



Creating A Place for Children and Young People in Building a Peaceful Future

Part of Human Rights Week Festival - 9th December 2015 at The Mac

Event Report
December 2016

1.0 Event Aim

To examine and create a forum to discuss the absence and exclusion of children and young people from discussions and decision making on building a peaceful and stable society in Northern Ireland.

2.0 Background

This event was held to raise awareness and create an understanding of Children's and Young People's Rights in the broader context of Human Rights overall – 'Children's Rights Are Human Rights'. Also, as a result of the issues being presented by Children and Young People during our engagement with them, through the 'Your Voice Matters' (YVM) programme in 2015-16 and in discussions with CVS and other Stakeholders in the 2015-16 business year.

During the YVM engagement, there were many issues raised by children and young people but one issue about which young people were most animated in discussions was 'Community Safety'. This broad umbrella covered a range of issues from the continued influence of paramilitaries, to the impact of sectarianism in education, play and leisure activities, social activities, mental health and employment. These issues were echoed in additional discussions with the NICCY Youth Panel and in feedback from the Community Relations workshop delivered by the Participation team at the end of October 2015.

This 'Human Rights Festival' event aimed to examine the absence and/or exclusion of Children and Young People from the Northern Ireland Peace Process, which itself aims to create a more peaceful, inclusive and stable society. The event focus was on the right of the Child to be brought up in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity as well as the Child's right to have a say in all matters concerning them and to have their views taken into account – in keeping with UNCRC Articles 12 & 29.

A central component was an examination of the current impact of the conflict on the lives of Children and Young People here. The event advocated taking a child rights approach necessitating the centrality of Children and Young People, in developing solutions for a better future.

It was intended that the issues presented / views expressed at the event be used to 'inform' NICCY's Business Plan 2016-17, the next Children's and Young People's Strategy and in providing 'Additional Information'¹ to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in preparation for the Committee's upcoming examination of the UK State Party's compliance with the UNCRC.

¹ List of issues in relation to the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, October 2015

3.0 Participants

Young people:	21 (including representatives from Cara Friend; Extern Larne Youth Council; NICCY Youth Panel)
Adults:	14 (including representatives from CVS; CRIS; Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council; Include Youth)
Total:	35 - this represents an 85% turnout from registered participants

4.0 Programme

5.00pm	Registration and food
5.15pm	Welcome & Overview: Koulla Yiasouma, Commissioner, NICCY
5.25pm	Guest Speakers: Prof Phil Scraton & Dr. Deena Haydon, QUB
5.45pm	Cafe style discussion
6.30pm	Open Forum & discussion: Chaired by Mairead McCafferty, CE, NICCY
6.55pm	Close & next steps: Koulla Yiasouma
7.00pm	Finish

5.0 Process

The evening opened with the Commissioner giving an overview of the event, reviewing feedback from children and young people to date, focusing in particular on the 'Your Voice Matters' programme.

This was followed by Dr Deena Haydon and Prof Phil Scraton's (Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative, QUB) presentation on 'Creating a Place for Children and Young People in Building a Peaceful Future. The presentation highlighted

- the UNCRC;
- relevant articles;
- transition from a conflicted society;
- the children and young people rights deficit; and
- ensuring a rights based future.

Following the presentation there was a cafe style discussion which was led by facilitators at each table. There was a mix of young people and adults at each table with facilitators asking the questions, under the following questions three themes:

1. **Exclusion from consultations about how a peaceful society in Northern Ireland can be achieved**
 - *How should children and young people be included in discussions and decisions about bringing about a peaceful society?*
 - *What needs to change?*
2. **The continuing impact of the Conflict, including paramilitary activity, in communities**
 - *Twenty years after the Ceasefires, how are children and young people still affected by the Conflict?*
3. **Addressing the impact of the conflict on the lives of children and young people**
 - *Who is responsible for dealing with the continuing impact of the Conflict on children and young people?*
 - *What should be the role of:*
 - *Government – MLAs/ local councillors?*
 - *State agencies (schools; health services; youth services)?*
 - *Voluntary and community agencies?*
 - *Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Human Rights Commission?*

Each table then provided feedback to the audience.

