

# **Young Consumers**

**By**

**Northern Ireland Commissioner  
for Children and Young People  
(NICCY)**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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- NICCY Youth Panel members who helped plan and oversee the work
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Your contributions are greatly valued.



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## **A. Introduction**

- When the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was out and about across Northern Ireland in 2005, he was told by a number of young people that both they, and their peers, felt they were often treated negatively in shops. Members of the NICCY Youth Panel also confirmed this to be their experience.
- NICCY therefore decided to conduct a brief peer-led survey on the issue of 'young consumers' in order to find out a bit more about how positive or negative young people's experiences were in shops across Northern Ireland. The details here highlight the key findings of both this survey and the interviews and case studies that accompanied it.

## **B. The Process**

- A steering group of NICCY staff and youth panel members was established to oversee this project. This group decided to use a number of different methods to further explore the experiences of young consumers within Northern Ireland. These were:
  1. A young person's questionnaire, to be used as part of a street survey.
  2. A web-based version of this questionnaire, accessible via the NICCY website.
  3. An adult questionnaire, to be used as part of a street survey.
  4. Personal shopping diaries, completed by NICCY youth panel members.
  5. Interviews with retail representatives.



- The street survey was conducted during a six week period in September and October 2006. During this time, NICCY Youth Panel members and staff 'hit the streets' across Northern Ireland to find out people's opinions on the issue of young consumers. Both young people and adults willingly spoke to our peer researchers, freely sharing their views on how they feel young people are treated in shops.
- The completion of personal shopping diaries also took place during this time, with a number of NICCY Youth Panel members recording both the highs and lows of their normal day to day shopping experiences and offering their reflections on how this made them feel.
- Interviews with a small number of retail representatives followed at the end of October, exploring with them their views on the status of young consumers and retail staff's responses to them.
- A key element throughout all aspects of this work was the centrality of young people's voices. Young people initially brought this issue to the attention of NICCY. A group of NICCY Youth Panel members then helped set up and oversee the work. Young researchers also led on all aspects of data collection, including a street survey with both adults and their peers and interviews with retail staff.

### **C. The Participants**

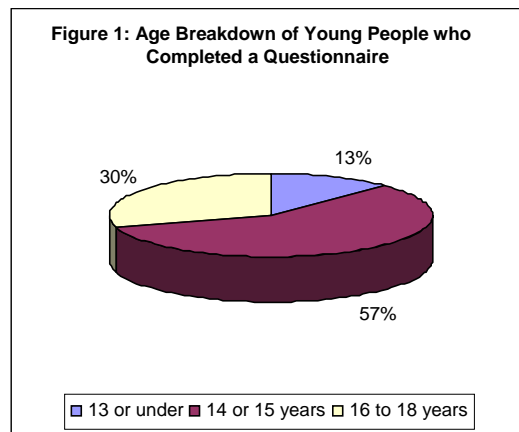
A total of 559 young people and adults participated in this work, sharing their views on how they feel shops in Northern Ireland treat young consumers:

- 455 young people, aged between 8 and 18 years, completed a young person's questionnaire.
- 92 adults completed a corresponding adult questionnaire.
- 8 NICCY youth panel members, aged between 15 and 20 years, completed shopping diaries.
- 4 representatives from the retail trade completed individual interviews.



## **The young person's questionnaire**

- 455 young people, from across Northern Ireland, completed a young person's questionnaire (see appendix one).
- 44% of these young people completed their questionnaire face to face with one of NICCY's peer researchers. The remaining 56% completed a written version of the questionnaire, either via the NICCY website (31%) or as part of the street survey (25%).
- There was a fairly even male/female split amongst those young people who completed questionnaires (48% were male; 52% were female).
- Figure 1 below shows the age breakdown of these young people.

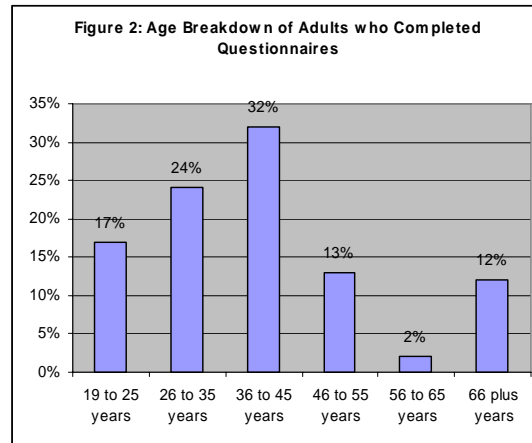


## **The adult questionnaire**

- 92 adults, from across Northern Ireland, completed an adult version of the same questionnaire (see appendix two).
- 87% completed their questionnaire face to face with one of NICCY's peer researchers. The remaining 13% completed a written version as part of the street survey.
- 80 females completed the adult survey compared to only 12 males.



