



Department of
Education



Children and Young People's Strategy

Report of Consultations with Children and Young People

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Introduction

The Participation Network is a project of Children in Northern Ireland. It was established in 2007, with funding from OFMdfM, to support Government Departments and agencies to engage children and young people, their parents and carers in public decision making.

The Participation Network:

- Supports organisations to develop comprehensive strategies for engaging children and young people in their work
- Facilitates direct engagements between officials and children and young people
- Develops and delivers bespoke training to Government officials
- Develops and designs child friendly versions of Government strategies, policies, legislation, reports and other documentation.

The Participation Network was commissioned by the Department of Education to undertake a consultation with children and young people on the draft Children and Young People's Strategy

The consultation set out to elicit views on:

- Whether the Strategy has focused on the correct priorities to achieve each outcome;
- Whether there is anything else children and young people think needs to be done through the Strategy;
- How can the Executive ensure ongoing engagement with children and young people during the implementation of the Strategy?

Focus groups

In total six focus groups were held, involving 108 young people

Age	N ^o of yp
12 yrs old	3
13 yrs old	7
14 yrs old	21
15 yrs old	12
16 yrs old	21
17 yrs old	17
18 yrs old	12
19 yrs old	7
20 yrs old	3
23 yrs old	5
Total	108

Location	Male	Female	Total
Lisnaskea – Co. Fermanagh	6	5	11
Belfast – Co. Antrim	9	21	30
Derry – Co. L'Derry	7	5	12
Keady – Co. Armagh	10	6	16
Newry – Co. Down	16	14	30
Dungannon – Co. Tyrone	5	4	9
Total	53	55	108

Findings

The views expressed by children and young people in relation to each of the strategy's outcomes are summarised below.

The main focus of the workshops was to determine if the young people felt that the N.I. Executive was doing the right things in this strategy, and whether they felt there were other areas that need to be addressed.

Overall, it would be fair to say that young people were happy with the 8 outcomes established within the strategy. They did, however, have a lot to say about aspects of the outcomes that they felt needed to be addressed further.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY HEALTHY

Mental health emerged as a clear priority area for the young people in all focus groups. It was raised again and again as a major concern. There was general agreement that not enough is being done to address the mental health needs of young people.

The young people identified a number of **factors that give rise** to poor mental health and which need to be addressed if the strategy is to prove effective. These included:

- Exam pressure and the stress this causes
- Lack of social opportunities either because of having to study or the absence of local facilities
- Widespread drug abuse
- Social media and peer pressure
- Abuse of alcohol among young people
- Difficulty of access to services for young people with mental health difficulties – long waiting lists
- Underdevelopment of, and underinvestment in, mental health services

“It’s hard to have a social life with so much homework to do – it effects mental health – you need something to look forward to.”

“It’s so hard to get an appointment in a mental health place – you need to speak to a person face-to-face – somewhere you can walk in at 3 o’clock in the morning.”

“There isn’t enough money for organisations that help with mental health.”

Young people also came up with suggestions for how the issue of mental health might be addressed. Many highlighted the need for **more education** for young people and parents alike. They felt that education around mental health, and the development of coping skills, should start in primary school. Many of the young people spoke about suicide and some related stories of close friends or relatives who had taken their own lives.

“Some think suicide is the only option – there needs to be more training on suicide prevention.”

“Parents and carers should have more education on the symptoms people can show.”

They particularly stressed the importance of **youth work** and informal settings.

“Projects and youth clubs can help – they can distract you and be a positive in your life.”

“In youth clubs you can talk about things and be yourself.”

Some young people felt that the **taboo and stigma** around mental health served to prevent many young people from seeking help. They felt awareness raising was needed to tackle this.

“There is still a lot of stigma – young people are too shy or too ashamed to ask for help. There should be advertisements on TV so young people know they’re not the only one going through it.”

Mental health proved to be such a priority issue for young people that it dominated the health discussions. There was very little mention of **physical health**, except in relation to addictions i.e. the problem of young people smoking, the availability of drugs and how easy it is for even young children to access alcohol.

“Drugs and alcohol is a big issue – it effects your education.”

“More money should be put into services – detox centres, counsellors in schools, drugs education.”

A number of young people felt that the lack of **sex education** was an issue in relation to health.

“Sex education is a touchy subject – particularly in Catholic schools – kids need to be informed about the complications of sexual activity.”

“There should be sex education in primary schools – they’re not told about puberty, adolescence, physical changes - even ‘though they’re about to go through it.”

