

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE – TAKING PART COUNTS!

In the absence of government having a specific policy on how children and young people should be involved in having a say in decisions that affect their lives the Commissioner submitted advice to government and undertook a series of initiatives.

One of the first participation initiatives on a strategic level was the development of our work on school councils.

As a key part of children's lives is their experience in education, both Nigel Williams and Patricia Lewsley-Mooney have worked to develop participation throughout school life.

NICCY developed [Democra-School](#) and worked with pupils themselves to develop school councils and other structures for participation in school to make sure that pupils would have a voice.

Democra-School is designed to support and encourage the development of meaningful school councils and the practice of democracy in the school environment. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children and young people should have a say in decisions that affect their lives. Experience from schools in Northern Ireland, England and further afield shows that a school council that is supported and nurtured helps and improves many aspects of school life.

A Democra-School guidance pack was developed with the co-operation and involvement of teachers, pupils, and key officials at board and department level. The Democra-School guidance pack contains practical advice on how to set-up, or improve, a school council. Every school in Northern Ireland received a copy of the pack.

NICCY's innovative programme to improve pupils' say in the day-to-day life of schools received ministerial endorsement when their guidance pack was launched in Lisburn in May 2007 and was placed on the Department of Education's website as a valuable resource for schools.

During the ongoing outworking of the Democra- School programme a number of noteworthy developments occurred:

- NICCY received the support of all min teaching unions in calling for the development of school policy.
- Following the Commissioner's intervention in a case of pupils at Ballyclare High School who had been disciplined for refusing to have their hair cut to the length approved by the school rules, Mr. Justice Weatherup referred specifically to Article 12 of the UNCRC.
- In his published judgment he said: "Such a code [school uniform policy] must be a living instrument and there must be in place appropriate mechanisms for change and for engaging the voice of the pupil and engaging all the other properly interested voices. The School Council is the vehicle through which these issues should be addressed.
- At least 11 DENI policies / circulars reference School Councils

As part of the programme, NICCY is also called on the Education Minister to adopt Democra-School as policy in Northern Ireland which he did at a conference in the spring of 2013 when he made a public commitment to establish a policy on school councils.

The Department's (DE) school improvement policy recognises the importance of a greater focus on engagement within schools, particularly with pupils. However, DE does not wish to be prescriptive about the approach but rather wants to encourage all schools to find meaningful ways of giving pupils a voice and of listening and responding to the views of pupils.

The DE website contains information on school councils, which are one mechanism by which effective pupil participation can be achieved, and links to the Democra-School programme designed by NICCY.

Positively, DE announced (Nov '13) that they are currently preparing a 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.

NICCY welcomes this development and will follow up with the Minister to seek further details on how he proposes to monitor future levels of pupil participation.

We've been building on our work to raise awareness and encourage Government and others to participate with and involve children and young people in their work. Evidence shows that the outcomes are better and services more successful if the opinions of the person are affected by policy and practices are taken into account.

Therefore, to encourage and support Government to incorporate participation in all relevant aspects of their work the Commissioner developed a Participation Policy Statement of Intent. This provided government departments with a structure they could use to develop their own specific work.

Out of 12 government departments, 11 have signed up to the Participation Policy Statement of Intent. An additional (at the time of writing) 23 public agencies, including 9 local councils, 4 health and social care trusts, and 2 education boards, have made this public commitment to the participation of children and young people in decision-making.

Although progress has been made, NICCY realise that we have a long way to go before participation with children and young people is mainstreamed and common practice.

While aware of the work of a variety with external organisations it was also clear to NICCY that while there may not have been strategic or departmental level participation policy, there was significant work being undertaken throughout government departments and the agencies that reported to them.

Having cognisance of our duty to monitor the performance of our government departments and to help establish baselines of participation with children and young people, NICCY circulated a Children and Young People's Participation Review Questionnaire to all Government departments

This Participation Review Questionnaire has been completed and returned by all government departments, including the one department which did not endorse the Participation Policy Statement of Intent.

Initial analysis of the questionnaire responses highlighted both positive practice and areas where there were gaps in good participative practice. Whilst all departments reported that there was engagement between department officials and young people, and that this

engagement had influenced the development of policy, there was commonality in gaps within all departments, e.g. on policy development, impact evaluation and terms of reference for Children's Champions.

For NICCY, the next stage is commission research to evidence the impact of direct participation with children and young people in the development of departmental policies / strategies / legislation.

Through the Participation Review Questionnaires, feedback from government departments indicates that consultation with children and young people has had a direct impact on the development of policies / strategies / legislation. This research aims to dig deeper into this feedback and identify:-

- What processes, in policy/strategic and legislative development, are used to track what information from c&yp is actually used and how is this evidence recorded, what methods are used, how c&yp receive feedback, etc.;
- When a process is evident, what enablers are in place to make it happen e.g. training / specific role descriptors;
- When it is not evident, what barriers are in place?
- Positive examples of good practice

The Review of Public Administration, the realignment of Council boundaries and subsequent development of the Local Government Bill provides a unique opportunity for the Northern Ireland Executive to enhance children and young people's participation.

