

include **YOUTH**

Response to Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Strategic Plan 2013 - 2016 July 2013

“Sure if a child in one house is reading a book, and is a wee nerd or something. Then a child in another house is getting beaten by the parents. Then when the one who gets beaten by the parents goes outside, they might be angry and beat the other one, for being a wee nerd. So the child at risk at home might be a risk to others on the street.”

“We get a criminal record, they [the politicians] sit there and laugh. We’re only trying to survive, doing stuff every day to make things better and they sit there getting paid loads, getting people to make them tea and we get nothing only criminal records or get put places where we don’t feel safe or are at risk.”

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Include Youth

Include Youth is an independent non-governmental organisation that actively promotes the rights, best interests of and best practice with disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people.

The young people we work with and for include those from socially disadvantaged areas, those who have had poor educational experiences, those from a care background, 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.

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 135 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 young people on the Scheme are care experienced while over a third has a background in offending.

Include Youth also delivers an Employability Service on behalf of two of the Health Trusts for young people aged 16 + who have had experience of the care system. This service is designed to offer tangible and concrete opportunities to assist young people leaving care to prepare for, and engage in work.

Include Youth has also been a Specialist Support Provider to DEL's Training for Success Programme since 2007. This service helps improve retention and encourage progression for young people who present with multiple barriers to their learning.

The organisation also leads on collaborative initiatives (Youth Works and START programme) across several sites in Northern Ireland, working with community-based organisations to improve education, employment and training outcomes for the most disadvantaged young people.

Include Youth's Young Voices project is a way of delivering participative democracy to marginalised young people in Northern Ireland. Its main aim is to support marginalised young people at risk or with experience of the criminal justice system, to become involved in decision making processes which impact on their lives, particularly in social welfare, education and criminal justice matters. The project works with a range of groups of young people in the community and in Woodlands

Juvenile Justice Centre and has worked in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre in the past.

Include Youth's policy advocacy work is informed by relevant international human rights and children's rights standards, is evidence based, including that provided by young people and practitioners and is based on high quality, critical analysis.

Reflecting the profile of the young people we work with, Include Youth's two main policy priority areas are employability and youth justice.

General Comments

Include Youth welcomes the opportunity to comment on this three year strategy aimed at safeguarding children.

We welcome the comments made by the Chair of SBNI in the foreword to the document that "children and young people's wishes, feelings and experiences should be at the centre of what we do".

Include Youth is deeply committed to ensuring that the voices of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people are heard in all policy developments that impact on their lives. Nonetheless important that society better protects and keeps children safe. This is a particularly pertinent debate for the young people Include Youth comes into contact with, given the extremely complex and multi layered issues which many of them have to deal with. Sadly all too many of these young people are familiar with feelings and circumstances associated with being unprotected, unsafe and vulnerable to exploitation.

For that reason our response is informed by the views and voices of children and young people. As well as drawing on quotes used in a range of other recent policy consultations we conducted discussions with young people participating in our Give and Take Scheme in Ballymena and Belfast, as well as young people in the Juvenile Justice Centre.

We approached the discussion from a slightly different angle than that intended and represented in the consultation document. In order to make the debate relevant to the young people we work with we had to encourage conversations which explored experiences and views on both safety and risk. Many of these young people have never experienced the luxury of feeling safe and so find it hard to talk about a concept of which they have no real life experience. In talking to them instead about their perception of risk and in what avenues of their life they have experienced risk we are able to better understand how we can keep them safe.

International research consistently demonstrates that children and young people involved in offending demonstrate a range of characteristics, such as having left school early, having special needs, been excluded from school, experience of residential care, and most significantly in relation to this consultation, have experienced neglect or abuse within their families.

We believe that the young people we work with have a particular contribution to make to the debate on how best to keep children safe. These young people are more likely than most young people to have a specific understanding of what it feels like to be unsafe and unprotected. They may also raise different challenges to the debate, as they talk about their relationship with the agencies and individuals most commonly associated and charged with keeping children safe. Their experiences offer a completely contradictory view and rather demonstrate how such agencies have failed to keep them safe or in extreme cases have actually put them in a position of harm.

“You should feel safe when you see the police, but you automatically feel anxious.”

The safeguarding debate must also take cognisance of the impact of the legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Children and young people continue to experience the social, economic, civil and political consequences of a society in transition. Despite the formal acceptance of the PSNI by communities paramilitary type “punishment attacks”, or more accurately assaults on children, continue.

