

YCNI Response to TBUC inquiry, October 2014.

Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI) wish to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for Education for the opportunity to submit written evidence to the current Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education.

Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI) was established in 1990, with a key function to encourage and develop community relations. Over the years a number of initiatives and review processes have highlighted the important contribution of Youth Service to the creation, development and maintenance of a shared and peaceful society (see for example 1999; DENI, A Model for Effective Practice, 1987 (*updated 2003*); DENI, A Youth Service for a New Millennium; DENI, CRED Policy Guidance notes, 2011).

Youth Work is an important aspect of education. As the Education Minister sets out in his foreword to Priorities for Youth (2013), 'Youth work has an important contribution to make to the development of young people within the context of the education service... It is and should be recognised as a major contributor to improving educational and lifelong learning outcomes'. Priorities for Youth also sets out the central role that youth work has to play in building a shared society; noting that 'equipping children and young people with the skills, attitudes and behaviours needed to recognise, understand and respect difference... is particularly important as we continue to deal with the legacy of the conflict and move towards a shared and inclusive society'.

The YCNI welcomes developments aimed at enhancing the shared experience of our young people through formal education and the vital role this work has to play in continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. Relationship building across divided communities remains central to the process of maintaining lasting reconciliation and Education has an important responsibility within this.

Within Education the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) Policy plays a vital role in supporting both youth service providers and schools to deliver on this area. It promotes a whole organisational approach to embedding the principles and practices needed to build a shared society. YCNI has a key responsibility to support and coordinate the delivery and implementation of the CRED policy across Regional Voluntary Headquarter Youth Organisations. The task of embedding CRED within all youth and school settings is large, and resources limited. Reconciliation is a task for the long term; thus it follows that planning and resourcing should model this.

The YCNI recognises and welcomes the commitment to review the nature and definition of Shared Education and Integrated Education, including consideration of the need for a formal statutory definition and an obligation in statute to facilitate and encourage Shared Education. However, this work must not diminish the valuable role and place of Integrated Education nor should it diminish existing CRED related work plans. YCNI endorses the need for a continuum of provision which includes both Shared and Integrated Education.

The YCNI wishes to highlight that youth work practitioners, particularly those with many years commitment to peace and reconciliation work, have much to offer the implementation and delivery of initiatives aimed at enhancing the shared and integrated education experience. A number of voluntary sector youth organisations contributed to the International Fund for Ireland Sharing in Education programme.

The Department of Education's commitment to developing shared and integrated education would benefit from being part of a wider strategy aimed at enhancing the shared educational experience of all, with an accompanying sustainable, well-resourced package and operational plan outlining the breadth and range of underpinning activity required to make this vision a reality. Prioritisation of financial investment would reflect the stated political commitment to this area. Existing models of good practice should be built upon (including whole organisational approaches to embedding this work such as that modelled by the JEDI initiative (see: www.jedini.com)).

In addition, a regional body, at arm's length to Government, would be beneficial to securing co-ordination and ongoing challenge for all peacebuilding work across all government departments, including that which contributes to the development of Integrated and Shared Education.