

Shout as loudly as you can!



After spending three days in Paris making important policy recommendations on mental health, 16-year-old *Clara Gray* (above) wants children and adults alike to know that anyone can be a Human Rights Defender

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From 18 to 21 September 2018, I had the incredible opportunity to attend ENOC 2018 – the annual European Network of Ombudspersons for Children conference – in Paris, representing the views of Scotland’s children and young people on improving mental health. Earlier this year, I was one of a small group of young people from across Scotland who came up with recommendations on mental health, which were discussed in Barcelona in June with young people from 10 other countries around Europe. These were compiled to create a massive list of recommendations, with the aim of improving young people’s experiences of mental health.

I went to Paris supported by the office of the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland: Bruce – the Commissioner, Nick – Head of Advice and Investigation, and Kara – International Legal Officer. Together, we made up TEAM SCOTLAND! I was a bit nervous as I had never been on a trip like this before, I’d never met any of the young people, and I didn’t have much idea of what was going to happen. Safe to say, the nerves didn’t last long: Bruce, Nick and Kara helped me to feel at home. When we arrived in Paris we met up with the representatives from Northern Ireland and we hit it off immediately, chatting way into the night (sorry Bruce!).

On Wednesday I met the other young people, and I was genuinely surprised at how welcoming everyone was and how well I fitted in. We were given the task of putting together a two-and-a-half-hour-long presentation of our recommendations for the next day. This was difficult because none of us had ever had to present for that long before, and we needed to make sure we got our points across. With the help of our coordinators and Bruce, we overcame language barriers, compromised, and discussed the best ways to fill the time with a presentation we would be proud of.

The presentation

We were all very happy with how our presentation turned out. We began from within the audience, reading our statement on mental health; we chose to start like this as it showed that children and young people are part of society as well, and that every decision that is made impacts us too.

To ensure our recommendations were heard, we played a game called ‘Telephone’ where the participants had to whisper our recommendations down their line and see if they remained the same at the end. We chose this game as it would demonstrate the fact that sometimes our voices get distorted, diluted

and drowned out in ‘adult conversations’. It was good to witness the adults listening to our ideas and getting so competitive. The adults continued to work in their groups to discuss the recommendations and come up with ways to ‘solve’ the issues, which gave a good insight into how they use our views in their day-to-day jobs.

Last year’s discussion topic was on ‘Relationships and Sexuality Education,’ and we wanted to hold the Ombudspersons to account by asking them how they took on board the recommendations. After a slightly hesitant start, we were surprised by the number of countries that came forward to share their progress. It was really encouraging to hear, as it made me realise our ideas were taken seriously and used to make real changes across Europe.

We ended by encouraging the countries to continue to cooperate internationally like they had during the games earlier in the day, to improve mental healthcare experiences for the whole continent. We got every person in the room to connect by linking hands, which resulted in a long chain of people stretching from the stage all the way to the back of the room; young people, Ombudspersons, staff, journalists and the top children’s human rights advocates in the world holding hands, smiling and singing ‘Inclusive World’ (the song from the European Network of Young Advisors in Barcelona). It was a really powerful moment that I’ll never forget, as it brought everyone together in such a simple way that delivered a beautiful message of cooperation, a shared goal, and family.

The people

Throughout the conference I got the incredible experience of meeting some of the most influential advocates of children’s human rights. We spoke to Geneviève Avenard, the chair of ENOC, about the importance of involving young people in decisions and providing an outlet for us to have our voices heard. I was also introduced to Regina Jensdottir, the Council of Europe’s representative on the Rights of the Child, who gave me advice about university and possible internships. It was inspiring to hear that there are so many opportunities for young people to work for human rights organisations across the globe.

On Wednesday night’s dinner cruise (which was



Clara Gray and other young advisors prepare their contributions at the ENOC conference, 2018

surreal in itself!) I had the immense privilege of interviewing Marta Santos Pais, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children! These interviews will hopefully be used to influence the Scottish Government to improve the human rights of children in Scotland, and I am honoured to be a part of such an important cause. Meeting Marta was a highlight for me as I aspire to work for the UN in the future, and it was inspiring to hear her speak so passionately.

While it was a privilege to be able to work alongside so many esteemed adults in what was, essentially, my dream job, the people who inspired me most were the other young people. We overcame language and cultural barriers, encouraged and motivated each other and became close within a matter of hours. Thanks to the wonders of social media, it is much easier for me to keep in contact with my new friends from across Europe, which is why I am very excited about next year’s ENOC topic: Digital Rights!

Get involved

It is incredibly important for young people to have opportunities to share our views. We make up almost a quarter of the world’s population, and the fact that the majority of our voices aren’t heard because we can’t vote is unacceptable. It must become commonplace for organisations, places of influence and governments to involve young people in their work and in their decision-making processes. All decisions that are taken by adults will affect us too, whether that is now or in the future. I am so glad that platforms such as ENOC value the opinions and experiences of young people so highly. More organisations should follow suit.

It was the most overwhelming week in the best way. We achieved so much, and on the train home it hit me what an incredible opportunity I’d been given – and I proceeded to look like an absolute numpty as I cried happy tears all the way home from Dundee! So, I encourage you to get involved. For adults: provide a platform for young people’s voices to be heard, listen and act. And for children: shout. Shout as loudly and as passionately as you can. Remember, you don’t need qualifications or experience to be a **#humanrightsdefender**.

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> Find out more about the European Network of Young Advisors and the recommendations made by the young people at cypcs.org.uk/education/enya