questions, asking young people for their favourite VR app or game, what they liked most about how VR made them feel, and if there was anything they did not like about how VR made them feel.

Regarding favourite apps, Rec Room was the most frequently mentioned response (five young people). Specific apps cited were Yeeps, Snipers versus Runners, Creed, Beat Saber, Blade and Sorcery, Bonelab, Moon Rider, VRChat and Job Simulator, while one young person indicated that they liked sports apps, without specifying a particular app.

There was quite a diverse range of responses to the question about most liked aspects. Three young people wrote that they enjoyed how VR felt "real" and they could become immersed in it, while another three indicated that what they liked most was that it was fun or interesting:

It makes me feel like I'm in a different universe and I can do anything and move anywhere

Like I'm truly in that world

Entertaining

Other responses referred to feeling connected in VR, feeling relaxed, that it was something they could do by themselves without assistance, that was novel, or that they enjoyed the thrill of the games.

Conversely, there was far less variation in what young people did not like about how VR made them feel. Five cited motion sickness or illness as something they did not like, well three indicated there was nothing they disliked about how VR made them feel:

Motion sickness

sick if ur on for too long

Never, I love playing VR

Other negative aspects identified included it not being real life, VR having an overly fake artificial vibe, and some games containing inappropriate language. One quite specific critique related to those with limited mobility:

The games that need you to stand up to do stuff. More games for people that cannot walk, can't move.

6. An integrated review

This section combines information from pre-existing data collected by Foróige's GoVirtual team and data collected during the current research. As part of the current research, interviews were conducted with four parents of young people who were currently or had previously been involved with GoVirtual, and with the GoVirtual team. A focus group was also planned for a group of young people, but despite repeated attempts by the GoVirtual team to engage young people, only one took part in the interview.

Given the relatively limited qualitative data collected for the research, information already held by the GoVirtual team was drawn upon. This included feedback provided by parents during phone call surveys and debriefings, video testimonials from young people involved in various GoVirtual groups, two newspaper articles to which to young people engaged with GoVirtual had contributed, interviews with two facilitators from the School Completion Programme, video interviews with two youth workers, and four Vróige impact case studies from earlier iterations of GoVirtual.

All of these varied data sources are drawn on here, combined thematically rather than by source. This means that rather than describing parent views, followed by young people's views, and then youth worker views, the rest of the chapter is grouped around a series of themes. The first section looks at the nature of young people involved in GoVirtual, followed by a description of how initial contacts were made and the "onboarding" process was organised. The next two sections describe how novice users start their GoVirtual journey, and what happens in a GoVirtual VR session. Next, some of the skills developed by participants examined. Finally, various perspectives are combined to examine what are the contributors to and inhibitors of an effective use of VR in a youth work context.

Nature of young people involved

One of the first points to note is that young people involved in GoVirtual (and its predecessor Vróige) were quite diverse. Some had quite obvious geographical barriers to participation in traditional youth work settings (e.g., some were part of a group of young people who lived on islands), others had obvious physical barriers (e.g., wheelchair user), and others had less obvious barriers such as social or emotional issues (e.g., autism, social anxiety). One mother pointed out that VR enabled her wheelchair user son to engage with others on equal terms and that accessibility had never been an issue with VR, not only within the VR environment but because VR was in his home, meaning that no complex travel arrangements required prior to engagement in his group session:

Things are harder in a wheelchair outside VR. The simplest thing can be a dealbreaker in real life, and what you think is an accessible activity or venue isn't. That has never been an issue in VR … Not only is being in VR accessible, but it's on your doorstep. You don't need to spend hours getting there and setting up.

A mother whose children had taken part in the GoVirtual island-based group also flagged the accessibility as a major plus. For young people who have to rely on significant parental support to facilitate access to peer groups, VR offered a much simpler access route. This meant that it was far less stressful and less work for parents, while also offering a much greater sense of independence to the young person:

I've seen it benefit [Name] in being able to easily meet up with his teenage peers. This is something that often becomes much more complicated living on an island, with the weather, ferries, and overnight stays to contend with.

In some cases, the young people had relatively easy access to local supports but were unwilling to engage with them, for reasons such as lack of interest or appeal, or feeling that their age group was not represented. One parent felt that youth work via VR appealed to older age groups because it had an aura of "cool" that regular clubs were perceived to lack. Her children were unwilling to attend their local club, but thought the VR approach was appealing because it was new and interesting. Another parent talked of how her child would not engage with the local group as he felt other attendees were too young. In a related vein, a youth worker thought VR appealed to an older age group in a way that regular youth work might not:

It's a great tool for engaging older young people that possibly wouldn't engage otherwise because a lot of the work I do would be youth mental health and building confidence and trying new experiences. So VR is perfect for that.

Amongst those youth workers who had been trained in the use of VR and used it in their youth worker practice, most incorporated it into their in-person work rather than engaging remotely. Thus, while GoVirtual was seen as a way to reach those who could not engage with traditional, in-person, youth work, it was frequently used with those who also engaged in in-person activities.

Introduction to GoVirtual

The process by which young people engage with groups run by the GoVirtual team is relatively similar, irrespective of the nature of the group. After initial referral, there is a short meeting with parents and young people to discuss the group in more detail, and if interested, permission and loaning forms are completed. Once completed, pre-loaded VR headsets are delivered and onboarding sessions (video call or similar) are arranged for the young person and parents. Next, the young person uses the First Steps app to familiarise themselves with the environment, after which they are guided through Rec Room. Any parental concerns or questions are addressed, and parents are provided with contact numbers for the GoVirtual team, should any issues (technical or otherwise) arise. Once the young person is deemed ready to join a group, they and their parent receive a weekly email about the group times, the facilitator, a reminder – where necessary – to update apps, and charge the headsets. Any other news or information is also shared via this email.

As part of interviews with parents, they were asked about their introduction to GoVirtual and what they knew about VR prior to that point. A universal feature of parent commentary was how little they initially knew about VR, and how satisfied they were with the manner in which the GoVirtual team managed the induction process. One mother explained that she knew so little about VR that she thought it would just be her son with a headset. Even parents who considered themselves relatively up to date, technologically, admitted to knowing very little about VR:

I'd no idea what to expect - hadn't an idea what was involved or how brilliant the guys would be.

No idea. I was a dinosaur.

All parents were very satisfied with the introduction and were very complimentary about the background information they received from the GoVirtual team. They also expressed their satisfaction with the safety of the GoVirtual model, the fact that it was managed by a reputable

organisation, that their VR environment was off-limits to strangers, and that trusted adults were always present:

As a parent you always worry but you need to know that there is always an adult there and it's properly supported. It's a safe environment. You're also in your own home.

That the platform was inaccessible to outsiders. A big plus in an era when children are going online and interacting with strangers.

