

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S STRATEGY ACTION PLAN AND THE
UNCRC CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

Be Seen, Be Heard
Youth Conference, 21st November 2009



**WHAT YOUNG
PEOPLE TOLD US**

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S UNIT, OFMDFM

JANUARY 2010



Office of the

**First Minister and
Deputy First Minister**

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INTRODUCTION

Following a consultation with children and young people, this document aims to summarise the key issues which they identified as being important to them and which they think government should do something about. Their views were formed by looking at the existing strategy action plan and the UNCRC concluding observations and the key aim was to identify those issues which they feel are not already addressed in the current plan and should be addressed in the revised and future plans.

There were two main parts to this work.

- A series of workshops with children and young people to seek their views on the existing strategy action plan and identify those important issues which were not being addressed
- A conference for young people, as part of the celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the UNCRC, to seek their views on what Government can do to tackle the issues they have raised

BACKGROUND

The 10 Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland aims to improve children's lives in 6 key areas:

- Healthy;
- Enjoying, learning and achieving;
- Living in safety and with stability;
- Experiencing economic and environmental well-being;
- Contributing positively to community and society;
- Living in a society which respects their rights.

Action plans are developed to deliver on the strategy. The current children and young people's strategy action plan is for the period 2008 – 2011 and it was agreed that it would be a living document which would be reviewed and amended.

In line with article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the supporting theme of the 10 Year Strategy for Children and Young People; *'developing a culture where the views of our children and young people are routinely sought in matters which impact on their lives'*, a series of workshops to seek the views of children and young people were held between August and October 2009.

The aim of this was to hear directly from young people about what they thought government should be doing to meet their priority needs in each of the 6 areas to help inform the development of new or revised actions, particularly in light of the UNCRC concluding observations.

WHAT WE DID

Series of workshops

Almost 40 workshops took place between August and October 2009, involving over 600 young people from a wide range of backgrounds. The workshops took place in the young people's own settings and were led by their group leaders. The aim of the workshops was to identify what young people felt were the key issues facing them, which were not already addressed by the existing strategy action plan. A young people's version of the action plan and the UNCRC concluding observations were provided to assist in the discussions. Representatives from several government departments attended most of the workshops to hear first hand what the young people had to say.

Conference

The conference was held to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the UNCRC, end the consultation process and bring representatives from each of the workshops together to feed back directly to policy makers. The views put forward by the young people at the workshops were analysed in advance of the conference and given to the facilitators and the young people taking part to help them prepare for the day. The aim of the conference was to enable the young people to tell policy makers what they think Government should do to tackle the key issues identified. Representatives who are involved in making policy from most government departments and the OFMDFM Junior Ministers, who are responsible for driving forward the 10 Year Strategy, were there on the day to engage directly with the participants.

WHAT THE YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US

There was a wide range of views emerging from the conference relating to each of the 6 outcome areas of the 10 year strategy. Indeed whilst many of the young people voiced similar concerns in relation to particular issues, there were some things on which they also disagreed. A summary of the views expressed under each outcome area are detailed below. A full list of the views put forward is provided at Annex 1.

HEALTHY

The majority of the young people wanted to see more emphasis on healthy eating, both through affordable, accessible healthy food options in school and education at an early age. They also suggested that in order to tackle mental health, government should provide more resources and facilities and whilst education at an early age would help prevent issues and the prejudice surrounding mental health, it was important that assessments were carried out earlier to tackle the problems when they arise. The young people also wanted increased sexual health education both in and out of school and access to more clinics. Some of the other key recommendations put forward in this area were access to dentists, hospitals in rural areas and GP services as well as support and awareness raising around disabilities, drugs and alcohol and eating disorders.

ENJOYING, LEARNING & ACHIEVING

There was a strong view that Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) should be available for all post 16 year old students and should not be based on parental income. The young people also suggested that teachers should be more flexible and have sufficient time to meet the needs of the class as a whole, as well as individual students. There was a call for actions to tackle bullying and to ensure children know what support is available to them, and for more support for children leaving primary school, including reducing pressure and removing all forms of exams for transfer to post primary education. Whilst there were general views put forward around improving

school life such as increasing staffing levels and reducing class sizes, more help with homework, better support for parents in relation to education, bigger playgrounds, more after school clubs, wider choice of subjects and a focus on maths and English and support for teenage mums, there was some disagreement around class length. Some young people wanted to see a reduction in the length of classes whilst others wanted to see class times increased. There was also a view that children with disabilities should be able to avail of mainstream education and proposals to completely remove 'Statements of Special Educational Needs' should not be taken forward.

