



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Education Bill: Northern Ireland Youth  
Forum Briefing

6 February 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Michaela Boyle  
Mr Jonathan Craig  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mrs Brenda Hale  
Mr Chris Hazzard  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr Sean Rogers  
Mr Pat Sheehan

**Witnesses:**

Mr Declan Campbell	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Mr Martin McAuley	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Miss Rhiannon Ní Cheallaigh	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Mr Chris Quinn	Northern Ireland Youth Forum

**The Chairperson:** I welcome to the Committee representatives of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. With us today are Martin McAuley, the chairperson; Rhiannon Ní Cheallaigh, the vice-chairperson; Chris Quinn, the director; and Declan Campbell. You are very welcome. I am personally pleased that, in the very short time you had to consider the invitation, you were able to turn it around and come to us this morning. Genuinely, the fact that you are the last group to make a presentation in the evidence sessions on the Bill is in no way a reflection of where we see young people and youth services. In a sense, having heard all that has been said by others, it gives you a prime opportunity to inform the Committee of your concerns and issues with the Bill, particularly how it impacts on young people.

Thank you for coming and for the time you have taken. Martin, we are in your and your colleagues' hands. Do not feel intimidated by any of us. We feel more intimidated by you. We are open to hear your presentation, and members will have questions. Thank you.

**Mr Martin McAuley (Northern Ireland Youth Forum):** Mr Chairman, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today. As always, I thank members for their time, and we value the opportunity to have meaningful dialogue with decision-makers.

It may be in order for us to first make some brief introductions on who we are. Given the subject matter of today's discussion, we will give our educational background so that you may have a flavour of the area that each of us, as young people — our director is not so young any more — has come

from. *[Laughter.]* I will start off. I am the chairperson of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. I went to Holy Cross Boys' Primary School in Ardoyne and then St Malachy's College in north Belfast. I suppose that I should declare an early interest in that I am a member of the board of governors of St Malachy's College. However, I am here as the chairman of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, and I will try not to allow my membership of the board of governors to influence anything I say.

**Miss Rhiannon Ní Cheallaigh (Northern Ireland Youth Forum):** I am the vice-chair of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. I attended Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain and Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin. I now go to Little Flower Girls' School.

**Mr Declan Campbell (Northern Ireland Youth Forum):** I went to Holy Cross Boys' Primary School in Ardoyne and St Gabriel's. I am here on behalf of Challenge for Youth.

**Mr Chris Quinn (Northern Ireland Youth Forum):** I am the director of the Youth Forum. For the record, my educational background was St Bernard's Primary School, Edmund Rice College and St Malachy's College. I am here now for my sins.

**Mr McAuley:** It may be useful if we give you some background on the Northern Ireland Youth Forum as an organisation, although I am aware that some of you probably know of our work anyway. The Northern Ireland Youth Forum was established in 1979 by the Department of Education to act as a direct link between young people, the Minister and the Department. Put simply, our role is to empower young people and give them access to decision-makers such as you. Our core aim is to promote the voice of young people and make their voice heard at the heart of government.

I suppose that if I was to sum up the work of the Youth Forum in one word it would be participation. With that in mind, I have to say that, generally speaking, our main concern about the Bill is the element of participation within it. It is no secret that our education system is long overdue a serious exercise in scrutiny and overhaul. However, where there are opportunities to really change the ethos of education here and shift the focus on to the active participation of young people, the Bill, in its current form, misses out somewhat, but not such much that we cannot change that before it achieves passage.

There are areas of the Bill that we are particularly concerned about, where the lack of emphasis on the role of young people, who are the primary service users, in shaping the system is most evident. That is particularly evident in clauses such as clause 28, but we can go into that in more detail later.

We also have concerns about the lack of focus on youth services at all. We have to remember that this is a Bill of 69 clauses and eight schedules, with a further 75 clauses in those schedules. Of those 144 would-be legislative provisions, youth services form the basis — I use that term lightly — of three provisions. Youth services are often described, fairly or not, as the neglected sibling of education, and I think that this Bill only furthers that impression. Given that the only piece of legislation to be repealed in its entirety by the Education Bill would be the Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, we would expect something more concrete to have been provided to fill the gap. However, again, that is something that we can come back to.

As was the case the last time we gave evidence to the Committee — I apologise to those members who were not assigned to the Committee at that time — our primary concerns remain the involvement of young people in the policymaking sphere. Nowhere should that be a greater priority than in education, yet that is simply not the case. I am sure that members are aware that the UK and Ireland are signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and I hope that I will not patronise you too much if I take the liberty of quoting from article 12 of the convention. It states:

*"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."*

What we have here is an opportunity to strengthen children's rights in domestic legislation. In 2002, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted about Northern Ireland:

*"school children are not ... consulted in matters that affect them."*

It called for:

*"further steps to promote, facilitate and monitor ... meaningful and effective participation of all groups of children".*

Whatever way you look at that, it is a damning indictment of our failure to uphold our responsibilities under article 12. In 2008, the Committee again reported and stated:

*"Participation of children in all aspects of schooling is inadequate".*

The next time the Committee reports, I do not want to be in the position of it continuing to highlight our failures in this area.

That is the backdrop to the participatory deficit that we think remains largely unaddressed by the Bill. Actually, in some cases, there is a cycling back of participation.

