

Policy Brief: Truth about Youth

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This brief focuses on policy issues relating to negative stereotyping and young people. It draws on published research evidence and the discussion at a Roundtable event organised by Access Research Knowledge (ARK). Roundtable participants included officials from government departments, statutory bodies, the PSNI, representatives from a range of NGOs and academics. The event was conducted under the anonymity of reporting allowed under the Chatham House Rule to encourage open debate.

Introduction

While there is nothing new about discourses of 'problem' youth, there is concern about the extent to which negative stereotyping of young people has become more aggressive and the impact of this on young people, particularly since the emergence of a strong anti-social behaviour narrative in the 1990s. Within the body of research on stereotyping and young people, considerable attention has been given to the role of the media. But one need look no further than the academic literature on young people to find a strong association with problems and problematic situations (for example the substantive literature on issues such as; teenage pregnancy, smoking,

drugs, unemployment, young people categorised as 'NEET'). It is uncommon for academics to be funded to seek the views of young people on issues other than the problematic.

Survey evidence from a number of countries shows that young people feel public and media attitudes towards them are predominantly negative (Bolzam, 2003; Anderson et al, 2004). The 2010 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey included the following question 'Are young people judged negatively just because they are young?' Eighty three per cent of 16 year olds surveyed felt that young people were judged negatively solely on that basis. Over half said they had been treated with disrespect, although rarely (once or twice a year) while over a quarter said they experienced this two/three times a month. Twenty six per cent reported having been excluded from a shop or shopping centre and 56% said they had been asked to move on when standing with friends on the street (of those who said they had had this experience, two of every three reported that they had been asked to do so by residents; half by the Police). Three out of four said that the media portrayed young people 'mostly negatively' with only 3% saying that media coverage was mostly positive.

Findings from the Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS) 2011/12 show that "a lack of discipline from parents" was identified by 60% of respondents as one of the three "major cause of crime" in NI today. The other two identified causes were drugs (71%) and alcohol (65%). This suggests that respondents see young people, still living with their parents, as some of the main perpetrators of crime.

Data collected for the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (18 years +) show that public attitudes towards young people are not overwhelmingly negative in character. Instead, they tend to be characterised by ambivalence and contradictions (Anderson et al, 2004; Anderson and Dobbie, 2008) with respondents displaying concern both for and about young people. For example, in the 2004 Survey more respondents said that young people were 'helpful and friendly' than thought young people had 'no respect for older people' and 57% said young people were 'well behaved and responsible'. Interestingly, findings from the 2009 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (Ormston and Anderson, 2010) which referred to 'young people in this area' suggests that people are more likely to feel that local young people are responsible and well-behaved than to feel this about young people in general. The most critical attitudes were not in fact from older people but from young adults

(18-29 years); men were more likely than women to hold positive attitudes to young people and those educated to degree level were more positive than those with no qualifications.

As Devlin (2006) points out 'Stereotyping has an impact on the stereotyped: it can result in, and be used to justify, discriminatory practices... Stereotyping can also have a further impact, as when prejudicial ideas lead to (or are used to justify) a profound lack of respect for, or even violence against, the members of a given group. The depth and scope of the impact of stereotyping are such that it is a significant barrier to the achievement of equality'. It is therefore important to understand more about the causes, extent and impact of stereotyping and to look at how policy and practice can address the issue.

Influences on stereotypical attitudes towards young people

There is some evidence that young people are most positively perceived by those community members who have direct and meaningful contact with them but most negatively perceived by those who did not know them. Bolzan's study of community attitudes to young people in Australia asked adult respondents what factors influenced their attitudes. The strongest influence was the direct experience of young people (47% of respondents), 23% of respondents cited the media while they reported that the factor which least influenced them was what politicians said. Data from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (Anderson et al, 2004) found that those respondents who knew many of the young people in their area were more likely than those who didn't to have positive views of young people. Variables loosely connected to themes of social cohesion, connectedness and trust appear to be associated with a more positive view of young people.

