



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Youth Forum Review
Date:	9 April 2008
Reporting Officer:	Marie-Thérèse McGivern Director of Development ext. 3470
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Relevant Background Information

On 15 June 2005 the Community and Recreation Committee agreed to the establishment of a Youth Forum for Belfast City Council. Since then a Children and Young People Coordinator was appointed on a fixed term contract and the Youth Forum has been established.

The Youth Forum consists of 36 young people from 13-18 years old from across the City. The Forum is split into issue based sub groups as directed by the young people themselves and have looked at issues including mental health, suicide, drugs and alcohol, anti social behaviour, facilities and youth provision.

The Belfast City Council Youth Forum is recognised locally and nationally in both GB and the Republic of Ireland, as a model of best practice and Belfast City Council is regularly commended on this work.

Members will be aware that in June 2005 it was agreed that after the initial two years term in office, a review of the Youth Forum would be carried out. At its meeting of 12 December 2007, Committee agreed to extend the term in office of the current Youth Forum until April 08 in order to facilitate the conclusion of this review and the subsequent report to Committee.

The purpose of this report is to give members details of the review as well as to make recommendations on the future of the BCC Youth Forum.

Key Issues

Members will be aware of the background to the work of the BCC YF from previous committee reports. A short video will be shown which documents some of the work of the Youth Forum.

Youth Forum Review Synopsis

The YF review was carried out independently by Justice Associates in order to define:

- Current role of the Youth Forum in Council.
- Resources provided / needed to support the forum.
- Governance arrangements
- Practice to date
- the future role of the Youth Forum within the Development Department and the Council

The review focused on the following specific objectives

- Review the need for the forum and the policy context within which it operates
- Review the achievements of the forum to date
- Review the effectiveness of the processes and systems used to:
 1. Recruit young people to ensure that the forum is representative of young people in Belfast in terms of age, gender, religion, location.
 2. Select topics for discussion
 3. Engage with other young people who are not on the forum
 4. Engage with Councillors, Council officers, Youth champions etc.
 5. Support the young people on the forum
 6. Conduct meetings
- Review of resources needed to support the forum
- Identify best practice models for Youth engagement that are being used by other organisations in other cities.
- Based on best practice models make recommendations for the Council on the ways of improving the Youth Forum.

Approach

The report offers insight into the policy context & background of the Youth Forum highlighting Section 75 legislation, the UNCRC, Best Value Legislation, and other policy documents which outline the duty to involve young people in decision making and policy development.

The review also details some of the work of the YF and outlines the methodology adopted for data collection which included obtaining feedback from Youth Forum members; the BCC interdepartmental group for children and young people (CHYPs); the Joint Youth Panel (external stakeholders) and the Youth Champions (elected members).

The report finishes with conclusions and recommendations.

Key issues from the report:

The review is generally very positive. It highlights that as a model the Belfast City Council Forum is a good way of involving young people in public decision making. Feedback from respondents overwhelmingly reflects this view.

The review also highlights the continuing development of the Youth Forum, and details how ongoing monitoring and evaluation has led to visible positive improvements in the way the Youth Forum approaches its work.

Representation:

Representation of any such structure is always scrutinised. In the case of the Belfast City Council Youth Forum the report highlights that the method of recruitment is satisfactory and as a result representation is good. The report notes balanced representation in terms of age, gender, geography, religion and section 75 groups. The report points to a perception in some quarters that the Youth Forum is made up of an 'elite' group of young people. Given the contrary evidence, the evaluators suggest there 'might be merit in devising a suitable mechanism for recording the make-up of the membership in order to better combat any impression of exclusiveness or elitism.'

Member turnover:

Young people are a transient group: the pressures of adolescence coupled with factors such as family life, studies, relationships, extra curricular interests or more serious personal issues can impact on levels of drop out in all youth participation structures.

In the case of the BCC Youth Forum, turnover was noted as satisfactory, and the review considered that systems in place to combat this are good.

Impact on policies:

The report also discusses the Forum's impact on policies, and suggests that it can be difficult to recognise the impact young people's views have on policy making, particularly in a large local authority like Belfast City Council as it can be complex and slow-moving process. The consultants however point to evidence which demonstrates how the Youth Forum has engaged with a wide range of Council Departments and Units in the design and delivery of initiatives. They argue such engagement influences the policy at the correct stage, at the time of its development, but note this is difficult to measure.

Furthermore the review recognises that the long term significance of the Youth Forum also relates to organisational culture. It suggests that if it is accepted that young people should be consulted about any policy or action that affects them; and that their views are taken into account in the decision-making process; then the Youth Forum will invariably impact on these outcomes. This therefore highlights the importance that the culture of engaging with young people becomes embedded in the Council's processes.

They commend the plans for further development in relation to this internally, such as training for officers in youth participation, and mechanisms to monitor and evaluate consultations with the Youth Forum in relation to outcomes.

They further welcome the planned development of a communications plan for the Youth Forum in order to better inform elected members, officers, other young people, and the general public on the work of the Youth Forum and vice versa.

Youth Champions:

The review highlights the importance of the Youth Champions and the role they have played in the success of the Youth Forum. The Youth Champions provide a vital link between the work of the young people and that of elected members. Engagement between young people and elected members has been a hugely positive part of the Youth Forum, with meetings involving these groupings being seen as one of the Youth Forum's great strengths.

This aspect of the Youth Forum has helped promote the BCC Youth Forum as a model of good practice and other models have attempted to, or have made plans to follow suit, nationally and internationally.

The review recommends the continuation of the BCC Youth Forum with young people outlining their preferred method for the selection process for a second term in office.

Value for Money:

Justice Associates have highlighted that to assess this properly they would need to carry out a SMART assessment; but have said that for an organisation of BCC's size the budget is satisfactory value for money and note the project is 'well resourced'.

Overall conclusion

The conclusion details how the Belfast City Council Youth Forum is a uniquely valuable contribution to the decision making process of the Belfast City Council. The review also highlights areas for improvement, some of which are already underway.

The review highlights how the first two years of work has provided a solid basis on which to continue to develop the Belfast City Council Youth Forum.

Justice Associates commend Belfast City Council on the Youth Forum and recommend that the Forum continues.

Resource Implications

Financial

There are no additional financial implications outside revenue estimates.

Human Resources

The post of the Children and Young People Coordinator is currently fixed term and runs until August 2008. The post is being considered within the current structural review of the service.

Recommendations

Committee are asked to support the following recommendations from the independent review of the Youth Forum:

1. BCC develop a corporate strategy for Children and Young People and this strategy provides a framework for the Youth Forum and the work of the Joint Youth Panel.
2. The BCC Youth Forum continues to operate for a further term of two years and that re-elections take place during May / June 2008.
3. The proposals on the selection process as outlined by the Youth Forum are adopted.
4. The post of C&YP Co-ordinator is reviewed.

5. Consideration is given to the adoption of the concept of 'senior member' or 'volunteer youth leader' in order to harness the knowledge and experience of young people who have gone through the system and to offer support to the BCC officer.
6. The development of a comprehensive Communications & Engagement strategy.
7. The value of young people's participation in grant assessment to be considered within the context of the department grant review.

Key to Abbreviations

YF: Belfast City Council Youth Forum
UNCRC: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
CHYPs: BCC Interdepartmental Group for Children & Young People

Documents Attached

Appendix 1: Youth Forum Review - carried out by Justice Associates

APPENDIX 1

Justice Associates

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REVIEW OF BELFAST CITY COUNCIL'S YOUTH FORUM (Draft)

Introduction

About Justice Associates

This evaluation has been carried out by Brian Gormally and Margaret McTeggart, members of Justice Associates – a loose network of consultants who work, individually or in co-operation, on policy, research, evaluation and management support mainly for the voluntary and community sector in Ireland, North and South.

