

# People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 26th January, 2021

## SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Councillor Baker (In the Chair);  
Alderman Rodgers; and  
Councillors Black, Bunting, Corr, de Faoite, Flynn, Garrett,  
M. Kelly, Magee, McCusker, Mulholland, Pankhurst, Smyth  
and Verner.

Also attended: Councillor O'Hara.

In attendance: Mrs. C. Taggart, Neighbourhood Services Manager;  
Mrs. G. O'Hare, Community Development Officer;  
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer; and  
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

### **External attendance:**

Belfast Youth Forum: Shántana Mc Cullough (Chair);  
John Joe McGrady (Vice Chair);  
Maria Aaroy (Secretary);  
David Shields; and  
Carter Wickham.

NI Youth Forum: Phil Glennon  
Catriona Clifford  
Natalie Corbett  
Niamh Mallaghan

Common Youth: Michael McCartan

Public Health Agency: Olive McLead, Interim Chief Executive;  
David Tumilty, Health and Social Well Being  
Improvement Manager; and  
Marie Roulston, Director of Social Care HSCB.

Department of Education: Richard Irwin, Director, Inclusion and Wellbeing  
Directorate;  
Angela Kane, Head of Pupil Support Team; and  
Sam Dempster, Head of Curriculum and  
Assessment Team.

QUB Centre for Children's Rights: Dr. Michelle Templeton

### Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Councillors Cobain and Newton.

### Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were recorded.

### Introduction and Purpose of Meeting

The Committee was advised that representatives from the Belfast Youth Forum were in attendance to provide an update in relation to the work of the Belfast Youth Forum.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, welcomed the representatives to the meeting.

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 20th October, it had agreed that representatives from the Department of Health (DoH), Department of Education (DoE) and the Public Health Agency would be invited to the next meeting to discuss both the 'Any Use?' Relationship and Sexual Education Campaign and report and the 'Elephant in the Room' mental Health Campaign and report and accordingly their representatives were welcomed to the meeting.

The Committee noted correspondence received from the Permanent Secretary of the DoH Mr. Richard Pengelly who unfortunately was unable to attend the meeting.

They noted that a brief update would also be given on the current BYF recruitment drive and on the National Children's Bureau (NCB) Mental Health Charter for Children and Young People.

Noted.

### Restricted Items

At the request of an external contributor that their submission to the meeting was not recorded, the live feed and recording of the meeting was paused for the next two agenda items.

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the Press and public from the meeting during these presentations.

### 'Any Use' Relationship & Sexuality Education (RSE) campaign – Shantana McCullough and David Shield

At the previous joint meetings held in January and October 2020, the BYF had presented its piece of research to the Elected Members of the People and Communities Committee on Relationship and Sexual Education (RSE). This was entitled 'Any Use?'

The Youth Forum representatives advised that the aim of the report was to find out young people's opinions on RSE in Belfast; how useful young people found their current RSE; and if young people understood their rights in relation to RSE.

The research had been undertaken in conjunction with the QUB Centre for Children's Rights and Common Youth (a representative was in attendance at the meeting) who had helped develop an online survey, designed survey questions, collected surveys from young people and analysed the findings. 771 young people had taken part in the survey and some of the main findings included the following:

With regard to the right to receive RSE:

- 72% of young people said they knew they had a right to receive RSE in school;
- 52% of young people said they felt their right to RSE was not being met;
- Only 23% felt that adults trusted young people to make their own choices about relationships and sex;
- The proportion of 14 – 16 year olds saying their right was met (56%) was significantly higher than the proportion of those 17 or over saying this (43%); and
- 58% felt that adults did not trust them and one in five (20%) said they did not know if adults trusted them in this regard.

The report then highlighted how young people described their RSE and, overall, negative word associations dominated those answers with the four most common being basic, unhelpful, useless and bias.

With regard to learning about sexual relationships, the three most popular sources from which young people said they learned about relationships and sex were through friends and peers (62%); social media (55%); and lessons in school (54%).

