



YOUR VOICE MATTERS.... Because You Matter

**Fieldwork Report
December 2015**

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1.0 Introduction

In March 2015, the Commissioner Koulla Yiasouma came into post. She took time to listen to the views of a range of stakeholders and this led to the identification of four priority areas of work, that have potential to make a real difference to the lives of all our children and young people over the next four years. These are:

- Educational Inequalities;
- Child Poverty/impact of austerity;
- Children and young people's Mental Health;
- UNCRC's General Measures of Implementation.

At the end of June 2015, the Commissioner launched her 'Your Voice Matters... Because You Matter' programme. This was a Northern Ireland wide engagement programme, or conversation, to hear directly from young people themselves.

Aims

The key aims of the programme were to:

1. Raise awareness of children's rights;
2. To inform and build capacity of children and young people about NICCY's priority areas;
3. To hear the voice of children and young people on NICCY's priority areas;
4. To identify additional (emerging) issues facing children and young people; and
5. To hear the voice of children and young people on suggestions (format; speakers; audience, etc.) about an event to celebrate Universal Children's Day¹.

What we found

We engaged with 31 groups and over 350 young people aged between 8-21yrs, including NICCY's Youth Panel (NYP) receiving feedback about our choice of priority areas, on issues affecting children and young people.

Also, during the roll out of the project, and as we met more children and young people,

¹ Universal Children's Day, 20th November: The day the UN General adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, in 1959, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in 1989:

www.un.org/en/events/childrenday/

other key issues were also raised. One which came to the fore could be categorised under the heading of ‘community safety’, ranging from the influence of paramilitaries to community sectarianism and how this impacts the lives of children and young people.

The feedback we received around organising an event to explore the ‘Your Voice Matters’ feedback, in the week that marks and coincides with Universal Children’s Day was really pivotal. We learned that it should centre on children and young people sharing their experiences and exploring what they, as young people, can do to raise awareness of the different issues. We have listened and developed the event, alongside our youth panel, to be youth led and youth focused (see below).

This event is only the start of the conversation between the Commissioner, children and young people and the decision makers, as the event will include discussion on ‘what happens next’, e.g. young people led - calls to action.

2.0 Methodology

All of the engagement with children and young people was done face to face. A workshop was developed to give the engagement structure and consistency, whilst allowing for flexibility depending on numbers of young people and the time available for discussion.

Workshops began with a series of statements on general measures of implementation of the UNCRC, which young people were asked if they agreed or disagreed with. Feedback was also captured on these responses. Following on from this an open discussion was held on NICCY’s priorities; participants were given a short introduction to key concerns NICCY had about Mental Health, Educational Inequalities and Poverty. Young people’s feedback on this and other concerns they had about each topic were recorded. Following this, participants were asked if there was anything else the Commissioner should be aware of and finally asked how they would like to continue to engage with NICCY, including at the Your Voice Matters event.

The NYP was involved in the development of this project. They were involved in developing the content of the workshop with Participation staff and piloting the workshop. Two placement students, one of which was a NYP member, also had a key role to correlate feedback from children and young people, in preparation for this report.

3.0 Participant breakdown

A key aim of the programme was to hear from young people from a diverse range of contexts and identities; across and from different geographical, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, information about the Your Voice Matters engagement was widely circulated via:

- NICCY's e-zine, Facebook and Twitter;
- Youthnet's E-Pipe;
- Contact within the Education Authority's regions;
- The children and young people NGO sector; and
- Schools.

We were aware of the specific need to engage with marginalised young people so a particular effort was made to target those organisations that engaged with more vulnerable young people.

The initial target was to deliver 25 workshops. Between mid-July and early October 2015, the Participation Staff facilitated workshops with 31 groups of children and young people.

The following is a breakdown of the young people that participated in the Your Voice Matters consultation programme:

1. Age Range:

- 8-21 yrs

2. Background:

- Primary School: 17
- Post Primary: 24
- Further Education College: 43
- General youth groups: 121
- Specialist youth groups: 145

3. Geographical spread:

- Mid - Antrim and North Coast area: 98
- Belfast and Greater Belfast: 160
- Down: 14

- Mid-Ulster: 20
- West and North West: 58

4. (Perceived) Community Breakdown:

- Protestant Communities: 76
- Catholic Communities: 71
- Mixed and Other Communities: 203

4.0 Key findings – On the Priorities

The workshops explored, through structured questions and open discussion, the thoughts, experiences and opinions of young people on each of the priority areas; and on any other issues that they felt were important to them. They also provide opportunity for participants to help us plan the format for the event to mark Universal Children’s Day. This report represents a summary of that feedback.