Terms of Reference

In December 2007 Belfast City Council produced the following Terms of Reference for a Review of the Youth Forum:

- Define current role of the Youth Forum in Council.
- Resources provided / needed to support the forum.
- Governance arrangements
- Practice to date
- Identify the future role of the Youth Forum within the Development Department and the Council

The objectives

- Review the need for the forum and the policy context within which it operates
- Review the achievements of the forum to date
- Review the effectiveness of the processes and systems used to:
 - Recruit young people to ensure that the forum is representative of young people in Belfast in terms of age, gender, religion, location.
 - Select topics for discussion
 - Engage with other young people who are not on the forum
 - Engage with Councillors, Council officers, Youth champions etc.
 - Support the young people on the forum
 - Conduct meetings
- Review of resources needed to support the forum
- Identify best practice models for Youth engagement that are being used by other organisations in other cities
 - Based on best practice models make recommendations for the Council on the ways of improving the Youth Forum

The Policy Context of the Review

There is an increasing emphasis, both in government and civil society, on involving those who are affected by various policies in the process of decision-making. There are a number of motivating factors for this including the demands of equality legislation, particularly, in our case, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, the requirement to seek best value and the proper desire to fit policy to the needs of people. There is a particular interest in involving young people.

Young people are, of course, the consumers, voters and stakeholders of the future. They are also young citizens whose views and interests are as important as any other section of society. Furthermore, there is an increasing recognition of the specific rights of children and young people. The basic international legal instrument in this connection is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, agreed in 1989. This is a legal document binding on States that have ratified it, including the United Kingdom. There is a specific reference to consulting children in Article 12, which reads:

'To the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'

This Article can be read as referring to collective consultation on matters affecting young people as well as in the case of decisions affecting an individual's life.

At a UK level a number of initiatives have been taken in the past few years to increase the participation of young people in decision making. The Labour government established the Children and Young People's Unit which was given the power to require central government departments to publicly state the ways in which they were involving young people in their decision-making. The Unit also established the UK Youth Parliament which now has an assembly of young people elected from every local authority in the country.

In 2001 the Local Government Association, in association with the National Youth Agency, developed the Hear by Right initiative which gave local authorities in England and elsewhere guidance on ways in which they should be involving young people in local democracy and detailed standards to aspire to. This was revised in 2005 and has attracted considerable interest and many authorities are actively developing their practice in this area.

In July 2005 the government launched its green paper Youth Matters setting out proposals designed to improve outcomes for 13-19-year-olds. It proposed that young people should have:

- More things to do and places to go in their local area - and more choice and influence over what is available
- More opportunities to volunteer and to make a contribution to their local community
- Better information, advice and guidance about issues that matter to them, delivered in the way they want to receive it
- Better support when they need extra help to deal with problems

Amongst other things the Green Paper highlights that teenagers have not been sufficiently involved in decisions about service provision. It proposes that additional duties be placed on local authorities to create more opportunities for young people to make a contribution to decision making processes. It states:

"We want young people to have more direct involvement in all stages of service, design, development, delivery and evaluation. By involving them we can help to ensure that they will share ownership of decisions and use facilities and services responsibly and that the investment of public, private or charitable funds is directed to meet their needs."

In more general terms, involving local people and consumers in decisions affecting them has been a principle of much government policy. Children and young people are one of the key constituencies for such participation.

In Northern Ireland, OFMDFM has developed a Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People 2006-2016. The strategy is effectively a ten year plan with the aims 'to ensure that by 2016 all our children and young people are fulfilling their potential.' Again, amongst other things it argues the importance of involving young people in decision making.

There have been a number of other responses to this policy context in Northern Ireland.

The Participation Network aims to develop the capacity of statutory authorities and government departments in NI to fulfil their duties to effectively engage, consult with and involve children and young people in decision making. It tries to do this by creating a network of agencies with expertise, offer training/consultancy support, develop and promote good practice standards for participation, and develop a bank of resource materials. The Network is based in Children in Northern Ireland.

The Big Deal programme brought together many of the key stakeholders involved in the development, delivery and management of children and youth services in Northern Ireland to develop the Participation Hub. The aim of the programme is to encourage children and young people to become involved in participatory activities through the Hub and to increase the level of children and young people's involvement in the planning and management of activities and services for them. The Hub aims to build connections and create networks for children and young people to influence public policy and decision making locally and across communities. The Big Deal has carried out an Audit of Participative Structures in Northern Ireland (May 2007) and is currently consulting on a set of Standards for Youth Councils in relation to participation. Associated with the Big Deal is the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. The NIYF is a youth led organisation that lobbies, advocates, promotes and fights for the rights of young people in NI. It aims to build the confidence and awareness of all young people so that they can assert their rights.

The Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work in Northern Ireland 2005-2008 from the Department of Education has youth participation as one of its key themes.

In September 2006 the report of the URBACT programme was published. The URBACT (Urban Action) programme involved ten young adults aged between sixteen and twenty-five years. They were all professional youth workers and were drawn from Belfast's main youth providers, with the Belfast Education and Library Board's Youth Service, Youth Action NI, Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Opportunity Youth and Belfast City Council all taking part, with BCC taking the lead. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People also provided support and guidance.

The project focused on Youth Participation on a European level and the end result was the production of a toolkit for youth participation. The toolkit recommended seven broad principals for youth participation.

Understanding Participation – this recommendation accepts there are different models of participation and emphasises a realistic assessment of resources at the

beginning of the process and the need to understand young people's interests, needs and capabilities

Diversity – this recommendation recognises that young people are diverse and there is a need to be proactive when engaging with those young people who are disadvantaged or socially excluded

Motivation – this recommendation the importance of identifying what motivates young people

Communication - this recommendation recognises the importance of communication with young people and the need to use appropriate language and mediums

Credibility - this recommendation is about being clear with young people about what can be achieved and delivering on any commitments given

Sustainability - this recommendations about embedding the participation of young people in the organisation but also developing a flexible approach which recognise young people will opt in and out as their interests and commitments dictate

Resources – This recommendation recognises that the participative approach does require resources

This Report and principals for participation were agreed and adopted by Belfast City Council.

In 2006 the Department of Education tasked the Youth Council for NI to act as Chair and Secretariat to a cross-sectoral working group which would advise the Department on the development of a Northern Ireland Network for Youth (NINFY). The role of NINFY will be to 'strengthen the direct voice of young people in all relevant aspects of government provision'. (Minister of Education, 2006). We understand that BCC represents local government on this group through their Children and Young People's Coordinator. A pre-consultation phase took place from July-September 2007, and the [Summary of Responses](#) from this has been published. A full consultation report will be issued in early Spring 2008. The production of the report will be informed by an advisory panel of children and young people, which was to be established in January 2008.

There is therefore a groundswell of support in government and in civil society for increased participation by young people in decision-making. The process is not, however, easy.

There is a considerable literature on the issues and problems involved in encouraging young people's participation in decision-making. For the last decade, a major UK project, the Carnegie Youth Initiative has been devoted to the subject; June 2007 was its final month of operation and much of its work has been passed on to Participation Works. Participation Works is a consortium of six leading children and young people's organisations that provides expert advice to anyone wanting to give a voice to children and young people. This is not the place to rehearse all the significant features of the literature and research on the topic. However, in approaching this review of a major initiative in youth participation, it is important to have some understanding of the factors likely to be significant in making a project a success.

When it comes to youth participation and involvement in Northern Ireland, a research study commissioned by the Carnegie Youth Initiative documents some of the emerging lessons, both from the literature and a survey of practice here that they carried out in 2000. These are detailed in "Taking the Initiative: Promoting Young People's Involvement in Public Decision Making Northern Ireland Report," carried out by a partnership of Save the Children Fund and the Youth Council for Northern Ireland. This report says:

"To support the involvement of children and young people in decision making, a number of measures are required:

- A clear management vision for involving children and young people in decision making with a sound value system, matching good practice guidelines and overall clarity with regards to planning, outcomes and limitations.
- An organisational culture of involvement including structures, systems and processes and the creation of meaningful opportunities to engage children and young people in decision making.
- Adequate resources to support the involvement of children and young people in decision making including professional staff employed, financial backing and good quality training for both adults and young people.
- Appropriate mechanisms to involve marginalised or disadvantaged children and young people on an equitable basis to enable them to engage effectively in the process.
- Independent Quality Assurance measures and an evaluation framework to sustain involvement in decision making to provide accountability for children and young people."

We have not taken the above points as a formal framework of analysis for the Review, nor have we had the time or resources to investigate all the aspects indicated. However, we will bear in mind these lessons as indicators of success in making a judgment on the performance of the Belfast City Council Youth Forum.

