



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Committee for Education**

**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

**Inquiry into School Councils: National  
Children's Bureau NI**

**18 April 2012**

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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### **Inquiry into School Councils: National Children's Bureau NI**

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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  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mrs Brenda Hale  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Miss Michelle McIlveen

**Witnesses:**

Ms Gill Hassard	National Children's Bureau NI
Ms Celine McStravick	National Children's Bureau NI

**The Chairperson:** I welcome to the Committee Celine McStravick, who is the director of the National Children's Bureau (NCB) NI, and Gill Hassard, who is the participation officer. I am sorry for the delay, but we took a bit longer than expected to go through our correspondence. You are very welcome.

**Ms Celine McStravick (National Children's Bureau NI):** Thank you very much for inviting NCB to present on our Participation Support programme for schools. I commend the Committee for commencing the inquiry. Some of the research you have already developed has been incredibly useful and relevant. I know from talking to school principals that everyone is very happy that this has been picked up as an issue.

I want to speak for a few minutes on what NCB is because some of you may not be familiar with our work. I will then hand over to the very able Gill, our participation officer, who will talk in more detail about our programme in schools.

The National Children's Bureau in Northern Ireland is a department of a much larger organisation based in England. We specialise in policy-relevant research; practice development, which is working with anyone who works directly with children and young people; and participation. We always work from an evidence-based perspective and really try to move policy forward and provide the best outcomes for children and young people.

We have been in Northern Ireland for nearly 15 years. We commenced our work here because we were given so many government commissions for research. We listed in the briefing paper some interesting research about young people's attitudes to and experiences of contact with people from different

minority ethnic backgrounds. That was commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and I worked with several schools in doing that research.

What makes us different as well is that we always involve young people in any research we do. In particular, we train young people as researchers to work alongside us. We think that gives a particularly useful and rich perspective.

In Northern Ireland we also run Young NCB, which is one of our participation projects. That was set up a few years ago, and is a network of over 100 young people throughout Northern Ireland. We bring them together, and Gill runs an excellent capacity-building programme with them. That is about influencing policy as well and getting young voices heard on issues that affect them. They are developing very important life skills. I always say that, interestingly, they keep us on track as well. So, the staff of NCB always have to listen to our Young NCB colleagues and often have to do things that we may not be inclined to do in the first instance. Last year, Young NCB raised the issue of body image and its effect on young people, and did some very interesting research of its own.

We also run Building a Culture of Participation, which was a programme developed from research we did throughout England; namely, in residential care homes for children, and looked at how to change organisational structure and leadership in order to develop effective participation of children and young people.

We also run the Participation Support programme in schools. That is a very recent development for us in Northern Ireland. In and around 2009, when we were conducting research in schools and working very closely with staff and principals, we were often asked whether we could come and support them to improve participation. I have to say that my first inclination was to say that there was already lots of support out there, because we were aware that the education and library boards were doing some work and that the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) had the Democra-School programme. In the first instance, I thought that I would be signposting schools to what already existed, but when we went to meet the Children's Commissioner and the education and library boards, we realised that there was no support for schools. There were toolkits for schools, but school principals were at a loss in respect of how to engage senior management teams (SMTs), in particular, in order to make them understand why participation was important. I suppose that is why we started looking at developing a very specialised and bespoke programme that, we thought, gathered all our skills on participation, any evidence that we had on what worked and any of our experience from elsewhere.

We also lead a partnership of organisations in England called Participation Works, which has an excellent website that has incredible resources all about improving participation. We use some of its work as well. When we started developing the curriculum for the Participation Support programme, we worked very closely with schools, because we wanted to make sure that it met their needs. I thought that it might be useful for you to know a bit more about what the programme looks and feels like and the experiences of schools, so I will now hand over to Gill, who will tell you a bit more about it.

