



Children's Strategy – Pre-Consultation

**A Response from YOUNG VOICES Participative Project to the
Children and Young Person's Unit, Office of the First Minister
and Deputy First Minister**

January 2003

Introduction

Include Youth promotes best practice with young people at risk of social exclusion. Amongst the young people at risk with whom, and on whose behalf Include Youth works are young people from socially disadvantaged areas, those with a learning disability, those with special needs, those who have been truanting, suspended or expelled from school, those from a care background, those who have had a negative parenting experience, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs or alcohol, undertaking unsafe sexual behaviour or other harmful activities, or of being harmed themselves. We achieve this through the development and promotion of resources, the provision of training, information and support of practitioners and organisations. We also undertake activities which attempt to influence public policy and public awareness locally and nationally.

Include Youth promotes the development of positive choices and opportunities for vulnerable and challenging young people whether in the community, residential care or custody. Include Youth promotes the use of community alternatives to care and custody for children and young people.

Include Youth also runs the Give and Take Scheme and Peer Mediation.

Young Voices

The Young Voices Project was established by Include Youth in August 2002, and aims to facilitate the participation of socially excluded and at risk young people in policy debate and formulation.

The participants in the Young Voices Project generally have lived through a range of the above experiences, but in particular the group draws its members from young people who are either involved or at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system. The group to date has drawn its members from a range of agencies and projects working with young people – including the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, Newry Adolescent Project, Westside Adolescent Partnership, Towers Adolescent Project, Armagh and Dungannon

Adolescent Partnership, Whitefield East Belfast (all Whitefield projects), Lisnevin Juvenile Justice Centre, NIACRO, and the Give and Take Scheme.

The group is still in the early stages of development – however, already the young people in YOUNG VOICES have made a number of significant achievements. As you will be aware, the group is represented on the Children and Young People’s Advisory Forum. In addition the group very effectively participated in a research project currently being conducted by Queens University Belfast, School of Law and commissioned by the Northern Ireland Office into the subject of young people and policing.

The Children’s Strategy

On 13 January the group met in Newry to discuss the Children’s Strategy. The young people participating were drawn from both the traditional religious/political communities, and ranged from 15 – 18 years of age. There was one expectant mother, and two thirds of the group were young males. All participants were white. The following is an account of the comments the young people made. We did not base the discussion around the fact that these young people have been involved in offending behaviour, but rather allowed the participants to explore and express their views on a wide range of issues, which they themselves identified.

We have drawn out a number of issues, and then have included lists of the young people’s direct responses taken on the evening of the discussion.

The Northern Ireland Context

We first examined what is **good and bad about living in NI** as a child or young person. What emerged very strongly from all in the group was the impact that the conflict has had on children and young people living in Northern Ireland, and that this for the most part was a ‘bad’ thing. (although the issue of ‘recreational rioting’ came up for one young person as something which was fun and exciting). The group agreed that identity in NI is very divisive, and for the young people in our group, this proved to be no exception. Despite this, however, the group were able to have quite a lengthy discussion and exchange of views on different areas of life associated with the ‘troubles’. A range of views were put forward on

topics including the British Army, the police, rioting, parades, media coverage, paramilitaries, interface areas, joy riding and the emotional impact the conflict has on children and young people.

Frustration was expressed at the current state of the NI political process – one young woman wanted to ‘bang the politician’s heads together’ in an effort to get them to talk and work out a solution together.

Poverty & Class Divisions

All of the young people in the group agreed that poverty has a very negative effect on children and young people. In particular the group identified a number of areas where they believe poverty and class impact upon their lives and the lives of other young people, including education and policing.

In terms of education, the participants all were or had been disenfranchised from school. They had felt labelled and judged as ‘bad’ from an early age. They all had experienced significant family trauma, some at an early age, and others over a protracted period. But key to the discussion – *they ALL wanted to stay at school*. They felt that they had not been heard or understood by their teachers, and that enough effort had not been made to take the child’s individual circumstances into account. Indeed they felt that the teachers could not relate to their life experience – teachers were perceived to be from middle class backgrounds. Perhaps the strategy could contain provisions seeking to ensure that teacher-training programmes encompass significant areas of work addressing working with challenging and vulnerable children in a mainstream environment. They also felt that the 11+ mostly benefited children from more affluent families.

Young people from both sides considered that the police did not treat everyone equally. And while the young people from both side of the traditional religious/political divide perceived that ‘the other side’ was treated in a fairer way than they were by the PSNI, they agreed, however, that a class issue is at play in terms of operational policing and young people. All believed that young people get away with more if they are from more affluent middle-class backgrounds.