I think that it would probably be useful if we explained some of our specific concerns about the Bill. We start, quite largely, with clause 28. Clause 28(1) and 28(2) impose a duty on the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) to consult with sectoral bodies, youth service providers and educational service providers. Of course, that is to be welcomed. However, we cannot fall into the trap of allowing ourselves to think that the views of service providers — teachers and youth workers — will be equivalent to the views of young people. Youth workers and teachers may, in some cases, have their own particular agenda. I do not use that term in a very negative way, but it is an agenda that simply will not be there with young people who just want to have their voice heard.

Clause 28(4) states that ESA may consult with a range of stakeholders, and the list includes young people. That creates a clear dichotomy between service providers on one hand and service users on the other, giving less weight to the latter. We would argue that in drawing up area education plans, which have the unfortunate acronym of AEPs, there should be a duty on ESA to consult with young people. I note that, when the Department was giving briefings on the Bill, Mrs Dobson asked questions about that disparity and why there is no duty to consult with young people. As far as I can glean from the information, the response was that it would be impractical to consult with every young person. The problem I have with that response is that this provision does not allow for consulting with every young person. In fact, it would mean that ESA does not have to consult with any young people if it does not want to. That is where we have even more serious concerns.

Members, you will have to forgive me. As a law graduate, I sometimes think with a very cynical mind.

**The Chairperson:** There are no cynics on this Committee. Speaking impartially as the Chair, I have never known it to be cynical.

**Mr McAuley:** I can tell; it is always the case when we come here.

When reading through the Bill, I was initially perplexed about why the legislation contains a prescriptive list of groups that ESA may consult with. Surely, if the board of ESA had a mind to, it could consult with anyone — young people, old people, tall people or short people — it wanted to. Why include a list of people that it might consult with but has no duty to? Therein lies the point. We have deep concerns that this provision legislates for the notion that there is no duty to consult with young people on area plans. We have concerns that the provision is an exercise in covering the back of decision-makers, in case, in say two years' time, a young lad from Lurgan comes along and asks why there was no consultation with him or with young people on his local area education plan. The decision-makers could point to the legislation, which states that there is no duty to consult with young people anyway, and say, "Sorry about that. We went and asked your teacher, and they said that you were happy with it." That is the kind of problem that we face. I am sure that you are also aware that the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 made it a statutory requirement for a board of governors to consult pupils on changes or revisions to policy. Why then should there not be a similar statutory duty on ESA to consult pupils and young people on area-based plans?

The last time that I appeared before the Committee, I quoted Phil Scraton, a lecturer in criminology at Queen's University and a former chairman of Include Youth. I think that that quote remains valid here in the same context. He said:

*"Lack of consultation dominates the private and public domains that contextualise children's lives, reminding them that active participation in the decisions that define their destiny ... is for adults only."*

That is the very thing that we struggle to challenge daily, and this is a real opportunity to help all those who are engaged in that struggle.

There are other areas of the Bill where we believe that the participation of pupils could be greatly strengthened: for example, the appointment of school governors as re-legislated for under clause 39. We propose that that provision could be amended to provide for the specific appointment of a young person to each board of governors, and I hope that members are not recoiling in shock too much at that suggestion. It draws on a recommendation of the Committee from its inquiry into school councils, which was that a governor in each school should be identified to deal with engaging with the school council. We suggest taking that a step further and appointing a pupil to sit on the board of governors, because there can be no stronger link between governors and the student body if a pupil is there and represented. It is worth noting that that position was supported by the Children's Commissioner when she gave evidence on the inquiry into school councils. Furthermore, a Department of Education advance briefing paper to the Committee during the inquiry suggested that pupil membership of school boards of governors would increase effective student engagement. Now that the structure is being recodified, is this not the perfect time to translate those calls into action to prove that the commitment to engaging with young people goes beyond lip service?

In the same vein of participation, we argue that a space should be reserved on the board of ESA for — *[Inaudible.]* I am sure that your eyes are rolling at this stage, because you are probably sick of hearing from interested groups about why they should be represented on the board of ESA and having them ask why they are not there and someone else is. However, there are clear and compelling reasons for the involvement of a young person on the board beyond those that we have already talked about with regard to participation.

As previously noted, the Bill strips away the Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 and legislates for the removal of the library boards in favour of the Education and Skills Authority. Through the library boards, young people had a channel to voice their opinions on service delivery and to effect change through youth councils. When the boards are dissolved, the mechanism for that engagement will also dissolve, and the legislation provides no concrete replacement. In fact, the Bill erodes a way for young people to have their voice heard, and we believe that that could be compensated for by placing them at the top of the policymaking sphere and having their ideas dripped down through the structure.

Lastly, we argue that there needs to be a sectoral body for young people. As noted earlier, there is a duty for ESA to consult with sectoral bodies under clause 28, and, although a range of educationalist sectors will be accommodated, there is no recognised body to represent young people in that way. A range of bodies is funded by the current Youth Council to involve young people, and we are a prime example of that. It would be very prudent and forward-thinking to recognise a body to represent the views of those young people who do not yet have the capacity to give effect to the rights that we hope will be entailed in an amended version of the Bill.

