

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Communication on the follow-up to the White Paper on a New Impetus for European Youth. Proposed common objectives for voluntary activities among young people in response to the Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 regarding the framework of European cooperation in the youth field Communication on the follow-up to the White Paper on a New Impetus for European Youth. Proposed common objectives for a greater understanding and knowledge of youth in response to the Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 regarding the framework of European cooperation in the youth field**

(2005/C 43/11)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

**Having regard to** the Communication from the Commission to the Council – Follow-up to the White Paper on a New Impetus for European Youth. Proposed common objectives for a greater understanding and knowledge of youth, in response to the Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 regarding the framework of European cooperation in the field of youth (COM(2004) 336 final);

**Having regard to** the Communication from the Commission to the Council – Follow-up to the White Paper on a New Impetus for European Youth. Proposed common objectives for voluntary activities among young people in response to the Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 regarding the framework of European cooperation in the field of youth (COM (2004) 337 final);

**Having regard to** the decision of the European Commission of 30 April 2004 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

**Having regard to** the decision of its President of 5 April 2004 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an Opinion on this subject;

**Having regard to** its opinion on the working document of the European Commission entitled *Towards a European voluntary service for young people* (CdR 191/96 fin) <sup>(1)</sup>;

**Having regard to** its opinion on the *Community action programme on European voluntary service for young people* (CdR 86/97 fin) <sup>(2)</sup>;

**Having regard to** the resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 27 June 2002 regarding the framework of European cooperation in the youth field <sup>(3)</sup>;

**Having regard to** its opinion on the European Commission White Paper on *A new impetus for European youth* (CdR 389/2001 fin) <sup>(4)</sup>;

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council on the *Follow-up to the White Paper on a New Impetus for European Youth. Proposed common objectives for the participation and information of young people, in response to the Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 regarding the framework of European cooperation in the youth field* (COM(2003) 184 final);

**Having regard to** the Council resolution of 25 November 2003 on common objectives for participation by and information for young people <sup>(5)</sup>;

**Having regard to** the Commission report to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the *Follow-up to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 10 July 2001 on mobility within the Community of students, persons undergoing training, volunteers and teachers and trainers* (COM(2004) 21 final);

<sup>(1)</sup> OJ C 42 of 10.2.1997, p.1

<sup>(2)</sup> OJ C 244 of 11.8.1997, p.47

<sup>(3)</sup> OJ C 168 of 13.7.2002.

<sup>(4)</sup> OJ C 287 of 22.11.2002, p.6

<sup>(5)</sup> OJ C 295 of 5.12.2003

**Having regard to** its opinion on the Commission's Communication to the Council on the *Follow-up to the White Paper on a New Impetus for European Youth. Proposed common objectives for the participation and information of young people, in response to the Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 regarding the framework of European cooperation in the youth field* (CdR 309/2003 fin);

**Having regard to** its Draft Opinion (CdR 192/2004 rev. 1 adopted on 9 July 2004 by its Commission for Culture and Education, (Rapporteur: **Mr Roberto Pella**, President of Biella Provincial Council (IT/EPP);

Whereas

- 1) local and regional authorities have always welcomed the attention given to youth policies, in the firm belief that the EU, the Member States and regional and local authorities need to persuade young citizens of the importance of active citizenship at national level. It is especially important to give young people the opportunity to contribute significantly to the creation of a democratic Europe based on solidarity, but also a Europe that is strong and competitive from the economic and cultural point of view;
- 2) in the light of the recent enlargement of the European Union, local and regional authorities view the Laeken Declaration, appended to the Conclusions of the European Council of 14 and 15 December 2001, as essential and highly topical, since it describes one of the main challenges facing the European Union as 'how to bring citizens, and primarily the young, closer to the European design and the European institutions'. However, the challenge should have been couched in terms of bringing the European project and European institutions closer to the citizen, and to young people in particular, in order to strengthen relations between the younger generation and existing political structures;
- 3) local and regional authorities consider it vital to achieve implementation of the strategic objectives laid down at the Lisbon and Barcelona European Councils, intended to make Europe 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world', and are convinced that youth mobility within Europe is a prerequisite for achieving this objective. A European youth policy should, however, avoid an over-instrumental approach to the younger generation. Youth policy should be underpinned by an appreciation of young people as European citizens of equal worth, with the opportunity and power to forge their own and Europe's future. This will, in the broadest sense, have repercussions for European competitiveness and economic development;

