

Network for Youth consultation

**An overview of the responses
[Full length version]**

January 2009

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Introduction

In 2007 the Department of Education, on behalf of the Government, set up a working group to advise on the development of a Network for Youth. The purpose of the Network would be to '**strengthen the direct voice of children and young people (aged 0-25) in all relevant aspects of government provision**'

The working group conducted a pre-consultation exercise in 2007, followed by a formal consultation process which closed on 30 November 2008. The working group would like to thank all those who responded, either by completing an individual response postcard, by taking part in a group response, or by sending an organisational response. Thanks are also due to all those working with children and young people who helped to facilitate the consultation.

The following report provides a summary of responses to the formal consultation. A report on the pre-consultation, and further information about the Network for Youth working group is available at www.ycni.org

Executive Summary

Numbers of respondents : 790 individual response postcards were received – at least 93% of these being from under 25 year olds. Twenty two group responses, representing the views of approximately 350 children and young people were also received, along with twelve organisational responses from those in the voluntary and statutory sectors.

Vision and Values : There was almost unanimous endorsement of the proposed vision for the network, and over 95% agreement on the proposed values. In terms of the latter, some respondents had concerns that the target age range of 0-25 was unrealistic, and there were some suggested additions or revisions to the proposed values.

Preferred option : Of the 790 who responded using individual response postcards, 44% voted for the Youth Assembly, 23% for the Regional youth-led option, 19% for a Network of Networks, and 14% proposed combinations of two or more of these options.

Responses from the groups of children and young people illustrated the diversity of opinion, with half of the groups unable to reach a group consensus on a preferred option, and a quarter proposing alternative plans to combine two or more of the options.

Eight out of the twelve organisations which responded selected the Network of Networks option.

Reasons given for choice of option :

Individuals who selected the **Regional youth led option** felt it would be open and accessible, had a youth-led agenda, had a good local and regional structure, that it would be easier to have a voice, that a full range of existing groups could connect with it, and it would have social benefits. Feedback from the group responses tended to highlight the importance of the local structure and accessibility to local decision makers. It was also felt that this option would be open to those not involved in existing groups.

Individuals who selected the **Network of Networks option** felt it would be based on existing groups, be more inclusive of a wider range of children and young people, be cheaper/simpler to operate, provide a social aspect, provide an easier way to communicate, and offer adult support. Feedback from the group responses indicated that this option may be the most conducive to excluded and minority groups and those with disabilities, as it would allow children and young people to express their views in familiar settings. This view was reiterated by organisational responses, which suggested the option provided greatest opportunities for inclusion and would help to build on, rather than duplicate, existing provision.

Individuals who selected the **Youth Assembly option** felt it would ensure that young people are heard, that it has a direct link to government, would be more likely to have an impact, would have a range of educational and image benefits for young people, was based on a clear local /regional structure, and would be high profile. Feedback from group responses echoed all of these points, with an emphasis on the local structures and the need to ensure these were fully inclusive. Three of the organisational responses advocated retaining a Youth Assembly within alternative proposals. It is notable that the Youth Assembly was the option which generated the highest number of comments from respondents – both positive and negative.

Alternative proposals

14% of the individuals felt the network should comprise a combination of the options. Alternative models proposed by groups tended to focus on ensuring full inclusion at local level, and also full information flow between local structures and the diversity of local groups.

Two organisations proposed alternative models which would incorporate elements of the other options.

How to involve younger children

Some respondents felt that the network should operate with different age bands using different methods. Proponents of the Network of Networks suggested that this option would be inclusive of the range of existing groups which work with younger children. Many other respondents suggested that local structures associated with either the Youth Assembly or regional youth-led should ensure that they connect with the full range of local groups, including those for younger children. A majority of respondents also suggested that younger children could be involved through play-based and fun workshops or roadshows visiting primary schools and youth groups. Responses from younger children indicated their positive interest in the idea of a network, and highlighted that children should be provided with a range of ways to participate. Many of the children indicated that they would want to remain in familiar settings when expressing their views.

Additional issues raised by respondents

Some respondents made additional suggestions or observations which could have significant impact on the development of any model for a Network.

1. The provisional title 'Network for Youth' is inappropriate to the age range 0-25 and should be revised
2. Several respondents affirmed the efforts made by the working group to include children and young people during the consultation process, but proposed that these stakeholders must continue to be involved in the ongoing development of the model for the network.
3. Some young respondents – and particularly those who took part in focus groups and were often identified as marginalized – expressed high levels of cynicism as to the likely impact of this initiative. From these respondents, and some of the facilitators who relayed their views, there was a strong message that if the network is simply a talking shop or window dressing for government, then there is no point in taking it any further.
4. The need for capacity building and support systems was highlighted by many respondents, both young people and professionals. Some suggested that a specific role of the network should be to enable and develop the skills base for children and young people to engage in participation, and some proposed that the work of the Big Deal initiative could be tied into the role of the network on a long term basis. Similarly some respondents pointed to the role and value of the Participation Network in terms of building capacity within the public

sector to ensure adults are equipped to engage with children and young people in a meaningful way. It was proposed that the work of the Participation Network should also be connected to the workings of the Network for Youth.

5. The focus groups in particular highlighted that young people want the network to act proactively – raising issues and lobbying – rather than simply responding to governments agenda.

6. Some of the organisational responses proposed that to maximise the impact of the network, there should be cross departmental co-operation and a line of reporting to OFMDFM. It was also proposed that the role of the network should include a remit to monitor the 10 Year strategy for children and young people.

7. One respondent proposed that the policy decision relating to the Network for Youth proposal must adhere to section 75 and therefore undergo impact assessment.

Who responded, and how were the responses analysed?

Individual responses

Consultation leaflets were designed specifically to reach those aged under 25, and these leaflets included detachable response postcards to gain the views of individuals. Dissemination of the leaflets was co-ordinated to reach a balanced selection of children and young people from across Northern Ireland, including those in youth service and play provision, those not involved in groups, and those from a range of circumstances which could hinder their involvement in a network. A more detailed account of the process is provided in Appendix 1.

790 individual response postcards were received. 93% of these (No= 736) were from under 25 year olds, 4% did not provide their age, and 3% were from 25+ year olds. The majority of individual respondents (78%) were aged between 11-17 age range.

Responses to the 'Yes/No' questions were counted and analysed according to age group, as were votes for the preferred option. Approximately 80% of the individual respondents also provided written comments, which provide a valuable insight, particularly into the reasoning behind their choice of option. These comments were initially coded into 60 categories of response. These 60 categories were then merged into broader themes, until six key themes emerged for each of the options. These broad themes reflect the most common reasons for respondents choice of option, and so illustrate the main 'selling points' for each of the options.

Child and youth Group responses

Nineteen groups of children and /or young people contributed towards written group submissions.

An additional response, submitted by Playboard, summarised their direct consultations with approximately 100 children (aged under 11). Further to this, some of the organisational responses also contained 'sub-reports' which reported their consultations with young people. The organisational responses have been analysed separately, but references to their consultations with young people are included within the group analysis. Specifically, this refers to responses by the NICCY youth panel and those by young people involved with Include Youth projects.

An estimated 350 children and young people contributed towards group responses. Analysis of the group responses had to be approached with some caution, however, because approximately one third of the 350 had also completed individual response cards.

To avoid double-counting, analysis relates to the 22 groups rather than the 350 individuals. The group responses were analysed by key themes, using the same methodology as that used for individual responses (see above). The groups were:

Armagh district youth council (6 young people, individual responses also sent)

Banbridge youth council (number unspecified)

Fermanagh youth council (20 young people, individual responses also sent)

Cookstown district youth council (number unspecified)

Newry & Mourne youth council (14 young people, individual responses also sent)

South Armagh youth council (number unspecified)

Foyle youth council (8 young people, individual responses also sent)

Craigavon district youth council (12 young people)

Three Ways Youth (number unspecified)

Face Inclusion Matters : Newry peer education group (5 young people aged 15-21, individual responses also sent)

All Saints Youth Club, Ballymena – Senior Members (7 young people)

Cregagh Youth Centre – senior group (6 young people)

Group of unattached young people aged 14 from Limavady (facilitated by Area Youth Worker)

St Dominics school, Politics classes (50 pupils, group response only)

Belfast city centre Pathways group – facilitated by consultant (8 young people aged 14-17, individual responses also sent)

Shankill Pathways group – facilitated by consultant (10 young people aged 14-17, individual responses also sent)

Pathways 174 group – facilitated by consultant (9 young people aged 14-17, individual responses also sent)

VOYPIC – facilitated by consultant (5 young people aged 11-25, individual responses also sent)

Young people accommodated by the Simon community – facilitated by consultant (5 young people, individual responses also sent)

Playboard – approximately 100 children (aged under 11) consulted by staff (group response only)

NICCY youth panel (Individual responses also sent)

Include Youth Young Voices – consultations with young people (aged 14-17) involved with Young Voices project in Greater Belfast. Includes consultations with young people in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre and Hydebank YOC

Organisational responses

Responses were received from a further 12 organisations from the statutory and voluntary sectors. Whilst these provide organisational positions, it is noted that almost half of these responses were in turn informed by discussions with young people. The organisational responses were from:

UK Youth Parliament

National Children's Bureau (with input from Young at NCB children and young peoples panel)

Youth Action NI

Children in NI (informed by a consultation workshop attended by professionals from 22 organisations, including CI-NI members and members of the Participation Network)

Child Brain injury Trust (an endorsement of the CI-NI response)

Omagh District Council

NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (with input from NICCY youth panel)

Include Youth (with input from focus groups held with young people in juvenile justice centre and YOC)

Northern Ireland Youth Forum (with input from NIYF Executive committee of young people)

Playboard

Ballymoney community safety partnership

Volunteer Development Agency (with input from focus group of young millennium volunteers)

Gaps in the responses

The consultation process reached a wide diversity of young people, both linked to existing participative structures and those not involved

with youth groups. Extensive effort was made to engage with children and young people from minority or excluded groups, as well as ensuring responses from all geographic areas across Northern Ireland.