**Ms Gill Hassard (National Children's Bureau NI):** I suppose that, first, we acknowledged that all schools will be different in respect of what training they need and maybe even what level of participation they already have. Initially, we meet principals and senior management teams to ask them some basic questions and look at the school size and population; it is basically a baseline audit of participation levels. It is often the case that those who have school councils feel that they need extra support to run them and that those who do not have them want to set them up. So, as soon as we have all that information, we go away and develop a workshop that we run with the pupils. For example, I was recently in a school where the student council was up and running, but the pupils had not actually received any training on how to run it, such as taking minutes, looking at ideas for getting the rest of the pupils' voices heard and communication between themselves and the senior management team. So, I was able to go away and develop a bespoke support package for that school and then go back in and do some training days with them. That was really to embed participation with the pupils.

As well as that, we use our time in the workshops to develop a school survey and an audit for the whole school population. The pupils develop questions and get the survey done, and then we analyse the results for them and come back with the answers about the levels of participation from the rest of

the pupils in their school. They may think that a certain issue needs to be tackled in their school, so we will go away and then come back with the answers once we have analysed all the results for them.

The difference between our programme and a Democra-School-type resource is that we go in and do specific training with senior management teams and principals. As Celine talked about, that is through the Building a Culture of Participation training. What we have done is adapted that for schools. So, we go in and look at individual schools and deliver the programme. It involves a full day's training with the staff team. It is really about making staff in a school aware of the issues of participation. In my experience, it is really about negating the fear of giving pupils more control of the school. In my experience, that is one of the barriers to participation between teachers and pupils, and it is one of the elements of the training. They also do an audit of what they would like their school to look like — a wish list, if you will — and we then develop an action plan for them based on what comes out of the training day. We develop a participation action plan for the school based on the pupil surveys and staff feedback on the training. I am their contact, so if they have any questions as they go through the year or the action plan, I can provide one-to-one support. What we really do is leave them with the action plan and go back a year later to support them with any additional training needs that they may have and the development of staff and pupil needs.

That is really what the Participation Support programme looks like and how it is run, but it is really different in each school, because some schools want a lot of support, and I could be going back to them almost on a weekly basis, and other schools are happy to just have one big training day and go away with their action plan, and are quite happy to run with it themselves. That is the way that looks.

I just want to tell you a little bit about the funding. We were aware that there were no big pots of money available. We were talking to principals, who were saying that, ideally, they would love NCB to come in and do it, but they did not have any money for it. We have got two years' funding through Atlantic Philanthropies to do the Participation Support programme. We have done it in a couple of schools for free and they have been able to avail themselves of that service without us having to charge them for anything. That has been a fantastic resource for them. Obviously, the uptake is now going to be a lot higher because people will obviously want something if they can get it for nothing. The challenge that we then have is how we roll it out to all schools and enable everybody to have equal opportunities to access the training. That is one of the challenges that we are looking at around the funding and meeting the demand for the Participation Support programme in all schools.

Training needs to be an annual thing, because, if pupils are going to be moving on, and school councils often have annual elections, the school will need training each year; so, ideally we would like to go back in and train them on an annual basis. We also thought of the turnover of P7s and first years.

We only started that earlier last year, so we have been going quite well and the feedback has been fantastic from pupils and staff. The letter that I gave to you includes a few examples of the kind of things they said on their feedback questionnaires. I think that they are looking for more support from us, and, ideally, we would like to be in a place to give them that in the coming years.

**The Chairperson:** Celine, I was almost tempted to say that, given the work that NCB does, maybe it could go and help the Department of Education in relation to letting go of control. That might be useful.

**Ms McStravick:** No comment.

**The Chairperson:** I would not put you in that position.

Thank you for coming and thank you for the paper that you submitted and the work that you do. We set out on the school inquiry to see what the participation was, how schools organise their school councils, what level of school councils there are and what the variation is in what they achieve or whatever. You have picked up an issue in relation to staff, which, in a sense, is a key issue. If that has been the focus, how do you see the Department and the boards and what has been your interaction between those? Clearly, it will come down to whether the principal can afford to do the training, but, if that was set aside, do you believe that there is a rationale in the Department and the boards to encourage schools to go down that particular route?