I am sure that you can see that our primary concerns with the Bill are that young people should be afforded the space to participate in one of the systems that will most keenly affect their development. I can quote no better authority than the Department in its most recent advertising campaign:

*"Education works better when you get involved."*

Therefore, allow young people to get involved. Challenge the notion that only adults know what is best for young people; otherwise, the model may as well be:

*"Education works better when you are not involved."*

Those are our main concerns. If I have left anything out, Rhiannon, Chris or Declan will be happy to add it.

**Mr Quinn:** When we looked at this closely and prepared for today's presentation, we looked at Finland as a model, because we are told that it is one of the best educational models around. There are many things that we could learn from the Finnish model that Marty has alluded to, and that goes back to young people driving the agenda. We talked a lot, internally in the Youth Forum, with other young people about the curriculum itself. We looked at how, in Finland, there is not one curriculum but over 3,500 curricula. Those are shaped around the pupil and the parents and what the young person's

desires are for their career. In Finland, the curriculum is delivered in such a way that every school is a good school. The Minister talks about that concept, and we agree that we should be aiming for that. As such, in that school system, if you want to study a certain curriculum or a certain subject matter, you can do so between schools. That is not a big issue.

We also looked at how the curriculum was designed. We found evidence from Ken Robinson, who does a lot of lectures on the education system. He alluded to the fact that the curriculum was first designed at the time of industrialisation, so the key subjects were those such as maths, English and science. Those are very important, and we see the importance of them, but Ken Robinson also argues that there is the need to develop and invest in creativity and innovation. Especially in the present times of recession, we talk about the need for innovation. We felt, as did the young people we work with, that, because of the way the curriculum is delivered, it is often the young people who are really academically talented who excel. People who are good at maths, English and science will, ultimately, do well at school here, and that is fantastic and great for them and the schools. Often, many other children and young people are left behind. Currently, the system fails so many other young people. We believe that involving young people in curriculum design could help to shape the system. We think that, further down the line, that would have an impact on the problem of unemployment and young people who are NEET.

**Mr D Campbell:** I want to add something about the voices of young people being heard on the boards of governors. When I was at secondary school, I did not get a voice. My voice was not heard. In my view, it really did affect my education. I have found that youth services, which are being left out from the Bill, have benefited me a lot. Young people should have a bit more of a voice on the board of governors. It is their life, so why should they not have a voice in it? It is their future.

**Miss Ní Cheallaigh:** Clause 16(1)(a) and 16(1)(b) states that it is the duty of ESA to provide adequate facilities for education and youth activities. Although it says that there will be adequate buildings and services, it does not say what is meant by adequate. For instance, are Portakabins considered adequate for the school to be running? Is not having enough classrooms for the school to be allowed? The Bill does not state what is adequate, so would it not be easier to ask young people for their view on what is adequate?

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Chris, Martin, Declan and Rhiannon. The process that we will commence today, in an informal way, will be to go through the clauses of the Bill. In the next number of weeks, we will go through each clause. You made specific reference to clause 28 and other elements of the Bill. After this presentation, we will have one of the senior civil servants from the Department, Mr Chris Stewart, who dutifully attends this Committee every week along with his colleagues. They have been here and have heard the comments that you made and, from the Department's point of view, will be able to give some response to that, which will be useful. On the issue of consultation and of you having a sectoral body, clearly, we have issues around consultation and who will be consulted about the future provision of schools. We will come to that and take on board the issue that you raised.

I want to tease out a bit around the fact that the Youth Forum is a non-departmental public body. Chris, I do not know whether you received a phone call yesterday from a gentleman regarding the 1972 order.

**Mr Quinn:** I did, yes.

**The Chairperson:** I was going to give him the number for another Chris and ask him to ring him, but I decided to give him your number because it was about youth service and voluntary involvement. I did a bit of work about where it sat with the 1972 order. I am not that clear about it, because it seems to have been subsumed into the 1986 order around youth provision, which is now having an impact on this legislation. As a non-departmental public body, as things stand, do you feel that you have not been consulted, listened to and had your views taken on board? That is crucial, because some bodies, as they currently stand, will continue to be non-departmental public bodies after this Bill comes into operation. How do you view where you have been in all of that? I am taking into consideration Martin's points about feeling that you have not been consulted. Can you try to tie those two things together for me so that we have some idea about how your organisation currently sits in relation to how those things operate?

**Mr Quinn:** The previous time that we attended the Committee, we raised that very issue. We received notification from the Department that changes would be made to the way that we were funded, to our

position in the sector and to our links to the Minister. That was the key issue that we wanted to raise. At that time, we did not feel that we had been consulted adequately. Thankfully, we worked with the Department, the Minister and the permanent secretary at the end, and we came to some kind of arrangement. They sort of acknowledged that they perhaps had not gone about it the right way, and there was, at least, an interim period set up. Generally, where we sit, there is a degree of uncertainty. We have our usual notification from the Youth Council for Northern Ireland that we probably might get funding in the next year, but there are no certainties. That is the way that it has been for the past three or four years, and, as a sector, unfortunately, we get used to working that way. It is not ideal. We need certainty.

