



**RESPONSE TO: DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT: RURAL ANTI-POVERTY AND
SOCIAL INCLUSION FRAMEWORK**

“Give young people more to do in communities. Make them better. ”

March 2009

Introduction

Include Youth promotes best practice with young people in need or at risk of social exclusion. 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 aimed at influencing public policy and policy awareness – both locally and nationally.

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 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.

Include Youth runs the Young Voices project, a participation project for young people who have been involved or are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, with the aim of supporting these young people to become involved in decision-making processes which impact on their lives. Young Voices runs group in custody (JJCNI – Woodlands and Hydebank Wood YOC) and in the community, particularly North Belfast. Include Youth manages the LACE (Looked After Children in Education) Project which is a multi-agency partnership with the aim of promoting better educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

The Give and Take Scheme aims to improve the employability and increase the self esteem of young people in need or at risk from across Northern Ireland. The Scheme works with approximately 150 young people from a care or criminal justice background. The Scheme aims to support young people to overcome particular barriers that prevent them from moving into mainstream training or employment and towards independent living. 75% of people on the Scheme are care experienced and we have strong partnership with all Trusts, YJA, PBNI and Careers service. The scheme provides essential skills training (ICT, English and maths) to all of the young people. The scheme attracts young people from across Northern Ireland, including a number of rural areas.

In addition, Include Youth runs the YOYO Practitioners Forum, which draws together professionals from a range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations working directly with young people in need or at risk, and meets on a quarterly basis.

General Comments

Include Youth welcomes the publication of the Rural Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Framework and is pleased to have the opportunity to make this response. A number of the young people we work with live in rural areas and have experience of multiple disadvantages and as such we feel it is important that their experiences are fed into the development of a rural anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy.

We welcome the fact that DARD met with a range of government departments to discuss the issue of rural poverty and exclusion and acknowledge the need for a joined up approach to addressing rural poverty and social exclusion. We would also wish to highlight the various strategies and policies which are currently being implemented which will undoubtedly impact on aspects of rural poverty and social exclusion particularly as they relate to families. These include the Play Strategy, Family Matters and the Children and Young People's Strategy. We would welcome more information on how DARD will link in with these various strategies in the outworking of the rural anti poverty and social inclusion framework document.

While we acknowledge the efforts made in the preparation of drawing up this document to work across the various government departments, we would recommend that there is much to be gained from further co-operation on key strategic issues to ensure that policies working to achieve similar aims are working in unison. For example, there is still a need for DARD and DE to form strategic linkages. One example of this is the development of the Extended Schools programme. There is a need for clear thinking around how this important policy is worked out in rural schools as at present, children cannot attend because of distance and travel.

Specific Comments

A. Fuel Poverty

Child Poverty

We welcome the acknowledgement of the extent of child poverty in Northern Ireland and concur that there are a significant number of children in rural areas currently experiencing poverty. While welcoming the Government's commitment to end child poverty by 2020 and noting that child poverty has reduced, in 2008 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Committee remained "concerned that poverty is a very serious problem affecting all parts of the UK... and that it is a particular concern in Northern Ireland where over 20% of children reportedly live in persistent poverty" (UNCRC, 2008, para 64).

One in three children (122,000) in Northern Ireland live in income poverty, and one in ten (44,000) live in severe poverty (Magadi and Middleton, 2007). Between 2001-2004, short-term poverty (ie poverty for 1-2 years of a 4 year period) affected 27% of children in Northern Ireland compared with 22% in Britain. However, persistent poverty (ie poverty in at least 3-4 years of a 4 year period) affected 21% of children in Northern Ireland compared with 9% in Britain (Monteith et al, 2008). **We would recommend that the framework document makes specific reference to the extent of persistent poverty in NI.**

The study of rural child poverty is extremely complex and should take into account a range of factors including concentration, severity and geography in terms of area and type. When we look at the number of children vulnerable to poverty we find that children in rural areas are particularly at risk of falling into poverty (McLaughlin and Monteith, 2006). Rural poverty also has an impact on the profile of the rural community, as young people increasingly tend to move out of deprived rural areas to urban areas to seek work, resulting in an ageing rural population.