**adopted the following opinion at its 56<sup>th</sup> plenary session on 29-30 September 2004 (meeting of 30<sup>th</sup> September).**

## 1. The Committee of the Regions' views

### THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1.1 **agrees** with the Commission in emphasising the need to apply the open method of cooperation to youth problems and action for youth, as called for by the Council, in view of the rapidly changing situation of younger generations in Europe;

1.2 **welcomes** the method used by the Commission, marked by wide-ranging consultation of the relevant actors;

1.3 **considers** that it must be regularly consulted and kept briefed on matters concerning the four priority themes put forward in the Commission's White Paper on A New Impetus for European Youth, especially given that local and regional authorities, on account of their official responsibilities, have always been involved in launching initiatives to encourage active participation by young people in the communities where they live;

1.4 **agrees** with the Commission's observation that there is a worrying loss of interest among young people in politics, but notes that in contrast they are often involved in other spheres of social activity such as voluntary work, and that these represent a form of active citizenship. It therefore **believes** that politicians should take the first step and look again at how they present themselves to young people and adopt an approach that enables them to enhance their democratic credibility with the young. This applies – not least – to the Committee of the Regions, which could take a more proactive approach to recruiting young members, both male and female, whose youth and political commitment at local and regional level could help to improve the Committee's work;

1.5 **is convinced**, on the basis of the present document, and as argued in previous Committee of the Regions opinions on the subject, that 'youth policy in Europe should be visible at all administrative and political levels and in all countries, and be communicated through the channels and in the language that young people in Europe use' (CdR 309/2003 fin). In this connection, the Committee welcomes the creation of a European youth Internet portal at [http://www.europa.eu.int/youth/index\\_en.html](http://www.europa.eu.int/youth/index_en.html).

## 2. Specific recommendations of the Committee of the Regions regarding a greater understanding and knowledge of youth

### THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

2.1 **considers** that, in order to bring politics closer to young people, the most appropriate approach must firstly be identified and that to achieve this, as the Commission accurately points out in explaining the overall goal of its communication to the Council, 'for timely, efficient and sustainable policy making, it is essential to develop a coherent, relevant and qualitative knowledge area in the youth field in Europe and anticipate future needs, through exchange, dialogue and networks';

2.2 **agrees** with the subsidiary objectives established by the Commission under the overall objective, and **welcomes** the Commission's openness to other priority sectors relevant to youth, alongside those initially indicated by the Member States in their replies to the questionnaire submitted to them. This is an essential feature of a suitable method for studying a sector experiencing such rapid change as the youth sector;

2.3 **emphasises** that local and regional authorities can play a crucial part in locating existing knowledge in youth-related sectors, and **calls upon** the Council to bear this in mind concerning the lines of action identified at national level; the need to 'undertake further studies, collect statistical data and gather practical knowledge of NGOs, youth organisations and young people themselves on the identified themes in order to fill gaps and constantly update knowledge on such identified themes' is indicated, but no mention is made of local and regional authorities. If such knowledge is to be complete and up-to-date, it must also be sought at local level, albeit with national coordination, in order to achieve the overall goal of a coherent knowledge area;

2.4 **considers** that the most efficient means of meeting the need for such coordination at national level would be data collection projects directly involving local and regional authorities, since they can more readily get in touch with young people in their areas, and that to do so, they should be able to draw on appropriate European financial resources;

2.5 **urges** the Commission to take account of the crucial role of schools when drawing up documents relating to the four priority themes of the white paper on youth, since they can provide an ideal channel for young people to fill in questionnaires on the various areas of research. Local and regional authorities' social welfare bodies can reach out to those young

people no longer attending school on account of social disadvantage;

2.6 **believes** that local and regional authorities could usefully seek the active cooperation of the many youth advisory bodies or youth councils established in their areas. These consultative bodies have already proved themselves as an excellent means of building up solid and, in particular, constantly updated knowledge on young people at local level while at the same time fostering active citizenship;

2.7 **considers** that local youth participation and lobby groups, such as youth councils, should also be given decision-making powers in certain areas, together with adequate resources. This would mean that young people could themselves decide on and implement projects that interest and concern them. If youth councils had real decision-making powers, this would project a positive image of democracy to young people and foster youth participation;

2.8 **calls upon** the Commission to involve the local and regional authorities of the new Member States in a direct way and to facilitate the dissemination of best practice among them, for instance by twinning exercises and cultural exchanges between youth councils across Europe;

