

include YOUTH

Response to the Northern Ireland Executive Draft Programme for Government 2011-15

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Introduction

Include Youth is an independent NGO that has been in existence since 1979. The organisation promotes the rights and best interests of and best practice with young people in need or at risk. We undertake activities aimed at influencing public policy and policy awareness in the areas of youth justice and education, employment and training of young people. Include Youth works directly with young people to support them to be engaged with policy decision making processes through our Young Voices project and to improve their employability through our Give and Take Scheme. We produce resources and provide training, information and support to practitioners and organisations.

This response focuses on how Include Youth believes the draft Programme for Government (PfG) will impact on our two priority areas of work – youth justice and youth employability.

We wish to fully endorse Children in Northern Ireland's (CiNI) response, having participated in and informed their sectoral workshop on the subject, which addresses the process and structural issues arising.

General Comments

We welcome the acknowledgement of the importance of collaboration and effective cross departmental working within the Draft PfG. We support the intention to work in partnership with the voluntary and community sectors. We also welcome the commitment to tackling inequality and disadvantage and the acknowledgement that tackling social deprivation and exclusion is a prerequisite for economic growth.

However we are concerned that the key commitments, including milestones and outcomes, are very general and vague and without the Departments' Delivery Plans published alongside for consultation it is hard to comment in detail on them. We would welcome more detail on the delivery plans under each commitment. It is clear that the content will be critical and we are keen to know when these plans will be developed and what steps are being taken to involve the voluntary sector as well as children and young people in this process.

Given the commitment made at the outset of the document to work in a cross-departmental way it is disappointing that there is no specific reference made to introducing

a statutory duty to co-operate, financial incentives for collaboration as well as sanctions for not working collaboratively.

Include Youth believes that the Executive's 10 Year Strategy for Children and Young People 2006-2016 and the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People should be afforded an explicit high priority within the Programme for Government. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) should also be named within the Programme for Government as an effective and robust delivery mechanism for co-ordinated working.

The CYPSP is an exciting and innovative concept which brings together all the key players in relation to the delivery of services to children, young people and their families. As such it should be recognised within the Programme for Government and given a mandate to deliver on key commitments in relation to children and young people.

We agree with the First and Deputy First Minister that these are challenging economic times for everyone, and we welcome the commitment to improving opportunities and ensuring that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society are protected. This has become a critical factor given the constrained economic operating context, which the draft PfG is set against, and which has impacted hugely on young people across Northern Ireland. Latest statistics from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reveal that almost one in five 18-24 year olds in Northern Ireland are now unemployed.

This situation is made all the worse for the young people with complex unmet needs with whom Include Youth's Give and Take Scheme and others work to enhance their employability. These young people struggled to access training and employment prior to the economic downturn, but those barriers have multiplied in recent years, as a result of the lack of employment opportunities and increased competition in the job market. The young people we work with increasingly feel that they have no future or prospects and they have slipped even further down the employment ladder.

"There's no point doing it (further education) 'cos the jobs are all took anyway 'cos of the global economy, slowing down and all." (Young person on Include Youth Give and Take Scheme)

In 2009 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ¹reflected that:

“Low skilled youth, who even before the crisis faced multiple barriers in finding work are now at high risk of long term economic inactivity and exclusion.”

Reference is made in the ‘Where We Are’ section of the draft PfG to the increase in the percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C. While we welcome this improvement in the level of educational qualifications obtained it is well documented that the educational attainment outcomes for marginalised young people remains extremely worrying. The reality continues to be that the education system, which is of critical importance in preventing young people becoming NEET, is not working for many young people in NI.²

Include Youth recommends that the PfG must contain an express commitment to ensuring education is provided in a manner which works for all children and young people in Northern Ireland; the system cannot continue to fail our children.

Specific Comments

Priority 1: Growing a Sustainable Economy and Investing in the Future

While we support all efforts to increase the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C or equivalent including GCSEs in English and Maths, we repeat again our concerns for those young people who are currently coming out of school unable to read or write to an appropriate standard.

While we support the commitment to up-skill the working age population and to increase the uptake in economically relevant Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) places, we again stress the need for the PfG to go beyond supporting only those young people already progressing. There must be specific goals in relation to addressing the lack of qualifications, skills and opportunities for those young people currently Not in

¹ OECD, 2009, Scarpetta, S., Sonnet, A. and Manfredi, T., Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, Social Employment and Migration Papers, No.106, Rising Youth Unemployment during the Crisis: How to prevent negative long term consequences on a generation.