4.1 UNCRC’s general measures of implementation:

The UK Government is expected to do all it can to implement the UNCRC - to make sure all law, policy and decisions which impact on children comply with their human rights. There are different ways of making sure laws and policies comply with the UNCRC: legal measures, which mean that decisions can be challenged in court; and non-legal measures, such as collecting and analysing information about whether children enjoy their rights and making sure that the rights under the UNCRC are widely known and understood by children, adults and public bodies.

In 2008, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child called on the UK Government to take further action to ensure that there are adequate structures and mechanisms in place to make sure children’s rights are taken into account when the government and other public bodies are making decisions. These include:

- Incorporating the UNCRC rights into UK domestic law;
- Co-ordinating implementation of the UNCRC throughout government and different local authorities;
- Ensuring the Children’s Commissioners are independent of government and have the necessary resources to carry out their roles;

- Strengthening efforts to ensure that the UNCRC is widely known and understood;
- Ensuring systematic training on children’s rights for all professionals working with children;
- Promoting, facilitating and implementing the principle of respect for the views of the child, including by supporting forums for children’s participation.

In the context of the Your Voice Matters programme, a series of questions were asked to ascertain young people’s knowledge of the UNCRC, adult’s knowledge of children’s rights; awareness of NICCY and the Commissioner and how easy it is to access services.

A summary of feedback is below:

i. Do you know about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and what is in it?

66% of young people hadn’t heard of the UNCRC or were sure if they had. For those who had a clear understanding most were involved in youth projects such as youth councils and youth organisations that are based on the principles of the UNCRC.

“I was taught it in school but did not really understand it”

“I knew there were rights but not exactly what they were.”

ii. Do you know who the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People is and what her job is?

75% of young people didn’t know who the Commissioner is or what her job was. A few had heard of the Commissioner through school however those who had the clearest understanding of the Commissioner and the role of NICCY knew this from meeting her or another NICCY staff member.

“I vaguely remember the teacher telling us something about this in school but it was a boring session.”

“Yeah I know Koulla – she is the Commissioner. Her job is to talk a lot and represent children and young people in Northern Ireland about their rights.”

iii. Can children and young people in Northern Ireland access all of their rights?

Lack of awareness is a major barrier to children and young people accessing their rights. Young people identified the following as being difficult to access rights: young carers; mental health support; education (particularly Alternative Education Provision); care provision; having a say; policing; LGBT; issues; bullying.

“Technically yes but young people don’t know they have the rights so cant access them.”

“Young people don’t know NICCY exists so don’t know how to get help to access their rights.”

“I don’t really know what to do or how to complain if you don’t get your rights.”

iv. Do children and young people receive good quality education on the UNCRC?

Children’s rights education should be taught both inside and outside schools using non-formal education methods. Young people also thought it was important to communicate to a wide audience of young people about their rights using different media (TV, internet, posters, adverts, etc.). Those who felt they had received a good education about their rights had done so as part of a course such as child or social care.

“We did about other people’s rights in LLW. Like gay rights, disability and refugees. But now our own rights”

“They should teach it inside and outside schools but do activities, not just talk to you about it.”

v. Do adults know about and respect children’s rights?

Most felt that parents and people working with children (particularly youth workers) respected their rights but many felt that in general, adults don’t respect young people. The most negative interactions with adults were with Police, shop workers, on public transport. Some felt that all parents (including foster parents) should know more about the UNCRC and it may be useful to do an awareness raising campaign such as leaflets through doors.

“Adults talk to you disrespectfully if you’re not an adult. Like on trains and shops and things.”

“It depends on who the adult is – parents do, some teachers do but then people in general society don’t.”

vi. Do you think that young people can have a say in decisions that affect them?

There was a feeling that this increased with age, particularly for those over 16. There were varied experiences of school councils and some negative experience of social workers asking views.

“It comes with age. I always felt my opinion wasn’t necessary when I was growing up”

“We can’t vote.”

“Adults ask us because they have to at times and they don’t explain why they are not listening and there is no recourse if they don’t listen – they just blame it on higher authorities.”

vii. Have you been treated badly in a shop or public place because of your age?

Almost 75% of young people had experienced poor treatment in a shop or other public place.