Most often an **informal / youth work** response was advocated.

“Brook should be going into schools – they should bring in outside people or else cover it in youth clubs.”

“You can’t deal with that sort of stuff with a teacher – you should have talks in the youth club.”

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ENJOY PLAY AND LEISURE

The main issue raised by young people in relation to play and leisure concerned the prevalence of **negative stereotyping** of young people. Many related that when they wanted to “hang out” in public spaces, adults treated them with suspicion.

“You get stereotyped and lumped in with people who actually are causing problems.”

“Young people stay in because they’re not allowed to play outside. Adults move you on – no ball games allowed.”

“People don’t want teenagers hanging around.”

“People think the worst of all young people – there’s a prejudice against us.”

Some raised **safety issues** saying that they were put off using public amenities e.g. parks because of drugs, vandalism and fighting.

“Some parks become a problem because of drugs – then you can’t use them any more.”

“Our park is just a drinking den – they end up fighting and wreck the place - you wouldn’t go there.”

An issue raised by many young people concerned the **lack of local facilities** for young people and, for some the **prohibitive cost** of using local centres.

Young people who live **rurally** feel they have less access to provisions such as sports, leisure, cinema etc. and have difficulty getting transport to larger urban areas.

“Living rurally is boring, there’s nothing to do – you get drunk just because you’re bored.”

“Everything happens in the town – but how do you get to the town – buses are useless.”

“You need more leisure centres – ‘though they can be expensive.”

“It should be affordable – or free.”

“Schools and sports clubs should be open up to more public use.”

Young people were generally able to readily identify the **benefits of play and leisure** and some mentioned that this outcome represented a positive commitment on the part of the Government. They felt that play and leisure could contribute to mental health by reducing stress and anxiety, helping young people stay focussed at school, improving social skills, providing opportunities to develop social networks and promoting creativity.

The value of having locally based **youth clubs** was highlighted by many young people who availed of such facilities. They mentioned both the fun and educational aspects of membership.

“If it wasn’t for the youth club, I’d have nowhere to go.”

“There should be more money for youth groups – you can have fun and that chills you out.”

“You can do sport, drama and learn about stuff in a way that you can take it in.”

Young people also brought up the issue of **social media**. Some felt that it was too prevalent and led to young people staying at home more and losing face-to-face contact. In some instances this could put young people at risk.

“There is more and more cyber bullying happening.”

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN AND ACHIEVE

Predictably young people had a great deal to say about this outcome. The major issue emerging across the focus groups was in relation to the **emphasis on exams** as a measure of success and the stress that this brought with it.

“School should be about more than just exams. There’s a lot of pressure to do homework and a heavy workload of tests. There’s no co-ordination among teachers to control the workload.”

“Children should be at the centre of education – it should be based on their learning needs rather than passing exams.”

“Assessment should focus more on course work – exams cause too much pressure.”

Many young people felt that more could be done in schools to **tackle stress**.

“There needs to be more support, there isn’t enough counselling. Teachers don’t really know what’s going on at home. There should be more about managing stress.”

“There can be a lot of stress to pass exams – there should be more support to help with stress.”

Many young people spoke about the need for a more **varied curriculum**, arguing for what might be described as, a more rounded education. They talked about the need for young people to learn life skills, the need for more non-academic subjects, and the need for pupils to be treated more as individuals.

“We need to learn practical stuff – taxes, politics, how to use a credit card, how to pay bills, what car insurance is.”

“Life skills should be part of the curriculum – how to vote, skills for the workplace. There should be a better understanding of democracy and parliament, the voting system.”

“There should be a greater choice of subjects based on young people’s interests.”

“People have different skills, education should look at the individual child because everyone learns differently – it shouldn’t be one size fits all.”

“Grammar schools should focus less on academic subjects – lots of pressure – think of pupils as individuals rather than academic subjects. There is more to learning.”

Most of the young people who mentioned the **transfer test** felt negatively about it. Some felt it was unfair and ineffective and many talked about the stress it placed on young children.

“The transfer test is not an accurate predictor of someone’s potential.”

“The 11+ system makes people segregate.”

“Children have to rebuild their confidence after the transfer test.”

“The transfer test creates anxiety, the build up is unnecessary – all the costs of tutoring. It’s basically unfair – there’s an uneven playing field for those from unfortunate circumstances.”

In a related point some young people were concerned about **inequality** in education, particularly in relation to the grammar school system, the distribution of resources and the education of children with disabilities.