Less obvious, but no less connected to the conflict and its legacy, are issues concerning mental health, inter-generational trauma, domestic violence, poverty and education. It is recognised that factors associated with the conflict and with the emergence from conflict have impacted severely on child and adolescent mental health in Northern Ireland.¹ The Chief Medical Officer estimated that over 20% of young people in Northern Ireland are suffering “significant mental health problems” by their 18th birthday.² Yet there has been a gross failure to recognise and respond to the long term consequences of trans-generational trauma. McAlister et al (2009) note that “the inter-relationship of unaddressed conflict-related trauma, interpersonal

¹ See Commissioner for Children and Young People (2009) *Children’s Rights: Rhetoric or Reality A Review of Children’s Rights in Northern Ireland 2007/08*: NICCY and McAlister et al (2010) *Childhood in Transition Experiencing Marginalisation and Conflict in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Queen’s University Belfast, Save the Children and Princes Trust for detailed explorations of the social and economic impact of the conflict on children and young people within disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

² Chief Medical Officer (1999) *Health of the Public in Northern Ireland: report of the Chief Medical Officer, 1999: Taking care of the next generation* Belfast DHSSPS.

violence within families, continuing paramilitary intimidation, forced exiling, economic marginalisation and social exclusion constitute ‘special circumstances’ for children, young people and their families in Northern Ireland”.³

All of these circumstances and underlying contexts must be borne in mind in developing an overarching strategy for keeping children and young people in Northern Ireland safe.

Specific Comments

1. Introduction

We welcome the establishment of the SBNI and its commitment to protect the rights and well-being of children and young people. Include Youth is pleased to have been appointed to SBNI as a representative of the voluntary and community sectors. We agree that the term safeguarding should be used in its widest sense to encompass both prevention and protection activity and that it should include the promotion and protection of children’s rights.

Priority should be given to promoting awareness of children’s rights to those most vulnerable children and young people and to those professionals working with them, and we look forward to seeing the detailed plans of the “Communication and Engagement” and “Education and Training” committees in this regard.

2. Strategic Context

We welcome the commitment to ensure that the rights outlined in the UNCRC are central to the work of the SBNI. We would encourage the SBNI to refer to the various reports from the UNCRC Committee.

Training on safeguarding and promoting the welfare and promotion and protection of children’s rights is a critical element for each agency.

3. SBNI Function

We welcome the stated function ‘to promote communication between the SBNI and children and young people’ and ‘to take into account the views of children and young people on the effectiveness of the arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.’

4. SBNI Purpose

³ Op cited note 1 p 25

Include Youth endorses this purpose but recognises that that it presents a challenging task as it brings a broad range of bodies from a number of sectors into SBN's remit.

5. SBNI Vision

We support the vision of the SBNI as stated.

6. SBNI Values

We applaud the commitment to place children and young people's wishes, feelings and experiences at the centre, but would also extend this to include 'children's rights'.

SBNI Strategic Priorities

Children who display sexually harmful behaviours

Whilst we accept that the priorities set in this first strategic plan for SBNI must to be both realistic and achievable Include Youth believes that there is a significant omission in the priorities identified. There is a broad consensus supported by extensive evidence (most recently in NI when in 2011 NSPCC published Sexual and Physical Violence against Children in NI, A statistical overview 2008 – 2010) that between 25% and 33% of all sexual abuse is perpetrated by children and young people. Children who display sexually harmful behaviours (SHB) present significant and incredibly complex issues which straddle many systems and process. It is an issue that merits strategic policy framework that drives systems and interventions with the young people, their families and their victims.

The Risky Children or Children at Risk Group was convened by Include Youth in 1999 and was concerned with policy and practice as it related to children and young people who display sexually harmful behaviours. The group comprised a number of agencies, including representatives from the then Health and Social Services Boards, PBNI, DHSS&PS, Youth Justice, police as well as the projects that work directly with young people. The group worked on a number of issues, which included the sharing of information, data collection, the Manual of Guidance when Working with Sexual Offenders (MASRAM), Co-operating to Safeguard Children, the Review of Sexual Offences legislation, Regional Child Protection Policy and Procedures and Public Protection Arrangements. The group hosted two conferences in 1999 and 2002; the second Conference highlighted a number of issues which included the lack of baseline information with regards to the numbers and pathways of young people reported because of their SHB. RCCR published DHSSPS funded research in 2006, An Investigation in the Application of Child Protection and Related Procedures with Children and Young People who Display Sexually Harmful Behaviours (available on request from Include Youth). The research examined referral files from PSNI, Social

Services and Education Welfare Service in order to identify the pathways that young people took. Secondly nearly 80 professional staff from across the three sectors were interviewed concerning the assessment procedures and training needs. The research made a number of observations and recommendations outlined below.

