



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Belfast City Council Youth Forum
Date:	22 May 2012
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1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	Belfast City Council (BCC) Youth Forum was established in March 2006 and sits within the Community Services Section of the Development Department. It was set up as a vehicle whereby Council could consult with young people on their views of Council issues and policies, as well as offering a conduit through which young people could raise issues of importance to them.
1.2	The current membership of 36 young people will serve until 30 June 2012. Four members are drawn from each of the nine electoral wards of the city and reflect the diversity of the city in regard to all Section 75 categories including religion, race, social background, sexual orientation and political opinion.
1.3	Notably, each of the Political Parties within Council has a designated "Youth Champion" who assumes a leading role within their Party on matters affecting young people. More specifically, each youth champion acts as a first point of contact for the members of the Youth Forum and play an active role through taking part in regular participative events involving Youth Forum members. Crucially, it is this systemic connection that sets the operation of the Youth Forum apart as a mechanism that offers direct access for young people to a process of political engagement on issues of importance to them.
1.4	With the imminent completion of the term for the current cohort of members, recent consultation with the Youth Champions has elicited a clear political consensus in regard to the proposed future work of the Youth Forum, based on a vision of an enhanced role for City Council, using the Youth Forum as a preferred mechanism, for civic engagement across the city with young people.

1.5	In looking at the future of the Youth Forum, it is regarded by Youth Champions as vital that a longer term commitment should now be considered to enable the potential of the mechanism to be realised fully.
1.6	The report that follows summarises the work of the current Youth Forum during the period July 2010 to June 2012 and sets out the key workstreams as proposed by Council's political Youth Champions (appendix 1). In seeking the necessary political agreement as to the future role and reach of a Council sponsored mechanism, the contemporary external policy environment within which any future activity should be aligned is first briefly examined.

2	Key Issues
2.1	<u>Policy trends.</u>
	The broad theme of children and young people has emerged as an increasingly important and topical policy area with related frameworks now cascading from international, European, national and regional levels.
2.2	Under the Programme for Government, the Executive has set out a number of priorities across relevant Government Departments that affect the well-being of children and young people. OFMDFM lead on policy responsibility and have produced a regional ten year strategy for the period 2006-2016. The strategy promotes a "whole child" approach that recognises the individuality of children, their capacity to shape their lives and the complex networks of social support which children gain from and contribute to. Concurrent to the focus on the "whole child" perspective is an emphasis in policy on better outcomes for children and young people.
2.3	Towards that end, the Department of Health has been mandated to convene a regional partnership - the Strategic Partnership for Children and Young People (SPCYP) - to bring together key stakeholders from across the statutory, local government, community and voluntary sectors. Local Government is well represented on the SPCYP and hold the position of Vice Chairperson. Under the SPCYP, at Health Trust geographic levels, five so-called "Outcomes Groups", including the Belfast Outcomes Group, have been established to drive the policy agenda forward and report on its implementation. BCC is represented on the Belfast Outcomes Group by the Director of Environmental Services.
2.4	The overall effect has been to signal clearly a commitment to introduce a greater sense of coherence at policy and programme levels, coupled to greater structural alignment, to the promotion of a developmental approach to implementing and monitoring children's rights and well-being. Common to all the policies and related structures is a shared commitment to a <u>long term vision that all government departments, statutory agencies and local government will develop a culture where the views of our children and young people are routinely sought in matters which impact on their lives.</u> In effect, Government is committed to <u>encouraging children</u> and young people <u>to make their voices heard and to encourage decision makers to listen.</u>

