

Submission to the Committee for the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister

10 October 2014

Introduction

The office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was created in accordance with 'The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order' (2003) to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people. The age remit of the office is children from birth up to 18 years, or 21 years of age if a child is care experienced or has a disability. NICCY references its work within the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other relevant child rights instruments.

Scope of NICCY submission

Recognising the wide ranging nature of the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry, this submission will focus on '*recommendations to support and enhance policy and decision-making with regard to building a united community*', through consideration of the Executive's Strategy: 'Together: Building a United Community'.

General comments on Together, Building a United Community

The Commissioner welcomed the publication of Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) when it was published last year. Addressing the sectarian and racist divisions within our society is critical if we are collectively to flourish and overcome the divisions of our troubled past. Delays in the development of this strategy have caused concern, and we note that, while a draft document, Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI), was consulted on in 2010, many aspects of T:BUC were not contained in CSI and so were not consulted on. Moreover, there did not appear to be a process within government of working across departments and their agencies to ensure that the Strategy integrated with other initiatives and programmes, for example the NEETs .

However, since publication, NICCY is aware of considerable effort put in to engaging with stakeholders from within government as well as NGOs and the public in relation to taking forward some of this work.

Role of children and young people in addressing divisions

The Commissioner notes that the document recognises children and young people as a priority area and commits to directing resources towards particularly marginalised children and young people living in interface areas. However, the wording of the first shared aim focuses on the need to address negative attitudes on the part of ‘our children and young people’:

‘To continue to improve attitudes amongst our young people and to build a community where they can play a full and active role in building good relations.’

This aim suggests that young people (or children and young people) have negative attitudes that are in some way responsible for the community divisions in Northern Ireland. This is consistent with the draft strategy, CSI, which also negatively stereotyped of children and young people.

The Commissioner believes that it is extremely problematic for this objective to remain unchanged within T:BUC, given that children and young people are the only part of Northern Ireland society that does not hold some level of blame for the past, as none were born before the 1994 ceasefire.

It is appropriate instead to recognise the important part children and young people play in building a new society, in which sectarian divisions and violence is less dominant. Indeed, children and young people are generally very passionate about the need to overcome the divisions within society, as can be seen the responses to a question in the 2007 Young Life and Times Survey in which they were asked to write about the type of society they wanted Northern Ireland to be in the future. (See Appendix 1)

Indeed, other parts of the Strategy recognise the huge contribution children and young people can make in the future, and the problems of young people being blamed for society’s problems:

‘This strategy does not view young people as a negative influence but instead recognised the potential they hold for the future...’ (p34)

‘However, we do recognise that society can at times vilify youth and blame them for community problems...’ (p81)

It is critical that the first Shared Aim of the Strategy is rewritten to focus instead on the huge contribution make to society, and may make to overcoming the divisions of the past. However, it is also critical to recognise the responsibility of all within society to deal with the past, particularly those in political leadership. This cannot be delegated to the youngest and most disempowered.

Role of political leadership in addressing divisions

It is noticeable that there is little reference in T:BUC to the role of politicians in overcoming divisions, other than through departmental implementation of the Strategy. Instead of seeking to place responsibility on those who were not born before the ceasefires, political leaders must take responsibility for dealing with the past, through delivering effective governance, and fully meeting the commitments contained in the Belfast Agreement, and subsequent St Andrews Agreement. This includes reaching compromise in relation to highly divisive issues including parades and flags, and also working together in coalition to deliver effective governance for all the people of Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, children and young people are severely impacted by the continuing sectarian divisions, and have an important role to play in building a more tolerant and inclusive society. However, the key role for addressing our conflicted past lies with Northern Ireland's elected representatives, and it is their responsibility to deliver on the commitments made in the Belfast Agreement and St Andrews Agreement.

Appendix 1: Responses to question in 2007 Young Life and Times survey: ‘What sort of society (do) you want Northern Ireland to be in the future.

Methodology

The data utilised in this research emerged from the 2007 Young Life and Times survey, carried out by ARK, a joint project between the Queen’s University Belfast and the University of Ulster. This survey records the attitudes and values of young people living in Northern Ireland. The edition of the survey used in this paper illustrates the views of young people who celebrated their 16th birthday in February 2007. A letter was sent to all eligible 16 year olds and of the 1,925 letters sent out, 627 responses were received. The data was collected between 10th August and 30th September 2007 using a questionnaire which was completed by respondents online, by telephone or on paper. The survey asked respondents a range of questions on a variety of issues including education, poverty, family and politics. The open-ended question to which respondents provided feedback read:

“The new Assembly has the potential to shape the future for our society. Please use the space below to say what sort of society you want Northern Ireland to be in the future.”