Fuel Poverty and Health of Children and Young People

The document refers to the ever growing problem of fuel poverty and we would like to emphasize the impact living in fuel poverty has, particularly on children. Severely poor children in NI are more likely than non-poor children to be living in accommodation that has mould, damp walls and floors, as well as rot in window frames and floors (McLaughlin and Monteith, 2004). This undoubtedly has an effect on the health and well being of children,

leading to increased risk of childhood diseases such as asthma. **We welcome the stated desired outcome under the Fuel Poverty programme of ‘more effective targeting of vulnerable groups in rural areas’ and would recommend that particular priority be given to families and those living in persistent and extreme poverty.**

We also agree that families in rural areas experience a range of problems which further compound their experience of deprivation and exclusion. There is limited access to services such as health services such as GPs and dentists and hospitals. All of these factors add to the health inequalities experienced by poor children and their families.

B. Rural Transport and Access

We welcome the high priority which transport is given within the framework document but would stress the need to further emphasize the impact this issue has on the lives of rural children and young people. Lack of access to transport has a major impact on the quality of life for young people in rural areas, both in terms of access to education, training and employment opportunities as well as access to play, leisure and opportunities for social development. We believe the document could expand more on the particular needs of young people with regard to transport issues. Young people in rural areas face extreme difficulty in accessing opportunities for social development, something which is essential for the general well being and positive mental health of young people. Include Youth’s Give and Take Scheme endeavours to provide each young person with the same high quality service regardless of where that young person comes from. Poor access to transport for some young people in remote rural locations has proved a challenge for staff, highlighting again the importance of accessible transport for accessing training and employment opportunities.

We would recommend that improved access to transport for young people should be included as one of the desired outcomes under the rural transport and access programme.

C. Rural Childcare

We concur with the desired outcomes listed under the Rural Childcare programme. However, we would recommend that this aspect of the framework document should also include some reference to the need for family support programmes in areas of deprivation.

In January 2007 the Minister for Children and Young People launched proposals for “Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland - a family and parenting strategy - stating that the aim of the strategy “is to ensure that families, particularly those who are vulnerable or isolated, have access to a range of supports when they need them most.” (OFMDFM, 2007). A £4 million funding package was intended to be spent on: increased provision of parenting education, positive parenting and anger management classes; enhanced provision of family mediation services; a new regional helpline and information service for parents; development of Child Contact Centres. It also included funding for: families affected by parental substance misuse; children experiencing domestic violence; a youth and parent support programme targeted at children at risk of coming into conflict with the law; strengthening front-line services for vulnerable families through development of family group conferencing and the introduction of therapeutic family support workers. We are interested to know how the proposed rural anti-poverty and social inclusion framework will relate to the strategic development and programme of activities contained within Families Matters.

The provision of existing parenting services has been extremely patchy in NI. In its 2008 concluding observations, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child was “concerned that many families lack appropriate assistance in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities, and notably those families in a crisis situation due to poverty” (UNCRC, 2008). **We would be particularly concerned about the need for adequate and accessible family support for those families living in rural areas and would recommend that the framework document includes an outcome in relation to this issue.**

D. Rural Anti-Poverty / Social Inclusion Challenge Programme

We concur with the need to provide more training and employment opportunities for young people in rural areas.

We support the work of the Bridging the Gap project which encourages organisations across NI to recognise the potential of rural young people as a resource. The YFCU, through this package, has ensured that skills and training is made available to young people in rural communities who do not currently have access to this support.

We agree that measures must be taken to address the effect that poverty and social exclusion have on mental health and are particularly concerned about the prevalence of depression and

suicide amongst our young people. A key health issue is under age drinking which some research has highlighted as being more of a problem in rural areas than urban because of lack of things to do. Community representatives remain very concerned about this issue in NI. The general health and well being of young people in rural areas is a cause for concern.

We would recommend that the framework document makes specific reference to the need to address the mental health needs of young people in rural areas.

The desired outcome under the Rural Anti-Poverty/ Social Inclusion Challenge programme appears to be extremely vague. Given the range of complex issues raised by the variety of rural stakeholders, we would welcome considerably more detail on examples of practical proposals which would contribute to the alleviation of poverty and social exclusion.

