

HAVING THEIR SAY

In 2003 it was clear that the voice of children and young people was not being heard in the public domain, despite the right of children, under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights to the Child to have their say in decisions that affect their lives.

Additionally, the Commissioner has a duty to hear the voice of children and young people in her work. Therefore it has been a key priority since 2003 that children and young people are listened to and have a say in decisions that affect their lives.

Both Commissioners and their staff have met with more than 40,000 children and young people in 10 years; they have engaged with them, heard what is important in their lives and in return the children and young people have contributed to and helped shape NICCY's work.

As part of that engagement the NICCY Youth Panel (NYP) has provided direct input to the Commissioner's work over the past 10 years, as well as leading on activities to make sure their voices were heard at the highest level of Government.

From the start, the first Children's Commissioner Nigel Williams decided to work with the panel of young people who were involved in his appointment. This panel had been created by the Children and Young People Unit of the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

The panel of 12-18 year old young people played a significant role in making sure that our plans matched the needs of children and young people including helping create the criteria that led to our move to Millennium House in Belfast's Great Victoria Street. The panel told us they wanted a location close to public transport links, with access directly from the street, finished to create a welcoming environment and with specific spaces for children and young people including multimedia features and a 'chill-out' area. After the lengthy process we identified Millennium House as our best option and began work on January 5th 2004 to fit out the building.

Also, from the design of our original web site through to the initial recruitment of senior staff, the panel was involved.

This engagement with the NYP has continued throughout the last 10 years including delivering a number of campaigns and initiatives; accompanying the Commissioner to visit Ministers; co-presenting with the Commissioner at presentation and events, and supporting the ongoing work of the Commission.

NYP campaigning

Some of the most effective work of the panel have been involved in has been around campaign initiatives.

Young People's views were vital in campaigns such as the [Young Consumers research](#) and report, when the Youth Panel undertook a role as field researchers.

Feedback to the Commissioner from young people indicated that they, and their peers, felt they were often treated negatively in shops. Members of the NICCY Youth Panel also confirmed this to be their experience.

It was decided to conduct a NYP peer-led survey on the issue of 'young consumers' in order to find out a bit more about how positive or negative young people's experiences were in shops across Northern Ireland.

After interviewing a total of 455 young people and 95 adults, the key messages coming out of the research include:-

- The general feeling amongst both the adults and young people who took part in this project is that shop staff treat young people more negatively than adults.
- Shops are perceived to be:
 - More suspicious of young shoppers.
 - Less respectful to young shoppers.
 - Particularly unwelcoming to groups of young people.
- Particular ways in which young people and adults feel shop staff act less favourably towards young people are:
 - Treating them with less respect when not accompanied by an adult.
 - Having rules that apply only to young people (e.g. wearing hoodies or baseball caps; limiting numbers in the store).
 - Serving adults first, irrespective of who was next in line.
 - Acting in a more suspicious manner towards young shoppers.

The most common perception, amongst both young people and adults, as to why shops treat young people less favourably than adults is the existence of 'negative stereotypical attitudes towards young people' and a belief that most young people are 'up to no good' or 'out to cause trouble'.

At the time, Carol Edwards, Head of Education at the Consumer Council said: "More pocket money and part time jobs give young people huge spending power. Young People's money is as good as anyone else's and forward thinking businesses should value and embrace this shopping generation."

Panel members also challenged media perception of young people and appeared on television and radio news shows to make sure children and young people's issues were delivered into homes across Northern Ireland. This included a ['We Want The Airwaves'](#) campaign that saw members highlight children's rights on several media outlets.

The 'We Want the Airwaves' initiative coincides with the 20th anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a list of 42 promises Government has made to young people.

In partnership with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and Young National Children's Bureau (NCB) NI, young people youth panel members and other young people took over some of the country's most popular TV and radio shows next week to talk about the issues which affect them everyday.

Young people will worked with broadcasters to interview politicians and highlight their concerns around issues such as, mental health, play and leisure and how young people are perceived in their local communities and by the media. They were young reporters for UTV Live, interviewed politicians for BBC Talkback, discussed mental health on Feile FM and put Marc Mallet through his paces for UTV's Seven Thirty Show and were interview by Frank Mitchell on U105 and Carolyn Stewart on U105.