LIVING IN SAFETY & WITH STABILITY

The four key areas in which young people felt government should take action were road safety, community safety, bullying and stability. They suggested more speed controls, traffic lights, patrol men/women, cycle lanes, street lights and CCTV cameras. Young people also wanted to see more community policing at night, safe places including parks and youth clubs for young people to meet and play and safer housing areas for ethnic minorities. Throughout all of the 6 areas, the needs of children and young people with disabilities were continually highlighted and for this particular area, they suggested more ramps and even ground for wheelchair users and better integration within the community. Stability was a key issue and the young people were keen to see more cross community work, more access to housing and shops, more support for young families, more financial support and less sectarianism. They also wanted to see paramilitaries disbanded and more weapons amnesties.

EXPERIENCING ECONOMIC & ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING

Whilst the young people wanted to see actions to protect and preserve the environment such as more cycle lanes, solar panels, green areas, alternative fuels and reduction in the use of aerosols, their key concerns were around having enough money, receiving the necessary support to achieve their full potential, housing and employment. Young people wanted government to

extend Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for all children and to do away with allocation through means testing. They wanted help and support with University fees, student discount for all children under 18 as well as University/College students, standard minimum wage regardless of age, reduced travel costs for all under 18s and particular financial support for young mothers and children leaving care. In addition to more funding for youth organisations and supported accommodation, the young people also wanted more support for children with disabilities and young carers.

CONTRIBUTING POSITIVELY TO COMMUNITY & SOCIETY

A key issue for young people in this area was participation. They wanted government to provide more opportunities for them to have their say through surveys, involvement in government meetings, establishing a Youth Assembly, shadow organisations and more groups to promote participation. The young people also suggested talking to the media about showing more positive pictures of young people to help tackle negative portrayal. Support for children with disabilities, young parents, more job opportunities and employment centres and better communication between the PSNI and young people were also important issues which the young people wished to see addressed.

LIVING IN A SOCIETY WHICH RESPECTS THEIR RIGHTS

The suggestions put forward by the young people in this area were also raised under the other outcome areas. Issues such as participation, safety, employment, housing, play and leisure and negative portrayal of young people continued to be a focus. Additional actions which the young people wanted to see taken included educating young people to tackle racism and promoting cultural respect and the identification and implementation of an alternative to ASBOs.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE ISSUES RAISED

All of the issues raised by the young people will help inform our future work and will be given careful consideration by the N.I. Executive. We are committed to making children's lives better and the information gathered will help us identify how we can best do this. The workshops and the conference were a very welcome opportunity to hear directly from young people and get a real insight to their lives and the key issues affecting them.

We are currently sharing the information gathered with government departments to help in their consideration of additional actions to strengthen the current children and young people's strategy action plan, taking account of the UNCRC concluding observations. When published, the revised plan will ultimately show where the Executive has been able to take action to help address some of the issues the young people have put forward.

Whilst careful consideration will be given to the content of this report, it may not be possible to develop specific actions around all of the issues identified. Departments will need to take time to analyse the views and consider if and how they can take action to tackle the priorities. However some actions are already being taken in relation to some of the issues raised and examples include:

Healthy eating: Healthy eating in school is something which the Executive continues to promote as part of its efforts to halt obesity. A policy has been developed which aims to ensure that all food provided in school contributes to good nutrition and to good health.

Mental Health: Mental health is a very wide and important issue. There are already a number of actions in the current action plan to help tackle suicide through counselling and support services, to treat those suffering from eating disorders and to increase the in-patient beds for children suffering from mental health issues.

Sexual health: This is taught as part of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary level and Personal Development at post-primary level. A survey is currently being carried out on the delivery of this in schools.

Drugs and alcohol: An action plan to address and prevent alcohol use amongst children and young people is currently being implemented. Work is also underway to reduce the number of children 'at risk' due to parental/carer substance misuse.

