

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 20th October, 2020

SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Councillor Baker (Chairperson);
Alderman Rodgers; and
Councillors Black, Bunting, Cobain, Flynn,
McReynolds, Mulholland, Newton, Pankhurst
and Smyth.

In attendance: Harry Booker;
John Joe McGrady;
Luke Patterson;
Carter Wickham, Belfast Youth Forum;
Mrs. C. Taggart, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Mrs. G. O'Hare, Community Development Officer; and
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Councillors Collins, de Faoite, M. Kelly, McAteer and Vener.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were recorded.

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.

Update in respect of request to meet DoE and PHA

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 8th January, it had agreed that letters be forwarded to the Permanent Secretaries of both the Department of Health (DoH) and the Department of Education (DoE) and also to the Public Health Agency seeking a joint meeting with representatives of the Committee and the Belfast Youth Forum to discuss both the 'Any Use?' Relationship and Sexual Education Campaign and report and the 'Elephant in the Room' mental Health Campaign and report.

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The Members were then referred to responses that had been received from the DoE and the PHA. The Democratic Services Officer confirmed that, to date, no response had been received from the DoH.

The DoE indicated that it would be willing to meet to discuss these important issues, whilst the PHA had sought clarity in respect of the specific matters that the Youth Forum wished to address at the meeting. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic, this matter had not been progressed and the representatives were asked how they wished to proceed.

Following discussion, it was agreed that letters would again be forwarded to all three organisations seeking to invite a representative to the next joint meeting of the Committee to discuss both the 'Any Use?' Relationship and Sexual Education Campaign and report and the 'Elephant in the Room' mental Health Campaign and report. The letter to the PHA should explain that the Members of the Youth Forum were keen to learn more about the role of the PHA to help it develop a better understanding of its remit.

'Any Use' Relationship and Sexual Health Education Campaign – Luke Patterson

At the previous joint meeting held in January 2020, the BYF had presented its piece of research to the Elected Members of the People and Communities Committee on Relationship and Sexual Education (RSE). This was entitled 'Any Use?'

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.

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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.

The Committee was advised that following the last meeting, where the findings had initially been presented, the Youth Forum been approached by representatives from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Board who had also been in attendance at the ‘Any Use?’ presentation in the City Hall. They had expressed an interest in replicating the research in other council areas in Northern Ireland. The Youth Forum was pleased with this opportunity, as they felt it would provide them with more substance when lobbying government to support and implement its recommendations. They were currently looking at progressing how this research could be replicated effectively. In addition, the representative reported that Joe Harris, Sexual Health Co-ordinator for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, had been invited to attend the BYF December meeting to discuss the findings.

The Committee noted that, unfortunately as a result of the current restrictions, the official launch of the report which had been scheduled for March had been delayed. He advised that the BYF were now investigating a digital launch as well as a digital presentation to the Education Committee in Stormont.

Members of the Committee commended the Belfast Youth Forum on its RSE campaign and the production of the report.

Noted.

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Diversity Project – Harry Booker

The Committee was reminded that, at the previous joint meeting with the Committee, the Youth Forum had given a brief overview of its latest piece of work - HOME. The Youth Forum representative advised that, since then, its members had been working with youth worker Mr. Neil Symington and Dr. Jonny Byrne from Ulster University on a piece of research in respect of Black and Minority Ethnic young people's experiences of living in Belfast. He advised that it was the intention of BYF to conduct a number of focus groups with different ethnic youth groups across Belfast. The findings from these focus groups would then be analysed and a report would be prepared which would include recommendations as to how Belfast could be more culturally diverse city. It was also their intention to produce a short film that would focus on some of the BAME young people's experiences.

The representative advised that working with Dr. Byrne had enabled the Youth Forum Members to draw up relevant questions for the focus groups. He reported that these centred around the following five themes:

- A sense of belonging;
- Racism and prejudice;
- School life;
- Living in Belfast; and
- Changes they would like to see.

Unfortunately, as a result of both the summer holidays and the added Covid-19 restrictions, it had proven difficult to organise focus groups. It was the BYF's intention that it would approach schools in the Belfast area and ask them to identify a number of BAME young people and hopefully to carry out the focus groups in a socially distanced way within the school. They could then, hopefully, identify a small number of participants who would engage at a later time to form part of a short film about their experiences.