Given that the individual response postcards were anonymous, it is not possible to prove that the responses were fully representative of all children and young people. However there are some known gaps in types of respondents.

Thanks to the active support of Playboard approximately 100 young children contributed towards group responses. However it is noted that less than 2% of the 790 individual response postcards were sent by children under 11 years.

In terms of the inclusion of children and young people with learning disabilities, a pictorial questionnaire and facilitator notes were provided, and contact was made with a number of relevant groups. Similarly, Braille and large-print questionnaires were provided to support participation of those with visual impairment. However it is noted that only ten responses were received in picture based or large-print format, which means that the views of those with learning disabilities and also those with visual impairment are under-represented in this analysis.

In terms of responses from the statutory and political sectors, it is noted that no responses were received from government departments or political parties, and only one of the 26 local councils responded.

Clearly all of these groups are potential stakeholders to a network and the absence of data from these groups must be highlighted. Whilst the working group had scheduled extra time after the formal consultation period to address any such gaps, an unavoidable change in the timetable has meant that this is not possible.

Weighting of Responses

'Weighting responses' refers to the practice of judging particular consultation responses to be more or less important than other responses. Weighting can be used for a range of purposes, eg to magnify the voice of minority groups, to give priority to key stakeholders, to acknowledge those with expertise, to demarcate individuals from groups etc. Weighting is therefore a value-based rather than scientific process, and as such any decision to apply weighting to responses must be made transparently.

Whilst this report differentiates between the responses from individuals, groups and organisations, it does not recommend or imply any weighting between respondents. To clarify, the purpose of this report is to represent and illustrate the range of comments which were made by respondents, and to provide an objective overview of their ideas and concerns. Based on this analysis, the working group will make broad recommendations to the Department of Education, and these recommendations will be published at www.ycni.org. Ultimately it will be the responsibility of the Department to apply weighting or not when reaching a final decision about the network. As with any policy, the DE considerations will include not only stakeholder and professional views, but also an appraisal of the economic, practical and legislative implications of the proposals.

It is worth highlighting that young respondents – the central stakeholders to a future Network – had contrasting views on how a Network should operate. Statistically, the proposal for a Youth Assembly received the greatest proportion of 'votes' from young people, and yet this option did not receive a majority vote (ie >50%). Likewise, the views of professional organisations were disparate – whilst these respondents tended to favour the option of a Network of Networks, this was not a unanimous view.

Views on proposed Vision

Individual responses

99.7% of respondents agreed with the proposed vision. The small number who disagreed mainly felt that the vision was unrealistic or unattainable.

One respondent (aged over 25) suggested the vision should be reworded to 'The Network for youth shall support and enable the participation of children and young people by...' and that the vision could refer to regional and local aspects, reference to the Priorities for Youth, and proposed outcomes.

Five respondents (aged 11-17) agreed with the vision but thought the concept of 'vision' was difficult for young people. Alternative replacement words were suggested as 'goal' or 'aim'.

Group responses

Some groups did not discuss vision and instead focused on the options. However of those which did provide comment on the proposed vision, all agreed with it. Two groups proposed that government commitment to take children and young peoples views seriously should be mentioned in the vision. One suggested that the provision of training and support to enable young people to express their view should be included in the vision.

Organisational responses

All organisations agreed with the proposed vision, with additional observations being made by the following three organisations:

Include Youth : Endorse the vision, but highlighted that its achievement would be challenging – most particularly in terms of providing appropriate opportunities for the hardest to reach young people. Include Youth proposed that the sentence that young people will 'have their views taken seriously by government' was insufficient, and that it should include an element of government accountability to act. *' We strongly agree that children and young people need to have their views taken seriously, but would welcome more demonstrable examples of what this will mean in practice. The young people we come into contact with require clear examples of exactly how their views are being taken seriously. We understand that this is not always an easy thing to achieve as very often policy change is a slow and gradual process. Nonetheless, we would urge the importance of*

showing young people that their views have resulted in tangible change.'

Children in Northern Ireland : CiNI agrees with the suggested vision. Those who attended the consultation exercise were keen to emphasise that the concept of 'communication' should be broadly interpreted and recognised to include non-verbal, creative and innovative methods of communication which were of particular importance to young children and children with disabilities. It was also highlighted that throughout the entire process of development of the Network through to its establishment and operation government must be mindful of the requirement to produce consultation materials in a child friendly manner.

Youth Action NI : We believe that the vision should be rephrased to reflect the following: **The Network for Youth shall support and enable the participation of children and young people by:** (the 4 objectives)

- Should the age range and targeting local and regional level be incorporated within the visions?
- Should the vision refer to the priorities for Youth / Youth work strategy and reflect the PARTICIPATION priority?
- Should the vision refer to the contribution of young people to a shared future, decision making and overall contribution to peace-building?
- Should the vision highlight the anticipated impact or outcome such as: to improve participation of all young people / to support young people understand decision making processes and the HOW to make a difference
- We would advocate a vision which encompasses the following: **An independent body which strives to be a centre for excellence – the network should be a champion for young people across government where young people can effectively lobby. It should be a youth network recognised in legislation**

Views on proposed Values

Individual responses

95.5% of individual respondents agreed with the proposed values. Among those who disagreed, the key concern was a view that the target age group of 0-25 is too wide. They suggested that the lower age limit should be raised (the majority of suggestions were to raise it to 7-8 years) and that the upper age limit should be raised either to the voting age of 18, or to 21. They felt that younger children would not be

able to participate in a structured network, and that older age groups have the opportunity to engage with government through voting. Some voiced concern that there would be too many conflicting views according to such a wide age range.

They cry and are not old enough to go. [Should be] 8-25 (aged under 11)

It would be bad for the younger children and the older children as they would not get along so well (aged under 11)

8-21. We only have limited money and it should be concentrated where it can best be used. Over 21s should be able to use an adult system to engaging with government (aged 18-25)

Feel that 7-21 would be able to represent the youth population more fairly as at 7 years old young people can express their opinions and at 21 they are nearly adults (aged 18-25)

Age range of 21 is more appropriate as people of 25 are adults and have different concerns(aged 11-17)

Age 14 and up, as ideas put forward would be more mature and reasonable (aged 11-25)

The 0-25 is my problem. How are babies meant to know what is going on? (aged 11-25)

There were some suggested additions to the list of values. Two felt that 'fun' should be included as a value. Two felt that being helped and encouraged to be involved should be included. One felt that the values are too general, and another felt that the values are already enshrined by human rights.

A small number suggested that the values need to include reference to governmental accountability to respond to the network, and that adults should 'do what they say they will do'.

Group responses

Some groups did not discuss values and instead focused on the options. The groups which did discuss the proposed values agreed with them, with some suggested additions:

- That EDI should be included – 'equity' as opposed to 'equality'
- That the age range is too wide and should be 7-21

- That 'To help young people achieve' should be added as a value
- That alternative methods could be used for younger and older age groups
- That 'Direct communication with government officials' should be an additional value.
- That the values should refer to involvement in the network as being fun and enjoyable for its members

Organisational responses

All organisations agreed with the proposed values, with additional observations being made by the following three organisations:

Include Youth: *We agree that the Network needs to be accessible, but would go beyond this to say that it must not just be accessible to all young people but must go out of its way to **target** specific young people. It is important that the Network does not wait for the young people to approach it and hope that it is accessible enough to do so, but must actually be proactive in seeking out young people at risk.*

Clearly, some work needs to be done to help some young people to become involved and to feel empowered. We would also ask if similar preparatory work will be done with adults to ensure that they are ready to accept and act for 'empowered' children and young people. It is important that adults and those in authority realise that some young people do not come ready prepared for interaction and will as a result use their own language, express themselves in ways which they are comfortable with – the challenge will be for adults to interpret it and put in the effort required to understand their position. Include Youth are members of and applaud the work of the Participation Network who along with others have begun to progress this work.

