"A Missed Opportunity to put Youth at the Centre of Europe"

Initial Response

of the National Youth Council of Ireland, incorporating the views of the Group of Irish Young People involved in the White Paper Consultative Conference in Paris

to the

EU White Paper: “A New Impetus for European Youth”

November 2001
Overall Response

The National Youth Council of Ireland is very disappointed with the publication of the EU White Paper on youth policy “A New Impetus for European Youth”. We consider the contents of the White Paper to be a missed opportunity to put young people at the centre of Europe. The White Paper is fundamentally flawed, it misunderstands and virtually ignores the important role played by young people’s own organisations in society. Its vision of how the EU could build a real and effective policy framework for young people is vague and severely limited. The only sign of any substantive innovation is the introduction of the ‘Open Method of Co-ordination’. Even this innovation has the potential to be quite dangerous to young people’s interests, as the format for this co-ordination of youth policy practically ignores the participation of young people and their organisations in devising policy. Other hazards include the lack of regard for the autonomy of youth organisations and representative structures, the suggestion of inappropriate mechanisms by which youth consultations might be conducted and the lack of any mention of the contributions of structures at national level within member states.

NYCI and the young people who were involved in the consultative process in Paris are united in condemning the current draft. The expressions of disappointment from all of us who contributed so much to this process was palpable, particularly at a meeting of the group of the Irish young people who had been involved in the Paris conference. They contend that the White Paper holds no real value for them. It
does not reflect their understanding of the exercise. It is inoperable, the vast majority of the sections are too vague. The content is extremely limited, full of good intentions but little by way of action. The information contained within the document is not user friendly and does not reflect the actual needs and aspirations expressed by the young people through consultations. The White Paper is very weak on implementation and timeframes. The co-ordinating and monitoring structures to ensure the effective implementation are in most cases non-existent. This document is tokenistic and ignores many of the key issues. The White Paper is unsatisfactory and will have little impact in a constructive or meaningful way on the economic, social, cultural and political situation of young people.

We urge all involved in the production of the White Paper to critically review this work. We believe that there needs to be a fundamental revision of the current draft in order to make a real and positive difference to youth policy in the EU.
Background

The National Youth Council of Ireland, as the representative body for Irish youth organisations and young people, was pleased to contribute to the development of the EU White Paper on Youth Policy. We contributed to organising and participated in the various consultative mechanisms during its preparation, including the youth conference in Dublin in July 00, the Paris Conference in October 00, the hearing of the Economic & Social Committee of the EC in Brussels in January 01, a meeting with the European Commission in Dublin in January 01 and the Umea Conference in Sweden in February 01. In addition we developed and submitted a detailed Submission “Putting Youth at the Centre of Europe” in January 01.

Throughout this process we worked closely with young people, our member organisations, the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education & Science, the European Youth Forum, the various countries holding the Presidency of the EU and the European Commission.

We expressed our belief that young people are not a homogenous group and that a youth policy should not be seen as an isolated aspect of education or social policy. Our analysis and recommendations have implications for institutions throughout Europe, at local, regional, national and European levels. In our submission, we outlined how policy and action at an EU level will contribute to improving the lives of young people at a local level throughout the Union. We suggested that the Youth Policy should to be based on a democratic philosophy and that principles concerning rights and needs, as well as personal development and social change, should underpin the policy.

We made a series of recommendations under the headings:
- Participation of Young People in Society
- Employment and Social Integration
- Education
- Health and Well-Being, Personal Independence and Youth Culture
- European Values, Mobility in Europe and Europe in the World
- EU Strategic Plan for Youth

Our full submission is available for further study.

This Response

This response was prepared during the short period of time between the publication of the White Paper and the meeting in Ghent, Belgium in November 2001. It was adopted unanimously at NYCI’s General Assembly on 24th November 2001, following discussions involving member organizations and the group of young people who participated at the Paris Conference.

The document sets out NYCI’s initial analysis of the draft White Paper. We first outline our overall response to the draft, which is overwhelmingly negative. We then go on to a more detailed analysis under the headings used in the document.
Commentary

Foreword

Young People and Europe
A reference is made to “the people to whom tomorrow’s Europe belongs”. This smacks of seeing young people in the future tense, saying that the Europe of the future belongs to young people. An implication of this is that Europe does not belong to young people in the present tense, in today’s Europe.

We welcome the last paragraph in this section, referring to young people as a “positive force in the construction of Europe rather than as a problem”.

From local to European: a new Dynamic
It is curious that in this section there is no mention of a regional dimension, and the national dimension is underdeveloped. We consider it essential that the EU’s approach is not dominated by a vague notion of creating the link between the local and the European level. The slipping in of the phrase “offering a forum for local initiatives”, which is the only concrete recommendation in this section, is worrying.

