

include YOUTH

Response to Consultation on Proposals for the Future of the Youth Council July 2015

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Include Youth

Include Youth is an independent non-governmental organisation that actively promotes the rights, best interests of and best practice with disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people.

The young people we work with and for include those from socially disadvantaged areas, those who have had poor educational experiences, those from a care background, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs or alcohol, undertaking unsafe sexual behaviour or other harmful activities, or of being harmed themselves.

The Give and Take Scheme aims to improve the employability and increase the self-esteem of young people in need or at risk from across Northern Ireland. The Scheme supports young people to overcome particular barriers that prevent them from moving into mainstream training or employment and towards independent living. Seventy-five per cent of young people on the Scheme are care experienced, while over a third has a background in offending.

Include Youth also delivers an Employability Service on behalf of Health Trusts for young people aged 16 + who have had experience of the care system. This service is designed to offer tangible and concrete opportunities to assist young people leaving care to prepare for, and engage in work.

The organisation also leads on the collaborative initiative START which operates across several sites in Northern Ireland, working with community based organisations to improve education, employment and training outcomes for the most disadvantaged young people.

Include Youth's participation work is a way of delivering participative democracy to marginalised young people in Northern Ireland. Its main aim is to support marginalised young people to become involved in decision making processes which impact on their lives, particularly in social welfare, education and criminal justice matters. The project works with a range of groups of young people in the community and in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre.

Include Youth's policy advocacy work is informed by relevant international human rights and children's rights standards, is evidence based, including that provided by young people and practitioners and is based on high quality, critical analysis.

General Comments

Include Youth welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Department of Education consultation on the future of the Youth Council and trust our comments are useful.

Include Youth recognise the severe financial pressures we all face and are sympathetic to the need to increase efficiency while reducing bureaucracy and duplication. While recognising the legitimacy of the motivation behind the decision to review the roles, functions and relationship between the Youth Council and Education Authority, we do not believe we are at a point nor have sufficient information to make such an important decision as those proposed.

Consultation process

We are concerned at the limited 'options' available within the consultation document. That not all options are available fosters the impression that the 'consultation' is a fait accompli for the end of the Youth Council without due consultation. We believe the time is not right for such a move and that due process, a cost benefit analysis and a consultation with a full range of options should be undertaken with such information on the table before such a decision is reached.

The rationale that reducing bureaucracy and saving money around both the Education Authority and Youth Council may create flexibility to both protect and increase budgets for front line service is sound. However this is on the proviso that a full role audit and cost benefit analysis have been undertaken as an evidence base. More information is needed on what duplication exists, which additional roles need to be protected and what the specifics of the financial implications are.

On logistics and finance, the options being consulted upon do not provide information on how the Youth Council would be incorporated into the Education Authority. There is also limited information on budgeting and on if or how specific budgets might be protected within a much larger entity.

Duplication and Roles

Include Youth believes there are important roles and functions carried out by the Youth Council which are not duplicated within the Education Authority, roles and functions it is imperative to continue with but that around which doubts exist on whether or not the Education Authority can legislatively deliver on or have the internal skills, experience, understanding and capacity to undertake. A look at the Youth Service (1989) Order and the Education Bill (2014) illustrates unique functions.

Include Youth recognise the important role YCNI plays in the development and advancement of the youth sector and believe there are elements of the Youth

Council functions that must be retained and which are placed at risk under current proposals, these include but are not limited to:

- Investment funding for infrastructure, capacity building and practice development across the youth sector.
- An independent challenge role, including promoting learning and expertise from the voluntary youth sector to make improvements across the board.
- A bridge between the voluntary and statutory youth service
- A neutral and independent advisory role
- Policy and research
- Development of practice on a regional basis
- Encouraging good community relations
- Cross border, cross Europe and wider international work
- Coordination of regional training across the sector

Impacts of such a change now

We believe dissolution of the Youth Council at this point will create instability and have adverse impacts on young people, voluntary organisations and service provision.

Given the cross community dimension to Youth Council's work and focus on Section 75 groups alongside their leveraging of additional funds from outside of DE which benefit the same areas of work, there is a concern that there will be adverse impacts on Section 75 groups.

Recommendation

It is our view that the Youth Council provides distinct and important functions which it is vital to protect and that YCNI also have substantial organisational experience and expertise which should be secured. With that in mind we would recommend a greater 'bedding in' period for the Education Authority alongside a comprehensive audit of roles and finances being undertaken at which point an informed and evidence based decision can be taken and any resulting changes suitably planned for in order to maintain stability.

The Youth Council in their own response have welcomed the concept of 'reshaping' and with the establishment of the Education Authority Include Youth sees value in reassessing roles, functions and cost to investigate where improvements can be made, bureaucracy reduced and positive outcomes for young people maximised. However *all* options should be considered and Include Youth do not believe we currently have sufficient information or evidence to support any of the proposed options which would so drastically change the status quo. We are happy to continue to be involved and provide whatever assistance we can as this issue develops and

look forward to hearing the Department's thoughts and plans once cognisance has been taken of views and concerns raised within this consultation process.