“Some young people steal and some don’t steal. It’s the same with adults – some steal and some don’t steal – but only young people get followed round shops all the time.”

“There’s a bouncer at my local [fast food restaurant] – you get put out as soon as your finished eating and they’re always watching to make sure you don’t take too long. Sometimes you don’t even get in.”

“Even when you work in a shop or cafe some adults come in and assume you don’t know what you’re doing because you’re young.”

viii. Are under 18s discriminated against?

The majority of participants felt that young people are discriminated against or

negatively stereotyped. There were particular problems for children in care. There was a feeling that the media doesn't help as negative stereotyping makes adults wary of young people. The issue of lower rates of pay for younger people was also raised as a form of discrimination.

"There's a general disrespect for young people."

"It's good to be involved with [youth projects] that give you a voice."

ix. Is it easy for people under 18 to access all the public services they need?

There were varied responses but generally negative experiences in health (including mental health); housing, education, transport and benefits. Also mentioned was the lack of privacy when seeing doctors, i.e., having to go with or get permission from parents.

"You always have to go through your parents. Especially in health things. Under 16s need more privacy."

"It's difficult to get mental health services if you are younger."

x. Should the proposed Anti-age discrimination law only include people from 16 years and older?

85% of young people feedback that the new law should cover all people and that children and young people should be included.

"It should apply to everyone – just because we are kids doesn't mean we shouldn't be protected"

"I don't see the logic in age discrimination law that mentions an age limit."

4.2 Children and Young People's Mental Health

The topic of young people's mental health was introduced by setting the current situation in context. Some key facts were shared, i.e.:

- Children and young people in Northern Ireland suffer disproportionately high rates of mental ill health than their UK counterparts.
- Over 20% of children under 18 years of age suffer significant mental health problems and this comprises the commonest form of severe disability in childhood.

- In Northern Ireland in 2013/14, only 7.8% of the mental health expenditure was allocated to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), despite the fact that children and young people under 18 represent nearly a quarter of Northern Ireland's population
- NI experiences higher rates of youth suicide amongst children and young people than other parts of the UK. Comparative statistics from the Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland in 2014 show that rates of suicide in NI are 4 times higher than England and Wales for 15-19 yr olds and 17 times more for 10-14 yr olds.

Feedback from the young people is as follows:

i. Adequate training for those working with young people:

- A high number of participants said that teachers should be more experienced with the subject of mental health to know how to deal with people appropriately and how to refer them for further support.

“More training is needed for the teachers so they can assist a student if they are having a problem or need someone to talk to.”

“Teachers should be better trained to do personal development or get someone to help.”

- A number of young people said that teachers should be given a tool kit including a calming tool and methods for dealing with stress.

ii. Importance of Early Intervention:

- Young people recognised the importance of early intervention and keeping healthy minds but felt that all too often this was not the focus of teaching or training they received about mental health or it wasn't carried out very effectively.

“Investment is needed in early intervention such as advertising and raising awareness.”

“Early intervention is needed to save money on cost of giving people drugs.”

iii. Awareness of services among young people:

- Many young people were not aware of voluntary services, such as the SOS bus, NIAMH and PIPS. They feel these voluntary services should be better advertised so young people are aware of what services are available.

- A small number talked about the Mind Your Head campaign but felt that while this was good it was important to keep up advertising and awareness to remind people.

iv. Service provision:

- There was a perception among most people interviewed that there was not adequate service provision for young people's mental health.
- Young people found that counselling services had long waiting lists; a number had been told they would have to wait 6 months to access a counselling service.

"They shouldn't have waiting lists, how can you make people wait for this?"

- The quality of counselling services provided was also called in to question. Young people had varied experiences with counsellors, including in school counsellors, and felt that there weren't any alternatives if you didn't feel it was helping.
- The Child and Adolescent In-Patient Unit at Beechcroft came up a couple of times throughout the study. There were varied experiences of quality of care.

v. Stigma of having mental health issues:

- Stigma was a prominent subject in the discussions. Young people felt a lot of stigma is attached to mental health. There was a feeling that lack of awareness about the causes of mental health problems led to embarrassment and people hiding their concerns.
- Some felt that the issue was taboo in some schools and that teachers needed to lead the way to break down stigma.

"Some schools don't want to discuss mental health"

"The teachers think that if you start talking about suicide and stuff then everybody is going to start doing it"

- Many students said that the 'box' method for school counselling² is not a good idea because it makes the counselling process less confidential.

