WALKING OR TALKING PARTICIPATION?

NICCY
PROMOTING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE
EVIDENCING THE IMPACT OF DIRECT PARTICIPATION WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL POLICIES, STRATEGIES, LEGISLATION AND SERVICES.

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Commissioned by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COMMISSIONER’S FOREWORD</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FINDINGS</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement activity</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and co-ordination</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of OFMDFM</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors that enable effective engagement</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to effective engagement</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of impact</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other examples of good practice</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX I</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICCY Youth Panel</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As I approach the end of my 8th and final year as Commissioner for Children and Young People, I have begun to reflect on my time in post, and on the work of my office. A lot has changed in the lives of children and young people, as we work towards the goal of making children’s rights a reality for every child in Northern Ireland. One key area which has been a constant focus for me has been the participation of children and young people in the decisions that affect their lives.

The participation of children and young people is a core element of both my legislation and the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC). When I first became Commissioner, I wanted to meet as many young people as possible, to hear first hand about their experiences and the issues affecting them. I have continued to do this, and with the support of my staff and my Youth Panel, I have actively worked to promote participation and the ‘voice’ of children and young people.

As well as working directly with children and young people, I have been working at a more strategic level with government departments and public agencies. The aim of this work has been to raise awareness of the need and benefits of participation, and to work towards embedding a ‘culture of participation’ in the decision making process right across government. This included a particular focus with government departments who have a significant role in delivering services for children and young people.

In the absence of government having a specific policy or structures in place to ensure that children and young people are involved and have a say in decisions that affect them, NICCY has been undertaking a series of initiatives to move this forward. The first of these was to develop the Participation Policy Statement of Intent (PPSI) initiative. The purpose of this was to act as a guide to support government departments and public bodies in the development of their own participation policy and practices.

I was encouraged that the majority of departments endorsed the PPSI. Two years later we did a follow up review, with all government departments, to see if there was any improvement as a result of them signing the PPSI. That review highlighted both positive practice and areas where gaps still existed. Following NICCY’s own analysis of the PPSI review, we provided feedback to each department, highlighting positive actions and areas for improvement.
My biennial Participation Awards form another strand to this work and have been successful in encouraging, identifying and celebrating good participative practice among public bodies and agencies.

Another indication of the state of participative practice, was referenced in a report that NICCY produced in 2011. The report, ‘Barriers to Effective Government Delivery for Children in Northern Ireland’, concluded that government is falling short in implementing the UNCRC, with participation referenced as one such area, as part of that wider review.

So, while we had previously identified some evidence and examples of good practice and government’s commitment to participation, there was little evidence of the impact that engaging with children and young people was having in the development of policies, strategies, legislation and service delivery. For example, are there established processes that track and incorporate children and young people’s input? How is this information actually used and how is this evidence recorded? What methods are used and do children and young people receive feedback? How is change or impact measured and evidenced?
These are just some of the questions that we needed more information on. By taking stock of our work, over the past number of years, it became evident that this external research, ‘Walking or Talking Participation?’ could probe deeper and hopefully provide answers.

The report itself illustrates examples of good practice but findings identify that more work still needs to be done to create a more systematic and consistent approach to participation across all government departments.

Above all this report provides clarity on the ‘state of play’, illuminating the way ahead and providing a clear direction of travel along the journey of participation. While I welcome and commend these examples of good practice, I call on all government bodies to do more to accelerate their progress and speed of travel. The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), as lead department, have an important role in this and I would particularly encourage them to lead the way.

Translating a commitment to participation into real and tangible ‘practice’ on the ground is a challenge, but by working together I firmly believe that it will help to create a better place for this and for future generations of children and young people.

Patricia Lewsley-Mooney
Commissioner
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
PURPOSE

The overall aim of this study is to identify evidence of the impact of direct participation with children and young people in the development of departmental policies, strategies, legislation and services.

Key areas of enquiry on the development of policies, strategies, legislation and services include:

- Do departments have processes for dealing with input from children and young people? How do they record and use their views? Do they give feedback? Can they provide evidence that the views of children and young people have had an impact / led to change?
- When a process is evident what are the enabling / supportive factors?
- When it is not evident what barriers are in place?
- What examples of good practice can be identified?

METHODOLOGY

The primary methodology involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the Children’s Champions of the 12 government departments.

All departments responded positively to the request for an interview. Some of the Children’s Champions met the researcher alone but most were accompanied by other departmental officials. In some instances the process prompted the interviewee to gather additional information to forward to the researcher.

The NICCY Youth Panel (NYP) contributed to the design of the interview schedule through a facilitated workshop. As a result of this the young people went on to formulate advice for officials wishing to engage children and young people.

FINDINGS

Systems

Officials were asked what systems they used to: record the views of children and young people; analyse / give weight to their views; evaluate engagements; and feedback outcomes to children and young people.

It is fair to say that no department was able to present evidence of undertaking such activity systematically.

As will often be said in this report this does not necessarily mean that such activity is absent, indeed some departments were able to show good practice in some of these areas related to specific engagements. Rather, it is clear that there is no systematic process in relation to these activities, consistently applied, in any department.
Engagement activity

Departments provided evidence of a wide range of engagement activity. They were most likely to engage with children and young people in relation to consultation on a specific strategy or policy document but officials also provided accounts of informal listening, creative ways of involving children and young people, longer-term processes and pre-consultation exercises.

Communication and co-ordination

One of the issues highlighted within the departmental interviews was an apparent lack of co-ordination of and communication about engaging children and young people – both within and across departments.

Interviewees were asked if there was a way for officials to share the outcomes and experience of consultations with colleagues, whether any individual had an overview of engagements with children and young people and if there was a way of ensuring that children and young people weren’t being asked the same things.

The majority of departments had no formal way of co-ordinating or communicating about engagements with children and young people, although some mentioned that they might have informal discussions with colleagues.

Role of the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister

Since OFMDFM funding of the Participation Network came to an end in December 2012, departments have been unable to avail of centrally funded specialist support in relation to engaging children and young people in public decision making. Almost every interviewee articulated the need for such technical expertise.

A paper detailing future arrangements for supporting departments to deliver on their UNCRC obligations is currently with Ministers and officials have said they plan to have support arrangements in place by April 2014.

