

'Breaking Barriers through Youth Work'

Conference Report – Executive Summary

Apr 2010

“...I pay tribute to all the progressive forces in the youth service, which have done so much to foster hope and citizenship, in reality in contested society ‘peace’ and the whole sense of the word will always remain an ideal, albeit an ideal to be pursued relentlessly and with all the creativity and imagination we can muster...” P. Sweeney

Community Relations Council



European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation 2007-2013, Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland (PEACE III)

MEASURE : 1.A Building Positive Relations at the Local Level

Introduction and Overview

'*Breaking Barriers through Youth Work*' Conference was a partnership between the Community Relations Council and Youthnet NI aimed at examining the role of youth work in conflict transformation, its impact on young people and its contribution to reconciliation. A steering group was established to plan and organize the conference. The steering group brought together a reference group of young people from across the region in a residential setting to capture their views prior to the conference.

The Conference opened with welcome and introductory remarks from the chair of the Community Relations Council, Tony McCusker followed by a presentation of a Community Relations Award to David Stevens and Mary Kelly for their contribution to peace-building within Northern Ireland. Michael Wardlow, chair of Youthnet followed this award with an examination of the current context of youth work and its role in building a shared future.

Youth Action Northern Ireland's Suitcase Theatre presented a short exert from their 2010 production '*Eclipse – the 'other side' of peace*' reflecting on the true impact of the past on the youth of today.

Keynote Address - 'Can we nudge history forward just a little?'

Paul Sweeney, Permanent Secretary for the Department of Education was the keynote speaker who gave a reflective and personal keynote address on education and youth work and asked whether we can nudge history forward just a little.

"It does occur to me that we are moving beyond short term thinking and that we are considering more than ever before the impact that we are having on future generations"

Paul asked whether those involved in community relations, community sharing and reconciliation would begin to interrogate what will be required to nudge history forward, even just a millimeter.

Paul paid tribute to those involved in education and youth work, particularly through the period we call 'the Troubles' but also in the period beyond. He commented on the stability provided by educators for young people and the significant role models they were within communities.

"It has been my great privilege over the years to know some remarkable teachers and some remarkable youth workers who have achieved some extraordinary results with limited resources"

Other themes that were contained in this keynote address included - youth work's role in the broader education community, addressing artificial boundaries between schools and the youth service, and integrating community relations practice more fully into the educational system.

'I recognise and applaud the contributions of youth work in improving community relations. I know that many of you were actively involved, often at your own risk, in helping young people in testing their values and beliefs and providing safe spaces...'
P.Sweeney

Contribution of Youth Work to Reconciliation

The reference group of young people created a film to input into the conference. 20 young people attended a residential to debate and discuss issues impacting on their immediate lives within the context of a segregated society. The DVD presented at conference aimed to highlight the key points from their discussions and their thoughts on what they think they would like to see happening in the future

Workshops*

A selection of workshops took place to prepare a number of questions for a political panel made up of politicians from the SDLP, Sinn Fein, Alliance, UUP, DUP and PUP.

Delegates reflected on how effective they were at articulating the impact of their work and agreed that

more needed to be done to ensure political representatives and local government recognized the need for community relations work with children and young people. They also strongly questioned how community relations work with young people was valued by politicians and invited a response to the recent cuts.

They expressed frustration at the lack of strategic planning and policy direction underpinning the allocation of resources for youth and community relations work and invited politicians to identify concrete actions, with regards to children and young people, to deliver on their commitment to a shared society.

'I think there is a sense that politics is now there, it is firmly in place and consequently community relations issues don't have the same level of priority in the agenda that they had previously. From our own experience that would be a serious mistake.' T. McCusker

Political Panel

In addition to the questions devised by workshop participants, the Qwizdom facility was used to help supplement and direct questions to the political panel and prior to the formal debate the Qwizdom facility was used to set the scene and give the politicians a sense of the issues which were coming forward as priority areas for discussion.

The political panel consisted of

- Jonathan Bell, DUP
- Naomi Long, Alliance Party
- Basil McCrea, UUP

QUIZDOM

86% felt that young people were unsure of their role on the peace process

89% thought that the legacy of the conflict is still impacting on everyday lives of children and young people in NI

Only **15%** of delegates felt that the contribution of youth work to good relations and building a shared society

* A week prior to the staging of the conference the Department of Education announced a significant cut to community relations funding in youth and schools. Workshops discussions took place against this backdrop

- Conall McDevitt, SDLP
- Daithí McKay of Sinn Fein
- Dawn Purvis, PUP

Mark Carruthers from BBC NI chaired the political debate.

The SDLP stated there was a huge disconnect between the reality of politics and the possibility of a shared future; and that strong political leadership was required to deliver on the key ambitions of a shared society e.g. shared education and shared housing.

QUIZDOM RESPONSE

33% suggested that ‘Strong Political Leadership’ would be the single change that would have the greatest impact on building a shared society

31% felt that the single change having the greatest impact on building a shared society would be ‘shared education/ housing’

75% agreed that Politicians do not do enough to promote positive images of children and young people

83% said that politicians should take more steps to ensure greater shared services for society in NI

Political leadership was also of huge importance for the PUP, as well as addressing disadvantage and inequalities that exist within many of our communities. The Alliance party emphasised the need to have a convergence between political efforts, policy development and grassroots work. Sinn Fein felt political leadership had delivered change on the ground but recognised the level of detachment between young people and political structures. The need to ensure the next generation is not held back because of the legacy of the past was highlighted as a priority. The DUP felt huge progress had been made and reflected on the change over the last 20 years, but agreed that more needed to be done.