"There's box in the middle of the room, we all had to put our names in it – it's supposed to be anonymous but they call your name out."

² Where students have to fill out their details and put a card in a box if they need counselling or support

“The secretary comes round and calls you out of class and everyone knows you’re going for counselling”

“You’re handed a yellow slip when you have to go for counselling, everyone knows that means you have anxiety issues.”

vi. Prevalence of suicide and self-harming:

- Suicide also was a prominent subject that came up. Suicides in the North Belfast area were raised with young people from the area feeling that it was still a major problem even though it had “calmed down” from the rate it was at before.

“Suicide at a young age is becoming a bigger issue because of the popularity people get after they die”³

- Some young people felt that the mental health education they received was too skewed towards suicide prevention and not enough about early intervention and keeping minds healthy.
- It also appeared that self-harm is an issue as some young people felt this is becoming a trend.

4.3 Educational Inequalities

The group discussion was based upon the following key points:

- Northern Ireland has unacceptable levels of educational inequalities and gaps which need to be closed. It is well documented that our poorest and most disadvantaged children and young people are fairing the worst.
- The challenges facing children with special educational needs accessing services and support have been well documented and include delays in the assessment of children’s needs, and inadequate numbers of educational psychologists.
- The UN Committee on the rights of the child has highlighted the need to address the segregated education system in Northern Ireland as well as academic selection which can act as an instrument that allow issues like poverty to dictate the school that children go to.
- Is the current system of a number of different education bodies too expensive?

³ Such as memorial pages on Facebook etc.

- Should decisions regarding the further planning and development of shared education be informed by the views and experiences of those who will be most directly impacted, i.e. children and young people?

Feedback from the groups is highlighted below:

i. Negative impact of the transfer test:

- The 11+ or transfer tests were mentioned a lot of times throughout the study. Many felt that these should not be required.

“Get rid of 11+ and all entry tests as they cause too much pressure.”

- Young people feel that grammar and secondary schools teach the same things so there shouldn't be a division.

“We learn the same things in grammar and secondary schools so there should be no difference.”

“Some people get better exam results in high schools than in grammar schools so there shouldn't be the idea that grammar is better.”

- Young people felt that higher academic achievers are focused on more by teachers and get more attention compared to students that didn't have such academic success.

“In school higher bands get more attention, lower bands hardly get taught and get no homework.”

ii. Impact of social inequalities on education:

- Particular groups of young people felt that depending where you live or what area you come from limits your educational outcomes.

“Where you live limits you.”

“Not all schools in different areas have the same opportunities.”

- There is not enough funding on education initiatives in certain communities where this happens there are lower outcomes, than in other areas.

“Some areas should be prioritized for funding to raise achievements.”

iii. Dealing with bullying:

- Some young people felt that bullying is not addressed properly in schools, this then links to anxiety and depression.
- A number of young people had experienced bullying in the past and no one felt that the school did enough to stop it.
- Some felt that it was important to try and prevent bullying by making sure that teachers didn't treat students differently and were positive about young people from different backgrounds, gender orientation, sexuality or race.
- Bullying was usually not confined to the school grounds or the school hours but continued outside the classroom through social media or texting.

“Even if the school does something they can only do what they see. It's not as bad as it used to be with the online stuff that other people can see but you can still get bullied through private messages or texts and then the school can't do anything cause if you tell you'll just get more hassle.”

“All children should do classes about bullying so they understand the effects more.”

iv. Inadequate support for children and young people with special educational needs:

- Dyslexia came up a few times in the study. People felt that there is no support for further education if you have dyslexia or other special educational needs. It was felt that students should be able to access the same support they do in schools.

“There's no support in further education for SEN/dyslexia which means having to drop out of courses.”

v. Additional support for literacy and numeracy issues needed:

- Some young people felt that further literacy and numeracy support is needed, particularly for people with learning difficulties or with English as a second language.
- Again young people felt that there was unnecessary stigmatising of young people requiring additional support in school.

“They should help you in the class more and not make you go out for special classes because then everybody will know that you’re getting extra classes and you feel wick so some people don’t let on they need help.”

vi. Inadequate support from classroom/teaching Assistants:

- Classroom assistants were another subject of concern. Those who previously had support from classroom assistants felt that this hadn’t fully met their needs and they had no opportunity to have a say in the way they were helped.

“My classroom assistant hours reduced every year, I had no say in what classes I needed help with so I ended up getting help in the classes that I could cope with on my own.”