E. Community Development

Children and Young People as Partners

We agree that supporting a community development approach is vital to addressing issues of poverty, social exclusion and inequality and that there is a need for a specialised approach to rural community development. We also agree that this must include community involvement. We would stress the importance of seeing children and young people as important contributors to this process. Given the feelings of isolation and exclusion felt by many rural young people it is imperative that they are given an active role in the development of their community and are seen as partners in the process. Research with young people has identified that young people in rural areas want to be active in this way and are looking for opportunities to engage with adults in decision making processes.

Youth Action's (2004) research on young people and rural isolation identified the following key findings:

- Older young people want to get involved in developing their own projects around issues that are important to them and address their needs. However, many activities are organised by adults for children and young people in rural communities and young people do participate in them.
- Friendships are very important to young people. Young people want somewhere to meet with their friends outside of their home.

- Young people living in isolated rural areas feel powerless. They want to feel that they have a role to play in the life of their local community and have much to contribute.
- Young people value the closeness of rural communities. However, this also makes them feel inhibited because everyone knows what they are involved in.
- Young people from isolated rural communities spend a large amount of their time travelling to access services.
- Young people from rural communities have few opportunities to engage with young people from another cultural tradition.
- Young people feel that they have some support from the local community. However, they also feel that some individuals don't trust them and put obstacles in their way.

The evaluation of the Creating Links Rural Youth Community Development Programme identified that young people have tended to be marginal to the development of rural policy (Youth Action, 2006). The evaluation of the programme highlighted the fact that before the project commenced young people were typically seen as a problem and often blamed for or associated with anti social behaviour. After working with the young people the attitudes of the adults were challenged. Where previously they had feared young people, afterwards they saw them as partners in a process. This resulted in better working relationships between adults and young people in the community. However, the report concludes that:

'there is a significant lack of readily available examples of connections being made between young people and rural policy, or between the youth sector and rural development. The Creating Links project is a rare example of this being attempted... a new vision is needed for standards of support and quality of life for young people in rural communities at all ages based on the effective participation of young people in their communities and in decision making. '

We would recommend that the framework document takes this opportunity to address the lack of involvement of rural young people both in rural policy and youth policy.

Access to Play and Leisure for Young People

An important aspect of community development is the provision of play and leisure facilities for children and young people. We believe that any policy aimed at addressing the poverty

and social exclusion of children and young people must include objectives around accessing safe play and leisure facilities. Include Youth have undertaken a number of consultations with young people on the subject of play and leisure and through these the young people have identified that there is a clear link between the lack of these facilities and the risk of offending. We believe these issues are particularly pertinent to rural areas given the dearth of provision there.

In a recent consultation undertaken by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People it was clear that one of the biggest issues for children and young people across NI was “things to do” –there is insufficient play or leisure facilities for our younger citizens. Clearly there is a danger that young people who become bored and have nowhere to go become involved in so called ‘anti-social’ behaviour. The lack of facilities in rural areas and difficulties in accessing other youth provision means that rural areas are prone to the possible effects of ‘anti-social’ behaviour.

A significant intervention which Include Youth believes will address some issues of anti-social behaviour and the issue of the appropriate use of public spaces is play facilities for older children. Young people have suggested that one aspect of support needed by children and families is access to play and leisure. For 5-10 year olds this included: “Play groups” and “Places to play sport”. For 10-15 year olds it included:

“Places to play football – somewhere good to play.”

“Good stuff that’s gonna be exciting. Not just like wee youth clubs. Go karting. There’s nothing as exciting as crime, only drugs. But you need something that’s going to keep you occupied.”

“Leisure centres where you can go do stuff – free, that you don’t have to pay into.”

In Northern Ireland, one in five children (21%) do not have access to adequate, nearby fixed play facilities, although this figure rises to one in three (37%) amongst those experiencing severe child poverty (McLaughlin and Monteith, 2004). Lack of safe social space, poorly resourced and inadequate provision of affordable sports or leisure facilities are consistently raised as a priority in our work with children and young people. Young people in conflict with the law describe the consequences of limited provision:

*“There’s f***-all to do. That’s why kids are out on the streets.”*

“Put things into communities that keep young people off the street, especially in the summer. There’s nothing to do. You just drink ‘cos you’re bored.”

