

People and Communities Committee

Wednesday, 8th January, 2020

SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Michael Collins (Chairperson); and Councillors Black, Bunting, Cobain, de Faoite, Garrett, Kyle, Magee, McLaughlin, McMullan, Mulholland, and Verner.

In attendance: Harry Booker;
Ben Matchett;
Aoife McCallin;
Shántana McCullough;
John Joe McGrady;
Lauren Murphy;
Che Robinson-Taylor;
David Shields, and
Carter Wickham, Belfast Youth Forum;
Ms. C. Taggart, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Ms. A. Hargey, Young People's Co-ordinator; and
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

Belfast Youth Forum Update

In accordance with a previous decision, the Committee was advised that representatives from the Belfast Youth Forum were in attendance to provide an update in relation to the work of the Forum.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, welcomed the representatives to the meeting and they proceeded to provide the Committee with an update on a number of their campaigns.

Relationship and Sexual Health Education Project

The Committee viewed a video which outlined the experiences of the members of the Belfast Youth Forum on the issue of relationship and sexual education in schools, following which members of the forum presented the report.

The Committee was advised that the report entitled 'Any Use?' Young People's Opinions on Relationship and Sexuality Education in Belfast 2019 had been launched in the City Hall in November. The research had been undertaken as Relationship and Sexual Education (RSE) had been highlighted by young people as an issue and the Forum had decided to select it as one of their campaign areas.

The aims of the report were to find out young people's opinions on RSE in Belfast; how useful young people find their current RSE; and if young people understand their rights in relation to RSE.

The research had been undertaken in conjunction with the QUB Centre for Children's Rights and Common Youth who had helped develop an online survey, designed survey questions, collect surveys from young people and analysed the findings. 771 young people had taken part in the survey and some of the main findings included the following:

With regard to the right to receive RSE:

- 72% of young people said they knew they had a right to receive RSE in school;
- 52% of young people said they felt their right to RSE was not being met;
- Only 23% felt that adults trusted young people to make their own choices about relationships and sex;
- The proportion of 14 – 16 year olds saying their right was met (56%) was significantly higher than the proportion of those 17 or over saying this (43%); and
- 58% felt that adults did not trust them and one in five (20%) said they did not know if adults trusted them in this regard.

The report then highlighted how young people described their RSE and, overall, negative word associations dominated those answers with the four most common being basic, unhelpful, useless and bias.

With regard to learning about sexual relationships, the three most popular sources from which young people said they learned about relationships and sex were through friends and peers (62%); social media (55%); and lessons in school (54%).

The survey then asked a range of questions about RSE in schools and how useful it was. The vast majority of young people (86%) felt that school was the best place to receive RSE, yet only 60% of respondents said that this actually occurred. In relation to how useful their RSE in school was, 66% of young people felt that the information they received was either "not very useful" or "not useful at all", with only 10% saying that they thought the information they received was "very useful". The report then highlighted through which subjects RSE was taught in schools and questioned how the young people felt RSE should be delivered in schools and who should deliver it, with the most commonly given response being a qualified RSE teacher. The survey also sought views on what should be taught to young people in RSE, with the most popular subject young people wanted to learn about was personal relationships.

The representatives of the forum then presented its recommendations for government and policy makers which were:

1. To adopt a rights-based and proactive approach to relationship and sexual education;
2. Work with young people to co-produce a RSE curricular programme for schools; and

3. For such a curricular programme to be taught by specialised, qualified and trained staff.

After lengthy discussion, during which the members of the Committee commended the Belfast Youth Forum on its RSE campaign and the production of the report, it was agreed that letters be forwarded to the Permanent Secretaries of both the Department of Health and the Department of Education seeking a joint meeting with representatives of the Committee and the Belfast Youth Forum to discuss its 'Any Use?' Relationship and Sexual Education Campaign and report. The wording of this letter to be sent to BYF members for input before the final draft was completed and sent.

Racism and Diversity

The Committee was advised that the Youth Forum was undertaking a racism and diversity project and would be holding workshops in the City Hall in February with young people from immigrant/refugee/asylum seeker communities in Belfast. The workshop would explore these young people's experiences of living in Belfast, as well as gathering their opinions in how best to promote multi-culturalism and diversity in the city. The forum would use the feedback from the discussions on the day to create a video report, which would be launched in the Queen's Film Theatre in spring 2020. Dr. Jonny Byrne from the Ulster University was working with the Forum to create the workshop content and to analyse the data which was collected. The Forum members also updated the Members of their plans to source funding to visit Auschwitz in Poland as part of their diversity project. The Members welcomed this and committed to helping the Forum source funding for this.

Noted.