Young People Seen And Heard

There was also very strong agreement that children and young people have the right to be heard and to have their views taken into account. All of the young people taking part in the discussion did not feel that government or others in positions of authority (schools, police, lawyers, magistrates/judges, parents) listened to them, much less take their views into consideration. It is important to remember that the young people taking part in the YOUNG VOICES group suffer multiple forms of disadvantage and exclusion – they are generally speaking outside the mainstream, and consequently do not tend to have their opinions heard through such vehicles as school councils, organised events to which school representatives are invited, youth forums, youth clubs etc that other young people might have access to.

A number of the young people expressed disillusionment, and a cynicism that ‘nothing they say would make any difference’. However, we challenged their view, or perhaps more accurately, their experience, that this always had to be the case. And they did agree to participate in the process of developing a strategy for all children living in Northern Ireland.

We therefore believe that the challenge for us as adults working in both the voluntary and statutory sector is to help ensure that this experience is a positive one for these young people – that they are listened to, and heard, and their views are seriously taken on board at all stages in the process of developing a Children’s Strategy. It is our strong assertion that this will in no small way help develop a strategy which is a world leader, and which places the best interests of all children at its core. In addition, we are of the view that young people from a range of backgrounds and experiences must also be involved at a real level in ensuring that the agreed strategy is effectively implemented at the earliest possible opportunity.

Importance Of Parents

All of those taking part in the discussion spoke about the important role parents should play in their children’s life – at all stages of development – from birth right through to they become adults. Indeed one young woman felt that her mother was just as important to her now that she is 15. And all of the young people believed that parents / carers needed special help in dealing with teenagers – acknowledging that at times their own behaviour can be

difficult for their parents / carers to manage in an appropriate way. A number of people in the group believed that it is difficult to be a parent, and that help, information and support should be available to parents who need it, in an accessible format. Many of the needs associated with children which the group identified, and which we have listed later in this paper, are aspirational, as a number of the children who took part in our session have had a negative parenting experience. And on this point one young man spoke of the difficulties children face if a parent is mentally or physically ill, or has a drink or drugs problem, or if there is violence in the family. In these cases, the group felt that children and the wider family needed help and support to overcome their problems.

Direct Responses

What's Good In NI For Children And Young People?

- Rioting – With opposite religions
- Football/sports –Gaelic –‘pride in wearing my jersey’ and ‘pride in who I am’ – hope to play for my county some day
- Nightclubs
- British Army – skilled, would like to join
- Paramilitaries – respect for the Ra, hunger strikers. They deal with joy riders and problems like that.
- ‘Who you are and who you know’ – paramilitaries - it can be good *and* bad depending if you are from the right family and / or know the right people – they can protect you, but if not you could lose your kneecaps...
- My dog
- Family
- NHS –good in Belfast – not as good outside Belfast
- Less crime than in UK
- Good looking women!
- Respect for police
- Different cultures – integrated schools are good –good chance to meet lots of different types of young people.

- Our accent – different accents within a relatively short distance

What's Bad In NI For Children And Young People?

- Fear
- Not safe to live in NI – what areas you can go and can't go into – you can feel safe in some areas
- Holy Cross – children having nightmares, phobias. All agreed that it was terrible what was happening to those primary school children.
- British Army – shouldn't be here – harassment, Bloody Sunday
- Conflict- anger, hurt, death-riots, plastic bullets, police, Drumcree, Ormeau Road
- Bias media coverage - 12 July televised and not St. Patrick's Day or Easter Sunday – media are the cause of a lot of the trouble – they whip it up
- Identity very divisive in NI
- No pride – only trouble, fighting shooting, paramilitaries, riots
- Joy riding – it is sometimes all that is in the community- it is normal – its an adrenalin buzz – its how you get on with your mates and meet people
- Police do not treat everyone equally
- Working-class problems with policing – interface areas, riots, plastic bullets
- Worse for younger children- growing up with drugs, fighting, lack of leisure. drugs
- Get away with more if you're from a well-off posh background (eg rugby boys from a grammar school drinking, or boys on street corner in an estate drinking – which is more likely to get into trouble? – the working class boys, cos they'll be labelled as trouble makers). Also this happens often because the young people have nowhere to go – no appropriate recreational space.
- Paramilitaries – danger, forced to join, drugs, debt, children and young girls – sexual exploitation, intimidation, put out
- Reputation – labelling – NI has a bad image around the world
- We become numb to our problems and issues
- Lack of opportunities – more negative than positive
- Poverty – causes a lot of other problems – crime, bad health, drinking, worry and stress
- Rural transport/ poor public transport – e.g. can't get a direct bus from Dungannon to Newry – have to go via Belfast. Very expensive.