Children in NI : *CiNI welcomes the broad and comprehensive set of suggested values identified for the Network.*

*In particular we welcome the **rights-based** value which asserts that the Network will support the UNCRC and uphold and protect children and young people's rights. However, we would go further and recommend that at its core this value statement must seek to ensure that the Network itself embeds the guiding principles of the UNCRC. That is, the Network must be appropriately child and young person focused by operating in such a way*

that no child or young person is discriminated against (UNCRC article 2); the best interests of each individual child and young person are promoted (UNCRC article 3); and the views of all children and young people are listened to and given due regard throughout the entire process of the Network's development, setting up and subsequent operation (UNCRC article 12).

Those who attended the consultation workshop were keen that the **respectful** value should be developed further. It was felt that while it was important that government takes children and young people's views seriously, government has to demonstrate very clearly how children and young people's contributions have shaped policy. Where their contributions cannot or will not be used children and young people need feedback on this. Children and young people need to see and feel that their lives are changing for the better as a result of their engagement with government, otherwise they will become disillusioned very quickly by the whole concept of participation.

Youth Action NI : The overall VALUES already imply that the Network is a core body or group rather than a Network. We would also question if some of the VALUES are actually VALUES?

We believe that the **Inclusion** value should be about engaging with young people on the boundaries of youth sector and education processes. This should include a strategic partnership approach with the 3 pillars (young people, voluntary and statutory). This should be about utilising well established models of youth participation while embarking on new models. This should involve preparing young people and adults for effective participation in new and challenging ways and not solely replicating an adult oriented model. We believe that **accessibility** should be a PROACTIVE statement which incorporates outreach/detached approaches

Within the **respectful** value we believe that it is crucial to state the role of the youth sector as a key resource which developed and embeds youth participation at its core. This respect should be backed up with a financial investment and support for existing groups

The **rights-based** value is misleading as it indicates that the Network will "treat everyone with respect". Furthermore this is about entitlement

We believe that **recognition** for participation is a core value and should be made available as an option for young people–The effectiveness will depend on the valuing of processes as well as products. Young people should be appreciated and recognised for their contributions such as through the YouthAction NI Youth Achievement Award scheme (recognised through ASDAN)

Preferred option – an outline of all responses

790 individual respondents

Individual respondents tended to favour the two structural proposals, and favoured the Youth Assembly model in particular. Less than 1 in 5 chose the Network of Networks, and 1 in 7 felt that alternative or combinations of options would be more effective. It is noted that whilst the Youth Assembly option was the most popular choice among all age groups ie. Under 11, 11-17, 18-25 and 25+, it was significantly more popular among 11-17 year olds. Those within the 18-25 and 25+ age ranges were more equally divided among their choice of options.

Option	Number	%
Youth Assembly	344	44
Regional youth led	178	23
Network of Networks	147	19
Combine Youth Assembly with youth led 41		5
'Other' [not stated]	32	4
Combine all three options	17	2
Combine Network of Networks with Youth Assembly	15	2
Combine Network of Networks with regional Youth led	10	1
Missing data	5	<1
Total	790	100

Group responses

It is noted that around half of the groups could not reach a group consensus about the preferred option. A further quarter of groups provided alternative proposals based on two or more options.

Group	Preferred option
Armagh district youth council	Preferences divided between Regional youth-led and Youth Assembly
Banbridge youth council	Youth Assembly
Fermanagh youth council	Alternative option combining Regional youth-led with Network of Networks
Cookstown district youth council	Alternative proposal, primarily based on Network of Networks but with formal links to NI Assembly
Newry & Mourne youth council	Mixed views
South Armagh youth council	Youth Assembly
Foyle youth council	Network of Networks
Craigavon district youth council	Alternative option combining Regional youth-led with Network of Networks
Three Ways Youth	Alternative proposal based on Youth Assembly but ensuring accessibility of local structures
Face Inclusion Matters	No consensus, but concern that structure predicated on local youth councils could exclude those with a disability
All Saints Youth Club	Regional youth led
Cregagh Youth Centre	Regional youth led
Unattached group from Limavady	Alternative proposal based on Regional youth led and Network of Networks
St Dominics politics classes	Regional youth led
Belfast city Pathways	Mixed views
Shankill Pathways	Majority for Youth Assembly – not unanimous
174 Pathways group	Mixed views
VOYPIC	Mixed views
Group from Simon community	Mixed views
Consultation with appx 100 Children under age of 11	No specific preference – environmental and ‘fun’ aspects important in any option
NICCY youth panel	Preferences divided between Regional youth-led and Youth

	Assembly
Groups consulted by Include Youth	Mixed views

Organisational Responses

Seven out of the twelve organisational responses selected the option of a Network of Network.

Organisation	Preferred option
National Children's Bureau	Network of Networks
Youth Action NI	Network of Networks
Children in NI (based on consultation workshop attended by 22 member groups)	Network of Networks
Child Brain Injury Trust (endorsement of CI-NI response)	Network of Networks
Omagh District council	Network of Networks
NI Commissioner for Children and Young People	Youth Assembly, with elements of youth led model
UK Youth Parliament	No preference stated
Include Youth	Network of Networks
NI Youth Forum	Alternative proposal incorporating elements of all options
Playboard	Network of Networks, incorporating different parts of the other options
Ballymoney community safety partnership	Regional youth led
Volunteer Development Agency	Network of Networks

Views on the Options Option A : Regional Youth-led

790 Individual Responses

The six broad themes cited by those in favour of the Regional youth-led option were as follows (most frequently mentioned theme is Number 1, and so on)

1. Open and accessible

Respondents felt that this model was open to anyone to get involved, regardless of whether they were involved in groups or not. They felt anyone could join in and that the proposal for shop-front offices would provide easy access for a range of individuals.

2. (joint) Youth led agenda

Those in favour of this option felt that the focus of the local branches and central organisation would be more relevant if young people were in control of the agenda. Some respondents from youth groups commented that youth-led management has proven effective in their own groups. Others felt that it would remove adult manipulation, and would give young people the benefit of 'hands-on' involvement

2 (joint) Structure – local / central

The structural model was equally important to the youth-led element. Respondents felt that the division between local and central would ensure that all types of issues could be dealt with. They felt that this structure would ensure geographic spread of involvement, and that the connections between local branches would strengthen the voice of the central component.

4. Easier to have a voice

Respondents felt that the less formal nature of this model, along with the open and welcoming aspect and the youth-led element would make it easier for young people to express their views.

5. Full range of existing groups can get involved

Whilst respondents felt individuals could get involved, they also suggested that the model would attract a range of existing groups and hence that it would be inclusive to a diversity of members.

6. Social aspect

The opportunity to make new friends, meet people and socialise was seen as a benefit of this model, although was cited by a minority of those who favoured this model.

Below is a range of comments in favour of the regional youth led option

Will be more local. Our young people need a voice and local group will be more representative (Aged over 25)

Would be easier to approach and talk to. Not as intimidating as other methods (aged 18-25)

It gives everyone a chance (aged 18-25)

Welcomes everyone as an individual, is led by young people therefore it will be done the way its wanted. Already a model put in place, won't cost much, quick process, also welcomes local groups so has advantage of help from network organisations (aged 18-25)

It gives a chance for all young people to have a say. Not just the most confident or popular people (aged 11-17)

Like the idea of having local branches which could look at our local issues and having a central office which would help with bigger stuff (aged 11-17)

Smaller group discussions, therefore everyone is more likely to have their say (aged 11-17)

It can be led by all children from all areas who feel some issues need to be made aware of (aged 11-17)

It involves local people (Aged 11-17)

Anyone can join in (aged 11-17)

I think this would be the best way to be in touch with all younger people that aren't in youth groups (aged 11-17)

I think it would be easy for the majority of people just to walk into a shop (aged 11-17)

Its not as complicated and political than the other two options (aged 11-17)

It gives everyone a chance to join and its run by us, so we have a say in what happens (aged 11-17)

Everyone can get involved (aged 11-17)

Anyone that wants to can join, nobody feels left out, everyone has their own say and gets heard (aged 11-17)

Because it would be easier to speak with young people if they were around the same age (aged 11-17)

Young people know what young people want, not old people (aged 11-17)

I like the idea of young people running a group (aged 11-17)

You can go to your one near you then they can go to the bigger one and see what can happen (aged 11-17)

I like it – connection to each branch – better structure (aged 18-25)

Brings in more groups of youth groups (aged 18-25)

More people have option and can get a suggestion in, easier and more practical to make a suggestion (Aged 11-17)

I think it would be better to have something in my own area (aged 11-17)

Diverse information, more youth, more ideas, information from different parts of society (Aged 11-17)

Group responses

Positive comments about the option of a regional youth led mechanism were broadly similar to those expressed in the individual responses, although the local dimension appeared to be the main 'selling point' to those who took part in group discussions, and there was little reference to the youth-led aspect.