Putting a more positive spin on the Bill, we have waited a long time for the Bill to come through, and it will help. It will provide stability and certainty, and we look forward to that. As a youth forum, we are pretty confident that we will continue to be in existence regardless. We have proved that there is a need. We have proved that young people want to engage through a youth forum, and we have proved that we can secure funding from a variety of sources to do that. We aspire to have a strong link with the Department and the Minister and Committees such as this one. As Marty said in his introduction, we believe that direct engagement between young people and the decision-makers is a key part to participation. We are pushing hard for that, and we feel that the ESA Bill and the Priorities for Youth policy should include strong legislation. It should not be grey and say that "we might consult" but that "we will consult" with young people and the youth service and that there will be a direct link. Does that answer your question?

**The Chairperson:** Yes. You have basically come to the point where you feel that there is an arrangement as opposed to a relationship between you and the Department. I assume that you have to prepare a business case for anything that you propose to do, as opposed to receiving grant aid from the Department, which are two very different types of ways in which you can receive funding. Clearly, your current situation is that, if the Department decides that it will give you money, it will do so, but, on the other hand, if it decides not to, it has no duty to give you what you require. For members of the Committee, that is an important issue when we look particularly at the arrangements and the structure of sectoral bodies.

On the issue of consultation — I appreciate what you said about clause 28 in relation to the duty to consult — from your perspective, how do you feel that you as an organisation can advise? This point was raised in our previous presentation on teachers' pay. There is a proposal to change teachers' pension arrangements. We have thousands of teachers, but only 14 teachers replied to that.

How does your organisation go down the food chain and ensure that as a forum you accurately reflect the issues that are relevant to young people? Do you find trying to really engage with young people a problem? I know that you are all very enthusiastic about what you do at the board level and the forum level, but how do you feel that is down at the grass-roots level? I think that it is important for us to understand that as we look at the whole issue of consultation.

**Mr Quinn:** Every week, I get umpteen letters from Departments and other public bodies saying that there is a consultation on whatever. Everything we do is youth-led, and that is the way that we as an organisation approach it. Young people advise us as the staff team what the strategy and direction are and the key issues on which they want to engage. So, traditionally, young people drive the agenda on which consultations we respond to.

The challenge for us, as people who support young people in that process, is to ensure that it is meaningful. It can be very challenging. For instance, how do you turn the Bill into a document or use language that young people will be able to respond to in a meaningful way? So, that can be a difficulty, and it takes a lot of time, energy and resources to do that.

I think that there is a degree of consultation fatigue out there. You have probably heard that over and over again. Again, it is back to that meaningfulness. If people feel that their input has been meaningful, they will feel valued and respond to consultations again. For me, a big part of that is about feeding back, and we do not often receive that feedback.

I want to go back to what Martin said when he alluded to young people's voices dripping down through the system. We believe that that is key to solving consultation fatigue. Consultation should not happen at the end of a process. It should not just be the tick-box exercise at the very end. If you are making policy, that policy should reflect the needs of the people whom it is about. That is why, in theory, area planning is a positive thing. If we plan on an area basis, based on the needs of people, and young people are part of that, that would be positive. What we do not want is a consultation

process at the end of a planning process. It is about having the stakeholders at the table at the very start. Like Martin said, we would argue that young people should be at that table.

**Mr McAuley:** We would even argue that young people can lead the way on consultation.

We recently did a survey for the UK Youth Parliament in Northern Ireland on the most important issues for young people. Our perspective was that that should be youth-led. Young people should be going into their communities and asking other young people what their issues are. It is very easy for a young person to feel manipulated when they are in a room with a youth worker who may want to get certain items on the agenda for young people. However, if you send young people into their community and get them to talk to one other, you will get a much more realistic reflection of what their issues are.

More than 12,000 young people responded to our survey. So, we are skilled at involving young people at every level of the process and at getting uptake in great numbers.

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you. I have found this fascinating. Given what I have seen in education, I have felt all the way through that we are leaving youth out. So, I am very keen to hear what you say. I note from your figures that you engage with 30,000 young people. I think that the Priorities for Youth consultation got out to 80,000 on the formal side and to something like 300,000 more informally. How do you see yourselves being able to expand and get out so that you are representing and pulling together youth from both formal and informal settings and everywhere? It is a huge task. Does that mean that funding is needed? It is something that we have to get a grip of and get involved. That is one question: how do we help get you there? The other is then to make sure that when we have got you there, if you are talking about boards of governors, which I think is an excellent idea, the church is involved, politicians are involved, teachers are involved and parents are involved. You are asking for one of youth, yet we do not want to double up. How do you see selection, even if it is one person or a substitute or two, so that you always have representation? How do you see actually choosing the person to go on the board so that it fits in with the ethos and allows you to check it through?

**Mr Quinn:** On the first question, we talk a lot in our sector about partnership working and cross-sectoral partnerships. That is crucial. To be fair to the Department, it has recognised that we have a really strong, vibrant voluntary sector, which, for many years, has helped in reaching many young people. There are lots of organisations at a grass-roots level doing fantastic jobs. We also have a number of regional voluntary organisations, which are reaching out locally, regionally, nationally and internationally and doing fantastic work.

