



The Next Generations:
Inter-generational and Youth Policy
in Northern Ireland's New Century

Public Consultation Paper

October 2020

Introduction

The Democratic Unionist Party is preparing a new paper on future of youth policy with the aim of developing a full policy statement focused on the Assembly and Local Councils.

Party Vision

Northern Ireland will mark its centenary in 2021. This will be an opportunity to celebrate our achievements and contribution to the wider world. It also provides the opportunity to identify and learn from our mistakes and equally to see this new century as Northern Ireland's new opportunity – building on our strengths and fixing what's wrong.

The DUP sees this next century as a meritocratic Northern Ireland driven by the talents of all. Our devolved political structures, complemented by a reinvigorated national parliament, will enable the UK, NI and its people to fulfil their true potential. We will unlock the abilities, entrepreneurship and ambition of everyone to make a Northern Ireland all can take pride in. This will deliver the common good and individual prosperity to raise Northern Ireland up, to give the next generation a better life than we had and increase our contribution to the United Kingdom and the wider world.

The practical outworking of this vision must apply to those who will be living most or all of their lives in Northern Ireland's new century. This will mean an inter-generational focus on such areas as early years development, mental health, education and vocational training and youth services. This paper focuses on a framework for inter-generational focus and future model for youth services.

Pre-consultation paper

The first step of that process was the pre-consultation paper released in February 2020. A number of youth umbrella organisations and youth groups kindly responded to the paper as well as offers of youth engagement at the later stages.

However, the total number of responses was lower than hoped for what we consider an important policy area. Our assessment of the reasons for this were three-fold:

- Restoration – Organisations were focusing their efforts on engaging with the restored Assembly and Executive.

- Volume – As the DUP sought to make up for the interruption of the election to its policy development work, this resulted in a high number of consultations running simultaneous. This made it difficult to raise awareness of an individual consultation.
- Funding – The consultation coincided with an Education Authority funding application period so this may have been of greater priority for some organisations. The prevalence of the funding process did seem to the forefront of minds when engaging with groups with an impact on the feedback.

Furthermore, this consultation period was partially disrupted by the spread of COVID 19 to the UK and is likely to significantly disrupt this stage of the consultation paper as well. Whatever the necessary short-term disruptions, it will also have a further long-term financial and societal impact. The DUP wants to help those that will spend much of their life living with the consequences. While many of the older generations lived with the consequences of terrorism and its legacy, those under 30 face living with the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis and the 2020 pandemic. Ulster Bank economist Richard Ramsey summarised it as:

*“People under the age of 30 will be in the frontline when it comes to the financial impact of the pandemic and the resulting lockdown. Most people are adversely impacted in a recession in some manner, but this is even more true for younger people. Economic research confirms that younger people get hit harder than other age groups in terms of both employment and earnings. In turn, this delays gaining a foothold on the property ladder and starting a pension...
...Clearly the legacy of the last downturn is still with us within the younger age groups. And it is this bracket that is being impacted significantly again. And overall, they are now being hit harder this time than the last time.”*

The recognition of what under 30s will face as they grow older has shaped the ambition of this draft policy.

The responses the DUP did receive raised the following issues:

- The statutory basis of youth services was identified as a clear positive with general contentment about how our system compares with other parts of the United Kingdom. However, there was a general failure to document and evidence the good work here in comparison with elsewhere - ‘too busy doing it’.

- Youth providers have a strong track record of delivery and innovation especially in deeply problematic and dangerous times as documented in the valuable resource of *Investing in Lives: The History of The Youth Service in Northern Ireland Vol. 2*.
- Voluntary groups remain the core deliverers of youth development across Northern Ireland with consistent work on updating their programmes.
- Highest level of collaboration and co-operation between uniform groups compared with anywhere else in the UK.
- Generalist provision v targeted interventions tensions with some lack of awareness of the targeted interventions as well as a perception of government having its favourites for such work.
- Youth service was an overlooked policy area with voluntary youth groups and rural areas feeling overlooked within it.
- Criticism of the EA funding approach being more like tenders than a funding application process, as demonstrated by highly prescriptive funding contracts. There was decreasing engagement at lower grant levels with voluntary groups seeing this as practical demonstration of a lack of statutory interest.
- Concerns about the loss of the Youth Council with a view it operated with a flexibility and freedom to innovate that has been curtailed under the new structures.
- Engagement with Education Authority Board members had been generally positive but the view was youth provision was just another on a long list of EA issues.
- Groups detailed the key aspects and value of their respective work.