2.5	<p>One further point is worth noting. In the contemporary context, beyond the moral argument in support of the direct involvement and influence of young people on policy making, a shared responsibility to introduce efficiencies across the public sector points to the imperatives of greater integration and better targeting of resources. The principle holds internally, across Council, as well as externally, with a range of key stakeholders. The Youth Forum, in already establishing its reputation as a vehicle for engagement and consultation, offers a mechanism that can assist in better formulation and delivery of policies and programmes not only by Council but by other public bodies.</p>
2.6	<p>In short, the confluence of political, policy and financial interests thus points to an area of growing importance and in which Council is already recognized as being a key player. Council's "unique selling proposition" however remains that of its systemic connection that offers direct access to the formal political process around issues, identified by young people themselves, as a means of addressing those issues.</p>
2.7	<p><u>Operational trends.</u> In breaking new ground with the setting up of the Youth Forum in 2006, City Council has led from the front in terms of local authority and statutory initiatives promoting themes of participation, inclusion and citizenship, and in offering 'voice and choice' to young people. The operation of the Youth Forum has served as a model of good practice and, as such, has brought significant recognition to Council as well as attracting widespread interest, including that of the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers in regard to the setting up of a NI Youth Parliament.</p>
2.8	<p>Since being established in 2006, the Youth Forum has been involved in a wide range of developmental, participatory and representative activities. Learning from each cohort has been applied through a process of ongoing improvement and reflective practice to create a model tailored to the particular needs of Belfast.</p>
2.9	<p>In discussions with political Youth Champions and other stakeholders it is clear that a shared sense of opportunity exists to further develop a model of civic engagement, extending beyond the individual participation of 36 young people, that reaches out to young people in communities and groups across the city, in a two-way interactive process that connects felt needs at neighbourhood level with the formal political process within City Council as a means of addressing those needs.</p>
2.10	<p>Three key workstreams, as proposed by Youth Champions and officers on the basis of the lessons learned from operational experience, are set out diagrammatically as an appendix to this report (appendix 1). In short, the model seeks to build the developmental competences of individual members; make systematic the process of engagement and political discourse with Members of Council; and promote a process of structured engagement with individual young people, groups, and communities across the city on issues of importance to children and young people.</p>
2.10	<p><u>Summary of achievements: Youth Forum 2010 – 2012</u> A summary of the activities and outcomes from the two year programme of work of the current Youth Forum are attached as an appendix to this report (Appendix 2).</p>

2.11	<p>Notable amongst their achievements are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The contribution of 7849 hours of volunteering - The organisation of events attracting over 2,000 young people - Completion of accredited training including suicide awareness and prevention, conflict resolution, and alcohol and drugs awareness; - Organisation in Council Chamber of “Question Time” style debates with political Youth Champions on topical issues including Hate Crime, mental health and Travellers. Eighty participants from across the city were involved on each occasion; - The organisation of a clothes drive for The Welcome Centre in December 2011 as part of the work of the homelessness sub-group. 66 large bin bags were collected and sorted with an estimated value of £2,640 (£40 per bag). - Participation in a range of BCC consultation exercises and focus groups around proposed service provision including, most recently, the draft investment programme; and submitted formal responses to external consultation exercises including those of the NI Arts Council, the Council for Homeless and the Department for the Environment.
2.12	<p><u>Operational expenditure.</u></p> <p>To date, political approval for the operation of the Forum and related expenditure has been granted on the basis of the two year tenure of each cohort. Committee approval was last received in March 2010 for the period July 2010 to June 2012. Given the success of the Youth Forum thus far, allied to a shared sense of political ambition, it is considered timely that political consideration should now be given to placing the Youth Forum on a more stable footing, underpinned by a long term commitment to its operation and an enhanced role within the civic fabric of the city.</p>
2.13	<p><u>Programme costs.</u></p> <p>Provision has previously been made for a budget of £50k per annum for the programme costs for the Youth Forum. Through prudent management, efficient procurement of services (such as training and residential courses), and effective control the actual expenditure incurred during financial years 2010/11 and 2011/12 has been £25k and £37k respectively.</p>

3	Resource Implications
3.1	Budgets for the operational costs associated with the Youth Forum have been approved for the current financial year 2012/13 at a level of £50k.

4	Equality Implications
4.1	The composition and operation of the Youth Forum impacts positively upon all Section 75 categories within the city of Belfast.

5	Recommendations
	<p>Members are asked :</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To note the contents of the report; 2. To endorse the proposed framework for the future programme of work for the Youth Forum; 3. To approve the recruitment of a new Youth Forum in September 2012; 4. To approve related programme expenditure up to a maximum of £50,000 per annum;

6	Decision Tracking
	Reporting Officer: Catherine Taggart

7	Key to Abbreviations
	<p>CYPSP: Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. OFMDFM: Office of the First and Deputy First Minister</p>

8	Documents Attached
	<p>Appendix 1: Youth Forum key workstreams. Appendix 2: Summary of achievements 2010 – 2012.</p>