The challenge for the Department is to continue to recognise the contribution that the voluntary sector is making and continue to support it. You talked about funding being a challenge. I have been in youth and community work for 15 or 16 years now, and that has always been the challenge. On the one hand, you are trying to effect social change and trying to work with people at a grass-roots level, but, on the other hand, you are looking down the line and seeing when your funding runs out and where you are going to get it from. So, it has always been a challenge, and, thankfully, it is something that we as a sector are pretty good at. However, what the Department could do more of is investing in voluntary and statutory sector relationships. There is about £30 million or £29 million for youth services as part of the education budget, and Marty quite rightly said that we are often seen as the Cinderella service. On the other hand, if you look at it like the deposit on a mortgage, there is a huge amount of money that we can use to lever in additional money from Europe and other places. If the Department were to put more recognition on the importance of core funding for groups such as us and local community groups, it would go a long way to the sustainability and reaching more young people.

In respect of the representation, I suppose that is always a challenge in any walk of life. We work with a huge diversity of young people, and what we tried to do today was bring you a selection of people to demonstrate to you the diversity of the young people that we work with. Martin here has gone through a grammar school education. The education system has been really good to him, if you do not mind me making that assumption.

**Mr McAuley:** That is fair.

**Mr Quinn:** He has come through, and he is a law graduate. We have Rhiannon, who came through Irish-medium education and is now in secondary school. She is doing her school very proud in her Little Flower uniform today. We have Declan, who came through secondary school education. He got



involved with us through the Champions 4 Change programme, which was to engage with NEET young people.

I am trying to demonstrate to you that that representation is possible. It is about using all that expertise and the resources that you have to reach widely and work in partnership to ensure that we are opening doors for young people to take opportunities like today's and to otherwise ensure that you have representation. When you look at boards of governors, which we are pushing for, or the board of ESA itself, it is up to us as practitioners to support young people so you do not always have the A\* student on the board, so that there is support there for other students and young people to have their voices heard at that level.

**Mr McAuley:** We are currently engaged with the Commissioner for Public Appointments in work towards making the system much more accessible to young people. We both identified a need for application forms for selection panels to be much more accessible. For any young person, or anyone up to the age of 30 or 40, an application form for a public appointment is a pretty daunting prospect. So, we are working with the commissioner to try to develop more young-people-friendly versions of those application forms and to train people on panels to be aware of how they should engage with young people and how they can get the best out of them at an interview situation.

**Mr Hazzard:** Thanks to everybody for the briefing so far. I have been fortunate enough to attend a few consultation events where the Youth Forum has been present. Without annoying any of the other groups, you have always been the most vibrant and challenging and the ones driving the arguments for change at the table. So, it is very welcome that you are here today. The vote at 16 was just the same, so hopefully we will see a lot more of that in the years to come.

I am interested in the proposal for boards of governors. It sounds fair and very interesting. I want to pick up on Danny's point about how it would work logistically. Also, Martin, what about your experience on the board? How did it benefit not just you as a young person but the actual school itself? Secondly, I agree that young people should, at the very least, have their voices heard on the ESA board. If that is not possible, what is the next best thing? How do we go about making sure that young people's voices are heard?

**Mr McAuley:** Thank you for those really kind words at the beginning. It is an interesting prospect being a young person on a board of governors, because a lot of young people would not see me as a young person anymore. However, comparatively, if we lined up all the members of boards of governors, there would be quite an age gap by the time you got to me. There is an interesting dynamic there, because there are people coming at it from an educationalist point of view, which is extremely necessary, and there are people coming at it from a parenting angle. Having come into a board of governors, you notice quite quickly that there is this deficit of a young people's view. These people do not understand the perspective of people who are going to the school or who have just left the school. I only left St Malachy's about four years ago, so the memories are still almost fresh: they are starting to linger, but they are still almost fresh and I can remember what it is like to be a pupil at the school. That is of huge benefit, because if you go to any school and ask any of the pupils whether they can name one of the governors, you will struggle to get one in every 30 schools you ask who are able to name one of them. That is a problem, because young people feel disengaged from the people who are running their school and setting policy for them.

It was really interesting to read the investigation into schools councils, because there is sometimes even a disconnect between pupils and their student councils. Then, there is even further disconnect between the student council and the board of governors. So, even when there are mechanisms in place to engage with young people, some of them are, to call a spade a spade, tokenistic and are there to say, "Look at us, we have a schools council. Aren't we great? We're consulting with young people." Yet, that is not happening in practice. So, there is a deficit of participation in schools. Who is more important to consult with on education or something that you are going to do in a school than a young person? It is really strange that it has taken so long for us to get to the stage where we are seriously talking about including young people in that way.

**Mr Hazzard:** That is an important point, especially when we are talking about extending the roles of boards of governors and the importance that boards of governors are going to take on in very many aspects. It will be very important to make sure that the voices of young people are heard and are at the centre of that process.

**Mr Quinn:** Chair, I will take up your second question about the board of ESA, because it was something on which we had engaged, tentatively at least, with the Minister and his advisers around the notion of young people being represented at that level. As Martin said, we have had quite positive discussions with the Commissioner for Public Appointments on the whole issue of young people on public bodies, outside the ESA stuff. So, as an organisation, we tried to encourage and support as many young people as possible to apply to be on the board. In reality, that was quite a difficult task, because, as Marty said, the application process is not the most accessible to any person, never mind a young person. We also encouraged people in our sector to apply and act as advocates. That is not the ideal as we see it, but it may go some way towards at least having representation of young people's voices at that top table. Something that I do quite a lot in my job is go along to various different boards. I am there not as Chris Quinn but as the advocate for the young people that I am working for.