The Pre-Consultation paper set out the following:

“The core aims of the new Youth policy will be to demonstrate and develop:

- *Government commitment and practice towards ensuring good living conditions and opportunities for the young population of Northern Ireland.*
- *A strategy involving families, voluntary sector and government to provide young people with opportunities and experiences that support their successful integration into society and enable them to be active and responsible members of society. This strategy should be built upon 6 elements:*
 - *Education & training*
 - *Employment & entrepreneurship*
 - *Health & well-being*

- *Cultural Identity and Interaction*
- *Inclusion, Participation & Volunteering*
- *Creativity*

The underlying philosophy is that the next generations of Northern Ireland grow up in strong families, maximise their potential and choose to live their lives here contributing to Northern Ireland as an advancing and prosperous part of the United Kingdom.”

In terms of consultees the greatest discussion was around the elements of what future youth approaches should be built around. Based on this feedback adaptations will be made to the first and third elements:

- Education, learning & training achievement
- Physical and mental health and well-being

There was some criticism of:

“support their successful integration into society and enable them to be active and responsible members of society”

This was criticised as social engineering with the argument that youth development should not have a pre-ordained end point. At this stage of the consultation, this criticism has not been accepted for the following reasons:

- The identification of outputs and outcomes to public investment is standard and good practice.
- The language was drawn from a number of existing policies and approaches. Therefore, we do not consider it a radical departure or unduly onerous expectation.
- It is the nature of these terms that they evolve and change over time so the ‘fixed’ outcome is not necessarily so fixed.
- Dislocation from family, community and others can be a contributor to poor mental health for younger people. Thus, we consider these goals as overall positive for young people.

However, it is highlighted and included here for the discussion to continue.

Next steps

The following issues need to be taken into consideration when deciding next steps:

- A lower level (though high quality) of responses.
- The focus of responses on more pressing issues and changes.
- Disruption of COVID to engagement in the pre-consultation and this one.

Therefore, there will be the following differences to this paper and possibly the process:

- More detail of the pre-consultation responses (as in section above) than usually contained within a DUP consultation document.
- There will be more selection of policy options than firm proposals with the positives and negatives of proposals identified.
- A second public consultation may be considered.

Aim 1 – Government commitment and policy action

The differentials in government action between age groups is an overlooked but underlying political issue. Surprisingly, it was the Conservatives in their 2017 campaign that tried to place the issue as a central theme of political debate. However, its association with a ham-fisted approach to social care reform resulted as an ‘anti-older generation’ measure. The poor electoral result that followed resulted in these issues once again being left out on the fringes of political priorities.

Why is this so?

First, it is the primary responsibility of a child’s family to raise and provide for them. Thus, a lower level of intervention and provision naturally flows from that. The state intervenes primarily in the areas of education (the area with greatest and long-term economic and social consequence) and protection (welfare and protection from harm).

Second, this generation of young people and children have been disproportionately impacted by the global financial collapse with the long-term consequences of the explosion in public debt and the impact on public finances.

Third, non-participation in politics. Despite various examples of youth activism over different causes, the broad pattern remains that young people (18-30) are less likely to vote and opinion polls consistently show less interest in and knowledge of politics in this age range. Political interest tends to be something that grows with age, family and wealth and there is some evidence that voting is partially an inherited habit from parents.

