



RESPONSE TO NETWORK 4 YOUTH CONSULTATION

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November 2008

Introduction

Include Youth promotes best practice with young people in need or at risk. We achieve this through the development and promotion of resources, the provision of training, information and support of practitioners and organisations. We also undertake activities aimed at influencing public policy and policy awareness – both locally and nationally.

Include Youth promotes the development of positive choices and opportunities for vulnerable and challenging young people in the community, residential care or custody. Include Youth promotes the use of community alternatives to care and custody for children and young people.

Amongst the young people at risk with whom, and on whose behalf, Include Youth works are young people from socially disadvantaged areas, those with a learning disability, those with special needs, those who have been truanting, suspended or expelled from school, those from a care background, those who had a negative parenting experience, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs or alcohol, undertaking unsafe sexual behaviour or other harmful activities, or of being harmed themselves.

Include Youth runs the Young Voices project, a participation project for young people who have been involved or are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, with the aim of supporting these young people to become involved in decision-making processes which impact on their lives. Currently the Young Voices Project supports young people in two groups – one drawing its members from the Greater Belfast area, and the second based in the Juvenile Justice Centre, Bangor.

Include Youth manages the LACE (Looked After Children in Education) Project which is a multi-agency partnership with the aim of promoting better educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

The Give and Take Scheme aims to improve the employability and increase the self esteem of young people in need or at risk from across Northern Ireland. The Scheme works with approximately 135 young people from a care or criminal justice background. The Scheme aims to support young people to overcome particular barriers that prevent

them from moving into mainstream training or employment and towards independent living. 75% of people on the Scheme are care experienced and we have strong partnership with all Trusts, YJA, PBNI and Careers service. The Scheme provides essential skills training (ICT, English and maths) to all of the young people.

In addition, Include Youth runs the YOYO Practitioners Forum, which draws together professionals from a range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations working directly with young people in need or at risk, and meets on a quarterly basis.

General Comments

Include Youth welcomes the publication of 'Network 4 Youth', and is pleased to have this opportunity to make this response. We full endorse the proposal for co-ordinated participation for all children and young people.

In the course of preparing our response to the consultation, we held a number of consultations with young people (aged 14- 17) from the Young Voices Project. One group of young men aged 14 years to 17 years from Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre in Bangor participated in the consultation, as well as one other group from Hydebank Wood YOC. The young people did not find it easy to engage with the specific questions provided, a reflection perhaps of the fact that these young people are simply not used to being consulted. The response will first outline the general issues identified as being important by the young people and then go on to address specific questions.

Issues Identified by the Young People

The young people were asked to consider what issues they thought would be important for the government to hear about with regards to their lives.

- They wanted changes to be made to the justice system.
- Address the issue of young people being locked in cells all day.
- Do something about how young people are treated by the police.

'They shouldn't be allowed to harass you as much.'

'They follow me everywhere, all around the estate, back to my house – they shouldn't be allowed to do that.'

- Stop paramilitaries targeting young people for punishment attacks.
'The IRA – they're scumbags. Not the old IRA, the proper IRA, but the RA now, the Provies – they beat the life out of you if they don't like you.'
- Help to reduce offending for young people.
- With regard to the issue of drugs, the young people wanted cannabis legalised. They also requested more support for young children not to start taking drugs, particularly those under the age of 16.
- Change the legal age for buying tobacco to 16 years of age.
- Reduce the legal age for getting a full driving licence.
- Improve care of young people from social services. They wanted something to be done about the fact that social workers can 'wash their hands of you' once you turn 18 or when you are in custody. They also stressed the need for more support for young people involved in crime when they are leaving care.
- Improve education and make teachers *'better'*.
- Increase the number of youth centres and facilities for young people.
- Address alcohol abuse in young people.

Response to Specific Questions

1. Do you understand/ agree with the suggested vision?

The young people had no specific comments to make on the values and visions.

However, as an organisation working with young people at risk, Include Youth does have some comments to make on the suggested vision statements. We strongly agree that children and young people need to have their views taken seriously, but would welcome more demonstrable examples of what this will mean in practice. The young people we come into contact with require clear examples of exactly how their views are being taken seriously. We understand that this is not always an easy thing to achieve as very often

policy change is a slow and gradual process. Nonetheless, we would urge the importance of showing young people that their views have resulted in tangible change.