The survey had then asked a range of questions about RSE in schools and how useful it was. The vast majority of young people (86%) felt that school was the best place to receive RSE, yet only 60% of respondents said that this actually occurred. In relation to how useful their RSE in school was, 66% of young people felt that the information they received was either "not very useful" or "not useful at all", with only 10% saying that they thought the information they received was "very useful". It highlighted through which subjects RSE was taught in schools and questioned how the young people felt RSE should be delivered in schools and who should deliver it, with the most commonly given response being a qualified RSE teacher. The survey also sought views on what should be taught to young people in RSE, with the most popular subject young people wanted to learn about was personal relationships. Over half of the respondents had felt that young people should start to be taught about personal relationships when they were between 11 and 13 years of age.

The representatives of the forum then presented its recommendations for government and policy makers which were:

1. To adopt a rights-based and proactive approach to relationship and sexual education;
2. Work with young people to co-produce a RSE curricular programme for schools; and
3. For such a curricular programme to be taught by specialised, qualified and trained staff.

The Committee was advised of the work to date, as follows:

- August 2020 – BYF representative had met with Health Development Specialist (Sexual Health and Disability) within SEHSCT, with a view to replicating the research outside of Belfast. They were currently exploring ways that this work could be progressed;
- December 2020 – BYF representative had met with Joe Harris from BHCT who was responsible for the training of teachers to deliver RSE in schools across NI;
- December 2020 – Correspondence was sent to CCMS seeking a meeting to present the RSE the report. They were currently awaiting a response;
- Representatives from the BYF now sit on the ‘Gillen Education and Awareness Working group’ set up by DoJ. The aim of the Working Group was to try and progress a number of recommendations made by Sir John Gillen in his review into the handling of serious sexual offences. Part of these recommendations included the need for an extensive public awareness and school education campaign and some of this included RSE in school. The working group was aware of and had read the Any Use report and its recommendations and were keen to use it for reference; and
- January 2021 - BYF members informally presented the ‘Any Use?’ report to the Stormont Education Committee.

Discussion ensued in regard to how the RSE programme could potentially be progressed within the school curriculum and for the need for it to be taught by specialised, qualified and trained staff. The huge variances in the way RSE was taught throughout schools was highlighted and there was a general consensus that it would be better to have a more aligned approach. The Department of Education (DoE) referred to the RSE Hub information which it had available for educators and which provided relevant and credible information. The representative from QUB advised that, whilst there was useful information available on the hub, there was no actual statutory requirement for schools to access the resource, which resulted in very different approaches being adopted.

A DoE representative referred to the New Decade, New Approach Agreement and the fact that an independent review of Education had been commissioned as part of this document and stated that it might be possible, with lobbying, for this to be considered as part of this review. He did, however, caution that any change to the

teaching of RSE would require legislative change through the Assembly, which would take time.

A number of Elected Members commended the Youth Forum for their excellent research and concurred with the need for sexual education to be taught by trained individuals, they highlighted the importance of all relationships and the need for different sexualities to be discussed from an early age to help remove any stigmas that existed.

Detailed discussion ensued with the representatives during which it was noted that a multiagency approach to progress the RSE initiative was required, it also noted the impact that proper RSE training could have on young people's emotional health and wellbeing (which would be further discussed as part of the next agenda item).

Given the length of discussion and volume of information presented by the various organisations, it was agreed that the DoE, PHA and the QUB Centre for Children's Rights would each forward a summary of their current procedures and a synopsis of the points raised for circulation to the Elected Members and the Belfast Youth Forum Members.

**'Elephant in the Room' (EITR) Mental Health Campaign –  
Niamh Mallaghan and Johnjo McGrady**

Members of the Youth Forum presented their "Elephant in the Room Campaign", a report which explored young people's awareness of mental health in Northern Ireland.

The Committee was advised that, in July 2016, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child had recommended that the Northern Ireland Government invest heavily in children and young people's mental health services. Consequently, in October 2016, the Belfast Youth Forum, alongside members from Northern Ireland Youth Forum and the Children's Law Centre, had organised an event where over 100 young people had expressed their frustrations at the lack of mental health education and support services available in NI and called for the UN's recommendation to be fully implemented by the NI Government.

In 2017 between members of Belfast Youth Forum and Northern Ireland Youth Forum a Youth Mental Health Committee had been established. The aim of the Mental Health Committee had been to explore issues connected to mental health and young people and to ensure that as many young people as possible had a meaningful say in shaping the future of mental health education and support services. This research would eventually take the form of the 'Elephant in the Room' report.