- Figure 2 below shows the age breakdown of the 92 adults who completed a questionnaire.



## **D. The Findings**

### **How shop staff treat young people compared to adults**

- The general consensus amongst both the young people and adults who took part in this project was that shop staff treat young people differently to adults: 74% of young people and 75% of adults who completed questionnaires stated that they felt this was the case.
- The 334 young people and 69 adults who stated that they felt shop staff treated young people differently to adults were asked to explain in what ways they felt this was the case. Their answers are presented below.
- With just one exception, all stated that they felt children and young people were, in some way, treated more negatively and/or with less respect than adults.
- 1 in 3 felt that shop staff were more suspicious of young people shoplifting or causing trouble:



*"They think young people are prone to steal" (young person)*

*"They are suspicious of young people" (adult)*

*"I saw a security guard trying to follow a group of 4 or 5 teenagers around the shop" (diary entry)*

*"They take it for granted that all young people are thieves" (adult)*

*"Young People are treated differently in some shops like [Large toy store] where we were denied access to the products because me and my four friends were all entering at once – but in other shops like [nationwide game retailer] we are treated better than adults because we are more likely to know what we are buying. Adults are being patronised because they are thought to be strangers to the world of gaming. I think in some ways we are respected but in other stores we are shown little respect." (young person)*

- 18% of the young people and 7% of the adults said that shop staff followed young people around more and made them feel uncomfortable/unwelcome in their store:

*"I was watched all the time and was sort of followed" (diary entry)*

*"Young people are watched more than adults" (young person)*

*"They watch young people more, especially when they are in groups" (adult)*





- 1 in 4 felt that shop staff did not act in a respectful way to young people:

*"They have little respect for young people" (adult)*

*"The staff were totally disrespectful and rude. Arrogant and unpleasant – I won't use this shop again" (diary entry)*

*"They see young people as a nuisance" (adult)*

*"I was treated with total disregard (in some shops). I felt as if I should have had a sign on saying 'Not shoplifting' as I could see the shop assistant staring at me" (diary entry)*

*"Staff are not as helpful to young people" (young person)*

*"Children are seen as second class citizens" (adult)*

*"They are not polite to young people" (adult)*

- 8% of the young people and 9% of the adults felt that stores applied stricter rules to young people than to adults. Specific examples mentioned include bags to be left outside; limits on the number of young people allowed in together and rules banning baseball caps or hoodies:

*"They have to leave their schoolbags at the shop door" (adult)*

*"(There are) signs on the door e.g. only 3 children allowed in at a time" (young person)*

*"Young people are not allowed in shops in groups" (adult)*

*"They only allow a certain number of children in at one time" (adult)*

*"(They have a sign that says) No under 18s after 8pm" (young person)*



*"They ban hoodies" (young person)*

*"Treatment gets worse if they (young person) are wearing a hood or hat" (adult)*

- 16% of the adults and 5% of the young people felt that young people often struggled to get attention in shops and/or that adults always got served before young people, no matter who was next in line:

*"Young people are often overlooked" (adult)*

*"Young people get treated like they are invisible and I'm sick of it" (young person)*

*"Some staff were not busy but when we tried to get attention, we weren't given the service" (diary entry)*

*"Adults are moved forward and get served first" (adult)*

*"I was served behind someone that was behind me. I said to the lady that I was in front and she told me to stop being so cheeky" (diary entry)*

- Whilst it was felt that this more negative treatment of young people occurred across many different types of shops, those that were most frequently mentioned in the questionnaires were:
  - Clothes/accessories shops
  - Newsagents/stationers
  - Pharmacists/chemists
  - Department stores
  - Supermarkets, convenience stores and other food shops
  - Music stores (only identified by young people)

## **Why do shop staff treat young people and adults differently?**

- Those individuals who said in their questionnaire that they felt shop staff treated young people differently to adults were asked why they thought this happened. They identified three possible reasons:
- The key reason, mentioned by 63% of these young people and 57% of these adults was that of 'negative stereotypical attitudes towards young people' amongst shop staff. This included a belief that all young people were 'up to no good' or 'out to cause trouble':

*"They think young people are prone to steal" (young person)*

*"They are always expecting the worst of young people" (adult)*

*"They think all kids are bad. They forget they were a kid" (adult)*

- The second potential reason, identified by 8% of young people and 13% of adults, was that of shops not expecting much custom from young people:

