

Thank you Marcella.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone at NICCY for giving me the opportunity to speak to you all today as we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the establishment of NICCY.

My name is Megan O’Kane and I was a member of the NICCY Youth Panel for 4 years between 2006 and 2010. Being a member of the NICCY Youth Panel was easily one of the best things that I have ever done.

Before I joined the panel, I was quite shy and I often felt reluctant to express my views and opinions in fear that they would seem “stupid.” Little did I know that within a few months I would be a regular speaker at Stormont about issues that ranged from child poverty to school councils.

I first heard about the opportunity to join the NICCY Youth Panel when I was volunteering at my local youth centre in Bangor. I didn’t know much about the work of NICCY, so I didn’t know what to expect before my first meeting.

The more I learnt about children’s rights, the more passionate I became about them and making sure that in Northern Ireland, all children and young people have effectively safeguarded rights.

When I look back on my time at NICCY, I feel incredibly lucky to have been part of an organization that makes such an impact on the lives of children and young people on a daily basis.

The skills I learnt as a panel member helped me to gain my part-time job as a youth worker and also enabled me to get a place at the University of York, where I studied Applied Social Science. After I graduated in July of this year, I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to come back to NICCY to gain some work experience.

When I was thinking about writing this speech and how to explain why children’s rights are so important, I came across this quote that I would like to share with you from Children’s Rights International, which really does sum up the way that I view children’s rights.

*“Children’s rights are about treating children with the equality, respect and dignity to which they are entitled, not because they are the “adults of tomorrow”, but because they are human beings today”.*

Every child and young person has rights, no matter who they are or where they live. 193 countries across the world have signed and ratified the principles of the UNCRC, so why do children’s rights continue to be violated?

Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to have a say in decisions which affect them. Too often adults make decisions on a young person's behalf because it is what THEY think is in the best interest of the child, without consulting the young person themselves. All young people deserve to have the opportunity to explore their full potential and to be protected as they do so.

In the future I would like to see a Northern Ireland where children and young people's rights are recognized and respected by everyone. That includes the government, public services and even parents. I believe that if children's rights are respected on an international level, children and their options will be able to climb up the political agenda. This way they will be able to be active citizens in a democratic society.

During my four years on the NICCY Youth Panel, I was involved in more projects, focus groups and campaigns than I can remember.

Today I am going to share some of these with you.

The projects I have chosen are the ones that I feel had the greatest impact on my knowledge of children's rights and my own personal development. In 2008, myself and another member of the panel travelled to London to give evidence to the Good Childhood Enquiry about issues surrounding young people's mental health. We collaborated with SCCYP's Youth Panel, our Scottish equivalent.

The skills I learnt during this experience were plentiful. Our team working skills were immediately put to the test as we had to construct a presentation with a group of young people we had never met before in a very short space of time. We also improved our communication and public speaking skills, as we had to deliver our presentation to a group of professionals.

Thankfully our presentation went really well and as a result, our names were published in the Good Childhood Enquiry report.

The second experience I will be sharing with you was my trip to Paris in 2009. Myself and two other youth panel members accompanied the Commissioner to Paris to participate in the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children Conference or ENOC for short.

We were the first young people to facilitate a workshop in the history of the ENOC's Annual Conferences. Our presentation was based around children's rights and the context of the workshop was that children had taken over the world and they had to decide which rights adults should have.

Our main objective was to put the Ombudspersons into the shoes of a young person, so that they could experience what it felt like to have their rights taken away. The workshop required a lot of preparation, such as coming into the office after school and on weekends.

Our time-management skills were challenged, in addition to our presentation and communication skills. This conference was a great opportunity for us as we got to meet Children's Commissioners from across Europe and learn about the state of children's rights in their countries.

I remember that we were all really nervous during the build-up to our workshop, but we held some practice runs with the NICCY staff to build our confidence. As well as all of the personal development factors from this experience, it was also a chance for us to learn more about French culture and see the sights, an opportunity which we may not have found elsewhere.

Finally, in my last year as a panel member I was involved in a campaign called "We Want the Airwaves." This was a joint project between NICCY, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and the Young National Children's Bureau. We became young reporters for UTV Live, interviewing politicians for BBC Talkback, discussing mental health on Feile FM and putting Marc Mallet through his paces for UTV's Seven Thirty Show.

We were given extensive media training whilst taking part in this campaign. We have been able to take the interview skills we learnt into later life, for example when applying for jobs and universities. I enjoyed taking part in this campaign because it enabled us to meet with young people with similar interests from other organizations, try to shine a positive light on the young people of Northern Ireland and ensure that the good things they do get as much coverage in the media as the negative ones.

It was also great fun to watch Ministers squirm when we asked them questions that they didn't want to answer!

Some other projects and tasks I was involved in included interviewing new staff, making promotional videos for NICCY, representing NICCY at political party conferences and meeting with government Ministers to discuss children's rights issues.

However, being a member of the NICCY Youth Panel was not all work and no play. During my time on the panel, I was able to build friendships with young people from different backgrounds who lived all across Northern Ireland. Working with such a diverse group of young people really challenged my perceptions of issues and helped me to form opinions on topics which I previously did not believe affected me. I am still friends with many of the people I met on the NICCY Youth Panel today.

Some of my favourite memories from my time at NICCY are from our residencies at The Share Centre. Occasionally we had the opportunity to go on weekend residencies and during our breaks from NICCY work, we took part in outdoor activities such as bouldering, banana boating and rock climbing.

Then in the evenings we had theme nights. One that always stands out for me is when we went to the Share Centre over Halloween weekend and had a fancy-dress party. The whole panel plus, staff dressed up and we had a brilliant time getting to know each other.

This made our team working during work time, even better.

I remember that one of my favourite things about NICCY was how welcoming the office environment was and how friendly the staff were.

The staff members at NICCY were genuinely interested in what you had to say, and our opinions never felt tokenistic. Staff were always on hand to help if we needed any guidance or support and I think I speak for all of the youth panel members from my cohort by saying that there were definitely times when we would have been lost without them.

As part of my work experience at NICCY, I have been able to work with the new youth panel and it's really great to see their passion for children's rights and their enthusiasm to get involved and make a difference. I'm sure that the NICCY Youth Panel will go from strength to strength as the years go by.

I will always grateful for the experiences and opportunities I was given at NICCY and would not hesitate to say that they have really helped me to get to where I am today.

Thank you.