Many of the responses suggest that the opportunity to engage at a local level, to comment on local issues, and get involved with other local groups, was the overriding concern of young people. Several of the responses emphasised that the local structures would need careful planning and ongoing support, to ensure that they were fully accessible and representative of all young people within the area. Some group responses provided diagrams to illustrate the range of groups which they felt should be involved in local structures. Many of those who were already involved in local youth councils acknowledged the limitations of their group in terms of representation, and signalled a willingness to connect and contribute to a wider local system.

Members of one youth council examined the three options from hypothetical perspectives, these being an individual young person, an excluded individual (eg with disability, minority ethnic etc) and a group of young people (eg peer group, youth group). As a result of this exercise, they felt that that the regional youth led organisation would be the most appropriate for individuals and excluded young people, as they felt it would provide local and accessible points of access and would be easier to relate to. On a similar point, a school-based group of respondents felt that this option would be more inclusive for young people who are not involved in formal youth provision, especially if the local branches were advertised.

The accessibility and local dimension of this option were also given as reasons for choosing this option by members of a youth group. This group also felt that the option would be easier to sustain, and they suggested that the local branches should have regular meetings with local councillors.

Organisational responses

Only one of the twelve organisational responses endorsed this option in its entirety, believing it would be a more efficient body, with quicker and better communication with young people, and dealing with local issues more effectively with greater 'buy in ' from local groups.

Two further responses advocated for elements of the youth led option to be adopted (see Alternative proposals)

Arguments against the regional youth led option

A number of concerns were raised by respondents who had not selected this option – these were :

Doesn't have sufficient power / no clear link to Assembly

Need transport to access local branch, especially in rural areas

Could attract too many individuals – too many diverse views

May only attract those in youth groups

11 local branches throughout NI would not be local enough

Hard to circulate sufficient information to make involvement meaningful

Only suitable for teenagers/young adults – excludes children

Option B - Network of Networks

790 Individual responses

The six broad themes cited by those in favour of the Network of Networks option were as follows (most frequently mentioned theme is Number 1, and so on).

1. Based on existing groups

Those in favour of this option felt that the use of existing groups would be easier for children and young people – that they would be more comfortable to express their views in situ with their friends, and some suggested that this approach was already being done in some areas.

2. Inclusive

Respondents felt that this option would ensure a wide diversity of children and young people could become involved – including different age groups and marginalized groups

3. Cheaper / simpler

Many in favour of this option felt that it had several practical advantages – that it would be cheaper to run, that there would be less travelling, and that it would be less disruptive for children and young people

4. Social aspect.

The opportunity to meet new people and make contacts was seen as a benefit to this option

5. Easier way for young people to communicate

Respondents felt that the use of national debates, group –based discussions, and an on-line forum, would be effective and easier ways for participants to get their views across to government

6. Adult support

A relatively small number of respondents suggested that the involvement of adults in supporting roles would ensure that the network would operate smoothly and that participants would be supported.

Below is a range of comments in favour of the network of networks option

There is no hassle and so it stays the same (aged under 11)

Fits with existing groups which currently lack connection (Aged 25+)

It seems the NIYF and CINI are already doing this type of work and we should use their skills/expertise to further develop this (aged 25+)

Because it would fit in with existing services and make them stronger as they work together (aged 25+)

This would give young people a chance to voice their own opinions directly to government bodies (aged 18-25)

Using the existing groups would allow young people to be more comfortable speaking their opinions in a known environment – you would get more views expressed (aged 18-25)

It would be better to use the resources of existing groups rather than trying to reinvent the wheel (aged 18-25)

Not much extra work (Aged 18-25)

May be more cost effective for a new idea and easy to introduce as it fits with existing groups (Aged 18-25)

Easier to find out what different people think (aged not provided)

Because it would be more organised if an adult was helping. It was made up of existing youth groups and it would be easier for the young people (aged 11-17)

I like coming together and working as a group (Aged 11-17)

I like the thought of meeting new people and finding our other opinions (aged 11-17)

Network of networks gets everyone, everywhere, working together (aged 11-17)

Not a lot of travelling (aged 11-17)

It would be fair to involve different individuals (aged 11-17)

Local places are easier to get to (aged 11-17)

This would bring all the different groups into contact, spreading information and questions across the board on to the government (Aged 11-17)

Represents a much greater variety of different people (Aged 11-17)

Exists already – would get it sorted quicker (aged 11-17)

Because its easy and you have peer support (Aged 11-17)

Its with friends (Aged 11-17)

A lot of voices will be heard from a lot of different age groups (Aged 11-17)

Its not the dearest option (aged 11-17)

Feel more comfortable with groups like this – Extern, Pathways, Holy Family and Artillery (aged 11-17)

It would be the best idea because there is youth workers involved and they care the most about our ideas (aged 11-17)

This will help with the language barrier (Polish). We feel comfortable with our workers to give our ideas (aged 11-17)

Because it's like VOYPIC and VOYPIC is very good at what they do (aged 11-17)

Group responses

Whilst only one of the group responses selected the Network of Network option on its own, several responses suggested that elements of this option should be retained in alternative proposals. The main 'selling point' of this option to group respondents was the ability to remain within existing groups, with support workers who are known and trusted. This was highlighted by some (although not all) of the focus groups carried out with marginalised or excluded young people. A similar trend was apparent in the individual response postcards from those with physical or learning disabilities, where respondents had indicated their wish to remain within their own group with their support workers.

One group also suggested that the main benefit of this option would be that children and young people of all ages could be represented. Similarly, the opportunity to remain in familiar settings with known adults was also highlighted as important by many of the younger children consulted by Playboard.

Another group felt that the option of a Network of networks would be more inclusive to those from rural areas.

Organisational responses

Seven of the twelve organisational responses endorsed the Network of Networks option, and a further two proposed that elements of this should be incorporated into a hybrid model.

Children in Northern Ireland examined all three options against the 'must haves' which had been stipulated in the DE Terms of Reference, and concluded that the Network of Networks was the most closely aligned to these requirements. In particular CI-NI and Playboard both proposed that the option would ensure inclusion of the younger age groups, including minority and under-represented groupings.

Having consulted with young people in a juvenile justice centre and the YOC at Hydebank, Include Youth concluded that the Network of Networks would provide these young people with the best chance of getting involved. Existing groups, led by familiar professionals, would provide the requisite support to marginalized young people to get involved (although Include Youth highlighted the high levels of cynicism among young offenders that government would consider their views). The response also noted that incarceration would preclude young people in custody with the opportunity to get involved in the other proposed options.

Other organisational proponents of this option included National Children's Bureau, which proposed that the opportunity to build on existing structures would maximise good practice and offer the most sustainable option. The Volunteer Development Agency proposed that the Network of Networks would be the most financially viable of the three options, and would avoid duplication. Omagh District Council concurred, stating there is already a strong base from which to build the network, and so it would be easily established and relatively cost effective.

In endorsing the Network of Networks, Youth Action NI suggested that a variety of methodologies would be important, moving away from more formal methods and using more creative methods of expression. YANI also felt that government could commission peer research as one method to inform policy, and that co-ordinating this could be a role for member groups of the network.

Arguments against the Network of Networks option

A number of concerns were raised by respondents who had not selected this option – these were :

Doesn't have a local structure

Groups may not co-operate

Unrealistic / unmanageable

Unlikely to attract individuals – only group-based

Uses adults to relay voice – less direct communication for children/young people with government

No direct link to Assembly

Too complicated / confusing

Low profile – less impact

Too many varied and vested interests, hard to gain cohesion

Option C - Youth Assembly

790 Individual responses

The option of a youth assembly generated the greatest number, and widest range, of comments from respondents. The six broad themes cited by those in favour of the Youth Assembly option were as follows (most frequently mentioned theme is Number 1, and so on)

1/Provides a voice. Young people are heard

The vast majority of those in favour of this option felt that it would be the most likely mechanism to ensure that young peoples views are heard

2. Direct link to government

Respondents felt that the direct channel of communication between young people and politicians and government officials was an important benefit of this model

3. More likely to have an impact

A range of comments were made in terms of impact – respondents felt that a Youth Assembly would mean that politicians would be publicly accountable to young people, that the setting of Stormont would add weight to young peoples voices, and that decisions would be made quicker with this option

4. Positive for young people

A range of comments were made about the potential benefits of this model, including promoting a positive media image of young people, providing educational experiences, promoting community relations between young people, and empowering young people.

5. System – local/council/central

A range of comments were made in favour of the local and regional structure of this option – that it provides geographic representation, that the structure is more 'professional', and that it connects young people from different areas.

