



Research Update

Respect in Northern Ireland: Exploring understandings, perceptions and feelings of respect

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Respect is a complex but often taken-for-granted concept, central to everyday life and relationships. While Lawrence-Lightfoot (2012) suggests that respect is the most powerful component that binds communities together, we rarely talk about what respect is and how its meaning may vary across communities and contexts.

This Research Update explores understandings, perceptions and feelings of respect and disrespect among 1,201 respondents to the 2018 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey and 1,200 respondents to the 2023 NILT survey. We examine respect in relation to a range of variables, including age, sex, highest educational qualification, socio-economic status (using the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification [NS-SEC]) and disability (i.e., having a limiting health condition/illness). Due to small sample sizes, it is not possible to analyse the data with regards to other demographics such as ethnicity and sexuality.

The data reported here are drawn mostly from the 2018 NILT survey responses to the questions on public understandings and perceptions of respect (the last time these questions were asked), but also from the 2023 survey data on two specific questions (perception of Northern

Ireland (NI) as a respectful place; and feeling of being treated with respect). By drawing on these data, we explore: how is respect perceived? How is it enacted by different social groups? Is NI considered a respectful society? Do people in NI feel respected? And do certain groups feel more respected than others?

What is respect?

There is no consensual definition of respect, its components, typologies and what it involves. This is because respect is a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional concept. Thus, it has been conceptualised in a range of ways, including: 1) as a value, a moral duty, and/or as a marker of citizenship (e.g., Hammett & Staeheli, 2011); 2) as an attitude or disposition (e.g., Darwall, 1977); 3) as a social practice, i.e., something that people do, and so that involves a specific pattern of behaviours (showing respect) (e.g., Sennett, 2003); and 4) as a feeling or affect (feeling respect and feeling respected) (e.g., Malti et al., 2020).

In 2018, the NILT survey had an open-ended question asking respondents to define respect ('When you hear the word 'respect', what does it mean to you?'), and 1,185 individuals responded. While some answered that they did not

know or were not sure, many answers reflected the multi-dimensional nature of the concept as found in the literature. Most responses leaned towards defining it either as an attitude or a specific pattern of behaviours. An attitude is the way in which an individual feels about or views something, usually leading to them responding to it in a certain way. Therefore, attitudes include beliefs, emotional responses and behavioural tendencies. Common answers from the 2018 survey associated respect with kindness, esteem and appreciation, tolerance, integrity, compassion, decency, honour, courtesy and manners, dignity, friendship, care, admiration and love. Some believed that respect should be given to everyone, and equated respect with equality, tolerance and acceptance, non-discrimination, 'no prejudice' (being 'non-judgemental'), and fairness, i.e., treating everyone as equals regardless of religion, country of origin, sex, etc. The following are typical of these types of responses:

'That everybody treats each other fairly. Respect other people's feelings and opinions regardless of whether you agree with them or not'

'Treating people well irrespective of their background, religion or disability'

However, many expressed more conditionality in terms of who/what should be respected. Some of these answers connected respect with admiration and obedience, and some respondents believed that one should only respect those that respect them back or those that ‘deserve’ or ‘earn’ respect. Yet, some also referred to specific groups as deserving or expecting respect, and the obligation to respect elders was frequently mentioned:

‘... respect those in authority, respect people of the cloth no matter what persuasion, respect your elders, respect your teachers’

A range of behaviours or patterns of behaviours were also associated with respect. Most often expressed was the sentiment ‘treat others like you would like to be treated’. Other specific behaviours recurrently stated were: ‘thinking well of people’, being ‘understanding’, ‘pleasant’ and ‘friendly’ to others, being honest and reliable, listening to people, and being mannerly (like saying please and thank you):

‘To not offend others and to be considerate and caring’

‘Listen to someone’s viewpoints and don’t shout anyone down, it’s all about compromise’

We might take these as an indication of respondents understanding of what it means to be respectful or to show respect.

Clearly respect is not easily defined, but there are consistent (and sometimes conflicting) themes in participants’ responses linked to fairness, decency and reciprocity but also tradition, culture and expectation.

Is respect important?