The Members noted that the aim was to establish what young people in NI thought and knew about mental health, in particular:

- Where young people got their information about mental health and how they rated it;
- Where young people liked to go to receive mental health information and support;
- How young people viewed mental health and how it impacted on their ability to speak about it;
- What actions they felt that the government should take to promote positive mental health and well-being in society.

The representative advised that a survey had been developed and 1,117 young people had responded, as well as responses from four focus groups across Northern Ireland. The focus groups had a total of 151 young people who had participated.

He reported that the findings of the research had then been broken down in to three broad themes, as follows:

- Stigma – young people indicated that there was a huge negative stigma attached to mental health which in turn led to a “culture of silence”, where young people were afraid to talk about mental health issues;
- Safe Spaces – 76% of survey respondents stated that young people were afraid to talk about mental health and there was a lack of safe spaces available to talk about it. The overall view from young people was that on-line was a good place to access mental health information, but there was issues with being able to separate fact from fiction. In addition, the young people had identified social media as having a negative impact; and
- Schools and Information – according to young people, the three most common places they would source information about mental health were on-line (59%), a family member (48%) and friends (45%). However, young people said the problem was that the quality of the information was inconsistent and it wasn't always useful, for example, it was usually framed in a negative way.

As a result of the findings of the Elephant in the Room report, a number of recommendations had been made, these included:

- To support the creation of a youth-led, government backed mental health campaign, challenging the culture of silence and negative stigma;
- To work with young people to develop a new and positive language around mental health by creating an age appropriate ‘mental health dictionary’ which could be used as part of a mental health curriculum programme;
- To engage with young people to create and fund safe digital solutions to receive mental health information and support. These digital solutions should be designed by young people for young people;
- To create a compulsory curriculum programme for all schools and colleges on mental health and wellbeing that would help to raise awareness and challenge stigma and allows young people to access consistent mental health information. This curriculum programme should be long term and embedded in schools – as it was felt that one off workshops would not be effective; and
- Mental health and wellbeing training for all teachers, school support workers and youth workers to enable effective delivery of the programme.

The representative then provided the Committee with an up-to-date breakdown of the current work stream:

- July 2020 – representative from the BYF had met with Executive working group on Mental Wellbeing, Resilience and Suicide prevention to present the EITR report;
- September 2020 – representative from BYF had met with Minister Carál Ní Chuilín from DfC to discuss how the DfC could support the implementation of the recommendations in the EITR. A reply was received in October 2020, stating that the DfC were supportive of the requirement of an app for young people to access accurate and meaningful advice on mental health as part of a Mental Health Strategy which was agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. They advised that they were currently scheduling a follow up meeting to explore how this could be progressed;
- November 2020 – following a question from Mr. Chris Lyttle MLA to the Minister of Education the officials had responded by acknowledging that there were many other areas to be addressed, including the Elephant in the Room recommendations, and that these would be considered in subsequent Framework implementation plans;
- The EITR group had been working to raise its publicity and its work had been referenced in a variety of pieces of similar work; and
- Creation of ‘Heads Up’ mental health advocacy toolkit.

The proposed next steps were then detailed, as follows:

- The EITR group planned to invite the current Mental Health Champion to the Executive, Professor Siobhan O’Neill, to meet. They advised that Professor O’Neill had attended the presentation to the Executive Working Group on Mental Wellbeing, Resilience and Suicide Prevention in July and was keen to discuss the EITR report further;
- To source potential funding streams to further the work of EITR;
- To Launch ‘Heads Up’ toolkit;
- To convene a follow up meeting with the DfC regarding the development of an app to be designed specifically for young people in relation to mental health issues;
- To continue to raise the voices of young people in relation to their mental health and to campaign for mental health services that would benefit young people; and
- To build relationships with agencies and organisations who could help advocate for better mental health services for young people.

The Chairperson thanked the Youth Forum representatives for their informative presentation.

Discussion ensued in regard to how capacity could be built to support children and young people and to ensure that they could easily access the services. The importance of the various agencies adopting a multi-agency, joined up approach was discussed at length and it was noted that, whilst this approach had already been adopted, it needed to be further developed to ensure that long-term strategies were

brought forward which would have meaningful outcomes and affect change at a local level.