6.High profile

Respondents suggested a youth assembly would be high profile – some linked this to an assumption that it would operate at Stormont.

Below is a range of comments in favour of the youth assembly option

Because I want my voice to be heard directly by the people who should hear (aged under 11)

Young people would have the opportunity to represent themselves (aged over 25)

Young peoples ideas and views need to be given a high profile in order to be successful, plus opportunities will be available in all areas (aged 18-25)

Gives the opportunity to youths to have their voices heard by the important people in our government (aged 18-25)

It could provide the best method for change (aged 18-25)

MLAs should be accountable to their community and young people (aged 18-25)

This idea allows for each area to be covered locally first of all, by local council members and outside peers, but also can bring together Northern Ireland as a whole youth community (aged 18-25)

I think a Youth Assembly is a good idea as it gets people from each county together (Aged 11-17)

Fair way of representation of the constituencies. Very educational. Easy link to MPs. High profile so more likely to make a difference. Good for province debates (aged 11-17)

I feel the youth assembly gives young people a better understanding of how Stormont is run and the thoughts of young people are more likely to be taken seriously by politicians if they are raised in a system similar to their own (aged 11-17)

Good because it is more like the government so young people would be taken more seriously. (aged 11-17)

Gets young peoples voices heard in topical issues that will really affect our lives through people who have the power to make a difference. It also builds up young peoples knowledge of politics (aged 11-17)

Involves youth from a wide range of backgrounds in an organised and centralised basis (aged 11-17)

A youth assembly I believe would command a greater amount of gravitas than the others. Stronger links to influential politicians is a must for greater success (aged 11-17)

A Youth Assembly will be taken most seriously, will have easy access to politicians and has the highest profile (Aged 11-17)

It would have a high profile and also would be likely to make decisions quickly (aged 11-17)

I think young people will be heard more with this option (aged 11-17)

Be able to get our opinions out to people who can actually do something about it (aged 11-17)

Easier to get your point issued to Parliament, it is a more planned idea which I think will work (aged 11-17)

You get to talk directly to Ministers and they hear you first hand and they get to know how you feel and how important they are to you (aged 11-17)

Because it could work – because its only young people that know how other young people feel like. Adults who are trained might not be able to help the young children (aged 11-17)

Gives the younger community a chance to speak up and be accounted for, it gives them belief within themselves and will encourage more young people (Aged 11-17)

You can go straight to Stormont and get your voices heard (aged 11-17)

Different youth councils all meet up and their views will be heard at Stormont and maybe the politicians might step in and listen (Aged 11-17)

I strongly believe in strength in numbers. 108 young people talking to the government would be suitable to express our views to the government (Aged 11-17)

Makes more sense a young person speaking on behalf of young people rather than a person older (Aged 11-17)

The Youth Assembly would ensure that there is actual possibility to get young peoples views heard by politicians. IF there was training provided by the Youth Assembly everyone/anyone who wants it, then it would be accessible to not just the 'competent' (aged 11-17)

Group responses

As was the case with the individual responses, the option of a Youth Assembly generated the most comments within the group responses. However only two group responses gained a consensus vote in favour of the Youth Assembly, whilst three proposed alternative options largely based on this model. The range of comments in favour of a Youth Assembly were virtually identical to the six key points raised within the individual responses, namely that the option would give young people a collective voice, that it was a direct link to those in power, that it would be the most likely option to create change, that the local and regional model was a good structure, and that the Youth Assembly would be high profile and would help to improve the image of young people.

Whilst group respondents supported the inclusion of local structures within this option, several groups qualified their support by proposing that any local structures would need to ensure full representation and inclusion of the diversity of young people. Another group proposed that the Youth Assembly would need to have a clearly stated role and remit in relation to the work of the NI Assembly and government departments, and in relation to influencing policy and legislation. The focus groups with some marginalized and excluded young people illustrated the ambivalent views towards a Youth Assembly. Whilst many of these respondents were in support of the option, at the same time they felt it would be exclusive and would not reach out to them personally.

Organisational responses

None of the responses endorsed the Youth Assembly option in its entirety, but three of the organisational responses proposed incorporating elements of this option (see Alternative proposals)

Arguments against the Youth Assembly option

A number of concerns were raised by respondents who had not selected this option – these were :

Would only attract confident young people /popularity contest

Would overlook some excluded groups/personality types

Could become elitist

Limited numbers involved [although one group suggested that 108 was too many]

Needs stronger local structure – need better representation

Could mirror sectarian politics / become politicised

Stormont = Belfast based / excludes rural

Intimidating for individuals

Only suitable for teenagers/young adults – excludes children

Structure is too formal / exclusive

Some individuals object to Stormont and wouldn't go there

Option D - Alternative options

Individual responses

14% of the individual respondents suggested that an alternative option would be more appropriate, with various combinations of options A-C suggested as follows:

	Number	%
Combine Youth Assembly with youth led	41	5
'Other' [not stated]	32	4
Combine all three options	17	2
Combine Network of Networks with Youth Assembly	15	2
Combine Network of Networks with regional Youth led	10	1
Total	115	14%

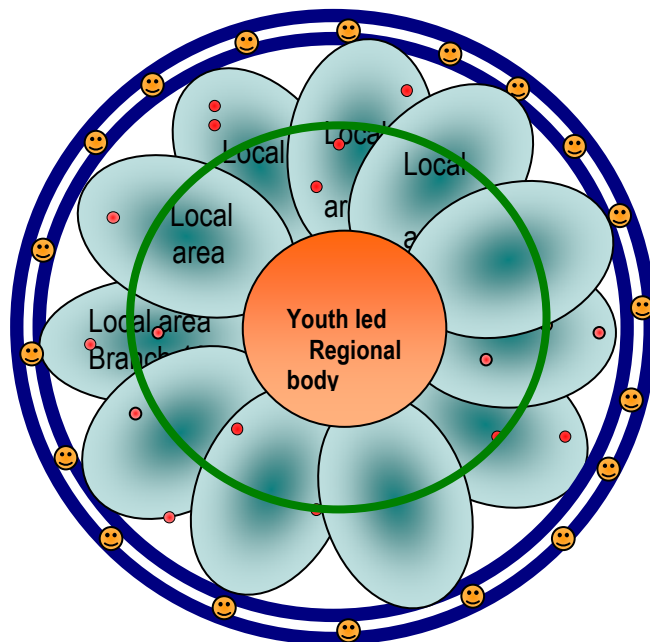
Group responses

One of the pressing concerns for groups was ensuring that the local structure was right, and several groups proposed alternative models which they felt would improve local representation. These models were based on either the Youth Assembly or Regional youth led model at the centre, but with improved local structures based on the 11 council areas. It was proposed that these local structures should connect with all existing groups in that area, providing a two way information flow, and co-ordinating local involvement in area planning and community planning. These proposals were also concerned that the widest range of groups possible could be included in the local structure, eg. to involve schools, outreach workers, sports groups, play provision and so on.

Organisational responses

Two organisations made substantive proposals for alternative models, and these are reproduced below

1. Proposal by NI Youth Forum



'We recommend that the most appropriate model would be one that encapsulates all three options. We believe that this model has the potential to suit the voluntary, statutory and community sector. This model represents a regional youth led body with local area branches based on the 11 proposed district council areas and linked to a Northern Ireland Assembly. Within each local area branch local youth councils, youth forums, children and young people's groups and individual children and young people can become part of the Network.'

*The inner pink circle represents the **Regional youth led body** (similar to option A)*

The young people are supported by core staff, the young people are nominated from the local area branches. They could be directly supported by a membership worker, with supplementary support from other staff members

- The 11 blue ovals represent the proposed **local area branches** based on the 11 different council areas (and proposed areas for ESA)*

We don't believe it is necessary to have a shop front for the local branches. They could be based within the services that already exist in that area. Participation workers with responsibility for play and youth could be based in the local area branch. The workers could have a similar role to that currently undertaken by The Big Deal participation workers and Play Quest team

- The pink dots represent **Network 4 Youth members** which could be made up of:
 - Individual children and young people
 - Groups of children and young people
 - Youth and children's organisations that support children to have a voice
 - Youth participative structures such as youth councils, forums, committees etc.

The Network 4 Youth members could get support from the local area branches (similar to option B) and the central office.

- The outer circle (with the smiley faces) represents the **youth population**. They underpin the work of the Network 4 Youth. It is the role of the Regional youth led body to engage these young people and signpost them into opportunities in the local area branches.
- The green circle represents a **Youth Assembly** (similar to option c). The Network 4 Youth is the mechanism that supports a youth assembly. We believe the youth assembly should be just one part of Network 4 Youth rather than the central focus of Network 4 Youth.
- The green dots within the green circle represent the **Government**, this could be at a local level right up to the Northern Ireland Executive. Young people have a direct link to them.