The young people's response to the introduction to GoVirtual varied, depending on their own experience with VR and their personal circumstances. In one case, a parent felt that because her son understood the technology and had met the two facilitators, he was better equipped to know what to expect and to feel comfortable than might have been the case had he gone to an in-person Foróige club. In another case, a mother explained her son was reluctant to take part, partly because he was unfamiliar with the technology, but also because he had become socially isolated and was nervous about interacting with strangers. However, once the GoVirtual team explained he did not have to talk to anyone, he agreed to try it.

Starting in GoVirtual

There are three elements to starting in a GoVirtual environment: learning to manage the equipment, potentially learning to use the technology, and interacting with others in a VR environment.

Managing equipment

Those who were involved in earlier iterations of GoVirtual or where support was also provided by staff in a referrer organisation rather than directly from the GoVirtual team seemed more likely to report problems managing equipment and technical teething problems. As well as local issues such as poor connectivity, some staff mentioned problems with keeping the equipment updated and the headset charged for VR sessions. However, the GoVirtual team has gradually adapted the induction process in response to issues flagged in the early phases. Any induction includes comprehensive instructions about how to manage equipment, troubleshooting and safety issues. As noted, they send weekly email updates to the parents and young people with which they deal directly, flagging what will happen in the next session and any equipment updates or maintenance needed. Parents commented that this was very helpful and meant no technical issues arose, with some noting that their child was very careful to ensure that their headset was always fully charged ahead of their weekly session, and probably no longer needed reminders.

It would seem that those interacting with the central GoVirtual team – very experienced VR users – rarely experienced technical issues. In contrast, a sizable minority of youth workers surveyed expressed frustration with technical obstacles, so it is reasonable to assume that some young people whose youth workers are less experienced with VR will encounter technical issues. However, as the current evaluation did not engage with young people whose youth workers were relatively novice users, it is not possible to know to what extent they felt that the technical issues impinged on the overall experience.

Learning to use the technology

Most young people seemed to have few issues with learning to use the technology, although one young person explained how it takes a little time to become acclimatised to the environment, and that he initially had headaches. Novice users are encouraged to use the First Steps app, which

familiarises users with the controllers and moving around in VR. Youth workers use the first VR session to gauge the young person's needs, including VR familiarity and other factors that might affect their capacity to engage with different activities, such as patience levels and literacy:

So the first thing I do is use First Steps as well as part of that needs assessment and that they're being introduced to VR. Can they engage with the process? Where they're at with it? It kind of tells me a lot about their ability, where they're at with technology. Brings up a lot of conversations around using your internet safely, how do they engage online.

In general, VR was seen as relatively easy to navigate unless – as was the case with one example offered – the user had very restricted manual dexterity.

Interacting with others

Regarding the third element of starting – interaction with others – there was widespread recognition that many young people had social anxiety, but mixed opinions on how that affected their initial group engagement within VR. One young person who had been involved with GoVirtual for some time observed that newcomers found their feet relatively quickly and that even those who were very shy in their first meeting were soon engaging:

I could be, like… barely say a word, like… be really quiet in the first week or two, and then when I'm in the third, I'm breaking out of the shell and talkin' more.

A parent explained that while her son was now very chatty, in real life and in VR, she discovered it had taken him a few months before he really engaged with his VR group. He stopped attending school and had become withdrawn and lacking in confidence (the reason he was originally referred to GoVirtual), so he found it difficult to talk in the group but he gradually came out of his shell and:

now realises he likes to talk!

Another young person described how he struggled a little with physical youth clubs. He found it easier to meet new people and interact in VR because he was in his own home and felt he had more control over the situation:

I used to be quite socially awkward, and I think this has helped me. ... I didn't really go to many youth clubs. I've been once or twice but again I was usually pretty quiet and hiding in the corner. Whereas this [VR], kinda don't have that. You're still in your own room, you know, it's your comfort space and all that. You're not really anxious cuz like if something bad happens you just take off the headset and you're good to go. You can still ***choose*** *to be quiet in the corner if you want but like there's less of a reason to do so.*

The home location was raised by another young person as a positive. He felt that a socially anxious young person would find the journey to a physical club stressful, making the session itself stressful. In contrast, the home location meant the young person might start a session in a more relaxed state and could therefore find it easier to talk to people:

Say that I have social anxiety, like, say that I'm going out in public. I could be like … being very quiet, I'm trying not to be seen, making myself as small as possible. VR would be good for that, because you don't have to go out in public.[But you still have to talk to people in VR?] Yeah, but you don't have to go OUT because you are home and already there. [And does VR help with social anxiety?} Yeah, cos they help them break out of themselves by talking to people.

Another young person felt that the online environment was easier for people with social anxiety because it involved many different people and activities, so the "chaotic" nature of interaction meant there was less opportunity for young people to feel shy:

People with social anxiety and that. It might not, like, they might be shy the first couple times meeting in person. As for online it doesn't really matter. Chaotic! You get to meet new people and, people from across the country and you get to just, like, have some time with them every week and play a few games and that. Every person is different.

In a related vein, a youth worker felt that using VR was a good youth work tool because it facilitated chatting and conversations amongst young people who have difficulty chatting with people in real life:

*If you've got a group of people socializing together, that **is** youth work. And things will come up and people will chat about them and often people who are not comfortable about chatting about something about something in real life, like people with autism for example might have real difficulty talking in a group, but those social barriers are not as strong in VR. You don't have to contend with awkward eye contact, you don't have to contend with facial expressions that are hard to read.*

What happens in a VR session

It is not possible to describe a typical VR session because they vary so much and there is an extensive range of apps and activities that can feature in a session. As is the case for activities with any group of young people, the nature of activities will depend on the nature of the group. For example, in the *Making Music in a Virtual World* collaboration between Music Generation, Foróige and Tusla, apps related to making music (such as PatchWorld) featured strongly. For School Completion Programme staff working with young people experiencing anxiety, especially anxiety related to school attendance, the Dala programme developed by CAMHS staff featured strongly. For those in programmes such as Alternate Spacers or who were in the Islands Project, games such as Uno, Paintballing, treasure hunts and quizzes featured alongside conversations in Rec Room. In contrast, young people who engaged virtually in a module from Foróige's Leadership for Life programme would have experienced a much stronger emphasis on developing personal and leadership goals.

Nonetheless, some elements are common to most or all sessions, in many ways reflecting the normal flow of in-person youth work. The first step is that a youth worker opens the private space, watches for group members coming online and invites them into the private GoVirtual space. There is a brief check in with everyone. There might, for example, be a group conversation about any news or activities since their last session. Sessions usually begin with an initial chat with the group to agree the plan for the session. Depending on the group, there may be a short reminder of the agreed group rules, with an emphasis on treating others with respect. One young person described how the group agree a set of rules, which are then displayed on a whiteboard in Rec Room as a reminder to everyone:

We have the whiteboard here. We have a set of rules that we make every year, like… say , for example, we have one big rule. Be kind to everyone … Respect each other.