“The classroom assistant just did my work for me. She didn’t help me try and understand so I wasn’t learning anything.”

vii. Class sizes

- Class sizes were also raised as a concern as there was a feeling that classes needed to be smaller to be able to deal with different learning styles and have extra support from classroom assistants, where needed.

4.4 Poverty and Austerity

The introduction to the discussion on child poverty and austerity highlighted:

- There are 101,000 children in Northern Ireland living in absolute poverty. They will be joined by approximately another 26,000 in the next 5 years.
- Sufficient income – Does it make sense that so many children are living in poverty even though their parents are in employment?
- Northern Ireland's families remain the worst off in all UK regions, despite an

improvement in spending power. After outgoings on essentials, local households have £95 a week less to spend than the UK average.

- There should be targeted services for specific groups of children and young people – we know that children living in homes where they or a family member has a disability or within lone parent families are more likely to live in poverty than other children.

Many of the young people interviewed felt that poverty and the impact of austerity was a major concern for them and their families. There was a high level of awareness about potential cuts to benefits as a result of welfare reform and that this would further heighten the difficulties many were already facing.

“Definitely work on poverty it’s really hard to fend for yourself at 16”

Other feedback included;

i. Financial implications including benefit cuts:

- Some families are already struggling due to increased food prices and other financial pressures.

“We don’t have enough food. The minimum wage is not enough”

- There was some concern that asylum seekers or economic migrants were worse off as they often ended up working in ‘black market’, low paid jobs. Some young people saw this as a threat to our economy and there was a lack of awareness about the benefits that newcomers are actually entitled to. There was concern among some groups that more migration would worsen the situation.

“Minimum wage should be for all people from all countries.”

“We need to help everyone. Need to find more money”

- Young people felt let down by politicians as they didn’t face the same impact from austerity measures as those who were receiving welfare support. There was a perception that politicians didn’t care about the effect on ordinary people as their own salaries were protected.

“People making cuts don’t care, they’re millionaires”

- There was concern that young people were more affected as they were entitled to less through benefits and also lower minimum wage for those in employment, yet they didn't have any reduction in cost for food or heating. For some the lower cost of employing younger people meant that employers favoured those under 18 who could be paid at a lower rate.

“Extra help (seasonal grants) should happen for younger people.”

“Minimum wage works against Young People. Employers don't want to employ them any more when they turn 18”

“Tax the rich more.”

ii. Impact of poverty on young people in education:

- It was clear that concerns over money indirectly impacted young people's education by adding worry and also embarrassment about being identified as having less money than others, which could lead to bullying.

“Free school meals is an embarrassment – you get a different colour ticket”

“You need to have the right clothes for non uniform day or I just wouldn't go in. I just went in my uniform last time and said I forgot”

- The cost of school uniforms was another concern. Some children reported that their choice of secondary school was influenced by the uniform requirements of schools. One child was sent home from school as the shoes they had from the previous year no longer met the uniform standards and their mum hadn't been able to afford to buy new ones.

“There's no need to have such expensive blazers and everything. I got an honours blazer but couldn't get it cause it was too dear – they should just give you a badge instead.”

“The tracksuit alone is over £40. There's no need to have a school tracksuit unless you're on a team or something.”

- For some, Education Maintenance Allowance could help out with costs such as transport and school lunches, others used this as pocket money so they didn't need to get a part time job or rely on parents. However it was widely felt that the all children should have access to EMA as it gives them a sense of independence and that families who are better off don't always give more money to children.

“EMA needs to go up and set a higher threshold for being allowed it.”

iii. Impact on family life:

- Even for those who weren't living in poverty they were aware that their families had less to go on

“We don't live in poverty but don't have money”

- Food banks were seen as something to be embarrassed about and some felt that their families wouldn't go because of pride. One young person volunteered at a food bank and said they were surprised that it was just ordinary people going, not people who you would think would have to.
- Some young people were concerned that child neglect could be worse if families have less money. Others expressed concern that some families wouldn't prioritise spending on children.
- There was awareness among many young people that parents struggle to make ends meet.
- Winter coming was a particular concern because of Christmas and increased fuel costs which would have an additional impact.

iv. Provision of services:

- Youth groups recognised the impact of austerity on youth provision. Services had been reduced compared to a few years ago and there was less funding available for projects and special events. Participants felt that youth services should be prioritised for funding to give extra support to young people whose families were struggling financially.

“There's no summer schemes – it's not happening.”