“People don’t get an equal chance. If you’re from the lower class you don’t get the same chance.”

“There are different facilities in different schools – people get different treatment – grammar versus secondary – it’s discrimination.”

“Some special schools don’t support pupils to achieve – there is segregation of children with disabilities – especially physical disabilities.”

The issue of **bullying and pastoral care** in schools was also raised. There was a general agreement that teachers could benefit from more training in relation to dealing with bullying and supporting children, particularly those experiencing stress. On-line bullying was seen as an increasing problem.

“There is more on-line bullying, it’s more subtle and hard for teachers to do anything about because it’s not obvious all of the time, but under the surface.”

Most of the young people expressed support for **integrated education** and felt that more young people should be able to avail of it.

The value of **youth work and informal learning** was also highlighted by young people discussing this outcome. They felt that the informal atmosphere was best for exploring issues like sex education, they appreciated the opportunity to have a say in decisions and described the impact on their personal development.

“There should be more informal education like in youth clubs. The doors it has opened is unreal. You get to speak your opinion more and learn that way. You learn about what’s socially going on around you.”

You can talk about anything – it feels safe to learn about sex.”

“You can learn to make decisions in the youth club – our senior members influence what happens there.”

“Youth work can help someone to develop their character – it really gave me the confidence to speak out.”

“It’s a chance to meet young people from all over the place – they can literally change your life.”

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE LIVE IN SAFETY AND STABILITY

In relation to this outcome the clear priority issue for young people was **bullying**. Young people felt that many of their peers felt unsafe at school.

“Imagine feeling afraid all the time you’re in school – and, like, you have to go – every day.”

The issue of **cyber bullying** was raised again. Many young people felt that adults were largely unaware of the problem and they suggested that training would be helpful.

“Parents haven’t a clue about cyber bullying – it wasn’t around in their day.”

“Parents need awareness raising about cyber bullying – it can be going on under their noses.”

Interestingly, young people identified progressive legislation as a protective factor for young LGBT people and felt that, for example, the introduction of Marriage Equality would support a reduction in **homophobic bullying**. They felt this was the responsibility of politicians.

“Politicians should educate themselves about LGBT issues, HIV etc.”

They also discussed the issue of **children being abused by their parents**, and felt that more needed to be done to protect children in these circumstances.

“More direct action is needed for children with abusive parents.”

One group, living in a border area talked about feeling unsafe. They felt there was a lack of clarity around access to **emergency services** in a crisis and that the lines of responsibility were unclear. Some felt that no-one took responsibility and this left the community feeling vulnerable.

Young people also spoke about safety in their **neighbourhoods**. Some felt they were safe where they lived because they were used to the area. In one group young people cited instances where men in cars were approaching young girls in the neighbourhood and this was very frightening.

Young people in rural areas felt that the lack of **public transport** compromised their safety. Buses are scheduled so infrequently that children and young people have to wait in isolated areas for considerable periods of time.

Young people in general felt that they learned very little about how to keep themselves safe. They felt that classes in **personal safety** should be offered in schools or youth clubs. They felt this should focus on issues such as dealing with peer pressure, and drugs and alcohol.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCE ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING

Overall the priority issues for young people were the costs relating to education and the need for young people to have job opportunities. There was very little discussion of the environment. Some young people felt that the **environment** wasn’t an issue that young people take seriously, while others argued that more needed to be done in relation to raising awareness of issues like littering and recycling.

There was discussion on the **Government’s priorities** for action, which echoed comments made in relation to many of the other actions set out in the strategy.

“They’re so vague – the focus is on words not actions. The question is how the Government will reduce poverty, make the economy stronger and protect the environment.”

In terms of **costs relating to education**, young people spoke of the expense of buying uniforms and equipment and the cost of transport to school. Some young people described how this could impact on mental health.

“Young people who don’t have the right stuff get bullied and picked on – this can lead to mental health issues.”

They felt that **transport**, particularly in rural areas, needed to be available, frequent and affordable.

It was also felt that families could miss out on essential things and leisure opportunities because of having to meet the costs of things like uniforms. Some young people felt there should be somewhere to donate old uniforms for families who can’t afford to buy new outfits.

There was a particular focus on **poverty**. Young people talked about the range of impacts that poverty has in relation to education and future prospects. The issue of **abortion** was also highlighted in these discussions. It was felt that in the absence of legal abortion here, only young women who had the money to go to England could afford to access abortions.

Some young people felt that the Educational Maintenance Allowance didn’t provide enough money to live on and that this kept them in poverty.