We also agree that children and young people should have opportunities to be involved and believe that these opportunities do not always come easily to our most vulnerable children and young people. We must work hard to tailor these opportunities to include our hardest to reach young people.

We cannot overestimate the importance of young people being valued, involved and listened to. The young people from Include Youth do not have many examples in their lives when this has been the case. Many of the adults, agencies and state bodies that they come into contact with do not leave them feeling valued, quite the opposite in fact, with parents, teachers, social workers etc. only serving to alienate them further. This is clearly a challenge to those wishing to set up channels of communication between young people and those in authority. When preparing to do so, we must remember that these young people are coming at it from very negative experiences in the past.

2. Do you agree with the suggested values?

We agree that the Network needs to be accessible, but would go beyond this to say that it must not just be accessible to all young people but must go out of its way to **target** specific young people. It is important that the Network does not wait for the young people to approach it and hope that it is accessible enough to do so, but must actually be proactive in seeking out young people at risk.

Clearly, some work needs to be done to help some young people to become involved and to feel empowered. We would also ask if similar preparatory work will be done with adults to ensure that they are ready to accept and act for 'empowered' children and young people. It is important that adults and those in authority realise that some young people do not come ready prepared for interaction and will as a result use their own language, express themselves in ways which they are comfortable with – the challenge will be for adults to interpret it and put in the effort required to understand their position. Include Youth are members of and applaud the work of the Participation Network who along with others have begun to progress this work.

3. Please indicate your preferred option for the Network 4 Youth model.

Option A: Regional youth-led organisation with local branches.

Many of the young people did not support this option. Some of them specifically objected to the fact that it would be a local branch, claiming that they would not trust anything run on a localised basis, largely due to their experiences in the past of these types of groups. Others reacted negatively, not so much to the specific regional model but more generally to the idea, believing that it would just become a talking shop that would change nothing. They had a mistrust of government agencies in general.

'No, I don't trust groups on your area – every group I've gone to is run by hoods, Provies. I don't trust anyone in my area, and not community groups.'

'They'd just sit and talk and talk and talk and talk, and do nothing.'

'The government's shite anyway. See if the government did a good job, at keeping people straight, we wouldn't be in here [JJC] now.'

'I probably wouldn't go to the group [local NINFY branch] – what would be the point, nothing's going to change.'

One individual objected to the idea of local groups because he does not align himself to any particular local area. This is largely due to the fact that his life is so chaotic with frequent moves from one children's home to another.

*'**** that! I don't have an area, I don't live anywhere, I move about different places, different children's homes, different addresses, so I am hardly going to go to one.'*

Some of the young people were just not interested in taking part because they said they had better things to do with their time. This apathy stems from their lack of belief that taking part in it would make any real difference to their lives.

'No, I wouldn't go to that, I've better things to do with my time'

'Most people in here wouldn't go – it would be crap, they couldn't be arsed.'

'I wouldn't go to it at all, it's not something I'd like to go to – I've got better things to do with my time.'

Others were less negative and responded well to the idea of local branches.

'Yes, I'd take part in that.'

'It would give you a chance to say what you think.'

'You'd have freedom to talk.'

'Option A sounds good.'

Option B: A Network of Networks

Some of the young people liked the idea of a network of networks and could see the value of having professionals to work with who would help them relay their views to those in authority.

'I'd choose option B – 'cos you need people who know what they're talking about, who know the score when they're talking to young people and how to talk to them – professionally qualified young people who you know will go back and talk to the government.'

'That would be good, meeting politicians – so they can hear your view, hear about what young people think.'

The young people felt that they would only take part in something if it meant seeking their opinions while they were in the Centre. This highlights the importance of targeting the young people and proactively seeking out their participation, using whatever model will work to involve them.

'If they brought it in here (YOC), had one of the groups in here, anybody would take part, but outside there's better things to do.'

'It's different in here, I do it 'cos it gets me out of my room.'

'Not that many people would actually go to a group. It's better for you to come to us, like this [Young Voices].'

One young person made a comment with regard to using the internet to feed views into the Network. He reminded us that this form of communication was not open to everyone.

'It's not that good – some people don't have the internet – so they wouldn't be able to do the online thing.'