The NYP have led an ongoing campaign against the negative stereotyping of children and young people called ['Disable the Label'](#)

This initiative was set up to try to help with the issue of negative stereotyping. Stereotyping is seen as a huge problem to children and young people today. The youth panel believes media are sometimes responsible for shaping people's opinions and think that by getting

the media to publish realistic pictures of young people today will help to improve stereotyping.

Work on this included:

Held meetings to establish the campaign and have drafted an action plan.

Promoted our campaign at [key events around Northern Ireland](#)

- Created new and innovative ways to help people understand what stereotyping is including using merchandise to highlight the issues:
 - *Fortune Cookies* containing a question related to stereotyping for people to answer on the website to give the initiative group an insight on the views of others about stereotyping
 - *Wristbands* were distributed to people at different events. They gave an opportunity for people to inform others about the project when they are asked what the wristband is for.
 - *USB sticks* uploaded with a campaign pack were distributed to a number of people. They gave information on how to start your own campaign and it is also great resource for teachers for lesson plans.
- Met with key politicians to take the fight for negative stereotyping to them.
- Created a campaign pack to help anyone who wants to help people get involved you can [download the campaigners pack here](#).
- Created [a video to publicise the campaign so far](#).
- [Don't Label Me](#) research into coverage of c&yp in Northern Ireland's main daily papers were, in 24 news articles about young people aged 11 to 18 years old, they found that almost three quarters portrayed young people in a negative light.

The youth panel's work on the negative stereotyping has been recognised by the UK government by referencing it in the UK State Party draft (at the time of writing) report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013).

Currently, the Youth Panel has been campaigning on the issue of including under 18s on anti age discrimination legislation on the provision of [goods facilities and services](#) (GFS).

NICCY and the youth panel are very concerned, based on information coming from the Assembly, that children and young people under the age of 18 may not be covered by the proposed changes to the law.

The panel have been publicising an online petition through Facebook, twitter, at youth events, using a QR code and through local media outlets. The panel have planned to

deliver the petition to government to make sure they don't exclude young people from this important legislation.

NYP and promoting children and young people rights

The youth panel works is not based solely on campaigning. They also have a key role in promoting children's rights to their peers, adults and decision makers.

Three panel members gave evidence to the 'Good Childhood Inquiry 2012' which was commissioned by The Children's Society and launched in September 2006 as the UK's first independent national inquiry into childhood. Its aims were to renew society's understanding of modern childhood and to inform, improve and inspire all our relationships with children.

The inquiry panel wanted to investigate which life elements make a "good childhood" in the UK and the panel, in partnership with the Scottish Children's Commissioner's Youth Panel, were asked to speak on the topic of mental health. Together they made an hour-long presentation to display to the panel and their input was recognised in the final report which was published as a book – 'A Good Childhood: Searching for values in a competitive age'.

As NICCY is a member of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), the opportunity came up for 3 members youth panel travelled to Paris with the Commissioner in September 2009 to deliver a workshop on children's rights at ENOC's Annual Conference.

The conference focused on "the Best Interest of the Child" and it was the first time that children and young people had been invited to attend.

The panel developed a workshop exploring the differences between an adult's view of rights compared to children and young people's experiences. This was done in an interactive way where each participant was asked to look at the world through a child's eyes.

Representatives from more than 15 different countries took part in the workshop and were given a glimpse of life from a child's point of view.

The Commissioner and the three youth panel members were keen for the representatives at ENOC to hear directly about experiences of children's rights in Northern Ireland and share the knowledge gained with children and young people where they live.

The involvement of young people at the conference encouraged ENOC to develop the ENOC Network of Youth Advisors (ENYA) where the NICCY youth panel participated. The NYP in fact drafted the E-Forum Code of Conduct that is used by ENYA and has since been utilised by other European initiatives.

Through ENYA, members of our youth panel discussed online and at a conference in Strasbourg, key children's rights issues with other European young people.

In general, NICCY's Youth Panel is a sounding board and focal point for a range of activities including:

- peer research;
- sitting on research steering groups;
- participation in project planning;
- being part of NICCY's ethics;
- meeting Government Ministers;
- attended party political conferences to make sure Ministers, MLAs, councillors and others heard the voice of young people directly.
- advising on child friendliness of publications;
- and importantly, developing their own skills and awareness.

