

Northern Ireland Network for Youth

Pre consultation Response; Chris Quinn, Children and Young People's Coordinator; Belfast City Council.

[Nb. We have been asked to indicate that this response constitutes a staff opinion and does not necessarily reflect the position of BCC : Secretariat of Participation Working group]

Below is a response to the request for pre consultation responses on a Northern Ireland Network for Youth.

- **What is your vision of an ideal NINFY?**

The Northern Ireland Network for Youth may be seen as a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly.

A Northern Ireland Youth Assembly would consist of 108 young people from across NI. They would be nominated by local authorities via Shadow Youth Councils, along the same boundaries as the NI Assembly electoral areas.

In an ideal world each local authority would have a shadow youth council; and it is recommended that this proposal should be part of RPA.

In electoral areas where there are no shadow youth councils, schools councils and area youth fora will be asked to come forward to express interest in nominating young people.

The NIYA should be the responsibility of the Children and Young People's Unit (OFMDFM). There should be a dedicated team of staff to work on the project. This team would be tasked with looking at the finer issues such as nominations per council where two local councils fall within the same electoral area. It will also be the responsibility of this team to negotiate with nominating bodies as to how many nominations they should make. The team should also decide, based on a call for expressions of interest in nominating young people, how many nominations should be received and based on this whether or not interviews need to take place. Consideration should also be given to allowing young people to 'self nominate'.

Another suggestion is that the NIYA should adopt the same principal as the Dail na nOg (ROI) in that there should be an executive / smaller group of young people who meet regularly to drive forward the agenda as set out by the NIYA. These young people would be like junior ministers, and it is recommended that there would be 36 young people (two from each electoral area). This group would meet monthly / bi monthly (as directed by

them) at a venue / venues that is accessible and at a time as agreed by the group.

Travel arrangements are an obstacle for young people across NI; which makes it hard for young people to meet across such a wide geographical area.

Possible solutions to this might be:

- The use of technology such as video conferencing – e.g. it may be feasible to set up 4 area based meetings across NI, which are all linked by video conferencing. This could happen in local council facilities / schools or youth clubs.
- That 'youth participation' be part of the school citizenship curriculum. Although it could be some years away, the notion that every young person takes part in citizenship education at the same time every week may be realistic. E.g. if Friday afternoons were set aside for this work, young people could meet and do NIYA / Shadow Youth Council work during this time. This work should be accredited (through Youth Achievement Awards / OCN accreditation / GCSE)

It is suggested that if the 'executive' meet on a monthly / bi monthly basis, the NIYA should meet on a quarterly basis, in the chamber, in Stormont. This should be at a time as directed by the young people; schools should recognise the work, and negotiate some time for travel (assuming that the suggestions above will not be in place by the time a NIYA might be set up).

The young people on the NIYA should be aged 13 – 18, and should serve for 2 years. The Nomination process should be January – March, with Easter Holidays being used for an annual NIYA residential where induction, and action planning take place.

There should be a small group of 18 – 25 year olds who will act mentors / peer facilitators for the NIYA. This will be made up of young people who were previously members of the NIYA and wish to stay involved in a mentoring capacity. This group will form a pool of peer educators and on leaving the NIYA will take part in youth work and citizenship training. This will allow for young people aged up to the age of 25 to be involved in NINFY as set stipulated.

In the first two years of the NIYA the NIYF executive committee may, at their discussion be able to act in this role with the support of the participation Hub.

The Participation Hub should be responsible for the promotion of the NIYA and local Shadow Youth Councils, as well as be involved in the recruitment / selection process.

0 – 13 year olds will be involved in participation through the work of the Play Quest team. This team should continue to work as they are; delivering workshops and promoting youth participation. Issues raised during their work should be fed into the NIYA.

Members of the NIYA should be encouraged to observe this kind of work when it happens in their area so they can hear for themselves what the issues of their 'constituents' are.

Communication with elected representatives:

It is suggested that each political party has a minister of the NI Assembly who should be their 'Youth Champion' / 'Party spokesperson on Youth'. These Assembly members, along with the Ministers for Youth, and the NI Children's Commissioner for Children and Young people should meet regularly with the NIYA.

Furthermore the ministers for Youth (currently G. Kelly & I. Paisley jnr) should take a 'hands on' approach to the NIYA. The NIYA should be responsibility of the Children and Young People's Unit, which these ministers should be responsible for.