“No ball games... nothing to do but stand and drink, sniff glue.”

“Most people get into crime at the start ‘cos they’re bored and have nothing to do.”

“Have more for young people to do, instead of just punishing you after you’ve done something.”

They are clear about what play and recreational facilities are needed in their communities:

“More facilities and support for young people in the area – ones that suit ant and all ages, not just for young kids.”

“More affordable facilities – leisure centres, sports clubs, bars – most are too expensive for young people.”

“More money in communities – funding for youth and community projects.”

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted that the steady reduction in playgrounds in recent years has had the effect of pushing children and young people into gathering in public open spaces – a behaviour which may be seen as anti-social (UNCRC: 2008).

Young Voices participants also made the connection between the right to play and prevention of risk taking behaviours among older children and young people.

1. What happens if children / young people are not given opportunities to play?

- *They turn out like me – they’ll do crime*
- *They turn out to be your typical nightmare*
- *You don’t learn to socialise – you don’t learn to be with other kids, then later you get behavioural problems. I think that’s the reason for the majority of people being violent.*

2. What would/does work to help stop young people doing crime/ASB?

- *More to do in communities – most people get into crime at the start cos they’re bored and have nothing to do.*
- *More youth activities late at night when young people are out hanging about with nothing to do*
- *Give people activities / programmes to do, before they do crime*
- *Make other areas safe to go into*
- *Poor kids need help to have fun, to go places, where their parents don’t have money to take them*

- *The government should pay for the majority of the stuff, then let you pay for some of it yourself*

This relationship between lack of appropriate play opportunities for children and young people, and problems emerging in relation to anti-social behaviour has been well documented. Research commissioned by NICCY in 2004 found that ‘many children and young people who participated ...suggested that a lack of things for young people to do in their free time led to them either becoming involved in anti-social behaviour, or being viewed in this, even if it was not the case’(Kilkelly et al, 2004: 203) .

This lack of things to do and inability to earn a wage can lead to discontent and despondency amongst young people. The causes of crime in rural areas are similar to those in urban areas – poverty, family problems, educational difficulties, unmet mental health needs, drug and alcohol abuse. However, there are many aspects of life in rural areas that can lead to pressures facing young people – a lack of nearby facilities, poor transport, limited work and leisure opportunities. Young people can experience real problems accessing help.

Although children and young people have as much right as adults to make use of public space, their high visibility on the streets, mainly ‘hanging about’, has resulted in young people being blamed for being a nuisance and seen as a problem to be solved, not as a group of children who need somewhere to meet and ‘play’.

Research on rural crime in England suggests that because young people in rural communities are more highly visible and as a result are more likely to be stigmatised and marginalised. The report states that young people are invisible when it comes to developing rural policy and service provision and claims that rural policy and practice has failed to meet the needs of young people, particularly those caught up in the criminal justice system. The findings suggest that key issues within rural communities include lack of services, isolation and intergenerational tensions (Meek, 2006). It goes to say that young people returning to their local communities are at risk of re-offending because of this failure to meet unmet needs.

We do not think that the framework document currently does enough to address the lack of play and leisure provision for children and young people living in rural areas. We would recommend that a desired outcome be included which outlines a commitment to increase the level of quality, accessible and affordable play, leisure and youth provision for children and young people.

. Conclusion

We believe now more than ever there needs to be a concerted effort to address the level and extent of poverty in NI. More and more families and individuals are slipping into poverty on a daily basis and the numbers of those experiencing persistent poverty are also growing. Those living in rural areas face particular circumstances leading to extreme isolation and exclusion. We work with young people who know what it is like to feel excluded and marginalised. These young people have often had the poorest start in life and the fewest rights and their behaviour also poses our society with the most challenges. We would contend that DARD in their attempt to address rural poverty and social exclusion must include the targeting of the most marginalised of young people. Not to do so will result in problems for the future as children and young people will feel they are being abandoned by the communities in which they have grown up. We hope that any future strategy will make children and young people more visible, realising that if our young people are to be the future custodians of rural life, they require an investment in their lives now.

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