While respect is not well-defined, there is general agreement that it is of importance to people (Dillon, 2003, 2022). This is supported in NI whereby 89 per cent of NILT respondents disagreed with the statement that ‘respect isn’t very important to me’ in 2018. Only five per cent agreed that respect was not important to them. Finding respect personally important was slightly higher

for women than men with 92 per cent of females compared to 85 per cent of males disagreeing that respect is not important to them. In contrast, while not statistically significant, the proportion of those with a limiting health condition/illness who indicated that respect was personally important was lower than for those who did not have a limiting health condition/illness (86% vs 90%). There were, however, no other differences found across social groups/categories in terms of age, qualification or socio-economic status. This suggests that respect, however personally interpreted, is generally felt to be important across multiple societal categories.

Who deserves respect?

One of the main definitions of respect is ‘valuing, caring about and being concerned for’ oneself or others (Somerville, 2009). Thus, as an attitude, respect implies a subject who respects, and an object which is respected – i.e., respect is always given to, paid to, or shown to some object (Dillon, 2003, 2022). A key question for theorists and researchers, therefore, is who or what is worthy of this type of ‘regard’ and appreciation. While some believe that all human beings are worthy of respect, others understand respect as something that is earned or gained, as well as lost. Or that it is dependent on displaying certain qualities, actions or achievements, and meeting certain standards.

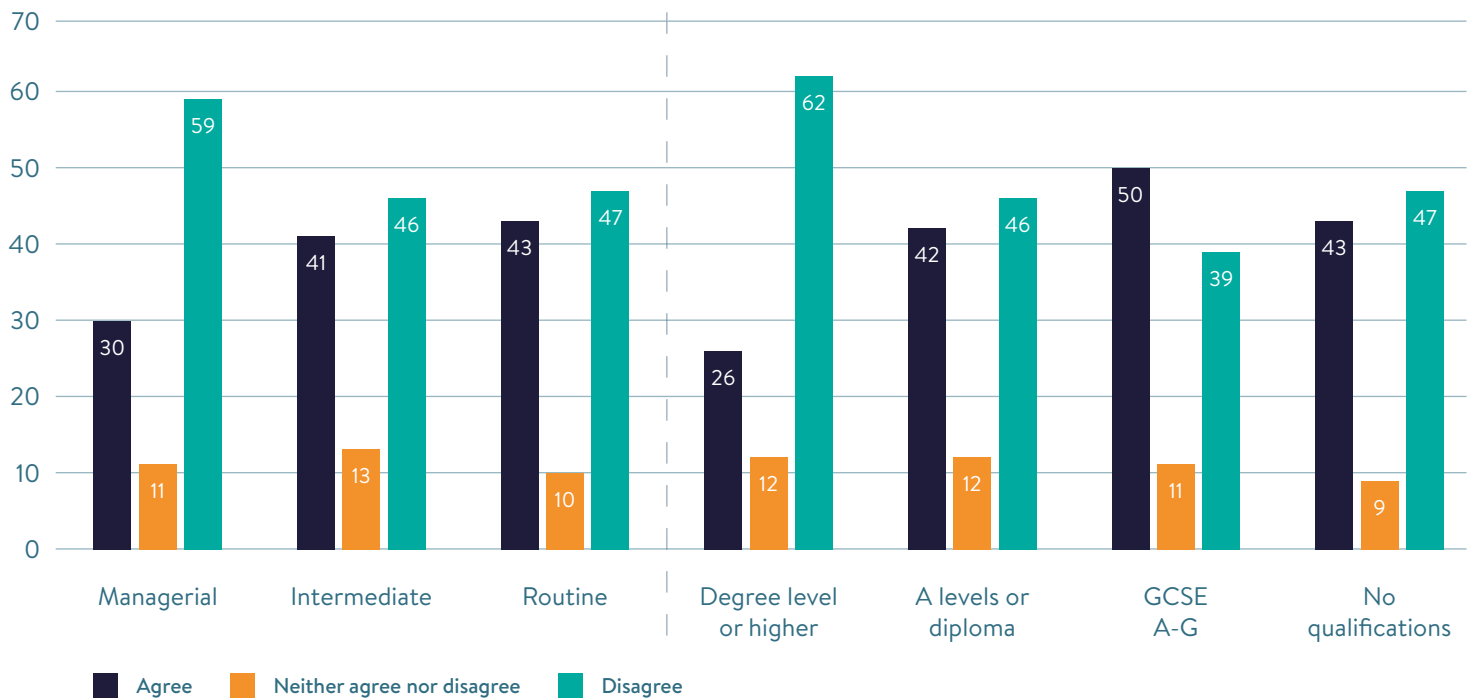
In 2018, NILT respondents were asked their view on whether respect had to be earned. Most agreed that respect had to be earned (79%). There were no statistically significant differences in terms of age, sex and disability. However, there appeared to be some differences in terms of socio-economic status and qualifications. For instance, those in routine occupations were much more likely to understand respect as having to be earned (86%) compared to those in managerial or intermediate occupations (72% and 79% respectively). In addition, those with no qualifications and those with GCSEs as their highest qualification were also more likely to consider that respect had to be earned (84% and 86% respectively), compared to those who had A levels/ diploma, or degree level or higher qualifications (76% and 69% respectively).