**The Chairperson:** Just on that point, Chris. In terms of the relationship or the interaction between what are seen as established bodies that purport to represent sectors — because sometimes you find this right across the piece. There are organisations, and they have titles and they may have the perception that they listen to everybody's views, but they may only have a very small or narrow view on particular things.

Take, for example, the organisations that exist, whether it is the boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) or whatever. Of all those organisations, how do you relate to them and how do they relate to you? If we get to the stage of the ESA board, I think, from the number of requests that we have in as to who wants to be on the ESA board, I do not what building is going to hold it. I think that the Department will have to book the Odyssey for the board meetings. Clearly, it is going to be a very difficult job. However, do you have any confidence that those that are already there have any understanding, relationship or interaction with you, or even understand and know what the issues are as regards young people? That is a key element as well.

**Mr Quinn:** It is hard to give a definite answer. We try to engage with as many public bodies and boards as we can, but, in saying that, we are juggling many balls.

There are certain boards that we sit on. For example, we sit on the Youth Service liaison forum. We have also requested — and I know that probably the ship has sailed — in the past that young people should sit on the board of the Youth Council itself, or boards like that. A colleague of mine who is here today sits on the Northern Ireland Policing Board youth advisory panel. At that board we are pushing for young people to be there themselves, but we are not there yet. At least we have representation at an advisory level, but we are still pushing for young people to be on all boards.

**The Chairperson:** That is something that we should note, in terms of proposals. I do not think there is, but if we were to give ESA the power — although some people would argue that we should not be giving it the power — in the famous clause 22 so that it can basically do anything, it could establish an advisory panel. It would give it the power to do that very thing. I am not saying that that is what you should aim for, but at least there would be something there that would be a comparator to an established organisation. If I am not mistaken, we have two members of the Policing Board sitting around this table. That board has a very challenging role, but it has made provision to listen to young people and have youth involvement. There is a model there, and that is useful.

**Mr Quinn:** As I said earlier, we raised the point that it should not necessarily be me or my colleague sitting representing the views of young people. We would much prefer it if it was young people themselves. The youth advisory panel chair has agreed to raise that with the Policing Board, and the next time that it is appointing boards it should be raised at that level.

**The Chairperson:** OK. I am sure he two members present —

**Mr Craig:** Three.

**The Chairperson:** Three? OK. There we are. I know two of them, but I am not sure who the third one is.

**Mr Lunn:** The two of us and —

**The Chairperson:** Oh sorry, Trevor. You are on the Policing Board too. You are a busy man.

**Mr Lunn:** I am too quiet, you see. *[Laughter.]*

**Mrs Dobson:** That was a very well articulated presentation. Martin, I am hosting a public speaking competition tonight in the Senate Chamber and I think that you would be absolutely brilliant at it.

I totally agree with your point that over a quarter of our population is being ignored in deciding the future of our education. I would also be totally supportive of your suggested amendment to involve young people on boards of governors. It is a great idea.

I want to explore a bit more about the school councils. Do you feel that, if young people were represented on boards of governors, that would take school councils to the next level?

**Mr McAuley:** Yes, absolutely. The last time we presented to the Committee, we very much focused on the idea of connectedness and meaningful dialogue. A lot of the complaints we hear from young people about school councils are that they are almost meaningless. They go along, and there is a teacher there to supervise it. They say, can we have this, and the teacher says "No, that is not feasible. You can't do that", and that is the end of the discussion. Even if something is not feasible we would expect schools to have that discussion with young people, tell them the reasons why they do not think they can do it but that they will bring the proposals to the board of governors anyway. That is happening in very few schools where you are getting that idea of connectedness.

It is also about buy-in from young people. If they see a school council that cannot do anything or that, at the height of its power, can get one extra water fountain in the playground, they are not going to engage with it. On the other hand, if they see that a school is investing in its school council and saying that it wants to engage with them so much that it is going to give them a space on the board of governors and make that young person equal in decision-making capacity, that would be a huge sign to young people that they are being listened to. If they are being listened to, they will bring their problems and engage more readily with it.

**Mrs Dobson:** I am a big fan and supporter of school councils. Do you see the setting up of schools councils — you talked about their powers — as perhaps the duty of the student who serves on the board of governors? If that were to be implemented, that would be their duty. As you said, that would show that they were making a difference. Would you like that to be designated to that student?

**Mr McAuley:** Absolutely. I think that the two ideas almost sat in isolation, if you like — that there would be a student council and that there would be a governor to engage directly with that student council to give it legitimacy and get that feeling of connectedness. If we are talking about appointing young people to boards of governors, it makes absolute sense that young people would connect to other young people. If a governor is coming down from on high to listen to their views — that is what it will feel like to young people on a student council — it will be very difficult for student councils to engage in a really meaningful way. If, however, Johnny in class 3B is a member of the board of governors, they will be able to talk much more frankly and openly about their issues and have confidence that those issues will be relayed in their entirety back to the board.

**Mrs Dobson:** Are you aware of any examples of young people playing active roles on boards of governors in any other countries? You spoke about Finland, Chris. Are you aware of this happening?