Interviewees were asked what support departments needed from OFMDFM. Responses fell broadly into four themes:

- Expertise / guidance
- Central co-ordinating role
- The need for facilitation of engagements
- Caveats
Factors that enable effective engagement

Where officials felt that engagement had been effective they were asked to identify enabling factors:

- Being present to clarify or answer questions while having the support of expert facilitators
- Undertaking pre-consultation
- Young people being prepared for the engagement
- Good communication within the department
- Having ready access to young people through funded organisations
- Enthusiasm from officials
- Having time / opportunities to focus specifically on young people / consultation –
- Ministerial leadership

Barriers to effective engagement

A number of issues raised during the interviews highlighted barriers to effective engagement with children and young people:

- Lack of practical support
- Attitudes
- Processes and procedures
- Time and workloads
- Responsibility of arms length bodies
- Fear of disadvantaging adults

Evidence of impact

The central task in undertaking this study was to identify concrete evidence that direct engagement between departments and children and young people had an impact on the development of policies, strategies, legislation and services.

Disappointingly, very few departments were able to provide such evidence. Many were however readily able to articulate the benefits of engagement. Five examples of the impact of engaging with children and young people are detailed.

Other examples of good practice

As mentioned at the outset, while departments struggled to provide evidence of systematic and consistent approaches to engagement many were nonetheless able to provide examples of a range of good practice. Examples were provided in relation to:

- Feedback
- Evaluation
- On-going engagement
- Documentation
- Support structures
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to build on previous work undertaken by NICCY, in particular the work recently undertaken through the children and young people’s Participation Review questionnaires. In relation to the main task of providing evidence of the impact of direct participation of children and young people in the development of departmental policies, strategies, legislation and services – the results are clearly disappointing.

What is less clear is determining the explanation for this lack of concrete evidence. Interviews with officials revealed an absence of robust systems for recording, analysing, evaluating and providing feedback to children and young people on the outcomes of engagements. Until such systems are established it will not be possible to verify the true extent of the impact that directly engaging children and young people in public decision-making is having. And while the current situation persists the Northern Ireland Executive will not be able to fully account for meeting its obligations under Article 12 of the UNCRC nor its duties under Section 751.

However, it is also important to note that a number of departments are actively and enthusiastically engaging with children and young people. Indeed some are developing good participative practice, and this is to be commended.

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1 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to NI, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:
• between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
• between men and women generally;
• between persons with disability and persons without; and
• between persons with dependants and persons without.
In order to further progress the effectiveness of engagement activity across departments, the NI Executive needs to address the following:

1. All government departments need to develop effective systems for engaging children and young people in order to fulfil their duties under the UNCRC and to ensure that they are in a position to accurately report that they are meeting their obligations.

2. OFMDFM should consider the findings of this report in taking forward plans to support departments to establish robust mechanisms for engaging children and young people in public decision making. Particular attention could usefully be paid to recording and analysing their views, evaluating the effectiveness of the process and providing feedback to participants on the outcomes and impact of the engagements.

3. In particular, OFMDFM should ensure that standardised methods for evaluating engagements with children and young people include a clear mechanism for identifying changes that have been made as a result of the engagement.

4. In order to ensure that children and young people are involved in developing the current plans to support departments in relation to engaging children and young people in public decision making, OFMDFM should engage with NICCY before arrangements are finalised.

5. In order to ensure a consistent and coordinated approach both within and across departments, each department should identify someone in a policy role to lead on engaging children and young people. This person should work closely with the Children’s Champion, advise officials on effective methodologies and collate the recording, evaluation and impact of engagements.

6. In order to identify those polices which have most relevance to the lives of children and young people departments should carry out a Child Rights Impact Assessment.
The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was established by legislation in 2003. The key role of the Commissioner is to “safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young persons”.

All of the work of the Commissioner and her staff is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)\(^2\) – an internationally binding treaty which sets out minimum standards for Governments in delivering on children’s rights. The UK Government ratified the UNCRC in 1991 and its provisions also apply to the devolved administrations across the UK.

The UNCRC addresses a range of aspects of children’s lives guaranteeing rights to, for example, health, education, family life, identity, privacy, information and indeed life itself.

Among a host of rights in the Convention is Article 12, which gives children the right to express their views on all matters concerning them. It also states that these views must be given due weight depending on the age and maturity of the child. The United Nations Committee, which periodically examines Governments on the implementation of the Convention, has commented\(^3\) that the involvement of, and consultation with, children must avoid being tokenistic and should aim to achieve a representative range of views\(^4\). The Committee also says that Government must develop a direct relationship with children and young people (not just hear their views through third parties) and ensure the active participation of young people at all levels of decision making\(^5\).

The benefits of directly engaging children and young people have been well established. Apart from the obvious benefit of working within the parameters of international law, policies and services that impact upon children and young people are likely to be more relevant and effective if they are informed by their views and perspectives. Policy makers have a unique opportunity to access information from the very people who experience problems and may be aware of innovative solutions.

A policy has greater potential to effectively address the needs of children and young people, if those needs are identified by children and young people who have daily experience of dealing with the issues the policy is attempting to improve.

Particularly at the pre-consultation stage, engaging with children and young people allows the opportunity to test out ideas and perhaps be alerted to serious, and potentially expensive, flaws that an adult perspective may have failed to identify.

It is also argued that there are benefits for all of society – giving children and young people the experience of contributing, being listened to and respected, and the opportunity to make a difference - will help develop citizenship skills and counter the feelings of alienation, isolation and lack of belonging that can lead to seemingly intractable problems such as rising youth suicide or anti-social behaviour.

The current children and young people’s commissioner has taken a keen interest in ensuring that the NI Executive fulfils its obligations to engage with and actively listen to children and young people.

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\(^3\) General Comment No12 (2009) The Right of the Child to be heard. CRC/C/GC/12 1 July 2009

\(^4\) Ibid paragraph 132

\(^5\) Ibid paragraph 88
To this end she has encouraged a range of activity within her office.

- Convening a Participation Forum which regularly brings together Departmental representatives and staff from child and youth agencies to share information and experience.
- The development of the role of the NYP (composed of over 50 children and young people) to extend beyond advising the Commissioner to undertaking proactive, self-directed projects raising children’s voices on rights issues.
- The production of the Commissioner’s (PPSI). This serves as an outline participation strategy and has been endorsed by 11 of the 12 Government Departments.
- The promotion of good participative practice by statutory authorities through the NICCY Participation Awards competition. Members of the NYP lead this initiative.
- The development of a Children and Young People’s Participation Review questionnaire, which was completed by all Departments, in line with the Commissioner’s duty to monitor NI Executive fulfilment of its child rights undertakings.
- Providing on-going strategic professional advice to Government and Arms Length Bodies in relation to participation.

An internal analysis of the questionnaire data highlighted that while there was some evidence of good participative practice there were also gaps. A number of themes in relation to the shortfalls emerged and were fed back to the departments. NICCY decided that the performance of Departments bore further scrutiny.

This decision was given further impetus by the completion of a NICCY commissioned report examining the barriers to effective government delivery on children’s rights in Northern Ireland.