Related to this are those whom respondents feel are deserving of respect. While almost four in five respondents felt respect needed to be earned, there was much less agreement when it came to showing respect. Here, just two in five (41%) agreed that they only respect those who deserve it, thus suggesting differences in attitudes and actual behaviours. There were, however, differences between respondents in terms of age, sex, socio-economic status, recorded highest qualifications, and disability. Some of these were more salient than others; we now discuss them in turn.

Although age differences were not statistically significant, some age groups appeared more likely to claim that they only respected those who deserved it (50% of 18-24-year-olds agreeing with the statement compared to 35% of 25-34-year-olds, 36% of 45-54-year-olds or 40% of 65+-year-olds). In addition, although not statistically significant either, a higher proportion of men agreed that they only respected those who deserved it (45%) compared to a smaller proportion of women (38%), as well as a higher proportion of those with a limiting health condition/disability (47%) compared to those with none (40%). Statistically-significant differences were found in terms of socio-economic status and highest qualifications, with those in routine and intermediate occupations more likely to agree with the statement (43% and 41% respectively) compared to those in managerial occupations (30%). This trend was also true of those with GCSEs or no qualifications (50% and 43% respectively) compared to those with a degree level qualification or higher (26%) (Figure 1).

There does appear to be some consistency here in that those of lower socio-economic status and those with fewer educational qualifications are more likely to feel that respect needs to be earned and should only be shown to those deserving of it. This may reflect their personal experiences of respect (see below - ‘Experiencing respect’).

Figure 1: How much would you agree or disagree that you only respect those who deserve it? By National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) [left] and highest qualification achieved [right] (%) (NILT 2018)



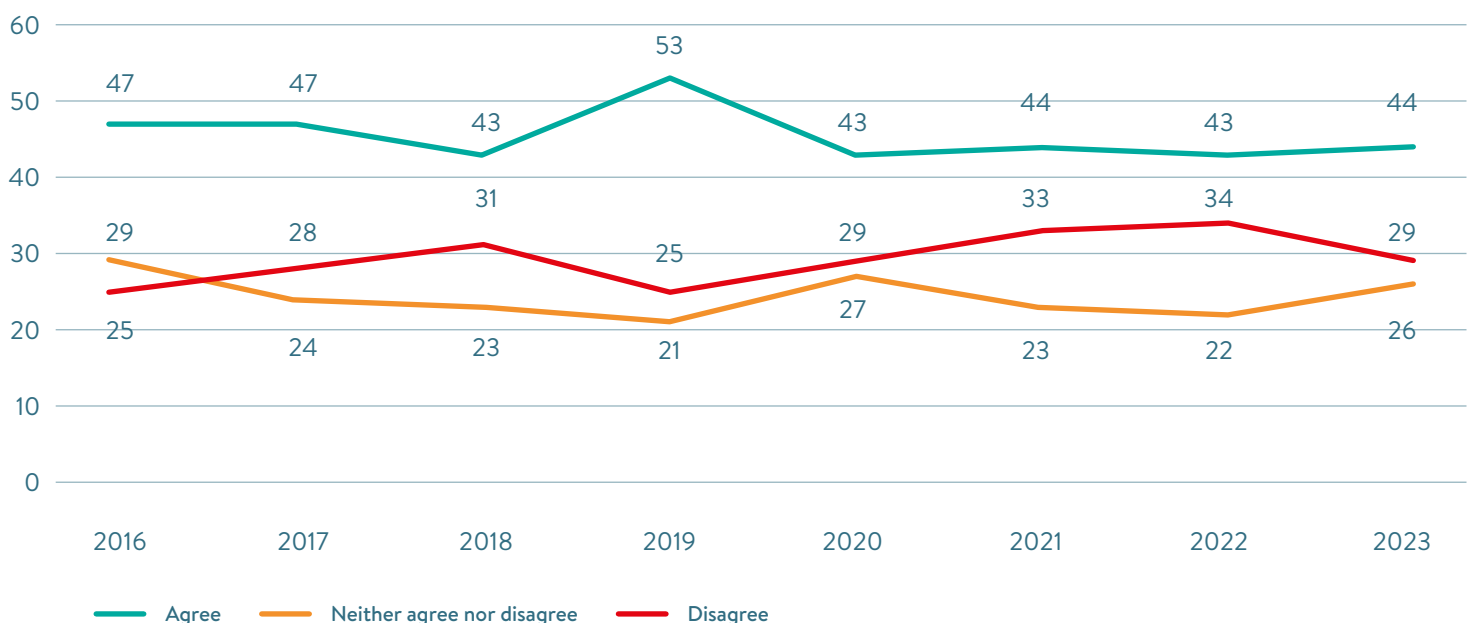
Is Northern Ireland a respectful society?