After that point, activities will diverge, depending on the nature of the group and the learning objectives for that particular session. Selection of activities is directed by the young people, guided by youth workers.

For example, the group might:

- Use a whiteboard to choose a game or app.
- Work on a project, such as recording a podcast, scripting or making a video.
- Chat about current news events.
- Discuss a theme that is relevant to the group. For example, the group might source information on and discuss internet safety or examination stress. Themes might also be seasonal, such as related to Christmas.
- Have experiences for new group members to get to know other members and the staff in the group.

One youth worker who was interviewed about using VR felt that a major advantage of using VR was that some of the apps permitted young people to create high quality products:

The product is very good as well. And as we all know, anything to do with community work youth work, stuff like that, the product is really, really important as well because people like to be proud of the stuff that they've created, and it's very easy to create very impressive things.

Despite the surface differences in activities, at the core are youth workers engaging with and supporting young people, as would be the case with face-to-face youth work. As one mother put it, her son's VR session was like a regular youth club where young people received supports, but in a way that the young people felt comfortable about:

A sort of sideways way of talking, where they do things and talk at the same time.

After the activities, the group have a short check out in the GoVirtual space. Here, there is a guided conversation about the session and about plans for the following weeks. The young people then leave the session, with the youth worker remaining in situ until all the group are gone. After the session, there are regular follow-ups with parents/guardians/referrers to discuss progression, or the youth worker might follow up if a young person had missed a few sessions without any explanation.

Skills and self-development

The previous chapters showed that the young people and youth workers surveyed felt that VR could help develop a wide variety of skills in young people. As well as the, perhaps obvious, development of digital skills, both groups felt that VR was particularly helpful in developing social skills and combatting loneliness, fostering teamwork and communication skills and helping to manage emotions. Many of these were also reflected in the qualitative feedback provided. In particular, parents noted large changes in social skills, confidence and independence.

Social skills and interaction with others

An earlier section in this chapter described how young people interacted with each other within the VR environment. Feedback from youth workers and young people suggested that being able to adopt an avatar and not having to engage in eye-to-eye contact were significant factors in making it easier for some socially anxious young people to engage. Further, comments from parents suggest that some of the social skills developed within VR had transferred into real life. In particular, those who had struggled to engage were described as coming out of their shell:

*It has transferred too, in real life, where he now realises he **likes** to talk. He is very shy and it has really helped him to come out of his shell because he had no confidence.*

Absolutely. He's now sociable and less anxious.

One parent discussed how her son remained somewhat shy but had become (or rather, reverted to being) a nicer person and a better person as a result of engaging with the GoVirtual team. In the year preceding engagement with GoVirtual he had withdrawn socially, even from family activities, but she saw him gradually engage more and become nicer to interact with as he spent more time in the group. She commented that one person in the group had additional needs and that this led to her son becoming much more open to engagement with other young people with additional needs. He gradually renewed a real life friendship with a young neighbour with autism. The group had given him the confidence to become friends with him again, even though he was "a little bit different".

Independence and confidence

Some of the parents interviewed indicated that they deliberately had very little knowledge of what their child did during VR sessions. In the case of the young person in a wheelchair, his mother was keen to point out that VR allowed him a level of independence that he could not experience elsewhere. While she had to assist him in many everyday activities, he could independently engage with his peer group in VR. While she was aware that he enjoyed the group activities and he sometimes spoke about what they had done in the group, she tried not to ask too much about it.

I don't really know what sort of thing enjoys most because I let him be independent and manage the time himself. It's great. … He spends from 7 to 8 PM and it's fun and intense. He doesn't talk about it but I know he has friends online and you can hear the banter from the next room. … he's gotten way more confident. It's his "thing" for himself to manage. He doesn't need me or any assistance from anyone to do it.

Another mother talked about how her son does not like to tell her about things, possibly as a way of marking his independence. That noted, she was able to tell from his behaviour that he was very happy in the VR group and that his confidence had improved, which she attributed to support from the youth workers:

I know for a fact it really did bring up his confidence. He talks about the leaders, like, he knows them and uses their first name. They seem to in some way know the kids even though they've never met them, they seem to really understand them.

Managing school-related anxiety

One of the GoVirtual pilot projects involved some coordinators from the School Completion Programme using the Dala VR programme. The aim of Dala is to help young people manage school-related anxiety. In the programme, they embody Dala, a gender neutral character who is anxious about going to school. The coordinators had several criticisms of DALA (technical, and clarity and organisation of materials) and thought it was not suitable for all young people:

I identified two students originally, but one who had a lot of anxiety around coming into school didn't really like the feeling of the VR headset—it kind of freaked them out.

Found it a bit much because it was quite a lot of time, and even having the headset on for that long—she did comment on that. She said she preferred being able to just watch some of the videos and then having that week in between to process what was being said.

Nonetheless, they felt that correctly delivered and supported, it could significantly reduce school-related anxiety and make attendance a more manageable prospect for many students struggling with anxiety:

This programme isn't for everyone, but for the right student, it's powerful

The way they explain anxiety really clicked for her. She finally connected the dots—it wasn't just something in school, but something happening at home and in social situations too.

A broader outlook

Many of the young people involved had a relatively small pool of social interactions. Taking part in GoVirtual opened them up not just to more young people, but to young people who often had quite different experiences to themselves. For example, the young people in the islands group met other young islanders, with whom they bonded over the very distinct experiences of island life. As a mother noted:

It may be a cliché, but it really is different, island life.

Yet, while they shared that common background, they differed in many other ways, and this, she felt, gave her children a much broader outlook and understanding of different perspectives than would otherwise have been the case:

There wasn't a lot for the children to do on the island. Anything at all would be a help. Anything to broaden their mind. Anything to help them move forward, meet other people. From that perspective the VR was good. The opportunities they got with that, it was brilliant.

Likewise, youth workers commented on how GoVirtual had provided opportunities for some young people to meet with members of the Oireachtas and government officials, either in person or remotely. In these meetings, traditional hierarchies of knowledge were reversed. The young people were the experts and the politicians were in the student role, learning about VR.