In 2009 the work of the group was taken on and developed by a sub-group of the then Regional Child Protection Committee who Include Youth understands prepared a report or findings of work to be passed on to the Safeguarding Board in 2012.

Addressing issues concerning children and young people who display sexually harmful and violent behaviour is complex. Many children are dealt with through the children in need or child protection arrangements often through services that are commissioned. The Regional Child Protection Policy and Procedures (Ch. 9) provide clear operational processes and arrangements and their precedence has been accepted by the Public Protection System in NI which states that “in the vast majority of cases those risks will be effectively managed under the present social services child protection and social services arrangements” (PPANI, Guidance to Agencies on Public Protection Arrangements, 2008 and Manual of Practice, 2012). Child protection cannot be the only system that intervenes with these young people and it is often appropriate that young people are dealt with through the criminal justice system through a variety of provisions including Youth Conferencing but again this as in many other complex issues is often undertaken in partnership with child protection and children in need.

However it is apparent that there is broad acceptance of the prominent role of child protection/safeguarding systems in the lives of the vast majority of young people who display sexually harmful behaviour in a way that ensure that they no longer present such risks, achieve better outcomes and most importantly that their victims are supported and protected.

It is also apparent from the work that the RCCR Group undertook that a number of unresolved issues remain many of which were identified in our research which include the following:

Regional policy and procedures

- The introduction of an over-arching and comprehensive NI-wide policy and procedures when working with children and young people who display sexually harmful behaviour,
- The impending Safeguarding arrangements must give clear (mandatory) regional protocols with regards to the decision making processes, including a specific category assigned to these children and young people.

Some of the components may include:

1. Risk assessment and decision making:

- Assessment tools currently being considered such as Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) must take into account the complexities and challenges of working with children and young people who sexually harm,
- There should be a common risk assessment tool across all sectors or at the very least different agencies' tools should be compatible.

2. Knowledge base of staff:

- There must be a shared understanding of sexually harmful behaviours across all sectors,
- Introduction of uniform provision of specialist services providing information, advice and consultancy for professionals across NI,
- The introduction of a comprehensive training and information programme addressing areas such as adolescent development, recognising sexually harmful behaviours and risk assessment. The training should cover a range of professionals including trainees (social workers, teachers and police officers) all professionals who work with children and young people, residential care staff and foster carers. Training should be undertaken on a cross-sector basis wherever possible.

3. Service development:

- Ensuring that all areas across NI have specialist/therapeutic projects working with these young people,
- Development of provision or services to work with children under the age of 10 and those with learning difficulties.

4. Awareness raising:

- Education of young people with regards to what is sexually harmful or inappropriate behaviour,
- Public health approach to inform families and communities,
- Awareness of community projects.

Whilst these recommendations were made over 6 years ago and there have been developments in this area there remain a number of issues still to be addressed. Include Youth is not aware of the detail of the work undertaken by the RCPC as despite several requests we have not had sight of it but we understand they identified some issues for development. It is therefore concerning that this issue has not been included in the as an area to be addressed within the SBNI Strategic Plan.

Include Youth urges the SBNI to develop over-arching and comprehensive policy and procedures for working with children and young people who display sexually harmful behaviours as part of its work during the next three years.

Other Issues

We welcome Strategic Priority 4.1 to protect and safeguard children who go missing from home or care and are at risk of sexual exploitation.

We welcome Strategic Priority 4.2 to help children at risk of becoming criminalised through on-line activity, bullying through cyber activity and sexual abuse through 'sexting' and on-line exploitation. The young people we spoke to displayed varying degrees of awareness of the risk of this form of abuse. There is clearly a need to educate and make children and young people aware of the potential risks and of what steps they can take to better protect themselves.

Consultation Process

We are of the opinion that it is essential that the Department makes every effort to ensure that children and young people have an opportunity to feed their views in to the draft strategy. We therefore welcome the production of the Young People's version of the document and the accompanying session plans, and will be interested to hear how widely children and young people engaged in the process and what their views were on the plan.