**Ms McStravick:** It is a difficult question to answer, given the state of the boards at the moment, because they are obviously going through incredible change. We first went to meet a few advisers in different boards at the start of this journey, and I thought that the boards were there to offer support through their advisory role, particularly the Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS), that there was already support there, and that maybe the problem was that signposting was not correct. However, when we went to meet two particular officers in the boards, it was very clear that they were at a loss as well. They had determined the demand, but they did not have the capacity either. Also, when you are going into a school to provide this particular support, it is good to be independent. The board goes into a school with its own experience of that school, whereas we can go in with a very independent perspective, as a critical friend, to listen to the young people. It is interesting that, when we go in, some schools will say that the school council is working fine and that it needs only a tiny bit of support, but, when we ask the school council, we might hear something very different and we can reflect that in our programme.

We met the Department at the start of the process. It wanted to highlight what we were doing, but, because at that stage we had not sourced any funding for it, the Department said that it could not roll it out to all schools as it would have raised expectations too much. We were happy enough. We knew that there were schools that needed it, so we just continued with it.

With regard to school councils and this kind of inquiry, there is an absolute imperative for the Department to show some policy leadership, but beyond school councils. School councils is one example, not the answer.

**The Chairperson:** That is my next question. After it, I will open the meeting to members' questions.

NCB has carried out work on a wider remit and, obviously, its reports on Northern Ireland have been very specific on certain issues. Is NCB convinced, in principle, of the need to have school councils and of their value? It is easy to get into the scenario whereby this is seen as a bit of tokenism on the part of the school or the system. They allow school councils, but they will not give up control. As an outsider, I am interested in your work as an organisation that has a very wide remit covering participation, development and research. It would be very useful for the Committee's inquiry to give empirical evidence that shows the value of this. In education, we always talk about added value. This is something that you, as an organisation, see as adding value and worth to the character of young people, the community, the school, and so on.

**Ms McStravick:** I absolutely agree. It is incredibly important for all schools to recognise the value of participation. I caution against saying that school councils are the answer, unless they are accompanied by quality standards and a good evaluation of what that means.

**The Chairperson:** The other mistake that could be made is that school councils are seen as the only vehicle for participation.

**Ms McStravick:** Absolutely. The school council is not the only vehicle, it is just one. In a school in which we worked very recently, we were brought in and the management said that they wanted to set up a school council. However, after we worked with the SMT for a day, it realised that there were so many other things that it could do to improve dialogue with the pupils which were much broader than a school council. Even the process of encouraging young people to get their voices heard in all sorts of ways would help the entire running of the school. Having a culture of participation — not wanting to steal the title of one of our training programmes — is really essential. It has all sorts of added value. There is no doubt about it. We talk to Young NCB members. When they are involved in their school and feel that they have some kind of role, they are more likely to attend, contribute, feel valued and all the other things that will come of it.

For me, it is really important that, if the systems are in place, if there are school councils, there should be a process to reflect on how they are doing. Schools that we go into may say they are absolutely fine, but there is no system there to ask young people how it is going for them and what they are getting out of it. It is not about the school; it is about the young people.

**The Chairperson:** The other area is pastoral care. That can be seen as something needing a very subjective approach. A school in my constituency has developed a postbox system that has worked very well throughout the school. A child can drop something in, putting their name to it or anonymously. That system has raised a considerable number of issues in that school. It has been to the benefit of the senior management team in addressing particular problems. In some cases, the senior management team was not even aware of what was going on.

**Ms McStravick:** That is a good example of how it is broader than just a council.

**The Chairperson:** That postbox system always comes back to my mind as another form. Regardless of whether it was under the guise of pastoral care, there was participation and a voice being heard, but in a different format than going and knocking on the principal's door.

**Ms McStravick:** For us, it is also important that the young people see that their voice is being heard, so we work with schools to show how you demonstrate that, if somebody has put something in a postbox, something has happened as a result. We need much more of that in schools. We can say that pupils suggested this, and as a result we did this or, as a result, we thought about it and did not do it because of this. So, it is not just that pupils keep giving their views and then wonder what is happening. All that wider process is part of our action plan when we are working with schools, and it is all about the culture. One school principal recently said to me that it helped them in bringing forward some disclosure from pupils on very sensitive issues because all of a sudden they felt that it was OK to kind of raise things. So, you are absolutely right.