There are the general pressures on politics and government, now commonly referred to as ‘bandwidth’. There is never a shortage of issues seeking attention and those with short to medium term action and deliverables always succeed in gaining more attention, focus and action than those requiring long-term approaches e.g. raising productivity.

As the counter balance to these we have the motivation to deliver what each generation before us has tried to achieve – that the next generation enjoys a better life than we had. It is telling that the expectation that this will be achieved has fallen. Polling in 2016 found:

“A majority (54%) of the public now think that quality of life for today’s youth will be lower than that of their parents, with just one in five (22%) saying that their quality of life will be higher. This is the highest

percentage of people saying quality of life will be lower for young people since we started asking this question, and represents a nineteen percentage-point increase in pessimism since 2011, when one third (35%) felt that today's youth would have a worse standard of life. When this question was asked in 2003, just 12 per cent of the public felt that the quality of life for today's youth would be lower than that of their parents."

What will it be when the same questions are asked after this pandemic? This pessimism and second global event should be the spur to action.

As this policy paper is primarily focused on what the Northern Ireland Assembly can do, we should identify the additional barriers that apply to it. Namely, a multi-party consociational Assembly and Executive placed on top of a civil service with a silo approach, a culture lacking in policy innovation and attitude to legislation more appropriate for direct rule than a devolved legislative body. It has limited fiscal space unless we engage in substantive public sector reform. However, establishing new and extra resources through local tax raising is difficult in a poorer region with cumbersome pre-existing tax tools.

The Welsh Model

The Welsh Assembly have acknowledged the challenge of politics and long-term approaches. They have created a policy framework and structure to address them with the Future Generations Act 2015. This sets out:

"...the ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act requires public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change."

In addition to the duties placed on public bodies there is also a Future Generations Commissioner and support team. The present holder is Sophie Howe, a former Labour Party adviser and Councillor. The role of the Commissioner is:

"... is to be the guardian of future generations"

This has led to the tag of 'Minister for the yet to be born'. General duties and scope for action are:

“Promote the sustainable development principle, in particular to act as a guardian of the ability of future generations to meet their needs and encourage public bodies to take greater account of the long-term impact of the things they do.

Monitor and assess the extent to which well-being objectives set by public bodies are being met.

Provide advice to Public Bodies and Public Services Boards

Carry out reviews into how public bodies are taking account of the long-term impact of their decisions

Make recommendations following a review”

Such a development would enable more to be done to shape the Northern Ireland that the next generation will inherit, as well as long-term and future policy challenges.

The identified difficulties are:

- Consociationalism and challenge - More deliverable in a non-consociational system with a single office holder more likely to subject to bias, the perception of bias or the accusation of it regardless of any real validity. The political background of the Welsh Commissioner was an area of challenge.
- Commissioner fatigue - When you consider the number of Commissioners Northern Ireland already have within our system with more to come through New Decade New Approach, there may be a significant degree of public cynicism about the creation of another. The £95K salary of the Welsh Commissioner was a source of criticism.
- Tendency towards more government – Policy development has a very strong focus on public law, policy and finances with the potential of the private sector, market or citizen response to provide solutions downplayed, achieved through inefficient subsidies or approaches not based on behavioural science. An expansion of government is generally a position of the left and can be hostile to the market/private sector solutions. In Northern Ireland the public sector already plays a disproportionate role.

However, the creation of something new does not mean it has to be additional – if we were to proceed in such a direction, we could subsume the work and responsibilities of other Commissioners within the new structures providing greater synergies and less duplication. It could also be given thematic panels to help inform the work of the Commissioner, for example:

- Children and Young People.
- Poverty.
- Climate Change & Sustainability.
- Productivity and Fourth Industrial Revolution.

It would help ensure the lasting impact of the Programme for Government process.

Political Structures

The focus on future generations and youth services could be provided at ministerial level.

There are two opportunities for this:

1. The creation of a Junior Minister within the Department of Education (DE).
2. Future generation and youth services moved to the Executive Office with Junior Ministers given the responsibility (TEO).