Bullying: A bullying comic focusing on: what it is; how to deal with it; how to protect yourself; who to tell when you are being bullied; why people become bullies and; bullying in schools, was distributed to all primary school children in November 2009. The Department of Education also continue to sponsor the Anti-Bullying Forum.

Play and leisure: The Executive recognises the benefits of play and leisure and has developed a policy which aims to improve current play and leisure provision for all children aged 0-18. An implementation plan is currently being finalised and will issue for consultation this year.

Disability: There are currently a number of actions being taken forward to improve respite, enable children with learning disabilities to live in good community placements and to improve wheelchair services.

Poverty: Tackling poverty, including child poverty, remains a priority for the Executive and work is ongoing to develop a childcare strategy and increase benefit uptake. The Executive will also be preparing our Child Poverty Strategy as part of the overall UK strategy.

Participation: A 'Network of Networks' is currently being developed to strengthen the direct voice of children and young people in all relevant aspects of government provision. The Assembly has also put forward proposals for the establishment of a Youth Assembly and government continues to sponsor the Participation Network to provide a mechanism for engaging children and young people.

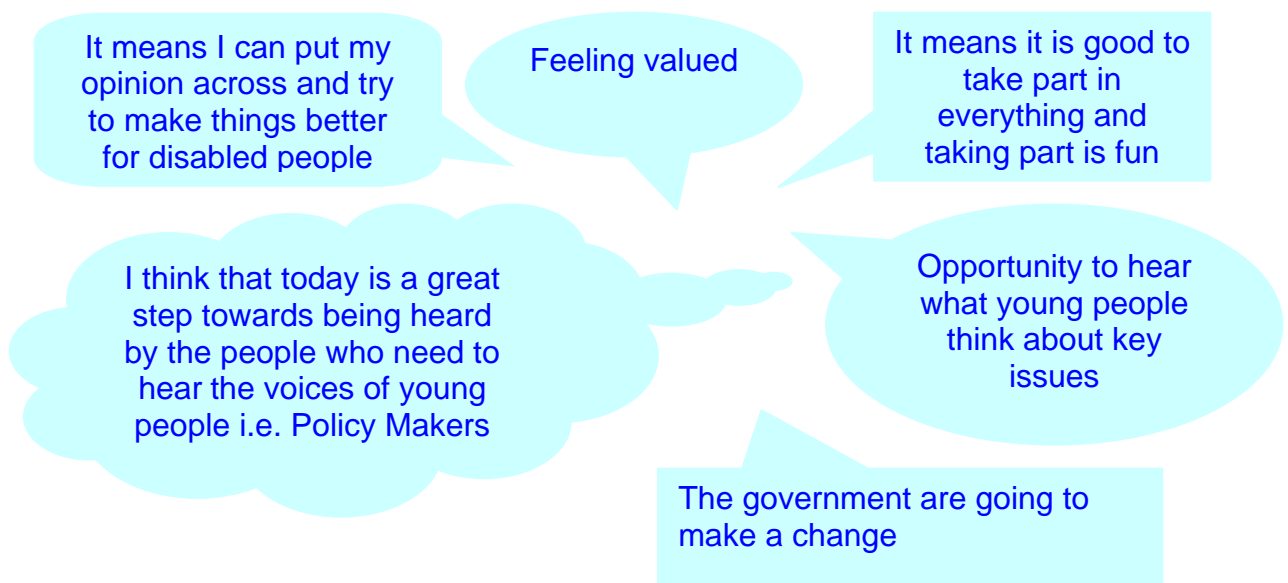
Whilst this aims to provide examples of some of the work ongoing in relation to the issues the young people identified by way of response, it does not reflect on all of the issues. As already stated, the full list of views is being shared with all government departments to help inform their consideration of additional actions.

LESSONS LEARNT FOR FUTURE CONSULTATIONS

To help identify how young people felt about the day, we asked them what they thought of the conference. Their views, outlined below, will help us in taking forward future engagement with children and young people.

	YES	NO
Did You feel the Government really listened to the views of young people today?	24	4
Do you feel you have had your say about the three-year action plan?	30	2
Would you like to have further opportunities to tell Government what you think?	31	1

What the young people said being at the conference meant to them



Summary of comments about the day

What did they like best?