Leadership

One parent interviewed talked about how her son was on a pathway to obtaining Leadership for Life qualifications because of his involvement in GoVirtual. He had not enjoyed his local youth group, and did not see the point in attending it or appreciate what Foróige could offer. In contrast, VR suited him because he was very technically minded, he liked the group, and he had met the GoVirtual team in person at the Leadership for Life Youth Conference in Maynooth. She was keen that he continue to engage with his VR group so that he could complete the Leadership for Life programme, and said she would encourage other parents to let their child engage with GoVirtual:

[What would you say to a parent whose child is thinking of joining?] *Definitely do it. Even if it's virtual, you have access to all the resources and courses that Foróige manage, so you can do things like get qualifications.*

Apart from the formally accredited Leadership for Life programme, leadership and growing maturity were mentioned by several parents. Two parents commented on how their sons had started to assume some responsibility within the group, and to assume a leadership role, helping younger or newer group members. Another mother talked of how her son had matured so much as a consequence of his GoVirtual experience that he was now interested in becoming a youth worker, inspired by the GoVirtual team. He wanted to help others as he had himself been helped.

Creative and digital skills

As might be expected, young people tended to develop improved digital skills, including learning how to update and maintain equipment. Amongst the young people surveyed for this review, almost all felt VR improved digital skills, but *all* felt that it could help develop creative skills. Evidence in support of this comes from youth worker descriptions of how young people learned 3D and VR design, and were able to develop art work, animation and music:

A magical experience you know. And with very little work on their behalf, and quite a lot of crack, suddenly they're producing something that looks absolutely amazing. And it's very very quick … the technical skills would be things that might be a bit daunting in other apps. Like 3D modelling, animation and sort of being able to visualize stuff that's in your head.

What worked and what did not

GoVirtual is not a typical Foróige project or club. Rather, it is a model of delivery of youth work, and during the last few years the GoVirtual team have trialled different ways of using VR in youth work practice. Not all piloted projects worked as intended, as might be expected when trialling new technologies in a variety of contexts. Also, it is important to remember that many of the target young people faced considerable issues that might hamper their capacity to engage with GoVirtual. The very reasons some were referred – such as social anxiety, mental health issues – were factors that potentially affected the extent to which they engaged. That caveat noted, many of those young people who did initially engage managed to maintain engagement over a long period of time, and the large majority of those who engaged seemed to have enjoyed their VR experiences.

As noted earlier, the induction process has evolved over the course of the pilot. More recent iterations have learned from earlier trials. Providing a comprehensive introduction to the young people and their families has been very helpful in establishing longer-term engagement. Some feedback from a Tusla Family Youth Services support worker linked to the Making Music in a Virtual World programme indirectly provides evidence of this by showing how some young people failed to engage because they did *not* fully understand what was involved:

They are both massively struggling with their self-image, so I think with it being online they thought they would have to have their cameras on and become judged off their appearance.

Regular reminders to young people about charging headset batteries and any necessary updates also helped maintain engagement. However, while this is a feature of the GoVirtual team's engagement with young people, it seems that youth workers who did not use VR on a very regular basis were sometimes caught unawares by updates, or struggled to manage the headsets. Although it is possible to use a centralised system to manage the headsets, it is expensive. Thus, the GoVirtual model is designed so that each project or programme manages its own headsets, supported by how-to videos on the set up and management of headsets. The chosen approach is cheaper, and it theoretically offers greater local flexibility, but it can also create issues for less technically minded youth workers.

Also, at least in the initial phases, some apps seemed to cause more problems than others, either proving hard to connect to, or occasionally crashing. For example, feedback suggests that engagement within Music Making in a Virtual World and within the Young Carers group was hampered by technical issues. As well as some young people needing additional support to actively participate, app crashes and poor internet connectivity affected sessions. All technical problems were resolved, and the feedback from various pilots noted how helpful it was to the GoVirtual team's

assistance to resolve technical issues. Nonetheless, where technical issues regularly interrupted the flow of sessions, there is a reasonable chance that they also hampered engagement.

A significant amount of work has been put into training Foróige youth workers in the use of VR. Many of those who have received training have put the training to use in their youth work practice. Yet, many others make relatively little use of VR. It was apparent that it takes regular practice for youth workers to become *proficient* in the use of VR as a youth work tool, and to facilitate trouble-free sessions. In particular, engaging in youth work in VR multiplayer environments needs experience, and youth workers need to be comfortable in a VR environment, which can be problematic for some. As one youth worker explained:

> *more than anything, time to develop my own skills to use it. Although I struggle to use it as I find it too intense and can't have the headset on for too long which is a big barrier because it's hard for me to use it and make the most out of it and get familiar with the apps.*

7. Summary and recommendations

Foróige's GoVirtual uses VR to engage young people in Foróige youth development activities, with a particular focus on those facing barriers to participation in more traditional forms of engagement in Foróige clubs, projects and programmes. This review examined the efficacy of the GoVirtual model using a mixed methods approach that examined quantitative survey and administrative data and qualitative data collected during interviews, recorded testimonials and feedback provided by young people and their parents. The first phase of the review examined data previously collected by the GoVirtual team, while the second phase drew on those analyses to identify emergent themes and to gauge the views of youth workers and young people.

Specifically, the review sought to:

- examine the robustness of impact data previously collected by GoVirtual.
- independently examine the extent to which positive change had occurred.
- assess if GoVirtual was effective in engaging with young people who experienced barriers to participation in traditional youth development.
- evaluate the relevance and sustainability of the GoVirtual model.

The remainder of this chapter summarises the main findings from the review and proposes several recommendations.

Summary

This summary is divided into three broad parts, the first of which summarises some outcomes from the impact data previously collected by the GoVirtual team. The second part examines the extent to which GoVirtual has expanded, or scaled up, between 2023-2025, while the third section summarises findings from the current review about how GoVirtual was used and its effects.

Pre-existing impact data

As well as interviews, video testimonials and other forms of qualitative feedback, pre-existing data included:

- pre- and post-session surveys of those provided with VR training, to gauge their familiarity with key aspects of VR (collected during 2023 to 2025).
- a 2023 survey about the use of VR and its perceived effects on young people, offered to all Foróige sites that had received VR headsets, or where a staff member had been trained in the use of VR.

Over the duration of the Scaling Education Funding period, youth workers and other Foróige staff were offered basic or intermediate level training on the use of VR for youth workers. A comparison of ratings provided in pre- and post-training session surveys showed that the training contributed to very substantial increases in self-rated *understanding* and confidence across a range of areas. In particular, youth workers showed large increases in understanding issues related to safety and safeguarding, to facilitating young people in VR and to knowing how to identify appropriate VR resources.

The 2023 survey about the *use* of VR suggested that it was used by many youth workers, albeit mainly in person, and that many positive effects on young people had been observed. Almost all felt that the young people engaged in VR had fun doing so, most felt they had developed digital skills, and almost half felt that VR had reduced young people's isolation, developed their social skills, and provided them with a new interest or hobby. However, the survey only allowed non-response or positive responses to questions, meaning it may have presented an overly positively picture. Responses to an open-ended question suggested that those who had difficulty with social interactions particularly benefited from being in a VR environment.