There is a strong association between higher levels of deprivation in the local area and more negative views of young people. For example, the NI Crime

Survey found 40% of those in the most deprived quintile were concerned about "teenagers hanging about on the streets", compared to 15% in the third most deprived quintile and 18% in the least deprived. Concern about "teenagers hanging about on the streets" was expressed by 28% of respondents living in urban areas, but just 14% of those living in rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Egan et al (2012) used qualitative methods to explore claims that concern about antisocial behaviour may be linked to generally negative attitudes towards young people. The study used focus groups of adults living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods of urban Glasgow. They found some evidence of generalised negative stereotyping of young people, but not of a general climate of intolerance. However, they found only isolated examples of intergenerational connectivity outside of participants' immediate families. While the focus groups provided many examples of negative encounters with young people (harassment, damage to property), adult residents tended to suggest that local young people were not perceived to be the only perpetrators of anti-social behaviour and were not solely responsible for neighbourhood problems; rather, they argued that such behaviours occur in the context of poor environments and poor adult behaviour.

The media and negative stereotyping

As outlined above, data from the YLT survey in Northern Ireland shows that young people feel the media presents a stereotypical and unfair picture of them. Data from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (18 years +) presents mixed views about whether the media present a fair or unfair picture of young people in Scotland. In 2004, there was little difference between the proportion of people who thought it was fair (42%) and those who thought it was unfair (38%); in 2009, the survey asked about whether coverage of young people in newspapers and TV was too negative, about right or too positive. Again,

the results were mixed with almost half those surveyed saying it was too negative and almost half saying it was about right. Qualitative research in Northern Ireland (McAlister et al, 2010) showed that young people considered the labelling of their behaviour as 'anti-social' or 'criminal' by sections of the media to be an unfair and unfounded misrepresentation and that this was deeply resented.

A wide range of research including analysis of policy documents and media analysis shows that the anti-social behaviour narrative has largely focused on young people in disadvantaged areas (see for example Egan 2012).

The media focus on young people's anti-social behaviour is certainly not new as the following extract shows:

'It is a strange anomaly, that in a country boasting to be the most civilized in the world, no effective machinery exists for checking the growth of vice in young offenders. Our gaols, as reformatories, are worse than useless.' **Morning Chronicle, 22 October 1842**

But there is concern about the negative impact of both the media focus and reporting on this issue. *Hoodies or Altar Boys?*, a joint research project by women in Journalism and the British Library (Bawdon, 2009) found there was a polarisation in the portrayal of young males in the media, with the tendency to typify them as being prone to criminality - "heartless hoodies" and likening them to "feral" animals. The research was based on a survey of 1,000 teenage boys (aged 13-19) across five UK regions, most of whom (85%) thought that newspapers give them a bad press.

The following quote is cited by the researchers as one example of how the reporting is skewed:

'We are a group of 14-year-old boys from the Reclaim project; since the project started, we have been approached by so many different newspapers, magazines and TV companies, most of who want to talk to us about guns and knives and gangs. We keep trying



to explain that we are not involved in gangs and crime; we're doing positive things in this area – and then journalists go away, as they tell us that's not the story people are interested in...' **Open letter from Manchester-based Reclaim, published in Guardian, 25 August 2008.**

Interestingly, new media fared a little better than newspapers, with 31% of respondents saying the likes of BBC online or Sky News online portrayed teenage boys in a good or neutral light. Reality TV shows were seen as representing them most fairly, with 44% of boys surveyed saying programmes like X-Factor and Britain's Got Talent portrayed them in a good light. In addition to the survey with young people the researchers tracked newspaper stories about teenage boys across the national and regional press over a period of a year. They found coverage was unrelentingly negative and focused disproportionately on crime. There were very few positive stories to balance the bad ones. One of the most striking findings was how teenage boys are influenced by the bad press they get with some evidence that the media reports had made them fearful of other teens. Nearly a third said they are 'always' or 'often' wary of teenage boys they don't know; nearly three-quarters have changed their behaviour to avoid other teens. The most common reason for their wariness, cited by half of respondents, was 'media stories about teen boys', compared with four out of ten who said their wariness was based on their own or friends' bad experiences of other teens.

