

Opening Statement by North-South Youth Forum to the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

Thursday 15th February, 9:30am-10:45am, Leinster House

Hello committee members and on behalf of the entire North-South Youth Forum, I would like to thank you for the invitation for us to present to you today. My name is Claire Hesketh and I am a member of the North South Youth Forum's Northern group as well as an executive committee member at NI Youth Forum.

For our presentation to you today I will begin with an introduction to our project and I will be followed by Eve from Dublin, Hannah and Sara from Louth, Eric from Galway and then finally Cohen who is also from the Northern group.

We are delighted to be here today as we believe youth engagement with government and decision-makers is so important. It creates a platform between those who have power and those who sometimes feel they don't. We want decision-makers to act on young people's right to be heard and involve them when making decisions and writing policies that affect our lives.

What is the North-South Youth Forum? It is a youth-led programme connecting young people across the island of Ireland with a focus on peace-building and promoting youth voice. It engages with decision-makers and politicians to allow young people to have their say and voices heard on issues facing them. The programme does this by creating a platform for young people to discuss the issues they and people in their communities face.

This was established in 2012 by the NI Youth Forum and in 2021 NIYF received funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and during this programme we hosted four "have your say days" across the island, in the North, Galway, Louth and Cork. These events gathered young people's views and opinions and following these events we worked together to create a key asks document - which you will have received in advance of our meeting today.

Our 2023-2024 group came together from NI Youth Forum, Ballymun Regional Youth Resource, Youth Work Ireland Louth and Youth Work Ireland Galway to continue this work - including training on young people's rights, democracy and lobbying and developing our understanding as a group of the unique history we have on this island. Today you will hear directly from the young people representing the four groups.

As you will have seen from our briefing presentation, each of the groups has come up with their own briefing papers which includes an introduction to their organisations, what key topics they have focused on as part of the North South Youth Forum and a key ask that we would like you as a committee to act on. Dublin's key topic is Regeneration, Louth's key topic is Lack of services, Galway's key topic is mis and dis information and the North's is political instability.

I will now pass to Eve who is representing Ballymun Regional Youth Resource, in Dublin.

Ballymun Regional Youth Resource (BRYR) is a service operating in the community of Ballymun, working with young people aged 10-24. Providing ongoing support in their personal development through relationship focused approaches.

BRYR's vision is one where all young people in Ballymun are able to have a wide range of positive experiences which support their true sense of identity, realise their potential and participate as full and active citizens in a secure and peaceful society, know their rights and have these rights protected and promoted, understand their responsibilities to self and others. Are valued, understood, involved and feel safe and supported.

Having engaged in this programme, we have been so glad to learn and have a better understanding of the challenges and complexities faced by young people across communities and across borders.

As part of our research, we looked at the social regeneration of Ballymun. We now understand there were promises made to the community which included investment in housing, leisure & amenities, community and the redevelopment of a shopping centre in a now vacant plot of land. These promises were made over the years and politicians have continuously pushed these developments back and not followed through on the promises or commitments made to the people of Ballymun.

We believe that the key thing to building on North-South relationships is investment in our young people and our areas. It is through this investment that young people's basic needs can be met and following this, they can then begin to develop relationships with others such as between North and South.

Our key asks for you today is to encourage investment in the Ballymun area and to follow through on promises made to the community. This should put children, young people and adults from the community at the heart of the process and ensure their voices are heard, as this will promote ownership and pride in future development and investment. As it is with this investment that we can develop the young people in our community further and engage further in cross-border initiatives on leadership, peacebuilding and good relations like the North-South Youth Forum.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to listen to me and my group's research to date. As part of this process, we have been meeting weekly in BRYR and engaging with the other groups as part of the North-South Youth Forum, which has really been a lovely experience!

Thank you for listening and I will now pass to Hannah and Sara from Louth.

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed members of the committee, and fellow young advocates,

Today, I stand before you as a representative of the young people in our community. We are a resilient and passionate group, but we often find ourselves overlooked when vital services are being rolled out. Our voices matter, and it's time to amplify them.

Let me paint a picture of our reality:

Our neighbouring community, Coxe's, enjoy a community house and full-time youth services. Their transport options are well-timetabled, seamlessly connecting them to the resources they need. But what about us? Our area remains further away from essential amenities, like shops, leaving us isolated and underserved.

Our local football AstroTurf, once a hub of activity, was recently sacrificed to make way for the new Smiths toys distribution centre. While progress is essential, it shouldn't come at the cost of our recreational spaces. We gather once a week in a Crèche, grateful but aware that it falls short of our aspirations.

