HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE

YEAR OF YOUNG PEOPLE 2018

SUBMISSION FROM Amy Woodhouse, Head of Policy, Projects and Participation, Children in Scotland

Introduction

Children in Scotland is the national network improving children’s lives. Giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish is at the heart of everything we do. By bringing together a network of people working with and for children, alongside children and young people themselves, we offer a broad, balanced and independent voice. We create solutions, provide support and develop positive change across all areas affecting children in Scotland. We do this by listening, gathering evidence, and applying and sharing our learning, while always working to uphold children’s rights.

As one of the national project partners in Year of Young People 2018 (YOYP), along with Young Scot and the Scottish Youth Parliament, we welcome the decision of the Health and Sport Committee to hold a roundtable evidence session on the topic of young people’s engagement in health and sports policy making. As outlined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) children and young people have a right to be listened to and taken seriously on matters that affect their lives. We hope that YOYP offers opportunities to reflect on progress towards implementing this right within policy making and make further meaningful changes to ensure that children and young people are fully engaged in policy relating to health, sport and all other aspects of their lives.

How well are the views and interests of young people taken into account in health and sport policy?

Together’s State of Child Rights report (2016) suggests that in recent years children and young people have had increasing opportunities to inform and influence national and local policy making across a range of policy areas\(^1\). In relation to health, the report highlights the work of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) under the ‘&Us’ programme, to ensure that children and young people have opportunities to share their views and influence policy and practice at all levels. However, as well as highlighting good practice, the State of Child Rights Report also acknowledges a number of persisting gaps, particularly with regard to involving younger children and those with additional support needs.

The quality and depth of children and young people’s engagement in policy making also varies considerably from policy to policy. In 2017 Children in Scotland published a research

report for the Scottish Government on children and young people’s participation in policy making, focusing on six case studies where children and young people had influenced policy\(^2\). Research participants, which included national and local policy makers, service providers and young people, highlighted many positive examples. While not comprehensive in its scope, the research did find more examples of detailed, young person led policy making taking place at a local level than a national level. For example, Young Edinburgh Action had made lasting changes to how sex education was delivered in schools throughout the city.

**Timescales, budgets, planning and feedback loops** were all found to impact on how effective children and young people’s involvement was. Our report recommended that young people's participation must be made more meaningful by building their engagement in from the start of the policy-making process at the planning stage. This includes prioritising topic areas, setting the agenda and designing the methods of engagement. Policy makers must be encouraged to think more creatively than one-off consultation events. Scottish Government and local authorities should also build in consistent funding streams to promote the participation of children and young people.

In relation to recent national health and sports policies we again have witnessed mixed practice. Considerable engagement activity was undertaken with children and young people to inform the development of the Scottish Government’s **Mental Health Strategy** (2017-2027). The Scottish Youth Parliament’s **Our Generation’s Epidemic** report for example surveyed 1500 young people for their views about mental health\(^3\). Children in Scotland was commissioned to undertake engagement work with primary school aged children as part of this process, and we commend the Mental Health Unit for recognising the importance of including younger children in this process\(^4\). There is no doubt that the new strategy places a significant emphasis on children and young people’s mental health. However, it is not transparent how the voices of young people directly shaped the final strategy or its actions.

In other recent consultations on national policies relating to health, such as **A Healthier Future: Actions on Diet, Activity and Healthy Weight**, we understand that some engagement activity with children and young people has taken place, and we will wait to see how this is reflected in the final strategy. However, the recent engagement document for the draft **Suicide Prevention Action Plan** made scant reference to children and young people, indicating that the needs and views of children and young people had not been prioritised at the early policy development stage, a conclusion we made in our own consultation response\(^5\).


\(^3\) [http://www.syp.org.uk/our_generation_s_epidemic](http://www.syp.org.uk/our_generation_s_epidemic)


We would welcome discussion with the Committee to explore how meaningful engagement with children and young people can become consistent practice from the earliest policy development phases into implementation and review.

What are the priorities in health and sport for young people?

Children in Scotland, Young Scot and the Scottish Youth Parliament began engaging with young people around their priorities for the Year of Young People in 2015. From that engagement activity the six themes for YOYP were agreed, including one focused on health and wellbeing. This theme has been framed in terms of supporting young people to lead healthier, active lives and have opportunities to learn about and improve their mental health and resilience.

In terms of mental health, Our Generation’s Epidemic provides a wealth of evidence about what young people want. In particular it highlights the need for more information about where to get help for mental health problems, more action to support mental health in schools and a need for increasing emphasis on supporting the mental health of 16-25 year olds⁶.

From our own engagement work to inform the mental health strategy⁷, younger children prioritised the following themes:

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<th>THEME</th>
<th>CHILDREN’S VIEW</th>
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<td>To feel safe and supported through positive relationships</td>
<td>‘I feel safe when I’m with my mum and dad and play with friends’</td>
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<tr>
<td>The opportunity to take part in activities and hobbies</td>
<td>‘I get happy when I go swimming’ ‘When I am allowed to play’</td>
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<td>Support to deal with their worries and concerns.</td>
<td>‘Getting taken away from mum’ ‘Gran is disabled’</td>
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<td>Support to look after their physical health as well as their mental health.</td>
<td>‘My body and fruit and vegetables and doing PE in school and playing games and running’</td>
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As part of the review of school nursing in 2016 we asked children and young people what sort of issues and problems they would go to the school nurse with⁸. The key issues they identified were:

- Personal hygiene and keeping clean
- Sleep and tiredness

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⁶ [http://www.syp.org.uk/our_generation_s_epidemic](http://www.syp.org.uk/our_generation_s_epidemic)
Disabilities, autism and ADHD
Growing and developing
Anxiety and worry
Healthy eating and food
Relationships, including friendships, bullying, conflict within families, anxiety and caring responsibilities.

The children and young people involved in that consultation described a number of important barriers to seeking help for health issues, including worries about how problems would reflect on their parents and families;

"It could make them look like a bad parent if you don't have anything to eat or if your mum is struggling as well."

They emphasised the need for trust between young people and professionals to overcome these concerns.

Barriers to health and sport were also raised in our recent Year of Young People special meeting of the Cross Party Group for Children and Young People on 12th June 2018. We heard from one YOYP Ambassador who was originally denied the opportunity to box because of his disabilities. He has subsequently gone on box and to be a member of the SportsScotland Young People’s Sports Panel. However his story is a useful reminder that access to sport for children and young people with additional support needs can still be a challenge.

We ask that the committee considers how services, whether mental health, physical health or sport and leisure facilities can break down the persistent barriers to engagement in ways that are sensitive and supportive to young people’s individual needs and circumstances.