

RESPONSE FROM BELFAST CITY COUNCIL YOUTH FORUM

[Nb. We have been asked to indicate that this response is subject to ratification by Belfast city council and as such constitutes an 'unapproved' text with regards to BCC. Secretariat of Participation Working group]

Pre-Consultation Proposal: Northern Ireland Youth Assembly

Introduction

As members of the Belfast City Council Youth Forum, we are involved in helping make a difference to the young people of Belfast through organising events and tackling issues such as multi-culturalism.

We believe that as the youth of Northern Ireland, a bigger voice is needed so that our opinions can be heard. Not only will this include issues that involve our own age group, but also matters such as the environment and the debate on water charges, as the decisions made now will affect the young people's future.

As you may be aware, the existence of the UK Youth Parliament means very little to the Northern Irish delegation; the difference in the ratio of Northern Irish representatives to English representatives means that our voice and views are rarely considered. As a result we believe that it would be beneficial to set up a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, which would work with Stormont and give the young people of Northern Ireland a platform to represent their views and community, thus better helping our youth. With a good knowledge of our peers, the existence of a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly would not only benefit the community by working on projects such as raising awareness of drug abuse or teenage pregnancy, but it would also benefit the Assembly members.

We plan for the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly (NIYA) to be Northern Ireland wide and to have representation from every part of the community. The NIYA would be based on the Stormont model, consisting of 108 young people, 6 from each of the 18 electoral areas, we hope for them to meet on a quarterly basis in Belfast, and hopefully we will have 2 members from each region (a total of 36) to form an executive and meet monthly.

Support from the main political parties for the establishment of a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly is crucial and it was inspiring to receive support from the MLAs we consulted with.

Our visit to Dáil Na NÓg and consultations with other youth organisations have proved the existence of a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly to be vital. The Dáil Na NÓg has made an enormous improvement in the Republic of Ireland and we strongly believe that with good guidance and structure, we may do just as well, if not better.

The Youth Voice

It is important that children and young people are not only considered as the voice of tomorrow, but also as the voice of today. Young people have always been stereotyped and the lack of a youth vote means that young people do not have a voice within the community. Considering children and young people make up 31% of the Northern Irish population, we believe this to be rather nonsensical.

The existence of a United Kingdom Youth Parliament has proven to be of limited advantage to Northern Ireland since being in a minority compared to Great Britain means we find it difficult to get Northern Irish Issues heard. Other establishments such as local youth councils or forums could also benefit greatly if there was a NIYA and access to MLAs.

We have seen numerous examples of effective organisations for Youth participation, such as the Dáil Na NÓg, the Scottish Youth Parliament, Funky Dragon and others, all of which can teach us valuable lessons. They are an excellent testament to the abilities of Young People, and a counter-example to naysayers who doubt their abilities.

With our knowledge and ideas, we believe that the formation of a NIYA would improve the lives of young people and as a consequence lead to a happier youth. All too often, the complaint from Young People, who get themselves a name for causing trouble, is that they are simply not appreciated, respected, or listened to. A Youth Assembly would be an adequate antidote to such ills.

Youth Issues

In the present climate of Northern Ireland, there are a number of issues involving young people. These issues detrimentally affect the lives of young people, but they cannot help resolve these issues without support of the Northern Ireland Parliament or governing bodies.

The issues that effect young people today include:

- **ALCOHOL** – Teenagers are now binge drinking at an alarming rate, but the Government's initiatives do not seem to be helping this; we believe this is mainly because their advertising campaigns do not seem to bother the youth.
- **YOUTH VIOLENCE** – Weapon culture is very prominent in youth today and teenagers are now dying at the hands of their peers. Laws and advice will not help; it is down to the teenagers themselves to help promote safety and help their peers, as they are the only people most youths will listen to.
- **EDUCATION** – Education involves youths directly, so it would be ludicrous for them not to have an input. Young people should have a say on matters such as the

abolition or retention of the Transfer Test, as they have the most recent, relevant experience.

