NEETS Consultation
Department for Employment and Learning
Room 307 Adelaide House
39/49 Adelaide St
BELFAST BT2 8FD

30 June 2011

Re: Pathways to Success: Establishing an initial broad strategic direction and supporting cross-Departmental actions to reduce the number of young people most at risk of remaining outside education, employment or training (NEET)

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT
NICCY welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. In doing so, the Commissioner acknowledges the Department’s efforts to address the complex range of issues affecting the very significant numbers of young people who are NEET. Having reviewed the proposals outlining the Department’s strategic focus, NICCY has identified a number of concerns and recommendations. These are outlined below.

The Commissioner has been monitoring the issue of young people not in education, employment or training for some time and has expressed her concerns about this issue on a number of occasions, most recently in written and oral submissions to the NI Assembly Employment and Learning Committee Inquiry and through NICCY’s ‘Make it Right’ Campaign in the January Policy Briefing;
http://www.niccy.org/uploaded_docs/Making%20It%20Right/Poverty20policy.pdf

The content of our written submission to the Employment and Learning Committee’s inquiry into Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training is relevant to the current consultation and can be accessed here;
http://www.niccy.org/article.aspx?menuid=7652. Our comments concerning this consultation reiterate some of the issues raised in our submission to the Inquiry.

NICCY also commissioned research into the rights and entitlements of 16 and 17 year olds with regard to services relating to the access and enjoyment of housing, benefits and earnings with specific reference to young people not in education, employment and training.
This research was undertaken by the Northern Ireland Anti-poverty Network (NIAPN) and a report was published in 2010: 

The findings emerging from this study are relevant to the Department's proposals and NICCY recommends these are considered as part of its work in developing a strategic direction.

KEY ISSUES

1. Special Protections for under 18s and specific groups under 21
In considering the issue of young people not in education, employment or training, NICCY would draw attention to the fact that young people aged under 18 years are still recognised as children and as such, should be afforded special protections. In addition, where young people have a disability or are care experienced, such protections should be extended to them, up to the age of 21.

2. Involvement of Young People in developing a Strategic Approach
NICCY is concerned that too little reference is made in the consultation document, to involving young people who are NEET, in the development of strategic proposals. Young people who are NEET should always be at the centre of the issues and they should have the opportunity to comment on and contribute to all decisions affecting them. The various research and information gathering proposals outlined in Sections A and B should, as far as possible, involve young people who are, are at risk of becoming or have been categorised as NEET. Where appropriate, NICCY strongly advocates that young people aged 16-24 years be consulted so that their experiences at different stages can be documented and used to inform decisions regarding prevention and intervention measures. Consideration should also be given to consulting with young adults aged over 25 years who were categorised as NEET. Their experiences may provide valuable insights into continuing gaps as well as opportunities in services and provision.

3. Need for accurate statistics for Young People who are NEET
More recent statistics on young people who are NEET were released for the period January to March 2011. These indicate that Northern Ireland compares unfavourably with the UK average. The Labour Force Survey (Quarter 1, 2011) reveals that 19,000 16-19 year olds, that is 19% of this age group in Northern Ireland were categorised as NEET, compared to 13.8% for the UK. In the 16-24 age range, 20.7% of this group (47,000) were NEET in Northern Ireland, compared with a UK figure of 18%. While acknowledging the Department's point regarding the limitations of the Labour Force Survey figures, an analysis of the statistics, particularly for 16-19 year olds indicates a worrying upward trend. NICCY would strongly endorse the Department's intention to develop a more precise form of measurement, which will not only record
baseline information but also accurately track young people’s experiences after they leave school.

4. Contribution of the voluntary and community sectors
NICCY is disappointed that more detailed reference is not made to the valuable work which is being undertaken by agencies within the voluntary and community sectors in seeking to address the needs of young people who are NEET. The provision offered by agencies within these sectors may cover areas such as essential skills, career guidance, specialised training and tailored interventions. NICCY believes it is vital that the knowledge and expertise of professionals working in this capacity is shared and built upon. This in turn will contribute to a more detailed evidence base and highlight examples of good practice. In developing a strategic approach it will be extremely important that the principles of ‘collaboration’, ‘interdependence’, ‘sharing’ and ‘coordination’ envisaged throughout the document, fully involve all agencies and organisations.

