



Engagement and Participation of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland

CiNI believe that our children and young people must be accorded greater priority and made more visible in all levels of government policy, planning and decisions about the future.

Children and young people living in Northern Ireland have been both past victims of violence but they also should be considered as peacemakers and peace builders. They represent the future of this country, therefore engaging them in this current process is important. Having themselves been part of the processes within Northern Ireland, it is important that children and young people are allowed to assert their own power and be motivated to participate in peace building initiatives. Social anthropologist Jo Boyden called for a paradigmatic shift that would involve "thinking about children as agents of their own development who, even during times of great adversity, consciously act upon and influence the environments in which they live."¹

While obligations have been placed upon Government Departments to engage directly with children and young people, as a group who will be impacted by Government policy, it is important children and young people are included in any decisions relating to the future of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, we would highlight

¹ Jo Boyden, "Children under Fire: Challenging Assumptions about Children's Resilience," *Children, Youth and Environments* 13(1) (Spring 2003).

the obligations placed upon Departments by Section 75 of the NI Act 1998, UNCRC article 12 and UNCRPD article 7. Obligations associated with article 12 also mean that it is important to consider whether services promote the voice of the child; is the voice of the child integral to service design, planning, delivery, evaluation. In relation to article 12 the Committee on the Rights of the Child is clear –

“As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views, which should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child ... they make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language ... the right to express views and feelings should be anchored in the child’s daily life at home and in his or her community; within the full range of early childhood health, care and education facilities, as well as in legal proceedings; and in the development of policies and services, including through research and consultations.”

Children in Europe² has highlighted the participation of children as an essential value, stating that services should embody participation as an expression of democracy and as a means to combat social exclusion and should mean the active inclusion of the entire community. We would also emphasize that engagement with children and young people must include young children as well as young adults, noting the research evidence which demonstrates that from an early age children do exhibit small but significant cultural and political awareness.³

With this in mind Children in Northern Ireland are asking that this current process allows for children and young people to bring their perspective on the current issues as well as on how consensus can be built, their experience and resources will not only help but a new set of knowledge and experiences of inclusion will ensure their voices and ideas are heard. ***We ask that the current method of engagement also provides an opportunity to garner views and ideas from children and young people.***

² Children in Europe (2007) Ten principles for a European approach to services

³ Connolly, P., Smith, A. & Kelly, B. (2002) *Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.