

Thank you Sarah.

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen and Junior Ministers. My name is Sorcha Hughes and I, along with my other panel member Wayne Chang, are going to be discussing the future for children and young people in school, society and in terms of panels such as these.

We believe that these issues talked about already today are vital to the evolution of children's rights and happiness in our modern world, because without the discussion of these issues, children would be left without a voice, and not happy with the world that they are living in.

We all have a vision of what we want the world to be in the next few years. If you asked any young person this question, the first thing they would say would probably be better smart phones, faster cars and less homework!

But if you asked them to **REALLY** think about what they wanted life for them to be like in the future, they would ask for better rights, for people to listen to what they have to say regarding their life outcomes and how they are perceived by society, and most of all, they would ask for a voice. I am here to be a voice as a representative of almost 25% of the population¹ to tell you all here today, what the future should look like for children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of a Child, or the UNCRC, states that a child who is capable of forming his or her own views, should have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting that child.

But this isn't happening enough. At my time in NICCY so far, I have heard stories from my peers on the Youth Panel about being asked to leave shops, to leave their belongings outside the shop they want to enter making them a very easy target for theft. They are being followed around shops by security guards; asked to move on from shopping centres and street corners. Now, I am very happy to say that this hasn't happened to me in the town that I live in, but maybe that's a matter of chance rather than design.

Unfortunately, the type of behaviour just mentioned is likely to continue if the Goods, Facilities and Services anti-discrimination legislation proposed by OFMdfM goes through excluding children and young people under 18 years.

Or being more positive, 'this type of behaviour will reduce when everyone is included in the Goods, Facilities and Services anti-discrimination legislation proposed by OFMdfM'.

When my partner, Wayne Chang and I were exploring ideas as to what to say at this event, the very first thing we wrote down was, respect.

¹ Census of Population for Northern Ireland, 2011

And I don't know about you but I find it awful that we even had to write down that word, because respect is fundamental to how we should all treat each other. Article 13 of the UNCRC states that a child can express themselves in any way, be it through art, orally, or through written word.

We show and gain respect by how we interact with others; by engaging with others like I'm doing with you right now. I think this is what Article 13 is all about – providing an avenue so that children and young people can gain the understanding and respect of others. And this is exactly what Wayne and I meant when we wrote down 'respect' but we had to write it down because we have experienced, at some time, the exact opposite of what this article proposed – that we have not had the opportunity to express ourselves.

Not only do we want some things to change, we also want some things to stay the way they are! Things like this - the NICCY youth panel. If it wasn't for this panel then I am sure that some, if not most of us, wouldn't be aware of the number of rights we have that aren't being delivered upon, and also discovered rights that we didn't even know we had! And most importantly, we wouldn't be able to help make a difference to the lives and rights of other children and young people.

There are, however, several initiatives for children and young people that could drastically improve their rights and social perception. For example, a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly that young people would be able to use as an avenue for their voice to be heard at Stormont. This would be a great thing because it would show the world just how important our voices are and how capable children and young people are in understanding and explaining their needs; how they can make themselves heard, using powerful language, drama, music, or any other medium that they choose.

I think that that a unique and intelligent thing about children and young people is that they can be heard and understood using many forms of communication. I also believe that skilful and versatile use of social media is going to be key in the forthcoming campaign for the introduction of Children's Rights Legislation in Northern Ireland. I know Wayne will touch on this again shortly.

We all know that most children and young people spend most of the working day in school. This is why we need the Education Minister to follow through with his earlier commitment to ensure that school councils or some form of student representation are in every school and that they will be supported and provided with good resources.

This will not only help maintain and provide for the existing school councils, but also help other pupils become more motivated and interested in their futures and the futures of their peers. I say "futures of their peers" because school councils rely on the interconnection of the people within them and around them. Without support, a group of motivated students or adults who are all focused on a common goal, will find it difficult to achieve anything of significance to children and young people.

This is why I view support of school councils and student representation as vital to the growth of a respectful society, one that nourishes and protects young people and aids them in their creation of a better world for themselves.

And this is why I support the Education's Minister's statement promoting NICCY's Democra-School Programme and declaring that his department is preparing a Departmental Circular that will provide further guidance for Principals and Boards of Governors on how to encourage pupil participation in decision making in schools and to identify ways to ensure the pupil voice is heard. The circular will include information and guidelines on best practice to help schools identify the method and degree of participation that will best suit the needs of their pupils. This is to be welcomed!

Finally, as someone who does many activities outside my formal school environment, I believe that the Youth Service should not be used as a 'second school', where the main focus is attainment. The youth service should keep its focus on the personal social and life skills development of young people, helping them prepare for living in the outside world, independently.

Children can benefit from Youth Service in a way that accredit us, but also helps them develop as active members of society, so we can fulfil our aspirations for our futures. We need to be teaching young people what they are entitled to and giving them all the tools they need to be aware of themselves and how they are being treated in society. If they aren't aware of this, then they won't know when or how to stand up for themselves. It is my opinion that we need to use the education of children and young people to help them better their OWN future.

As Nelson Mandela said "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"

But all of these hopes and aspirations are juxtaposed with the lack of recognition of the contribution that children and young people make and the general negative stereotyping that young people as a group have to face.

We see the future as a place where everyone knows who we are and what we need to flourish and reach our potential. I'm sure that every single person here today is willing to work with us, and all young people throughout Northern Ireland, to help us achieve successful and fulfilling lives.

Thank you and I'll hand you over Wayne.

Thank you.