“School trips – things like music lessons – young people in poverty miss out on those.”

“If you can’t afford to get the things you need to support your education it can affect your chances of getting a job – you whole life.”

“Young women need access to safe, legal abortion.”

Some felt that more needed to be done to raise awareness of poverty, lift people out of poverty and finance projects like food banks.

Young people were very concerned about their prospects of securing **employment** opportunities. They also felt that it was unfair that the minimum wage for young people was at a lower rate than that paid to adults. Some argued that work needs to provide a living wage, so that it pays to work.

They recognised the importance of skills developed and welcomed training opportunities, although many felt these should be increased.

“There needs to be more jobs for young people and they should be paid the same as adults.”

“Jobs just aren’t available to young people”

“More skills training is needed to help young people get jobs.”

“Apprenticeships are a good idea.”

Some young people felt that students should be able to avail of employment placement programmes like the Work IT initiative.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY

The discussions in relation to this outcome focussed mostly on young people having a voice. While there was a degree of cynicism about the Government expressed in discussion of most outcomes, it was perhaps most apparent in the discussions pertaining to this outcome.

“They say they’re going to listen to young people – why aren’t they doing it now. All Government statements are in the future tense.”

It was clear that almost all young people taking part welcomed the opportunity to have a say on the Children and Young People’s Strategy and indeed on other matters. There was a great deal of energy and enthusiasm for this topic. Many of the young people were active members of youth forums and described how much they got out of their involvement.

However, the majority of the young people expressed disillusionment with the processes and structures for participation, they felt that decision makers don’t really take their views on board and spoke of tokenism.

Many felt that even ‘though they have a voice, they are **not listened to** by the media, by adults or by politicians. Some felt this was because of ageism and that people feel that the opinions of children and young people don’t matter.”

“The media don’t want to hear the full story – they’re only interested in hearing from older people.”

“They hear us but dismiss it – when you’re 16 – 23 you’re not listened to.”

“Adults don’t listen to young people. They always think you’re up to something.”

“I’ve never seen something change as a result of a consultation – they don’t report back to young people.”

“Politicians don’t reach out to us because we don’t vote.”

“Politicians aren’t actively listening – they’re actively putting us off.”

While many young people from NICCY and other youth forums made significant contributions to this consultation, overall there was a feeling among young people that engagement **structures** weren’t effective in ensuring that young people’s views were taken on board.

“It’s good to be listened to by NICCY – but sometimes it seems that NICCY doesn’t have the influence it should have.”

“How can we have a say in Community Planning? Most young people don’t know anything about it.”

“Schools Councils – no-one takes them seriously. Whenever pupils put forward ideas the response from teachers is ‘we’ll see what we can do’ – but nothing is acted on. Teachers aren’t interested in pupils’ views – the council is just a front – for display.”

“There’s a lot of tokenism – it’s very frustrating – there should be active efforts to speak to young people. If young people are called ‘hard to reach’ it’s because the people in charge are not trying hard enough.”

The majority of young people said they had not heard of the work of NICCY. There was a general view that schools should do more to **publicise** NICCY and other youth forums. It

was also felt that community planning consultations should be geared towards young people, and publicised more.

Young people also talked about the **political process**. They felt that, as young people, they were **more open minded** than most politicians. They cited examples in relation to supporting LGBT rights in general, marriage equality in particular and attitudes towards refugees.

There was a degree of anger about the outcome of the Brexit referendum.

“Young people weren’t asked but it will effect our lives the most.”

Young people were particularly exercised around the **voting age**, many of them felt that this should be reduced to 16 years of age.

“You can get married at 16 but you can’t vote”

“You’re allowed to work and pay taxes but you can’t vote!”

They welcomed the fact that more young people were coming into politics and felt that young people needed more **political education**.

“Young people need to be taught about politics – we need information on the parties, jargon is intimidating – we need to move away from orange and green politics.”

“There’s a need to introduce young people to politics at a younger age. Our passion is going to waste.”

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE LIVE IN A SOCIETY WHICH RESPECTS THEIR RIGHTS

Similar themes emerged in the discussions on rights. Again, young people appeared to be **disillusioned with the Government**.

“They won’t do anything – they say what they think you want to hear to get your votes but they don’t do it.”

Some young people expressed anger about the heating scandal and felt that alleged **corruption** among politicians did not augur well for delivery on children’s rights.

“If a young person was deceitful in school they’d be punished.”