"Elephant in the Room" Mental Health Campaign

Members of the Youth Forum presented their "Elephant in the Room Campaign", a report which explored young people's awareness of mental health in Northern Ireland.

The report was developed on the recommendations of the UN Committee on the rights of the child which had recommended that the Northern Ireland Assembly should invest heavily in children and young people's mental health services. Following an event held in October, 2016 at which young people had requested a campaign on mental health, the Youth Forum, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and the Children's Law Centre, had developed an on-line survey. The survey had been sent to all post-primary schools in Northern Ireland and a total of 1,117 young people had completed it, out of which 91% had indicated that mental health was a huge issue for young people in Northern Ireland.

The findings of the research could be broken in to three broad themes:

- Stigma – young people indicated that there was a huge negative stigma attached to mental health which in turn led to a "culture of silence", where young people were afraid to talk about mental health issues;
- Safe Spaces – 76% of survey respondents stated that young people were afraid to talk about mental health and there was a lack of safe spaces available to talk about it. The overall view from young people was that on-line was a good place to access mental health information, but there was issues with being able to separate fact

from fiction. In addition, the young people had identified social media as having a negative impact; and

- Schools and Information – according to young people, the three most common places they would source information about mental health were on-line (59%), a family member (48%) and friends (45%). However, young people said the problem was that the quality of the information was inconsistent and it wasn't always useful, for example, it was usually framed in a negative way.

The Youth Forum then outlined the recommendations for government in relation to the three broad areas:

- Stigma – to support the creation of a youth-led mental health campaign challenging the culture of silence and negative stigma. To work with young people to develop a new and positive language around mental health by creating a “Mental Health Dictionary”. This could be used as part of a potential mental health curriculum programme;
- Safe Spaces – to engage with young people to create a fun, safe, digital solution, such as a dedicated App, to receive mental health information and support. These digital solutions should be designed by young people for young people; and
- Schools – to create a compulsory curriculum programme for all schools and colleges on mental health and wellbeing that helped to raise awareness and challenge stigma and allowed young people to access consistent mental health information. The programme should be long-term and embedded in schools as one-off workshops would not be effective. In addition, there should be mental health and wellbeing training for all teachers, school support workers and youth workers so that the curriculum programme could be delivered effectively.

After discussion, during which the members of the Youth Forum reflected on their own experiences in relation to mental health issues. The Committee commended the report and agreed that the aforementioned meeting being sought with the Permanent Secretaries for Health and Education should also include discussions on young people's mental health issues.

It was agreed also that Members meet with the Youth Forum to discuss bringing cross-party RSE and mental health motions to full Council in the coming months.

“Poverty: It's not a Choice”

The Committee was reminded that in 2016 the Youth Forum had launched its “Poverty: It's not a choice” campaign. Following that, in October 2019 the Youth forum had met with the Permanent Secretaries of the Department for Communities, the Department of Education and the Department of Infrastructure to discuss the findings. Subsequently, the Council had recently launched its Inclusive Growth Strategy and the findings, research and recommendations in the forum's poverty report in relation to young people's views had not been mentioned in the Council's strategy. Accordingly, the forum was seeking the Committee's views on how the poverty report could be incorporated as part of the Inclusive Growth Strategy and that it did not sit as a separate piece of work.

After discussion, during which the Committee discussed the minimum wage, the high cost of public transport and the need for the findings to be part of the inclusive growth, it was agreed that the Committee commend to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee the Youth Forum's findings in its pilot study "Poverty: Its not a choice campaign" and that those findings be included in the Council's Inclusive Growth Strategy and that this would be an opportune time for the representatives of the Youth Forum to present to that Committee.

Nashville Sister City Podcast

The Committee was advised that the Youth Forum would be taking part in a podcast with a school from Nashville. There would be three episodes with four representatives from the Youth Forum and four representatives from the school taking part in each of the episodes. The first episode would be entitled 'who we are' and would take place the following week, the second would be entitled 'what we face' and would take place in February with the third episode being 'how we will change it'.

Noted.

Belfast Youth Forum Recruitment

The Committee was provided with an update in relation to the recruitment to fill current vacancies for the 2020 – 2022 Belfast Youth Forum.

The Young People's co-ordinator reminded the Committee that, at its meeting on 23rd December, it had agreed the timetable for the 2020 – 2022 recruitment. Accordingly, she was seeking the Committee's approval to have this amended for the recruitment process to begin in September and end in October, rather than in April and May, as had been previously agreed, as that was a time when young people were undertaking exams.

The Committee agreed to this course of action.

Date of next Special Meeting

The Committee noted that the next special meeting at which the Youth Forum would attend was Tuesday, 2nd June and it was agreed that all Members of the Council be invited to attend.

Chairperson