Dr Bronagh Byrne and Professor Laura Lundy produced a comprehensive analysis of how the NI Executive has been adhering to its commitments to deliver children’s rights. The document provides an excellent overview of Government performance and covers a range of areas including Article 12 obligations to seek and take account of the views of children and young people. In relation to children and young people’s involvement in the consultation processes of targeted strategies, policies and action plans the authors commented:

“An assessment of the extent to which children and young people have indeed been engaged in these processes has been complicated by a lack of clear and available information from government departments in this regard and of concrete evidence wherein children’s views have been taken on board and given due weight in the final strategy, policy or action plan.”

The current study has been commissioned in an attempt to address those gaps.

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6 Barriers to Effective Government Delivery for Children in Northern Ireland, Dr Bronagh Byrne and Professor Laura Lundy, November 2011. NICCY
Purpose

The overall aim of this study is to identify evidence of the impact of direct participation with children and young people in the development of departmental policies, strategies, legislation and services.

Key areas of enquiry on the development of policies, strategies, legislation and services include:

- Do Departments have processes for dealing with input from children and young people? How do they record and use their views? Do they give feedback? Can they provide evidence that the views of children and young people have had an impact / led to change?

- When a process is evident what are the enabling / supportive factors?

- When it is not evident what barriers are in place?

- What examples of good practice can be identified?

Methods

Given the subject matter of this study the starting point was to meet with young people to hear their views and experiences. The researcher initially met with two members of the NYP – one of whom had been involved in the Participation Awards programme and the other who had been working on a campaign concerning the extension of age related legislation on Goods, Facilities and Services to children.

Together, we designed a session to be undertaken with the full membership of the Youth Panel.

This involved explaining the context of the study; asking young people to explore their experiences of being consulted and/or not consulted; and seeking advice from young people about what questions should be asked of departmental officials.

This proved to be a very fruitful exercise; indeed the discussion highlighted a range of advice that the youth panel members would give to decision makers wishing to engage with children and young people. This has developed into a distinct piece of work, which is included in this document (Appendix I).

Having reviewed a range of NICCY documentation (departmental questionnaires / analysis and feedback; Participation Awards applications; reports etc.) the next stage was to conduct semi-structured interviews with the Children’s Champions7 of the 12 government departments.

All Departments responded positively to the request for an interview. Some of the Children’s Champions met the researcher alone but most were accompanied by other departmental officials. In some instances the process prompted the interviewee to gather additional information to forward to the researcher.

This report is a distillation and analysis of those interviews and the information provided.

Findings will be set out under a number of themes.

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7 Children’s champions are senior level departmental officials who are a point of contact, liaison and advice in relation to the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People. They are charged with raising awareness at Departmental level to encourage and ensure children and young people’s interests are fostered and their views sought on policy and strategy issues.
SYSTEMS

Officials were asked what systems they used to: record the views of children and young people: analyse / give weight to their views; evaluate engagements; and feedback outcomes to children and young people. It is fair to say that no department was able to present evidence of undertaking such activity systematically.

As will often be said in this report this does not necessarily mean that such activity is absent, indeed some departments were able to show good practice in some of these areas related to specific engagements. Rather, it is clear that there is no systematic process in relation to these activities, consistently applied, in any department.

In relation to recording the views of children and young people during engagements, in some instances departments relied upon reports being provided by external facilitators, whether officials were present at the engagement or not. Other officials made their own notes. One official noted:

“Recording is much the same as in any consultation – you have to try to understand what’s behind what they’re saying but there’s nothing specific for young people – we wouldn’t want it to be formulaic.”

Where officials do not attend engagements there is a danger in overreliance on third party accounts of children views, some of whom may have their own agenda. As one official pointed out:

“The true voice of the child can be influenced by a facilitator – the conversation may be, even inadvertently, directed.”

This highlights the importance of direct engagement between officials and children and young people as set out by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and referenced in NICCY’s PPSI:

Effective recording of children and young people’s views is a necessary first step in analysing their messages and the implications for a given policy, strategy or service. The process for analysing children and young people’s input was described in similar vein across most departments. Unless the subject of the consultation had very clear relevance to children and young people their views were not analysed or reported on separately from those of adults. The task of the analyst was to:

“Ask what they’re saying, what’s the evidence, what does that mean for the policy? You inform the Minister of passions and feelings but really it’s about identifying issues.”

“There’s an absence of guidance generally in relation to analysis. We publish a summary report. We look at responses and decide if it is accepted/noted or not accepted and explain why. We reflect to the Minister what the public say – he makes the decisions.”

The clear danger here is that children and young people’s perspective, and valuable learning, may be lost entirely. Some officials were aware of this:

“We may consider children and parent’s views together and highlight those – or we may make a point of referencing young people where that’s relevant. If the policy is aimed at children and young people or has a differential impact on them you’d isolate those responses.”
There was little question of assigning particular weight to the views of young respondents. For some this was a question of equity and held the danger of creating an uneven playing field – disadvantaging older respondents.

“It’s subjective to weight one group over another – statisticians say it’s hard to defend.”

One official who is a strong advocate for child and youth participation made an interesting point:

“We don’t use weighting scores but, as with adults, weight might be attached differently to various respondents – organisations, individuals, groups. With young people, if lots are saying the same thing that’s significant – but equally one young person could come up with something brilliant and unique.”

Most departments do not undertake formal evaluation of any stakeholder engagement. One official commented:

“We couldn’t evaluate every time – we don’t do it for adults, it wouldn’t be a level playing field, but maybe with children we need to do more – it could help us be more effective.”

Another felt that it could increase demands on informants:

“There’s no formal evaluation but you would have a chat at the end of focus groups. It’s a challenge to get them to give the time to engage – you can’t ask them to come back and say how it was.”

The problem of course with not undertaking evaluation is that valuable lessons may be lost and ineffective methods may be repeated. Officials have no opportunity to reflect on the experience and make adjustments.

However, the Department of Justice (DoJ) has made some attempt to address this issue. They have produced “A user guide to stakeholder consultation”. While this document encompasses all stakeholders there is some reference to children and young people.
It usefully sets out a step-by-step guide to consultation. Stage 8 is “Review of consultation process”. It poses two questions “Have you evaluated your consultation?” and “How will you consider the ‘Lessons learned’ during the process?” Officials are exhorted to “hold an early wash-up meeting to reflect on lessons learned”. The importance of evaluating whether the consultation made a difference is emphasised.

Routine implementation of such evaluation tools would make a significant contribution to providing evidence of the impact of direct participation with children and young people in the development of departmental policies, strategies, legislation and services.

Some officials regarded the publication on departmental web-sites of documents summarising consultation responses to be an adequate means of feedback to respondents. This may well be true for organisations, professionals and other adults but would be meaningless for children and young people – particularly as their views are often not separated out.