One of the questions that has been asked since 2016 is whether NI is a place where people respect one another. Although there are some differences between the years (with the year 2019 displaying the

most positive views), respondents' views appear divided, with just under half of the sample agreeing with the statement that 'Northern Ireland is a place where people respect each other' (Figure 2).

Consistently over time, between one-quarter and one-third of respondents disagree that NI is a respectful society.

Figure 2: How much would you agree or disagree that Northern Ireland is a place where people respect each other? (%) NILT 2016-2023



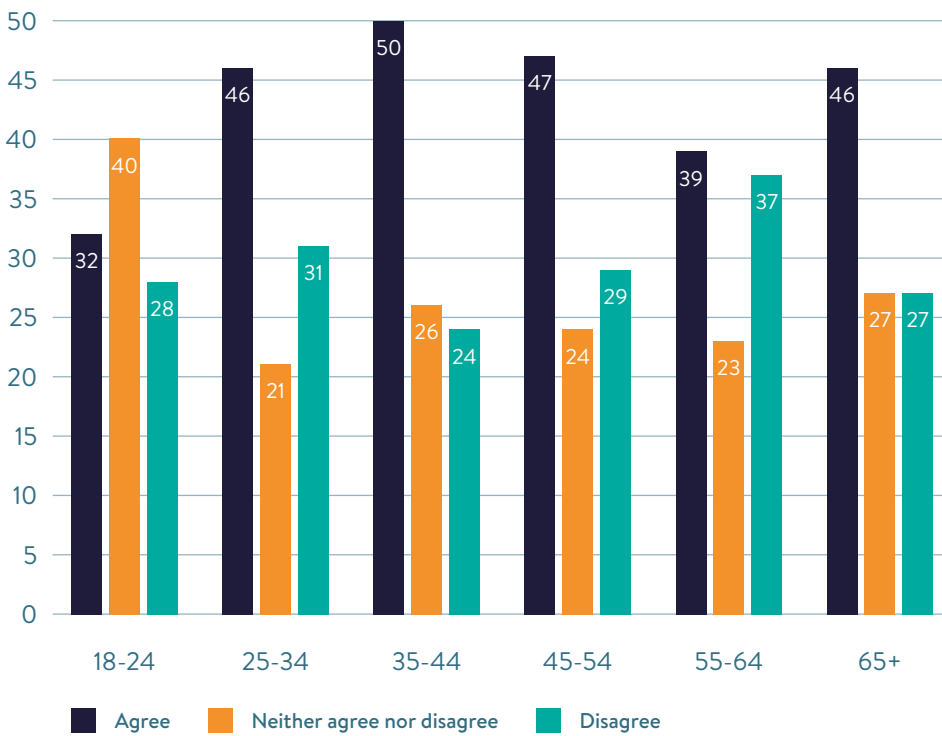
When examining this attitude among different social groups/categories, we focus on figures from the 2023 survey. Here we see that younger people (18-24-year-olds) were less likely to agree with the statement (32% vs 44% for the total sample) and much more likely to respond neither agree nor disagree (40% vs 26% for the total sample) (Figure 3). There were also statistically-significant differences in terms of disability, with

just one in three respondents with a limiting health condition/illness (34%) agreeing with the statement compared to a higher proportion – nearly half – of those that did not have a limiting health condition (47%).

