Children and Young People
Overview and Scrutiny Committee

12 June 2024

Medway Youth Council (MYC) Conference Report 2024

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Summary

On 26 January 2024 Medway Youth Council (MYC) delivered its annual conference that addressed issues related to identity, with specific attention to young people's experiences of homophobia and racism and how they are tackled. The report made key recommendations from young people about how this should be dealt with within and outside schools.

This was initially considered and noted at Annual Council on 15 May 2024.

1. Recommendations

1.1. The Committee is asked to note the Medway Youth Council (MYC) Annual Conference Report 2024.

2. Budget and policy framework

2.1. The terms of reference for the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Chapter 4 Part 5 paragraph 22.2(b) of the Constitution) states; ''to fulfil all the functions of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee in relation to children''.

3. Background

3.1. Medway Youth Council is a diverse youth led organisation that looks to have the young people of Medway's voices heard. Our members come from all backgrounds. We are active in the wider community and are often involved in many outside events. We help young people to build skills needed for the future both politically and in all aspects of life.

3.2. The 2024 conference was held on 26th January 2024, 17 schools were represented with over 70 participants. Schools involved included:

3.2.1. Abbey Court, City of Rochester, Rochester Maths, Rochester Grammar Girls, Walderslade Girls, Robert Napier, Hundred of Hoo, The Howard School, Rivermead, Ripplevale, Mid-Kent College, the Rowans, Kings School and Maritime. Additional schools such as Chatham Grammar, Fort Pitt Grammar and Holcombe were represented by members of the Youth Council. MYC are proud of the vast variety of schools and year groups which have attended, this has allowed us to have students from various economical, academic and cultural backgrounds.

3.3. This year the conference was about identity, specifically addressing issues related to racism and homophobia. MYC conducted a survey asking for suggestions, support for the LBTQIA+ community and tackling racism were chosen as the topic for this year's conference. We found we were able to link these together, along with tackling discrimination in other aspects of identity such as disabilities, religion, and culture.

3.4. A report from the YMCA found that 95% of young Black people report that they have heard and witnessed the use of racist language at school and 49% of young Black people feel that racism is the biggest barrier to attaining success in school.

3.5. The Growing Up LGBT+ report from Cibyl (2021) found that 42% of LGBT+ young people had been bullied in the past year, which was double the number of non-LGBT+ pupils. 1 in 5 did not feel they could report this at the time.

3.6. Message from the Medway Youth Council chair, Naomi Oduntan:

'This January, Medway Youth Council hosted their annual conference. This year it was centred around identity and focused on the impact it has on Medway's youth and what they feel needs to be done around it. We invited students between 11 and 18 from a variety of schools and enjoyed hearing their different opinions and experiences regarding the matter. The conference featured three workshops: Racism, Stereotyping and Discrimination and LQBTQ+ identities. The attendants were split up and sent to each of the different workshops where they discussed their unique views in a safe and encouraging environment. This year's event also featured a marketplace where students had the opportunity to talk to different professionals at their stalls to have any questions they developed during the event, answered. To round up the day, we had a Q and A panel allowing people to ask questions to a few familiar faces. To cut a very long story short, we spoke to lots of vibrant people and had a very busy but informative day.'

4. Headline findings

4.1. On the lead up to and at the conference a survey was completed by 104 young people. This suggested some key information.

4.2. 20.4% of responses indicated frequent issues with racism experienced at school. 40.4% reported frequent issues in the wider Medway community.

4.3.   When asked whether racist behaviour was punished in school 45% suggested it was dealt with inconsistently.

4.4.   In terms of education about race and diversity, 74% felt their school made them aware of different ethnicities and cultures, but only 60% felt supported when discussing racism.

4.5.   50% felt safe expressing their gender and sexuality at school, compared to 30% who did not feel safe and 20% who felt neither safe nor unsafe.

4.6.   58% believed that homophobic behaviour was punished inconsistently.

4.7.   52% said that their school made them aware of different genders and sexualities. But only 50% felt supported discussing homophobia.

4.8.   When asked about religious expression, 48% felt their schools effectively punished prejudice against their religion. 77% felt their schools made them aware of other religions, but only 55% felt they had support available for different religions.

4.9.   Regarding disability, 16% said they had been discriminated against due to disability, but 19% said they had not and 65% said this did not apply to them.