- Community/estates knowing things about you / your family
- Lack of trust in people – stab you in the back
- School – no-one listens, understands, school exclusions, leave school early – suspensions, lack of interest, bad appeal system – when you're out you're out, shared taxi to guidance centre totally inappropriate as it took a catholic boy traumatised by paramilitaries into 2 loyalist estates to pick up other pupils on the way to the centre, labelling of pupils, teachers need to be trained on handling behaviour – they don't seem to know anything about our experience – is their training too middle class?
- This 'who you are and who you know' approach is throughout NI life generally – e.g. education – only get to good schools if someone in your family has been before –but what if you're from an area where aren't good schools, or if you are the oldest child in your family, or you are labelled because of area you live, parents or brothers/sisters who may have been in trouble, or if you've had problems in primary school.
- Health- rural poor, waiting times, ambulance times, mental health issues not enough awareness of health, drugs, poor adolescent mental health provision
- Young people not listened to enough, good, middle class young people get more – they need to be heard – but so do we!!!
- Accommodation for young people, especially 15/16/ 17 year olds, homelessness, young people leaving care, can be very unsafe
- Lack of adequate facilities and services for young people who need to leave home – e.g. because of abuse, disabled, ill parents, parents can't cope, parents with alcohol/drugs problems
- Class distinction
- Drink – young people and adults drink too much – paranoia and anger in drink and drugs
- Paedophilia – children need to be more safe
- Not as cosmopolitan as other countries or cities – eg Dublin
- Nightclubs

What Do Children Need...

The young people later in the session looked at what children need – and how that changes as a child gets older. Below we have listed the needs identified for a baby, a primary-school aged child, and a teenager. However, before turning to examine the age-specific needs, it may be useful to identify the common things that all children of all ages require.

Needs Common To All Children

Love, physical, emotional and financial security, parents, family, a home, safety, stability, affection, stimulation, health, to belong, to be nurtured, food.

➤ **Babies**

Love, Parents (resources for parents and baby and parenting advice and help accessible), Food, Milk, Home, Clothes, Security, Stimulation, Tender touch, Attention, Shelter, Safety, To be Warm, Hugs and kisses, Toys, Cots, Prams, Nappies, Equipment, Need to belong (age 1-2), Healthy, medical assistance, injection, doctor, nurse, other medical care when needed, Nurture, and Stability
Can't do things for themselves – totally dependant,

➤ **Primary School Age**

To be accepted by friends, Friends, Home, Security, Safety, Stability, School books, Play, Clothes, Love, Medicine, Support – parents, family, Protection, Emotions (still dependent, need acceptance, understanding, can be traumatic and fearful time for a young child growing up in NI eg Holy Cross), Food, Toys, Bed, Warmth and a Safe place to play and live
As they get older they can do things for themselves

➤ **Teenagers**

Being significant, Parents – still very important, Money, Food, Warmth, A Bed, A home, Security, Shelter, To be understood, Sex, Friends, Experimentation, Somewhere to go, To belong (family, community, friend), Attention from e.g. youth workers; significant adult in life, Lose security, shelter on route to independence, Freedom/ independence, Learning, Experience, Hobbies (sport music), Need to be allowed to make mistakes, Listened to (recognised as young adults), Parents need help with teenagers, Need to be able to ask for help – and to get it, Direction, Love and affection
'Sometimes all I want is to be told by my mum that I'm not allowed to do x, y, or z'

Conclusion

It is clear that the young people to whom we spoke welcome governments plans to introduce a strategy which seeks to address the needs of all children living in Northern Ireland. These young people have had difficult life experiences to date, which have necessitated the involvement of a number of different statutory agencies in their lives, and the lives of their families. They have clear understanding and views about what is currently failing to meet the best interests of children – and crucially they also have positive suggestions about how to make things better for both themselves and for other younger children.

They are pleased to be involved in the process, and have begun to invest in the work of developing the strategy through Include Youth's Young Voices Project.

We look forward to facilitating the YOUNG VOICES group to engage directly with the Children and Young People's Unit to offer their views on the next phase of consultation in relation to the strategy.