**Mr Quinn:** No, Jo-Anne, I am not aware of that happening.

**Mrs Dobson:** It might be useful to explore that, see what has happened in other countries already and whether any lessons could be learned from that.

**Mr Quinn:** Again, the crucial thing is that meaningful engagement. In the Youth Forum, we talk a lot about supporting young people and the youth-led model. We spend a lot of our time and energy supporting people like you see in front of you today and in delivering that participative model.

The schools council model was something that we talked a lot about before we came here today. Should we be making a recommendation around legislation for schools councils? We knew that that debate had already happened and that there was discussion around potential legislation, and that was one of the reasons why we did not propose it formally today. We are also concerned that just setting

up schools councils does not mean that they are going to be meaningful. They need to have resources and support put into them to make sure that wee Johnny from 3B, who is the board of governors rep and is responsible for liaising with the school council, has the support to do that. Wee Johnny from 3B probably also has to homework, exams, a family and might have a part-time job. It is important that someone in the education system supports that.

**Mrs Dobson:** It appears to be the next link, and, as you said, it would engage others. I would definitely be fully supportive of that. Thank you.

**Mr Rogers:** You are very welcome. I must commend you on your presentation. There are many boards of governors out there that would be very envious of having a young member like you.

Following on from what Jo-Anne said, do we have many school councils that have a designated governor in the North?

**Mr Quinn:** We have found no evidence of that.

**Mr Rogers:** I am delighted that you are here. The two important groups of people that education affects are left out of this Bill: parents and young people. Research tells us that up to 80% of your education takes place outside your school. When children are young, parents are up there as the prime educator, but, as the child gets older, the community that they live in, the youth club and the football or camogie team or whatever that they play with become very active in that. Really, my question is to do with area planning. In terms of having an active voice for young people in area planning, do you see that there will be a possibility that, even within these sectoral bodies, they would have designated youth representation?

**Mr McAuley:** Absolutely. In the absence of a recognised sectoral body for young people, there absolutely has to be some representation for young people on community groups and on bodies that are involved in area-based planning. That can only complement what they bring to the table anyway, because if, on the one hand, they say that this is what we do and this is the angle that they are coming from, but on the other hand here are a group of young people who are service users, and this is what they think, it adds another string to your bow, if you like. It cannot be a bad thing.

**Mr Quinn:** We have had tentative conversations with people such as the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) around the idea of shadow youth councils. We have talked to various local authorities over the years, and at one stage we were involved in a lobby for legislation to be passed that was similar to schools council legislation so that every local authority should have a shadow youth council. We see that as part of the community planning and area planning picture, and we hope to continue to have conversations with the relevant people in those various sectors. That is one mechanism whereby young people can be involved in the community planning and area planning process, because, of course, you are going to have statutory providers and voluntary providers. The obvious missing part of that jigsaw is young people themselves.

**Mr Rogers:** I know that this youth voice works, because I remember that, in my previous role as a principal, we looked at the changing of the school uniform. Very often, in the past, the uniform was changed and people were told about it, but in our school, we involved the girls in changing the type and length of skirt and the boys in changing from a grey shirt to a white shirt. Once young people were involved in that and felt that they had a role to play in changing that, there became fewer problems with actually wearing the uniform.

**Mr Lunn:** I am sorry that I missed part of your presentation, but I heard plenty. Like all others here, I congratulate you on your approach to this. It is very refreshing.

I want to ask you about clause 28 specifically, which is on area planning, and the lack of consultation. Ideally, you would like to have your own sectoral body, and that would bring in the duty of ESA to secure the views of that sectoral body in the preparation or otherwise of area plans. In the next two or three months, there is going to be a lot of discussion about sectoral bodies, and, frankly, my impression is that, at the end of it, there will not be any new sectoral bodies, frankly. So, there must be some other way that you can suggest in which clause 28 could be tinkered with to provide a strengthened requirement on ESA to consult with young people. The duty part of it says that ESA must consult with:

*"(2) Those persons are persons appearing to ESA to represent the interests of —  
(a) providers of youth services".*

That is a starting point. Further down, it states that ESA may make arrangements to consult with:

*"(5) Those persons ... appearing to ESA to represent the interests of —  
(a) children and young persons living ... in the area;  
(b) persons for whom educational services are provided in the area; ...  
(d) the parents of children or young persons ...;  
(e) ... providers of educational or youth services".*

It is fairly wide, and it is hardly realistic to start to refer to specific organisations, because there are a lot of them. If you can recognise that, frankly, it is unlikely that you will get the sectoral body — it is not up to me, otherwise you would get it — what specific amendment would you like to see to that clause that would give a level of satisfaction? Do you have any thoughts about that while we are sitting here?

**Mr McAuley:** I suppose that if we were really to press you about one particular amendment to clause 28, it would be the change that we explained about the dichotomy that exists in that clause between education and youth providers and service users. It creates these two tiers where ESA will consult people who are providing the service, but it may consult if it wants with people who are using the service. We can solve that quite easily by imposing a duty on ESA to consult with young people in general. If that means that when area education plans are being drawn up they go to a local youth council, or it engages with pupils from local schools, then that satisfies me that young people are being engaged with. As it stands, if ESA is saying only that it may consult young people and parents — equally, when I talk about young people here, the same argument applies to parents — in my very cynical, legal mind, that reads that it is saying that it may not consult young people and parents, and there is nothing that you can do to force it to do that.