1. Background
The first paragraph quotes the Lisbon European Council, making Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”. It is a pity this was not followed with another statement acknowledging the role of Europe as more than just an economy.

A section on pages 6 and 7 sets out 5 fundamental principles which should apply for the youth area. We are surprised with some of the text which is used to explain these principles. Under Accountability, there is a mention of “developing a new and structured form of co-operation”. This does not explain the principle, rather it sets out an agenda regarding a form of co-operation, without saying what this is.

2. Challenges

Demographic Trends
There needs to be greater acknowledgement of the differences in demographics within and between member states. We are acutely aware that Ireland, as the country with proportionately the greatest youth population, does not fit with the analysis given. It is extremely difficult to draw conclusions based on generalised information.
We question the role of the EU to “invent new mechanisms for solidarity between young people and their parents or even their grandparents”, as stated on page 9.

Changing Youth
We suggest that the analysis here should acknowledge some of the positive aspects of the movement to “non-linear paths” for young people. For many young people this change has resulted in the creation of more opportunities and choice.

Involving young people in public life
There is more general trend in society that is not acknowledged in this analysis. The decrease in ‘Social Capital’ is a more widespread phenomenon, the disengagement from structures is widespread. It has, of course, some particular features for young people, but is a societal trend in itself.

We are surprised at the tone of the last paragraph in this section, the suggestion that we must ensure that we do not “encourage protest”. Protest by young people has is an honoured tradition. And, of course, many of the current generation of young people are already engaged in protest.

European Integration
We are disappointed that perceived contribution of young people to “pursuing the Community goal” consists of their participation in “specific projects”. Young people are being boxed in to a specific role with no particular choice. The suggestion that these “specific projects” will be “suited to their situations, aspirations and abilities” begs the question, who judges what is suitable?

Globalisation
We question the statement in the first paragraph that, for young people, “the world is their frame of reference”. This contention is far too general, for many young people this is not a reality.

We are suspicious of the motives behind the last paragraph. The fact that it is in the section on globalisation suggests to us an implication that the challenge is to ensure that we ‘head off’ young people’s involvement in movements which challenge globalisation. Could we be right?
3. A Productive Consultation Exercise

It is clear to us, given our involvement in the consultative exercise, that the last statement in this section is quite limited. Young people do not just “insist on being fully involved in the policy-making process”. They also want to be involved in initialising work, they want to be involved in decision-making regarding the use of resources, etc.

3.1 Key Messages

We consider this section to be an important indication of the agendas to be pursued through the White Paper.

Active citizenship for young people

We are pleased with much of the content and tone of this section, some of the matters we raised in this area are covered. It is ironic, however, that the paper stresses the importance of user-friendly information, yet this document is not user-friendly itself.

Expanding and recognising areas of experimentation

The title of this section is curious and misleading. Surely what is being dealt with here is the potential of non-formal education, not “experimentation”. Young people do not want to be considered as subjects of ‘lab experiments’. We refer the EU Commission to its own work in the Lifelong Learning area, as expressed in the recent Communication.

Developing autonomy among young people

The understandings which underlie this section are quite limited. We believe that there is much more to the autonomy of young people than the economic analysis provided here. We welcome the inclusion of “housing and transport policies” along with income as important facets of autonomy, but consider that a more holistic understanding of young people’s autonomy include their ability to make decisions in a wide range of areas in their lives. Promoting autonomy should also be about empowering young people. We believe that autonomy is a right, not just a demand. If the economic dimension is to be dealt with, the situation whereby there is discrimination against young people in minimum wage legislation must be dealt with.

For A European Union as the champion of values

We resent the implications of the first and third paragraphs in this section. The EU is attempting to appropriate young people’s values as their own. This is dangerous, a short step from saying that Europe represents young peoples values.
4. A New Ambition

We are pleased to note the emphasis in the introduction on the local level, “it is the decisions made at local level which have the greatest impact on young people’s daily lives”, which is in accordance with our own submission.

The Specific Field of Youth

Open Method of Co-ordination

We welcome the extension of the open method of co-ordination to the youth field. However, we are deeply unhappy with the plan proposed by the Commission for its implementation. It is not good enough to restrict young people’s participation in the exercise to consultations “on the priority themes and their follow-up” (bullet 7). Surely young people need to be involved at all stages in the process?

We also strongly object to the non-naming of young people’s own organisations, youth organisations and representative bodies, in this context. If the various structures of the EU can be named, why are our own structures not recognised? We demand the naming of the European Youth Forum, National Youth Councils and Youth Organisations.