- **TEEN SUICIDE** – It is a serious problem in Northern Ireland at present. Better access to councillors outside of school, without the knowledge of teachers or parents should be available, as many young people may be ashamed to tell people they know of their problems.

- **COMMUNITY INTERGRATION** – Sectarian issues still involve young people today. We should help resolve religious tensions, by integrating all communities via cross community activities and integrated youth clubs.

- **ROAD SAFETY** – Most of the drink driving accidents on today's roads are by drivers under the age of 21, who are usually under the influence of alcohol. The police are cracking down on it but the problem persists and we need to help put a stop to it and raise awareness amongst young people.

- **CITIZENSHIP** - Learning about citizenship in your youth is excellent experience for when you are old enough to vote, so that 18-25 year olds will use this opportunity. This could be taught through the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly if it is set up.

- **TEENAGE PREGNANCIES AND SEXUAL HEALTH** – Greater awareness of contraceptives and how to get them should be available, as well as having more places provide condoms, for example school nurses and youth schemes.

- **ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS** – Teenagers must do their part to help the environment as it is *their* future. Most young people do not take into consideration environmental issues as they believe they cannot make a difference; there should be lessons in school on how they can do their bit.

- **CHILD ABUSE** – This is mainly a taboo subject but lots of children are affected by it. Most resources and help should be available for those who need it.

- **DRUG ABUSE** – Many young people have taken drugs (85% of young people have taken marijuana - <http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens/drugs.asp>). This issue needs to be resolved and more measures need to be taken to help the youth understand about the complications of taking drugs.

We hope to have a look at some of these issues and to do analysis of how we can help combat these problems by taking our own experiences and ideas into consideration, to have a better, more accepted outcome.

Structure

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act states people from all walks of life should be given equal opportunities. In order to achieve this, we have decided to follow the Stormont Model. The 108 members, 6 from each of the 18 constituencies, would be of ages 13-18 and meet quarterly. A Senate, or Upper Chamber, comprised of young people aged 18- 21 would have more regular meetings, taking place on a monthly basis. Not only does this provide an opportunity for those who are older to take part in youth issues, the senate can also provide feedback on ongoing projects and assess their quality and efficiency.

We believe that 25% of the representatives should come from political parties as that will further encourage their support for a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. The remaining 75% would be made up of the general public and members, once elected, would sit for two years. Setting a two year term in office means that members stay focused on their work, and allows for many people to participate over the lifetime of the Youth Assembly. For the results of the elections to show a fair

representation, a target should be set to encourage as many children and young people to take part in the voting procedure.

Channels of communication between the NIYA and youth establishments such as schools, technical colleges and youth organisations should be frequent to promote youth participation. Advertisements can also be used as a method of outreach to young people, placed on the street, in venues where they usually gather, and in teen magazines. Radio could also be utilised, as many young people listen to local radio stations on a regular basis.

We think that elections should take place to determine who is on the NIYA. Voting would be primarily conducted online, making it easier for young people to participate, and the use of SMS services could also be investigated. It is suggested that manifestos for candidates wishing to stand for election be posted online, and the possibility of talks in school is available. Ideally, elections would be held in late October or early November, as academic commitments would be at their lightest, with applications for candidacy open over the Summer Holidays.

Understandably, organising and maintaining this structure would be time-consuming and complicated, but we believe that with the full participation of Government, schools and Youth Organisations, it would be easily possible to run our proposed Youth Assembly with the minimum of fuss.