The Establishment of the Youth Forum

In Belfast City Council's Corporate Plan of 2004, "Improving Services for Children and Young People" was identified as a key priority issue. The Corporate Plan stated the commitment to listening to, and acting on young people's opinions, particularly in relation to services / policy decisions that affect their lives. In March 2005, Belfast City Council employed a Children and Young People's Coordinator, who would be responsible for dedicating time and resources to the establishment of a Youth Forum. The purpose of the Youth Forum was to provide the Council with a mechanism to engage with young people and also to give young people an opportunity to be listened to and become involved in the development of policies and services that interest them.

The Youth Forum was to have two main functions:

- To act as a consultation mechanism through which the Council would seek the views of young people on the range of policy, strategy and operational issues for which it has authority to act.
- To provide an opportunity for young people to raise and consider issues of importance for them and to seek the Council's support in progressing these.

It was decided that the age range for the Forum would be 13 to 18 (or up to age 21 for young people who are disabled or leaving care); and that 4 young people would be appointed from each of the 9 electoral areas; and that there would be an option for four extra places to allow young people to be co-opted from under represented groups e.g. those who may be described as 'section 75'. This gave a membership of 36 – 40 young people. Voluntary, statutory and community organisations working with young people in the Belfast City Council Area were asked to nominate potential members of the Forum. Two appointment panels were set up and nominees were interviewed.

The training and development of the young people was recognised as being a vital element in its success. A series of training and development sessions were held during April 2006. A preliminary meeting took place in the format of an induction briefing; the second meeting was a residential. At the residential young people took part in outdoor activities to enable them to get to know each other and start the bonding process. In addition, there were sessions on community mapping, action planning, committee skills and the expectations on the Youth Forum. During a third meeting the Council's corporate induction was tailored for young people, involving interactive methods of learning and a tour of City Hall. Since then other training undertaken by the members has included peace & reconciliation, drugs & alcohol, ASIST, action planning, Office Bearers training, how a Council works, Good Relations – Examples include Traveller awareness, racism, prejudice, sectarianism, citizenship

The first Youth Forum meeting was held in the Council Chamber on the 23rd May 2006. The full Youth Forum meets in the Council Chamber on a monthly basis, with sub groups meeting in Cecil Ward Building, also on a monthly basis. On arrival at meetings, which usually begin at 5.30, a hot meal is provided, with work beginning half an hour later. Young people are reimbursed for their bus tickets for their journey to meetings and given a taxi home.

Initially three sub-groups were established on drugs and alcohol, facilities and youth provision and health. The Drugs and Alcohol sub group decided that they wanted to do accredited training in Drugs and Alcohol Awareness. During a residential in August 2006, all members of the group completed their OCN level I in Drugs and Alcohol Awareness. They also produced a video highlighting the dangers of misuse of alcohol. The Facilities sub group carried out research into young people's views of youth provision, by taking part in mystery visits and carrying out an online survey as well as talking to their peers. They also investigated the feasibility of a "Leisureplex" for Belfast. We are told that they continue to work closely with BCC Leisure Services on improving provision for teenagers. Another achievement of this group is their work on a skate park for Belfast, which looks set to be completed later this year depending on funding. The Health sub group decided to focus on the problem of suicide and have undertaken training in peer awareness on the subject. Two young people were trained as trainers, and have delivered the ASIST programme to over 400 young people across Belfast & NI. The same sub group also ran an awareness raising play in partnership with the Samaritans in City Hall for an audience of 300 young people.

The Youth Forum also participates in the “6x5” funding scheme which provides 6 grants of £5,000 to Belfast City Council departments to run projects which improve services to Children and Young People. The focus of the projects includes promoting youth participation and combating anti-social behaviour. The young people set criteria, assess applications and make recommendations on funding.

In addition, members of the Youth Forum sit on a range of other bodies, and have taken part in various local, national and international conferences and seminars representing the views of their peers.

The political parties represented in the Council each agreed to appoint a Youth Champion. We understand that the Youth Champions meet with Forum members, regularly, usually every three months.

A Youth Forum planning session in December 2007 produced a full list of activities the Forum has engaged in since its inception. (Appendix 1)

Then at a meeting of the Youth Forum in January 2008, members, as well as planning future activities, agreed unanimously that the Youth Forum should run for a further 2 years.

Three young people presented detailed proposals on the re-election process for the next Youth Forum and after much debate and discussion it was agreed that the following proposals would be submitted to Justice Associates, who were carrying out an independent Review of the Youth Forum.

- a. The selection process should be via nomination and interview (involving the Co-ordinator, a neutral person and a past YF member)
- b. Nominations can be received from adults or young people.
- c. Young People can self nominate.
- d. A one page application form should be used again in case short listing is required
 - i. Although nominations can also be received by SMS text or e-mail
- e. Youth Forum Members can be re-nominated
- f. There should be no limit to the amount of current members who can get on the new YF; although they will be assessed on the following criteria:
 - i. Must have an acceptable attendance record (attendance at majority of meetings)
 - ii. Must have shown to give input / put their views across
 - iii. Has shown respect to other members e.g. one singer one song; respects other people’s opinions etc.
- g. The age should remain at 13 – 18 (up to 21 for disabled young people or care leavers was proposed but not agreed according to the minutes).
- h. Those aged over 18 should be offered the opportunity to stay on as helpers / possibly form a steering panel
- i. The current geographical spread (i.e. four young people from each of the 9 electoral areas) should be aspired towards, but this is not seen as essential – a N/S/E/W spread was seen as more important.

Methodology

(April-June 2007)

Justice Associates carried out an examination of materials made available by the Youth Forum Co-ordinator. An initial meeting was held in Belfast City Council Chamber with Youth Forum members, to discuss what an evaluation might entail and gather the views of members of the forum on the appropriate methodology.

Justice Associates then drafted questionnaires aimed at different audiences i.e. past and present members of the forum, members of the Joint Youth Panel and the Youth Champions.

A second meeting was held with the young people to assist those who hadn't already done so, to complete the questionnaire and to further explore their views on the impact of the forum. An analysis of the questionnaires and the outcome of the focus group session were carried out.

A questionnaire was circulated, several times in some cases, to Joint Youth Panel members.

Youth Champions were also contacted and telephone interviews were conducted with two of them.

A draft report was then produced in July 2007 and forwarded to the Youth Forum Co-ordinator for circulation.

(January-February 2008)

For this phase of the review Justice Associates met with the Co-ordinator and examined materials provided by him on developments which had taken place since the Summer.

Questionnaires were once again circulated to Youth Forum members and responses analysed.

The Associates attended meetings of both the Council's Children & Young Person's (CHYPS) Interdepartmental Group and the Joint Youth Panel.

Questionnaires were circulated to members of both groups and to other pertinent individuals identified by members and were analysed.

Questionnaires for the 6 Youth Champions were also devised and circulated resulting disappointingly in only one response via a telephone interview.

Other similar models were considered.

Based on all of the above this draft report was subsequently produced.

Analysis of the Youth Forum Members' Questionnaires

A questionnaire was administered to the young people who were members, or in a few cases, recently ex-members of the Youth Forum in April 2007. An almost

identical questionnaire was circulated to current members in January 2008. In each case 28 forms were returned.

Of the 28 young people who filled in questionnaires this year, 14 were male and 14 female. 11 were aged 13 to 15 years and 17 were aged 16 to 19 years. 17 of the young people had been members since the Forum was established, 6 had joined in the last year and 5 in the last six months. All the electoral areas of the City were represented by 3 young people, except for Castle which had 4. This is an improvement on the spread of representation from the previous year.