He concluded by advising that it might be necessary to conduct the forums via Microsoft Teams. Dr. Byrne would analyse the results received from the focus groups and would compile a report based on the findings which would be made available in due course.

A Member stated that she would like to see the young people taking the lead in more elements of research as she felt that they were best placed to progress many of the issues close to their own hearts. She felt that there could also be potential career opportunities in the future arising from experience gained.

The Committee was advised that officers were looking at progressing such an initiative and had held initial discussions with the Education Authority regarding the development of an OCN Level 2 certificate in Representation and Advocacy that would help provide the young people with the required skills and knowledge and also award them a recognised qualification for their efforts.

Noted.

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“Elephant in the Room” Mental Health Campaign – John Jo McGrady

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 Committee was advised that, in July 2016, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child had recommended that the Northern Ireland Government invest heavily in children and young people’s mental health services. Consequently, in October 2016, the Belfast Youth Forum, alongside members from Northern Ireland Youth Forum and the Children’s Law Centre, had organised an event where over 100 young people had expressed their frustrations at the lack of mental health education and support services available in NI and called for the UN’s recommendation to be fully implemented by the NI Government.

In 2017 between members of Belfast Youth Forum and Northern Ireland Youth Forum a Youth Mental Health Committee had been established. The aim of the Mental Health Committee had been to explore issues connected to mental health and young people and to ensure that as many young people as possible had a meaningful say in shaping the future of mental health education and support services. This research would eventually take the form of the ‘Elephant in the Room’ report.

The Members noted that the aim was to establish what young people in NI thought and knew about mental health, in particular:

- Where young people got their information about mental health and how they rated it;
- Where young people liked to go to receive mental health information and support;
- How young people viewed mental health and how it impacted on their ability to speak about it;
- What actions they felt that the government should take to promote positive mental health and well-being in society.

The representative advised that a survey had been developed and 1,117 young people had responded, as well as responses from four focus groups across Northern Ireland. The focus groups had a total of 151 young people who had participated.

He reported that the findings of the research had then been broken down in to three broad themes, as follows:

- 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.

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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.

As a result of the findings of the Elephant in the Room report, a number of recommendations had been made, these included:

- To support the creation of a youth-led, government backed 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 an age appropriate 'mental health dictionary' which could be used as part of a mental health curriculum programme;
- To engage with young people to create and fund safe digital solutions to receive mental health information and support. These digital solutions should be designed by young people for young people;
- To create a compulsory curriculum programme for all schools and colleges on mental health and wellbeing that would help to raise awareness and challenge stigma and allows young people to access consistent mental health information. This curriculum programme should be long term and embedded in schools – as it was felt that one off workshops would not be effective.
- Mental health and wellbeing training for all teachers, school support workers and youth workers to enable effective delivery of the programme.

The representative reported that, since the last joint meeting between BYF and the People and Communities Committee, the Elephant in the Room (EITR) group had been extremely active. In July 2020, young people from the EITR group had appeared before the Executive Working Group on Mental Wellbeing, Resilience and Suicide Prevention to discuss mental health reform. The young people had engaged with Ministers and encouraged them to adopt the recommendations set out in the EITR report.

Following this, in September 2020, the EITR group had met with Minister Carál Ní Chuilín from the Department for Communities (DfC) to discuss how it could support the implementation of the recommendations in the EITR report. He advised that correspondence had recently been received advising that DfC was supportive of the requirement of an app for young people to access accurate and meaningful advice on mental health as part of a Mental Health Strategy which was agreed in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. A follow up meeting was scheduled for October/November. The EITR group also stated that it intended to invite the current Mental Health Champion to the Executive, Professor Siobhan O'Neill, to meet the group. Professor O'Neill had been

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present at the presentation to Executive Working Group on Mental Wellbeing, Resilience and Suicide Prevention in July and was keen to discuss the EITR report further.

The representative advised that the Belfast Youth Forum, Northern Ireland Youth Forum and the Children's Commissioners Youth Panel had also been working together to create a mental health advocacy toolkit for young people titled 'Mind your head', which would help and support young people to take action and to campaign on local mental health issues. He explained that it would aim to help young people organise a mental health campaign project in their community and provide them with a simple steps to follow when doing this. The toolkit was in its final draft stage and would be published in the near future. A presentation on this would be given by BYF at the next joint BYF / People and Communities Committee meeting.