Others felt that those who facilitated engagement with children and young people could keep them apprised of subsequent developments.

“We need to find a way of giving feedback that is manageable. We have had 2,000 responses to a single consultation – you can’t respond in detail, the system would ground to a halt. We can only give a broad-brush response, identifying trends. Could organisations not let the children know where things have got to?”

A key difficulty in failing to give young people feedback about their engagement and how their views have been considered is that they may very well feel they have taken part in a tokenistic exercise and their views have been ignored – even when this is not the case. This can lead to disillusionment and reluctance to engage further.

Some departments have taken the message of the importance of feedback on board. For example, following engagements with looked after children and young people, the Chief Social Services Officer from the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) made a feedback video which was uploaded onto YouTube. In this he gave very detailed information about what he had heard and how the views of young people were reflected in the new Minimum Standards for Children’s Homes.

Importantly he also addressed what issues (e.g. having more trips and holidays) were not being taken on board and other issues that would be addressed by the Health and Social Care Board.

He also took the opportunity to encourage young people to take part in the public consultation and explained the next stages of developing the policy.

This innovative approach ensured that children and young people heard directly from the decision maker, understood that their views had been considered, learned about the impact of their input and had a clear idea of next steps.
ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY

Departments provided evidence of a wide range of engagement activity. They were most likely to engage with children and young people in relation to consultation on a specific strategy or policy document but officials also provided accounts of informal listening, creative ways of involving children and young people, longer-term processes and pre-consultation exercises.

A number of officials mentioned that they sometimes gleaned pertinent and useful information in informal settings.

“Really you can be listening all the time – it doesn’t always have to be about formal meetings or processes.”

Another made the point,

“You can be chatting casually to young people and pick up something they’re not happy about – sometimes you can fix it by having an internal conversation – it doesn’t have to be part of a formal consultation – that impact doesn’t get recorded.”

While one-off meetings to seek children and young people’s views are most common, more extensive creative partnership processes have also been used.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) worked with Youth Action to organise a Youth Unemployment conference. Youth Action held a preparatory one-day event for a wide range of young people who discussed the issues, developed a manifesto and brought the outcomes to the main conference. The young people took on leadership roles, working alongside adult participants and delivering their own workshops at the main event.

Innovative ways to include input from young people who were unable to attend the event included an on-line survey and hosting a series of regional focus groups.

Interestingly this initial engagement has led to the development of a mechanism to ensure the continuing involvement of young people in planning European Social Fund (ESF) provision for young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) – an all too rare example of young people being engaged at implementation stage.

The ESF Managing Authority has agreed to establish a group of young people for on-going stakeholder engagement. Such a mechanism has the potential to ensure that future initiatives are informed by the views of young people and is likely to increase the relevance and effectiveness of work developed to address their needs.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has developed a close working relationship with groups such as Young Farmers Clubs and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. This enables officials to regularly meet young people and invite them to raise issues pertaining to their lives as young people in rural areas. The issues raised, most recently in relation to gender and cross-community concerns, feed into the development of DARD’s Children and Young People’s Action Plan.

In relation to on-going engagement, as part of the DoJ, the Youth Justice Agency has established a Youth Forum at the Juvenile Justice Centre. This allows young residents to have a say in how the centre is run. This initiative emerged following an extensive engagement, facilitated by Include Youth some years ago, to involve young people within the justice system in the design of the new centre.
A number of departments mentioned the importance and usefulness of pre-consultation. Significantly such consultation, undertaken at the very earliest stages of developing policy, strategy and services, was identified as a point at which children and young people’s influence could prove to be most potent.

“When we have been working on a policy for months on end and finally arrive at a draft - we should have most of the bases covered and it’s almost too late to be talking to them. We need to be hearing from them at the very start – when it’s fresh and open.”

One illustration of this relates to the development of new fostering regulations within the DHSSPS. The Department worked with the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) to engage children and young people in a pre-consultation exercise comprising a focus group event and on-line survey. In response to views expressed by young people the department amended one of the proposed regulations. The original intention had been to highlight that the religious background of a foster parent should be given due consideration when arranging placement of a child. Following feedback from the young people the proposed regulation was amended to include additional factors such as racial origin, and cultural and linguistic background.

Direct engagement, involving face-to-face contact between children and young people and decision makers is generally agreed to be the preferred model. It is important that officials hear children and young people’s views for themselves, have an opportunity for dialogue and experience the full impact of such engagement.

Direct engagement is advocated by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, promoted in NICCY’s PPSI and highlighted in the Ask First Standards.

However, some officials advocated the usefulness of indirect methods of consultation. For example the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) wanted to find out about how young people engaged in sport, culture, leisure and the arts. In particular they hoped to identify barriers to involvement in these activities and to focus on disadvantage. To this end they included a series of questions in the Young Persons’ Behaviour and Attitudes Survey 2013. When analysed the results will be communicated to policy personnel within the Department.

Other departments mentioned conducting user satisfaction surveys among children and young people who use a variety of public spaces /facilities. Such exercises are of course worthwhile and represent a useful way collecting large amounts of information. They might best be seen as a useful adjunct to, rather than a substitute for, direct methods of engagement.

**COMMUNICATION AND CO-ORDINATION**

One of the issues highlighted within the departmental interviews was an apparent lack of co-ordination of and communication about engaging children and young people – both within and across departments.

Interviewees were asked if there was a way for officials to share the outcomes and experience of consultations with colleagues, whether any individual had an overview of engagements with children and young people and if there was a way of ensuring that children and young people weren’t being asked the same things.
The majority of departments had no formal way of co-ordinating or communicating about engagements with children and young people, although some mentioned that they might have informal discussions with colleagues.

In the absence of systematic mechanisms for co-ordination and communication there is a danger that valuable learning is lost, work may be duplicated and departments may struggle to give comprehensive accounts of their engagement activity. Indeed, in relation to the latter, it appeared that (except where there was minimal activity) none of the interviewees was aware of all the engagement activity across their department.

Departments are rarely called upon to collate data relating to engaging children and young people. It seems that the NICCY participation questionnaire and this follow-up study has actually generated a fair amount of documentation. The point is, that while such information is not centrally collated and analysed, it is quite possible that departments are providing inadequate accounts of their engagements and may even be selling themselves short in relation to reporting upon their obligations in this area.

In recognising that it may be useful for someone in each department to have a comprehensive overview of engagements with children and young people most interviewees agreed that this would not be a practicable role for the departmental Children’s Champions. Of necessity, the Champions are appointed from among senior officials who already carry a wide range of responsibilities.

They would not have the time to keep abreast of the detail of each consultation exercise.

“As Children’s Champion you’re not there to do – but rather, to encourage and cajole.”