“There’s too much corruption to believe they’d take children’s rights seriously.”

Again the issue of lowering the **voting age** to 16 was raised. There were also issues relating to what young people felt was a poor relationship with the **PSNI**.

“Cops don’t respect us. You don’t see them going up to a forty year old and asking them to empty their pockets.”

Many young people felt that much more **education on rights** was needed for both young people and adults. They felt that very few children and young people knew about their rights.

One group set out the **priorities** in relation to this outcome as: lowering the voting age, making sure that the PSNI treat young people fairly and more education for adults and young people on rights.

There was also a great deal of discussion around the **negative stereotyping** of young people. Many young people expressed the view that adults look down on young people and don't treat them as equals. They felt the media often portrayed young people in a negative light.

They felt that the poor view that many young people had of **politicians** might be redressed by politicians engaging with young people more directly, and having a greater presence on social media. Some felt that politicians focussed too much on the past rather than the present and future.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE LIVE IN A SOCIETY IN WHICH EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND GOOD RELATIONS ARE PROMOTED

In relation to equality of opportunity young people highlighted issues for LGBT people, refugees and ethnic minorities. A key point made by young people was that the **Government was a poor role model**. They said that equality of opportunity needed to come from the top down and that the Government was giving a poor lead because they were ignoring LGBT rights and were refusing to allow LGB people to get married.

"How do they expect us to have good relations when they can barely speak to each other never mind work together."

"We're the only part of the UK that discriminates against gay people in our laws – they don't treat people as equal."

One group set out its **priorities** as: Government needs to be a better role model and needs to be able to work together; Use funding more wisely for youth programmes and opportunities for mixing; and introduce gay marriage.

Young people were very supportive of **integrated education** but some felt that while **shared education** was important, it happened more in primary schools. They felt that there should be more funding for youth programmes that facilitate contact between Catholic and Protestant young people.

"It's good when it happen through youth clubs – it's a safe way to do it – but it's not happening enough – there needs to be more money put in."

Young people felt that the concept of **good relations should be wider** and be about more than the religious divide. Many identified the need to learn about a range of religious faiths and to know more about different nationalities and cultures. They pointed out that discrimination was based on a variety of factors and they should have opportunities to learn about all aspects.

"We need to know about different religions and what other people believe in – we don't know anything about Muslims except what you see on the news."

"There should be education about racism and other types of discrimination – from a young age – like nursery school. Prevention is better than cure."

There was a concern expressed about **refugees** and making sure that their needs are met, particularly as numbers increase.

“They come here and don’t have anyone to fight for them – they need proper services and things like more support in schools.”

A group of young people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities spoke about their experience of **racism**. They felt that racism was widespread but rarely tackled. They said that it could be blatant or more subtle. They concluded that there was generally a fear of difference and that this led people to discriminate.

“There’s places you can’t get into because of the colour of your skin.”

“Even small children will call you racist names.”

“In McDonalds, and other shops – like Tescos – you have to leave your bag and then you’re followed round by security – white children have to leave their bags but they’re not followed round the shop.”

FUTURE COMMUNICATION WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people were asked how they might be involved in ongoing engagement around the implementation and review of the strategy. Four options were suggested but young people were also given the opportunity to make their own suggestions.

Option 1 – Set up a panel of children and young people to meet 2 or 3 times a year to talk about how the plan is going.

This option was only received positively in Belfast and even then by a minority. One young person felt that the NICCY panel already exists and could fulfil this function.

Option 2 – Have an Online Forum where you can post your views on how the plan is going.

This option was the least popular. Young people generally felt they wanted to be more actively engaged.

Option 3 – Ask organisations if we can come and meet with their groups of children and young people once a year to talk about how the plan is going.

This option was favoured by the majority of young people. In fact, it most closely mirrored the process the young people were engaging in. Some young people felt it could be operated in conjunction with option 4.

Option 4 – Bring children and young people from different organisations together in a big summit to talk about the plan every couple of years.

Some young people favoured this option, with a few commenting that it should be annual.

Other suggestions

- Two young people felt it would be good to have young members of parliament who could represent young people’s views.
- One young person felt that MPs should visit youth centres and schools to hear directly from young people
- Another felt that the views of young people upon whom issues impact should be targeted for engagement

- One felt that all four options could be used as this would take account of the range of young people's needs and level of comfort with speaking out.
- A young person suggested the development of an app that could survey young people on how they think the plan is going.
- One group felt that workshops could take place in schools with people from the Department of education present.