Criticisms of option C were that it may only attract a certain type of young people and it might not be suitable for younger children. Our model enables younger children and other young people to get involved in Network 4 Youth through the local area branches. The youth assembly may also become more appealing to children and young people through their involvement in the local area branches.

There may not need to be 108 young people for the youth assembly. It could just be a group of 30 to 40 young people who have a direct link to the Northern Ireland Executive. We do not think a young person should have to be a member of a youth council to be nominated onto the youth assembly, the option should be open to any young person.

All the elements of the model overlap, this represents each element working together to create a cohesive Network 4 Youth. A Network where there is clear two way communication between everyone involved. Children and young people have the opportunity to contact decision makers about the issues that are important to them and the decision makers are able to contact young people to discuss the issues that they are interested in. The agenda should be led by young people and government equally'

2. NI Commissioner for Children and Young People

The alternative model proposed by NICCY comprises 11 Regional Youth Councils/Forums which would directly reflect the 11 new District councils restructured under RPA. These would interconnect, and all 11

would also connect to a NI Youth Assembly managed by a central office. The Regional Youth Council/Forum would draw in children and young people from a range of situations and circumstances – marginalised groups, existing statutory and voluntary youth, youth forums, school councils, individuals, and shadow youth councils. The response by NICCY notes :

' This model provides a direct avenue for children and young people to get involved in and have their say on local issues through area based planning. Regional youth councils/forums can feed into local issues, eg. play and leisure, anti-social behavioural issues to local representatives ie. councillors / <Las, as well as inputting into national issues through the NIYA forum, eg. Educational issues, media perception of children and young people.

We propose that the NI Youth Assembly is managed by a central office similar to that proposed to option A, this office would ensure the effective operation of the Youth Assembly. It is essential that the Youth Assembly has a properly defined role, remit and areas of responsibility to ensure that it is not a 'tick box exercise' or a 'meaningless talking shop' for government officials. Processes must be developed to ensure that the Network for Youth can be used as an effective vehicle for children and young people to influence policy and legislation at an early stage rather than it be simply a consultative body for government consultations.

The alternative model covers the 'musts' :

Direct and meaningful communication between children and young people and government

Open to young people up to 25 years old

Accessible, relevant and open to all groups and individuals

Complements existing groups; gives a local voice to local issues

Can identify contemporary issues

Regional groups can feed into new district council community planning structures

Ensure that that voice of young people is central to the development of government policy and legislation making

Has a public role/high profile

Encourage personal development and increased political awareness

The aged is led and managed by young people

Young people can represent themselves and/or other groups on the local youth councils/forums

Local groups can connect with each other through the local youth council/forum

Government needs to respond openly and honestly

Ongoing local support from existing staff

The option would need:

Good co-ordination and co-operation

Additional resources than other models

To ensure that the NIYA is not the only place to hear views – regional meetings and existing groups of young people are equally as viable and valuable

An alternative format required for younger children to have their voice heard

How to involve younger children

In developing the options for consultation, the working group acknowledged that the Regional youth led and Youth Assembly options were not appropriate mechanisms to involve younger children, particularly those under 11. The consultation process therefore sought ideas on how younger children could be involved in the work of the network.

Individual responses

Around 5% of young respondents felt that idea of young children expressing views on government issues was not appropriate, and that they would not have sufficient maturity to make sensible comments.

The remainder of young respondents tended to focus on where and how young children can be involved. The general view appeared to be that either specialist workers or trained young people should gain the views of young children by visiting them in primary schools, youth clubs and play centres. Very few felt that it would be appropriate for younger children to travel out of their familiar settings in order to express their views, although a minority of respondents did suggest either a Junior Youth Assembly or one-off events for children.

Many of the comments focused on the best methodology to gain the views of younger children, and these included :

- Interactive fun workshops or roadshows visiting schools
- Play methodology
- Arts, crafts, drama
- Picture or cartoon questionnaires
- Suggestion boxes in primary schools
- Play days or Funfests
- Using playworkers from specialist organisations
- Child friendly website
- Summer schemes

Several suggested that parents should also be consulted in terms of the views of very young children.

Some respondents proposed that the network should be divided into different age bands, with different methods used for each age band. Others felt that teenagers would be capable of advocating for

younger children, and that this could be one of the roles for teenagers involved in local structures.

Group responses

The majority of group responses supported the proposal to involve younger age groups in the work of the network, with suggestions including fun and play-based activities, and ensuring that play groups and youth service groups such as the Rainbows etc . are connected to local structures.

Playboard conducted direct consultations with approximately 100 young children aged under 11, and the following extracts highlight the positive responses and views of children:

All children in their comments emphasise that there is a need for a network 4 youth and it is really important that:

- *they have their say and are listened to*
- *their ideas are considered*
- *they get to discuss things they are interested in*
- *adults understand where they are coming from and what they experience in their day to day lives - at school, where they live, problems they face*

Overall the responses indicated that children did not identify a specific option for the Network. The responses highlighted that a range of options should be provided to give different children and young people the choice to participate in a range of ways. There was no overall option decided upon, as the concept of the models was very abstract for the children to understand and how they may work. Some queried how this may impact on their lives? The children related some of the models to how the settings where they spend time, listen to their ideas e.g afterschool committees, school councils.

Many of the children indicated that they would want to remain in settings where they are with familiar adults and through them find a way to pass their ideas onto government.

Children were also clear that there would need to be ways for children to contact government if and when they wanted to eg. email, websites in ways that are fun. They highlighted the need to be really listened and that politicians will really do something about it. This emphasises the need to ensure ways to allow two way communications to ensure government not always coming with very specific questions.

.....

Having fun and trying new things was one of the things that came through strongly in the consultation.

.....

The locations of consultations were suggested as being in familiar places with most frequent responses being after schools or clubs. Also important in terms of frequency of responses was being consulted when they were in the company of friends; both these points reinforce the comments about children feeling confident and safe

Organisational responses

All groups supported the rights of younger children to participate in the work of the network, and it was noted that the title Network for Youth would need to be revised to reflect all age groups.

Most responses proposed that the way to involve younger children is to ensure that children's groups, play providers, primary schools and other existing groups which work with children are connected to the network. Those respondents who had proposed the Network or Networks pointed out that this structure would enable existing groups which work with all ages 0-25 could be involved. Other respondents proposed that local structures should incorporate children's groups.

One respondent proposed that the network should organise age-specific consultation events. Several responses highlighted the need to support younger children to develop the skills required for participation, and suggested this could be achieved by continuing with the work carried out by specialist groups such as Playquest.

The responses from Playboard and Children in Northern Ireland both emphasise that the option of a Network of Networks is the only one of the three options which extends to younger children. Both responses highlight that the inclusion of all ages up to 25 is one of the 'must haves' which was stipulated by the Department of Education. The following is extracted from the CI-I response :

*We also note that with regard to the age range the DE has specified that that the Network **must** exist for any child or young person up to the age of 25 ... including pre-school children and also young adults who have left school'. It is therefore significant to note that the option of 'A Regional Youth-led Organisation with local branches' is described as 'unlikely to be as relevant or suitable for younger children'; and the option of 'A Youth Assembly' may also 'not be suitable for younger*

children'. In contrast the option of 'A Network of Networks' could be made up of children and young people and could strengthen the voice of younger children by 'organising regional and local events for younger children to meet directly with decision makers and raise their own concerns and/or respond to government plans'.

CiNI would suggest that the fact that the Regional youth led organisation and the Youth Assembly may not be relevant/suitable for younger children is more significant than simply a 'disadvantage'; rather it is a significant flaw to these options which in fact could rule both out of the running if not addressed, as it would mean that neither supports the revised age range for the Network, nor can either align with the DE's must haves. **Therefore, this would suggest that if the Network is to be open and accessible to younger children the preferred option would be the Network of networks.**

The Playboard response echoes this proposal, and suggests that the Network of Networks option would also ensure inclusion for minority and excluded children:

The Network must include all the different groups of children and young people in Northern Ireland. This needs to acknowledge that some children and young people find it more difficult than others to get their messages across to decision makers. This may include children and young living in rural areas, with a disability, those who face discrimination and those who don't want to join a group or are often unheard.

The network would need to fit with groups that currently exist to make the views of minority groups of children and young people heard. Therefore, this would suggest that if the Network is to include minority voices the preferred option for the Network would be the Network of networks where already existing support networks are incorporated into a network. The Network will need to strive to work fairly and honestly to support the participation of all children and young people. It is essential that we are open and transparent about how the network works and will have to be answerable to children and young people.

Additional issues raised by respondents

Some respondents made additional suggestions or observations which could have significant impact on the development of any model for a Network.

1. The provisional title 'Network for Youth' is inappropriate to the age range 0-25 and should be revised

2. Several respondents affirmed the efforts made by the working group to include children and young people during the consultation process, but proposed that these stakeholders must continue to be involved in the ongoing development of the model for the network.