Effectiveness

In order to improve the effectiveness of the NIYA, we have the following recommendations;

- **ONLINE NEWSLETTER**
 - The use of an online newsletter keeps people posted and interested.
- **SCHOOL PRESENTATIONS**
 - Though the use of school presentations, young people learn more about what they can do to make their home a better place. Schools could also be used as a platform to get people onto the NIYA.
- **TELEVISION BROADCASTING/ ADVERTISING**
 - This can be used to raise awareness and recruit new members
- **SUPPORT**
 - *Political*, support from Stormont will make the setting up of a NIYA easier.
 - *Dáil na nÓg*, as the equivalent in the Republic of Ireland, the Dáil na nÓg can offer advice or perhaps even opportunities to work together.
 - *Youth Organisations*, help will be required to recruit members and youth organisations is a good method of communication between the NIYA and young people.
 - *Schools*, support will be needed in raising awareness and recruitment of new members.
- **MEMBER BENEFITS**
 - *Travel Expenses*, having all travel expenses paid for means that young people are not put off from attending meetings.

- *Free Food*, based on ourselves as the Belfast City Council Youth Forum and the Dáil na nÓg, food plays a very important part of the meetings, it should be seen as a major motivation.
- *Freebies*, the use of member packs or free hoodies can improve team spirit and act as a motivation; members will feel a higher level of importance in themselves and their job.

Problems with the Proposal

There are some barriers which may prevent the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly from being effective and performing to the best of standards but with full participation from the young people and governing bodies, this should easily amended.

Some of the barriers may include:

- **TRAVEL** – If the quarterly meetings are held in Belfast, it could be quite difficult to arrange transport for all 108 people, especially those from regions such as Fermanagh. Holding meetings at weekends would go some way to getting past this issue.
- **LACK OF ADEQUATE RESOURCES** – We may find it hard to get the funding we need, at least at the start. We will probably need to get funding from private organisations as well as those that are parliamentarily based.
- **COMMUNICATION** – As members will be from all across the country we will need a way that they can relay information to each other, this could be done through SMS or online services such as bebo. We could also arrange for all representatives from the same region to meet up and possibly have video conferencing through on-line webcams.
- **THE PERCEIVED CAPABILITIES OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE** – Many adults may believe that the youth can not have much responsibility because of their age or lack of experience. We plan on doing the work to the best of our standards and after a year many of those who may have doubted the young people should have changed their minds.
- **TIME** – Young people may have to volunteer some of their personal time when they would rather be with friends or working. We can get the youth excited about doing this volunteer work by the use of initiatives, such as free transport, meals and residentials.
- **CONFIDENCE OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE** – Some may believe that it will not make a difference (both those in the NIYA and those who are not); support and responsibility from the Northern Ireland Parliament will help build the confidence of the young people involved.
- **THE TIME IT TAKES FOR A PLAN TO BECOME REALITY** – Some young people may get impatient if they do not see results straight away. By keeping them involved and giving them feedback it should help keep them interested.

In Conclusion

We, the Belfast City Council Youth Forum, believe strongly in the importance of giving young people a voice. It is we who will face tomorrow, and Northern Ireland is

on the cusp of a bright new future, a future we should all face together, and a future that is being formed by the people around us right now. As the late David Ervine told us when we met him to discuss our hopes and dreams: “You may be the voice of the future, but you are also the voice of *now*.”

We believe in fair and proportional representation of all young people living in Northern Ireland, and we believe in a platform for lively and spirited debate. We envisage the young people of Northern Ireland walking together into a future of peace and prosperity.

It is, therefore, our strongly held belief that a Youth Assembly is an important step and perfect vehicle for realising not only our hopes and dreams, but those of Northern Ireland as a whole. We considered many options in drafting this proposal, and we do not think that there is any more effective way for fairly representing the youth of Northern Ireland as a whole, or for tackling issues that affect our age group.

We are aware that setting up a forum for tackling Youth Issues will not be without difficulties, but we believe we have anticipated these and that they can and should be overcome, particularly since it is our belief that a Youth Assembly is such an important asset.

There is no reason why we cannot have full participation of Young People in the way our country tackles problems and makes decisions. Indeed, it is of paramount importance, a fact that you are no doubt in full agreement with. For these reasons, we urge you to consider our proposal: the proposal of the voice of tomorrow.