2.9 **highlights** the importance of seeking a coherent, relevant and qualitative knowledge area in the youth sector in Europe which reflects ethnic and linguistic minorities;

2.10 **welcomes** the Commission's willingness to set up a European Union Network of Youth Knowledge including representatives of all actors in the field in order to discuss methods and future themes as well as to exchange good practice;

2.11 **calls** for the earliest possible preparation of the practical steps for setting up the Network of Youth Knowledge, to which the Commission refers in its discussion of Objective 4 of the communication regarding greater understanding and knowledge of young people, and **asks** that specific provision be made for the participation of Committee of the Regions representatives;

2.12 **notes** that in their replies to the Commission's questionnaire, the Member States do not ask for new structures to facilitate and promote exchange, dialogue and networks to ensure visibility of knowledge in the youth field and anticipate future needs, but wish to build on existing networks and relationships, using and managing them more efficiently. Local authority youth contact points should therefore be strengthened and could serve as an ideal channel for information coming from young people themselves;

2.13 **agrees** with the Commission's emphasis on the importance of mobility in promoting education and training of researchers and experts – especially the young – working in the youth field, as well as of any other actors developing knowledge in the youth field, and **calls upon** the Commission to draw up strategies at European level which can increase awareness among the bodies to which researchers and experts belong, and especially schools and universities, since – as the Commission itself points out in its Report on the follow-up to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 10 July 2001 on mobility within the Community of students, persons undergoing training, volunteers and teachers and trainers (COM(2001) 21 final) – in spite of the strategies already implemented, 'the numbers of persons in education and training systems participating in mobility are still very limited';

2.14 **considers** that school teachers should be given a good grounding in the skills and knowledge needed to bring up issues relating to participation and community involvement both in the classroom and the extra-curricular activities of the student body. In addition, youth participation and lobby groups based in schools should be allowed a say in decisions on the planning and implementation of school premises and, for example, extra-curricular facilities.

### 3. Specific recommendations of the Committee of the Regions regarding voluntary activities among young people

#### THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

3.1 **welcomes** the Commission's detailed analysis of an issue which has always been of concern to local and regional authorities on account of the huge importance, primarily at local level, of voluntary associations, representing the living, active heart of every human community;

3.2 **welcomes** the information that many young people are engaged in voluntary activities and **points out** that this contradicts the assumption that young people are not interested in active citizenship. It **considers** it more accurate to describe young people as 'depoliticised' rather than uninterested, since voluntary activities – as the Commission itself states – are a form of social involvement, an educational experience and a factor of employability and integration;

3.3 **suggests** that young people have probably drifted away from politics because it seems to them to be remote from real problems. It **recalls** its recent opinion on the Communication to the Council on the participation and information of young people, which noted that local and regional authorities play a decisive part in European youth policy, being the institutions in closest contact with the younger generations;

3.4 **welcomes** the Commission's recognition of the role of local and regional authorities in implementing the steps to

improve existing voluntary activities for young people, and **underlines** the special relationship that these authorities can establish with young people in their areas;

3.5 **agrees** with the Commission's acknowledgement that voluntary activities for young people vary significantly from country to country, and that the situation is far from identical in the different Member States;

3.6 **hopes** that all the Member States will be alert to the need to facilitate voluntary engagement on the part of young people by removing existing obstacles. More specifically, it is essential that each Member State give legal recognition to volunteer status since treating it as equivalent to employment, as is the case in several Member States, often entails considerable disadvantages;

3.7 **appreciates** the fact that in the communication, the Commission again highlights the need to encourage mobility for volunteers, as it had extensively argued in the Report on the follow-up to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 10 July 2001 on mobility within the Community of students, persons undergoing training, volunteers and teachers and trainers <sup>(6)</sup>;

3.8 **emphasises** that in order to develop voluntary activities among young people, enhance the transparency of existing possibilities, enlarge their scope and improve their quality, local and regional authorities have a key role to play. They could, for example, set up 'volunteer service centres' to support local volunteer associations and 'volunteer contact points' to guide young people towards the form of volunteer activity best matching their expectations;

3.9 **calls upon** the Council to prepare a specific line of action to foster the establishment, at national, regional and local level, of a full-scale 'voluntary organisation register' in those countries still without one. Where such registers exist, they have proved to be a highly valuable tool, providing a constantly updated picture of voluntary associations within a given territory. The constant updating of these registers means that interested young people can always obtain specific information regarding their activities in this field;