Not surprisingly, those that felt they themselves were treated with less respect were more likely to disagree that NI is a place where people respect

one another. For instance, nearly half (47%) of those who reported being treated with less respect at least once a week, compared to only 21 per cent of those who reported never being treated with less respect, disagreed with the statement (see below – ‘Experiencing respect’). There were no other marked differences between other groups.

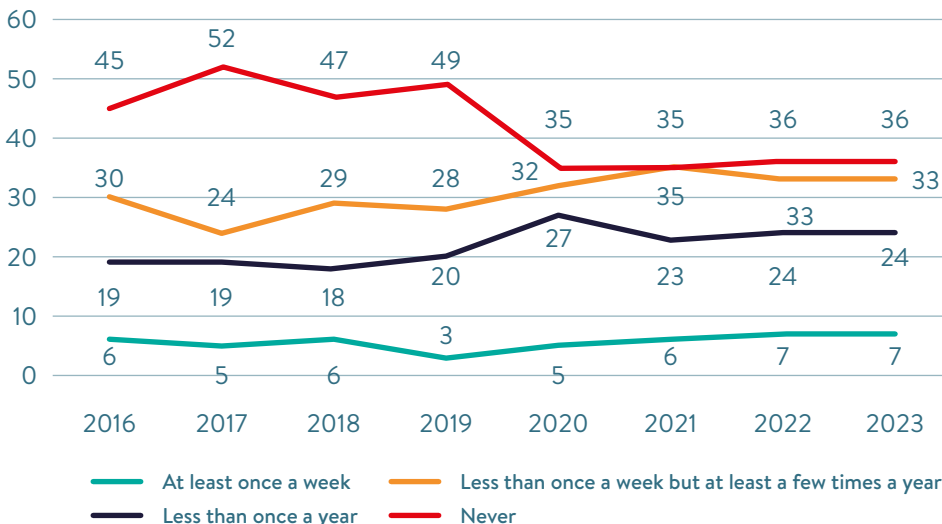
Figure 3: How much would you agree or disagree that Northern Ireland is a place where people respect each other? (%) By age group (NILT 2023)



Experiencing respect

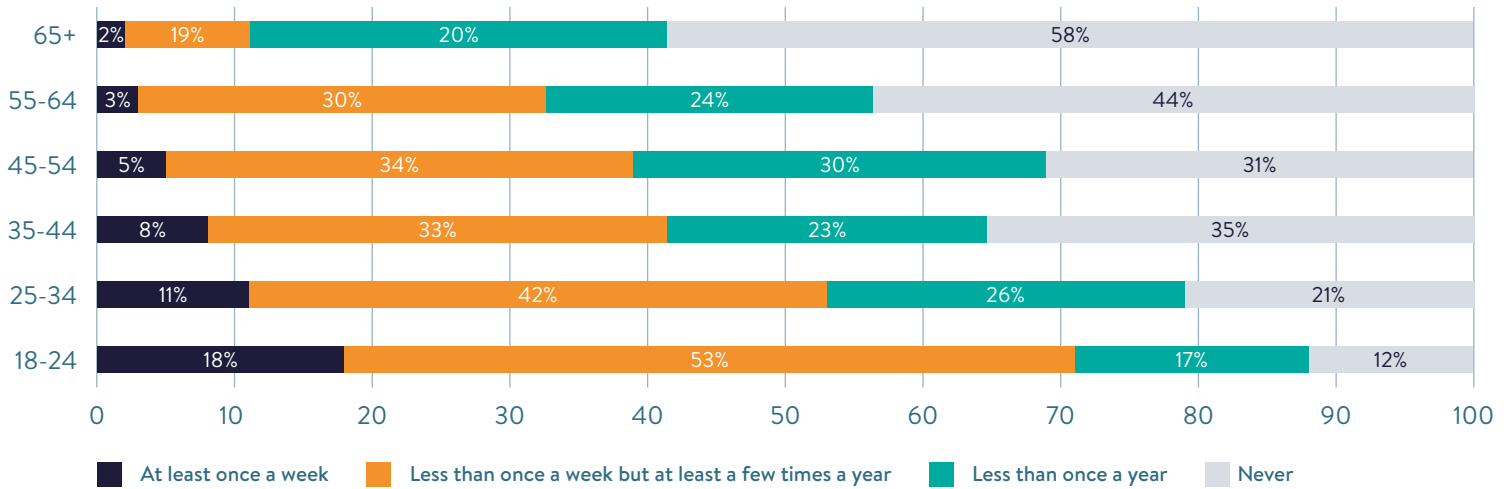
Since 2016, NILT has collected data on the degree to which people feel they are treated with respect. Figure 4 demonstrates the frequency with which respondents report feeling less respected than others over an eight-year period. In general, most respondents claim to be treated with respect most of the time, although since 2019 there seems to be a sharp decrease in the percentage of respondents claiming to never have been treated with less respect than other people are. There are also marked differences between groups/social categories in how often individuals claim to be treated with less respect than others.