The data was categorised by analyzing the words which appeared most frequently in the responses and then grouped accordingly under a number of headings.

Overview

In response to this question, some young people identified one specific suggestion which they felt would improve society in Northern Ireland whilst others identified two or more issues. The key issues which they felt should be addressed were peace, equality, safety, poverty, the economy and service provision.

The responses provided presented largely optimistic views about the future of society in Northern Ireland. 96% of young people surveyed conveyed that they hoped that Northern Ireland had a positive future regarding issues such as peace, safety and discrimination.

Analysis of responses

In responding to the question, 627 young people provided the following answers and feedback.

Peace

The most popular response received from the young people was “peace” with 23% of respondents highlighting that they would like to see a more peaceful society for Northern Ireland in the future. The words “peace” and “peaceful” were frequently placed alongside variations of the other most common responses such as “productive”, “safe” and “community”. This suggests that to these young people, peace does not only mean freedom from religious dispute and economic struggle, but also from racial tension.

“A peaceful and productive society, in which people of all religions and races can live successfully amongst each other”

“A peaceful one, where there is no more tension between the two communities and all past events are forgotten”

“A more peaceful community, as in no divides between Protestants and Catholics, e.g all schools made to be integrated so people are more open-minded”

“A peaceful society where young people can be taken as seriously as adults. People could feel safe to walk down any road without feeling threatened or in danger”

Discrimination and Equality

Another area frequently identified in the research was equality and specifically the presence of discrimination within society. 19% of respondents agreed that there should be “less discrimination” and 15% used the term “equality.” A number of respondents expressed a need for more cross-community schemes or initiatives to ensure that people from “both sides” (Protestant and Catholic communities) could live and work in the same areas. Eighteen young people expressed a concern that there should be a greater focus towards ensuring that civil rights are properly implemented in Northern Ireland. Other recurring responses included, “no prejudice”, “fair”, “multi-cultural”, “no boundaries”, “less segregation”, “respect” and “diverse.”

The majority of the responses relating to discrimination and equality were positive and indicated that they would like to see a more inclusive society in Northern Ireland. Only five respondents stated that “there should be less foreign workers.”

Safety

Safety was also a key concern for the young people who participated in the survey. 17% responded that they would like Northern Ireland to be a safer society. 11% stated that they felt that there should be less violence and that more needed to be done to ensure that crime rates in Northern Ireland are lowered. There was a particular concern regarding drugs with a significant number of young people linking crime rates with drugs.

“NI currently contains too much violence and disturbances. The amount of young offenders is on the increase as they have nothing to do and so turn to drink, drugs and violence. These issues should be tackled in order for people to feel safe in their homes.”

“I would like society to be a safe for children and adults. Also to be free from drugs and paramilitaries as these cause fights and deaths.”

Six young people suggested that the current justice system did not provide adequate sentences and punishments for those found guilty of committing a crime. Four young people stated that in the future they would like to live in a society where they could wear their favourite sports team’s jersey without having to cover it up in certain areas.

“I want NI to be peaceful and I would like to be able to walk over the town in ANY football top (Rangers) without thinking I will get attacked.”

There was a mixed response regarding the Police Service of Northern Ireland’s (PSNI) role in building a better society in Northern Ireland. Some young people felt that there should be a greater police presence on the streets to prevent crime, whereas others felt that there should be less presence on the streets and that the PSNI should spend more time investigating “real” crimes.

“I would want NI to be a safe place to be and I feel the PSNI spend more time trying to round up teenagers than solving more dangerous crimes, I could go on... “

“I would like there to be more peace in more communities where Protestants and Catholics live together, for example no flags on the twelfth or marches where Catholics live.”

“The younger generation should be more tolerant of other cultures and people with disabilities or who are disfigured. Also, flags such as Nationalist/Unionist should be

removed from streets as these can be intimidating and encourage extremist views on cultures.”

“A society free from sectarianism, free from flags on lampposts and paint on curbs. One where religion does not determine where you live, what school you go to and who your friends are.”