6.0 Feedback

Feedback from each of the questions has been summarised (and supported with quotes) under the headings below:

1. **Exclusion from consultations about how a peaceful society in Northern Ireland can be achieved**
 - a. On the issue of **exclusion**, almost all participants agreed that children and young people were/are excluded from discussions about peace. Young people said that it is very hard for their voice to be heard and that adults think that young people have no right to input. They gave examples of how young people had been turned away from the meetings held to discuss whether the peace walls should be taken down, as these were aimed at over 21 year olds only.

One young person referred to a local community group which was only for adults and did not afford young people the opportunity to join in discussions, and another

described how young people were not consulted about the erection of a loyalist arch for 'the Twelfth' and how their views were not taken seriously.

"Adults don't listen to each other so why would they listen to young people"

"Have a sense of being talked down to by older people"

"Adults need to listen more"

- b. A lot of feedback focussed on the role of **paramilitaries** and their ongoing impact within communities. It highlighted high levels of paramilitary activity in many areas and the associated threat of intimidation.

"The amount of young people under paramilitary threat has increased hugely in both Catholic and Protestant areas"

Some young people felt that young people are afraid to stand up and speak out against the paramilitaries. This is partly because they feel the PSNI won't go into areas where there is a paramilitary threat so young people can't challenge them as they have no support to do so.

"There is a real fear of paramilitaries in communities. Young people are afraid to speak out because they know who they are and what the consequences will be if they do."

Young people with experience of the criminal justice system are increasingly saying that they feel safer in the Juvenile Justice Centres than in their communities.

"Young people on both sides of the community are in fear of their lives and are being exiled from their communities."

- c. Young people felt that there was a lack of knowledge amongst them about the 'troubles' and there should be more **awareness raising** on the history of the conflict. It was stated that there is some good practice in relation to education although it was agreed that education does not always get it right. One of the young people from the Youth Council felt this had expanded his views and felt he listened to others more as a result.

"The troubles are not talked about in schools."

It was felt that much more cross-community work should be introduced in schools,

youth clubs and colleges, involving for example, Question and Answer sessions between Catholic and Protestant young people, to aid better understanding of each other's cultures. It was suggested that teachers and youth group leaders should get specific training in "how to do this and how to deal with and 'teach' about these issues".

"More training and awareness of the troubles is required for adults and young people."

There was awareness of the impact of family and community in maintaining or perpetrating mistrust.

"It is key that parents do not indoctrinate their children."

"I do not understand why after all this time there is still fighting."

Young people also felt that they should receive more awareness and education both on children's rights and on different religions which would both support them to have their voice heard and to get a better understanding of different cultures.

"People who grew up during the troubles do not know their rights"

"Young people are not aware of their rights and can't exercise them"

"R.E. should include teaching on all faiths".

An alternative viewpoint was expressed when one young person stated it was *"sometimes better to leave the past in the past"* although this was qualified by *"...unless it continues to affect the current generation of young people"*.

- d. Young people continue to feel that they are **negatively stereotyped** by the older generation although it was acknowledged that cross-generational activities could help this. Young people feel judged by adults who have "made them this way".

Interestingly, the young people highlighted that along with the discrimination that young people face based on their age, there is also discrimination based on social class which must be acknowledged and addressed. Examples of variances in PSNI treatment of young people in disadvantaged areas were given and compared to the treatment of young people by authorities in more affluent areas.

"The treatment experienced by young people in socio-economically deprived areas by the authorities is much slower and less satisfactory."

- e. The young people were very aware of the role of the **formal education sector**, suggesting that more integrated education was needed.

However, they did note that even within mixed educational establishments, tensions can and do arise. Young people stated that at mixed religion technical colleges they experienced young people taking up entrenched positions, particularly around the marching season when tensions were further heightened

“It was observed that tensions rise during the marching season but that afterwards things settled back to normal and everyone got on much better”

- f. The participants were critical of the political leadership provided by their representatives. There was little faith in the ‘Fresh Start’ Agreement and a feeling that there was a total disconnect between political leaders and children and young people.