Under the section outlining the scope for action using the open method of co-ordination in the youth field, it is curious that “youth work, youth clubs, street work” etc. are introduced as “more generally any other subject which might contribute to the development and recognition of activities on the youth front”. Why are these not considered to be central to youth policy?

Participation

This section is quite unbalanced in its understanding of how youth participation might be developed. We find it incongruous that the current role of youth organisations and representative bodies in promoting youth participation is not acknowledged. We also believe in the participation of young people who are not already involved in associations, but this must be achieved through building on what is already there. Why no mention of young people who are members of associations? We sense a destructive and interfering motivation behind such statements as “the spread of regional and national youth councils which are open to young people who are not necessarily active in organisations”. Surely respect for young people implies respect for young people’s structures? We strongly object to the cheeky proposal that the European Youth Forum should be “remodelled so that it is representative of young people who may or may not belong to youth organisations, as a suitable body for consulting”. It is up to the membership of the Youth Forum to determine how it operates, not the EU. At a national level, a similar assertion is interpreted as an insult to the work of youth organisations and national youth councils to encourage and enable youth participation. So much for autonomy!
The opening statement that “participation for young people is typically a concern of the member states” belies the problem where official encouragement of youth participation is patchy of non-existent in some member states.

The vague reference to the possibility “to increase the representation of young people within the Economic and Social Committee” of the EU is commendable, but does not go far enough. We demand that a commitment be given to the inclusion of the youth voice, and that the mechanism to implement this be the national youth councils in member states. It is not good enough that NYCI is the only national youth council with such a voice in this body.

The first bullet point refers to “direct dialogue with young people in the form of regular meetings”. The central involvement of national youth councils and the European Youth Forum in this process is absolutely essential. Any other mechanisms would be unsustainable, the evidence from the consultative exercise for the White Paper suggests that without our own youth structures, tokenism would abound. The Commission must work with the existing structures. Any attempt to set up parallel systems will be resisted.

Information
We sense some careful political ‘tip-toeing’ in operation in this section! On the specific strategy advanced, we wonder where the resources for the electronic portal may come from. With an electronic strategy, who knows who is active in contributing to an ‘electronic forum’? And surely, given previous statements on the importance of information, there should be more to the provision of information than “access to information on Europe”?

Voluntary service among young people
We disagree with the prominence given to the European Voluntary Service in this section. We believe that the EVS has had some negative influences, particularly in the impact it has had on existing programmes. It is not a priority in Ireland to engage in a process of EVS ‘empire building’. There are other models in operation, the last thing we need is to extend the involvement of the EVS on a more global level.

Greater Understanding of Youth
We support the moves to build a more comprehensive framework for research in the youth field.

Taking more account of youth in other policies
We believe that the extension of the youth dimension within other policy areas is to be commended, and should result in some positive results for young people. We worry, however, about the specific learning may accrue from the incomplete analysis of the consultations in Annex 1.
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Education, lifelong learning and mobility
We question why this section does not seem to concur with the latest EU thinking on education and lifelong learning, as expressed through the recent Communication on Lifelong Learning and other materials. This section is extremely vague and open to interpretation.

Employment
There is no mention of how the current system might be developed to ensure that the employment strategy meets the needs of young people. This section only states what currently exists. There is much room for improvements in process and content. Specifically, there is a need to address the blatant discrimination against young people in minimum wage legislation in many member states. Equal work should result in equal pay. What is left out in this section is more important than what is included.

Social Integration
We are pleased with the initiation of this process in the EU and back the inclusion of the youth dimension of this process in the White Paper, but wonder why there is no suggestion of how it may be developed to ensure the best results for young people.

Young people against racism and xenophobia
We believe that the emphasis in this section on a ‘project’-based work in inappropriate. The priority that must be given to this area should take the form of an integration of anti-racist approaches to all arenas that young people are involved in. This section must be developed to reflect this key challenge. It is also curious that the contribution of youth organisations is recognised in this section and not in others! In addition the huge problem of the abuse of the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers through racism is ignored.

Autonomy for young people
We question why this key concern is being ‘kicked to touch’. Is there no agreement on a way forward?

The role of the YOUTH programme
This section is extremely limited. After all the consultations, after considerable deliberations, the only new idea advanced is that “there should be a new Internet platform on the theme of racism and xenophobia”. Is there no greater vision?

5. Conclusion
This section of the White Paper reiterates the use of the open method of co-operation as a new framework for co-operation, which is welcome, but deeply flawed in its design. The lack of any serious attempt to deal with what happens at national level, through national structures, is a blatant error. The omission of any real backing for the important and central role played by young people’s own organisations: youth organisations and representative bodies, is completely unacceptable.