**Ms Hassard:** As far as I am aware when I am working with pupils and talking with Young NCB members, school councils are often made up of pupils who are very popular, outspoken and confident. You are then not getting the voices of the other students, particularly the ethnic minority students. We touch upon that in the training for the teachers in that they may well have a student council but let us look at the processes of how the election happened, for example, and how we can hear from other pupils in the school who may have equally valid points to make. For example, Mervyn, you were talking about the postbox system being an excellent method. There are lots of other examples, and, in the training for the teachers, those are the kind of examples we give out on activities that they can do with their pupils to encourage everybody to be heard, not just 12 of the brightest and most popular students.

**Mr Lunn:** Thanks for your presentation. I can sense your enthusiasm for this, and I share it, but you seem to be having a similar problem to what we have had. When we trawled the various schools, the response rate we got was quite disappointing. I think it is fair to say we were a wee bit surprised by the low number of schools that had a school council. I see that you say in your funding paragraph that you managed to deliver the Participation Support programme to three schools and are in discussions with two more. Are you satisfied with that?

**Ms McStravick:** To put it in context: we really started it only last year. I am quite satisfied because, at the minute, we have funding for only one member of staff. Because of the way we work, I am more inclined to make sure we get it right. I am really satisfied with the work and quality of work we have delivered in those schools.

When we went to see the chairperson of the Post Primary Principals' Association, he said that he could give me a list. That is the last thing we need because we do not have the capacity to deliver to all schools. This was us trying to meet the demand in the way we could. It is always difficult trying to get the balance right. We specifically targeted schools in disadvantaged or neighbourhood renewal areas because we are particularly interested in improving inequalities for children's outcomes. So, we do not see ourselves working in every school in Northern Ireland by any means.

**Mr Lunn:** You talked about disadvantaged areas, and I see that you have worked with Lismore in Craigavon, which is in a difficult area but I think it is a terrific school.

**Ms McStravick:** It is excellent.

**Mr Lunn:** I am delighted to see that you have had some success there. Do you have a target for the number of schools you may become involved with over the three years that you have the funding?

**Ms McStravick:** About 10 schools a year was our ambition but, as Gill rightly said, our approach is to say that no two schools are the same. For example, one school, which I will not name, thought that it did not have any issues, and then, when we went in and delved deeper, the programme became more intense. I came out feeling incredibly proud of what we achieved but we did not expect that it would take so long, nor did the school. I am not sure whether we will meet that target. I could do with another 15 staff, Trevor, if you are interested. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lunn:** Or another £15,000. *[Laughter.]* Yeah, OK. Thanks very much.

**Mrs Dobson:** Thank you for your presentation. I was interested to read Celine's reference to 'Attitudes to Difference'. On Monday evening, I met a group of migrants from my constituency — mainly Polish nationals — who attend a church-led evening class to learn English. Obviously, their children will come up against specific barriers when it comes to education. How do you feel that the Department and boards help children of migrant workers?

**Ms McStravick:** That is an interesting question because, as well as the work that we presented on today, we run a project called Diversity in Action Northern Ireland. That project is a direct result of a piece of research that we did, 'Attitudes to Difference', which is the evidence perspective from which we often work. That research showed that children from ethnic minority backgrounds were relatively happy in school and that the real issue lay with the front line practitioners — the teachers, GPs and health visitors — who were struggling to meet the needs of such children and were at a loss. So, we run training for all those front line practitioners, particularly in cultural competency and myth busting, that helps them understand the real issues.

Gill will tell you about a specific programme for ethnic minority children in schools that she ran, which was interesting.

**Ms Hassard:** We worked with different groups of ethnic minority children to try to get their voices heard about how it feels for them to be new into the country. One of the outputs from the project was that they designed postcards containing their own faces and handwritten messages. We felt that that was a powerful way of allowing those young people to be seen. Research shows that those young people were often taking a step back and were not sure where to go to, for example, access services.

You said that they were going to an after-school class to learn English, which is fantastic. However, they need to have somebody in their school or community who knew about the class to signpost it. That is where the Diversity in Action project has helped; it is a hub for anyone who is working with young people in that sector to find out about things that are happening across the Province and signpost them.