**Mr Lunn:** I agree with you. It does not actually say in any form that I recognise that ESA must consult young people. It talks about the providers of youth services and the parents and so on. If the second part, where it says that "ESA may make arrangements" was strengthened to become a duty, and if a form of words could be developed — I am trying to get the difference between consulting persons representing the interests of young people and actually consulting young people themselves. I really do not know how you could draft something that says that ESA must consult with young people, given that there are 400,000 of you. You might want to come back to us on that with a specific —

**Miss Ní Cheallaigh:** There are many ways that it could consult young people. The use of social media would make it a lot easier.

**Mr Lunn:** I am sorry, Rhiannon, I cannot hear you.

**Miss Ní Cheallaigh:** It would be easier for it to connect with young people on social media. It could Facebook it or set up a Twitter account so that they could get people's views.

**Mr McAuley:** I suppose the point that Rhiannon is making — we discussed among ourselves in great depth about how you consult young people — is that it goes back to the departmental response that you cannot place a duty to consult young people because it is impractical to consult all young people. I do not think that we need a duty to consult all young people. Obviously, that is absurd, and no legislation in the world could enforce anyone to consult every member of a stakeholder group. Therefore, if we are just talking about imposing a duty on ESA to consult young people, I think that that is a fair clause to have, and it would read — to use legal speak — to a reasonable person that ESA will consult a diverse group of young people and not drag three young people off the street, or the sons and daughters of three ESA board members, and consult them. A reasonable person would assume that that includes a diverse group of young people. It is not going to be all the young people in a given area, but it is not going to be a small group of them either.

**Mr Lunn:** I will be interested to hear what Chris thinks about that later on. The Bill does not say that ESA must consult teachers, for instance. It probably says somewhere that it must consult representative bodies, and that is the thrust of it, surely. At the moment, it places a duty on ESA to consult the providers of youth services, which is fairly strong. That would bring in your organisation, surely.

**Mr McAuley:** We welcome the fact that ESA will consult educational service providers and youth service providers. However, the point that we constantly make, and which is really ingrained into our ethos, is that you can consult youth workers and teachers, but that is not equivalent to consulting young people themselves. Obviously, you welcome the fact that you are going to consult youth service providers as a stepping stone to getting to the place where you consult young people in a very meaningful way. However, we are saying that we are not there yet, and there is scope for us to get there if we have a few amendments to that clause.

**Mr Lunn:** If you want to consult young people, the only practical way to do that is to consult a representative group of young people.

**Mr Quinn:** Various things are in place at the moment. The Northern Ireland Youth Forum is one of those groups, and many others are doing a great job representing the views and supporting young people to represent their own views. I think that some time ago, Maria Eagle, under direct rule, talked about a network for youth. That is still talked about, as is how, through a youth policy, young people could be connected to the decision-maker. However, many questions remain. Much of the outworking could be within Priorities for Youth and, through the Youth Service — voluntary and statutory — young people could be supported to make that sectoral body. We would argue, quite selfishly, that the Committee is hearing from a sectoral body right now, but others would obviously want to engage in that process, too. There is potentially provision, through Priorities for Youth, to give us the outworkings of that. As Martin said, the change in wording from the potentiality of "may" consult to "will" consult is subtle, but it could satisfy what we are looking for in the Bill.

**Mr Lunn:** Believe me that we have had many a discussion about "shall", "must", "may" or "will". We have also had many discussions on how many sectoral bodies there could be in Northern Ireland, but it is always interesting to hear from you. Some organisations have come back to us with specific and legally framed amendments. Martin, you are the man to do this, so let us hear from you.

**Mr McAuley:** I can see this landing on my desk already.

**Ms Boyle:** You are all very welcome. I do not have a question. I just want to make a few comments. I will start by reiterating what the Chair opened with: you are the last to present evidence but by no means least. It has been very refreshing to hear your comments. To be honest, you are the only group to have said nothing that I disagree with, and I am sure that I speak for many members.

If we want to make education work for our young people, it has to appeal to them. From listening to you, if we were not to involve young people, it would almost be like baking a cake and leaving out the main ingredients. That is the way that I see it, too. If we want to prepare young people for their future life, they have to be included in any discussions that take place, particularly on education, boards of governors, and so on. Schools and teachers do their best to represent our young people's views, but they do not always put young people's opinions or views across. Schools, teachers and boards of governors must address that in their establishments. I commend you on your work, and I certainly support your point of view. Thank you.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Chris, Martin, Rhíannon and Declan. This has been a useful session, particularly in relation to clause 28. I notice that clause 28(5)(g) states:

*"such other groups or bodies as ESA may consider appropriate".*

If all else fails, that at least provides something to latch on to and be aware of. Your time informing the Committee has been well spent, and we appreciate your contribution. I trust that today's session will not be seen as, nor is it, tea and sympathy, or us salving our conscience so that we can say that we did what others may not have. That is not how I want it to be seen because that is not how it is. We are happy for you to remain with us after this session as we begin the informal clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill. If we do well, we may even get to clause 28. *[Laughter.]* I see some eyebrows being raised.

Thank you very much, and I wish you all well in whatever your future may be.

**Mr McAuley:** Thank you very much.