We yearn for a space we can truly call our own—a haven where we can access information tailored to our age group. Imagine a place where we can find signposts to mental health services, employment opportunities, and vital support networks. A space that nurtures our growth and well-being.

The Wider Impact of Public Transport:

Our plea extends beyond our generation. The need for better public transport affects everyone. It's about accessibility, connectivity, and environmental responsibility. When we improve transport options, we uplift entire communities.

So, dear leaders, let us collaborate. Let us create a dedicated youth centre—a beacon of empowerment. A place where our dreams can take root, where we can learn, connect, and thrive. Let us invest in our future, recognizing that better services for young people benefit us all.

Thank you for listening, and let us work together to build a brighter tomorrow—one where no young person feels overlooked or left behind.

I will now pass to Eric from Galway.

Good morning. I'm Eric and I am here on behalf of the Galway group of the North South Youth Forum. It's an honour to be here this morning to share our findings and ask with the committee.

I think we're all aware of how massive a threat disinformation, and from that, misinformation is. According to a UNICEF survey performed in 10 countries, up to 75% of the young people polled felt they didn't have confidence in their ability to properly vet the information they

were receiving. This not only has an impact on their worldview and how they go on to make decisions as a citizen, but also on their relationships and mental wellbeing. This urgency, as well as input from over 100 young people from our Have Your Say Day is what brought us to the decision to address this as our ask.

Living a fulfilling and complete life, an active citizen, an informed decision maker and, most importantly, a peer necessitates a critical mind. It's very easy to take for granted that this is a learned skill that is becoming harder to hone. There is a quantity of information available today that would have been unthinkable half a century ago. It is no wonder that young people are struggling to keep up.

We've seen how much hatred can warp and escalate, and that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it, but those sentiments mean little if you do not know the history, or possibly worse, are being given a false account. In the Republic of Ireland, it is incredibly rare that a young person would have full, or even good, understanding of the history, politics and lived experiences of the people of Northern Ireland. This leads to their main sources on the matter being what is platformed, which more often than not, has an agenda other than education. What becomes important here is peer-to-peer communication, to realise that even if we are different in 10 ways, we have 100 things in common. The lived experiences and knowledge of Northern Irish young people are a powerful way to engage young people in the Republic and can then be followed up, in an ideal world, with trustworthy, unbiased information to broaden their understanding of subjects like the troubles, and the Good Friday Agreement that paved the way for peace in its aftermath.

All that being said, our ask is for a toolkit to be developed for youth workers and educators to provide young people with the tools they need to navigate our information dense world responsibly, with a critical mind and to extend understanding of the political sphere they are a part of. This could help to quell anxieties, build healthy and constructive cross border relationships and giving the next generation the confidence and information to have their

voices heard.

Thank you. I will now pass to Cohen from Northern Ireland for our final remarks.

Good morning committee members.

I would like to begin by thanking the committee for allowing us to speak today.

The Belfast Good Friday Agreement has provided us with relative peace, hope and the opportunity for a better future, its potential however is yet to be fully realised. Political instability and uncertainty has caused a backlog of decision making which alongside financial instability has resulted in many young people feeling alienated by politics in Northern Ireland.

I was one of the 8% of young people able to attend an integrated school, which in a largely segregated system, allows for children of different abilities, genders and religions to be taught together in the same classroom.

The Agreement pledges to encourage integrated education and shared housing, but more needs to be done to meet the growing demand from 77% of parents in a recent poll, who want their children to be educated together.

With the hope that those children then have the chance to then get the bus home together to a shared, safe and prosperous community. Moreover, a community where the fifteen thousand households who presented as homeless last year have a secure roof over their heads and the support they need.

Transgenerational trauma feeds into the worrying statistic that more people have committed suicide since the end of the Troubles than those who died as a result of the conflict throughout the Troubles itself. Record numbers of young people sit on waiting lists to see mental health professionals whilst services struggle to meet growing demand.

The agreement has given us so much, but young people need more action and delivery to make NI a better place for us all to grow up and live.

As you will see from the briefing paper, we have an overall ask for you today, we ask that you write to the relevant government departments, encouraging them to fund the establishment of a mechanism for long-term, meaningful engagement with young people; so the potential of the agreement can be fully realised, we must ensure that young people are at the heart of decision making and feel empowered by our politics. This must happen within Northern Ireland, but also North-South and East-West.

Thank you and we would welcome any questions you may have and we will try our best to answer them!