“There's no residential or trips anymore.”

- Public transport costs were also seen as prohibitive for many.

“Transport prices are too high. There should be more support for under 18s, like child fares until you’re 18.”

v. Impact on communities:

- Young people from some communities, particularly social housing felt that their communities were worse off and more prone to problems because of families not having enough money. It was felt that this had a negative impact on communities and could lead to other social problems such as gambling.

“Round here there’s loads of people just hanging about during the day drinking”

“There’s a lot of gambling and drugs problems because people are unemployed”

vi. Housing and homelessness:

- The cost of privately rented accommodation was a concern for some. There was a fear that mismanagement of public housing and prohibitive costs could lead to homelessness and an increase in people sleeping rough had been noted.

“Lots of Housing Executive homes have been bought and are rented out privately and people can’t afford the rent.”

“Lots of flats have been knocked down – there’s no opportunity for independent living.”

“Too much social housing is empty.”

“Private rent is too expensive.”

“Empty shops should provide accommodation for homeless people.”

vii. Employment issues:

- Many young people had concerns about their prospect of getting a job in the future. For some this was because of increased migration and again a lack of awareness of the reality of the impact of immigration was evident among some groups. Others felt that there were fewer jobs and of the jobs that were available these were only

offered on short term contracts and were low wage.

“It’s really hard to get a job these days.”

“There’s always one of your parents not working.”

viii. Impact on childcare:

- Some young people interviewed had children themselves or younger siblings and were aware of the impact childcare costs could have for people in low paid jobs. Further cuts could only worsen this situation and mean that some people would have to leave work because the cost of childcare was so high.

“Tax credit cuts will impact on many young families so should be looked at as family life is essential for young people’s well being.”

ix. Support for young people leaving care or living independently:

- For those preparing to leave care at 18 there was great concern about how they would be able to look after themselves. Despite the fact that young people leaving care are entitled to enhanced support, some of those interviewed were not aware of what support they would receive or still had concerns about how they would manage. Many were dependent on friends or partners and had concern that they wouldn’t be able to cope independently.

“You have to leave care homes at 18, that’s when you need most support – you couldn’t support yourself.”

4.5 Other Issues Raised

There were many other issues raised by children and young people (see below) but the issue that young people got most animated about in discussion was ‘Community Safety’. This broad umbrella covered many issues from the continued influence of paramilitaries, to the impact of sectarianism in the education field, play and leisure activities, social activities, mental health and employment. This feedback was supported by additional discussions with the NICCY Youth Panel and the feedback from the Community Relations workshop delivered by the Participation team at the end of October.

i. Legacy of the conflict:

- There were differing opinions on whether young people wanted to talk about the

conflict. For some they felt it was important just to move on and not be held back by what they felt were the concerns of their parents' generation. For others they felt they needed clearer information about what actually happened because people's own opinions got in the way when they were telling them things.

"Discussing Troubles – it's like adults want us to go through it again. We want to let it go and move on, it puts us off politics"

"All I know about what happened is from family who were affected. My friend came from a different community and when he came in to my area he was scared. We're not really sure what went on or who to ask"

- Many young people talked about conflict legacy issues as a part of normal life.

"They don't really talk about these things in my area because it's all one side so there are never any problems, except when there's riots"

- For some it was important to promote Shared or Integrated Education and turn contested spaces in to more positive play spaces for children and young people.
- Others felt that things were improving:

"There's less fights between here and Catholic areas."

"Everybody can just get on better together now, though I only know Protestant people from coming to this youth group – if you just stay with your school and family then you wouldn't know any different people."

- For most young people, particularly those living in areas with a lot of social housing the continued impact of the conflict was still very real. A number of groups from both Nationalist and Unionist areas expressed their concern about paramilitary influence and recruitment.

"Young people are joining paramilitaries because they get into debt and borrow off paramilitaries then have to join up or they get beat up. People end up dealing drugs to pay off their debt."

"You always get hassled by everybody and you have to join one group of hoods or

the other- that's your choice, steering clear is not an option 'cause then you just get it from everybody."

"All the fellas get hassled to join the hoods – it's hard... you can't really say no. Even wee young ones of about 12 and 13. You just have to hope that if you keep your head down and just do the bonies and the collections then you'll be ok"

"People don't contact the police when you're in trouble because they're not the ones who control things around here."