There is concern by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), has expressed concern that young people maligned in the press have little recourse for justice, especially those from more vulnerable backgrounds. Age-based discrimination is already included in the editorial principles of certain newspapers and the National Union of Journalists Code of Conduct contains clauses relating to age and reporting but critics argue that this

has had limited impact. A growing unease about the denigration of young people in the media led to twenty five organisations endorsing a submission to the Leveson Inquiry highlighting discriminatory practice by the print media against children and young people (Giner and Jones, 2013). The submission calls for age to be included as a classification in Clause 12i (the clause under the discrimination article of the Editors' Code) and that a new clause be added both to the Editors Code and the NUJ Code of Conduct that reflects the damage caused by negative generalisations about children and young people.

Impact of negative stereotyping

The UNCRC, in its 2008 report on the UK, referred to a 'general climate of intolerance' stating that '... negative public attitudes towards children – especially adolescents which appears to exist in the UK, including in the media ... may be often the underlying cause of further infringements of children's rights.' In England the Department for Education's 2011 Positive for Youth report says: "Negative images that present young people as a nuisance can also undermine young people's self-esteem as well as their confidence in their legitimate and valued place in society – also influencing adults and other young people to develop unwarranted feelings of mistrust." An analysis of the responses to the Department of Education's (NI) response to the *Priorities for Youth* Strategy consultation showed that a majority of the respondents felt that the negative image and perception of children and young people leads to them being constantly moved on 'from their local streets and shunned by their own community' (Haydon and McAlister, 2009).

A recently published study by DEMOS (Birdwell, 2014) reported on two surveys, one of which questioned 1,000 people aged between 14 and 17 across England and Northern Ireland, while the other questioned a sample

of teachers who teach members of this age group. The study revealed that contrary to negative stereotypes, today's teenagers are characterised by their tolerance, compassion and motivation to tackle social issues.

Four out of five of the young people surveyed believe that today's teenagers are more concerned with social issues than previous generations and had a strong sense of individual responsibility, findings supported by almost 70% of the teachers. The research showed that many young people were motivated to make a difference to their communities and to society but that their ways of doing so were quite different. Despite the optimism and activism the researchers identified among the young people and the teachers interviewed, the survey results also found that 80% of the teenagers felt that their age group was unfairly represented in the media. Of these, 85% either wrongly or rightly, as the survey did not investigate the views of employers, felt this had a negative impact on their chances of getting a job. In order to test whether the perception of the media was accurate, DEMOS analysed a sample of articles which related to young people taken from six major British newspapers over the last ten years. These appear to have confirmed what the young people said: they found that the words most commonly associated with "young people", "teenagers" and "youth" were "binge-drinking", "yobs" and "crime".

In NI it has been argued (ECNI and NICCY, 2013) that as a result of stereotypical negative attitudes towards young people, their access to services has either been denied or restricted. This includes being refused access to shops without justification and being harassed by service providers because of their age. It is further argued that this has impacted on their ability to access day to day services. Arguing for the inclusion of children and young people in age discrimination legislation in the provision of goods and services the ECNI and the NICCY take the view that if young people were to be protected under

the proposed legislation against age discrimination when accessing goods and services then the harassment or intimidation of children by security staff on shop premises, or forcible ejection of groups of children from cafes, based solely on stereotypical negative views of children and young people is likely to be unlawful.

Devlin (2006, p.17) argues that stereotyping diminishes the status of the group that is being stereotyped. This includes restricting access to decision making where stereotyping presents a barrier to the voice of the stereotyped group being given an adequate hearing. This in turn, can limit access to resources where the stereotyped group has little say in decisions on how resources are distributed.