² Include Youth Response to Every School and Good School, 2008.

Education, Employment and Training (NEET). We are therefore very concerned to see no mention of the Pathways to Success Strategy from DEL included within the ‘building blocks’ section of this priority. We are further concerned as we see this strategy having a cross-cutting impact with other government departments.

Include Youth strongly recommends that the PfG expressly references the Pathways to Success Strategy and that the relevant government departments, incorporate its implementation in the detailed departmental action and spending plans.

Priority 2: Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Wellbeing

We welcome the priority placed on closing the gap in educational underachievement between those who are least and most disadvantaged and improving the participation of young people in education, employment and training. We note that the Young People Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET) Strategy is listed as one of the Building Blocks in achieving this priority but are concerned that there is no delivery target for the NEET strategy detailed within the Programme for Government. We wish to receive clarification that this strategy refers to the Pathways to Success Strategy – if this is the case, then we welcome its inclusion within the building blocks section of priority 2, with the proviso that we fully expect the final strategy which has yet to be launched, will incorporate the significant comments and recommendations put forward by Include Youth in our comprehensive submission to the public consultation in June 2011.

However, once again, we are concerned that if there is no specific commitment and output attached to the Pathways to Success Strategy within the Programme for Government, it will be a priority and receive the necessary budget and departmental drive required to properly implement. Given the work that has gone into developing the strategy and the commitment made to it by DEL officials, the Assembly Employment and Learning Committee members, both past and present, and the wide variety of stakeholders from both the voluntary and community sectors, it is deeply disappointing that its implementation is not a key commitment within the Draft Programme for Government³.

³ Include Youth Response to the Department of Employment and Learning’s Consultation on the Pathways to Success, 2011.

Particular responsibility for supporting people into employment falls to DETI. Employers must be named as having a role to play in tackling the issues affecting young people who are NEET, and a significant level of intervention is required by DETI in this area. It is essential that employers working within the public and private sectors improve employment and work based training opportunities for young people. There is a pressing need for a concerted, high level approach to engaging with employers.

We welcome the commitment to deliver a range of measures to tackle poverty and social exclusion but would welcome more detail on how this will be progressed, monitored and evaluated.

We welcome the commitment to improve literacy and numeracy levels among all school leavers, with additional resources targeted at areas of educational underachievement.

Priority 3: Protecting our People, the Environment and Creating Safer Communities

Early Intervention

The draft Programme for Government does not include the need to prioritise funding for the development of Early Intervention programmes which would provide family support structures. As noted by the Youth Justice Review team it is now widely accepted that investment in health, education and family support in the early years of children's lives has a significant impact on their future life chances, through the prevention of social exclusion as well as of becoming involved in offending behaviour.

It is essential that the complexities of young people's lives are identified and understood and that appropriate, well resourced support is provided through early intervention measures. This requires cross departmental working and a commitment to an early intervention approach. Such an approach, targeted at promoting the well being of all children and characterised by universal services, holistic approaches and decriminalising responses comprise the most effective and least damaging forms of intervention and will subsequently minimise the necessity for intervention by the criminal justice system.

There is an absolute need for the Programme for Government to include a commitment to prioritise funding for investment in early intervention and prevention. This should be advanced in a cross departmental collaborative way. Additionally Government must ensure

that Early Intervention is not defined by age but to whenever a child or young person requires support regardless of their age.

Implementation of Youth Justice Review Recommendations

We are confused as to why implementation on the youth justice review is placed within the 'Reducing Levels of Serious Crime' commitment. It is unhelpful that the Review has been located within this section of the Programme. It gives the impression that the Youth Justice Review is linked to reducing serious crime, when in fact it should be seen as a much wider issue than that.

We note that the milestone/output for 2013/14 under the key commitment to 'reduce the level of serious crime' is to 'implement 90% of agreed Youth Justice Review recommendations'. We would seek clarification on how this figure was reached and what the evidence base was for this decision. We are concerned that it refers to 'agreed' recommendations, which suggests that potentially key recommendations within the Review may not be implemented. We would seek further clarification from the Department of Justice on the thinking behind this stated milestone. Once again, this demonstrates the challenge consultees face in engaging in a meaningful and constructive way with the current consultation in the absence of detailed departmental action plans, and re-iterate our recommendation that these be published for public consultation urgently, with concomitant EQIAs and spending plans.