Combined, the surveys and qualitative feedback suggested that while there were many positive aspects to GoVirtual, there were also two main types of issues: technical issues and patchy engagement. In the initial stages of rolling out GoVirtual, and where youth workers were not experienced, technical issues were common and could be quite disruptive, despite assistance from the GoVirtual team. Young people (and some youth workers) struggled to keep their headsets charged and updated, internet connectivity problems were an issue in rural areas, and youth workers who did not regularly use VR struggled to maintain familiarity. Young people with no prior familiarity with VR needed additional support to facilitate their engagement.

Also, engagement was sometimes difficult to maintain, perhaps partly attributable to frustration with technical teething problems but also to the nature of the target groups of young people. For example, some struggled with social anxiety and may have found any group environment difficult. However, overall, the reviews suggest that many of those who managed to engage and to maintain engagement found the experience very worthwhile. As well as skills development and learning to use new tools, many referenced enhanced social skills and a wider friendship network. Other positive identified were that young people felt safe in VR spaces and that VR made youth work accessible to young people who would not otherwise be able to access it.

In sum, existing data included extensive documentation of activities, and some good quality survey data. There was also clear evidence that the GoVirtual team had successfully developed a basic understanding of the appropriate use of VR in a sizeable proportion of Foróige staff. Knowledge gaps included a more comprehensive picture of the experiences of young people involved in GoVirtual, and greater detail from youth workers about how they used VR and their thoughts on its usefulness. The current review attempted to fill some of these gaps.

Expansion of the GoVirtual model

It was clear from the review of existing survey data and from the process of gathering new survey data that the GoVirtual model has expanded significantly during the Scaling Education Fund timeframe. Almost 150 pre-training surveys were completed by youth workers between 2023 and mid-2025. However, many of those trained did not complete surveys. Follow up with the GoVirtual team indicated that over 300 Foróige staff (mainly youth workers) have been trained in the use of VR in a youth work context, meaning the number of staff trained has almost quadrupled since Vróige morphed into Foróige's GoVirtual. Other than counties Wexford, Clare and Meath, every county in the Republic of Ireland had at least one person trained in the use of VR as a youth work tool. In addition, some staff have been trained in more advanced VR use, including supporting young people in multiplayer environments.

Of course, training does not always translate into use. However, the youth worker survey conducted as part of this review revealed that roughly two-thirds of those trained by the GoVirtual team used VR in their work at least occasionally. As the pool of staff trained in VR and using VR has increased, so

too has the number of young people using VR. Up until late 2022, Vróige had engaged a total of 400 young people with VR, whereas the GoVirtual team estimated that roughly 650 young people in 2023 and just over 1,500 young people in 2024 had engaged with VR in a Foróige setting. Final numbers for the 2025 year were not available at the time of writing, but it was on target to at least match the numbers reached in the previous years. Supporting evidence is also available from the survey of youth workers carried out as part of this review. If the responses of the relatively small, but representative, sample of youth workers are extrapolated out to the population of all those trained, it suggests that the target number of young people using it will have been comfortably exceeded.

A summary at the start of this report provided a sample of the various projects in which GoVirtual has been trialled. This included long-term engagement with the Alternate Spacers group, shorter projects such as the Roscommon Young Carers Project (with the South Roscommon Family Resource Centre), Making Music in a Virtual World (with Music Generation and Tusla Family Services in Galway), and Building Belonging in Virtual Worlds (a support group for autistic teenagers, with Mayo HSE Community Disability Network Team [CDNT]), as well as more unusual linkages such as VR meetings with young people in a Foróige club in Tamil Nadu in India and some youth workers in South Africa.

Some of these experienced significant technical problems that proved unsurmountable, at least in the short term (e.g., The Clubhouse collaboration in South Africa). In other cases though, while technical issues arose, the pilots showed enough promise to support another iteration. The outcomes of Building Belonging were presented to a national meeting of CDNT coordinators in 2025. As a result, a second iteration will begin in 2026, targeting young people identified by CDNT staff in two CDNT regions. A third version of the Making Music project will also be rolling out in Galway city and county in 2026, again in collaboration with Tusla and Music Generation. A handful of Education Welfare Officers have directly contacted the GoVirtual team to learn about using the Dala app to combat school-related anxiety, while several staff in Blackpool Glen Farranree Community Training Centre have been trained in the use of the Bodyswap app. This VR app had been used by a number of Foróige youth workers to help young people practice interview skills and develop a variety of transversal, or “soft”, skills. It is now being incorporated into some of the FET Level 5 courses offered in the Cork training centre.

Within Foróige as an organisation, the GoVirtual team have supported groups such as the Youth Advisory Panel, the GoSafely Youth Advisory Panel and the ECOllective (climate justice) group to meet in VR. The GoSafely group are currently transitioning to VR as the default mode of engagement while the ECOllective will be taking part in Foróige's FutureProof Programme through VR. They have also engaged with large groups of young people at national events such as Foróige’s Leadership for Life conference, the Amplified Festival, and Music Generation’s national showcase event.

Harking back to the original aims of GoVirtual, some key target groups were those who:

- could not engage fully with in-person options (disabilities, social anxiety, or prefer online spaces).
- could not engage in person due to lack of access to an appropriate local service (geographical isolation, islander, in care, hospital or Direct Provision setting, carer).

A review of activities to date suggests that for many of these groups, the GoVirtual team have established proof of concept. They have managed to deliver virtual youth work to young people with social anxiety, school-related anxiety, autism and physical disability. They have also dealt with some young people geographically isolated, including those on our islands. However, while they have

successfully partnered with local agencies, or local teams within national agencies (e.g., CDNTs) to target some key groups, partnering and maintaining partnerships with national agencies to target groups that are significantly geographically dispersed (e.g., wheelchair users/islanders) has proven more difficult.

In sum, GoVirtual has greatly increased the number of Foróige staff capable of using VR as a youth work tool, the number of staff using it as part of their youth work toolkit has increased, and the number of young people engaging with Foróige in a VR environment has increased considerably. However, access to and engagement with some of the key target groups remains difficult.

Outcomes from the current review

One of the first activities of this review was to access a database of all Foróige sites where someone had been trained in the use of VR as part of their youth work practice. This identified 184 sites where someone currently working there had received VR training. The purpose of the database was to draw a representative sample for a survey of youth workers, but it also it provided another source of evidence that GoVirtual had expanded considerably over the previous three years.