Figure 4: How often are you treated with less respect than other people are? (%) NILT 2016-2023



Here we concentrate on the findings from the 2023 survey. Regarding age, statistically-significant differences emerged, with a considerably higher proportion of older people (65+-year-olds) feeling they were treated with respect (i.e., 58% responded ‘never’ being treated less respectfully than other people) compared to a much smaller proportion of young people (12% of 18-24-year-olds) (Figure 5). On the other hand, a much higher proportion of young people (18-24-year-olds), compared to any other age group, reported being regularly or fairly regularly treated with less respect (18% at least once a week and 53% less than once a week but at least a few times a year).

Figure 5: How often are you treated with less respect than other people? By age group (NILT 2023)



Interestingly, no differences were found in terms of sex despite women reporting high levels of gender-based harassment and hate/misogyny in other research (e.g., Lagdon et al., 2023; McAlister et al., 2023). There were barely any differences in terms of disability. However, there

were some significant differences in terms of socio-economic status (Table 1), with those with routine occupations more likely to feel disrespected at least once a week (14% vs 5% of those in managerial occupations or 4% of those in intermediate occupations). In relation

to highest qualifications, those with no qualifications were also more likely to feel disrespected at least once a week than those with a degree level qualification or higher (16% vs 5%) (Table 1).

Table 1: How often are you treated with less than respect than other people are? NS SEC and highest qualification achieved (NILT 2023)

Frequency of being treated with less respect	National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC)			
	Managerial	Intermediate	Routine	
At least once a week	5%	4%	14%	
Less than once a week but at least a few times a year	32%	31%	40%	
Less than once a year	26%	23%	17%	
Never	37%	43%	30%	
Frequency of being treated with less respect	Highest qualification achieved			
	Degree level or higher	A levels or diploma	GCSE A-G	No qualifications
At least once a week	5%	8%	8%	16%
Less than once a week but at least a few times a year	35%	39%	26%	27%
Less than once a year	24%	25%	24%	23%
Never	36%	28%	42%	34%

Conclusion

Consistent with other research, analysis of the NILT data demonstrates that respect is multifaceted, incorporating a range of attitudes and behaviours. While not easily defined, perhaps because it is intuitive and felt, there is general agreement that it is important in people's lives. In defining respect most responses related to the consideration of others – in thoughts, words or actions. Most of the data we have on respect, however,

is from adults' perspectives. This is interesting given that age is a significant factor in experiences of respect, with the youngest age group in the NILT survey experiencing respect less often than other age groups.

In 2025, questions will be added to the Kids' Life and Times survey of 10-11-year-olds and the Young Life and Times survey of 16-year-olds to, for the first time,

collect the views and experiences of children and young people on respect. It will be interesting to compare their definitions with those of adults in the NILT data and collect the experiences of a cohort for whom there is an almost inherent obligation to show respect to those older than them, as evidenced in some of the responses to the open question in the 2018 NILT survey.

Key Points:

- Respect is considered important by the majority of NILT respondents (89%) and something that must be earned (79%) (in 2018).
- Respondents were divided on whether or not they would/did personally respect only those who deserve it, with only 41 per cent agreeing this was the case (in 2018).
- Less than half of NILT respondents between 2016-2023 agreed that Northern Ireland was a place where people respected each other (except for 2019 in which agreement reached 53%). In particular, the youngest age group and those with a disability were less likely to believe that NI is a place where people respect each other.
- Young people (18-24 years) and those of lower socio-economic status reported being treated with less respect than others.
- Perhaps reflective of their own experiences, those that experienced respect less often (including the youngest age group) were less likely to feel that Northern Ireland is a respectful society.

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