*"Young people are not seen as having money to buy" (adult)*

*"They only expect adults to have money" (adult)*

*"If they are not with a parent, shops wonder if they have money"  
(adult)*

- The third potential reason, mentioned by 6% of both young people and adults, was previous experiences of shoplifting by other youth:

*"Because of their experiences of shoplifting" (adult)*

*"Because some young people cause trouble they think we're all  
the same" (young person)*

- Whilst both young people and adults alike recognise that this may be true of some young people, very few see it as justification for the differential treatment of young consumers:



*"It is grossly unfair to treat all young people as if they're going to steal" (adult)*

*"Shops should give us a chance and not automatically judge us" (young person)*

*"Give all young people a chance. Don't judge all by a few ones" (adult)*

- Though not necessarily sure how much it happens in practice, the retail representatives who participated in this project also agreed that not all young people should be treated negatively on the basis of the behaviour of a few. All were keen to stress that they valued and welcomed the custom of young people:

*"We'd like to think they [young people] are a positive force in the centre – they are the consumers of years to come and most retailers would encourage young people to come and shop" (retail representative)*

*"They are the shoppers of the future. I was young once and I wanted to be treated the same as an adult and it is our aim to be as safe and welcoming as we can" (retail representative)*

### **How company affects treatment**

- The majority of young people (84%) and adults (87%) who completed questionnaires felt that shop staff treated young people differently, depending on who they were with. This was also the clear message coming through from the NICCY Youth Panel members who completed shopping diaries.
- Most young people and adults felt that staff treated young people best when they were with an adult and least well when they were with other young people.



- 30% of young people and 18% of adults who completed questionnaires felt shop staff were less suspicious of young people when they were with an adult:

*“They are less suspicious when they are with an adult” (adult)*

- 20% of young people and 28% of adults felt shop staff were more polite and respectful to young people when they were with an adult:

*“If they are with an adult they are taken more seriously” (adult)*

*“When they are with an older person, they are given more respect” (adult)*

*“Sometimes shops try to make a good impression on your parents or guardians by saying a polite hello to you. If you are on your own they just serve you without a hello or a goodbye – all they will do is take your money and give you your purchase in a very unfriendly manner” (young person)*

- 29% of young people and 32% of adults felt shops were particularly suspicious of young people when in a group:

*“Groups of girls are asked to move on, adults wouldn’t be” (young person)*

*“Groups of kids are seen as trouble” (adult)*

*“They are wary of young people, particularly when they come in a group” (adult)*

- The retail representatives who were interviewed as part of this project also agreed that young people were often viewed with more suspicion when in a group, but were keen to point out that this would also be true of adults in a group.
- All four said that when a large group entered the vicinity of the shopping centre, whether adults or young people, security would be asked to closely monitor the movements of the group on the grounds that they may potentially



shop lift or endanger the safety or wellbeing of other customers – particularly those who were elderly:

*“We do not allow big groups of young people to congregate in the centre [because] the centre has to look after the well being of shoppers as a whole and sometimes people can feel quite intimidated if there are large groups of young people walking about [and] if there’s large groups going into shops for the shopkeepers its sometimes not easy to keep an eye on everybody so this is another reason why security would keep an eye on young people [though] if we have any big groups of older people, well we don’t allow any big groups to congregate... so it doesn’t just strictly apply to younger people” (interview with retail representative)*

*“If a group comes in, security gets notified to watch out for them for security/ health and safety reasons – if they mess about they can knock over young children or adults. That is normal practice. Same approach if a group of adults comes in. A group is monitored on camera to see if there are any problems. If problems occur then security gets notified who will warn the group to stop misbehaving (maybe once, maybe twice depending on level of misbehaving). If there’s no positive response the group will be asked to leave – only once. If they don’t leave the PSNI are brought in right away. “We don’t take no nonsense, there’s no messing about”. The same would apply to adults” (interview with retail representative)*

### **What makes a shop welcoming to young people**

- It is important to recognise that not all shops are perceived to be unwelcoming to young people. The eight NICCY Youth Panel members who completed shopping diaries recorded a mix of both positive and negative shopping experiences.