The questionnaire included some monitoring information and some open-ended questions (see below) but the bulk of it was in the form of statements with which respondents were invited to agree or disagree. The data was collated by allocating each possible response to each statement a numerical value as follows:

Strongly agree	+2
Agree	+1
Don't Know	0
Disagree	- 1
Strongly disagree	- 2

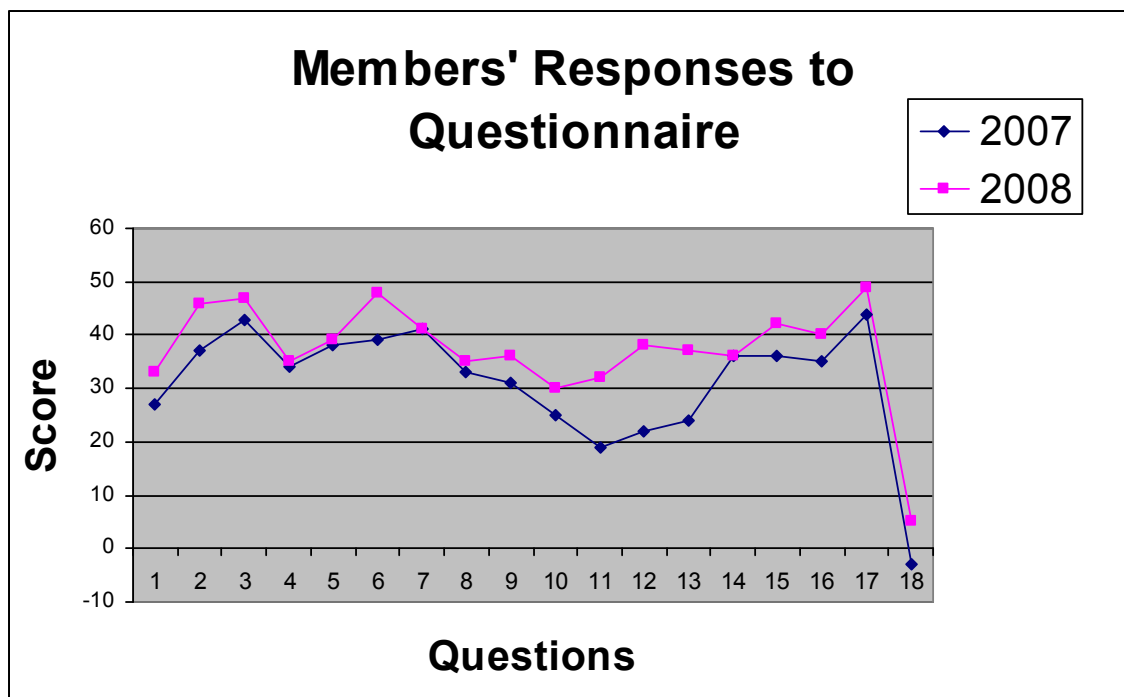
This method enables a numerical measure of the strength of agreement or disagreement with a particular statement. In this case, since the number of respondents in each case was 28, the maximum strength of agreement with any statement would be represented by a score of +56 and total disagreement with a score of -56.

The statements, together with the scores in each year are shown below.

Statements	2007	2008
1. The training we received when we started in the Youth Forum was useful and informative	27	33
2. From training and working in the Youth Forum I know more about Belfast City Council	37	46
3. From working in the Youth Forum I know more about the issues that are important to young people	43	47
4. The experience of working in the Youth Forum has made be better at communicating with other people	34	35
5. Working in the Youth Forum has made me more confident in expressing my views	38	39
6. I enjoy the meetings and activities of the Youth Forum	39	48
7. Working in my sub-group has made me more aware of the issues	41	41
8. My sub-group has raised the awareness of other young people about the issues involved	33	35

9. My sub-group has raised the awareness of Councillors about the issues involved	31	36
10. My sub-group has raised the awareness of other agencies and organisations about the issues involved	25	30
11. My sub-group has had a real influence on the policy of the Council	19	32
12. The projects supported by the 6x5 Funding have made a real difference for children and young people in the City	22	38
13. Making decisions on grants has been an important role for the Forum	24	37
14. Having representatives from the Youth Forum on other external bodies is an important way for us to get our views heard	36	36
15. The recruitment and selection of members of the Youth Forum is fair and open	36	42
16. The members of the Youth Forum are generally representative of the young people of the City	35	40
17. Communication by text and e-mails are good ways to keep me in touch with the Forum	44	49
18. The Youth Forum section of the City Council web-site is very useful and informative	-3	5

The responses are shown in graphical form below.



Statements 1 to 6 were designed to test the young people's views on the personal benefit and increase in knowledge that involvement in the forum had brought for them. As can be seen, the vast majority of the young people have found the experience of being involved in the forum very beneficial in terms of their increased knowledge in relation to Belfast City Council and to issues affecting young people in the greater Belfast area. It would also seem to have enhanced the personal development of the young people in being better able to communicate their views and having increased confidence so to do. An additional benefit is that they have evidently enjoyed the experience.

In this area, as in most others, it appears that the young people have become more positive in the period since the first survey was carried out. This is particularly marked in relation to increased knowledge about the City Council and to the enjoyment of the Forum's activities.

Statements 7 to 11 were about the work of the sub-groups and their influence on other people. The young people are fairly clear as to the personal benefit in terms of knowledge of the issues that working in the sub-groups as given them. They are less clear, however, about the extent of influence on other parties. In the 2007 survey, the young people were decreasingly confident about the impact their work had on individual Councillors, other agencies and the policy of the Council as a whole. In 2008 there was a similar pattern, but at a considerably higher level of confidence. In fact young people now seem to be convinced that their work is having a significant impact on Council policy.

Statements 12 and 13 were about the grant-making activities of the Forum. In 2007 there was considerable degree of uncertainty about the impact and importance of this work. By this year the young people seemed to be much more confident that the grant making was having an impact and was an important part of their work – the scores increased by 70%.

There was fairly strong and equal support over time for the proposition in Statement 14 that having Youth Forum members on other bodies was a useful way of getting their views heard.

Statements 15 and 16 were about the recruitment and representativeness of the members of the Youth Forum. Over the past year members seem to have increased their confidence that both the mechanism for recruiting members and their representativeness is satisfactory.

The last two Statements were about communication. Not surprisingly, the members remain happy with text and e-mail as a method of keeping them in touch. Unfortunately, there is still a high level of dissatisfaction with the Youth Forum section of the Council web-site.

The questionnaire concluded with some open-ended questions. The first was: **“Have you been able to get your views across to the Council and have they been taken seriously?”**

The big majority of respondents simply answered “yes” to this question. A couple said “no” or “don’t know.” While there was little detail in the responses, most young people seem to think their activities have been taken seriously.

The second question was: **“What can we improve in the way the Youth Forum is organised and does its business? (E.g. sharing information, initial training)”**

The single most frequent suggestion was variations on “more accredited training.” Other suggestions were “more planning,” “better communication with councillors” and one young person requested that “the reception staff be more friendly to Youth Forum members.”

The last question was: **“What do you want to see happen about the Youth Forum in the future?”**

Most respondents said something on the lines of “keep it going,” “make it permanent,” perhaps reflecting some anxiety about the review. One explained, “I want to see the Youth Forum be continued, this is because we still have a load of work to be done and there are a lot of new projects that we still have to start.” Again, one respondent suggested, “extend the YF and more responsibility given to members – further funding to enable us to work on more projects.” On a similar theme, one said, “I want the membership to expand and a larger variety of sub-groups to be available.” Another said they would like to see, “more Youth Forums opening up around Northern Ireland.” A number of young people suggested educational or exchange trips.

Focus Group Findings

The following are the questions that were put in the focus group discussion held in 2007 and a summary of the responses from the young people. Due to time constraints it was not possible to hold a focus group discussion in 2008.

Have you been able to get your views across to the Council and have they been taken seriously?

In general the young people seemed satisfied that they were able to get their views across and have them acted upon. They gave a number of examples such as the fact that the Facilities sub-group had pressed for a skate park in the city and this was now being actively pursued. They pointed out that this idea had been discussed for years but felt that their intervention had made it actually happen.

They were particularly appreciative of the “6x5” funding scheme in that they actually took the decisions. They also noted their participation in a number of consultations on subject such as firearms and “getting home safe” that evidently interested them.

There were some negative comments. The Facilities sub-group had wished to use leisure centre “boost cards” as prizes for participation in a youth survey and, while this was possible in the end, they felt that there was a great deal of bureaucratic delay in the process. The other negative comment was about the web-site – it is apparently a disappointment as content has to be vetted as being in line with Council policy since it carries the City Council logo. We have not had the opportunity to probe this matter further, but it reflects the rather negative view of the web-site expressed in the questionnaires.

Have you been able to raise your own issues with the Council and get support for progressing them?

There was a generally positive response to this question though less in the way of concrete examples. One example, however, was that the idea from the Drugs and Alcohol sub-group for a video on the dangers of misuse had received practical support from the Council in the form of matching funding that they themselves had raised. A general comment was that the young people were appreciative of the level of funding for the Youth Forum. It was felt to be sufficient to carry out its desired activities effectively.