Roundtable Discussion

Susanna Allen and Janet Flynn from the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister outlined the rationale for the roundtable and the importance attached to the topic within the Department. Currently the Department is leading on the Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People policy¹ which at the time of the roundtable was out to consultation. This integrates the Executive's *Child Poverty Strategy*, the *Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young people: Our Children, Our Pledge*² and work to meet the requirements of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Programme for Government contains specific proposals to promote positive action in relation to children and young people and the 2011 Play and Leisure Implementation Plan² has an action to positively promote children and young people to counteract negative stereotyping. It was acknowledged that more needed to be done to address the criticisms raised by the United Nation's Committee of the Rights of the Child in its 2008 report on the UK particularly

with regard to promoting positive change and addressing negative stereotyping. General Comment 17 on the UNCRC reinforces that this is a global issue which has significant impacts for children as citizens, rights holders and for society.

A core headline action committed to within *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* is the creation of 10,000 one year placements which includes the development of an employment and youth volunteering programme which builds capacity for leadership and improves good relations. The strategy aims to build on the wealth of experience, expertise and good practice that already exists. The United Youth Programme will provide further opportunities to enhance life experience, employability skills through work experience, volunteering and leisure opportunities that will further build the capacity and leadership of young people. The Department for Employment and Learning is now the lead department taking this Programme forward.

Formal input was provided by Dr Siobhan McAlister, Queen's University Belfast³ and Professor Maurice Devlin, NUI Maynooth⁴. In their presentations they painted a graphic picture of the extent and impact of negative stereotyping and also the relationship between negative stereotyping and discrimination which was widespread and persistent. Dr McAlister noted how, in research spanning more than 7 years, she identified an increasing intolerance of young people; that young people as a social group were seen to symbolise all that is wrong and are often portrayed as a threat to the stability of peace. The question was posed about why the perception of young people in the media was often so different from the reality and the extent to which this misperception was fuelled by the media. She reported

that analysis of media coverage of young people revealed a generally negative focus in the media with a lot of coverage of drugs, violence and anti-social behaviour. Furthermore, positive stories often had a negative slant, the example was provided of news about positive exam results being accompanied by stories about excessive alcohol use to celebrate results. Dr McAlister also drew attention to the 'regulation' of leisure which resulted in restrictions on young people's freedom of movement in their own areas, for example as a result of heavy levels of regulation by police and paramilitaries. She reminded participants that young people are sensitive to the labels attached to them and this affects how they engage with others and how others engage with them. She asserted the importance of understanding the factors which have influenced the transformation from a view of youth as hopeful and positive to the idea of youth as problematic.

Professor Devlin noted that the voice of young people has been consistent on this issue and there is an abundance of evidence about the extent and impact of negative stereotyping. He observed that research findings in the south of Ireland were very much in line with the issues outlined by Dr McAlister. He asserted the difficulty of tackling negative stereotyping, pointing to the limited progress made in the south of Ireland since his own research was published in 2006 and argued there is evidence that the situation is worsening. He observed that the media has been described as 'the way in which society talks to itself' so it is important that we look beyond the media to wider society. Academics could not be exempt from blame with much discourse in psychology, sociology and policy focusing on the negative aspects of youth. Professor Devlin reminded participants that not all young people are impacted in the same way and

¹ <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/delivering-social-change/dsc-children-young-people.htm>

² <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/play-implementation-plan-revised-target-dates.pdf>

³ Dr McAlister is a Lecturer in Criminology, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast.

⁴ Professor Devlin is Jean Monnet Professor and Director of the Centre for Youth Research and Development, Department of Applied Social Studies, NUI, Maynooth

young people in socially disadvantaged areas are more likely to be exposed to this stereotyping and to prejudiced and discriminatory practice. He discussed the role of language referring to the over – lexicalisation of young people with an endless array of synonyms – and the embedding of negative ideas and perceptions of young people as the norm. For example, in coverage of crime, there is disproportionate emphasis on young people as perpetrators of criminal activity and anti-social behaviour thus creating ‘moral panics’

There is a cumulative effect of negative stereotyping which results in lack of respect for young people in the public sphere. This has become particularly pernicious, is deeply corrosive of democracy itself, and poisons the way in which society facilitates the socialisation of children and young people. This, he argued, is a political and policy issue and while this stereotyping and discrimination may stop when the young person moves to adulthood the damage is already done and attitudes about public life and intergenerational relationships have been undermined and compromised.