The NYP also played a pivotal role in recruiting staff at NICCY - receiving training, sitting on interview panels and having an equal voice in the selection process.

Working with other young people to have their say

Working with the youth panel is not the sole focus of NICCY direct engagement with children and young people. Where possible, the commissioner and her staff will work closely with other young people and their youth organisations to promote their voice.

On 2007's Universal Day of the Child and supported by the Commissioner, Patricia Lewsley, 108 young people packed the steps of Parliament Buildings to demand a say in the decisions that affect their lives. The young people marched on Parliament Building on November 20th to deliver their call for a Youth Assembly.

As the young people occupied the steps to Parliament Buildings Junior Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive, Ian Paisley Jnr and Gerry Kelly joined the young people to hear their messages.

Representatives from all the major political parties also met the young people. Since the 108 campaign Assembly Commission and the Speaker of the Assembly created a youth panel which directed the work and laid the foundations of the NI Youth Assembly. NICCY are currently monitoring the implementation of Youth Assembly by the Assembly Commission.

Throughout the summer of 2009 young people were showing and telling NICCY about the things or lack of things there are to do across Northern Ireland as part of an online campaign to highlight the issue of play and leisure.

Entitled '[Here we are...Nowhere?](#)', the campaign is helped decision-makers find out about the views of young people on play and leisure.

The campaign was launched at a special concert in Belfast's Oh Yeah! Music Centre with young people invited to hear three local music acts. International rock band 'The Answer' also made a personal appearance to support the campaign.

Almost 90 videos and photographs were posted directly to NICCY's website and also appear on www.youtube.com/niccyplay

The videos and photographs were shown at a major conference in October to an audience of local, national and international representatives.

The Commissioner has a statutory duty to hold government to account in delivering change in the most critical areas and through the [Make It Right campaign](#), produced twelve briefings with clear calls for change, to improve children's lives. The importance of engaging and communicating these issues with children was also recognised together with the understanding that children should not just be passive recipients but should be encouraged to take action in support of NICCY's calls for change. The Make it Right Campaign was launched in January 2010 to raise awareness of these twelve key areas and to celebrate the signing of the Convention.

Gathering young people's views on the work of government was the key focus of the Make It Right campaign, which saw schoolchildren, college students and other young people bring their issues directly to government ministers.

Throughout the Make it Right Campaign, over 2000 children have taken action to Make it Right and NICCY has accumulated hundreds of messages from the children and young people who have taken part in the MIR workshops. In addition, since April, 'ACT NOW' Make it Right feedback postcards have been distributed at events, including Pride and MELA where children and young people have written messages to Government and posted them back to us. The evidence is also in its hundreds.

As part of the Make it Right (MIR) Campaign the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) made a promise to the children and young people and the organisations who work with them, to deliver their messages and concerns about issues that affect them, to Government and key decision makers.

On **Tuesday 7th December 2010** all these messages and evidence from children and young people's campaigns were hand delivered to Government up at Stormont. It was an evening of thanks and celebration and included a host of activities created by the children and young people who have been involved in Making It Right.

The 'Make it Right' campaign encouraged children and young people to contact Government, develop their own campaigns and help make sure that the issues that affect children day-to-day are listened to and valued by decision-makers and to make sure that the promises of the UNCRC are delivered.

NICCY and Children and young people want Government to:

1. **Listen** to children and young people's messages, concerns and positive contributions on matters that affect them.
2. **Value** the views and messages delivered to them from children and young people on issues that affect them and recognise their involvement to help 'Make it Right'.
3. **Act** and take steps to drive policies forward that safeguard and protect the rights of children and young people.

As a result of this engagement with children and young people, the Commissioner's own work has been informed by children and young people and ensured that young people's voices have been heard in key discussions on policy, for example on school councils, the transfer to post-primary education and a government consultation on 'shared education'.

Also, media outlets, ranging from television, radio and print publications have included the views of young people through the NICCY Youth Panel on a range of topics including negative stereotyping, school transport and nature of reporting of young people in the media

And finally, as evidenced by the Commissioner's Participation Awards and endorsements of NICCY's Participation Statement of Intent, children and young people's views are increasingly being listened to by government.