However, it was suggested that Equality Officers in each department might be best placed to take on a co-ordinating, communicating role in relation to engagements. One official felt that:

“Equality Officers know what consultations are going on – they already collect information – they’d just have to add 2 columns about children and young people.”

The Equality Officer within the DoJ has taken on a clear co-ordinating role.

“People contact me at an early stage and get a steer on who and how to consult. I can identify policies impacting on children and young people and co-ordinate engagements e.g. we were able to roll two consultations with similar issues together – it reduces consultation fatigue.”

As noted earlier, the DoJ, has produced a useful guide to stakeholder consultation, they have also established a Criminal Justice Consultative Forum which includes young people’s organisations and aims to:

“support and improve the way in which criminal justice agencies conduct consultation in order to ensure a broad scope of responses leading to inclusive analysis.”

Having a clear focus on engagement, reviewing and discussing issues with invited experts and establishing a central co-ordination and communication role is a useful model to support the development of best practice.
Applying such efforts specifically to engagements with children and young people would go some way to addressing clear deficits in both practice and reporting.

**ROLE OF THE OFFICE OF FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

In responding to the NICCY analysis of departmental questionnaires a number of Ministers referred to the cross cutting nature of the issues raised by the Commissioner and pointed to OFMDFM as having lead responsibility in these areas.

Department officials acknowledge that OFMDFM has a dual role.

“We not only have to do engagement with children and young people we have to support the other departments to do it.”

Since OFMDFM funding of the Participation Network came to an end in December 2012, departments have been unable to avail of centrally funded specialist support in relation to engaging children and young people in public decision making. Almost every interviewee articulated the need for such technical expertise.

A paper detailing future arrangements for supporting departments to deliver on their UNCRC obligations is currently with Ministers and officials have said they planned to have support arrangements in place by April 2014.

Interviewees were asked what support departments needed from OFMDFM. Responses fell broadly into four themes:

- Expertise / guidance
- Central co-ordinating role
- The need for facilitation of engagements

**Caveats**

**Expertise / guidance**

Almost all departments felt that OFMDFM could provide, or finance the provision of, expert support and guidance.

“We need access to expert advice”

“We need help to develop pro-formas, model participation strategies, tools for evaluation, how to record young people’s views – a compendium of good practice.”

“We need a step by step guide, particularly pre-engagement”

“You need something that explains what it is – for new policy officers – what's expected? What help can you get? A dedicated resource selling the benefits.”

“Building up expertise – a repository of good practice – breaking down the fear factor.”

“Contacts and guidance would be helpful.”

“OFMDFM could support us to reach children and young people – to access them.”

“We need guidelines and frameworks – tools and templates.”

“Not necessarily money, but tapping into expertise like the Participation Network.”

“Produce child friendly versions – a central resource paid for by OFMDFM.”
Central co-ordinating role

Some felt that OFMDFM could play a co-ordinating role in relation to information, assessment, standardisation and logistics.

“They need to share best practice. Their role is standardisation – rolling out best practice.”

“They need to provide an overview – a strategic assessment of the needs of young people – so we know where action is needed.”

“They could give more of a lead in finding out the needs of young people - look at issues like employment, education, health, transport etc. in the round – identify the key ones.”

“They could hold information centrally about what consultations are being done – a co-ordinating role.”

“They really should know what is happening in relation to consulting children, across departments, and ensure there is no duplication.”

“Better co-ordination – ensuring departments work together to make it easier for organisations and individuals to respond without adding more bureaucracy or lengthening timescales.”

The need for facilitation

Respondents were most vocal about the need to avail of expert facilitation when engaging children and young people and were anxious to ensure that they would be able to access such support in the future.

“Engagement has to be facilitated by experts – it’s important that we are there leading discussions, being challenged in the room. We need to understand why to do it but not how – we can’t become youth workers – that’s a very particular set of professional skills.”

“Direct engagement is key and we’re missing a valuable part of policy development if we don’t do that. It’s unfortunate that funding for the Participation Network dried up – we still need that level of support.”

“It needs to be facilitated – kids need to be prepared – we don’t have the skills. You can only be there to give more information, keep conversation focussed. I had an experience of young men being intimidating – you need their youth worker to be present.”

“You can’t do it without facilitators – officials can’t do it on their own.”

“If you don’t have it properly organised and supported by people who know what they’re doing it’s a complete waste of time.”

Caveats

While the majority of respondents were clear that OFMDFM had a particular role in relation to supporting the engagement of children and young people, a few sounded a note of caution.

“We wouldn’t want something imposed, some Departments might need a set menu but we would also want to do our own thing.”

“OFMDFM seeks to bring control into the centre – that’s wrong. It’s irritating that they set objectives and ask departments to report. They need to push responsibility back to departments.”
“They need to improve their relationships with departments.”

In delivering on plans to support departments to engage effectively with children and young people, OFMDFM might usefully consider the needs expressed here and give some thought to how they can address potential resistances.

**FACTORS THAT ENABLE EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT**

Where officials felt that engagement had been effective they were asked to identify enabling factors:

**Being present to clarify or answer questions while having the support of expert facilitators** - almost all who responded valued direct engagement and the support provided by youth workers.

**Undertaking pre-consultation** - it was felt that this allowed for early identification of important issues at a point when it was easy to take them on board – enabling more robust policy development from the outset.

**Young people being prepared for the engagement** – this meant that young people understood the issues and were ready to respond in a considered way.

**Good communication within the department** – where colleagues had opportunities to discuss engagements valuable lessons could be carried forward to future work.

**Having ready access to young people through funded organisations** – where a department funded a child or youth organisation they felt they could more easily draw on their support and expertise when the need to engage arose.

**Enthusiasm from officials** – this was based on experience of engaging and enjoying the interaction with children and young people. One official commented “We can get over eager because it’s so good to consult”. Another noted that “Talking in schools to 16-18 year olds was really enjoyable”.

**Having time / opportunities to focus specifically on young people / consultation** – examples of this were an internal departmental group to focus on children established by the Children’s Champion at the DOE (as a result of considering the NICCY questionnaire) and the development of a group focussing on consultation methodologies within the Department of Justice.

**Ministerial leadership** – examples provided of this included the Minister for Justice recording a piece to camera for young people making a personal assurance that he would let them know the outcomes of their engagement. Officials at the Department of Education (DE) and OFMDFM also noted how the enthusiasm of the Minister and Junior Ministers for meeting directly with children and young people helped support a culture of direct engagement within those Departments.

**BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT**

A number of issues raised during the interviews highlighted barriers to effective engagement with children and young people:

**Lack of practical support** - Issues raised here largely mirror those detailed earlier when discussing the expertise and guidance departments wanted from OFMDFM.
Officials are keen to have expert support to plan and deliver engagements, guidelines, templates and examples of best practice.

