



## Northern Ireland Youth Forum Response

### Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation

November 2010

#### **Northern Ireland Youth Forum Background**

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum was established by the Department of Education in 1979. The organisation was tasked with increasing the involvement of young people in the Youth Service, enabling young people to play their full part in decision-making. It is one of the key organisations that make up the youth sector in Northern Ireland.

Throughout its 31-year history the Youth Forum has championed the development of Participation within the sector, and has worked to improve policy and practice in youth work agencies.

As a leader in the field of Participation, the Youth Forum has cultivated an active membership of young people, and participative structures, to set the strategic direction of our work. For over 30 years the Youth Forum has led the way in promoting the voice of young people. We have effectively strengthened the direct voice of young people in the work that government does.

A 12-person voluntary management committee, made up of young people, elected from within the membership, work closely with the staff team to oversee the implementation of the strategy, and ensure that young people are fully involved in all levels of governance.

The Youth Forum provides training and support to its members, encouraging young people from a diverse range of backgrounds to participate fully in their local youth clubs, youth councils, and at all levels of society.

We have a strong track record in ensuring the effective participation of young people in the communities', services and structures that make up their lives. This has included many years of training young people in their rights, developing the awareness, confidence and skills of young people, lobbying and advocacy, influencing policy, developing forums for consultation and informing the debate and practice of participation.



In recent years the Youth Forum's members have been centrally involved in the creation of the Department of Education's Youth Work Strategy, including the creation of a young person friendly version. In addition the Youth Forum play an active role in the Youth Service Liaison Forum.

The NIYF is accessible to any young person aged 11 to 25 who is interested in our work or wants our support; however we have developed particular expertise in seeking the views of marginalised young people and groups of young people who tend to be overlooked. As such we engage directly with young people with a wide range of ability and background including all of the section 75 groups.

## **Background to CSI**

The Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) is a NI Assembly proposal that aims to build a strong community where everyone, regardless of race, color, religious or political opinion, age, gender, disability or sexual orientation can live, work and socialise in a context of fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect.

The CSI document is currently in consultation phase and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum has compiled the following response.

## **Methodology**

In capturing the information to compile this response to the CSI proposals members of staff of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum used a variety of methodologies to engage with members including one to one conversations with young people; a focus group session and through asking staff to act as advocates on behalf of the groups they engage with across Northern Ireland. The following sections draw together the major themes that emerged from the discussion groups.

## **Findings**

### *Sectarianism; Culture and identity*

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum membership agreed that it is of paramount importance that government prioritises a strategy for promoting good relations and promoting peace building in the North of Ireland.

Young people agreed that Sectarianism is a still a major issue here and that often it is forgotten about and reflected upon the societal shock when we witness sectarian violence. Many felt that this violence was perhaps not surprising given the

attitudes we often hear and see in our communities and in the media.

Young people questioned the statistic given that 'a survey in 2009 showed that 95% of both Catholics and Protestants said they respected each other's culture'.

Young people spoke of the mystery of 'the other community' and the fact that for many; before getting involved in the NI Youth Forum (or other projects) meeting young people from another religious background was unheard of.

### *Leadership*

Many agreed that they did respect other people's culture, but wondered that in reality, what attitudes are realities for many young people in their homes and in their communities; i.e. for some young people, what they hear and see at home and in their communities does not concur with respecting other's culture.

On a more positive note most young people did agree that they had no issue with other young people from different backgrounds; and that they do enjoy learning about other people's identity. However, they did comment that there is not enough time and support to allow this learning to take place and they did reflect upon instances where they could see that sectarianism is a reality for many.

The young people agreed that there is a genuine need for leadership - both politically at Stormont; Westminster; Dáil Éireann and locally within our communities.

Young people queried that if in the absence of this strong leadership from some quarters; could a Ministerial panel actually work? Would things change? And how would political point scoring and electioneering effect making positive change to the lives of real people in the North.

Young people spoke about a deficit in terms of political leadership coming from some areas. Some spoke of leadership at a grass roots level, particularly within Loyalist communities and spoke about the need for local capacity building in order to empower the most disenfranchised.

### **Making a Difference**

Young people expressed concern that the CSI strategy had the potential to end up being another document that didn't actually mean much. They referred to other government documents, which they had been consulted on and in real terms

meant nothing to them despite being led to believe that they were going to make an impact on their lives.

