

Written Ministerial Statement

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Education

OUTCOME OF CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE YOUTH COUNCIL AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Mr O'Dowd (Minister of Education):

Introduction

The purpose of this statement is to inform the Assembly of the outcome of the consultation on Proposals for the Future of the Youth Council and to indicate the approach I intend to take in relation to the Youth Council and the future administration and funding of regional youth services.

The Youth Council was established in 1990 under the Youth Service (NI) Order 1989 (1989 No 2413 (N.I. 22)). Its current status is as an executive Non Departmental Public Body of the Department of Education.

Following the establishment of the Education Authority on 1 April 2015, we now have two statutory organisations with legislation that enables them to provide for youth services on a regional basis. It was therefore right for me to consider the future need for a separate Youth Council. This, coupled with an extremely challenging public expenditure climate, is why I announced to the Education Committee in March of this year my intention to explore how all youth service funding and support might be delivered through a single organisation, the Education Authority.

Consultation

Public consultation on proposals for the future of the Youth Council took place from 20 April 2015 to 3 July 2015. I have today published a "Summary Report of Responses to the Consultation on Proposals for the Future of the Youth Council" which has been placed in the Assembly library and will also be published on my Department's website.

I have carefully considered the responses received to the consultation; the views expressed by the Education Committee; and the points made by various stakeholders and other interested parties.

I found within them a compelling case for the work that goes on in our youth services and a need to underpin that work with a strategic approach to the design, development and delivery of youth services across this jurisdiction.

The responses emphasised the importance attached to the work of our youth services – statutory and voluntary; regional and local - and often highlighted how those involved in delivering youth services have inspired and encouraged young people to reach their full potential.

This evidence was no surprise to me – I have long recognised the importance of our youth services and the value of the work that they do. Even in a difficult financial context, I have prioritised and sought to protect the funding for those services.

The issue at hand is not the value of youth work; it is the structures we need to ensure it is planned, supported, delivered and evaluated efficiently and effectively.

While I have heard and accepted the compelling case for youth services, I have not heard a similarly compelling case for the long-term retention of a separate non-departmental body in an area that is an integral element of our education system.

Future of the Youth Council

In a challenging financial context and in a context where we have a responsibility to reform and streamline how we operate our public services, I have concluded that the key activities currently undertaken by the Youth Council could and should be delivered effectively and efficiently by the Education Authority.

I have today written to my Executive colleagues seeking their agreement to the drafting of a Bill to repeal the Youth Service (NI) Order 1989 to resolve the administrative effect of the creation of the Education Authority (i.e. the existence of two statutory bodies operating at a regional level). The effect of this legislation will be to wind up the Youth Council. Primary legislation is required to repeal the Youth Service (NI) Order 1989 as there are no provisions within the Order itself in relation to the dissolution of the Youth Council.

The passage of legislation will require Executive agreement and will of course be subject to the view of this Assembly.

Arrangements for 2016-17

In the meantime, and in preparation for a new and challenging financial year, I have had to consider what approach might best ensure the effective and efficient delivery of youth services, including those currently undertaken through the Youth Council.

I am satisfied that, under Article 37 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, the Education Authority has the power to assist and finance Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations in place of the Youth Council. I have decided to proceed with a number of structural changes within the current legislative framework to ensure that youth services are supported to continue to provide the maximum level of frontline services within its approved budget.

The funding that the Department provides to support the work of Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations will, from April 2016, be routed through the Education Authority which will oversee its distribution and work in a new and constructive way with the Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations. I will earmark the funding destined for these regional organisations so that they can be confident that it will be available for them, no matter what other priorities the Authority may face.

Youth Council Staff

I want to turn now to the Youth Council itself, and first to its staff. An organisation's human resource is its most valuable asset and that applies as much to a small organisation like the Youth Council as it does to larger bodies. I want to pay tribute not only to the good work of the staff over very many years but also to their patience and understanding. I know that they have continued to operate during a period of uncertainty not just in recent weeks but for many years. I know too that they will be concerned to know what my decisions will mean for them as individuals.

I have been determined that no member of staff should feel that there is no longer a place for them in the education family. With the help and support of the Education Authority, I am able to offer employees of the Youth Council two options, transfer to the Education Authority or access to a Voluntary Exit Scheme. Every member of staff will have the opportunity to transfer to the Education Authority on the basis that the principles of TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)) will apply. This arrangement will ensure that every current staff member who wants to continue to work in the area of education will have the opportunity to do so. It will of course be based on individual circumstances and the precise timing will depend on the progress of the VES.

I am conscious, however, that not everyone may wish to transfer to the Education Authority. Therefore, I can also confirm that a VES for the Youth Council will be launched in the coming weeks,

again with the support of the Education Authority. I would like to acknowledge the Education Authority's assistance and support in helping to develop both solutions.

Youth Council Members

I shall turn finally to the Council itself, and the appointed members who serve on it. I am pleased and grateful that the Chair has signalled her willingness to remain in position and to fulfil this role for the remainder of her term of office until September 2016, during which time I hope a Bill to repeal the Youth Service (NI) Order 1989 will have been passed in the Assembly. I am hopeful that other members will similarly agree to serve in this way. I will be asking them to do so and will be making arrangements for Council members to receive the secretariat support they need to fulfil this role.

Taking account of the responses made in the consultation and the important concerns which have been raised, I will also establish a partnership chaired by my Department and involving the Education Authority and other key stakeholders. Its role will be to chart a way forward that secures full integration of regional and local youth services within the Education Authority. It is being established to ensure that the understanding of the Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations and other dimensions of youth services that the Youth Council has built up over many years can be transferred effectively to the Education Authority. I will announce the precise make-up and terms of reference of this group in the coming weeks. Through this supportive and collaborative partnership there will be an opportunity to find workable solutions which will enable the new arrangements to be as effective as possible. I believe that, while the Youth Council continues to exist in statute, its Council members should also have a role to play in advising and supporting that partnership, recognising their responsibilities in relation to providing encouragement and advice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe change to how we organise our support for youth services is necessary if we are to protect the services themselves. The steps that I have outlined above will provide stability, ensure accountability and deliver a strategic approach. The Education Authority and its predecessor boards have already demonstrated that they recognise and value the important role of youth services – regional and local – and I have confidence in its ability to make these new arrangements work for the benefit of those who matter most – our children and young people. I know that it will want to build on the important legacy that staff and members of the Youth Council, past and present, have built.

I remain fully committed to enhancing and improving the lives of all our children and young people through the delivery of high quality cost effective youth provision both at regional and local level in line with current educational priorities.