

NETWORK FOR YOUTH

TERMS OF REFERENCE

DESIGN OF PREFERRED OPTION

Background

In 2005 the then Minister for Education, Angela Smith announced plans to establish a 'Network for Youth, which is commonly referred to as (NfY or the Network). Its purpose would be to *'strengthen the direct voice of young people in all relevant aspects of government provision'* in line with participation as a key theme of youth work. A policy paper was developed for youth post-RPA (Policy Paper 9 - Youth Services) which makes reference to ESA establishing, monitoring and supporting such a mechanism.

The Network would be a high-profile expression of children and young people's right to be involved in public decision-making and to be engaged as active citizens in the North of Ireland. The design of the Network would take account of existing participation structures and be part of an overarching and coherent system for children and young people's participation.

The Network would contribute to the fulfilment of the vision of the Education Service in the north of Ireland, which is *"to ensure that every learner fulfils his or her full potential at each stage of development"* and the aim of the OFMDFM Ten Year Strategy for Young People *"to ensure that, by 2016, all children and young people here are fulfilling their potential"*.

A Working Group established in 2007 on behalf of the Department to examine possible options for a Network for Youth completed a consultation exercise on three models for the Network and made their recommendations to the Department. With a wide range of responses to the consultation, the Working Group did not recommend implementation of any of the three specific options. Instead, it proposed 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 recommendation was closest in concept to the Network of Networks option.

Given more recent discussions between the Minister for Education, the Junior Ministers and Assembly Speaker regarding plans to enhance participation and engagement for children and young people, the Minister for Education has decided that the Network of Networks option will now be further developed.

Network of Networks option

The Network of Networks will be established, supported and developed by ESA. It will join up and connect all the existing groups, offer an opportunity for children and young people to become active citizens by providing a portal to decision-makers, initially in DE, and allow ESA and the Department to engage directly with young people. It will enable children and young people to make comments on education issues which they identify and also to respond to consultations. In its early days, it will inevitably focus on education issues, since education is such a central part of young people's lives.

However, as it develops, it will provide an opportunity for other Executive departments, agencies and decision makers to make use of the Network to gain access to children and young people across the north, and vice-versa.

In order to facilitate such future development, it will be important to maintain dialogue between key stakeholders in all sectors. This will also help to maximise the scope for synergy between parallel initiatives.

The benefit of adopting the Network of Networks option includes:

- it will be based on existing groups, so involving their existing users, and therefore, be more inclusive of a wider range of children and young people;
- it will be simpler to operate, provide a social aspect and an easier way to communicate, and offer adult support;
- it can be most conducive to excluded and minority groups and those with disabilities, as it will allow children and young people to express their views in familiar settings;
- it will provide more opportunities for inclusion and will help to build on, rather than duplicate, existing provision; and
- it will be a cost effective option

Role of ESA

ESA will be responsible for establishing, supporting and developing the Network. An appropriate team of ESA staff (suitably trained and experienced in children/young people's participation) will manage a system whereby existing participative structures and advocacy groups are linked together and views collated, gaps in access to participative structures identified, and views of young people are collated and made available to policy makers. They will ensure that the Network is kept up to date, relevant for young people and linked into other new and emerging structures and forums.

Resources

During its initial phase, the Department envisages that the resources required to establish and develop the Network will be contained within the existing education sector budget.

Design options for the Network of Networks

The following paragraphs set out key elements for consideration in the design:

(a) *Key criteria that should underpin* the design and establishment of the Network include:

- it must strengthen the voice of children and young people;
- it must complement other relevant participation initiatives/structures;
- it must enshrine the principle of respect for the views of children/young people and increase opportunities for their meaningful participation;
- it must have the potential to become a visible mechanism recognised by other sectors providing services to children and young people, and relate to a Youth Assembly, if established;

- it must have effective links at both regional and local level; and
- it must be accessible to children and young people up the age of 25.

(b) The Network should not be the only way for children and young people to influence government. There are already a number of groups which do this effectively or on a smaller scale. It will be important that these *existing structures are able to connect to the Network* to ensure that a wide range of views from groups of young people in local areas can be carried to decision makers.

(c) The Network should not only strengthen the voice of young people by providing for children's participation developed at local levels, but these voices should *be collated and considered on a regional basis*. This should include the potential for issues identified by the Network to then be raised by young people, as part of the Youth Assembly, when established.

(d) The Network must *support the citizenship element of the curriculum*, thereby enabling young people to experience and enhance their skills as young citizens. All learners will be encouraged to participate within the Network. This will include those involved in Schools Councils and other forms of youth fora in non-formal education settings.

(e) One of the key outcomes to be achieved via the Network is that *young people who currently feel unable or prevented from having their views heard will have access to a mechanism that will allow two way communications* with the Department. This is particularly relevant for young people who live in isolated rural areas, young people with a disability, or young people who choose not to take part, or do not get the opportunity to take part, in activities that foster their active participation, such as youth work.

Within existing resources, measures should be set in place in order to ensure the active engagement of the young people described above. This may include the use of e-consultation strategies.

(f) A number of *potential disadvantages* of the Network of Networks option were identified during consultation; consideration should be given to how the design of the model could address these perceived issues:

- it does not have a specific structure;
 - it could use adults to relay voice and, therefore, represent less direct communication for children/young people with government;
 - there may be too many varied and vested interests and thus it could be hard to gain cohesion;
 - while having the benefit of providing a wide coverage of children and young people both locally and regionally it might not attract individuals; and
 - the link with the Youth Assembly will have to be considered.
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