There was a broader discussion about the current reality of division and segregation, and there were various opinions from the political panel with some parties feeling that opportunities for interaction and engagement should be taking place earlier. It was also stressed that politicians

should be more connected to young people and that they should be made to feel part of the peace process, if not they faced exclusion and isolation from the process. It is important to give young people aspirations and encouragement and ensure they don’t slip back into the patterns of the past. Another opinion was that over the last 10 years there had been a serious lack of political leadership on the issue of peace and reconciliation, which could have serious ramifications.

A big issue related to the actions taken by political parties with regards to children and young people to deliver on their commitments to a shared future.

The PUP spoke about their everyday work with local stakeholders, agencies, youth workers, churches and various other organisations. They advocate investing in children and young people’s services for the delivery of a better economy and a better future. The need to tackle education under-achievement and ensure children have a stake in whatever shared society we create was stressed. We need to reach the

hard-to-reach and ensure their voice is heard. The PUP felt the ‘separate but equal’ ideology is limited, and that the PUP supports integrated education, is anti-sectarian and encourages cross community endeavors.

Sinn Fein believes that all Section 75 groups should be protected, particularly the LGBT groups given the number of attacks. It is important to provide leadership on the ground, and is especially concerned at the level of disengagement with young people and politicians, which could have dangerous ramifications.

‘Unless there is youth work and schools work that supports young people to challenge and change the abnormal sectarian cultures that shape our society we will not go forward.’ D. Morrow

The DUP representative advocated the frontloading of services into early years, and ensuring problems are addressed much earlier. This involves working with faith and voluntary groups as well as with local statutory agencies to improve children’s lives. The DUP believe that there has been progress and political leadership and we should not lose sight of this.

The SDLP highlighted the health and under-achievement of children and young people, and our dysfunctional relationship with young people, and stressed the need to invest in integration and have a shared determination to promote and implement it.

The notion that segregation is normal is a huge manifesto issue for the Alliance party. Integration should not be seen as some kind of luxury, and we need to move to a position whereby integration becomes normal practice and available to people e.g. integrated education and shared space and services. We can’t afford to continue with segregation. The whole issue of integration versus celebration of culture was mentioned and the importance of exploring diversity as part of a wider and more complex issue, rather than a two dimensional paradigm.

The UUP agreed that investment in pre-school is important. They are also concerned that the youth service is somehow viewed as a bolt-on to the Department of Education, with huge demands and little resources. The UUP are committed to working with and hearing from young people and do this through a number of programmes and exchanges. They also believe that political leadership must be at the heart of government with a corresponding vision.

The next question focused on the announcement of a 70% cut in the Department of Education’s community relations budget from £3.5 million to £1.1 million, and whether each of the political parties supported it and what they are going to do about it.

- The Sinn Fein representative acknowledged it was a huge cut, but stated that difficult decisions have to be made by the Minister. It was important to look at innovative ways of delivering youth

work through other measures. Policy decisions are being taken in a climate of efficiency-savings and it was important to recognise the competing priorities.

- The DUP supported 3% efficiency savings but questioned if the 70% cut to the community relations budget was proportionate. The whole issue of relocating of unspent finance was raised as an opportunity.
- The Alliance Party representative questioned the cut within the context of efficiency e.g. the delay in establishing ESA and the huge costs associated with this. Millions spent on segregation so it doesn't make sense to cut this tiny community relations budget.
- The UUP felt that it revealed the different priorities of the different political parties, and that the budget should be increasing. It is sending the wrong message, and reveals the executive as a disjointed structure without a strategic vision on reconciling our various peoples.
- The PUP stressed that they are the only unofficial opposition in the Assembly. Community relations are not a priority for SF and that is why funding for this work is not a priority. Again references were made to the money spent on ESA and the surplus seats in the controlled and maintained sector, and the PUP believes that by cutting the budget for community relations the Department of Education is actually transferring those costs onto the health service, the criminal justice system and other government agencies/departments.
- The SDLP do not support the cuts made by the Department of Education. Reference was made to the previous Executive's Programme Fund.

'We have a truce and we have to work through from truth to transformation, and young people are agents of transformation. If you visit these communities, young people are energised, they're passionate' M. Wardlow

There were other examples quoted in relation to savings such as the Department of Education's Maintenance Budget and Commissioners for Education & Library Boards (i.e. Southern Education & Library Board)

Audience engagement

There was an opportunity for some discussion between members of the audience and the panel. The politicians were challenged to do something about the cuts, particularly those who didn't vote for the cuts; and there were strong opinions and disappointment from the audience in relation to comments made about finding other ways of delivering youth work and individuals felt there was a lack of recognition of the work carried out by youth workers as well as feeling devalued by these comments. It was also asked if the Executive could reverse this decision, but unfortunately it is not an executive issue and therefore should be pursued via the Minister directly.

Actions identified

Each of the parties committed themselves to taking a range of actions:

- Written questions to the Education Minister
- Relay views and opinions from today's conference to the Education Minister
- Persuade the Minister to change her mind and re-instate the budget.

Next steps

- CRC and Youthnet will continue to engage on issues of common concern
- Consult with voluntary youth sector on the following consultations upon publication:
 - OFMDFM's CSI consultation
 - DE's CRED consultation
- Continue to raise the issue of young people and community relations and the budgetary cuts with appropriate government departments, officials and politicians
- Arrange to meet with the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education and continue correspondence with the Minister of Education and with the Department of Education
- Organize a showcasing event for young people involved in developing '*Breaking Barriers through Youth Work*' DVD input