

Anna Lo MLA
Chair
Committee for the Environment
Room 416 Parliament Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

13 November 2013

Dear Ms Lo

Thank you for your invitation to respond and provide advice, on the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill.

As you will be aware, as Commissioner I have a duty to promote and safeguard the rights and best interests of children and young people. In this I am guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, of which the UK is a signatory. Article 12 of the Convention clearly states that children must have a say in decisions that affect their lives.

I believe that the Local Government Bill is a unique opportunity for the Northern Ireland Executive to enhance children and young people's participation. Therefore I wish to emphasise two parts of the proposals under the Local Government Bill that are relevant. Firstly I recommend the Committee includes in Article 16, **a specific requirement for the council to appoint a committee of young people resident within the council area to advise on matters affecting children and young people**, including on community planning issues. Several councils currently have such committees, commonly referred to as Youth Councils.

Such a reference would make sure councils include young people's views in an advisory capacity, in the first instance.

I can advise the Committee that the Department of Environment is a signatory to my Participation Policy Statement of Intent, as are currently 10 of the existing councils. This statement of intent is a commitment to ensure that children and young people are given the

opportunity to participate in civic life and decisions that affect them and in this case, as it applies to new council structures. Making the amendment above would reflect within the Local Government Bill a further commitment for the Department of Environment and new councils to fulfil Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as ensuring that the new structures would not be excluding children and young people under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which specifically requires that no person be discriminated against, on the basis of their age. Secondly, in relation to **Community Planning**, I believe that it is essential that as you aim to make sure the Bill reaches out to local communities, that this must also include a clear reference to reaching out to and **involving children and young people**. This should be followed with clear guidance on how this will be enabled and achieved.

Therefore, within Clause 76, I suggest that a council and its community planning partners must seek the participation of and encourage children and young people to express their views and ensure that their views are taken into account in connection with:

- a) Community planning
- b) The production of a community plan for the district; and
- c) The review of community plans.

As I'm sure the committee will agree it is essential that children and young people have a stake in the development of the area in which they live, therefore I commend to the Committee consideration of the above advice, which will ensure that the Department and new councils will realize the requirements of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and fulfil the promise they made as signatories to my Participation Policy Statement of Intent.

Yours sincerely



Patricia Lewsley-Mooney
Commissioner