**Attitudes** – comments highlighting this included “some remain to be convinced of the benefits of talking to children”; “colleagues don’t always see the relevance of policies to children”; “some are resistant – they need training”; “There’s a mind set to overcome to take the views of children and young people seriously”.

Two respondents mentioned that criticism and expectations from the children’s sector were felt as a pressure and that this could act as a barrier to action. For one “If you try to do an engagement you can just be giving them something to have a go at” while the other felt “You get beaten for not doing everything – it’s too big a bite.”

**Processes and procedures** – examples of this included the speed at which legislation from GB can be introduced “you barely have time to consult with colleagues, never mind anyone else”; the fact that people inherit policies half way through; the fact that officials are used to dealing with written responses and are unclear how to record more creative input from young people; the complexity of some processes for developing policy, and the fact that “strategies are of necessity at a very high level and there can be a gap between this and young people’s understanding.”

**Time and workloads** – this pressure was mentioned by almost all respondents and was particularly keenly felt within small policy departments “where there are few resources – everyone has the same statutory responsibility but not the same resources to deliver.”

**Responsibility of arms length bodies** – some departments mentioned that engagement was more likely to be undertaken by their arms length bodies who were more directly connected to delivering public services.

**Fear of disadvantaging adults** – there was some concern expressed that focussing on children and young people or paying particular attention to their views might create an unlevel playing field and inadvertently discriminate against adults.

**EVIDENCE OF IMPACT**

The central task in undertaking this study was to identify concrete evidence that direct engagement between departments and children and young people had an impact on the development of policies, strategies, legislation and services. Disappointingly, very few departments were able to provide such evidence.

It was noted earlier that no department was able to show consistent application of any systematic process in relation to recording the views of children and young people; analysing and weighing those views; evaluating engagements; or providing feedback to children and young people on how their input has been considered.

While this is the case it is not entirely surprising that evidence of impact is in such short supply.

It may well be that children and young people’s input, in relation to their views, experiences or ideas, is being taken on board and is reflected in government policy, strategy, legislation and services. Officials responding to this study and the NICCY’s C&YP’s Participation Review Questionnaire were clearly of the opinion that their work was enhanced through engagement.
Benefits cited included:

- It allows the department to shape policies / strategies in a way that addresses children and young people’s needs.

- Information from young people on their perspective of the service is critical to impact measurement.

- We get an insight into the barriers faced by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Engagement with young people helped us to develop our relationship with the leading representative organisations.

- Following consultation we were able to go back to our business areas and suggest where we could consider further actions to address concerns raised.

- Without the input of young people our plan would have been written in the usual ‘civil service jargon’.

- The input from young people gave a different perspective from adults and groups working with young people – they identified issues no-one else raised.

- Engagement allows for the harnessing of the full range of views and opinions and for the testing of initial assumptions. It also ensures that the policy making process is evidence based and robust and that the policy is well targeted and balanced.

- Hearing young people’s views in an ever-changing social climate has been found to be refreshing and helpful.

- Engagement has led the department to consider different policy options, which in turn has led to the development of better policies.

Many officials pointed to the difficulty of attributing change to the input of specific stakeholders. In some instances officials said they heard the same points being made by children and young people, parents, NICCY and other children’s sector representatives – indeed hearing the same thing from different sources added to the significance they attached to the issues raised.

It is difficult not to have sympathy with such difficulties.

However, obligations under Article 12 of the UNCRC are clear and at present a number of departments are either failing in their duty to deliver on children’s participation rights or, at the very least, are unable to show that they are meeting their Article 12 responsibilities.

A key question is whether we are seeing a failure to deliver or a failure to record? In the absence of further data it is not possible to definitively answer that question. It is worth noting, however, that the most robust evidence of impact through direct engagement provided by a department (in relation to the development of the Road Safety Strategy, described below) is characterised by detailed recording of views, analysis of input and feedback to the young participants.

The following examples show that it is possible for departments to provide evidence of the impact of directly engaging with children and young people in the development of polices, strategies, legislation and services.
Department of the Environment – NI
Road Safety Strategy

This example highlights the importance of having robust processes to record children and young people’s views and to analyse those views separately, in order to both track the impact of engagement and give children and young people detailed feedback on how their views have been considered.

The DoE undertook an extensive consultation during the process of developing a new Road Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland. Supported to design an engagement process by the Participation Network, officials met directly with over 200 children and young people aged between 4 and 20 years old. They also heard the views of a further 800 children and young people through questionnaires distributed by schools.

Officials recorded the children and young people’s views at a series of 12 workshops across Northern Ireland. In order to ensure the accuracy of their records they shared these with the groups concerned.

The input from young people was analysed by officials and presented to the project team. All proposals from the young people were considered and senior officers responsible for delivering on actions subsequently reviewed over 200 action measures arising from these proposals. They agreed 199 measures for inclusion in the final strategy.

Thorough recording and analysis of children and young people’s input allowed officials to track the outcomes of specific ideas and suggestions. This enabled officials to write back to the young people involved and tell them which ideas, originating from their group, had made it into the final strategy and explain why other proposals/suggestions had not been included.

For example, while the use of technology inside cars had not been identified as a key cause of collisions at the time of drafting the strategy, young people alerted officials to the extent to which young people used technology and said they felt this was likely to lead to accidents in future. According to the official who led the engagement process

“This warning influenced us enough to include their concern in paragraph 3.16 of the strategy document under the heading ‘Other issues for consideration’ and in order to address their concerns several action measures intended to reduce the risk of distraction inside cars have been included, two of which explicitly address use of mobile phones – action measures 104 and 105.”

Indeed, the official was able to provide an extensive table detailing the name of the group consulted, the issues raised, the young people’s proposals and specifying where in the strategy their ideas were reflected.

It is worth noting that the impact of hearing and attending to the views of children and young people can have an impact in the much longer term. In this example it may well prove to be the case that the result of effective engagement is a reduction in the loss of lives.

Department of Employment and Learning – Training allowances on European Social Fund programmes

This is an example of a department being influenced by representations initiated by young people.
DEL is responsible for “Pathways to Success” the NI Executive’s strategy for young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

During the development of that strategy young people from the Include Youth “Give and Take” project highlighted the fact that as a scheme funded by the European Social Fund they were not entitled to a training allowance – in contrast to young people on mainstream programmes who did receive such allowances. The young people raised the unfairness of this situation with the DEL committee and with the Minister.

As a direct result of their representations the NI Executive provided additional money to DEL and officials worked with training organisations to determine the most effective way of paying the new allowance.

In his statement to the NI Assembly the DEL Ministers highlighted how the young people’s views had led to the new policy initiative.

