

**Priorities for Youth in Northern Ireland**  
**Belfast City Council Draft Response**

1.0	<b>Comments</b>
1.1	Belfast City Council welcomes this opportunity to comment upon the ‘Priorities for Youth’ consultation exercise being taken forward by the Department of Education and would suggest that this should be the start of a process of discussion between the Department, the Youth Service profession and the Council which seeks to secure greater alignment in activity and a more joined-up approach to addressing the complex issues at hand.
1.2	Whilst the Council would be supportive, in principle, of the vision, mission and values set out within the “Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work in Northern Ireland 2005-2008”, it is difficult to comment fully on the associated priorities and areas of action in the absence of an evaluation having been undertaken on the impact of the 2005/08 strategy. Such an evaluation could provide evidence of the need and impact of what has been delivered in that period as a result of the strategy.
1.3	Accordingly, the comments outlined within this response do not specifically address the questions set out within the three questionnaires but rather; provide a strategic overview of what the Council believe to be the key issues impacting upon youth services within Northern Ireland. The comments provided are based on the Councils own experiences, its growing evidence base and reflects the relevant corporate priorities identified for the organisation.
1.4	The Council would highlight that there is concurrence between the high-level themes contained within the Department of Education’s ‘Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work in NI 2005-2008’ and its own approach to supporting children and young people which is based on the key areas of policy, provision (i.e. service delivery), protection and participation.
1.5	<b>Policy</b>
1.5.1	The Council would welcome and endorse a social education approach with young people and would note that the evidence would suggest that such approaches not only helps support the personal development of young people but also produce social capital and as a result have a real contribution to make in producing the active citizens of the future
1.5.2	Supporting Children and Young People has been identified as a specific priority area within the Council and significant investment has been made in services targeted at Children and Young People as well as delivering projects and programmes that focus on the personal and social development of young people.
1.5.3	Within its new Corporate Plan for the period 2008-2011 the Council has committed to the development of a council wide Strategy for Children and Young People which will be aligned with relevant funding streams. In order to inform the development of this strategy, research is being undertaken and a process of engagement will ensue with key stakeholder groups including young people to identify the main issues currently facing youth work and the key priorities on which to focus. As part of this evidence gathering an audit is being undertaken of the current activities and services which the Council provides to Children and Young People.
1.6	<b>Provision</b>
1.6.1	Based on its current statutory responsibilities the primary focus of the Councils support to children and young people is through direct service delivery e.g., provision of play facilities, recreational and leisure activities, children and young people fitness and sports programmes, community development, community safety initiatives etc.
1.6.2	In addition, the Council has actively supported the social and personal development of children and young people within a neighbourhood based approach e.g. young peoples awards, intergenerational project, Urban Arts Academy, supporting diversionary youth work through the use of BCC facilities and supporting an annual programme of culture and arts

	activities including youth media and urban arts academy.
1.6.3	The Council, in partnership with Youth Action NI, delivers the “Positive Action Programme” which provides a range of courses for young volunteers and youth workers in local communities who wish to develop their skills and experience in community youth work. The Council also supports the “Young Enterprise Primary Programme” which facilitates volunteers from local businesses to provide mentoring in classrooms to help young people gain an appreciation and understanding of entrepreneurship and business and to aid in the development of their leadership and communication skills. The council also carry out educational programmes with young people around health and wellbeing - such as Choose and Move - a campaign aimed at reducing childhood obesity.
1.6.4	The Council actively uses its network of facilities (e.g. community centres, leisure centres, Waterfront Hall, Ulster Hall, Belfast Castle, Malone House) to provide a comprehensive programme of activities and support for children and young people within the city.
1.6.5	<b>Strategic alignment at the local level</b> Belfast City Council believes that there is a considerable affinity between youth services and other services already delivered by councils. Local authorities already have responsibility for good relations planning and produce Good Relations Plans for their area. They are also responsible for the production of Community Support Plans, lead Community Safety Partnerships and provide leisure, sports, cultural and other local facilities. They are also involved in health improvement partnerships which shows that the Council takes an integrated and holistic approach to the issues facing young people. They will also be given responsibility for neighbourhood renewal and facilitating the community planning process which is designed to allow all sectors to contribute to a plan that will advance the economic, social and environmental well being of its area.
1.6.6	The Council would suggest that the needs of young people can only be fully met by effective inter-agency and inter-sectoral working and would support the principle of ‘subsidiarity’ which promotes local democracy and responsive service delivery at a local level. This principle should be a prerequisite governing the future delivery of youth services within Northern Ireland.
1.6.7	The Council would advocate that local government may be better placed to make the necessary links at the local level through an effective community planning process and could be the catalyst and convener of local service providers to address youth related issues. Therefore, the Council would advocate that one of the priorities for the youth service should be its integration with the community planning process. Potential benefits resulting from this would include greater collaboration, pooled resources and synergies at the local level. This would contribute towards the effectiveness and continued sustainability of the service.
1.7	<b>Protection</b>
1.7.1	Belfast City Council is fully committed to delivering its services in a way which promotes good practice and protects children from harm. The Council has adopted a Child Protection Policy backed up with robust procedures which fully conforms with “Our Duty to Care” to ensure it fulfils this commitment. This is further enhanced through the development of good practice guidelines for working with children and young people as contained within the Playwork Code of Practice.
1.7.2	The Council supports good practice through the provision of training for staff and community groups that have contact with children and young people. To enable this, the Council has five Child Protection trainers who are accredited and part of the “Keeping Safe initiative” co-ordinated by the Belfast Health & Social Services Trust. The training is further enhanced through various tailored training programmes and workshops. Last year, Belfast City Council