While the version produced will be accessible to a lot of young people we found the current version unworkable with the young people we work with. Many of the young people who participate on our Give and Take scheme and our Young Voices project would have literacy problems and found the young people's version overwhelming and hard to understand. We developed a tailored set of questions around the issues of safety, harm and risk to ensure that young people felt able to participate.

We would like to emphasize the sensitivity of discussing some of these issues with young people. It is not appropriate to explore children and young people's views on child abuse and sexual exploitation of children, without first ensuring that you are not putting any individuals at further harm or risk. We were very aware that some of the young people we spoke to may themselves have been victims of abuse or exploitation as children, and thus would not have wanted to, nor would it have been appropriate to openly talk about their views on this in a group context. If conversation on this issue was not forthcoming we did not prompt or probe further. We had to

ensure that young people discussed the issues in a general way, rather than disclosing personal information or internalising the subject matter.

The Views of Young People

1. What risks do children and young people face?

We explored with the young people their views on what they think the risks are for children and young people of various ages. Concerns for younger and primary aged school children centred around practical safety issues within and outside the home, such as falling down stairs, not being held properly by adults or dangers of road traffic.

- ***“Traffic and playing outside.”***
- ***“Equipment within the house, safety gates, door clips, bleach.”***

They also cited the risk that parents may not adequately care for their children, thus putting them at risk.

- ***“Not looking after them when they are crying and stuff.”***
- ***“Parents abusing them.”***
- ***“Parents not looking after them.”***
- ***“Neglect.”***
- ***“Families are too busy. Parents are at work and are too busy to watch their children”.***

They were also very aware of the risks at school and the prevalence that bullying at school poses for many children and young people.

- ***“Bullying – it’s bound to be top of the list.”***
- ***“I used to be bullied and picked on.”***
- ***“Nothing is done – they don’t keep you safe.”***
- ***“My advice for anyone going into secondary school is stick up for yourself.”***
- ***“If people hear you have problems at school, some people would go to towards you about it and bully you.”***
- ***“There is always someone in class getting ganged up on.”***

One young man referred to the risks posed by the internet in relation to bullying.

- “**Bullying over the internet – that’s getting worse. Facebook and all.**”

Several young people also mentioned the risks children and young people face from sectarian attacks and racist attacks.

When we asked them about the risks facing teenagers they talked more about an increase use of drugs and alcohol and of the risks inherent in this practice. One young person talked about the dangers of:

- “**Being influenced by older people.**”
- “**Teenage girls are more likely to get taken advantage of when they’re drunk.**”
- “**I was 14 when I started drinking, stole it off my Ma or Da. If you’re drunk on the street you could get knocked down by a car, there are lots of risks.**”
- “**Getting beat up.**”

They also talked about the impact your peer group has on whether you are more at risk or not.

- “**Getting in with the wrong group of friends.**”
- “**Who you are with when you are drunk is the main thing. If you’re with good company, the right people, then you’re fine.**”

While the issue of child abuse was raised briefly by some of the young people, this topic did not feature heavily in discussions. Again we would reiterate the fact that this is not a topic easily broached in a group setting.

- “**Being touched up.”**

2. Where do children feel unsafe?

We asked the young people how safe they felt children and young people were in a range of different contexts.

It is evident that keeping children and young people safe on our streets will present the SBNI with a significant challenge. The sources of threat and risk are multi-dimensional and not always in the control of the SBNI. It is interesting to note that the young people did not initially talk about these threats to their safety in the more general introductory discussion on areas of risk, but when the question was more specific to actually ask about their feelings of safety on the street, they were very

forthcoming about the high level of risk they feel. Their insights give us a worryingly descriptive picture of the reality of many young people's lives and the backdrop of danger which is all too constant. More challenging is the clear lack of sources of safety that these young people can draw on.

Being on the street, particularly at night poses a substantial threat to many young people and is where a large majority of them feel most at risk, whether that be because of:

- the widespread use of drugs and alcohol
- fear of getting involved in a fight
- being intimidated by paramilitaries
- being harassed by the police.