**Mrs Dobson:** Co-ordinate it.

**Ms Hassard:** Co-ordinate, yes, absolutely.

**Mrs Dobson:** Do you think that school councils are a way in which all views, including those of people from minority backgrounds, can be taken on board by schools when making decisions? How do you think that you could make them totally representative? You said earlier that sometimes the most popular children are those on the school council. How do you get the minority groups involved?

**Ms McStravick:** It is also important to raise the capacity of children in schools. If you start with just an election process, you will get young people who are going to do it. So, as part of our programme, we run a series of workshops in a school and ask the teachers to select young people to attend those workshops who would not normally put themselves forward. By that I mean that they need capacity raising. Gill works with them on their presentation skills, how to get their point across, and so on. She makes it fun for them to see the potential, because they may not understand what it involves. We think that it is important to add that into the process. You cannot just expect young people to put

themselves forward with no training, capacity-building or anything. As part of that, we always say that schools have to look at making sure that their council is representative of its population, whether it is ethnic minorities, male or female, or any of that.

**Mrs Dobson:** You would want that to happen to make sure that minority groups get their chance.

**Ms McStravick:** Yes. That is absolutely and utterly essential. We must make sure that, if that is not happening, specific support is put in for ethnic minority children to see why and to make sure that those barriers are broken down.

**Mrs Dobson:** Gill, you referred to feedback, and Trevor said that it included Lismore's. It is good to see that there is feedback from schools in Craigavon and Portadown in my constituency. You said that, following your research in 2009, you met school principals and boards. How receptive were they to your Participation Support programme?

**Ms McStravick:** It was interesting because all the school principals we met — through our research in other fields, we know quite a lot and have quite a good network of principals whose opinions we would seek — were incredibly receptive, to be honest. The only barrier was funding. They said they would love this and that it would fit in with their inset training, citizenship classes and learning for life and work. The principals said that it would fit everywhere; in fact, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) inspects schools on it and it would be great for them to demonstrate that they had done something.

**Mrs Dobson:** So, you had no difficulty in engaging with schools across the boards, just with the issue about funding?

**Ms McStravick:** We have never had a difficulty. In particular, we are always insistent that we work with the senior management team as well as part of the process, because I think there is absolutely no point in working with the young people unless you have got the senior management team engaged in the process. We have never had a problem. They might start off saying that there is no way that they could give us a full day, but they have never actually refused yet.

**Mrs Dobson:** So, they are very receptive, apart from the funding?

**Ms McStravick:** Yes, they are looking for the support.

**Ms Hassard:** The experience we had of one school was that the staff said that they did not do participation so they really needed us to come and help them, but, when we did our initial audit questionnaire and looked at the things that they did, they were actually doing quite a lot of good work, but they were not aware that that was what participation was. That is why we felt that the training with the senior management team at the start of that process was invaluable, because people bandy about the term "participation", but they need to know what it actually means and how it looks. That is why a lot of the stuff that they were doing just needed more co-ordination. They did not have to do a lot of extra work to develop their plan and get their school working more effectively.

**Mr Kinahan:** I congratulate you. It is fascinating hearing how you are doing. I am intrigued to see where you think we should be going, because we feel that what you are doing should be part of every school and part of the whole curriculum. If you are only doing 10 schools a year, it will take a long time to get through everyone. Therefore, should we be trying to adopt what you are doing everywhere? That is one question. The other point I am intrigued about is that, when you do get strong children with strong opinions, how do you get around the point of building up their expectations so that they feel that they are going to get what they want, when, in fact, there are lots of good reasons as to why a school cannot or will not. I congratulate you on what you are doing.

**Ms McStravick:** I will take the first question about what is next and whether it should be regionalised. Obviously, I agree: all schools should be able to avail themselves of some participation support. Gill and I were just speaking outside about the fact that there are resources available, including Democra-School and other toolkits that are available, but I think that, to change the culture of an organisation,



you need that investment and that one-to-one support. I do not think you can skip on to a checklist of what we should be doing, because, with the best will in the world, teachers are there to teach, and this is a different approach. I would like to be able to target the schools that need it the most. That might be the schools that have lower attainment levels, because I think there is a link to raising pupil aspirations and then raising attainment levels and engagement in their school and community, so it would be nice to be able to define the top tier of schools that you would go to first. If it is Department of Education policy that that should be happening, it should also provide the funding and support to enable it to happen. It is not really fair to ask schools to do this without a support programme running alongside it.