- having the opportunity to work in groups and mixing with other young people from different backgrounds
- being able to write up their views on large boards
- having the opportunity to input to all six outcome areas
- that there was sufficient time for everyone to get the opportunity to have their say and get their points across

- really being listened to and having their views valued
- hearing other young people's opinions and ideas
- having the opportunity to discuss and influence youth issues and policies directly with policy makers and Junior Ministers
- everything - the whole day
- it was good fun
- the food
- the entertainment

What did they not like?

- the idea of it being a conference – young people like to be active
- some of the speeches were too long
- the event was too long
- too long a wait between the different activities
- the opportunity to speak being dominated by a few people
- not being with anyone they knew in the groups
- it was too rushed - needed more time to write up their views on the boards and to speak to the Junior Ministers at the end
- having to stand too long throughout the day
- the food at lunchtime

CONCLUSION

Based on young people's assessment of the conference, it provided a real opportunity for young people to have their say and put forward their views on what government should do to tackle the priority issues facing them. The young people who took part mainly viewed it as a good opportunity to have their say, feel valued and really input to government which is important as participation and having their say is something which was continuously raised throughout the process as an issue for the young people. For further engagement with young people we will take on board the comments made about this event to ensure future events are appealing to young people, ultimately resulting in meaningful engagement.

Whilst careful consideration must be given to all of the issues and government may not be able to do everything suggested by the young people, this exercise, alongside the UN Committees concluding observations, will help inform the development of the revised and future action plans to improve children's lives.

It is important that in taking forward our work we take stock of what young people feel is important to them. Participation, negative portrayal and poverty were all raised by the young people as part of this process. These feature in the UNCRC concluding observations and have been identified as joint priorities which government will progress with the rest of the state party (England, Scotland and Wales). Whilst we will continue to look at all of the UNCRC concluding observations to inform our work, it is important that we also consider the views of young people, after all, it is their lives we are trying to better.

HEALTHY

Diet

- the cost of healthy food
- more flexibility about food in schools
- target young people more about a healthy diet and from an early age
- more education about healthy eating in schools

Mental Health

- earlier assessments
- more facilities and resources, including therapists, beds and support services e.g. help-lines and workshops
- target mental health issues from a younger age
- take away the prejudices about mental health problems to stop young people feeling afraid about speaking out/seeking help

Sexual Health

- more education about sexual health, contraception etc both in and out of school
- more sexual health clinics

General Health

- young people need to know their rights about health care
- more access to dental health
- re-think access to hospitals in rural areas
- more training for group leaders/health professionals
- look at the cost and access to facilities for young people
- everyone to have access to swine 'flu jab
- support for young people with hidden disabilities in school e.g. diabetes
- more education/awareness about drugs, alcohol, smoking and the consequences
- support for young people with parents with illness (young carers)

- set up groups in local areas to talk about health
- advertise health issues more e.g. information leaflets
- tackle skinny media images and stereo types
- eating disorders (no actions identified)

Exercise

- free gyms for under 18s
- more child gyms
- compulsory PE in schools
- greater focus on healthy activities for younger children

GPs

- better availability (not just 9-5)
- better privacy - one to one appointments – not through parents
- better community clinics for young people
- training for GPs to deal with young people and to talk on their level (no jargon/abbreviation)
- don't over prescribe tablets – young people need time to talk

ENJOYING, LEARNING & ACHIEVING

Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)

- all post 16 year old students should receive EMA and entitlement should not be based on parents' incomes

Teachers

- teachers should not be so strict and more relaxed classrooms – young people would behave better and get more work done
- more enthusiastic teachers
- more time available for teachers to show young people how to do things and to push/challenge them – then more likely to achieve

Schools

- increase staff members in school
- reduce the numbers in classes at primary and secondary schools to make sure students get the attention and education they need
- mixed courses i.e. able bodied and disabled, religion etc
- look at school starting age in N.I. – 4 years of age here but 8 years of age in European countries who have better performance rates
- later school start time e.g. 10am, because of lack of concentration in early classes
- shorter classes as some young people have a shorter attention span and longer break times
- longer classes – not enough time for class to settle, to teach , give homework etc
- state schools should be secular
- lockers to be available in school
- every school to have a school nurse
- all schools should be equal
- more help with homework and preparation for tests
- bigger playgrounds
- more after school clubs
- more vegetarian meals available
- more facilities for school age mums - special schools with crèches where can continue their education
- all pupils should be asked their opinion in school - not just the student council e.g. give all pupils questionnaires to fill in
- don't punish young people for bad behaviour – talk to them instead to find out why they are misbehaving – have a youth counsellor in every school
- Belfast Metropolitan College should offer free part-time courses
- more chances to make more friends in school