Young people expressed the view that promoting Good Relations was the responsibility of everyone who lives in NI, and that it should be core to everyone's work - particularly those involved in Youth and Community Work, Education or in a Leadership role.

Some young people felt that the document read like a series of facts and young people questioned its value as it stands. Despite this they did acknowledge that it was a good start.

Young people spoke about the need to focus on the real issues - issues at home, in schools and in the community. What they hear and see on a day-to-day basis; they spoke about the need to discuss the harder issues.

### **Young People - Empowering the Next Generation**

Young people agreed it was positive that as a section of the community they have been highlighted; though it should be stressed that they can be part of the solution as oppose to the problem. Although young people talked a lot about empowerment they also felt that they are not the 'next generation' but the present one.

It was also acknowledged that in order to make NI a more peaceful and cohesive society decision and policy makers must take into account all of the issues and challenges that young people experience in their lives.

Young people feature quite heavily in some of the sections. Those who participated in the consultation took umbrage to the negative language used in relation to young people. Again on this point young people felt that they were often seen as the problem; but in actual fact there are many examples of how young people can influence change in their families and communities.

Young people also talked about older generations and again the issue of leadership - i.e. that there was a big onus on older generations to play their role in peace building. Some young people spoke about inheriting attitudes from older people and being presented with prejudice from an early age.

Young people need to be fully engaged in the development of this policy. It was agreed that it is younger people who will be affected more by this policy and that they need to be central to its development.

The members of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum would like to be at the centre of any future developments given the organisation's role and remit.

Young people should be viewed as an integral part of the community and should be invested in. Young people are not the cause of sectarianism in the North.

There are many examples of how young people can play a positive role in Society in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Youth Forum offers one example but it should also be acknowledged that there are many projects on a local and sub regional level which also engage young people in participative democracy and social justice. These types of project should be invested in. Their benefits have been well documented.

Young people's participation in the decision making process needs to be core to the work of our communities and not a token gesture.

### **Linkages to other organisations and strategies**

As mentioned previously young people spoke of their experiences of being consulted on other government policies.

Some were able to highlight initiatives such as Network for Youth (DE); Priorities for Youth (DE) and the (OFMDFM) 10-year strategy for children and young people.

Some Young people spoke about have experience of different government departments such as Department of Justice; Department of Education; and the Department of Employment and Learning. (Some did not have such knowledge).

There was agreement though that all of the different stakeholders needed to buy into one plan.

Young people have also been asked to think about the Department of Education's (DE) Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education policy; but they were confused as to why we needed both CSI as well as the DE policy.

NI is traditionally fragmented and duplicated. Young people spoke with frustration and confusion about different organisations doing similar work across the board.

Collaboration was seen as essential - especially during a time of recession.

Regional and local agencies need to buy into the strategy and an agreed action plan developed. Those people who are most marginalised need to be part of this - disenfranchised communities and young people in particular.

Young people questioned how this policy and any action plan might be funded.

### **The role of the Youth and Community Sector**

It was acknowledged that the Youth and Community Sector has a key role to play in any CSI policy. Some acknowledged that there was an onus on a certain quality of work to be met across the board.

It was acknowledged that Youth Work offers young people learning in a non-formal way; and on a voluntary basis. Generally young people enjoy engaging in Youth Work and there was agreement that peace building should be / often is core to Youth Work.

Young people spoke about how their experiences of youth work included diversionary activity; educational, personal and social development; peace building and issue-based work. Many Young people spoke about how through Youth Work they were able to engage with young people from different backgrounds - an experience that ordinarily they would never be able to engage in.

#### *Importance of cross community work*

Sadly; for many young people in Northern Ireland; having the opportunity to meet a young person who practises a different religion is not always a reality. On a more positive more, when this 'cross-community' engagement does occur the affects are extremely positive.

Some young people who have experienced 'summer intervention programmes' criticised them as 'quick fix'. Young people did generally welcome the opportunity to become involved in this kind of work; but they stressed that it was needed throughout the year - not just during the summer months.

### **The Voices of the 'Real People'**

Young people expressed concern that this strategy was 'just a load of words' and meant very little in reality. They queried whether or not it reflected the views of the 'person on the street'.

The reality of living in communities affected by conflict was discussed and some touched on social deprivation. Young people spoke about how Paramilitaries; Policing; Bonfires and Parades

are still some of the hottest issues and they needed space to talk about these.