“This issue was brought to my attention by young people who were themselves on these programmes. They felt that a training allowance would provide an additional incentive to participate in ESF programmes and that there was a gap in provision given that other young people who enrolled in further education or Training for Success were potentially entitled to an Education Maintenance Allowance. I reflected on these comments and have acted accordingly. I commend these young people for engaging in the development of ‘Pathways to Success’ and this demonstrates that young people can make a difference when it comes to developing government policy.”

Again, consideration of the longer-term impact of the engagement may lead us to find that, as a result, more young people will be motivated to become involved in education, employment and training. This is clearly beneficial for the young people themselves in terms of self-confidence and self-esteem but may also lead to benefits for communities and Northern Ireland as a whole.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety – Fostering regulations

The following example highlights the importance of pre-consultation and how talking to children and young people in advance of finalising consultation documents can provide an early opportunity to respond to their concerns.

As mentioned previously the DHSSPS have recently been developing new regulations on fostering children and young people. The department worked alongside the VOYPIC to hear the views of young people who might be affected by the regulations in advance of finalising the consultation draft. Officials attended an event facilitated by VOYPIC and also had access to the results of an on-line questionnaire about the proposed regulations.

Young people were largely happy with the content of the document but an issue in relation to one particular regulation was raised. This specified that in considering where to place a child the religious background of the potential foster carer should be taken into account.

Young people felt that this placed undue emphasis on religion and that other factors were important.
As a result the regulation was amended to read:

• “In making arrangements for a placement, the responsible authority shall give due consideration to – (a) the religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background of the foster parent and any other members of his household and family.”

The longer term results of incorporating the views of young people in this instance may include having more appropriate and more stable placements – leading to improved outcomes for children and young people.

Department of Justice – Autism: a guide for criminal justice professionals

This is another example of how engagement at the pre-consultation stage can be an effective stimulus for action.

Officials from the DoJ attended pre-consultation meetings, hosted by the DHSSPS, in relation to the development of the Cross Departmental Autism Strategy and Action Plan. During these engagements a young man gave an account of an experience he had had with the police whereby a straightforward incident escalated to the point where he had been arrested. The young man explained that the officers did not understand that his apparently blunt style of communication and seeming unwillingness to co-operate were characteristics of his autism. He felt that there should be a guide about autism for the PSNI.

As a result of this the DoJ worked in partnership with the National Autistic Society to produce information about autism, designed specifically for professionals in the criminal justice system. The guide sets out the characteristics of autism, why it is important to recognise that a person may have autism and how to approach and question them. It is illustrated throughout with real life case studies about the experience of people with autism in the criminal justice system and quotations from people with autism.

In the longer term children and young people with autism who come into contact with the justice system should find those services more aware of, and hence more responsive to, their needs.

Department of Education – individual service user

The following example illustrates how consultation processes, which give young people access to officials, can provide children and young people with opportunities for self-advocacy.

As part of a review of Special Educational Needs, officials met with groups of young people with a variety of disabilities.

During one consultation a young person raised a number of concerns regarding the level of support / provision she was receiving in school, which was the responsibility of the local Education and Library Board (ELB).

Following the meeting officials, with the permission of the young person and her parents, approached the Education and Library Board to raise the concerns highlighted by the young person. This resulted in immediate action being taken by the Board and the school to make improvements to the level of provision being provided to the young person.
OTHER EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

As mentioned at the outset, while departments struggled to provide evidence of systematic and consistent approaches to engagement many were nonetheless able to provide examples of a range of good practice. Some of these have been mentioned throughout the text. The following table draws together a number of examples of activity within departments that others could usefully draw upon in developing sound engagement practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of engagement</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>DHSSPS</td>
<td>The Chief Social Services Officer made a feedback video – in this he described what he had heard during consultations on minimum standards in children’s homes, set out what ideas had been taken on board or not and outlined the next steps in consultation. The video was uploaded onto YouTube.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoE</td>
<td></td>
<td>The team developing the new marine plan produced a newsletter – to let children and young people they had engaged with in schools know the outcomes of their input and the progress of the plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFMdFM</td>
<td></td>
<td>The First Minister and Deputy First Minister sent a letter of thanks - to young people brought together to feed into the design of the United Youth Programme – the feedback analysis will be circulated to all participants via live link.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoJ</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Minister for Justice made a video - encouraging children and young people to get involved in research on their legal needs and giving a personal undertaking that he would keep them informed of outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>OFMdFM</td>
<td>An evaluation of workshops about the design of the United Youth Programme was undertaken – participants were asked to evaluate their overall experience of the day, format and content – this was subsequently analysed through an overall online evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-going engagement</td>
<td>DEL</td>
<td>A stakeholder group of young people has been established – to plan European Social Fund provision for NEETs young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of engagement</td>
<td>Department</td>
<td>Activity</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>DARD</td>
<td><strong>Production of a Departmental Action Plan</strong> - and engagements with children and young people to review/renew.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>On-going work to produce Departmental Engagement Strategy</strong> – if supported to completion would provide a useful template for other Departments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoJ</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Production of a guide to consultation</strong> – comprehensive resource, while generalist includes specific reference to children and young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support structures</td>
<td>DoE</td>
<td><strong>Children’s Champion led working group</strong> - with representatives from all divisions focussed on work impacting on children and young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoJ</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consultative Forum</strong> – multi agency, includes young people’s organisation – maintains focus on best practice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
This study set out to build on previous work undertaken by NICCY, in particular the recent Departmental Participation Review questionnaires. In relation to the main task of providing evidence of the impact of direct participation of children and young people in the development of departmental policies, strategies, legislation and services – the results are clearly disappointing.

What is less clear is determining the explanation for this lack of concrete evidence. Interviews with officials revealed an absence of robust systems for recording, analysing, evaluating and providing feedback to children and young people on the outcomes of, engagements.

Until such systems are established it will not be possible to verify the true extent of the impact that directly engaging children and young people in public decision-making is having. And while the current situation persists the NI Executive will not be able to fully account for meeting its obligations under Article 12 of the UNCRC nor its duties under Section 758.

However, it is also important to note that a number of departments are actively and enthusiastically engaging with children and young people. Indeed some are developing good participative practice, and this is to be commended.

It was notable in conducting the interviews for this study, that it was often the departments who have made most progress and who showed most ambition who were the most self-critical and aware of their shortcomings. It was also clear that those with most experience were most vociferous in articulating the need for expert support – particularly in relation to facilitation of engagements. They wanted to do more engagement but they wanted it to be even more effective. Such enthusiasm and appreciation of the process from many of the officials was heartening.

It is clear that some departments are undertaking very little engagement with children and young people. Reasons given for this included engagement being seen as more relevant to arms length bodies, the majority of policies not being relevant to children and young people, lack of internal resources and a lack of senior level commitment.