NICCY are engaging with the Environment Committee and are recommending that the Committee includes:

1. a specific requirement for the council to appoint a committee of young people resident within the council area to advise on matters affecting children and young people, including on community planning issues. Several councils currently have such committees, commonly referred to as Youth Councils. Such a reference would make sure councils include young people's views in an advisory capacity, in the first instance.

2. that a council and its community planning partners must seek the participation of and encourage children and young people to express their views and ensure that their views are taken into account in connection with:
 - a. Community planning
 - b. The production of a community plan for the district; and
 - c. The review of community plans.

The above, if included in the final legislation will make sure the Bill reaches out to local communities, and reaches out to and involves children and young people.

In recognising good practice in engaging with c&yp, staff worked with the NICCY Youth Panel (NYP) - who led on all aspects of the process - to develop the [Commissioner's Participation Awards](#).

The awards aim to support government departments in not only working towards this, but to identify good practice already in place by departments and their agencies.

Through our Participation Awards, a group of eight young people from our Youth Panel were involved in developing criteria for successful participation with children and young people by Public Bodies in two categories:

1. Putting young people at the forefront; and
2. Creating space for young people in decision making.

The panel was involved at all stages of the project, from designing the application process to scoring applicants. Recipients and government ministers were invited to attend an event to showcase and celebrate examples of good practice in participation to encourage others.

“Our involvement in this project has been recognised by the Chief Executive and we can see there is an important role to engage with young people who are one of our main demographics to target and listen to.” **Translink – Gold Award Winner ‘Putting Young People at the Forefront’**

The work of the Awards Panel has been very significant in this process. They developed expertise both in theories of participation and by looking at case studies of successful projects.

“The event and its content have helped to provide input to thinking on how best to promote and encourage effective engagement of children and young people in the policy process. Within the region, there is now a better understanding of the rationale for the engagement of children and young people in the policy process. There is however a continuing need to ensure policy officials know how to do this. The Participation Awards showed what can be achieved.” **OFMDFM Children and Young People’s Unit Spokesperson**

Five Government Ministers, who attended the awards ceremony made public commitments to advance work on participation;

NICCY’s initial education and training programme focused on raising awareness of NICCY, its duties and the children’s rights, mainly through engaging with school and youth clubs / organisations and in the first 6 years of NICCY, over 25,000 c&yp participate in this programme.

However, in a strategic change of direction, the education and training programme began to focus on a ‘train the trainers’ model and targeted professions, i.e. those within education & teaching, health & social care and legal ‘community’.

Our objective through this ‘education and capacity building’ work is that professions will use their learning and experience to embed rights within the ethos of their workplace. Current areas of work within the programme include:

- A peer training the trainer programme at St Mary’s College, Belfast
- A Masters in Education Module in children’s rights delivered in partnership with St Mary’s College
- UNCRC training within Stranmillis College
- A training programme was also delivered this year to the University of Ulster’s Youth & Community Work Course and a positive evaluation will enable further development and increased tailored programmes linking policy to practice.
- Developing work with health & social care professionals, providing link between children rights theory and practice.

In 2008, the Commissioner established a Participation Forum, made up of representatives of NGOs and statutory bodies with a vested interest in the participation of Children and Young People in today’s society.

The Forum aims to provide support and information to the Commissioner from a range of experts in the field of participation, assisting her in promoting the participation of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

The Forum membership comprises Government Departmental Children's Champions or their representative, and representatives of NGOs and other statutory bodies. This is a unique forum where statutory and voluntary agencies can discuss relevant interests and concerns and exchange information, ideas and experiences.

The Participation Forum meets on a biannual basis.

NICCY often works in partnership with other organisations to explore models to improve engagement with c&yp. One example of this saw the team complete an innovative pilot project to support the development of Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Youth Independent Advisory Groups (YIAG).

The aims of YIAGs were to help young people explain to the Police Service the problems and issues they face when dealing with the police and help shape local policing plans. The project was evaluated and [recommendations](#) delivered to the PSNI to encourage development, resourcing and mainstreaming across the whole of the PSNI within each District Command Unit.

The recommendations now form part of the PSNI's Policy directive on Children and Young People.

Subsequently, the Policing Board of Northern Ireland thematic report on children and young people made the same recommendation to the PSNI to expand YIAGs to each District Command Unit. The PSNI has accepted this recommendation.

On an International stage, NICCY have played key role by sitting on an advisory group in recent developments emanating from the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers who have adopted the 'Recommendation to member states on participation of children and young people under the age of 18'.

NICCY is encouraged by the Recommendation as it supplements the current 10 year Children's Strategy and government's commitment to living in a society that respects children's rights.