The DE option would give greater prominence to the issues of youth policy and services within the Department, but it would be hard to provide a meaningful future generations role as providing a cross-departmental challenge role from within a thematic department can be difficult. There is also the question of how such a junior ministerial role would fit in the d'Hondt mechanism. It would create another minister in the Executive when the broader direction of travel, led by the DUP, has been towards reduction.

The TEO option, considering its co-ordinating role across the Executive and the responsibility for the development of Programme for Government, gives it a means of championing and implementing longer-term approaches with the Junior Ministers. The joint nature of the office may assist in the introduction and management of such an approach within consociational structures.

The second element is should the youth services responsibility follow with the future generations policy remit. TEO through Delivering Social Change (DSC) has been leading on a number of targeted youth interventions as well as the youth relevant elements of Together Building a United Community (TBUC).

The argument against it is youth services can be viewed as 'informal' education that complements and assists the formal education system and the development of a closer relationship should be the policy direction rather than the 'distance' between the two.

Aim 2 & 3 - Youth Strategy, Services and Outcomes

A 2030 ambition for radical change?

This has been prepared on the basis that a highly ambitious aim should be established for the delivery of youth provision by the adoption of a highly successful system from another country, Iceland.

However, we need to be conscious of a number of immediate and limiting factors:

- The disruption of no Executive and Assembly – like any sectors the unnecessary collapse of the Assembly and Executive cause significant delay and disruption to decision-making and accountability. This is a sector seeking some stability.
- Sectoral change - The sector is dealing with change through the abolition of the Youth Council and new Education Authority led approaches.
- Children & Young People's Strategy – a new ten-year strategy was to run from 2017-2027 but with no Assembly this was not progressed.
- The COVID-19 Pandemic – at the point of writing the form and time-scale of the social distancing measures are unclear, but youth services will be very difficult to deliver in a socially distant format. There will also be the legacy of education disrupted, mental health impacts as well as the almost certain increases in domestic and child abuse during lockdown.

Equally we need to consider what achieving the ambition would involve beyond the political commitment to it. Namely, a number of significant step changes in areas such as:

- Legislation.
- Youth evidence base.
- Re-allocation of existing resources
- Allocation of new resources.
- Provisions of facilities and support for youth activities.
- New technology.
- Co-ordination between departments, councils and voluntary/community organisations to provide an equitable system across Northern Ireland.

Therefore, we believe the transformation should be set as a long-term policy goal, no later than 2030. If it can be achieved sooner this would be welcome. The Children and Young People's strategy, in particular its aims, would not be in conflict with what this new approach so could dovetail in the medium to long-term. Therefore, the 2020-30 strategy can be agreed and implemented while all necessary preparations are made.

The Icelandic model

A journalistic description of the Icelandic youth model is "enforced common sense". It was built and maintained around a clear evidence base of youth surveys since 1992. What one academic described as:

"...the most remarkably intense and profound study of stress in the lives of teenagers that I have ever seen,"

The factors that produced less stress amongst identified young people were fourfold:

- Participation in organised activities, especially sport.
- Total time spent with parent(s).
- Feeling cared about at school.
- Not being outdoors in the late evening.

Comparable surveys in other countries have produced the same results. This insight into youth was linked to research on risk taking and substance abuse and was cognitive that education focused programmes were not delivering the scale of change desired. The emphasis on sport and physical activity was partially driven by the argument that these produce a natural high. This is the best alternative to the unnatural and harmful highs of substance abuse.

What resulted from this was a broad ranging package of measures – legislative, policy and spending. While the general impression of Iceland is as part of the general Scandinavian social democratic norm, the package of solutions is a blend. It is neither a social conservative nor liberal answer, but both. It is neither leave it to parents nor a government only intervention, it is both. It is rights and responsibilities. It is both the carrot and the stick.

The carrot was increased public investment in sport facilities and organised youth activities, a leisure/youth card to encourage activity and family activities with additional targeted help

for those on low incomes and rural youth. It also involved legally established parent groups for every school and the development of age specific parenting agreements that help educate parents, raise broader social awareness and ultimately communicate 'common' social norms.