The subsequent survey of youth workers showed that roughly one-third of those trained in VR rarely or never used VR in their work. The main reasons for non-use were a lack of confidence, technical problems, and experiencing motion sickness. Some expressed a wish for a refresher course or to have help from a colleague familiar with VR. Amongst the two-thirds who used VR at least occasionally, it was used for a mixture of group and one-to-one work, but was far more likely to be delivered in person than remotely. Those who had completed the more advanced Level 2 training, or whose colleagues had also been trained in VR were more likely to use VR. There were also differences by project type, as almost half those using VR did so with UBU projects.

A core part of the review was to examine the extent to which using VR had led to *change* in young people targeted, including skills development (especially digital skills), improved digital citizenship and social skills, as well as the capacity to address specific issues such as social anxiety or lack of self-confidence. In terms of skills development, youth workers, parents and young people expressed similar views on the types of skills that VR was best placed to develop. Most youth workers saw VR as useful for developing a wide range of skills, but they saw it as particularly useful for developing digital, creative and communication skills (over 90% agreed it was useful). In a related vein, while young people saw it as most helpful in developing creative and digital skills (over 90% agreed), they also felt it supported social skills, making friends and developing teamwork skills. Support for this also comes from parent interviews, where a prominent theme was how their children's social skills and interactions with others had noticeably improved as a result of their engagement with VR.

Answers from both youth workers and young people were overwhelmingly positive when asked if VR could be useful in helping young people to face a variety of issues. Amongst youth workers, geographic and social isolation and physical disability were issues for which many felt VR would be particularly helpful. In a related vein, young people thought VR might be a particularly useful tool for dealing with issues such as managing emotions, anxiety, and loneliness. When asked about the effects that they had observed from using VR, a large majority of youth workers felt that it had contributed to noticeable improvements in self-confidence, problem-solving and general mental health, as well as social skills in general and making friends, in particular.

Youth workers reported that the most useful types of tools and apps were those that targeted sports and exercise, arts, music and creativity, while Rec Room (a virtual space where users can chat, create

and play games with friends) was also described as a useful tool. Again, young people largely reflected these emphases. Playing games (not specified) was by far the most common type of activity reported by young people, although many also used VR to learn about things, play sport, engage in creative activities, or to socialise and meet people.

Part of the rationale for GoVirtual was that it could reach young people who were unable to engage with more traditional forms of youth work. A very positive finding was that youth workers, parents and young people felt that VR was especially appropriate for those experiencing isolation for reasons such as social anxiety, geographic location, or physical disability. In other words, they independently verified the appropriateness of the GoVirtual targeting. In a related vein, the young people who had engaged with projects run by the GoVirtual team tended to reflect these characteristics, although GoVirtual also appealed to an older age group and to those for whom their local club did not appeal.

In sum, the current review reinforces the positive feedback contained in previous reviews by the GoVirtual team. However, it goes further because it shows that large majorities of all those involved (youth workers, young people, parents) feel that the GoVirtual model is capable of effecting positive changes in key aspects of young people's lives. Also, there is a strong symmetry between the surveyed views of youth workers and young people, with high levels of agreement as to how VR can be of most benefit, and to whom it can be of most benefit.

Recommendations

This section offers some suggestions as to how Foróige GoVirtual might be tweaked or improved. However, they are prefaced by a reminder that the model has been successfully trialled and is perceived to have had significant positive impacts on many or most of the young people who engaged.

Monitoring practices

The GoVirtual team already collect pre- and post- surveys from staff receiving training, and have gauged young people's views from several projects by using short check-ins. However, some small adjustments would help to provide a better evidence base for what works and what can be improved. Akin to what is asked of those in receipt of training, GoVirtual projects should include very short and simple pre- and post-project surveys of young people as an integral part of each project. Different projects will have different aims, possibly necessitating some modified questions for different projects. However, using a survey platform such as Alchemer, already used by the team to deliver surveys to youth workers, would facilitate delivering slightly modified versions of the same core survey to different projects. Using a core set of common questions could allow the GoVirtual team to pool young people's answers from across a variety of projects. This would have the double advantages of potentially providing a more robust evidence base for efficacy, as well as permitting comparison between projects.

That noted, it was apparent from the current review that it can be difficult to elicit responses to national, Foróige-wide surveys. One option to improve response rates is to avoid asking everyone everything, to improve targeting, and to use *representative samples* in the case of larger pools of potential respondents. At the moment, individual GoVirtual projects involve relatively few young people, but if they extended out to include large numbers, then sampling could be used. Likewise, a sizeable number of youth workers have already engaged with GoVirtual. Thus, for any future canvassing of their views, it would be more efficient to survey a sample and focus on obtaining a

reasonable response rate. This would make it possible to rely on the views expressed as being representative of the wider group, something ill-advised for large surveys with poor response rates.

Recommendation: The GoVirtual team should consider a more formal approach to gauging young people's views and behaviours, prior to and after engagement with projects.

Digital youth work as a concept

This review explored the training provided by the GoVirtual team to Foróige youth workers and staff. The team have also emphasised to this researcher that one reason such training was essential was because digital youth work does not feature as a component or module in education programmes leading to qualifications in youth and community work. It is beyond the scope of the current review to pronounce on the structure of third level courses. That noted, it seems a very large omission, given the increasingly digital nature of young people's lives, indeed, of all our lives. As an organisation that has championed digital youth work for many years, Foróige is among those best placed to advance arguments for the inclusion of digital youth work as a basic element of every youth worker's path to qualifications.

Recommendation: Foróige should continue to champion the inclusion of digital youth work in qualification pathways for youth workers.

Managing headsets

GoVirtual is designed so that each project or programme manages its own headsets, albeit supported by the central team, who also provide how-to videos about setting up and managing headsets. The decision to adopt this approach was taken in early 2023, weighing the main positives (local flexibility and lower costs) against the main negatives (additional local workload and additional central support). As problems with managing headsets was a prominent theme in the feedback from youth workers, it is worth reflecting again on what is the best approach from this point forward. From this author's (admittedly, quite limited) understanding, options have increased considerably in the last three years, but costs have not. Also, upfront financial costs need to be offset against the considerable ongoing time costs that we have seen accrue with a distributed rather than centralised model. Some of the main advantages to using centralised software to manage the headsets include the option to bulk load, manage and update apps, to control user access to specific apps and to limit access to download functions.

Clearly, there is a possibility for considerable time-saving efficiencies with centralised software, but it must be set against the cost of centrally managing the fleet of headsets. Also, the fleet of headsets is larger than it was at the start of 2023, and with the added complication that some are nearing the end of their use cycle. One option might be to invite sites to opt in or out of a central management model. This would allow youth workers who are very experienced in the use of VR to manage their sites' sets, allowing more agile use of the devices. Another option might be to explore *some* centrally controlled headsets, but linked to specific projects. In such cases, all content could be agreed and loaded onto assigned headsets for the duration of the projects.