It was perhaps not directly relevant to the question, but in this section of the discussion the young people raised their disappointment with meetings with the Joint Youth Panel. They noted that all the other youth organisations were represented by adults and at times they felt patronised in the meetings.

What can be improved in the way the Youth Forum is organised and does its business?

It was noted that change was happening anyway. The sub-groups were changing – Facilities and Youth Provision is moving on to a focus on Good Relations and the Drugs and Alcohol sub-group is coming to end of its work so will be changing its role.

There was a division of opinion on the time scale of sub-group activities. Some felt that programmes should be shorter and that a year is too long on one subject and perhaps 3 months would be better. Others felt that a year is good in that the subject could be approached in a deeper way.

There was also a diversity of views on the age range for participation in the Forum. Some felt the current age range was appropriate – others said that it should extend to 21. It was also clear that some of the younger ones got bored at meetings. Some felt that they should have two groups – older and younger. Some of the stuff is felt to be too heavy for young ones. Perhaps there should be a group for 13-15 year-

olds and then one for 16-21. As opposed to that some felt that that might marginalise younger ones.

There was some concern about poor behaviour by some members. It was suggested that the early residential had been disrupted and that there was sometimes problems in keeping control of meetings. There was a code of conduct but some people felt it was not properly enforced. There was also some concern about poor attendance – it was suggested that the rule of expulsion after three non-attendances had only been implemented once. It was also suggested that young people should be able to nominate themselves as potential members on the grounds that they may have more time than if they are already with a group.

A particular point was that there should be a female, as well as male, leader. It was noted that there was always a female volunteer or other staff member at residentials but it would be helpful during the normal business as well.

What do you want to see happen about the Youth Forum in the future?

The Forum wants to organise a European exchange visit in order to make contact with other youth forums. Funding is being raised but it is suggested that there is delay “because of bureaucracy.”

The younger members say that there is too much meeting. The “Quizdom” technique is seen as a good way of doing business but they have only used it once.

They are progressing Good Relations and policing is seen as a big issue for the future.

We understand that, following the feedback given in these focus groups during 2007, various changes were implemented including a more aggressive stance on youth forum attendance, shorter sub group projects, female facilitators brought in for meetings etc.

Internal Views of Belfast City Council

Completed questionnaires were received from 8 Council Officers, and a telephone interview was held with one of the Youth Champions. Their views are summarised below in italics with their recommendations where applicable.

Can you tell us what you know of the work of the BCC Youth Forum & how?

Its purpose/value

Its membership (role/level/induction)

How it does business (Chair/frequency of meetings/agendas)

Relationship/communication with CHYPS?

1 respondent provided no response to this question, 8 others would appear to have some knowledge of the purpose of the Youth Forum although only 4 spelt out its 2 fold nature in:

‘Acting as a mechanism through which the Council can consult with young people and;

Acting as a mechanism through which the young people can raise and discuss issues of importance to them and which can be raised with Council Officers and Elected Members.’

In relation to its membership, 1 respondent was very clear and gave a comprehensive response, 2 declared a good knowledge, another a basic understanding and the remaining 5 were unclear, unsure, had scant or no knowledge.

*“How it does business” produced a similar pattern of knowledge from comprehensive through to good, basic, unsure, none, with 1 person not responding
Relationship with CHYPS – 2 respondents cited the Co-ordinator as the main route for communication and in all but 1 of the remaining responses, it was unclear, limited knowledge or didn’t know.*

Recommendations:

*Membership - Stronger links forged to ensure representation of ethnic minorities and young people with a disability
Business – Minutes of the Forum circulated
Improved Relationship/communication with CHYPS*

Any suggestions as to mechanisms for ensuring new members of CHYPS are informed of the Youth Forum’s work?

There was no response from 2 respondents and 1 had no suggestions. Of the remaining 6 here are their views verbatim.

Recommendations:

Developmental day; invite to Youth Forum meeting; circulation of Youth Forum minutes

A formal induction programme should be drafted by the C&YP Co-ordinator in association with the YF. This would include a pack with items such as Terms of Reference, Governance arrangements, most recent agenda, minutes and quarterly progress reports and examples of specific project work such as publications etc. It should also include the agreed work programme for the current annual period. The pack should also detail the responsibility of the officer and the support they will receive in fulfilling the responsibility – nearly a contract of involvement. It might also be useful for new members to attend a meeting of the Youth Forum to meet the current members and to gain insight into their work and modus operandi. I think the induction programme should be extended, and if appropriate adapted, to all stakeholders i.e. Youth Champions, Youth Panel, senior managers (?), other officers with specific C&YP focus or interface.

Roles need defined, objectives need set, working and sub groups need reports via visual aids or paper reports. Or they could be briefed by the strategy group or operations group or by the children and young people’s coordinator or by the youth champions.

Members of the Youth Forum to attend the CHYPS meeting to provide an update of the work of the group, more frequent updates about the work of the Forum on the Belfast City Council website so we can refer new members to them and circulation of Youth Forum minutes and agendas to members of the CHYPS group.

Minutes would be a start. Also better dissemination of social networks such as Bebo. I think CHYPS members should be able to observe at YF meetings and vice versa. Through the future post of Youth Forum coordinator who would sit on the CHYPS

Do you think this model is a good way of representing young people's views to the Council and other agencies?

Can you suggest any improvements?

6 respondents stated a definitive "yes" to the model, 1 an equally definite "no" and of the remaining 2, 1 felt that the model needed further explanation and 1 that it was too focussed on a small group of young people.

Recommendations

Links should be made with a wider group through community centres. Workshops should be held with children and appropriate forums established resulting in a wider participative network.

Further improve the representativeness of the Youth Forum with a particular view to Section 75 type issues. We must also provide greater clarity around the process and procedures to protect the independence of the Forum and protecting Council.

Need to publicise better the work that the Youth Forum does, particularly amongst young people, and to emphasise the fact that they are working on behalf of other young people in the city.

There needs to be a better two way process between different departments in the Council and the forum

The experience of the older members should not be lost and perhaps there should be some type of peer mentoring programme or advisory leadership role for them.

Once a year meeting with full Council or the relevant Committee. Meeting other Councillors even mingling at social events. Should not be "hived off into a little corner"

Are you aware of any issues where the Council's position has been changed or modified because of the views expressed by the Forum?

Examples?

If not, practical suggestions as to how communication could be improved between the Youth Forum and CHYPS?

3 of the respondents stated no/none to the awareness of issues where Council's position had been influenced, 2 appeared very knowledgeable, 2 had some knowledge, mainly in relation to the proposed skate park, 1 felt that there should be a better link between Youth Forum coordinator and CHYPS and 1 cautioned that the Forum could be cited as an end in itself, rather than actually improving services to young people i.e. paying lip service

Recommendations

The C&YPs co-ordinator could facilitate the YF to provide a quarterly report to BCC outlining: Current and planned works Outputs, Results and Impacts Recommendations / Conclusions including any suggestions re service extension /

improvement. The report could be discussed at CHYPs where appropriate action would be agreed.

A report on the activities of the Youth Forum at each meeting would be a good starting point.

Are you aware of any issues that the Youth Forum has raised and have then been supported by the Council?

5 of the respondents responded negatively to this question, which given the purpose of the Forum is significant in that either the forum is not 'doing its job' or it is not communicating effectively that it is doing it. 2 were able to quote examples, 1 was not sure if any results were down solely to the Forum and 1 mentioned only the skate park.

Do you think the way the Forum is constituted (nominations for youth organisations within the different electoral areas and then selection) is fair, representative and effective or would you suggest an alternative method?

There were 2 outright Yes's, 4 suggested alternative methods – see recommendations, 1 didn't know, 1 felt that it should be guided by young people and 1 was a definite "no – not representative"

Recommendations

Create links with community forums and establish a children's network. The budget for the Youth Forum is very generous and this could be shared out in developing ways for other young people and children to participate.

The review should consider how to engage with other BCC interfaces with young people, for example, Community Centres, Urban Arts, Good Relations, etc.

It may be useful for Youth Forums throughout the city nominate a representative from that particular geographical area and that young person could be a representative for them and liaise for that location and bring issues and provide feedback etc

Membership should be open to all young people in the city (within the relevant age group) and not just those from youth organisations. I also think more publicity needs to be given to the membership drive to ensure a wide range of applicants.