- Three-quarters (76%) of all young people who completed a questionnaire were also able to think of at least one shop that they felt particularly welcome in. The remaining 24% however could not.
- Those young people who were able to identify a shop that they felt welcome in were asked to think about what it was that made them feel so welcome there. Not surprisingly, almost all their answers related to how shop staff treated them. Friendly and helpful staff made them feel welcome, as did a feeling that staff trusted them:

*"I was treated really well by friendly staff" (diary entry)*

*"Staff give them space to look about" (adult)*

*"It was good – the staff were nice and they helped us" (young person)*

*"Staff treat them like consumers – are respectful to them" (adult)*

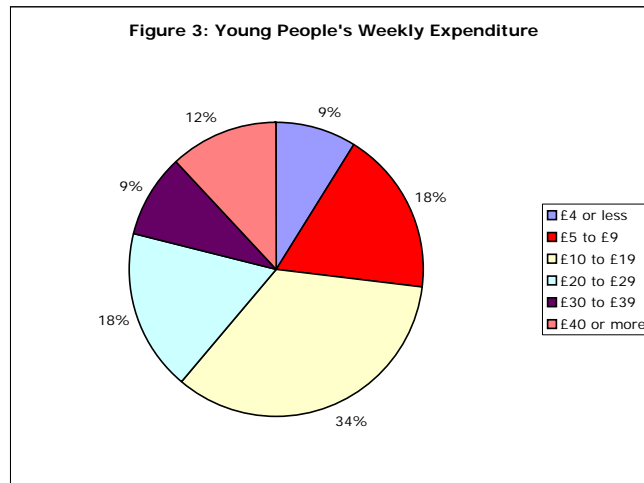
- Recognising that this is not the case across the board the retail representatives who took part in this work were very keen to hear young people's suggestions as to how they felt more shops could become more welcoming. Indeed, when asked what message they would like to give to young people through this project, the main response was to ask young people how they could be better accommodated in shops/stores:

*"Do they [young people] enjoy the centre, do they like what they see, how could we make changes? I can only learn, and we can only learn, from your opinion that's why we do carry out different surveys throughout the year...If there is any changes that the younger generation think that would be obviously feasible in the centre we will quite willingly make those changes" (retail representative)*



## Young people's shopping habits

- All young people who completed a questionnaire were asked to estimate how much they spent in shops per week. Figure 3 below reveals their average weekly spend.



- The weekly expenditure reported by young people in their questionnaires is substantial:
  - **73% of young people said they spend £10 or more per week in shops**
  - **39% said they spend £20 or more per week.**
- The spending patterns revealed by young people are particularly interesting in light of the earlier finding that 8% of young people and 13% of adults thought shops were less welcoming to, and accommodating of, young people because they didn't expect much custom from them.
- The key things that these young people reported spending their money on were:
  - Clothes and accessories (70%)
  - Food and drink (70%)





- Music, DVD and games (60%)
  - Magazines/Books (37%)
  - Mobile phone accessories/top ups etc. (26%)
  - Make up and toiletries (19%)
  - Sports equipment/clothing (13%)
- Again, this is particularly interesting when considered against the list of shops that were perceived to be most negative in their treatment of young people:
    - Clothes/accessories shops
    - Department stores
    - Supermarkets, convenience stores and other food shops
    - Music stores
    - Newsagents/stationers
    - Pharmacists/chemists
  - The type of shops that are perceived to be least welcoming to young people are, without exception, those that sell the goods young people tell us they are spending their money on.

## **E. Key Messages**

- The general feeling amongst both the adults and young people who took part in this project is that shop staff treat young people more negatively than adults. Whether or not this is actually the case, shops are perceived to be:
  - More suspicious of young shoppers.
  - Less respectful to young shoppers.
  - Particularly unwelcoming to groups of young people.
- Particular ways in which young people and adults feel shop staff act less favourably towards young people are:
  - Treating them with less respect when not accompanied by an adult.



- Having rules that apply only to young people (e.g. wearing hoodies or baseball caps; limiting numbers in the store).
  - Serving adults first, irrespective of who was next in line.
  - Acting in a more suspicious manner towards young shoppers.
- The most common perception, amongst both young people and adults, as to why shops treat young people less favourably than adults is the existence of 'negative stereotypical attitudes towards young people' and a belief that most young people are 'up to no good' or 'out to cause trouble'.
  - Whilst both young people and adults alike recognise that this may be true of some young people, very few see it as justification for the differential treatment of all young people.
  - The retail representatives who participated in this project also agreed that not all young people should be treated negatively on the basis of the behaviour of a few and all were keen to stress that they valued and welcomed the custom of young people.
  - These retail representatives we spoke to were very open to receiving suggestions as to how young consumers shopping experiences could be improved.
  - It is very encouraging to hear retail representatives express a willingness to learn from what children and young people have to say, in order to make shopping a more positive experience for young consumers. Whether it is intended or not, young people feel they are currently treated less favourably than adults within the shopping environment. Many adults agree.
  - Some young people are 'choosing with their feet'; removing their custom from shops that they feel least welcome in. This has significant repercussions for potential store revenue, not only in the future, but also now.
  - The weekly spending figures shared by the young people who took part in this project clearly reveal that young people are not only 'the consumers of years to come'; they are also the consumers of today.