5.   MYC Annual Conference Recommendations

5.1.   The MYC Annual Conference made the following recommendations. These have been shared with schools:

5.2.   The MYC recommends that schools carry out the recommendations from [The Growing Up LGBT+ report](#) by Cibyl. Key recommendations are 3 (Make LGBT+ visible and celebrated), 4 (Demonstrate that homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia and transphobia are unacceptable), 6 (Centre pupil voice) and 7 (Provide, signpost and facilitate the giving of information, guidance and support)

5.3.   MYC recommends that Schools and Young people's services staff complete the [Stonewall E-learning modules](#) (Improving LGBTQ+ young people's mental health and wellbeing, Supporting LGBTQ+ Children and Young People, Tackling anti-LGBTQ+ language and bullying)

5.4.   MYC recommends that schools carry out the recommendations from the [YMCA report 'Young and Black: the young Black experience of institutional racism in the UK'](#). Key recommendations are page 17, recommendation 1 (that school trusts, governing bodies, headteachers and school staff should review their policies through the lens of race and ethnicity, to ensure that they are inclusive, especially where it relates to image and presentation). And 2 (that schools embed anti-racist education throughout a student's academic journey to proactively combat racist language in schools. School leaders should consider opportunities across the curriculum, and not just standalone lessons, assemblies, or celebration of Black History Month.) -

5.5.   MYC recommends that Schools and Young people's services staff complete the red card anti-racism course (Promoting Equality and Tackling Racism in Schools) https://www.theredcard.org/training-and-workshops/teacher-training-online

5.6.   MYC to continue work with organisations involved in the Marketplace (see Appendix 4 Summary) to support them in reaching out to young people throughout Medway and to provide a youth voice to their work.

6.   Feedback

6.1.   MYC has received extremely positive feedback about the conference from pupils and teachers who attended. Specifically, there were positive comments about the inclusion of young disabled people. See below comments:

6.1.1. 'The meeting was a great success! It was well organised, and they catered to our needs. The parking space for our minibus was clearly labelled and easy for us to find which was great, if it could be closer to the building in future that would be really helpful although we did manage from where we were. All staff were helpful and arranged the seating so that we could be close to the door which worked well for us. The MYC representatives spoke clearly and concisely, and the PowerPoints were easy for us to follow. Two representatives in particular made a real effort to include us, regularly coming to our table to listen to our thoughts and ideas.I think it would be wonderful to attend every year.' (Abbey Court)

6.1.2. 'Our pupils really enjoyed the day and the workshops. They have asked if there are more events like this and would definitely like to come again if this is held next year.' (Hundred of Hoo)

6.1.3. 'It was a fantastic and well run day which our pupils really enjoyed. Whilst we were there they asked if they could come again next year! They are hoping to recreate some of the workshops in school with the other pupils. I think that the young people who delivered the sessions worked hard and did well. There was just the right amount of content in each workshop and included lots of involvement, thinking and discussion. On behalf of City of Rochester School, I would like to thank you and the young people who worked hard on the event. We would definitely like an invitation again next year!' (City of Rochester School)

6.1.4. 'I thought it went brilliantly well. Given the absolute numbers of young people in attendance, it was really well managed and the content considered, appropriate and interesting. It was obvious how hard the organisers, both MYC and Medway Youth Service staff – were committed to the day, and worked SO hard to make it work. I'd had an enjoyable, but full-on week leading up to the conference – and it proved to be just about the best ending to a work week I could have hoped for. I really enjoyed my engagement with the young people from the various schools: they were articulate, funny,

thoughtful and just all round 'nice'. I definitely think this should happen annually; I would be very happy to contribute to future events.' (METRO)

7.   Risk management

7.1.   There are no specific risks resulting from the recommendations of the report.

8.   Financial implications

8.1.   Delivery of the training set out in the Medway Youth Council recommendations would incur some costs for both schools and Medway Council in respect of youth services, and would need to be deliverable within existing budgets in order to not create a financial pressure.