"This community has had to look after itself because the police haven't come here in years. It's worse now because of the recent trouble – we just stay about here and don't go in to other areas."

ii. LGBT inclusion:

- Many young people felt that LGBT Rights and awareness in schools were largely ignored. For those that did receive sex education this was just for straight cis⁴ people. This could lead to problems with depression and anxiety for other who do not identify as belonging to this group.

"It's like we don't exist or if they start talking about gay people then everyone is going to turn gay."

- Some young people thought that adults, teachers in particular, needed to have a better understanding of gender identity and respect the chosen gender identity of individuals.

"I'm gender non-binary. School just doesn't get it – they don't even get that some people are Trans never mind not male or female. They need to learn how to respect my identity and use the proper pronouns."

iii. Political engagement:

- Most young people felt disengaged from politics and had little faith in politicians and decision makers. Many felt that no political group represented their concerns and that they were more interested in point scoring against other parties than dealing

⁴ cisgender – identify as the gender assigned at birth

with real issues that affect people's lives.

"They're more interested in their own agendas than their own politics."

"[Some parties] rarely come to events we organise even though we invite them and other parties come."

- Some felt that division was used to cover up the real problems and not face issues faced by other marginalised communities.

"The Irish flag on Stormont was given more focus than marriage equality or the budget crisis"

iv. Policing and Justice

- Many young people expressed concerns about their interactions with the police and felt that they were negatively stereotyped because of how they looked or where they were from. They felt that young people should be given more information on their rights when interacting with police.
- Many felt that police have a lack of respect for young people and that they should do more training on children's rights and how to treat the fairly.

"Police should treat young people better"

"They need to be taught how speak to kids like normal people and not thugs."

- Several groups felt that the age of criminal responsibility should be raised to at least 15 or 16 as many younger children are easily influenced or don't really understand the consequences of what they got involved in.
- Most young people do not know how to make a complaint if they have a concern about how they have been treated by police or that they didn't feel they would be taken seriously if they did complain.
- One group also asked how prisoners in detention centres could make a complaint as treatment by staff was a concern.

v. Play and leisure:

- Play and leisure experiences varied depending on the location of young people. Those in more rural communities felt that their opportunities were limited and

everything was geared towards cities. For those in more urban areas the main concern was not being allowed to meet with friends in public spaces.

“We always get moved on or moved out of park”

“There’s nothing really to do here except the youth forum and it’s only on once a month. Unless you like doing sports but I don’t so I mostly just talk to friends on the internet.”

- The theme of negative stereotyping came out quite strongly among groups. Some young people used the example of Belfast City Council’s ‘Playing Out campaign’ as it came across quite negative towards young people.
- One young person was an advocate for children’s right to play and had been involved in the production of an easy read version of general comment 17⁵. This young person felt that, if they had not been part of the advocacy group, they would know nothing about children’s right to play, as it is not promoted in schools.
- Some groups felt that provision of play facilities should be more inclusive and include all abilities and there should be more creative play opportunities for younger children (e.g. muddy kitchens/chalk/tyres/musical band).

vi. Media portrayal of young people:

- Some groups raised the issue of negative stereotyping of young people in the media. They felt this made them an easy target for criticism by adults when they were hanging about in their communities.

“There’s only negative stories apart from in school.”

“If you read the papers you’d think that all young people just wanted to get blocked and kill you.”

vii. Living in care:

- Care experienced young people had particular concerns about the level of support they got throughout the process, particularly when transferring between social workers. Many felt that they weren’t always fully informed about what was

⁵ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published more detail on what they right to play means and the implications for governments.

happening and that those taking care of them didn't understand what they were going through.

*"There's no follow up for people who have been put in care, this leads to them taking drugs/alcohol to block it out and self harming."*⁶

"Social Workers don't understand what it's like to be in care."

- LAC7 Reviews were a particular concern. For young people who did attend the reviews they felt it was quite a negative experience, that there were too many people involved, the process was intimidating and formal, and that the information shared wasn't always relevant to all of the people there.

"They share too much personal information. Stuff about you that isn't even true is told – everything you've done is in there."

"How many kids have their teachers knowing absolutely everything you've ever done wrong? It's embarrassing – they don't need to know your whole life. Then they either treat you like you're some kind of trouble kid or they feel sorry for you."

"They talk about you, not to you."

"They pick out all the bad stuff."

viii. Employment support:

- For those in programmes targeted at young people not in education, employment or training there was a concern that provision was targeted to what was easier for the government and not what was more suitable for them. Many felt that if they had the right support and incentives they would rather be in work but for those who hadn't achieved what they needed to in school they felt it was difficult to compete when looking for work.