Recommendation: Foróige and GoVirtual should again explore options for the use of centralised software to manage headsets.

Who is best placed to deliver digital youth work?

A relatively common theme in feedback from youth workers and from engaging with the GoVirtual team was that using VR, especially in group situations, took time and planning beyond what would be required for traditional youth work. It takes practice to become *proficient* in the use of VR as a youth work tool and to facilitate trouble-free sessions. In particular, managing a group and related activities and apps within VR requires experience, a solid understanding of safeguarding in online environments, and knowledge of age-appropriate tools. This suggests that while many youth workers are able to use VR in a one-to-one capacity, fewer can do so with groups, and that supporting groups in VR may not be feasible for the average volunteer. GoVirtual was, at least implicitly, initially conceived as a model that would be supported by staff and volunteers. There is certainly benefit to apprising volunteers of developments in digital youth work and introducing the GoVirtual model to them. A few have also availed of bespoke support from the GoVirtual team. However, without centrally managed headsets, incorporating VR into their practice would require an investment of volunteer time beyond what might be reasonably expected. Also, while there are supports within Foróige (a weekly open drop-in online session) this is not accessible to many volunteers, as it is during the working day.

Recommendation: For now, any expansion or consolidation of the GoVirtual model of group engagement should focus on delivery via youth workers.

Maintaining engagement with GoVirtual

Maintaining young people's engagement has been an issue, at least in some of the initial GoVirtual pilot projects. Several young people identified by referral agencies as appropriate targets for GoVirtual either did not engage at all, or engaged initially but then gradually disengaged. A key GoVirtual "selling point" is that it is not traditional, locally based youth work, meaning it can be accessed by those who cannot access traditional, locally based delivery. However, the corollary of this is that the GoVirtual team do not have easy access to the young people or their families, nor do they have "boots on the ground". If a young person is not responding to invitations to a weekly session, calling to the family home is not an option.

This means that close cooperation between the referral organisations and GoVirtual is essential. Initiating and sustaining engagement with GoVirtual requires the referral organisation to maintain contact with the young person, to provide ongoing support, and for there to be open communication channels between referrers and the GoVirtual team about any emerging issues. Although it may seem obvious, learning from earlier projects and making *explicit* any necessary strategies for support and information-sharing can help to maintain engagement. Some larger referrers will already have plenty of relevant protocols in place that may only need minor tweaks for a VR context. In contrast, smaller organisations, especially those whose main focus is not youth-centred, may not have well-developed procedures and may need additional assistance.

Recommendation: Initial engagement with referral agencies should include discussion about strategies to elicit and maintain engagement from young people.

The bigger picture

GoVirtual has been quite successful in promoting the use of VR as a youth work tool. Two-thirds of those trained by the GoVirtual team use VR at least occasionally. In many cases, it is used in person and with individuals, often those involved with UBU. Based on youth worker reports, using VR in this way has provided them with another effective tool for addressing the needs of young people. Thus,

this can be considered a very positive outcome. Large numbers of young people have been supported in developing skills that will help them make friends, improve their self-confidence, creativity, and eventual employability.

However, although these are very positive outcomes, they are not addressing the original aim of GoVirtual, which was to reach those young people who had difficulty accessing more traditional forms of youth work. Some of those young people have been reached too, but in much smaller numbers, and they have mainly been reached by the GoVirtual team. The team currently consists of two individuals, which clearly limits the number of young people with whom they can engage. And that reflects the issue at the core of the model. If focused universal youth work is funded based on geography, this militates against a model where small groups of young people with quite specific needs can be supported at regional or national level. Yet, such a model is clearly necessary in some cases. By very definition, those targeted by GoVirtual are isolated for one reason or another. They are not clustered together and therefore not easily dealt with under local youth work models. They need a national or regional level youth work funding framework, but an adequate one does not exist.

The GoVirtual team have developed a cohort of youth workers who are now capable of reaching out to groups of young people unable to access traditional services. The issue is that these youth workers are deployed based on geography, not specific need. For GoVirtual to really achieve its aims, some aspects of funding need to be disentangled from geography, and some youth workers need to have a different remit. For example, one option would be a group of youth workers with a national remit to offer VR youth work to targeted young people, either as part of their role as a youth worker, or as their full role. Another option would be to have national-level specialists in certain types of interventions (e.g., music-related) or with certain target groups (e.g., social anxiety). There are a number of models that could be explored, subject to changes to aspects of funding models or the availability of philanthropic support.

Recommendation: Young people targeted by GoVirtual are not neatly clustered by geographic location. For GoVirtual to extend its reach and to offer comprehensive supports to key target groups, a group of youth workers with a national or regional remit is needed. This requires a reconfiguration of aspects of funding models for youth work.

8. Appendices

Appendix A

Foróige GoVirtual Survey for Youth Workers

1. I have been given information about the survey (in an email) and have had a chance to ask questions *

- Yes
- No

2. I agree to complete the survey *

- Yes
- No

Those answering No were directed to the end of the survey.

3. Have you received training in using VR (Virtual Reality) as part of your youth work practice?

- Yes, Level 1
- Yes, Level 2
- Yes, not sure of Level
- No need, already familiar with using VR
- No, don't know how to use VR

4. Have any of your colleagues been trained in using VR?

- Yes
- Don't know
- No

5. Do you use VR as part of your work?

- Yes, regularly
- Yes, sometimes
- Rarely or never

6. On what type of project do you use VR?

- Youth Diversion Programme
- UBU
- School Completion Programme
- Neighbourhood Youth Project
- BBBS / Mentoring
- Other - Please Describe

7. How often do you use VR with young people in these ways?

	A few times a week	Every week or two	At least monthly	Rarely or never
One-to-one work	○	○	○	○
Group work	○	○	○	○
Remotely	○	○	○	○
In person	○	○	○	○

8. With how many young people are you **currently** using VR?

9. Over the past three years, with roughly how many young people **in total** have you used VR?

10. Based on your own experiences, do you think VR is a useful tool for engaging with young people **EXPERIENCING ANY OF THE FOLLOWING ISSUES?** (Tick Not applicable if the issue was not relevant to the young people with whom you used VR.)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
Social isolation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Physical disability	○	○	○	○	○	○
Geographic isolation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Mental health issues	○	○	○	○	○	○
Anxiety	○	○	○	○	○	○
School avoidance	○	○	○	○	○	○
Emotional disregulation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Substance misuse	○	○	○	○	○	○
Atypical living situation (e.g. in care / DP / homelessness)	○	○	○	○	○	○

11. Have you found VR a useful tool to help **FOSTER THESE SKILLS** in young people? (Tick Not Applicable if you have not tried to use VR to foster a particular skill.)