3.10 **remarks**, however, that where there is no prior family awareness, young people all too often only come into contact with the voluntary movement by chance, and that in consequence lines of action should be promoted to bring relevant information into schools from the earliest age. This could be done, for example, by means of meetings, tailored to the age groups in question, with individuals actively engaged in voluntary associations. This would be a shining example of modern civic education geared to the exercise of active citizenship by young people. It therefore **urges** the Commission to recognise the role of schools and the need to raise awareness among teachers;

<sup>(6)</sup> COM(2004) 21 final.

3.11 **shares** the Commission's emphasis, expressed in Objective 3 (promote voluntary activities with a view to reinforcing young people's solidarity and engagement as citizens), on creating better conditions for less advantaged young people to participate in voluntary activities, as voluntary work can facilitate young people's integration into society;

3.12 **believes** legal and social protection for voluntary work to be crucial, given that the main feature of voluntary work is that it is unpaid (with the occasional exception of reimbursement of expenses), entails the investment of considerable amounts of time and energy and often involves mobility, and that the substitution of paid work by voluntary work should be prevented. The primary responsibility for providing such protection lies at national, regional and local level but, on the basis of Articles 137 and 140 of the EC Treaty, the Commission could put forward a European charter of voluntary work as an instrument for cooperation and coordination;

3.13 **is pleased** that the Commission has highlighted the need to ensure recognition of voluntary activities of young people 'with a view to acknowledging their personal skills and their engagement for society'. It **hopes** that best practice will rapidly be disseminated at all levels so that such recognition is forthcoming from public authorities, private business, the social partners, civil society and young people themselves, as correctly argued by the Commission in the lines of action for Objective 4;

3.14 **agrees** with the Commission's concern to ensure better recognition, at European level, of the voluntary experience of young people in the framework of ongoing processes and by existing means in other policy fields, especially measures such as Europass, already implemented in the education sector. The same forms of incentive for student mobility could also be applied to facilitate voluntary experience for young people in Member States other than those of their origin;

3.15 **calls upon** the Commission to draw up proposals immediately to extend European Voluntary Service (EVS) to a broader range of activities, and at the same time to promote the preparation by the Member States of similar projects at national level in order to supplement and enrich Community initiatives;

3.16 **welcomes** the proposal made in Article III-223(5) of the draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe to set up 'a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps (...). European law shall determine the rules and operation of the Corps'; and **considers** that a voluntary corps could provide a framework for a joint contribution by young Europeans to the European Union's humanitarian actions;

3.17 **underlines**, as it has also done in recent opinions on promoting voluntary activity, the need for equal involvement of young men and women and of groups of young people who experience particular difficulty in exercising active citizenship on account of social or ethnic factors or physical or mental disability.

#### 4. General recommendations of the Committee of the Regions

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

4.1 **takes a positive view** of the two communications from the Commission discussed in the present opinion;

4.2 **specifically urges** the Commission to keep it regularly informed on the progress of the action programmes implemented by the Member States, disseminating as much information as possible as quickly as possible on good practice. Given the speed of change in the youth sphere, it must be remembered that appropriate practices are also changing rapidly;

4.3 **urges** the Member States to consult local and regional authorities, as has been done in other areas included in the four priorities in the white paper, when drawing up the national reports on the progress of implementation of the priorities regarding 'greater understanding and knowledge of youth' and 'voluntary activities among young people' scheduled for the end of 2005.

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

4.4 **sees** the need for greater flexibility in practical politics and **calls upon** the Commission to consider the feasibility of initiatives to alert politicians to the need for them to forge closer contact with young people, in all their complex diversity, in order to know them better and mobilise the essential contribution they can make to actively help bring about a strong, competitive and solidarity-based citizens' Europe; and **believes** that the Committee of the Regions could help here by launching a twinning scheme for young elected representatives from the authorities represented on it;

4.5 **repeats** the Committee's strong conviction, already voiced in its recent opinion on the participation and information of young people, that Article III-182 of the draft treaty for a constitution for Europe should supplement the Treaties' current provisions on youth policy in order to emphasise that the Union aims to encourage young people's participation in democratic life in Europe.

Brussels, 30 September 2004.

The President  
of the Committee of the Regions  
Peter STRAUB