The representatives also referred to the New Decade, New Approach Agreement and the subsequent commitment to deliver the Mental Health Action Plan. It was noted that this Plan contained a number of commitments to review and develop services and to put measures in place to ensure long term strategic change that would be brought about by the development and implementation of the 10 year Mental Health Strategy.

Both the DoE and PHA highlighted that additional funding was available and multi-agency work was already progressing. They specifically referred to the CAMHS teams (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) and the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) Approach.

A Member highlighted the emphasis that many schools placed on academic achievement and stated that it was important that schools started to focus less on this and more on children and young people's physical and mental health. He also called for an expansion in the mental health services available to primary school students and for the services currently available at post-primary level to be made available to younger pupils.

Following a query, the Neighbourhood Services Manager confirmed that the Council's Community Plan – the Belfast Agenda - linked in with the desired outcomes of the mental health action plan and 10 year strategy and that the Council was committed to working together with communities and other statutory agencies to review and help deliver the required services at a local level.

Several of the members of the Youth Forum reflected on their own experiences in relation to mental health issues, particularly over the lockdown period, which had exacerbated mental health problems for many young people.

An external representative from the DoE reiterated that funding was available and that much work had already commenced to prepare an initial implemental plan to progress the actions outlined in the Mental Health Action Plan. The representative noted that the EITR Research was very beneficial and stated that the DoE was keen to use the research and to link with the other statutory agencies to progress the delivery of this vital work.

As with the RSE Campaign, given the length of discussion and volume of information presented by the various organisations, it was agreed that the representatives from the statutory organisations would each forward a summary of their current procedures and a synopsis of the points raised for circulation to the Elected Members and the Belfast Youth Forum Members.

Noted.

### **Mental Health Toolkit – Ciara McBratney**

The representative advised the Members of the creation and imminent online launch of the 'Heads Up' mental health advocacy toolkit which had been designed in partnership between BYF, NIYF and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and

Young People (NICCY). She explained that the toolkit had been designed to help and support young people to take action and campaign on local mental health issues. It was predominantly for young people and youth groups who wanted to start their own mental health campaign and projects in their community and would give young people the skills and information to take action around mental health in the community.

The Committee noted that the Heads Up -Toolkit was due to be launched online on Thursday, 18th February.

### **Belfast Youth Forum - Recruitment Update**

The Committee was reminded that, at the August 2020 meeting of the People and Communities meeting, it had been agreed, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the limitations that the environment had presented for positive active engagement with young people, schools and service providers that the term of the existing BYF members be extended for another year.

Previously, at the January 2020 Special People and Communities Committee meeting, it had been agreed to amend the BYF recruitment process. It would now begin in September and end in October in line with the academic year, as the previous recruitment timeframe had been during April and May, which had conflicted with the exam season for the BYF members.

Following discussion at the August 2020 People and Communities Committee, it had been agreed that any current vacant places within the BYF would be filled with the intention of using targeted recruitment to address any gaps in relation to communities which were currently underrepresented in the Forum. In response to this, a limited recruitment drive was currently ongoing throughout December 2020 and January 2021 to fill the 10 vacant places within the Youth Forum. Applications were open to everyone, however the recruitment drive was being promoted in specific areas of Belfast and with specific groups which were under represented through various means such as social media, engagement with Elected Member, engagement with Education Authority Youth Service, promotion through existing area BCC Area Support staff and engagement with existing community contacts.

Noted.

### **NCB Mental Health Charter for Children and Young People**

The Committee was advised that the National Children's Bureau had been working on the development of a children and young person's mental health charter. The Members were asked to note that Belfast City Council had been involved in this as part of a project stakeholder group and that the Belfast Youth Forum had been referenced within it alongside NI Youth Forum, in relation to the Elephant in the Room report.

The Charter was due to be launched on 4th February and further updates on it would be presented at the next Joint Committee.

Noted.

**Date of next Meeting**

The Committee noted that the next Special Joint meeting was scheduled to be held on Tuesday, 22nd June at 5.15 p.m.

Chairperson