“Politicians target antisocial behaviour rather than engaging with YP”

- g. The participants were asked ‘what needs to change?’ to ensure the future inclusion of children and young people in discussions and decisions about bringing about a peaceful society? Responses included adherence to the UNCRC; avoiding tokenistic consultation and the importance of community projects.

“Taking action is vital on the basis of consultation. If young people see no action and nothing happening as a result of engaging with them, it becomes impossible to re-engage, as young people will not.”

“We must stop forcing adult structures and boring things on children and young people. Consultation and engagement with children and young people must take place in a young person friendly environment and activities should be ‘good craic’. Adults should avoid the formal board meeting structures and make conversations with young people easier and more accessible, where young people are at. “

“Voting and politics should be explained better as for many young people they see it as ‘just old men fighting”

Young people also felt that discussions should start at home as they felt that a lot of their views were shaped by their parents, so they felt change needs to start at home but that can be a challenge in itself as they are sometimes less affected and have different views than their parents which can cause conflict within the family.

“We need to be aware of who the best people are to have conversations with young people. Teachers are not necessarily the right people as there may be consequences for expressing your views honestly and sharing information.”

Importantly, some young people expressed the basic need to feel safe within their community, whilst others had more positive experiences. A young person from an interface area had not had any direct or personal experience of interface violence and so didn't feel any reluctance in going into different areas; her memories in contrast, were of the positive things between the two communities such as joint murals.

2. The continuing impact of the Conflict, including paramilitary activity, in communities

- a. Even after 20 years of a peace process, the participants had strong thoughts about paramilitaries sharing how they feel, that now “the conflict is not so much between communities, but within communities” – they felt that paramilitaries and indeed some politicians try and stir up tensions for their own ends.

“Paramilitary groups have never stopped recruiting despite peace time.”

“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.”

“Young people still affected by paramilitaries because ‘they haven't gone away’ and never have”

The participants were also aware of the relationship between paramilitaries, the PSNI and how ‘justice’ is delivered outside of, and in the perceived absence’ of formal policing. Young people see paramilitaries as people who carry out ‘justice’ in their area and not the police.

“Paramilitary control of areas has gotten much worse and the PSNI has lost control of areas. People have more faith in paramilitaries to deal with issues than the PSNI.”

“With the gaps left by the policing cuts these have been filled by paramilitaries. If YP are in trouble it is quicker and easier to contact paramilitaries rather than police. They won't question, just deal with it.”

- b. In a **political context**, the participants were aware of the impact of political actions and inactions, and the role of adults in the moving the peace process forward.

“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.”

“We talk of peace but in many communities the war continues. The divided Government reflects the divisions in society. There are geographical issues and in certain areas the threat level is as high as ever.

“Young people should be taken out of their own areas and work should be done on a cross-community basis in neutral areas. When young people go back into their communities, they revert to distrusting young people from the other side.”

Discussion highlighted that areas which suffered most as a result of the conflict remain suffering through socio-economic disadvantage and paramilitary threat.

“The gaps between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ in NI are huge.”

Participants discussed the threat to the Human Rights Act 1998 and lack of progression in relation to the Bill of Rights, stating that it illustrates how Government views the rights of its citizens.

“There is no respect for the rights of people, especially young people and the Government does not represent those who need their rights protected.”

- c. Additional impact on communities, as identified by the participants, includes legacy issues including mental health and poverty. It was highlighted that there are few opportunities for young people who have come from a disadvantaged background and who are living in poverty.

“It is impossible to get a job without experience and experience without a job.”

Division between communities is still a major issue and fear exists, whether actual or perceived.

“On 12th July we hide away!”

“Fear of different communities through ‘hearsay’ rather than seeing for themselves”

“There are still ‘no-go’ areas – “we wouldn’t go down there”

On the subject of the proposed removal of peace walls, one person said that they would be fearful if the peace walls were taken down. This links to experiences of negative stereotyping from the community, *“the other side is more bitter”*; from the media, *“they publish negative stories, not the stories of good things to happen in area”* and negativity from PSNI with one young person being told by a police officer, *“you look like someone who would do drugs”*.