The 'stick' took the form of:

- Raising the drinking age to 20 (if adopted this would require legal change in NI) and cigarette purchases to 18 (this is already the law here).
- Bans on alcohol and cigarette advertising – there are much more extensive limitations on cigarette advertising than on alcohol in the NI and the UK as a whole. A regional ban could be problematic.
- Winter and summer curfews – 10pm in winter and midnight in summer. This is the measure that others have not adopted.

These measures were to tackle harms and with the curfew, an evidence-based risk factor. In the adoption of this policy, taking all the nice bits but ignoring the difficult would be a temptation. It is notable that others who have sought to emulate the model but left parts out have seen improvements, but not the scale of progress that Iceland achieved.

However, rather than take these as prescriptive measures they are demonstrative of a broader issue: the value of establishing and enforcing boundaries for children and young people. While not proposing curfews, what would the boundaries that we would want to establish for young people here with parents sharing the responsibilities around them?

Delivery in Iceland was not centralised but was undertaken at the municipal level. As a major provider of sports facilities this would make Councils doubly relevant (as well as partnership with the voluntary sector and sports groups). There would need to be a discussion of whether this should be devolved to councils, undertaken in partnership, or be solely the primacy of the Assembly. As with the DUPs position on devolution of regeneration powers, any transfer of new powers or responsibilities to Council could only be considered if matched by reform and strengthening of the minority protection mechanisms.

These proposals would involve changes to the statutory sector as well as a step change in the relationship and support for the voluntary and uniformed youth providers.

The DUP would envisage the following model to advance it:

- Agreement and adoption by the Executive of this model as its long-term goal.
- Agreement with Local Government on its potential role and contribution.
- An Implementation Board with appropriate Icelandic and international expertise that would oversee:
 - Design, Commissioning and Collation of the Annual Youth Survey.
 - Mapping of facilities and activities.
 - Design of an activity card scheme for general provision what ‘premiums’ needed e.g. rural, income and/or special needs.
 - Review and re-purposing of all existing funding streams.
 - Partnership agreement with the voluntary and uniformed youth providers.
 - Identification of legislative measures.
 - A fully costed and timetabled implementation plan.

In conclusion, appropriate selection and development of a package of measures based on the options above would advance the underlying philosophy to this work, that:

“...the next generations of Northern Ireland grow up in strong families, maximise their potential and choose to live their lives here contributing to Northern Ireland as an advancing and prosperous part of the United Kingdom.”

Questions:

1. Do you agree with the amendments made to the elements of youth policy? Would you change or add anything more?

2. Do you consider including:

“support their successful integration into society and enable them to be active and responsible members of society”

As acceptable or does it constitute social engineering? Do you have alternative wording?

3. Which of the models for placing greater intergenerational focus into policy making do you prefer:

a. Adoption of the Welsh model?

i. Without reform of other commissioners in NI?

ii. With reform of other commissioners?

b. Expand the role of the Children and Young People’s Commissioner?

c. Political reforms with lead from:

i. The Department of Education with a junior minister position created?

ii. The Executive Office with the Junior Ministers primarily responsible?

1. With or without a transfer of youth services to TEO?

Do you have alternative proposals you believe we should consider?

4. Do you believe the Icelandic model is an appropriate one for Northern Ireland? What do you consider its strengths and weaknesses?

5. What other model or combination of models do you think we should consider?

6. If the Icelandic model were adopted:

a. What would be a suitable timeframe for adoption?

b. How would be required to successfully introduce its introduction?

c. What would the ‘boundaries’ we would seek to establish and enforce?

d. What roles and contributions would you identify from the different levels of government?

If you wish to discuss further please contact leereynolds@dup.org.uk to make arrangements.
Consultation responses can be submitted to by Monday 2nd November 2020 to the same email
or sent to DUP HQ, 91 Dundela Avenue, Belfast, BT4 3BU.