

Network for Youth Working Group

Briefing to the Department of Education

January 2009

The Network for Youth working group met on 21st January 2009 to discuss the analysis of consultation responses, and to prepare the following advice for the Department of Education (DE).

As the working group had been convened at short notice in order to meet with the revised DE timetable, several members were unable to attend. The following members attended the meeting on 21st Jan :

David Guilfoyle	Youth Council NI (Chair)
Rosin Mc Cooley	Playboard (substituting for Jacqueline O' Loughlin)
Chris Quinn	NI Youth Forum
Sara Mc Cartan	NI Youth Forum
Pauline Leeson	Children in NI
Vivian McConvey	VOYPIC [Voice of Young People in Care]
Gerard Doran	Southern Education and Library Board
Martin Mc Mullen	Youth Action NI
Clare Harvey & Helen McNamee as Secretariat	

The following members were not present at the meeting and have therefore not contributed towards this briefing paper:

Gilbert Bell	North Eastern Education and Library Board
Paula Keenan	Participation Network
Denis Palmer	YouthNet
Joe Hawkins	formerly YouthNet, now Young Farmers Clubs
Ann Godfrey	Southern Health and Social Services Board
David Simpson	Save the Children
(NI Local Government Association place on group vacant since Sept 08)	

When considering the analysis of responses, the working group did not apply weighting between categories of respondent. The analysis is, however, differentiated between individual, group and organisational responses to illustrate differing perspectives. As noted on page 11 of the analysis report '*Ultimately it will be the responsibility of the Department of Education to apply weighting or not when reaching a final decision about the network*'.

In preparing the following advice, the working group was guided by the Terms of Reference set by DE, namely that the Network:

- Will be an integral and essential component of an overall participation system within Northern Ireland
- Will be complementary to other relevant participation initiatives
- Will be recognised by all sectors providing services to children and young people, and by the NI Assembly, NI Executive, local government and all Government departments
- Will have effective links at both regional and local level
- Will be accessible to all children and young people up the age of 25.

VISION

Members noted the high levels of agreement to the proposed vision statement. A slightly simplified version was proposed - 'The Network for Youth [or alternative title] shall support and enable the participation of children and young people by : (followed by the four points of the vision statement, which would need to be rephrased to fit the shorter introductory line)

VALUES

Members noted the high levels of agreement to the proposed list of values. Members noted the concerns expressed by a minority of respondents that the target age group may be too wide – however members recommend to DE that the age range 0-25 should remain. However it was reiterated that very different methodologies are used to engage with different age groupings.

Based on the consultation responses, it was proposed that one amendment and two additional values should be added :

- Extend the current value statement on Accessibility to include : The Network should proactively target marginalised children and young people to support their involvement, using a range of approaches, including outreach work.
- Fun : It should be enjoyable and rewarding for any child or young person to be involved with the Network for Youth. Creative methodologies should be used which are meaningful to the children and young people involved
- Flexibility : Children and young people should be able to be engaged in different ways and at different times.

RECOMMENDED OPTION

The working group discussed the responses to each of the three options, and the alternative proposals. In particular members noted the diversity of opinion among respondents, and the range of reasons given for selecting different or alternative options.

Given the wide range of responses, members of the working group do not recommend implementation of any of the three specific options. Instead, the working group agreed on the following **core principles** and advice to DE :

1. The provisional title 'Network for Youth' is inappropriate as it excludes younger children. The working group would recommend that a new title is developed (not the title of any of the three option choices).
2. The Network should be anchored into the 10 year Strategy for Children and Young people. It is proposed that a formal role of the Network should be to enable children and young people to monitor the implementation of the strategy and to have a proactive role in informing the action plans. This would necessitate a formal link between the Network and the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People. These connections would ensure that the Network operates across government and influences all Departments, and is not exclusively linked to ESA (Education and Skills Authority) or youth services. In this respect, the group also noted that none of the government departments had responded to the consultation, and propose that securing cross-departmental commitment would be essential.
3. Based on the consultation responses, members propose a facilitated Network to ensure co-ordination and connectedness, populated by a comprehensive cross-section of children and young people who are supported by skilled practitioners. This should operate at community, area and regional levels, and should create linkages between all sectors, ie youth services, health, care, childrens services planning, housing, public bodies, Departments, voluntary organisations etc. It should also be designed to target and include unattached and marginalised children and young people. Whilst a facilitated Network requires a skeleton framework, it should have the flexibility to evolve.

4. Although this recommendation is closest in concept to the Network of Networks option, there are several important differences. The Network should reflect the characteristics which respondents felt were important to all of the options, ie it should include a direct link to government, it should have a clear local, as well as regional, structure, it should have sufficient resources to be high-profile and the capacity to reach out to individuals as well as groups, and there needs to be a mechanism to enable proactivity among members. Some of the characteristics of this Network would be :

- Connecting what already exists and building on existing infrastructure.
- 'Local' should be more than one tier – communities, neighbourhood, and council area
- Enabling children and young people to form their own groups to bring up issues they are interested in
- There is a key role for practitioners in the network - the workers need to have certain skills and engage in reflective practice. The learning must be shared.
- Clear way to communicate between different groups
- Public relations function, to inform children and young people and organisations about the work and how they can get involved

5. As stated in the Terms of Reference for the working group, the Network must be an integral and essential component of an overall participation 'system'. This system must comprise a number of essential and complementary dimensions :

- Capacity building for public authorities– currently the role of Participation Network
- Capacity building for children and young people – currently the role of the Big Deal and others
- Creating opportunity for children and young people to participate in policy development. Other organisations will work with children and young people to develop decision making in their own lives – the Network takes it to higher level.

- An interface with political representatives
 - An interface with the Ministerial Sub-committee on Children and Young People
 - Practitioners Forums
6. The working group proposes that youth services should be at the core of the Network with good linkages to other relevant sectors. Spatially, the Network should be aligned to ESA sub-regional structures, and there will also need to be neighbourhood/community connections as well as a central co-ordinating function.
 7. If this proposal is accepted by DE, the working group proposes that a reconstituted taskgroup be appointed to design the detailed framework. It recommends that this planning process should commence in advance of the introduction of ESA. This grouping should comprise all relevant sectors, and hence have a slightly wider composition than the current working group. It should also ensure continued involvement of children and young people in the planning stages.
 8. Whilst this proposal avoids the expense of establishing a new organisation, it will require sufficient and sustained investment.

A note on the consultation process :

Many responses from young people voiced frustration about the perceived lack of feedback and action following their input into various consultations. The working group would therefore recommend that DE issues a statement to thank consultees for taking part, to explain the DE decision and to outline the next steps. This statement could be circulated to groups which took part and posted on relevant websites. The working group believes this feedback would affirm the value of responding to consultations.