Furthermore, we would like to emphasize that implementation on the recommendations of the Youth Justice Review should not be seen as the only mechanism through which progress can be made. There are other vital issues which have not been addressed within the Youth Justice Review which nonetheless still require urgent attention, such as the need to develop cross-cutting and joined up services to reducing offending.

Legislative Framework

There are a number of recommendations arising from the Youth Justice Review which will require legislative change and yet no mention is made in the Programme for Government on the legislative framework and associated timescale. We are concerned that if these are not listed within the Programme for Government, key recommendations may not be implemented.

Tackling Crime Against Older and Vulnerable People

While we welcome the commitment to tackling crime against older and vulnerable people, we would have welcomed a clearer and more widely focused approach than that of ‘more effective and appropriate sentences and other measures’. We are concerned that this commitment may suggest the use of a narrow definition of ‘vulnerable people’. We know that young people are more likely to be victims of crime than perpetrators of crime and it is essential that this commitment addresses the high incidences of crime against young people as well as the fear so many young people have of becoming victims of crime. The Milestones and Outputs relating to this commitment appear to rely heavily on the use of effective and appropriate sentences rather than giving more detail on what ‘other measures’ could be to reduce crime.

We would recommend that more explicit reference is made to supporting community based initiatives which tackle crime.

Improve Community Safety by Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour

We agree that improving community safety should be a central commitment with the Programme for Government and are therefore pleased to see it listed as a Key Commitment. We are however, disappointed that the wording of the commitment is narrowed down to a focus on tackling anti-social behaviour and assigned to one Department only to take the lead, the Department of Justice. This narrow focus is surprising given the fact that the Draft Community Safety Strategy issued for consultation in April 2011 recognised the importance of developing early intervention and family support mechanisms and of the need to work in a co-ordinated and cross departmental way. Any solutions being proposed to address anti-social behaviour and to reduce fear amongst the vulnerable in our society need to tackle the demonisation and criminalisation of young people and to address the real causes of anti-social behaviour.

We would recommend that the key commitment on improving community safety within the Programme for Government should be extended beyond tackling anti-social behaviour and should make reference to the key drivers necessary to bring about a safer Northern Ireland for all – early intervention and prevention, minimal intervention, diversion,

reintegration and rehabilitation. Include Youth supports a community based response to anti-social behaviour in the form of community diversionary measures. We believe that there should be community based solutions to community problems, diverting young people from any contact with the criminal justice system. Include Youth defines 'diversion from the formal criminal justice system' as being diversion from all engagement with statutory criminal justice agencies, and processes prior to having been convicted for committing a criminal offence.

Include Youth supports the principles and ethos of restorative justice, and diversionary measures which seek to steer children and young people away from the criminal justice system.

We recommend that the Programme for Government should include an outcome which commits the Executive to ensuring there is sustained support and resourcing for the development of community-based restorative justice programmes across NI in a way that meets the needs of each community whilst diverting young people from the criminal justice system.

Include Youth also recommends that the PfG expressly commits to repealing the governing ASBO legislation, which has been shown to be ineffective in making communities safer.

We also believe that the development of early intervention and family support services is included within the context of making communities safer, and that reference is made to the children's strategy. Once again, we require detail via departmental action plans to fully comment.

Priority 4: Building a Strong and Shared Community

Prison Review

The Draft Programme for Government does make reference to the implementation of 90 per cent of the recommendations contained in the Prison Review Action Plan by 2014-15. We wish to clarify whether the Prison Review Action Plan has been drafted, and believe that it would be beneficial to have input from interested parties, including NGOs and oversight bodies. We further believe that this action plan must take a co-ordinated, transparent and

expeditious approach to implementation and wish to once again request the detail of the departmental action plan, including detailed plans for implementing recommendations from the Prison Review Team. There are a number of recommendations which should be brought forward as a matter of urgency, including the removal of under 18 year olds from Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre.

Conclusions

Include Youth welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Programme for Government and look forward to engaging in the next steps in the process. We are keen to influence the development of Delivery Plans at the earliest possible opportunity and to work alongside our colleagues in the Departments.