5. Inclusion of marginalised young people in the proposed strategic approach
The consultation document notes that young people included in this category are not a homogenous group. It goes on (4.6) to list ‘major risk categories’ of young people. It is vital that the specific needs of these different groups of young people who are NEET are clearly identified and appropriate interventions are devised to ensure their needs are effectively and comprehensively met. In addition to the list provided at 4.6, NICCY strongly urges the Department to consider the specific needs of all young people who may be marginalised and isolated, and either at risk of becoming NEET or already categorised as NEET. Where young people have been categorised as NEET for a prolonged period of time, there are concerns that this can have a potentially very negative impact and may be linked to suicide amongst the 16-24 age group. The Department should take account of these serious concerns. The needs of marginalised groups of young people should clearly be addressed through a discrete ‘suggestion’ (listed in 5.4) and also considered where appropriate, through the proposed suggestions. These will include young people who are;

- from a Traveller background;
- from a minority ethnic background;
- living in a rural setting;
- depressed or have low self-esteem;
- care experienced;
- homeless

or have;
- a disability
- had negative educational experiences
- been within the juvenile justice system
• experienced economic disadvantage
• abused alcohol or drugs.

6. Relevant Research, Studies and Issues
In progressing its work to address young people who are NEET, NICCY strongly suggests that the Department should take account of the following key studies, inquiries and issues:
• Outcomes of the ‘Working Group on Educational Underachievement and the Protestant Working Class’;
• The Report from the NI Assembly Education Committee Inquiry into ‘Successful Post-primary Schools serving Disadvantaged Communities’;
• The effect of poverty on primary school aged children and the impact this has on young people’s motivation to learn and their career aspirations, particularly in their teenage years;
• The Childcare Strategy. This should be considered when examining the provisions affecting young people.

7. Clarification of the Strategic Approach
The consultation document outlines key existing and new actions for each of the Government Departments involved, under three headings of Information, Intervention and Prevention. Each of these sections in the document then lists a wide range of initiatives and activities which are planned or in progress. If the ‘initial broad strategic direction’ is to be effectively developed into a workable and effective strategy, NICCY suggests that much greater clarity is required regarding the co-ordination of work under each heading. For example, under ‘Information’, eight different pieces of research or information gathering are considered, proposed or in progress. This is without taking account of other relevant research/information which should also be reviewed (see above). If valuable research and information is to be considered within the strategic approach, NICCY believes it is important that the Steering and Implementation Group (SIG) considers how this will be co-ordinated, managed and disseminated between different Government departments, voluntary and community sectors and other key stakeholders.

The SIG will also have to consider how information can be used to shape and influence intervention and prevention initiatives. NICCY suggests that the SIG may wish to consider appointing a co-ordinator or sub-group to monitor and manage research findings and information and to consider how these can influence intervention and prevention initiatives. A plethora of discrete and embedded activities are listed under ‘Intervention’. NICCY would strongly recommend that careful consideration is given to how the SIG will monitor the outcomes of these, ensure co-ordination across initiatives (and indeed Government departments) and evaluate how intervention measures link with information and prevention actions.
8. Funding

The consultation document comments on the financial resources already allocated to activities which 'are relevant to' young people who are NEET. From the information provided, NICCY would suggest it will be challenging to track and monitor the impact of financial investment on reducing the number of young people who are NEET. Whilst recognising the difficult financial climate, NICCY would strongly support the Department's proposal (2.32) to secure discrete funds to tackle this issue. NICCY would suggest that the allocation of existing funds should be undertaken in such a way that ensures Government departments work together to effectively pool resources so that the proposed strategy will be effective in the long term.