Following these inputs the discussion was opened to all participants. Key themes raised during the discussion are outlined below.

What is ‘youth’ ?

A number of participants spoke of confusion and contradiction in terms of what ages are covered by the term ‘youth’. For instance the OFMDFM Children and Young People’s Strategy and the responsibility of the Children’s Commissioner extends to those aged 18 (or 21 where young people have been in care); the UNCRC obligations cover young people up to age 18 meaning that not all young people fall under the ‘rights’ umbrella. Youth Policy in Northern Ireland traditionally included young people up to age 25 although the recent strategy for youth services ‘Priorities for Youth’ sees the

focus of youth policy as being up to age 18. ‘Young People Pathways to Success’ the Northern Ireland strategy for those young people not in education, employment or training extends to age 24. A number of participants expressed the view that ultimately, it is important to appreciate that development occurs at different rates and in different circumstances. Chronology in itself does not give an answer.

Profiling the problematic

It was suggested that the negative stereotyping and negative attitudes towards young people outlined by the presenters would be likely to get worse because of the way in which the funding of academic research is directed specifically at the problematic. As one participant noted the emphasis on research impact means that ‘the ‘ordinary’ will not be funded. This, together with a policy focus on addressing problems means that it is difficult for positive experiences and attitudes to be reported. A perception of ‘problem youth’ is created which is very disproportionate. It was argued that this emphasis on problems also detracts from need and results in failure to distinguish needs and problems. There are issues also about how ‘problems’ are defined with the point being made that young women’s needs in Northern Ireland have gone unmet. This was attributed their invisibility, in that they are not perceived as problematic in the way that young men are perceived as more likely to engage in violent or troublesome behaviour.

Issues underlying negative stereotyping

The point was made by a number of participants that negative stereotyping is a symptom of unequal status (including economic and social status) but that the stereotyping then acts to further marginalise young people. Participants provided many examples of this including the impact of the perception of young people in some communities as criminals which can also place them

at risk from paramilitaries. Reference was made to research looking at young people in a society emerging from conflict⁵. Young people interviewed for the research saw Belfast as a city divided in terms of adults and children; those participating in the research provided images of adult perceptions of them which illustrated this quite vividly and included, for example, bags piled up outside shops. Stereotyping as a result of inequality was also applied to gender and concern was expressed about continuing sexism and discrimination against young women which has a negative impact on their training and employment opportunities, their relationships, their vulnerability to violence and their equal participation in public and political life.

Concern was expressed that discourse and policies in recent years had created divisions between generations with younger people stereotypically portrayed as a threat to older people and older people portrayed as a group which was a financial burden on the rest of society. A number of participants pointed to the evidence of empathy between younger and older generations which goes largely unacknowledged. The point was made that intergenerational work is important but can’t be tokenistic nor can it be seen as some kind of panacea.

In looking at how stereotypes are perpetuated and can be challenged there was a strong view that much needed to be done in relation to raising awareness among politicians so that they would be informed about how their discourse and actions can have a broader impact.

There was much agreement with the observation that progress on challenging negative stereotyping requires a better understanding of the views and perceptions which adults hold of young people, the reasons for particular attitudes and to analyse some of the inconsistencies in attitudes. The

⁵ Leonard, M. and McKnight, M. (2010) ‘Teenagers’ Perceptions of Belfast as a Divided/Shared City’, *Shared Space*, 10, 23-39.

point was made that the fundamental issue was how to change core attitudes so that young people are viewed as assets. This linked to a discussion about young people as citizens. Although there has been a preoccupation across the UK about young people and active citizenship, this has been quite narrowly defined and in Northern Ireland citizenship education in schools at least has been quite focused on community relations. The point was also made that we can stereotype through initiatives- eg by thinking that we need programmes to help young people become active citizens when there is considerable evidence that they are already there. Research has also identified ways in which those young people who are most marginalised can be connected to things in communities (for example ideas emerging from research on adolescent male school – life experiences⁶).