A number of Members commended the Youth Forum in regard to the progress made with the EITR campaign and the establishment of the 'Mind your Head' toolkit and stated that they looked forward to hearing more about it at the next meeting.

Discussion ensued, during which a number of the members of the Youth Forum reflected on their own experiences in relation to mental health issues, particularly over the lockdown period, which had exacerbated mental health problems for many young people. It was noted that many had found the period to be extremely mentally challenging, either they or people that they knew, had struggled with issues such as isolation and loneliness, worries over their schoolwork and tense relationships with their families.

Discussion also ensued in respect of economic and social inequality making it difficult for people to access mental health services. It was further noted that the housing points system was hard to navigate, which presented challenges for young people. Concerning social media, the representatives agreed that whilst it was often perceived to have a negative impact on the mental health of young people it could also be used creatively to promote and share positive mental health campaigns.

The Members noted that, as the pandemic continued, it was important to understand what young people had been experiencing and to establish ways of supporting them to resume to normal life, or the 'new normal', over the coming months and years and to ensure that the necessary support mechanisms were available to them and that this was progressed within the inclusive growth concept.

The Members noted that they were keen to continue to work with the BYF to learn from them and to ensure that the necessary support was available.

Noted.

Sister City Podcast – Carter Wickham

The Committee was advised that, in January 2020, a number of the BYF members had participated in a podcast with young people from the Mayor's Youth Council in Nashville. The podcast can be found on the podcast section of <http://www.radiognp.com/>. A further two podcasts had been scheduled to take place but these had unfortunately been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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The representative stated that, as the Members would be aware, Belfast City Council had a relationship with Nashville as a 'Sister City' for 25 years. The Belfast-Nashville relationship had been born out of a shared interest and connectivity through music but it had since grown into education, tourism, business, city governance, resilience and, thanks to this project, connecting young people in each city.

The representative explained that, as the next podcast would be taking place later than originally planned, it would involve a new cohort of young people from Nashville. Six young people from Nashville would be taking part, along with five members of the Belfast Youth Forum.

He advised that an initial informal 'meet up' had taken place last Saturday in order to build up relationships, a few more of these would be held prior to recording the next podcast which would address the topic of social unrest and how it looked in each of the two countries.

The Committee noted that as a result of the Covid regulations, recording of the next podcast would have to be done differently, two BYF members would attend (socially distanced) the Youth Action premises to work the equipment, whilst everyone else taking part would dial in to the call via skype. This would be recorded as a podcast and published, probably the next day, on Radio YNP (Youth Network for Peace) and could be accessed using the link above.

The Committee noted that Radio YNP was a youth-led Online Radio Station developed for SEUPB's Youth Network For Peace program, aiming to engage with young people from both sides of the Irish border, to connect them and to make them more aware of the issues facing them in their local areas.

Noted.

Belfast Youth Forum Recruitment

The Committee was reminded that, at the previous joint meeting, it had been agreed that the BYF recruitment process would commence in September and end in October, in line with the academic year.

The Neighbourhood Services Manager asked the Members to note that, at the People and Communities meeting in August 2020, it had agreed, due to the ongoing impact of Covid 19, to extend the current cohort of members' term for another year.

She advised that the next recruitment line would now be as follows:

July 2021-September 2021	Engage with youth providers across Belfast regarding upcoming recruitment
September 2021	Expressions of Interest forms distributed

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Sep / Oct 2021	Youth Forum information session
Oct 2021	Young people invited to attend for interview – 40 young people recruited
Late Oct 2021	Induction night for young people and their families

The Committee also noted that, in response to discussion at the August meeting of the People and Communities Committee, any current vacancies within the Belfast Youth Forum, now or within the next 12 months, would be filled using targeted recruitment to address any gaps in relation to communities underrepresented in the Forum. To facilitate this, contact would be made with Elected Representatives, youth providers, statutory agencies and local communities in order to encourage people residing in these areas to apply. It was further noted that, although targeted recruitment would be used to encourage young people who were underrepresented to apply, applications would also be accepted from young people from all areas and communities within Belfast.

Noted.

Any other business/follow up from previous meeting

The Committee referred to discussion at the previous joint meeting in January and agreed to establish if the Youth Forum's findings in its pilot study 'Poverty: it's not a choice' Campaign had been included in the Council's Inclusive Growth Strategy.

The Democratic Services Officer undertook to establish if this had been progressed and to update the Youth Forum accordingly.

Chairperson