**Are you aware of the JYP? If so what do you see as its remit?
Do you think the meetings between the Joint Youth Panel and the Youth Forum members are valuable and do you think the young people are listened to?**

There were 6 negative responses to this question, particularly in relation to joint meetings. 1 suggested the need for more focus for the JYP. 1 was aware of its existence but not its role and 1 felt that it should meet more often.

Recommendations

Formal ToR, purpose statement and associated work programme for the group.

Are you familiar with the Champions and their role?

There was no response from 1 respondent and out of the remaining 8 all were aware of the existence of the Champion although 1 was unaware of the role they play and 2 stated that they could not name them. 4 did not know how they did business. 2 praised the interface between the Youth Forum and Champions but 1 was not convinced that communication with just the YF would ensure that Councillors are informed about the variety of issues facing Belfast's young people.

Recommendations

Consider how to better support the role of Champions to ensure dissemination to party colleagues.

Have regular meetings between the Forum and the full Council, or a regular briefing slot at each of the full Council meetings.

Is the management and administration of the Youth Forum properly placed within the Council structure?

4 respondents were clear that the Forum should remain where it is, 1 of them with the caveat, at least for now. 1 claimed it should be placed within 'directorate support'. There was no response from 1 person and another made no comment due to their lack of knowledge. 2 raised issues regarding the lack of its strategic approach, 1 querying its independence the need for it to link with other projects involving children & young people and the other in relation to whether it was the best use of resources.

Recommendations

*This review could offer alternative models
Two interesting suggestions were made. One, that in the future the Forum might align itself more closely with Councillors and two, that it could be funded by the Council but managed by a Youth NGO.*

Do you have any views about what the Youth Forum should be doing in the future?

Priorities over the next 2 years?

Recommendations

4 respondents commented on the need for the work of the Youth Forum to be aligned to the aims and strategic priorities of the BCC Strategy for Children and Youth People

2 proposed publicising the work that the Forum is currently involved in, 1 through better communication with the public, involving a communications plan and the other through holding regional and national seminars on European wide young person related issues

1 suggested that the Youth Forum should cease to continue based on it not representing value for money for the rates payer and on other agencies with youth as their central focus being better placed to advise council on the issues

2 mentioned re-establishing and expanding its base of children & young people across the city

1 campaigning for a N.I. Youth Assembly.

With more work done on gathering young people's views on issues, such as, racism/alcohol/volatile substance abuse

Are you aware of similar Youth Forum type structures in local authorities in other jurisdictions?

There does not appear to be extensive knowledge within this group of what is happening particularly within this jurisdiction. 4 respondents did not know of similar type structures, 1 was unsure if one existed in North Down, 1 cited Derry, Enniskillen & Newtown abbey as having folded and the others mentioned England, Scotland, Member States across Europe and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum.

Do you think there are other key organisations/individuals we should gather views from in relation to the review?

Below are the individuals/organisations mentioned:

PlayBoard

Joint Youth Panel members

DSD Voluntary & Community Unit

Belfast Area Partnerships

Youth Service

Community Foundation NI

NICVA

Youth NGOs

Playboard

Youth Champions

Director of Development, BCC

EU Manager, BCC

Policy Manager, Dev, BCC

All youth centres and BELB and young people

NICCY, UK Youth Parliament and other youth groups that the Youth Forum has worked with in the past, for example, Donegal Youth Council.

Belfast YMCA

Some final comments in this section

There were a couple of very negative comments expressed referring to the Forum as an 'elitist group' and to the attitude of the young people but as can be seen from the responses above the findings in the main have been positive.

"Generally feel funding for youth services should be increased. Value For Money should be determined on its effectiveness in influencing Council business"

"When you look at the scale of activity the Forum has been involved in it is impressive - so good job".

Views of External Stakeholders

Questions about the Forum and its work were circulated to all the current members of the Joint Youth Panel and also to other youth focussed organisations. 10 responses were received from individuals from external agencies and are summarised below, again in italics and where applicable with recommendations.

What are the terms of reference for the Joint Youth Panel?

Purpose/value of panel

Membership (role/level)

How it does business (Chair/frequency of meetings/agendas)

Relationship/communication with Youth Forum/Coordinator/Champions?

In 3 cases there was no response. 1 responded that as there does not appear to be formal Terms Of Reference and that one should be produced; a point reinforced by the lack of clarity expressed in relation to membership and communication with other Council structures. The remaining 5 respondents had different views of the panel including being an advisory body, information sharing/discussion forum, providing a voice for young people and interestingly enough giving direction to the Youth Forum and overseeing their work.

Recommendation

Draw up clear terms of reference so people can understand the purpose, roles and responsibilities of the group and what it hopes to achieve. The Terms Of Reference must clearly set out how it communicates with the Youth Forum and any other youth participative groups.

Do you think the Youth Forum model is a good way of representing young people's views to the Council and other agencies?

Can you suggest any improvements?

7 respondents agreed that the Youth Forum was a good model, enabling young people and the Council to have "an ongoing 2 way relationship" and 2 thought it an excellent way for young people to have their views heard by decision makers. 1 misunderstood the question, commenting on the JYP rather than the Forum.

Recommendation

A clear mechanism is needed for communicating young people's views from the Youth Forum to the Joint Youth Panel (a standing item?) and other agencies; with Champions from within being seen as a good idea.

Are you aware of any issues where the Council's position has been changed or modified because of the views expressed by the Forum?

If not, practical suggestions as to how communication could be improved?

4 respondents claimed that they were unaware of any issues, although in one case this could have been due to the fault of their own internal communication, there was no response from 3 and in the case of the remaining 3, the Lord Mayor attended an organisational event, 1 cited the rejection of the Door Project and the other was able to give 3 examples.

Recommendation

Improved Communication

Are you aware of any issues that the Youth Forum has raised and have then been supported by the Council?

If not, as above

2 respondents were unaware of any issues, of the remaining 8, 4 mentioned the skate park while others cited, changes in leisure centre operations, mental health, suicide, drugs & alcohol misuse, anti-social behaviour and smoking.

Recommendation

It would be beneficial to have an update on progress of issues at Joint Youth Panel meetings as a standing item.

Do you think the way the Forum is constituted (nominations for youth organisations within the different electoral areas and then selection) is fair, representative and effective or would you suggest an alternative method?

Do you see a role for JYP in recruitment?

In 3 cases there was no response, 5 commented on the fairness of the system with 1 stating that it was extremely fair and providing a wide representation, 2 highlighted recruitment from minority groups as an issue and 1 the difficulty of accessing representation from marginalised young people.

Recommendations

Ensure information on nominations is publicised as widely as possible using all available networks. We have noted the good practice of advertising the Youth Forum on buses and in leisure centres. It is essential to be proactive in relation to recruiting from minority groups and to use the skills and expertise of specialist organisation to enable this to happen. In addition recruiting young people from area youth councils and forums throughout Belfast might be worth exploring.

Build in a degree of flexibility to ensure as many gaps as possible are filled.

Do you have any views about what the Youth Forum should be doing in the future?

Priorities over the next 2 years?

There was no response from 1 person, 4 respondents stated that they felt it should keep doing what it is doing with 1 suggesting feeding into changes due to RPA and another referring to it's input being sought at the earliest stage of any development/policy change etc .A general comment on campaigning on issues affecting young people was made, with once again alcohol and drug abuse, the suicide problem and anti-social behaviour being highlighted.

Recommendations

The young people involved in the Youth Forum should be facilitated to set their own priorities for the next two years.

Youth Forum members should receive training which will not only benefit them in their future but other young people across Belfast (ASIST).

Do some research to find out what are the issues for young people in Belfast. The Forum's priorities should be based on the views of youth of the city.

Are you aware of similar Youth Forum type structures in local authorities in other jurisdictions?

There was no response from 1 respondent, another did not know of any other similar structures, 1 was aware but did not give any examples and another had carried out an audit. The remaining respondents identified the following organisations: CWVYS – Wales; NCVYS – England; YouthLink Scotland; National Youth Council of Ireland – ROI there are a range of local authority youth structures. Donegal Shadow Youth Council, Newtownabbey Shadow Youth Council, UKYP. Dail na nOg in the Republic of Ireland, and Fermanagh youth council (although that may be now not in operation) Youth Councils in Coleraine, Lisburn, Magherafelt, Derry. Funky Dragon in Wales as well as youth participation structures in Israel and the Basque region.