Option C: A Youth Assembly

The young people did like the idea of an Assembly but almost unanimously believed that a model like this would certainly not include them. They see themselves as being set apart from this type of participation and think it would be for other young people, not 'criminals'. They see it as a forum aimed at privileged young people and think they would be alienated both by these young people, whose lives bear no relation to theirs, and by the adults, who would dismiss them as being beyond the pale.

'That there's the best, cos it's all young people, they all know what they want – they could talk about what they want and they'd all agree on it.'

'You wouldn't get anyone like going to it though.'

'I would – to tell them what it's like. You can't know how any of it's going to work until it's tried out, you can't trust them [government] or not trust them – you just tell them and wait and see what happens.'

'I think it's a pile of crap, cos I don't like politicians – I think it's [NINFY] a pile of crap. All they do is moan and groan about the same things, it never makes a difference [to young people].'

'It would be all politician's kids doing it.'

'Or all the posh kids.'

'Would I be able to do it, would I be able to be elected to it if I was in jail?'

'We'd vote for you!'

'Would he be able to get in? How many bad people are there? Are there more good people than bad people? 'Cos the good ones wouldn't vote for us.'

'A full scale riot would break out at it – especially if it was all ones like us.'

'Would it be like they way you see on TV, the assembly, when all the politicians are sitting in the big place where they sit in the big seats and they get up to speak and shout at each other and all? That's ok for adults, but not young people. That's what adults do, but it wouldn't work for young people – they'd just start arguing and it would turn into a riot.'

The young people could not conceive how they could be part of a forum such as this.

'I just can't see how that could work.'

'It's a different kind of people who'd go to it, other people not like us - criminals, people who are into that sort of thing.'

'I don't think any criminals would be into it.'

'Option C would just be a riot, it wouldn't work.'

**4. If you are involved in an existing group, what are your expectations of a Network?
How could it be of greatest value to your group?**

Include Youth works with the Young Voices participation project and we believe that Option B would have the best chance of involving a group such as this. We already have workers dedicated to supporting the young people in this project, which we believe is a prerequisite for meaningful involvement in the Network. As the young people's comments have shown, this group has much to offer to the debate. Despite their scepticism and their belief that this is not 'for the likes of them', they did actually flag up relevant and

pertinent issues which the Network should be addressing. They do also support Include Youth's policy responses and without their input we would not be able to make such responses relevant and insightful. We believe they are a valuable resource for the Network and that they have a right to be heard within it, despite the additional challenges their involvement presents. The greatest value the Network could offer to these young people is the opportunity and platform to have their voices heard by those making decisions which affect their lives. It would also give the young people a chance to educate other young people about the reality of their lives.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the young people had identified a number of key issues which government should hear about, they were not convinced that the Network would be of any relevance to their lives. As a result it was difficult to get the young people to engage in a discussion about its proposed format. These young people, perhaps more than others, have actually more to contribute to a debate with policy and decision makers because they have had such a lot of contact with statutory agencies and government through the course of their lives. If we should be seeking out anyone's opinions, we should be making double the effort to ensure these hardest to reach young people are involved in this strategy. All too often these young people are in the position they are because they have not been listened to and valued by those important people in their lives and by those who have a responsibility to protect and nurture them. It is this breakdown of communication which ultimately results in lives which appear disjointed and lacking direction.

The young people generally liked the idea of having a say and in having government listen to them. However, any positive response they had was overridden by the scepticism they felt about what change would come about. Again, this reaction stems from past experience of not being listened to or having their views taken seriously. Include Youth does regularly consult young people and include their views in policy responses and has facilitated other agencies having access to the young people's views. All too often, these views are not acknowledged by the relevant authorities and the young people are left questioning the value of their inputs. There is never, in the young people's opinion, any evidence that anything changes in practice or that people's outlooks have been altered for the better. If they are to have any faith in Network for Youth, it must demonstrate tangible change and real benefits to young people as a result of its existence.

One of the strongest messages coming through from the young people was the feeling that the Network was not for them, but was rather aimed at other young people who had never been involved in crime. It is almost as if they believe that those setting it up already think that to include them would just be too hard, too unpopular and not worth the effort. It is up to those of us with any influence in how the Network is shaped and played out in practice, to prove them wrong.

Include Youth

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