Transfer from Primary to Secondary School

- there shouldn't be so much pressure put on students doing AQE tests
- young people shouldn't have to do 11+ or any other exams to get into grammar school
- shouldn't be different tests for different religions – causes more segregation
- primary schools should do more to help pupils with the move to secondary school

Curriculum

- more choice at GCSE/A level to suit young people's abilities and strengths
- more practical work experience available for the scientific field/laboratory work
- more workshops about working life
- focus on Maths and English skill levels
- more social, sexual and health education
- less homework involving computers as not everyone has one
- additional help/classes for young people in certain subjects
- improved early years coverage and 'informal curriculum' to promote reading and writing and close the gap between pupils at primary school who come from different areas/backgrounds

Bullying

- reduce bullying in schools
- ensure a strong support system is in place for victims of bullying e.g. help-lines
- ensure all pupils know about the support systems in place so they know their port of call

Children and Young People with Disabilities

- children and young people with disabilities to have the right to mainstream education.

- proposals to remove 'Statements of Special Educational Needs' would remove the legal protection for the right to an appropriate education by leaving it up to the education provider – needs to be kept in some form
- lifts for disabled students

General

- parents should be given support to enable them to support their children more (not just Surestart)
- more opportunities to get jobs

LIVING IN SAFETY & WITH STABILITY

Road Safety

- more speed control for cars
- more traffic lights/pedestrian crossings. need to be situated more carefully, provide an audible warning that it is safe to cross and stay green longer to allow sufficient time to cross
- tighter enforcement of the rules for learner drivers/promote pass plus scheme for young driver's education
- patrol men/women
- more brightly lit roads on dark nights
- more cycle ways
- make sure bus drivers check everyone is seated before setting off
- more training for taxi drivers to secure wheelchairs securely
- police need to approach joy riders more

Safety Out and About

- more CCTV cameras
- more local/community policing (especially at night) – so that numbers of police are proportional to crime rates
- more community safety wardens to target crime - will know the community better
- more ramps and even ground for wheelchair users

- more street lights and cameras so people can feel safe in their own area
- more safe parks/green spaces away from roads for younger children
- safe places/spaces/graffiti walls for young people to meet up
- family friendly open spaces/places/centres
- more activities/youth clubs in areas to prevent youth crime and to encourage young people to stay off drugs
- safer housing/areas for ethnic minorities
- knock down derelict buildings
- do more to target homeless people drinking alcohol in the city centre
- harsher punishment for crime/more emphasis on rehabilitation
- less pubs
- bring old people/young people and those with disabilities together to try and eliminate misconceptions

Bullying

- more cameras to catch young people getting bullied
- educate young people so they are clear about what to do about bullying outside school

Stability

- disbandment of paramilitaries
- more weapon amnesties
- less sectarian flags and removal of political murals
- more cross community education/outreach work, especially in mixed religion areas
- more accessible housing and shops
- more practical social help
- more support and accommodation for young families
- more benefits money/money for heating

EXPERIENCING ECONOMIC & ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING

Environment

- more cycle lanes to reduce fumes
- more solar panels
- more green areas and less building
- plant more trees/less concrete e.g. when new houses are built
- less rubber used in manufacturing tyres
- use alternative fuels for cars that cause less damage
- use roll-on deodorants only

Money

- EMA should not be means tested
- more help and support with university fees, including more access to student grants/loans
- cheaper student accommodation
- student discount for all young people, and not just university/college students
- starter packs for all new young, first time mothers to include nappies, bottles, baby grows etc, so they don't have to worry about the initial outlay
- reduce cost of public transport/increase age for travel fees to 18
- a set minimum wage for all
- more financial support for young people in care when moving into their own home
- emergency funds between waiting on benefits
- large businesses to respect other people's financial needs and not just their own