9.   Legal implications

9.1.   There are no legal implications for the local authority.

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Appendices

1) Outcomes of Stereotyping & Discrimination workshop
2) Outcomes of tackling racism workshop
3) Outcomes of tackling homophobia workshop
4) Summary

Background papers

None

Appendix 1 Outcomes of Stereotyping & Discrimination workshop

Students had discussions on what they believed stereotyping was, they then engaged in two activities which allowed them to think about how people stereotype within society. Students found that they made assumptions about people based on:

- 'what they look like'
- 'their facial expressions'
- 'what they wear'
- 'how they present themselves'

After going through the various ways someone could be discriminated against, we asked students to plan/ start writing an open letter to the people of Medway to express their views on how discrimination of any form should be dealt with and why it should stop. These are direct quotes from students:

- 'We are sending this letter to speak about sexuality discrimination. We would like schools to speak about different sexualities more positively along with other people/places.'
- 'Stopping racial discriminations is so important as racism affects many of the young people in Medway, it stops them from feeling welcome and safe in their community.'
- 'I am writing to you because I think discrimination is horrible. I think everyone should be treated equally and fairly, regardless of their race or ethnicity.'
- 'Why do people get treated differently because of their gender, race, religion. This seriously needs to stop. We all should start being more open minded. Racism, homophobia and any form of discrimination needs to stop.'
- 'We should stop discrimination against others because there is no need for it and just because someone is different than you doesn't give them a reason to discriminate. Everyone should just be happy with themselves and others.'
- 'It has come to my attention that there has been discrimination against race and ethnicity. I have suggestions on how to mitigate this: A safe environment to ask questions. Changes in school curriculum to introduce re-education. Debates.'
- 'I am writing to you to discuss the issue people still face today considering racism. Although racism now is no longer most commonly violent, there are still underlying unconscious racism people have to endure in everyday life. A big problem is the casual racism displayed in schools, Medway needs to work in changing these underlying problems.'

From reading the responses from the young people it is evidently clear that they believe discrimination is still a problem within Medway and that to tackle this issue

we must investigate whether there is enough education about these problems within schools.

MYC held a debate on the statement **'stereotypes are human nature'**. The debates allowed students a chance to participate in discussions and improve their skills in public speaking. The following are direct responses to the debate:

- Stereotypes are taught, integrated into school systems and media.
- They are taught by parents.
- It comes down to nature vs nurture.
- Result of influence of society
- Propaganda is the cause of stereotyping.

Overall, the Stereotyping and discrimination workshop allowed us to investigate how young people in Medway felt discrimination impacted them and where stereotypes were formed. Many believed that the stereotypes came from secondary agents of socialisation such as schools, family, and peers. Thus, having the conclusion that they were taught and that with the correct intervention we will be able to reduce the negative influence they have.

Appendix 2 - Outcomes of the tackling racism workshop

We asked the audience to come up with their own definitions of racism. As a collective they came to the agreement that racism was:

"Discrimination based on skin colour/race"

Alongside the data gathered from in person participants we also gathered the definitions given in our survey. Below are some of their responses, these are direct quotes:

- When someone discriminates towards a group of people due to their race or religion.
- prejudicial ideology that certain races have more importance, opportunity, and worth in society.
- Racism is a system of beliefs and behaviours that assert the superiority of one race over others, and which can result in discrimination, prejudice, and mistreatment.
- No tolerance towards any other ethical, religious or race
- Judging someone based on their race.
- A biased act of hate. Targeting people because of their skin colour or physical characteristics
- It's discriminating against a race that is different from yours because they are different.

When asked what the biggest cause of Racism is, Students told us that they believed that social media had a big influence on people and that it sometimes actually encouraged racism in schools.

Many mentioned that teachers often respond badly to cases of racism, taking the wrong action or sometimes doing nothing at all.

- For example, we were told that a teacher moved a student down a set when they expressed that another pupil was being racist towards them instead of dealing with the incident.

Many participants also mentioned that parents can be an issue as well. They are a big influence on their children, which meant that when a parent is racist it is often passed down to the child. Through discussions we found that students believed that racism was something which was taught and that to tackle it we needed to spread positive awareness as well as being able to challenge racist behaviour.

The last question we asked was how we should look to combat Racism, students spoke about ideas such as culture days, religious/ethnic holidays and black history month should be done, tackled more effectively. We found that lots of schools don't acknowledge religious and ethnic holidays at all and if they acknowledge black history month it is usually an assembly without much research behind it. Some said that assemblies aimed at reducing racism might help if done properly, and that they would like to have more external visitors to teach on the topic.

Many said that educating adults as well as young people was very important because racism often stems from ignorance and that upbringing often plays a part in someone being racist.

