



Ulster Unionist Party Consultation Response
on a Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland

September 2011

Introduction

The Ulster Unionist Party believes in any democracy it is extremely important for young people to engage, and be engaged. The Northern Ireland Assembly and Local Government Authorities are constantly taking decisions that have a significant impact on younger people in the future, such as tuition fees, provision of youth services and future employment strategies. Therefore we believe it is crucial that young people, particularly those under the voting age have a way and means to express their own opinions and put forward their own ideas and beliefs.

Therefore we warmly welcome the creation of a Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland.

Members of the Youth Assembly

The UUP believes that the success of a Youth Assembly can only ever be as strong as the members that makeup its membership.

Therefore, in order for the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly to be most effective, the UUP would be keen to ensure that it has a fair geographical composition. We believe the way in which this could be done is via the selection of two young people (Youth Assembly Members) from each of the current 18 Parliamentary Constituencies in Northern Ireland.

We believe that selection of Youth Assembly Members would be more appropriate than election; however great efforts should be taken to ensure that the new Youth Assembly is relatively representative of demographic circumstances, primarily in terms of religious and gender makeup.

What should be the age range of Youth Assembly Members

It is the belief of the Ulster Unionist Party that the primary purpose of a Youth Assembly should be to give young people, who are presently politically disenfranchised, a voice and vehicle of which they can use to campaign for their own desires. Therefore we believe that the age range for the new Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland should be from 14 to 20, with particular attention given to attracting applicants in the 16-18 range.

Role of the Youth Assembly

We believe the primary role of the Youth Assembly should be to provide young people, particularly those under the age of 18, a voice which they will genuinely promote their viewpoint in what is otherwise a heavily male, middle to old age, political environment. Youth Assembly Members should

become ambassadors for the schools, young people and youth groups in their constituencies. Youth Assembly Members should use the positions to champion their own causes and work for better services for local young people. The Ulster Unionist Party also strongly believes that if something is working well in their local communities and young people are genuinely pleased with the services and provisions available, then the Youth Assembly Members should stand up and make it known that X is working well but Y could be slightly improved by carrying out Z. This is fundamentally where we believe a Youth Assembly could play its biggest role.

We would also like to see the Youth Assembly making representations to the Northern Ireland Assembly, commissioning and publishing reports, and finally responding to statutory consultation papers.

Meetings of the Youth Assembly

Northern Ireland is lucky to have such a resourceful centre of politics at Parliament Buildings at Stormont; therefore the Ulster Unionist Party would like to see the Northern Ireland Assembly becoming the main base for the new Youth Assembly. We believe that resources such as the Assembly and Senate Chambers should be utilised, as should committee rooms and other services such as the library and IT offices.

However we believe that the Youth Assembly may have an advantage over its more institutional alternative in that it would have the ability to move around the province and therefore become more accessible and open. Therefore we would be keen to see the Youth Assembly holding a number of their meetings in different locations across Northern Ireland. This would include the public (plenary) meetings of the Assembly, as well as any subsequent committee meetings.

Induction and Training for Youth Assembly Members

We believe that every effort should be taken to ensure that new Youth Assembly Members are provided with the guidance and training that would help them perform in their roles more effectively. We believe that the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Service would hold answers to many of the questions which the new Youth Assembly Members will undoubtedly have. Therefore we would welcome the creation of an induction pack which could be issued to all the young Members. However we would also like to see a point of contact, whether that be within the Education Service, Outreach Unit or Business Office which could serve as first point of call for new Youth Assembly Members.

We also believe that many parties, certainly ourselves within the UUP, would be keen to provide any assistance that might be needed, whether that be sending an MLA to speak to a group of young people about what they could potentially achieve or a member of Party staff talking about how their role could influence Party policy.

Conclusion

In conclusion the Ulster Unionist Party strongly supports the creation of a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. We believe it should be target driven, and based on a set of principles which would work to the benefit of young people, elected representatives, and wider society as a whole.