Employment

- more employment opportunities, including for students
- more access and varied jobs for disabled young people

- more disability awareness for workers – equality for all
- education/training opportunities for young people to come together within their local community to achieve qualifications in order to get work

Housing

- more and quicker access to local housing for young people, including disabled young people – Housing Executive need to be more efficient and points system should be abolished/clearer guidelines on points system
- more hostels for homeless young people

Funding

- more funding for youth organisations, community groups, support centres, arts and sports
- more funding for ‘supported accommodation’ i.e. training opportunities for parents and children

Support

- more support for young people after care homes e.g. with cooking, budgeting, household jobs etc
- schools, youth clubs and detached projects e.g. Prince’s Trust, to support and facilitate young people with budgeting, home economics etc.
- more support and respect for young people from broken homes e.g. counselling
- speak to young people in early school years to prevent young pregnancies
- more support centres that include young people with disabilities and from mixed religion backgrounds
- more support/support groups for young carers
- more local government support for local businesses e.g. reduced rent
- more support/equipment (particularly I.T.) for young people with disabilities, including when doing courses
- more support for disabled young people in work and training

CONTRIBUTING POSITIVELY TO COMMUNITY & SOCIETY

Participation

- set up youth parliaments or groups involved in government to encourage youth to take part in society
- get young people on different decision making groups
- more surveys to get the opinions of young people
- getting young people involved in Government meetings where they decide how money is spent
- more volunteering opportunities for young people and help them with this e.g. provide training such disability awareness
- having 'shadow' District Policing Partnerships for young people and police
- story telling sessions with younger children
- more suitable and accessible clubs/night clubs/activities/groups for children and young people to get involved in, including those with disabilities/learning disabilities
- more young group leaders, including those with disabilities
- more cross community workshops
- encourage community regeneration projects involving everyone
- help older people to get out more
- 24 hour 'ideas line' - phone or on-line
- national pick-up litter day

Portrayal of Young People

- talk to the media about showing the more positive picture of young people

Support

- shadow mentors/buddy systems to help young people

- more support for disabled young people and those affected by domestic violence etc
- more organisations to listen to young people who have been involved in crime
- more detached youth workers
- police should talk to young people more and discuss why they continue to offend
- more talks between police and teenagers to break barriers and show that they don't have it in for teenagers
- drug education for young people at a young age – by people who have 'been there and done that'
- more help for young parents

Employment

- more job centres and similar places that are accessible for young people with disabilities
- more jobs available/adapted for disabled young people

LIVING IN A SOCIETY WHICH RESPECTS THEIR RIGHTS

Participation

- more youth involvement in government and government needs to show it is really listening - young people should be able to contribute to society.
- the right to vote at 16 years of age – we deserve to choose who is in charge of our community
- educate children and young people more about their rights
- children and young people, including those with disabilities and in care, should be allowed to make more decisions about things that affect them
- more access to the arts, music, drama and the media

Safety

- right to have safe areas to play - playgrounds and green areas – areas need to be cleaned
- better bus and rain safety – more cameras
- more community police and longer police station opening hours so families feel safe and don't have to move house
- less people drink driving and speeding on our roads

Racism

- there should be less racism - be respected for who you are
- young people need to be taught that everyone needs to be treated equally regardless of colour, race or religion
- greater integration – more mixing and social groups

Cultural Respect

- Irish language and other communities' languages written on street signs beside the English language

Employment

- more job opportunities for school leavers with disabilities

LGBT

- should have time to deal to come to terms with their sexual orientation and not be bullied because of it

Housing

- better housing for young people with learning difficulties – more points for them from the Housing Executive

Recreation

- more facilities e.g. gyms at a reasonable cost – student rates for all young people
- more children's projects involving paintings, drawings, murals etc

- more and better clubs for younger people – clubs currently cater for one social group only or over 18s

Portrayal of Young People

- more positive images of young people and positive stories on tv and radio etc
- more positive image of young parents
- remove 'no hoodie' policies in shops
- should be able to stand at a street corner or walk down the street without being hassled by PSNI or paramilitaries

ASBOs

- Should be stopped as only given to young people – an alternative should be put in place e.g. helping in the community instead