Some young people spoke about the multitude of issues affecting young people and wondered was there a relationship between social issues and those of a (post) conflict society.

On the other hand some young people expressed the opinion that NI really isn't that bad. In the global context young people spoke of other countries cities etc that experience much worse problems.

## **Building Peace and Understanding**

When young people were asked how we should go about building peace in Northern Ireland a large emphasis was placed on dialogue.

### *Developing community relationships*

Young people need safe space where they can socialise across political and religious boundaries and the opportunity to learn about each other's traditions and history.

### *Legacy of the conflict / role models / leadership*

Some young people spoke about learning from the past. They spoke about the value of hearing the stories of ex combatants and political leaders. They enjoyed the 'journey of understanding' - hearing different perspectives and trying to see 'the full picture'.

Young people acknowledged that it is rarely 'black and white' and loved the idea of exploring difference to understand the past.

### *Sectarianism*

Young people talked around the issue of mobility and aspiring towards living in a society where one can get a direct bus to visit a friend on 'the other side of the fence'.

For many young people transport related issues and safe (affordable) space to socialise are the starting point to accessing services, which they require.

### *Culture and identity*

Young people generally said that they want to live in a society where difference is valued and celebrated and not derided or feared. Flags and Emblems were seen as important and it was agreed that we need to move to a place where these could be understood and respected; but also that there is a responsibility not to entice others using them.

## **North South East West Working**

Young people generally agreed that 'Improving relationships within our society means making strong relationships between North and South and East and West'.

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum has been working on developing stronger North South East West Links for some time now.

The Youth Forum currently participates in the UK Youth Parliament and has strong East West Links. The Youth Forum engages in Cross Border working (North South) on a more local level and aspires towards developing a more strategic approach to this.

The Youth Forum has developed some papers on how this might happen and have presented ideas on a potential North South Youth Forum to key stakeholders.

Furthermore young people agreed that we need to take account of the fact that new countries are joining the European Community - sharing research and experiences on a North/South, East/West, European and International basis.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion the Northern Ireland Youth Forum welcomes the development of a Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation.

- o Young people agreed that 'a cohesive society is one in which everyone can live, work and socialise together free from intimidation and prejudice'.
- o Young people feel that Sectarianism is still very real and needs to be addressed.
- o Young people feel that they should be seen as part of the solution as oppose to the problem and that through dialogue as a society we can begin to understand.
- o A coordinated and connected approach needs to be adopted in order to make CSI work. It should connect from the

individual to NI Assembly policy and across government departments.

- o The youth and community sector has a key role to play, as do young people themselves.
- o We need to see more leadership at community and MLA levels in terms of combating sectarianism.
- o North South East West working is an important dimension.

## **Summary of main findings**

### *Leadership*

At times young people experience a lack of leadership politically and within communities. Young people need strong innovative leaders who they can relate to. They need adults who can lead the way in terms of tackling sectarianism at a range of levels and importantly within the media.

Chapter 4 of CSI refers to empowering young people. The Northern Ireland Youth Forum sees this as important and welcomes the idea in principle, but also acknowledges there is work to be done on the practicalities of this.

### *Sectarianism*

Sectarianism is a significant issue for young people. There are clear geographical differences with regards to relationships and interaction between young people from different community backgrounds. Generally young people had a positive view of cross community work.

### *The Role of the Youth and Community Sector*

The Youth Forum sees that there is an important role for the Youth and Community Sector in the delivery of the proposed programme. The Youth Forum would advocate for more joined up working between different organisations; individuals; projects; schools and sectors.

We must develop a coherent process that allows young people to discuss sensitive issues such as parades; bonfires; cultural symbols etc.

One might argue that the only reason these are sensitive issues is because adults say they are; young people are listening to adults (link to leadership issue); therefore a safe environment is crucial for young people be availed of opportunities to explore these concepts. The Youth Forum proposes that OFMDFM takes the lead on this

### *Voices of Young People*

The participation of young people in the policy making process is (supposedly) ingrained within the work of our policy makers

following legislation such as Section 75; the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; OFMDFM's Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People; etc.

However, many young people feel that this is a tick box exercise. Historically there is little evidence to show that their suggestions and opinions have any impact on policy and legislation. Through the Youth Forum, Young people participate in many Consultations on government policy. Young people welcome the opportunity to engage in such discussions, however, without feedback from the policy makers young people's impact it is difficult to measure.

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum would therefore welcome feedback with regards to this response.