Importance of Language

Language was identified by many participants as particularly important with a number of examples of ways in which language further embedded stereotyping. Examples provided included the term 'NEETS' and of how policies often talked of 'targeting' young people, and of how rhetoric from political opportunists has resulted in the demonisation of young people and promote a culture of fear. It was argued that organisations often use certain words in funding applications which exacerbates this problem as they strive to demonstrate that they are addressing 'problems'. Reference was made to an initiative within DHSSPS to ensure appropriate language and tone was adopted with regard to young people and that this could be a model for other policies.

Young People and Rights

Participants viewed this as an important issue and one of central importance

to address negative stereotyping. It was argued that children's rights can often be seen as secondary to parental rights, differing opinion on the capability of young people to make particular decisions (although in some cases there has been clarification in law – eg: the Gillick Principle), that there is too often an assumption that children will demand their rights themselves rather than rights being proactively given to children. There also has to be sufficient opportunity for children and young people to exercise their rights. Various examples were provided of how children's rights are breached, including the way in which photographs have been used in newspapers to identify children and young people involved in incidents related to flag protests and how the age of criminal responsibility may act to deny appropriate support to children in need.

The point was made that, if the obligations of the UNCRC were adopted into domestic policy, then this would help challenge and address some negative stereotyping. However, several participants expressed the view that there was reluctance amongst some politicians to really address the issues raised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and other bodies. An example cited was the failure to increase the age of criminal responsibility which was argued to be a good example of the contradictions and inconsistency in attitudes and policy on young people. While the age of criminal responsibility continues to be 10, placing considerable responsibility on the child, in other ways there is reluctance to give children and young people autonomy and responsibility.

Reference was made to the debate about the introduction of age discrimination legislation with regard to goods and services and whether new legislation should be restricted to people

over 65 or cover all ages. A number of participants spoke of the lack of justification for restricting the legislation to older people and arguing that this would perpetuate discrimination and inequality.

Young people and the media

This was an issue which received considerable attention. There was consensus that the negative language and misleading headlines results in coverage of young people being predominantly negative. Many participants pointed to examples of this and to the impact in terms of influencing public attitudes and policy. Some participants felt that the local press was more inclined to promote a positive view of young people than the national press. The media portrayal of young people has been an issue of concern for some time and, as highlighted in contextual part of this brief, there have been some attempts to work with media organisations and journalists to counter this. For example, the Positive Image Awards, which have been running since 2005, aim to encourage the media to take the lead by looking for positive story angles when reporting on young people and youth issues, and to encourage youth groups and local authorities to be proactive in publicising positive images of young people. Participants at the roundtable were also aware of specific initiatives in Northern Ireland including projects by Youth Net and Include Youth and the Headliners project which encourages the personal development of young people through journalism. The point was also made that it is not just about raising awareness amongst journalists but to aim to inform social bloggers and other media and indeed wider society in order to fundamentally change attitudes.

Policing and Justice

Participants discussed how perceptions

⁶ Harland, K and McCready, S (2012) Taking Boys Seriously - A Longitudinal Study Of Adolescent Male School-Life Experiences In Northern Ireland, <http://www.dojni.gov.uk/index/statistics-research/stats-research-publications/ad-hoc-research-reports/taking-boys-seriously-a-longitudinal-study-of-adolescent-male-school-life-experiences-in-northern-ireland-final.pdf>