3. Addressing the impact of the conflict on the lives of children and young people

Feedback can be correlated into the following areas:

a. Political change:

“Our so-called political leaders need to see the good work that is happening on the ground and to support it. There is no accountability as there is no political alternative. Politicians know this and don’t care about the reality of young people’s lives in some of our communities most in need.”

“We all need to pull together to challenge politicians collectively. They are still playing old politics of green and orange and ignoring the real issues, such as jobs, education, poverty, mental health etc.”

“We need an opposition Government and legislative change to amend the political structures in NI. Until politics changes, nothing changes.”

“Young people don’t vote and are politically disengaged. Politicians are doing nothing for young people and aren’t speaking to young people.”

“One young person said that they did not vote as they did not understand the process or the policies of the politicians and had no faith in them. They felt that they should not be made to vote.”

“Get young people up to Stormont to give fresh ideas on how things could be changed.”

Overall there was a degree of optimism among the young people about the future, but they felt that politics was largely irrelevant for them. One young person was 19 and had never voted and didn’t see that changing any time soon, another 17 year old had no particular interest in voting when she turned 18.

b. Educational change:

“Segregated education is a massive issue which has to be urgently addressed.”

“Schools – via integration; teaching should be based on understanding other communities”

“How can we respect other religions if we don’t know about them?”

c. What else would help change?

“Adults need to be aware of children’s rights and to have respect for them.”

“The promotion of equality – everyone is the same, Catholics and Protestants are no different.”

“Good relations courses”.

“Inclusion: Young people often felt excluded from local society and frequently got involved in drink and drugs.”

d. Who else is responsible for change?

- Everyone;
- Parents;
- Youth leaders / Teachers;
- Youth Councils / Youth Forums / Youth Clubs;
- Voluntary groups / Community groups
- The Children’s Commissioner could do more with schools and youth groups around the conflict.

Event Evaluation

- “It was good to see so many young and diverse young people here. It might have been good to use language more appropriate / friendly / young people focussed to help communication. The presentations were very academic and not very young people friendly. Confused about who the event was for – what audience?”
- “Hadn’t imagined that NICCY was doing so much. Would love to have more involvement within my organisation (Cara Friend)”
- “My thoughts on this event are very strong because I think people now want to listen to me and young people. I also found from this event that there are a lot more issue in my local community than I thought.”

- “I believe people (facilitators) really listened to my point of views. I believe NICCY will take on board the young people’s advice to help voice our opinions. Thank you for inviting me to this event.”
- “Just talking / no break / videos as some people take stuff on differently. Felt important as people listened to our opinion but like I said during group discussion people, some people don’t get the credit for their opinion. Also would like details of how to join the NICCY’s youth panel. I really enjoyed today so I will be looking forward to the next one.”
- “People wanted to listen; Think Prof. Phil and Dr. Deena should have been about during discussion; Enjoyed it”
- “The event was very good and a lot of interesting points where raised through discussions”
- “I enjoyed the event. It was good to bring together different people and especially young people. For future events it would be very good to engage with young people from diverse backgrounds.”
- “I found the event very eye opening. Thank you for having us.”
- “The event was very good, was great to have someone who actually listens to us, and gives us help with our rights and everyone else’s. Very good event. Thank you for the opportunity to tell you our thoughts and for you to listen and take the time out.”
- “The event was amazing, great to see young people mixing with different communities and this is what I enjoyed about this event. More events like this should be continued.”
- “should have more events outside Belfast.”
- “Would like to have seen more representation from other organisations. How much are colleges / schools consulted with? Is NICCY Youth Panel part of OFMDFM panel looking at monitoring tension – is there links with OFMDFM C&YP department? Are young people in youth offender centres consulted with? Homeless young people?”

NB: Professor Scraton and Dr. Haydon spoke with the young people at the end of the event and explained they did not want to restrict discussions by being ‘at the table’. They did say they would like further engagement with the young people as/when possible going forward.

Communications and Participation January 2016