It is proposed that many of the existing participative structures in NI could become part of / funded directly by the Children and Young People's Unit to promote a more coordinated approach, (as outlined below). This model could therefore cost in excess of £1m per year; and it is therefore recommended that each of the 12 government departments should pay £85,000 for the running of the NIYA. This sounds like a lot of money but should provide good value in that the NI community will benefit from the work of the NIYA. Furthermore with NI's youth population being 36% of the total, this figure is not unreasonable. This proposal would equate to around £1.70 per young person in Northern Ireland and if we are to 'strengthen the direct voice of young people to government', and build on the existing participation structures within the youth service in Northern Ireland, substantial resources need to be made available.

- **What sort of values and principles should NINFY adopt?**

NINFY / NIYA should adopt the same values and principals as set out in the 10 year strategy for Children and Young People; YSLP Youth Work Strategy; NI Programme for Government

- **What functions should NINFY cover?**

The NIYA / NINFY should act as a mechanism where by young people can raise issues of importance to them for consideration by the NI Youth Assembly.

It should also be a mechanism whereby the NI Assembly can consult with young people on issues that they are considering.

Young People should be able to opt in and out of issues of particular interest to them; and information on those issues discussed at Assembly level should be available in a 'Child friendly' format so that young people can be fully informed.

It is also suggested that the NIYA act as 'gate keepers' to the outcomes set out in the 10 year strategy for children and young people.

It is paramount that being involved in the NIYA is fun and rewarding for young people – otherwise it will simply not work.

- **How would NINFY link with existing participative structures for children and young people?**

The Participation Hub – the participation workers will be key to the success of a NIYA; the Hub could become part of or funded directly by the Children and Young People's Unit and provide the driving force behind the NIYA. On leaving the NIYA young people should be encouraged to take part in training for possible progression as a participation worker / participation support worker.

Each of the three strands of the Hub are very important in encouraging participation of all young people aged 0 – 25.

The Participation Network, and Participation Portal – Should both continue to function, although they might be best placed within the Children and Young People's Unit / or alternatively be funded by the Unit. The network should be responsible for a Shadow Youth Council Practitioners Forum.

Shadow Youth Council Practitioners Forum – a network of youth participation workers employed by local authorities who have been working together informally. This group was pulled together / administered previously by Save the Children. It is recommended that the Participation Network take responsibility for arranging meeting and administering the group.

NIYF – one possible suggestion could be that NIYF 'step sideward' and become part of the administration behind the NIYA - i.e. become part of the Children and Young People's Unit. Alternatively, like suggested above, it become funded and supported by the Children and Young People's Unit. NIYF members should continue as a valuable wider network of young people who can be consulted and raise issues of importance without actually having to attend meetings etc. The NIYF executive committee's function and role may need to be reviewed within this structure; although in the initial two years of the NIYA, this group may be able to take on the role of the 18 – 25 year old mentors as suggested above.

Civic Forum – around 6 young people from the NIYA should have seats on the NI Civic Forum

NICCY – The involvement of the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People is of paramount importance. The Commissioner could act as an 'ombudsman for youth participation'. Additionally the Commissioner should liaise closely with youth champions and NIYA members as suggested above.

Parent's advisory group / SPRG / Practitioners group / Research and information group – (all as proposed as part of the 10 year strategy for

children and young people) – these groups should be made aware of the work of the NIYA. NIYA should be a regular agenda item for all of these groups.

- **Are there any existing models in the UK or internationally that would be relevant to this initiative?**

Special attention should be paid to youth participation models in the UK and Ireland.

Examples of good practice can be seen through Dail na nOg; Funky Dragon; UKYP; Scottish Youth Parliament. All of which we can learn from and links to should be made.

These links would be in tune with N/S & E/W links that Government is currently involved in.

Furthermore representation at European and Global levels should be sought.

There are also some models of good practice at a local government level across NI / GB / ROI that are relevant such as Belfast City Council Youth Forum; Donegal Youth Council; Easington Youth Forum and many more.

- **What are the barriers that would stop NINFY from being effective?**

Barriers may include:

- Lack of adequate resources
- Duplication
- Tokenism
- Travel
- Time – voluntary aspect and other factors in young people's lives e.g. Desire to hang out with mates; work; family life; sports; Boredoms
- Confidence of young people involved – there is a need to promote an environment where all young people can have their say; furthermore a variety of ways of communicating with young people should be explored e.g. SMS text; Bebo etc.
- Diversity of age (0-25 is huge)
- Communication between young people and elected members
- If young people are not given 'the information'
- Perceived capabilities of young people by adults (i.e. adults underestimating young people)
- 'It takes too long' - The time it might take to make a difference – young people expect quick results / feedback
- Feedback – it is paramount that young people are made aware of what has happened with their work / ideas