3. Some young respondents – and particularly those who took part in focus groups and were often identified as marginalized – expressed high levels of cynicism as to the likely impact of this initiative. They felt that they had been engaged in consultations before, to little effect, and that politicians and government officials were unlikely to give serious credence to the network. From these respondents, and some of the facilitators who relayed their views, there was a strong message that if the network is simply a talking shop or window dressing for government, then there is no point in taking it any further. Some suggested that government accountability to act on the views of the network should be included within either the vision or the values for the network, and that there should be a clear mechanism to demonstrate, to children and young people, the impact of the work of the network on government.

4. The need for capacity building and support systems was highlighted by many respondents, both young people and professionals. Some suggested that a specific role of the network should be to enable and develop the skills base for children and young people to engage in participation, and some proposed that the work of the Big Deal initiative could be tied into the role of the network on a long term basis. Similarly some respondents pointed to the role and value of the Participation Network in terms of building capacity within the public sector to ensure adults are equipped to engage with children and young people in a meaningful way. It was proposed that the work of the Participation Network should also be connected to the workings of the Network for Youth.

5. Many of the respondents who took part in focus groups considered the types of policy issue which were important to them. The range of issues varied considerably from group to group, but highlighted that young people want the network to act proactively – raising issues and lobbying – rather than simply responding to governments agenda.

6. Some of the organisational responses proposed that to maximise the impact of the network, there should be cross departmental co-operation and a line of reporting to OFMDFM. It was also proposed that the role of the network should include a remit to monitor the 10 Year strategy for children and young people. The following is extracted from the CI-NI response:

*It is planned that the work of setting up the Network will be passed to the proposed new regional education body, the Education and Skills Authority (ESA)². **CiNI would highlight that in taking forward the work of setting up the Network it is essential that the ESA pro-actively engage with any new, emerging regional body for health and social care, acknowledging that alongside education, health and social services is the other main budget holder and provider of services for children and young people.** We would go further and suggest that to support the setting up of the Network both the ESA and the new regional Health and Social Care body should set up an inter-agency committee of all the relevant regional bodies to include for example, youth justice, housing etc. We believe this could make a significant contribution to ensuring that the Network fulfils its objective and looks beyond education to ensure that the direct voice of children and young people is strengthened in all relevant aspects of government functioning and provision. This also gives rise to the issue of where overall responsibility for the Network would rest at government level which is not addressed in the current proposals. CiNI welcomes the leadership shown by the DE in taking forward the development process to date, however in line with our recommendation above, we believe that the actual setting up of the Network should be taken forward as a joint cross government initiative. It would then be appropriate that the Network should report upwards to the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People which is chaired by the OFMDFM Junior Ministers¹ and tasked with driving forward implementation of the cross government 10 Year Children and Young People's Strategy. In line with the Strategy this would ensure that the Network enabled Government to be proactive in obtaining the views of children on matters of significance to them in accordance with article 12 of the UNCRC, and in doing so the Network would contribute to the creation of a culture of involving children and young people in decisions which affect their lives.*

At this point we would like to reiterate a key message from our response to the pre-consultation. We would strongly advocate that the Network must play a key role in enabling the direct engagement and involvement of children and young people in monitoring and reviewing government implementation of the 10 Year Strategy, with a view to working with government to bring the

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Strategy into line with the requirements for a National Action Plan for full implementation of the UNCRC³.

7. CI-NI also propose that the policy decision relating to the Network for Youth proposal must adhere to section 75 and therefore undergo impact assessment.

*The consultation document states that when the work of setting up of the Network is passed on to the Education and Skills Authority there will be further consultation including checking how the plans for the Network fit with equality law⁴. CiNI would highlight the DE's obligation to promote equality of opportunity in line with the requirements of section 75 of the NI Ireland Act 1998. **This would require that prior to making a decision on the options, and indeed as early in the development process as possible, the equality implications of each of the options must be identified and should be a key consideration informing the selection of a final option.***

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Appendix 1

Network for Youth consultation process

1. Development of the consultation materials

A pre-consultation exercise was held between July and September 2007 to gain initial ideas from stakeholders on the vision, values, methods and structure of a Network for Youth. The pre-consultation was promoted through websites, e-zines and targeted mailings, and gathered responses from almost 200 young people and 10 organisations. A report of the pre-consultation is available at www.ycni.org

As a result of the pre-consultation, the Department of Education agreed to make several changes to the original terms of reference for the Network for Youth. In particular, the target age-range was widened from 4-25 to 0-25, to reflect the participation rights of younger children. Similarly, the Department acknowledged that the provisional title 'Network for Youth' did not reflect the entire age range.

Given that children and young people are the main stakeholders of a Network, the working group decided that all consultation materials should be accessible to younger audiences. An advisory panel of young people was engaged to help with the design and wording of the consultation materials, and advice was also taken from disability organisations with regards to the accessibility of the materials.

The actual substance of the consultation materials, namely the vision, values and three options, derived from the pre-consultation responses. Two of the three options emerged from the responses from young people, whilst another option reflected organisational responses. Noting that the pre-consultation had not produced sufficient proposals for younger children, the working group decided to include a specific consultation question on how to involve children in the work of a Network.

2. Accessibility and support

- Consultation support materials were developed to help those consulting with children and young people. These included a workshop programme for those working with 11-25 year olds, guidance and a practice checklist for those working with 0-11 year olds, and facilitator notes and a picture-based questionnaire for those working with children or young people with learning disabilities.

- Alternative versions of the consultation reports were provided in Irish language, audio, Braille and large print.
- A consultant was engaged to encourage participation and to lend practical support to groups wishing to conduct their own consultations. When requested, the consultant facilitated focus group sessions.
- The consultation report noted that specialist consultation costs such as assisted travel, signers, translators etc. could be reimbursed.

3. Postal and electronic promotion of the consultation

The consultation ran from 1 September to 30 November 2008 and was promoted on a number of websites and e-zines, including those of Children in NI, NI Youth Forum, YouthNet, Curriculum Development Unit, Youth Information, and YCNI.

Consultation materials were posted to stakeholders, as follows:

- 14,000 brochures were posted to all youth service groups and organisations, using the Curriculum Development Unit's mailing agent.
- Organisations represented on the working group distributed copies to their affiliated groups and contacts, YouthNet, the Big Deal, Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Education and Library Boards (youth services), Playboard, and Children in Northern Ireland distributed a total of 9000 summary brochures and 800 full length reports.
- The National Union of Students distributed 1000 copies of the brochures during Freshers week.
- The Secretariat of the working group sent brochures and full length consultation reports to all political parties, government departments, further and higher education bodies, local councils, approximately eighty organisations which work with Section 75 and marginalised groups, and also to national participative structures operating in the UK and Republic of Ireland.
- 1000 brochures were distributed to all public libraries

4. Events

- Children in Northern Ireland (CI-NI) and the Participation Network held an information seminar for stakeholders within the children's sector
- The Southern Health Trust held three consultative events (Craigavon, Newry, Portadown) for their School Health and Wellbeing Forums.

- A wide range of local youth and community groups and participative structures held consultative meetings or events for their own members (the latter included groups such as Belfast city council youth forum, Millennium volunteers at the Volunteer Development Agency, Blackie community association, Young at NCB, local youth councils, senior members groups and NICCY youth panel).
- Big Deal staff carried out focus group sessions with the following local youth councils – Strabane, Hazelbank, Omagh, Ards and Finn.
- A training session with youth workers in the SELB area as facilitated by the Big Deal Participation Worker and SELB Youth Officer for Participation, exploring the consultation and ways for workers in SELB to consult with young people.

5. Outreach consultations

While the postal distribution targeted children and young people connected to service providers, it was important that 'unattached' children and young people also had opportunity to engage in the process.

To this end, staff from the Big Deal co-ordinated a series of eight outreach consultation days. These took place at weekends and half-term during October and November 2008, and entailed a youth-bus visiting locations in Belfast, L/Derry, Omagh, Coleraine, Ballymena, Lisburn and Newry. Young volunteers from NI Youth Forum and local youth councils provided information to young people in each location. The outreach consultation days collected the views of 256 young people.

6. Direct contact with marginalised groups

Approximately 50 organisations were individually approached and encouraged to consult with the children and young people they work with. This process was co-ordinated by an independent consultant working in conjunction with staff from the Big Deal initiative. The target groups included: young people with physical and learning disabilities, minority ethnic groups, LGBT, Travellers, young carers, young people with experience of the criminal justice system, alternative education projects, young parents, homeless young people, those with experience of the care system, young people in supported accommodation, and young people involved in detached youth projects. The consultant conducted focus groups with young people involved with the Simon Community, the Pathways projects and VOYPIC. Big Deal / NIYF staff conducted focus groups with New Mossley EOTAS and Newstart, a Polish youth group, and Chinese Youth Council members from CWA.