In conclusions students found that some of the main causes of racism were: schools – this included lack of proper education and awareness surrounding racism for both students and staff, lack of punishing or challenging racist behaviour. They found parents and adults had a big impact on young people as they were seen to replicate their views, to combat this we should be teaching children at a young age about racism and why it is bad. Social media was also a big problem that they felt could be delt with by making sure that information sent out was accurate and that we continue to have these conversations. The Beyond Racism Workshop was intended to gather data regarding the sensitive issue of racism in Medway. This was so we could help figure out and implement proactive strategies to significantly reduce racism. We believe we were able to successfully gather young people's views on the subject and can suggest the recommendations made (recommendation 4.3 & 4.4).

Appendix 3 Outcomes of tackling homophobia workshop

Within this workshop, students engaged with activities that allowed them to look at what homophobia is, what the causes and impacts are and how we can tackle them.

For their first task, they were asked to match the gender/sexuality flags to their corresponding meaning. This task allowed students to look at the education surrounding LGBTQ+.

The flags present in the task were Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Pansexual, Omnisexual, Transgender, Non-binary, Gender fluid and Asexual. We found that **only 64% of students got over 1/2 of these correctly matched up.** This allowed students to discuss whether the education on this topic is sufficient. The majority of participants stated they wanted **'to learn more in PSHE classes or assemblies'** and that they thought in time this would allow us to '**normalise talking about sexuality'.**

Attendees were then asked to rank the following statements in order of which are the biggest causes of homophobia. The table shows how many times each one was described as the highest-ranking problem.

<u>Cause of Homophobia</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Lack of education in schools	12
Inaccurate information	9
Hate	20
Representation in media	12
Outdated laws and views	10
Fear of the unknown	12
Religious and cultural intolerance	**28**
Other	5

Many placed an emphasis on education, explaining that people 'fear the unknown' and that the othering of the LGBTQ+ community could be reduced by awareness. They found this could be done through a more positive representation in the media and the correcting of inaccurate information. Religious and Cultural intolerance was found to be the highest cause of homophobia, showing that homophobic beliefs and behaviours were taught by influences such as parents, teachers, and peer groups.

Next, we proceeded to ask students what solutions they could come up with to deal with these issues. We asked them what the Government, Local Council, Schools, Local services, and they could do in order to solve the challenges that had previously arisen. Below are some of their answers:

- More training for teachers about LGBTQ+
- Education at younger years (Primary school education)

- Helping people understand the impact of language used.
- Educate about what is and isn't acceptable and punish bad behaviour more consistently.
- More conversations about LGBTQ+ to avoid fear of the unknown
- More positive representation in the media
- Speakers/ external organisations could come into schools more frequently.
- Report and challenge homophobic behaviour
- More support for mental health in relation to LGBTQ+
- Lunchtime clubs, intervention groups, pupil voice meetings

Many students wanted to see more funding towards education on different identities, for example changing PSHE slightly so that it would be at a level that would be educational for everyone and encourage respectful discussions to "normalise talking about sexuality" and teach tolerance and patience.

Participants stated they thought young people could benefit from sexuality and gender workshops where they are able to learn more about the LGBTQ society. Students mentioned they thought that it should be taught more in younger years (primary school) so that students were able to understand that having same sex parents is normal.

The workshop provided an opportunity for us to collect insight from the young people, from discussions had we found that schools need to have more education about LGBTQ for students (recommendation 4.1) and for teachers (recommendations 4.2).

Appendix 4 Summary

Overall conference was successful, alongside the 3 workshops MYC held a marketplace of organisations that allowed students to interact with those that interested them. We found that we were able to give the organisations involved a way to talk directly to students relating to their own work, helping them make connections and increase interest. Organisations involved were:

- The Halpern Charitable Foundation/Nucleus Arts
- Be you project.
- Medway Voluntary Action
- Medway Parent and Carers forum
- Metro
- Medway United Nations Association
- Victim Support

There was also a Q&A panel which allowed students ask our selected panel about anything they believed was important. We believe this was important because it reinforced our ethos of giving young people a voice and a chance to ask decision makers questions.

We have had lots of positive feedback with people asking to come back again next year. The team were able to deal with problems as they arose and were able to facilitate for all students despite some participants having additional needs. Members have worked tirelessly to create the three workshops, invite all visitors and schools, fundraise the money to put on the actual event and go through the data. MYC are very proud to have been able to put on this event and we believe it was imperative that we discussed the topic of identity. This is because it is such a prominent issue at the moment and one that has had a particularly big impact on young people. In the words of a participant when it comes to Identity *'there is a fine line that humans subconsciously cross, its identifying that you are doing it which makes the difference'.*