Do you think there are other key organisations/individuals we should gather views from in relation to the review?

*This time there was no response from 2 individuals and 1 was unaware of any, the remaining 6 supplied the following information:
The organisations responsible for the Shadow Youth Council in L'Derry and a similar grouping in Fermanagh to establish good practice and their current status.
The Big Deal "Audit of Participative Structures for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland" May 2007.
FASA, FPA
The council's Chief Officer Management Team, grass roots youth organisations (to facilitate awareness and possible recruitment) the youth Champions from the political parties, staff working with the OFM/DFM 10 year strategy and a general public survey
The Big Deal/BELB
Social services – Children's Planning Services
Young people who are not members of the Forum
NIYF
The main uniformed organisations that are not represented on the Forum*

Individuals from 3 other organisations also took the opportunity to give their views in an unstructured fashion.

1 felt that the remit of the Co-ordinator post was too narrow, focussing as it does on Youth Forum activities rather than a Council strategy for Children & Young People, which would provide the latter with an input into future Community Planning.

All 3 individuals cited collaborative working as the way forward by harnessing the expertise of other organisations for example, in distributing the 6x £5,000 monies, or by sitting on panels or participating in networks thereby widening the reach of the young people.

Some final comments in this section

"The group's (Youth Forum) method of working together was exceedingly impressive and efficient and I had no concerns with accepting and adopting their decisions. I would also have no concerns at requesting the group's support in future".

“Impressed with the Forum’s successes to date and participation at local, UK and European levels on youth related and issues such as citizenship. We look forward to working with Belfast City Council Youth Forum in April 2008”.

“We would see BCCYF’s work and their existence as a structure to link young people with decision makers as valuable and significant to children and young people’s participation in public decision making in NI”.

Case Studies

In February 2004, in its summary document the Youth Participation Research Project for Belfast City Council, identified three models of youth participation in local democracy as follows:

1. Elected Youth Parliaments and Councils

These cover large geographical areas such as counties and are formal elected bodies, shadowing existing local government structures. Their administrative areas may include towns with youth councils. In Northern Ireland Fermanagh District Council has established an elective school based Shadow Youth Council since 1998. **Kent Youth County Council** was selected to illustrate this model, as it is widely known within the field as an example of good practice. A short description of **Gateshead Youth Assembly** from written sources is also included with case studies.

2. Youth Councils and Forums

These cover smaller administrative areas such as towns and cities and may either be elected or non-elected bodies. They are supported by local government authorities and may also relate to locally based youth forums.

The **Local Democracy Project of Coventry** includes a youth council covering the city and was a pioneer in this field with considerable experience.

Newcastle Youth Council is a particular example for investigation because of its reputation in the field.

Dublin Youth Council recently came second in the youth participation awards sponsored by Eurocities.

The Mayor’s Youth Council of Boston provides an example of practice from the United States.

3. Youth Participation Panels

These are consultative bodies set up by local authorities for the purpose of ascertaining young people’s views on various issues. They may either take the form of convened focus groups of relatively small numbers of young people, or large scale questionnaire surveys.

Tomorrow’s Voices from **Wiltshire** and the **Young Consultants** from **Cambridge** provide the examples of this model.

More recently, the Big Deal Audit of Participative Structures for Children & Young People in Northern Ireland, mentioned earlier, found that Shadow Youth Councils/Forums appear to have an extra function. This is a relationship with Council

Officers, elected members and policy and decision makers. “The young people in Shadow Councils/Forums have the opportunity to meet with these people and feed their views to them directly. To allow young people to address pertinent local issues, through communication, developing active projects and events and meeting directly with policy and decision makers”.

Shadow youth Councils in Fermanagh & Derry, which were established for a long time have recently folded. We understand that Fermanagh was due to funding reasons and we are not sure what happened in Derry.

Newtownabbey appears to have been going for about a year and a half but is under threat of closure.

Apparently Strabane had a Shadow Youth Council for a short time but it has closed. Coleraine also have a Youth Forum which is linked to their council, but is also independent. Carrick have also set one up very recently, but it is voluntary and independent.

Belfast Youth Forum itself has had dealings with the Donegal Shadow Youth Council and a cross-border residential was planned for this month.

There is also a possibility that members of the BCCYF might be invited to future annual sittings of the Dail na nog – young people’s parliament of the Republic of Ireland, a step viewed as very positive by Forum members, given that the Forum is represented at the United Kingdom Youth Parliament and this would reflect Government’s North/South East/West policy.

Belfast City Council’s Youth Forum appears to be the only local authority youth council / forum in the North, that is directly funded by and sits within the structure of the council and is still in existence

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following are some of the themes we have identified during the course of the review and our conclusions and recommendations on them.

Recruitment and Representativeness

As the profile of the young people demonstrated, it seems that there is a wide range represented, in terms of age, gender and geographical location. We did not ask a question on community background or perceived religion, but it is our impression that there is a reasonable balance amongst the young people.

In our discussions in 2007, the young people themselves, the members of the Youth Panel and the Youth Champions all felt that the method of recruitment was satisfactory. In 2008, the young people had strengthened in their view and the spread of geographical representation does seem to have improved. A majority of the external stakeholders consulted in 2008 also felt that the system of recruitment was fair and representative, though a couple mentioned the importance of recruiting members of minority groups. However, of the 9 internal respondents, only 2 agreed that the system was fair and representative, with one expressing a clear negative. 4 respondents identified alternative or additional methods which are recorded in the text. We suggest that there might be merit in devising a suitable mechanism for

recording the make-up of the membership in order to better combat any impression of exclusiveness or elitism.

It is our view that the method of recruitment is ambitious but appears to have been generally successful. Furthermore, the alternative methods suggested do not have any obvious advantages. Having said that, as one response pointed out, orientating recruitment to young people who are involved in youth organisations may well bring in a bias to the well-integrated. However, that might partly be dealt with by trying to ensure that some participants come from those youth groups that specialise in engaging with alienated young people. It also has to be accepted that highly alienated or damaged young people are hardly likely to participate in this kind of forum. In that sense, any attempt to encourage young people themselves to participate in policy or decision-making is bound to be “elitist.” It may, however, be less so than a process that relies on having their purported views represented by adult professionals.

There does seem value in continuing outreach to minority groups. It also might be that the Forum itself should develop a programme of continuing communication with a wide range of youth groups – perhaps especially representative groups of Section 75 categories – as a core part of its activities. There has been some turnover in the period the Forum has been in existence. We think that this level of turnover is inevitable and acceptable. The keeping of a “reserve list” is a good idea and its effectiveness should be reviewed.

Practical problems with the 13-18 year age range were raised by the young people themselves. It may be that different activities might be arranged for the younger and older age groups at times, although we would not favour two parallel structures. This is a matter partly of resources in terms of leaders, but we think it should be kept under review.

The model itself

Some of the comments on the representativeness of the Forum membership actually relate to the model itself as a way of encouraging the participation of young people in the taking of decisions that affect them. Two-thirds of the internal respondents gave a clear positive view of the model with one clear opponent and two with reservations. All of the external respondents gave a positive assessment. It is clear that there are some problems with the Forum model and it should not, perhaps, be the sole means of ascertaining the views of young people. However, it has some clear advantages as we see it:

- Consistency and continuity
- The ability to deal with issues in depth
- A greater degree of representativeness than any other proposed method
- Capacity building of the young people involved
- High visibility and symbolic significance
- Potential to develop structural links with decision-makers
- Potential to reach out to other young groups and structures
- Mainstreaming youth participation and changing organisational culture

Personal capacity building

The young people seem to have got a great deal out of the experience of participating in the Forum. The response to the questionnaires demonstrated that young people felt they have benefited in knowledge – both of the Council's operations and youth issues – skills and personal development. It is important that they have also had fun! Although this is not the main purpose of the Forum, we believe that the development of these young people is an extremely valuable outcome.

Impact on policy

There are mixed messages coming through under this theme. On the one hand, most respondents, including the young people, felt that the Forum was a good way for young people to get their views heard. On the other hand, there was little in the way of specific examples where the opinions of the young people had either changed a Council policy or had raised a new issue which had been taken up. It is fair to say that the responses in 2008 were somewhat more negative than those in 2007.