We take this opportunity to thank all the groups and individuals who helped to distribute the consultation materials to a wide range of children and young people. Particular thanks are due to the consultant Rodney Green, and to staff from the Big Deal initiative.

7. Evaluation of the process

It is good practice to evaluate consultation processes, and most importantly, to reflect on any shortfalls and offer learning for future exercises.

Did the consultation reach the target audience?

As with any consultation process, there were limitations of time, staffing and funds. In practical terms, the print-run of 30,000 brochures equates to 5% of the total population of 0-25 year olds. The chosen strategy was to try to reach a balanced selection of potential consultees, rather than a blanket PR campaign.

The combination of targeting and outreach methods appears to have been effective in reaching a very diverse range of children and young people, both geographically and contextually. We highlight that this strategy depended very much on the support and co-operation of many partners across the child and youth sectors, and their input was greatly appreciated.

Following advice from the Department of Education, schools were not included on the distribution list, although a small number of schools became involved in the context of politics classes and school health forums. Contact was made with three Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS) advisers in an attempt to identify a small sample of schools – however this did not result in contact being made with any schools.

Given that schools seem an obvious place to engage with large numbers of children and young people, it is worth assessing their exclusion from this process. Whilst a school based approach may have yielded 'bulk returns', there is a risk that large numbers of responses from single locations could skew the responses. More pragmatically, schools receive numerous requests for access to their pupils, and rightly filter out many of these demands. In this respect we note that when consulting on the draft 'Play and Leisure' policy, OFMDFM contacted every school in Northern Ireland to encourage participation, and yet received no pupil-based responses and only two teacher responses. Therefore the exclusion of schools from the Network for Youth circulation list was not necessarily a major impediment to the final response rate.

One issue which may have impacted on the consultation process was the timing of the Department of Education's 'Priorities for Youth' consultation, which ran from August to mid October 2008. The two consultation processes shared similar target groups, and both relied in part upon youth service providers to disseminate information and engage with their memberships. It is hard to assess whether the overlapping timescales had a negative impact on either or both of the consultations, but we acknowledge that many youth groups and children's organisations worked hard to engage their members in both exercises.

Were the respondents representative of all children and young people?

Whilst we have confidence that the consultation materials were distributed to a wide diversity of children and young people, the self completion postcards did not seek personal data, other than age band. This anonymity was intentional – in part to encourage the response rate, and in part due to the limited space on the postcard response form. The downside is that we cannot quantify just how representative the respondents were of all children and young people. The majority of response postcards from young people were returned singly or in batches of less than 10, which would suggest that no single group or organisation dominated the responses.

The combination of consultation methods, which included outreach sessions, direct contact with marginalised groups, and facilitation by youth and children's services, would also suggest that the respondents represented a mix of 'mainstream' and 'marginalised' from across Northern Ireland. An analysis of participating groups would also confirm that a diversity of stakeholders took part in the consultation. The exception to this is the under-representation of responses on or on behalf of younger children (0-11). Due to an unforeseen change in the consultation timetable, there was insufficient time to address this gap.

Quality of Responses

Whilst the decision to refer to an advisory panel of young people to assist with the wording and design of the materials delayed the start of the consultation process, there is no doubt that it resulted in a more user-friendly format. The quality and relevance of written responses was generally high, indicating that respondents had understood the concept of a Network and the three options, were engaged by the process, and keen to express their views. Responses indicated that a small number of respondents had difficulty in understanding the purpose and wording of the statement of Vision and/or list of Values.

One drawback to the use of anonymous response-cards is the risk of duplicated responses. This can be difficult to identify, as young people in groups often compare responses and write similar comments to their friends. However where identical or similar comments were received the handwriting on the response cards was studied. This resulted in a total of 13 responses being excluded on the grounds of possible duplication. An additional two 'spoilt' responses were excluded.

Analysis of responses

In total 790 individual responses were received (excluding the 15 duplicate or spoilt responses) and 32 written submissions from groups or organisations. These were sub-divided according to age group and analysed using qualitative methods, based on identifying and coding key themes. Responses to 'Yes/No' questions and to the vote on preferred option were counted.

Appendix 2 – List of Respondents

Individual Respondents [by age group]

Under 11	12	<2%
11-17	617	78%
18 – 25	105	13%
25+	25	3%
Age not provided	31	4%
Total	790	100

Nb 15 additional individual responses were omitted as duplications or spoilt

Youth group responses

Face Inclusion Matters group

Three Ways youth

Armagh district youth council

Banbridge youth council

Fermanagh youth council

Cookstown district youth council

Newry and Mourne youth council

South Armagh youth council

All Saints youth club – senior members

Foyle youth council

Simon community (facilitated by consultant)

Cregagh Youth centre

City Centre Pathways (facilitated by consultant)

Shankill Pathways (facilitated by consultant)

Craigavon district youth council

Pathways 174 group (facilitated by consultant)

Group of unattached from Limavady

St Dominics – politics class (50 young people)

VOYPIC (facilitated by consultant)

100 children aged under 11 (facilitated by Playboard)

Organisational responses

UK Youth Parliament

National Children's Bureau (with input from Young at NCB children and young peoples panel)

Youth Action NI

Children in NI

Child Brain injury Trust (endorsement of the CI-NI response)

Omagh District Council

NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (with input from NICCY youth panel)

Include Youth (with input from focus groups with young people currently in juvenile justice centres/YOC)

Northern Ireland Youth Forum (with input from NIYF Executive committee of young people)

Playboard

Ballymoney community safety partnership

Volunteer Development Agency (with input from focus group of young millennium volunteers)

Appendix 3 – Main points from pre-consultation

The following is extracted from the pre-consultation analysis report – the full report is available at www.ycni.org

Outline of the pre-consultation

The pre-consultation phase ran from July – Sept 2007. In total the responses constitute the views of approximately 160 young people and eight organisations which work with or for children and young people.

Overview of responses

The responses showed a degree of commonality in terms of the **Vision** of NINFY, as a mechanism to allow children and young people to communicate directly with a range of government providers. Many suggested that NINFY should not simply be a means for government to consult on policies, but that it should also allow young people to bring their own issues and concerns to government, ie a mix of reactive and proactive.

Many respondents – particularly those from young people themselves – highlighted that NINFY must bring about real and beneficial change for young people. In order for this to happen, many noted the responsibility on the part of government providers to ensure views are genuinely listened to and acted upon.

Some respondents recorded concern about perceived gaps in the NINFY Terms of Reference, suggesting that the age group 4-25 unfairly excludes younger children; that NINFY must also relate to local government and should have a role in wider political contexts ie East / West, North/South.

There was a high degree of consensus on the **Values and Principles** which should underpin NINFY. Many respondents proposed that NINFY must reflect the relevant Articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ; that the underlying values should reflect those on the 10 year strategy for children and young people ; and that the values of inclusion and accessibility must be key features of NINFY.

Similarly there was considerable consensus on the perceived barriers to NINFY, such as:

- Logistical barriers for young people (times, travel, incentives etc)
- Need for adequate funding
- Risk of a lack of government commitment to change
- Lack of inclusion of the diverse range of ages and circumstances
- Tokenism
- Risk of an elite structure with no connections to local groups
- Low profile or poor awareness-raising
- Inflexibility
- Duplicating or displacing existing groups

In terms of how NINFY would **Function** and how it would **Link to other Structures**, the responses revealed a wide range of opinions and contrasting ideas. Some responses – particularly those from young people – tended to focus on the structure of NINFY as an organization. These responses generally favoured a youth-led model, or one where young people have a key role in governance. The different ideas included :

- A Northern Ireland shadow youth assembly : based on the electoral model it was proposed that this would have 108 young members nominated or elected from NI electoral areas – either through shadow youth councils or local forums of young people.
- A regional youth-led body with either local branches or satellite offices. This would be open to all young people and would link with existing groups of young people.
- A ‘network of networks’ which would connect all existing structures of young people and act in a co-ordinating role to support these local and themed groups.

These responses reflected quite contrasting proposals for NINFY- for example whether it should be a formal and structured organization with a fixed number of young people to represent their peers, or whether it should be an open and facilitative body where all children and young people can get involved as individuals.

Other respondents placed greater focus on the system which should underpin NINFY. These responses largely asserted that there should be some form of youth-led body or panel, but suggested that NINFY needs to ensure a coherent system to support participation at all levels in N Ireland. Proposals included the need for a multi-layered approach, with a high-level strategic group to steer participation, a policy unit, training provision for both government providers and young people, research capacity, quality assurance role, signposting, funding etc. The need to ensure that there is coherence at local level, and clear links between local groups and any regional grouping was highlighted in many responses. Some also suggested that NINFY should be recognized in legislation, should have a formal role in the monitoring of the 10 year strategy for children and young people, and should be centrally funded by OFMDFM. There were also concerns that sufficient funding must be provided, and a suggestion that all government departments should financially contribute to NINFY.