# Appendix 1

## Young Persons Questionnaire

**IMPORTANT: If you are under 14, please get your parent/carer to sign here to show they are happy for you to fill this in:**

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**Q1. Are you...**

male

female

**Q2. What age are you?**

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

**Q3. What town/city do you shop in most often?**

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**Q4. In general, do you think shops treat young people any differently to adults? (for example; are there any rules that apply to young people but not to adults?)**

Yes (Please fill in Q4a, 4b and 4c below)

No (Go now to the **red section** on the next page)

I don't know (Go now to the **red section** on the next page)

**4a. In what ways do you think shops treat young people differently to adults?**

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**4b. Are there any particular shops that do this?**

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**4c. Why do you think they do this?**

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**Q5. Do you think that how young people are treated by shops depends on who they are with (i.e. on their own, with an adult or with friends)?**

Yes

No

I don't know

**Please explain your answer:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Q6. Can you think of any shop that you feel really welcome in?**

Yes (Please fill in Q6a below)

No (Go now to the **green section** on the next page)

**Q6a. What is it about this shop that makes you feel this way?**

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**Q7. If you don't mind me asking, roughly how much do you spend in shops each week? (tick one box)**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> £4 or less          | <input type="checkbox"/> between £5 and £9   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> between £10 and £19 | <input type="checkbox"/> between £20 and £29 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> between £30 and £39 | <input type="checkbox"/> more than £40       |

**Q8. What sort of things do you buy? (tick as many boxes as you want)**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> music/DVD's/games   | <input type="checkbox"/> magazines/books      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> clothes/accessories | <input type="checkbox"/> food/drink           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> mobile phone stuff  | <input type="checkbox"/> anything else? _____ |
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Q9. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about how young people are treated in shops?**

**THANK YOU**



# Appendix 2



## **Adult Questionnaire: Self Completion**

**Q1. Are you...**       male                       female

**Q2. Are you...**       19-25 years               26-35 years  
 36-45 years               46-55 years               56-65 years  
 66 years plus

**Q3. What town or city do you shop in most often?**

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_ -

**Q4. Do you have any children?**       yes                       no

**If yes,** what age are your child(ren)? \_\_\_\_\_ -  
\_\_\_\_\_ years of age

**Q5. In general, do you think shops treat young people any differently to adults? For example; are there any rules that apply to young people but not to adults?**

- Yes (Please answer Q5a, Q5b and Q5c)
- No (Go straight to Q6 on the next page)
- I don't know (Go straight to Q6 on the next page)

**5a. In what ways do you think shops treat young people differently to adults?**

\_\_\_\_\_





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**5b. Are there any particular shops that do this?**

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**5c. Why do you think they do this?**

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**Q6. Do you think that how young people are treated by shops depends on who they are with (i.e. on their own, with an adult or with friends)?**

Yes

No

I don't

know

**Please explain:**

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**IF YOU HAVE CHILDREN AGED 10-18, OR KNOW YOUNG PEOPLE OF THIS AGE, PLEASE ANSWER THE LAST 4 QUESTIONS ON THE NEXT PAGE.**

**IF YOU DON'T KNOW YOUNG PEOPLE OF THIS AGE, YOU HAVE NOW FINISHED THE QUESTIONNAIRE. PLEASE RETURN IT TO THE NICCY RESEARCHER. THANK YOU.**

**Q7. Can you think of any shop that the young people you know feel really welcome in?**

- Yes (Please answer Q7a on the next page)
- No (Go straight to Q8)

**Q7a. What do you think it is about this shop that makes them feel this way?**

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**Q8. If you don't mind us asking, roughly how much do the young people you know spend in shops each week?**

- £4 or less
- between £5 and £9
- between £10 and £19
- between £20 and £29
- between £30 and £39
- more than £40



**Q9. What sort of things do they spend their money on?**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> music/DVD's/games   | <input type="checkbox"/> magazines/books |
| <input type="checkbox"/> clothes/accessories | <input type="checkbox"/> food/drink      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> mobile phone stuff  | <input type="checkbox"/> anything else?  |

Anything else?

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**Q10. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about how you think young people are treated in shops?**

**Thank you. Please give this back to the NICCY researcher.**

**They will give you a leaflet with information on how to CONTACT US if you have any questions or concerns after leaving today.**