At one level this is not surprising. Policy making in a large local authority like Belfast City Council is a complex and slow-moving process. There are many influences and factors to be taken into account and it is not to be expected that a Youth Forum will have a sudden and major impact. Furthermore, it will not always be possible to identify specific changes or developments that are directly related to initiatives of the Forum.

We think that the long term significance of the existence of a Youth Forum will be more about organisational culture. If it becomes accepted that young people should be consulted about any policy or action that affects them and that their views are taken into account – in a formal and structured way – in the decision-making process, then that will be a hugely important outcome. It is not so much a question of the particular members of the Youth Forum at a given time having a decisive influence on policy as that, through their existence and influence, the culture of engaging with young people becomes embedded in the Council's processes.

There may be an overall problem in communication between the Youth Forum, the internal structures of the Council, Councillors and external agencies. It is not appropriate for us to comment on internal organisation of the Council, though the views of respondents are noted in the body of the report.

Again, we believe the institution of councillor Champions is a good idea and the young people, at least, seem to appreciate it. The young people, and the Champions we spoke to, were all positive about the meetings between the Forum and the Champions. We think it appropriate to note that one of the Champions commented about the late David Irvine: "He was brilliant with the young people!" We believe that this idea of Party Youth Champions is an innovative and potentially extremely valuable aspect of the Youth Forum's operations.

We have noted above that we think the Youth Forum should have outreach to other organisations as a core part of its activities. In general, we think that the Forum should develop a thoroughgoing and comprehensive Communications Strategy. Positive developments and valuable discussions are of limited use unless knowledge of them is widely disseminated. This should include the methods of communication

with the internal administration of the Council and various ideas for this were suggested by respondents and are recorded in the body of the report.

Resourcing and structures

The job description of the Children and Young Person's Co-ordinator states that the main purpose of the job is two fold:

“Responsible to the Policy Development Manager for developing the work of the Steering Group leading on the provision of the services to children and young people.

...Particular emphasis on establishing the capacity of local young people to contribute to those decisions which affect them and bring about improvement in the delivery of services to children and young people through a youth forum”.

All of the materials we have examined and the views we have gathered would certainly confirm that the focus of the Co-ordinator's work has been on the development and support of the Youth Forum as stated in the second point.

However this does beg the question of the role in relation to the Council's overall Children & Young Person's strategy and the Co-ordinator's relationship with the internal services and structures dealing with children and young people. In other words, is the post one of BCC Children & Young People's Co-ordinator or does it have the narrower remit of Youth Forum Co-ordinator. It is our view that it should be the former.

We would suggest therefore that, in addition to the practical recommendations made in the body of this report in relation to the production of Terms of Reference, not only for the Youth Forum but also for other internal groups, the role of Co-ordinator and it's relationship with these groups should be clarified. In fact 2 years on, given the pilot nature of this initiative and the structural changes taking place within Council, it would seem to us to be a good time to review the job description and amend where necessary. It might also be timely to look at the level of the post as a result of this exercise and where it should sit in the Council's structure. Views given in the earlier part of the report would suggest that it remains where it is.

Consideration ought also to be given to the question raised with us of a female as well as male leader. This might be achieved by adopting the concept of “senior member” or “volunteer youth leader” as used in many youth work settings. This is simply an experienced and, potentially trained, young person who has come through the particular youth work context and is now ready and able to take a leadership role. We think the Youth Forum is an ideal setting for this kind of role. The young people themselves at their meeting last month put forward a similar view, although agreeing that the age range for membership of the Forum should stay at 13-18, they suggested that those over 18, who wanted to remain involved, could stay on in the role of 'helpers', or form a steering group. This idea would appear to have merit in harnessing the knowledge and experience of young people who have gone through the system and should be further explored.

The Sub-Group structure seems to work quite well though, as we have reported, there is some debate amongst young people as to the timescale of their projects. This is a matter best left to them to decide.

There appear to be problems with the web-site from the point of view of the young people. We understand that there may be a variety of problems connected with the fact that it is part of the official Council web-site. We have no solutions to offer but, given the importance of this method of communication, the issue should be examined.

Value for Money

The existing annual budget of the Youth Forum is £140,000, including the 6x5 Grant scheme. We have seen a breakdown of the budget and an estimate for 2008-09, which we understand is also of £140,000 but there is not sufficient detail for us to assess the various elements separately. So, taking it at face value, it would seem an extremely well resourced 'project', which does not only appear to be funding solely the Youth Forum but also to a degree other children & young people related activities e.g. CHYPS meetings, JYP meetings, skatepark meetings. However, in itself it does not seem to us that this is an unreasonable sum to expend on mainstreaming youth participation in decision-making in an organisation of the size and significance of Belfast City Council. However, it is only reasonable if the expenditure actually achieves desired outcomes.

It is our opinion that this Review shows a number of significant achievements and even more elements of potential. However, in order to ensure value for money in the future, the overriding need is for a proper Strategic Plan containing SMART objectives with the necessary resources, human, material and financial, listed against each one. Indicators of success need to be clear and measurable and proper monitoring and evaluation systems put in place. We would caution that success in influencing policy should not be such a measure. It is perfectly possible for policy makers and decision takers to ignore the views of young people, however effectively presented. It should be the effectiveness of that representation that should be the measure of success of a Youth Forum.

Overall conclusion

Though this Review is a relatively sketchy examination of the Youth Forum, we believe that, on the evidence we have collected, that it is a uniquely valuable contribution to the decision-making process of the Belfast City Council. There are many things that could be improved – and we have made some suggestions. However, we believe that this period has provided a solid basis on which to develop in the future. We would commend this process to the City Council and recommend that it continues to resource it.

Appendix 1

Detailed list of the Youth Forum's activities since its inception

Drugs and Alcohol sub group work
OCN accredited training in Drugs and Alcohol awareness
DVD on Alcohol misuse
Online Questionnaire

Facilities & Youth Provision sub group work
Mystery visits
Report to leisure manager
Study visits
Skate park initiative
Feasibility study on Leisureplex
Online Questionnaire

Health (with suicide being the primary issue) sub group work
Suicide awareness play
Suicide help card produced
ASIST training for trainers
ASIST rolled out across Belfast
Work on NI strategy for prevention of Suicide

Development of Youth Specific Website for BCC with input from Youth Forum representatives

Recommendation on Belfast Door Project to Council

Work with Good Relations Unit

Submission of Consultation document on NI Strategy for prevention of Suicide and Self harm subsequently submitted to Corporate Policy Unit and included in BCC response.

ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training)

Regular meetings with 'Youth Champions'

Representation on the UKYP

Representation on the NICVA executive committee

Representation on NIYF executive committee

Various consultations with council departments

Attendance at various Conferences

Visit to Auschwitz as part of a BCC delegation

Participation in Holocaust Memorial Day

Youth Exchange visit – currently in planning phase

Youth Awards

6x5 funding

Participation in URBACT toolkit launch

Work with BCC Community Safety Get Home Safe Campaign

Consultation with BCC waste management

Party in the Park

Work with BCC on development of Giant's Park / North Foreshore development

Work on talking ASB

Test Purchasing of tobacco with BCC environmental health

Anti Bullying competition judging in partnership with Save the Children

Participation at Blast Festival – BCCYF exhibition space and skating demo

Participation in Friends for ever international exchange programme

Challenge for Youth Summer Camp

Work with BCC and Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau on Branding Belfast

Ongoing work with BCC travellers liaison officer & Interdepartmental group for travellers

Work with H&E services on Choose 'n' move project
Anti Litter Campaign – TV Add judging
Good Relations – Peace and Reconciliation plan consultation
Consultation on improving Council Services
Work with Age Concern on Intergenerational project
Work with European Unit on Opportunity Europe
Work with H&E on Choose and Move Programme
Work with Newtownabbey Borough Shadow Youth Council
Work with Dail na nOg
Work with Donegal Shadow Youth Council
Consultation on NICCY corporate plan
Office bearers training
Proposals on NIYA
Proposals on Sex and relationship education in schools.
Development of SMS service for communicating with peers
Production of YF promotional video
Participation in various conferences, locally nationally and internationally.
Exchange programme
Opportunity Europe Event

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