	Very useful	Somewhat useful	Unsure	Not very useful	Not at all useful	Not applicable
Creativity (e.g., art, music)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Digital skills	○	○	○	○	○	○
Digital citizenship	○	○	○	○	○	○
Employment skills	○	○	○	○	○	○
Leadership	○	○	○	○	○	○
Teamwork	○	○	○	○	○	○
Communication skills	○	○	○	○	○	○
Understanding other cultures	○	○	○	○	○	○
Sports skills/fitness	○	○	○	○	○	○

12. Think of those young people with whom you've worked via VR. For what proportion have you seen a noticeable **IMPROVEMENT** on the following attributes?

	Almost all	Over half	Less than half	Few or none	Don't know
Self-confidence	○	○	○	○	○
Empathy	○	○	○	○	○
Problem-solving	○	○	○	○	○
Anxiety	○	○	○	○	○
General mental health	○	○	○	○	○
Independence	○	○	○	○	○
Resilience	○	○	○	○	○

13. Think of those young people with whom you've worked via VR. For what proportion have you seen a noticeable **IMPROVEMENT** on the following forms of interactions or behaviours?

	Almost all	Over half	Less than half	Few or none	Don't know
Social skills	○	○	○	○	○
Making friends	○	○	○	○	○
Trusting others	○	○	○	○	○
Interaction with family	○	○	○	○	○
Engagement with education	○	○	○	○	○
Community engagement	○	○	○	○	○
Better lifestyle choices	○	○	○	○	○

14. Are there any target groups of young people for whom you think VR and the GoVirtual model are especially appropriate?

15. Are there any target groups of young people for whom you think VR and the GoVirtual model are not appropriate?

16. Which VR tools or apps have you found most useful?

17. Is there any aspect of using VR with which you would like more training or advice?

Next questions only seen by those who do NOT regularly use VR

18. Why do you rarely or never use VR as part of your work? **(Tick all that apply)**

- [ ] There were too many technical problems
- [ ] I don't feel confident enough
- [ ] Needs too much "admin" from young people (e.g. charge headset, update app)
- [ ] VR is not suitable for the group I work with (e.g. too young)
- [ ] VR is not as effective as other forms of practice
- [ ] Don't have enough headsets
- [ ] I experience VR motion sickness
- [ ] The Young People have experienced VR motion sickness
- [ ] Other - Please Describe

19. What would make you more likely to use VR?

Appendix B

Foróige GoVirtual Young People's Evaluation

---

1. Have you ever used VR with a Foróige youth worker or as part of Foróige activities or clubs? (Don't count it if you ONLY use VR at home)

- Lots of times
- A few times
- No

---

2. Would you like to use VR in Foróige?

- Yes
- Not Sure
- No

3. Outside of Foróige, have you ever used VR?

- Never
- A few times
- A fair bit

---

4. **Why don’t you use VR?**
(Tick all that apply)

- [ ] I don’t have access to the right gear
- [ ] I don’t feel confident enough
- [ ] I get motion sickness
- [ ] I’ve trouble using the controls
- [ ] I’m not interested in it
- [ ] My parents don’t want me to use it
- [ ] Other - Please write in

---

5. How long do you usually spend in a VR session?
(Tell us if your answer is in minutes or hours!)

6. If you use multiplayer VR, how many people are usually in the group?
(You can write “0” if you don’t do multiplayer VR)

7. How often do you use VR on your own or with others? [One tick per line]

	Most days	At least once a week	At least once a month	Hardly ever or never
On your own	○	○	○	○
Part of a group, in person	○	○	○	○
Part of a group, remotely	○	○	○	○

8. Is it easier to meet new people in VR or in real life?

- ○ Definitely easier in VR
- ○ A bit easier in VR
- ○ Not sure
- ○ A bit easier in real life
- ○ Definitely easier in real life

9. Would you prefer to meet your youth worker in VR or real life?

- ○ Prefer all in VR
- ○ Prefer mainly VR
- ○ It would depend on what we were doing
- ○ Prefer mainly real life
- ○ Prefer all in real life

10. Have you ever used VR for any of these things?

	Yes	No	No, but I'd like to try it
Sports (e.g., boxing, golf, fitness)	○	○	○
Make music, DJ, write songs	○	○	○
Art, design or creative stuff	○	○	○
To learn about things	○	○	○
Develop job skills (e.g. interview practice)	○	○	○
Socialise, meet people	○	○	○
Manage anxiety or stress	○	○	○
Relax or meditate	○	○	○
To feel accepted as myself	○	○	○
Help me with school	○	○	○
Play games	○	○	○

11. Think of your own experiences of VR. How helpful could VR be for young people facing any of the following problems?

	Very helpful	Fairly helpful	Not sure	Not very helpful	No help
Loneliness	○	○	○	○	○
Anxiety or depression	○	○	○	○	○
Managing emotions	○	○	○	○	○
Lack of confidence	○	○	○	○	○
Not able to go to school	○	○	○	○	○
Dealing with substance misuse	○	○	○	○	○

12. Could VR help how young people like you get on with others?

	Very helpful	Fairly helpful	Not sure	Not very helpful	No help
Social skills and being able to talk to people	○	○	○	○	○
Making friends	○	○	○	○	○
Trusting others	○	○	○	○	○
Listening to others	○	○	○	○	○
Getting on with their family	○	○	○	○	○
Fitting in to their community	○	○	○	○	○

13. Could VR help develop the following skills in young people like you?

	Very helpful	Fairly helpful	Not sure	Not very helpful	No help
IT or digital skills	○	○	○	○	○
Employment skills	○	○	○	○	○
Creativity	○	○	○	○	○
Leadership	○	○	○	○	○
Teamwork	○	○	○	○	○
Study skills	○	○	○	○	○

14. What works best for doing the following? Is it VR or real life?

	VR	Don’t know / It depends	Real life
Managing anxiety	○	○	○
Relaxation/meditation	○	○	○
Making music, DJing, writing songs	○	○	○
Doing other creative or art stuff	○	○	○
Learning about things	○	○	○
Developing job skills	○	○	○
Developing social skills	○	○	○

15. What is your favourite VR app or game?

16. If you could create a VR app for other young people, what would it do?

17. What do you like most about how VR makes you feel?

18. Is there anything you don’t like about how VR makes you feel?

19. One last question! A big difference between VR and other types of youth work is that you can meet your youth worker or your group remotely. Can you think of any type of young person that would really benefit from this?

---

20. Which best describes your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Transgender or Non-Binary
- I am (use your own words)
- Prefer not to say

21. What type of Foróige project are you involved in?

- Big Brother Big Sister / Mentoring
- Neighbourhood Youth Project
- School Completion Programme
- UBU
- Youth Diversion Programme
- Don’t know the name
- Other (write in the name)