“A safe and clean environment that children can be brought up in. No more arguments or fights over religion, race etc. Hopefully for the society not to be divided by a bridge or flags. For there to be integration in estates between Protestants and Catholics”

“Equal rights for all people. To be able to go anywhere without feeling intimidated by flags and bunting etc.”

In this research only five young people directly mentioned the impact of flags and parades on society in Northern Ireland. The small number highlighting flags and parades would suggest that these were not significant issues in young people’s minds at the time of the survey in 2007.

Poverty

Five percent of young people expressed concern about poverty and homelessness levels in Northern Ireland and many said that they felt that a “classless” society would be better. The volume of responses which highlight poverty as a key issue suggests that some of the respondents may have been personally affected by poverty, or knew of others who had been affected.

“For our society it should be equal and there should be more help for families who suffer poverty”

“A “more happy” NI, so to speak. I know that there is not a lot of unhappiness in NI but I feel that people should be made more aware of the level of homelessness that actually is here...”

The Economy

A number of young people surveyed expressed concerns about the state of the economy in Northern Ireland. Eight percent of participants wanted Northern Ireland to be prosperous

and felt that there were not enough opportunities currently available for young people. Twenty-five young people hoped that the future of Northern Ireland would be “better for young people.”

“A society where there is enough jobs for young people and a better economy”

Fifteen young people felt that the reputation of Northern Ireland worldwide and within the UK could be improved. Eight of these young people felt that more should be done to promote tourism which should boost the economy.

“Northern Ireland should become a more inviting place, at the moment tourism is the main idea that people are promoting, but I believe that the tourism industry will not be a sustainable one if attractions are not put in place”

“A place with a better reputation than its current standing. Somewhere people can be that bit prouder to say “I’m from there.””

Provision of Services

Service provision across a number of sectors was addressed by the young people who took part in the survey. There were specific concerns from 16 young people that general services were not available for teenagers and in the future they would like to see more provision in place.

“I would like there to be more stuff for teenagers to do, as there is currently nothing in my area and many my age hang about in the street.”

There were a number of issues raised regarding educational provision. Thirteen young people suggested that there should be more integrated schools so that communities are encouraged to mix at a young age. Eleven young people felt that access to higher education was prohibitive for some due to rising costs. Two young people expressed the opinion that grammar schools should remain part of the education system in Northern Ireland. One participant requested that there should be more education about sexual identity and another proposed that:

“[There should be an] Education system which offers a wide range of subjects to cater for

all children, with consideration for different abilities and limitations.”

Health provision was another issue highlighted by a number of respondents. Fourteen young people felt that Northern Ireland needed better health provision.

“It will be a society where everyone has access to free and efficient health care.”

Five stated that care given to pensioners was inadequate. Two young people stated that they felt that abortion should not be allowed under any circumstances. Two young people felt that transport in Northern Ireland needed to be improved.

Atmosphere

A number of young people indicated that the atmosphere and attitudes in Northern Ireland needed to change. All of the young people who provided responses of this kind implied that they would like to see the general pervasive mood in Northern Ireland become more positive. Twenty-nine young people expressed a desire for society to be “more happy”, 22 felt that society should be “more friendly” and five used the term “more kind.” Other responses in this field include: “more relaxed”, “modern” and “mature.”

“Happy. Everybody gets on with everyone. Enjoyable.”

Environment

Fifteen young people stated that they would like to see Northern Ireland become more “clean” and in addition, six young people said that they felt that Northern Ireland should be more environmentally friendly. Two participants felt that there should be more protecting animals.

“An environmentally friendly society is very important which uses renewable energy. Cutting down on litter is essential and all animals and their habitats need to be protected.”

Other Responses

Some of the responses received did not fit neatly into a particular policy area. These addressed a range of issues.

Eight young people felt that Northern Ireland should remain part of Great Britain, three felt that there should be a United Ireland and four said that Northern Ireland should be an

independent country.

“Peaceful, united, independent society to feel safe in”

Four young people expressed concerns regarding the rates of child abuse in Northern Ireland and felt that these should be reduced. One simply stated that they wanted Northern Ireland to be “cool” and “Northern Ireland should be shaped according to God’s law.” Other miscellaneous comments suggested that Northern Ireland should be “co-operative”, “have more Asian shops” and “socialism.” Only one respondent claimed that “Northern Ireland won’t get better.”