	ran three different events focused around the issue of peer abuse.
1.7.3	Belfast City Council is involved in a region wide Local Government Child Protection Forum which explores issues and discusses standards across Councils for working with children and young people. Along with two other Councils, Belfast has been leading a pilot through the Local Government Staff Commission Training Group to advance the provision of child protection training across Councils in Northern Ireland
1.7.4	Belfast City Council is fully committed to working with the B.E.L.B. to further the protection of children and young people and fully endorses an approach which is child/young person centred and has the protection of children and young people as a paramount consideration.
1.8	<b>Participation and Engagement</b>
1.8.1	Recognising that young people have a positive contribution to make in society, the Council has a proven track record of consulting with young people and facilitating mechanisms which ensure they have a voice. It is imperative that youth work is accessible to all and allows for young people to be involved in decision-making processes. Accordingly, the Council has established and commits substantial annual funding towards a Youth Forum which informs the development of policy, strategy and service delivery.
1.8.2	Through the use of alternative forums such as community centres and summer schemes, the Council actively seeks to engage those hard to reach groups within society and supports the personal and social development of young people within a supportive environment. The Council is fully committed to the principles of participation and inclusiveness and would suggest that they remain a central constituent of any future youth strategy.
1.8.3	<p>As part of an URBACT initiative<sup>1</sup>, Belfast City Council alongside eight other European cities developed a best practice toolkit to support effective youth participation. The Council adopted the emerging seven guiding principles of participation and actively use these as a tool to ensure that services are shaped by young people and, therefore, are best placed to meet their needs. These principles include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Understanding Participation</b> - accept that 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</li> <li>▪ <b>Diversity</b> - recognise that young people are diverse and that there is a need to be proactive when engaging with those young people who are disadvantaged or socially excluded</li> <li>▪ <b>Motivation</b> - recognise the need to motivate young people to encourage their participation</li> <li>▪ <b>Communication</b> - recognise the important role of effective communications with young people and the need to use appropriate language and mediums</li> <li>▪ <b>Credibility</b> - recognise the importance of being clear with young people about what can be achieved and delivering on any commitments given</li> <li>▪ <b>Sustainability</b> - recognise the need to integrate youth participation into different policy-making areas within the organisation but also developing a flexible approach which enables young people to opt in and out as their interests and commitments dictate</li> <li>▪ <b>Resources</b> - recognise that adequate resources are necessary to sustain creditable opportunities for youth participation and to ensure that their diverse needs and interests are accommodated.</li> </ul>

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<sup>1</sup> URBACT Toolkit for Youth Participation; [http://urbact.eu/fileadmin/corporate/pdf/Toolkit\\_Document\\_ENG.pdf](http://urbact.eu/fileadmin/corporate/pdf/Toolkit_Document_ENG.pdf)

1.9	<b>Continued sustainability</b>
1.9.1	The Council would be concerned with the current lack of funding for youth services across Northern Ireland and would suggest that securing adequate resources to retain and enhance the standard of service is critical to its future sustainability. The funding shortfall for Youth Services in the NI Programme for Government and Budget give substance to allegations that the service is the ‘poor relation’ of the Education sector. It is clear that adequate resources need to be allocated towards supporting the Youth Service.
1.9.2	The Council would suggest that consideration be given to the extent to which youth services could be integrated with other service areas and ultimately enable greater mainstreaming of funding.
1.10	<b>Connection to formal education</b>
1.10.1	The Council recognises that the Youth Service does need to have a regional dimension and, of course, it needs to tie in with the formal education service, but most fundamentally, it needs to be delivered locally to tackle some of the real issues that people experience.
1.10.2	It will be equally as important to reinforce the link between formal and non formal education. The Council has a strong history of working within local neighbourhoods and has well established engagement mechanisms at the local level. It will be increasingly important to use these mechanisms to engage marginalised youth in non-formal education within their own areas.
1.10.3	The establishment of the Northern Ireland wide Education and Skills Authority will result in the removal of the sub-regional element of local youth provision and there is a potential risk that this would have an adverse impact on the service and its responsiveness to local need.
1.10.4	The Council would suggest that the potential transfer of local Youth Service delivery to councils can be a win-win situation for all concerned. The policy, accountability and performance framework would be retained and overseen by the Department of Education and the new Education and Skills Authority, whilst Councils would be responsible for delivering services at the local level which are integrated and aligned with local priorities. It is suggested that the transfer of the Youth Service to Councils would ensure a level of accountability and scrutiny which may not otherwise be achievable via central government or the Regional Educational and Skills Authority.
1.11	<b>Conclusion</b> Overall the Council would support an approach that reduces fragmentation and which puts children and young people at the centre of any new policies or strategies that will be implemented locally. To be effective such strategies must promote a collaborative and inter-agency approach to youth provision. Where possible, synergies should be pursued and resources targeted at addressing local needs. The Council would welcome further discussions with the Department and the youth profession to explore how we could make the strategic congruence between the Youth Service and the ongoing work of the Council more explicit, support greater collaboration and secure a more joined-up approach to supporting children and young people within the city.