"Government tried to take me off [my] programme and put me on a Steps to Success programme."

⁶ the young person was referring to counselling services to deal with the issues that had led them to be placed in the case system

⁷ Looked After Children

“Raise the minimum wage for young people.”

ix. Family life:

- Some young people felt that families needed extra support and that it should be easier for children to ask for help if they were having problems at home. A few children felt that domestic abuse was still a taboo issue and that it was difficult for families to let others know if this was going on, so it wasn't dealt with properly.
- For younger parents it was difficult to access support to raise their children, both financial support and also parenting advice.

“If young people having kids don't have good parents, it's hard to get support.”

x. Addiction:

- Many groups said that drugs and alcohol is very easily available. For some they felt that it would be better if young people could get alcohol at 16 because then you wouldn't have to rely on others to get it for them. Many young people felt that even if there was support for drug and alcohol addiction, it only addressed the initial problem and dealt with detox but didn't look at the reasons why the person became addicted in the first place.

“It's easy for anyone to get drink or drugs – as young as 12.”

“They don't deal with why the person is addicted in the first place so after they get dry then they just go back to the drink or drugs because the reason they are taking them is still there.”

- Gambling addiction was a concern for some groups who felt that it was very easy to start gambling if they felt that they wouldn't get a good job. There was no support available to those who were already addicted to gambling.

“Arcades are supposed to be over 18 but most places let them in for the 5p-10p machines. There's also machines in chippys and taxi depots. It's really easy to start there and then you're hooked.”

“You can gamble online even if you're not 18 – you just need to get someone's credit card. Then you can get more and more in debt because you think you'll be

able to clear it with a big win so you just start betting more and more.”

xi. Children’s rights awareness and treatment of children and young people:

- After talking about their concerns many of the groups interviewed had a renewed sense of the importance of Children’s Rights and what could be done to raise awareness.
- They felt that this should be prioritised in schools and in the curriculum and taught to young people throughout their time in school and in youth clubs.
- Young people said that adults who work with children should be better informed about children’s rights and put this in to practice in their interactions with children and young people.
- The group gave feedback on what they thought could be done to raise awareness outside of educational settings.

“Give young people experiences and responsibilities that adults have.”

“There should be more than 42 rights to deal with all this stuff.”

“Do leaflets giving more details on specific rights.”

“Everyone should be treated equally, even if they’re in care or are from a different country.”

“You should do a Facebook page with videos of young people talking about rights that are the biggest problems.”

“Adults should listen and do something about it!”

5.0 Event Format

Following ongoing engagement with young people through the ‘Youth Voice Matters...’ programme (including the NYP) with regards to the format and participation the following guidance was given to NICCY:

- The event should be young people focussed;
- Politicians should not be involved at this stage;
- Young people to share their experiences on NICCY’s priority issues and other important issues with each other;
- Young people should have a key role in delivering the event including co-facilitation;
- The event should include discussion on ‘what happens next’, e.g. youth led calls to action.

Taking into cognisance the feedback from young people and following planning with the NYP, the following programme was developed:

5.00pm	Arrival and Food
6.00pm	Welcome, Housekeeping and opening comments by NICCY Youth Panel
6.15pm	Commissioner’s Keynote Address
6.30pm	Workshops (led by y.p., supported by adults)
7.15pm	Break & refreshments
7.30pm	Continuation of Workshops
8.15pm	Closing comments and way forward (NYP & Commissioner)
8.30pm	Departure

6.0 Moving forward

As mentioned above the Your Voice Matters programme is only the start of an ongoing conversation or engagement with children and young people. Investing time and resources in the initial engagement has provided a strong evidence base for the Your Voice Matters event, to mark Universal Children's Day.

The event itself will provide fresh impetus for young people to share experiences on issues that affect them and, importantly, to explore potential actions for NICCY's ongoing engagement with young people, to maintain awareness levels of the issues that affect them.

It will also provide the opportunity to raise awareness of both children and young people's rights and the work of NICCY through face to face engagement, mainstream media engagement and through social media.

Feedback from young people on the issues that affect them, from both the initial engagement and from the event, will enable NICCY to refine its forthcoming Business and Corporate plans. Additionally, it will provide NICCY with additional evidence to the ongoing UN Committee reporting process on the state of children's rights in the UK.

December 2015

Communications and Participation