That was an excellent question about managing expectations, because it is often one of the fears of the teachers that they are going to want to change the uniform, paint classrooms and all sorts, but, actually, when we work with the young people, it is not often the case. Part of us raising the capacity of the young people is to be very clear with them that, if they want to be listened to, they should be reasonable. It is about compromise and co-operation; it is not about ruling the school. We build that into the training, and it is essential from the start to be very clear about expectations.

**Ms Hassard:** As part of the training with pupils, we also talk about channels of communication. Quite often, the school has a student council and feels that that is the job done, but actually it is not being managed correctly, because pupils are having a say and their messages are going out, but there is no feedback. Maybe the staff are not saying that they cannot have a change of uniform because there is no money, or whatever it is that they are asking for that is maybe not going to happen. In our training, we are very clear that, as long as you can ask the right question and as long as the teachers can feedback their responses — negatively or positively; it does not really matter — their expectations are met because they have asked the question and had the answer. You cannot have everything that you ask for, and that is OK as long as young people are clear that they are not being ignored.

**Ms Boyle:** Jo-Anne has already asked some of my questions. I have only one or two, if that is OK. Thank you for the presentation. I know that most or all of your work involves the participation of children in the school environment, but I will sidetrack here a wee bit. Society is changing and children have attitudes. Some of the attitudes outside school affect them in school. Do you see any trends there? Do any issues come out as you talk to children? Do those issues affect them outside of school? Are there any conclusions on that?

You have a waiting list because of the demand, which is good. How long is that waiting list? You are based in the North. Can I ask, as I represent a rural area, whether you have been out in the west? Are you getting into the schools and tapping into schools in rural areas?

**Ms Hassard:** When you asked about the issues, what occurred to me was the issue of bullying. Pupils talked about how they had helped their school look at its bullying policy. Feeding into that is a fantastic starting point. They gave examples of many problems with pupils fighting outside schools or between schools in the same area. And when they came into the schools —

**Ms Boyle:** Text bullying?

**Ms Hassard:** Yes, and cyberbullying and all of those things. That is one example of how students in the school can look at an issue. They can decide that they are going to have to tackle an issue in some way. Is that what you were asking about?

**Ms McStravick:** Just to note, as well, that NCB hosts the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum —

**Ms Hassard:** Coincidentally.

**Ms McStravick:** Coincidentally. Just to add to the portfolio of what we are doing at the moment.

**Ms Boyle:** Do you do a follow-up? Do you re-evaluate by going back into the schools after you have been in them?

**Ms McStravick:** Yes, we do. That is really important. There is absolutely no point in us handing over an action plan without going back in. In particular, the survey that we do in the school gives a kind of baseline of what pupils think the levels of participation are, not what the staff thinks. It is what the pupils are saying. Then we go back, six months later, and do the same survey. We are then able to say to the senior management team that things have not changed, have changed or have got worse. You cannot argue with what the young people are saying. We have, obviously, had conversations where schools have told us that everything is fine. We reply, "Interestingly, our survey says that these pupils think that they are not being heard." That encourages the school to change a bit more.

As for getting out and into rural areas, I am a rural girl myself so, yes, I welcome any opportunity to get out beyond Belfast. At the minute, interestingly enough, we are running another programme for the Big Lottery Fund and we are running some workshops about building a culture of participation for the voluntary sector up in Derry. Now that we have run the participation programme for a number of schools, we are much more confident that we have a very tight programme that we are able to roll out much wider. So my ambition — the answer — is yes. Try and stop me.