⁷ Jacson, J and Kirby, A (2012) Public attitudes to youth crime, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/116266/occ105.pdf

of young people included a blanket assumption that crime against older people is generally committed by young people. Reference was made to the Home Office report on public attitudes to youth crime⁷ and reference was made to research conducted by the Policing Board NI which highlighted quite a few stereotypical ideas and perceptions of young people which impacted on police responses. This included the view that if there were a number of young people congregating in an area the police had to do something about it. Participants agreed that it would be useful to have a better understanding of the views of the PSNI towards young people. While surveys had been done in some districts it is not clear what picture is emerging. The question was asked about whether this information could be collated, gaps in knowledge identified and made available. There was some discussion of the legacy of the conflict and the continuing presence of paramilitaries in local communities. The conflict was seen to have contributed to the idea that young people have to be 'policed'. In some communities paramilitaries act as 'protectors' and young people risk being recruited / chastised / or policed by paramilitaries.

Proposals and recommendations

It is clear that challenges to negative stereotyping do happen and have been successful. An example cited was the campaign to get TESCO to change the practice of asking children and young people to leave bags outside shops. However, there are important questions about why negative stereotyping is such a pervasive issue and how more fundamental change can be achieved. Participants agreed that a multi-faceted response is required which includes politicians, government officials and public agencies, the media and academia among others.

Stereotyping can result in the needs of young people not being met. Policy

that is defined through problems is not an accurate or holistic reflection of actual need. There needs to be a shift from policy on young people being defined in this way. Research funders and academics could contribute to developing a different research focus.

There is clearly a problem with negative language including in policy documents. Government departments could take action to ensure that negative and inappropriate language is not used. It was pointed out that the vocabulary to do so exists and is evident in the policy goals summarised at the start of the roundtable. But there is a need to think more broadly about language, including raising awareness among politicians of the impact of negative and derogatory language, as well as of generalisation.

In the course of the discussion there was strong emphasis on redefining how young people are perceived so that their value as young people is appreciated rather than the focus being on the development of future 'good adult citizens'. Changing perceptions of young people could be helped through the use of asset based policies which build citizenship among young people.

There is considerable criticism of the way in which the media stereotypes young people and research has identified this as an important factor. Research by Ipsos Mori (2005), shows that local papers present the most polarised view of young people. Participants at the roundtable identified examples of initiatives across the UK involving the media including in Northern Ireland the NSPCC guidance to the media on reporting child abuse cases^{8,9}. However there was also consensus that there needed to be greater efforts to work with the media to address the issue. It was proposed that this might include the development of a Charter whereby the media would sign up to certain courses of action.

A number of recommendations were made with regard to policy development

that goes beyond the the promotion of good practice in participation work for young people. In addition to ensuring that young people have an opportunity to participate to a much more meaningful extent it should also assist departments and agencies to look at how best to integrate young people into the policy making and implementation process.

There are examples of good practice which could be shared including VOYPIC experience of working with DHSSPS to ensure that young people participated effectively in policy consultation, YouthAction's Public Transport project with the Consumer Council and Translink on affordable public transport for young people and work by the National Children's Bureau helping young people to improve participation skills. There are also opportunities to integrate information on negative stereotyping into policies and strategies currently being developed – such as the Mental Health and Well-being Strategy

Given the link between inequality and stereotyping it was felt that there is much more potential for existing equality legislation, such as Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, to be used to address this issue. The point was made that as OFMDFM has policy responsibility for co-ordinating inequality there would be value in the Department taking the lead on analysing how equality legislation could be used to address the problem.

Participants were keen that potential opportunities for young people's participation presented by changes to local government in Northern Ireland should be maximised. For example, it is important that young people and youth issues are included in decisions about the implementation of Community Planning under the new Councils. This is a very opportune time to look at how young people can be centrally involved and perhaps to design and offer training to councils. The new council structures may provide opportunity for local engagement.

⁸ <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Archive/Polls/young-people-now.pdf>

⁹ http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/policyandpublicaffairs/northernireland/guidance/media-guidance_wdf93022.pdf

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The Ark Policy Unit works to develop a facility for a critical appraisal of policy which is based on knowledge and evidence and to encourage public engagement with Social Policy.

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