

Thank you Sorcha.

My name is Wayne Chang and it's a great pleasure for me to speak today at this event as a Youth Panel member, as a young person and as a member of society and citizen of Northern Ireland.

Today, the 20th of November as you are aware, is Universal Children's Rights Day and the day we are celebrating the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's 10th birthday. If you rewind 10 years and ask the children and young people in 2003 how they would like to see society in 10 yrs, they would probably visualise a peaceful and respectful society for children and young people today, where the issues they face will not exist.

Unfortunately, children and young people still face issues such as negative stereotyping, bullying and child poverty. And potentially and ironically, we could in the near future have 430,000 young people¹ being discriminated against in a piece of anti-discrimination legislation. These are just a few examples, in reality there are countless types of issues we face!

When Sorcha and I were asked to speak about our vision for the future of children and young people, I felt privileged to be able to be a representative my age group, and to voice our opinions on how we think the future should be for us. Just as Sorcha mentioned, if a child or young person was asked this question, they would really hope for better rights, to have a voice, and be treated with respect. However, things need to be carried out for this vision to become a reality.

Focussing on participation and to build on what Sorcha has already mentioned such as pupil participation in schools and the forthcoming Departmental Circular, there are other initiatives that may improve the way children and young people are viewed.

I know, and Sorcha knows, and I guess almost everyone in the audience knows, that children and young people have important contributions to make and which, if listened to and responded to by decision makers, can improve services as well as laying a long lasting foundation leading to effective citizenship and participation. Research by Powell and Smyth² suggests that while some young people may not be interested in local party politics, they are very interested in issues that affect them and their communities.

The 2002 Concluding Observations by the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the state of children's rights in the UK recommended to the UK government *"...that procedures be established that would allow the views expressed by children to be taken into account in, and to have an impact on developing programmes and policies affecting them³."*

¹ Census of Population for Northern Ireland, 2011

² Children's Participation Rights in Research Powell and Smyth, 2009

³ Concluding observations: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2002), Committee on the Rights of the Child (pg 8)

The 2008 Concluding Observations by the same Committee recommended the UK government encourage the active and systematic involvement of civil society in the promotion and implementation of children's rights, including their participation in the planning stage of policies⁴.

Things have improved, with 11 of our 12 Government Departments endorsing NICCY's Participation Policy Statement of Intent, highlighting a commitment to meaningful engagement with children and young people in decision making processes. And just to ease the concerns of the Junior Ministers, OFMdfM is not the missing Department so thank you for your commitment to engage with children and young people.

But there is more we can do.... starting with exploring options for the full implementation of UNCRC in local legislation because even though the UNCRC has been ratified by the UK government, we are still facing difficulties in our everyday lives.

Developing legislation to ensure government departments work together, focussing on a rights based approach for children should be seen as positive and progressive. It would certainly reflect the commitment of the Executive to build a society in which children are valued and respected.

Therefore, if UNCRC is able to have a larger influence of local legislation, the needs of children and young people will have higher importance and the issues we face today could reduce dramatically.

Also, under the Review of Public Administration or RPA there will be new legislation and new elections. Again, it is important to note that the Department of the Environment is one of the 11 departments that have endorsed the Participation Statement of Intent - as are 10 of the existing local councils to date.

I believe that the new Local Government Bill is a unique opportunity for the new bodies and new councillors to have an important influence on a future society for children and young people. This is especially important in community planning and should ensure that children and young people can truly participate in civic life.

For people in my age group to feel more respected and have a more peaceful society, the 11 new councils have to engage with children and young people at the earliest possible stages of planning and delivery of council services that will have a direct impact on us. If we were more aware of the facilities and services we have right to, we are more likely to seek help for the problems we face, and help solve those problems.

Children and young people want to have a voice. We want to be able to speak out about our views and opinions. To achieve this, as Sorcha has mentioned, I hope that there will be a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly where we will have an avenue for our voice to be heard at Stormont.

⁴ Concluding observations: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2008), Committee on the Rights of the Child (pg 8)

The ultimate goal we want to achieve is to live in a society that protects and nurtures its young people and one that respects us.

As a youngster with a different skin tone, things were not always easy for me. There are things that I had to face where others may not have experienced. However, joining the NICCY youth panel made me realise that there are many children and young people out there that went through similar situations as me. Although I was surprised by the amount of victims, I felt more secure and knew that I wasn't alone.

The NICCY youth panel not only allowed me to meet other children and young people, it also provided me with a learning platform where I became more aware of the rights we should have or want, but are aren't there at the moment.

And finally, people often say that children and young people are the future but this is misleading. Children and young people are citizens now, and their needs and rights are real and in the present.

I am here now; my needs should be met now.

Like adults, children and young people are rights holders. Our Government are the duty bearers with responsibility to deliver.
I want to be included now...

... but I am a patient person, young people are patient people.

I may not be under 18 anymore when young people get the protection they deserve under the new Goods, Facilities and Services legislation; and...

I may be someday into adulthood when we have Children Rights Legislation in Northern Ireland... but I will - along with my other panel members and children and young people across Northern Ireland - work hard to make it better for those young people coming after us.

Work with us!

Thank you