**Ms Boyle:** Have you ever been to any schools in Tyrone?

**Ms McStravick:** Not yet, but never say never.

**Ms Boyle:** Derry is not quite that rural.

**Ms McStravick:** Well, I am thinking of the north-west and some of our work with groups in Limavady.

**The Chairperson:** Do not forget Strabane.

**Ms McStravick:** How could I forget Strabane?

**Miss M McIlveen:** Chair, we are all very parochial.

**The Chairperson:** We are all very parochial, yes.

**Miss M McIlveen:** Thank you for your presentation. It is good to hear from you. I am just interested in the comment that you made in your introduction with respect to looked-after children and the work that you have done in some of the residential homes. I want to explore some of the benefits that you have found, what the young people have got out of that, how that has assisted them through school and whether you have seen any noticeable difference in attainment as a result of their being involved in participation networks.

**Ms McStravick:** The Building a Culture of Participation training was developed from baseline research which we did in residential care homes throughout England. We worked with a very broad cohort of staff through very different areas of the looked-after system. We identified what could happen differently in the care home to encourage participation and, as a result, interestingly, that research was quite fundamental in finding out how care homes could be run differently, down to very basic things like letting young people open the fridge themselves as opposed to having locks on them. These are things that we would take for granted, but staff are so used to them.

In Northern Ireland, participation with looked-after children is very ably led by the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC). However, through Young NCB and our work with the Big Lottery Fund, we run an Engage programme, and some of the young people on that are in the looked-after system. Time and again, we have found those children particularly eager to feel that they have a voice and a place.

As part of our work with the Engage programme, we ran a residential with young people, all of whom said, "We never had the opportunity to do this. Nobody ever listens to us" — all the usual things that I am sure we all felt as teenagers. I think that it is particularly important for those young people to feel valued, something that is often missing for someone in the looked-after system. What they say should not only be listened to but treated as important and valid. We find that telling them what has happened as a result of what they said helps that process. We will be getting some young people

involved in delivering some of the training that we do for the Big Lottery Fund, so that they are seen to be crucial parts of the whole area of training for the voluntary sector. As opposed to just being talked about, they will be involved in that.

I am not sure whether that answers your questions, Michelle, but —

**Miss M McIlveen:** I am looking at whether their participation has helped in confidence building and whether that has had any demonstrable achievement outcome or whether, just by getting involved, they are more inclined to get involved in the school system; their attendance improves, and so on. Have you done any research on that?

**Ms McStravick:** We have not done any research on that link between whether children in the looked-after system and voluntary participation had increased attainment. I suppose from our perspective, this is where I go back into saying that we cannot give you exact evidence of that. So I would feel uncomfortable quoting on that. However, hearsay and our ad hoc experience very clearly indicate that investing in any child and improving their participation and all such life skills will inspire them. A child who is inspired will aspire, and that is important. It is a difficult thing to get right, because it often takes a lot of time to invest and to do it properly.

**Ms Hassard:** A couple of looked-after young people who I worked with in the Engage programme said that they do not want to talk just about being looked after; they want to have a voice about being a teenager in Northern Ireland, being a male or female — whatever you would ask Joe Public about. That was an important thing that we encouraged. As Celine said, they will be on our training programme as co-facilitators in training for the Engage programme in September. We will be doing a capacity-building programme with them, so they will not just be talking about being looked after; they will have a voice in different ways. I think that that is important too.

**Miss M McIlveen:** How many young people are involved in Young NCB?

**Ms McStravick:** About 105 in the whole network, and there is an advisory group of about 12 or 13 at the last count. They come in for different reasons. It is not that we meet regularly with all of those young people. Gill works incredibly hard to make sure that other opportunities from across the voluntary sector are open to any members of Young NCB. Anything that we do to support organisations includes making sure that Young NCB does not become a problem in itself by becoming a closed group. We try to make it as open as possible.

**Miss M McIlveen:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson:** Celine and Gill, thank you very much. That has been very useful. I have one doubt that one area that has not been looked at is that of area planning, which schools are about to go into. The question was raised earlier about how we communicate all of this to parents. It would be an interesting piece of work to ask what young people think about a school merger proposed in area plans. That may be something that you may consider asking the Department to do. We will certainly be asking. However, Celine and Gill, thank you very much. Your input into the inquiry is very helpful. I have no doubt that we will be in contact with you again.

**Ms McStravick:** Thanks very much for giving us the opportunity to speak. If you need any more help or support, Gill will be able to help you.