The key question is how can this situation be improved? This is clearly a question for OFMDFM to address.

OFMDFM has central responsibility for supporting departments to effectively engage children and young people in public decision-making. They are keenly aware of their role.

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8 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to NI, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:
- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- between men and women generally;
- between persons with disability and persons without; and
- between persons with dependants and persons without.
It is unfortunate that a series of personnel changes within the department has resulted in a time-lag of, to date, 16 months between the ending of funding to the Participation Network and the creation of an alternative mechanism for supporting departments to develop effective engagement processes. The implementation of plans to address this deficit must be undertaken as a matter of urgency.

In fairness to OFMDFM they do seem to have clear plans for re-establishing a focus on engagement, hopefully they will soon be supported to put those plans into action. NICCY has commendably put a great deal of emphasis on child and youth engagement. In many ways they have shown considerable patience at the slow pace of change within government here. The lack of evidence of impact will be disappointing.

In many ways NICCY’s role is a difficult one. The organisation is charged with safeguarding and promoting the rights of children and young people here, this includes having a ‘watchdog’ role in relation to government compliance with the UNCRC. Where NICCY believes the government to be in breech of its UNCRC obligations, it has a clear duty to challenge.

At the same time NICCY has the role of providing advice and guidance. The difficulty arises when those being offered advice are also being vigorously challenged – it can make for very difficult relationships.

It goes without saying that in circumstances where NICCY becomes aware of a serious breech of children’s rights the issue must be pursued to the full extent of its powers.

In less serious situations the Commissioner must decide between offering the support of guidance and advice and the need to call government to account. There is clearly a balance to be reached in order to arrive at the most effective course of action to bring about change - and this may not always be easy.

It is interesting to note that the very act of looking into government performance in relation to engagement has already brought about change.

The DoE group focussed on children and young people was established in response to the Departmental Participation Review questionnaires. One department at the end of the interview for this study asked for a copy of the interview schedule as it raised issues they wanted to explore further to improve their practice. A number of departments mentioned that the process had raised their awareness and led to the collation of information that was previously unavailable.
In order to further progress the effectiveness of engagement activity across departments, the NI Executive needs to address the following:

1. All government departments need to develop effective systems for engaging children and young people in order to fulfil their duties under the UNCRC and to ensure that they are in a position to accurately report that they are meeting their obligations.

2. The Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister should consider the findings of this report in taking forward plans to support Departments to establish robust mechanisms for engaging children and young people in public decision making. Particular attention could usefully be paid to recording and analysing their views, evaluating the effectiveness of the process and providing feedback to participants on the outcomes and impact of the engagements.

3. In particular the OFMDFM should ensure that standardised methods for evaluating engagements with children and young people include a clear mechanism for identifying changes that have been made as a result of the engagement.

4. In order to ensure that children and young people are involved in developing the current plans to support departments in relation to engaging children and young people in public decision making, OFMDFM should engage with NICCY before arrangements are finalised.

5. In order to ensure a consistent and coordinated approach both within and across departments, each department should identify someone in a policy role to lead on engaging children and young people. This person should work closely with the Children’s Champion, advise officials on effective methodologies and collate the recording, evaluation and impact of engagements.

6. In order to identify those polices which have most relevance to the lives of children and young people departments should carry out a Child Rights Impact Assessment.
Getting Started – There are a number of things you need to think about before you get started.

1) Get young people involved at an early stage in planning:
   • If possible get young people involved from the planning stage of consultation. We know best how you can talk to us.
   • A last minute, tokenistic effort is never going to produce good results.
   • Have young people / easy read versions of materials ready when you launch the consultation – more adults might get involved if you give them this too.

2) Plan how the information will be used:
   • Be realistic about how our opinions will be used and don’t give false expectations.
   • Make sure our views will be interpreted back in to a language that policy makers will understand and that our feedback gets to the right people.

3) Plan to talk to the right people:
   • Make sure the groups you talk to represent a whole range of young people (different areas, backgrounds, race, etc.) if it is something that will affect all young people.
   • If you are making a decision about a specific group of young people make sure they are involved in the process, even if they are a more difficult to reach group.

4) Keep young people involved along the process:
   • It might be useful to have a steering group of young people to advise you along the way.

5) Plan the follow up:
   • Make sure you feed back to participants to let them know how you have used the information they provided in decisions made.
   • Don’t patronise – young people understand that they can’t have everything they want, but they want to know how decisions are arrived at and that their views have been considered properly.
   • Plan your evaluation of the process with the young people so you can learn for next time.
Getting people engaged - Young people can make a really useful contribution to planning and decision making. Make sure you do everything you can to get them involved

1) Make sure young people can get to you to take part:
   • Hold meetings at a suitable venue which is easily accessible for young people (e.g. schools, youth clubs, FE colleges, leisure centres).
   • Make sure meetings take place at a time which suits young people – 11am on a Tuesday morning may be handy for civil servants but we are likely to be at school.
   • There should be no extra cost for people to get to meetings.
   • If you are using online tools make sure they are accessible for everyone.

2) Think about some of the barriers which might prevent young people taking part:
   • Think about the kinds of things which might prevent you getting information from the people you need to – language, capacity, free-time, fear. If in doubt ask someone who is already in contact with these young people to help you.
   • Make sure young people don’t feel humiliated or intimidated by you.

3) Make it interesting:
   • Send people who are genuinely interested in young people’s views.
   • Meetings don’t need to be formal. You can get just as much information from a more fun, informal way of working.
   • A bit of free food is a good incentive and always make it easier for people to think.
   • Talk normally, don’t be patronising.
   • Tailor to your audience. Again, if you don’t know how to do this, ask someone who does.
   • Share your ideas to show interest – show you’ve been thinking about it yourself.
   • Take people seriously and make notes on what you hear.
   • Ask useful questions to help get the information you need.
   • Make sure your audience understands what you are talking about and that it is explained clearly.
Next Steps – It doesn’t end once you have spoken to young people. The next steps are just as, if not MORE important.

1) Make sure the information gets to the right people in your organisation:
   - If it needs to be translated back into policy language then find someone who can interpret properly.
   - Use the information when making decisions.

2) Feed back to those you have consulted:
   - There is nothing worse that the feeling of being asked your opinion only for it to be completely ignored.
   - Respond to concerns brought up.
   - Tell young people how you used the information they gave you in reaching the final conclusion.
   - Make sure you send information to those involved – feedback directly or through partner organisations, not just on your website.

3) Evaluate what you did:
   - Consider how effectively you sought young people’s views and how this information was used.
   - Is there anything you need to do within your organisation to make this easier in future? (e.g. Staff training, planning more time in to consultation timelines, getting supporting organisations involved)
   - THERE IS ALWAYS ROOM TO IMPROVE!
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