Drugs:

- “**Drug dealers, they don't come out on the street during the day.**”
- “**Sniffing glue – a lot of drugs.**”
- “**You just have to be streetwise.**”
- “**Drink and drugs.**”

Violence:

- “**Walking down the street, I would feel insecure.**”
- “**Rape, being attacked.**”
- “**Depends on the area you live in. If you go to a rough school or live in a rough area, then it's not safe.**”
- “**You could get a digging.**”
- “**Get into a fight.**”
- “**There will always be headers going up and down the road steaming.**”
- “**Robberies, stabblings.**”
- “**I wouldn't worry about the f***ing cars on a Friday or Saturday night, it's f***ing people. People who cause a f***ing row with you.**”

Paramilitary threat:

- “**If any paramilitaries are after you.**”
- “**Paramilitaries know you – there's certain areas just not safe for me, certain estates close to where I live.**”
- “**The way they are doing it now (paramilitary attacks), they are much worse.**”
- “**We'd be safe if it wasn't for the paramilitaries.**”
- “**It's the paramilitaries who make you feel unsafe – they know everything, know everyone ... so if they want you they will always get you.**”

Relationship with police:

- “**The police work for some people, make them safer – not people like us though.”**

Home is not regarded to be a safe place for many young people:

- “**You don’t know what is going on inside the home, the child might be getting a beating.”**
- “**Homes aren’t really a safe place for young people.”**
- “**Abuse and all - neglect.”**
- “**When I was a child I had a bike and I cycled everywhere all the time just to stay away from home. I never stayed in the house, ever.”**
- “**My home environment wasn’t safe and right, so I didn’t want to live there.”**
- “**My Mum was an alcoholic – one day I found beer in the house and I drank it. I liked it and I liked being drunk, so I just kept doing it.”**

Instability in family circumstances can leave children and young people feeling very unsafe.

Not all of the young people regarded home as being unsafe, with several young people saying that they did feel safe there because that it was where their Mum and Dad was.

- “**You can’t always be 100% safe, but it is home, you’re safer there.”**

The majority of the young people we spoke to had experience of living in a care home. Opinions varied on how safe young people felt when they were living there, dependent on the home, the staff and the other young people who were resident there at the time.

- “**It depends on the staff and social worker if you’re safe in a home. You have to talk to them about your life.”**
- “**Young people in the children’s home feel it’s bad, some don’t like it.”**
- “**There’s loads of risks there.”**

Several of the young people talked about violence in the home being a common occurrence.

- “**I’ve been in care four years and I’ve been moved 12 times. I didn’t feel safe in every home. In ***** you’re fighting every day. I’ve broken my nose umpteen times. I was fighting with young people.”**

- “**We were always fighting with each other and with staff. You can't get away from each other because you are living together the whole time.”**
- “**There are risks from the other young people, they can put you at serious risk if you go out with them – put bad influence on you.”**

Some of the young people expressed the particular risks that girls in children's homes faced and claimed that not enough is done to help girls feel safe.

- “**Staff don't put enough in place to make girls who might need help feel safe, the only thing they might do is move her.”**

We asked young people why some children and young people might go missing or run away from their care home.

- “**You're scared and you just can.”**
- “**Because you are depressed.”**
- “**You want to run away and be with your Mum and Dad.”**
- “**Because you don't like it.”**
- “**You might be getting bullied.”**

It is unacceptable that some children and young people do not feel safe while in residential care and a situation which we would urge the SBNI to address.

Getting into fights, peer pressure, access to drugs and experiencing bullying at school were some of the main reasons given for school not always being a safe place. Walking to and from school is also a time when young people feel particularly vulnerable.

- “**They're full of bullies and people who think they are better than you.”**
- “**Bullied if you're a different race or have a disability.”**
- “**There could be sectarian stuff at school.”**
- “**Sometimes people get battered at school – seven out of ten I'd say, things can happen in school.”**
- “**You're guaranteed that someone is getting bullied.”**
- “**Gangs. There's gangs in schools – people from different estates going to the one school, they get drunk at weekends, get into fights, then they scrap it out again when they see each other at school.”**

The young people were very aware of the dangers they face when out and about in the community or in the town centre, as well as the particular threats of living near an interface. Young people talked about the risk of physical violence and verbal abuse.

- “***There's always violence at it [the interface], always rioting.***”
- “***Getting hit by stones or bottles.***”
- “***Getting attacked.***”
- “***If you're a Protestant walking through a Catholic estate or a Catholic walking through a Protestant estate.***”
- “***I wouldn't go through the estate next to mine – no chance.***”
- “***There might be sectarian attacks on homes so children can't go out and play.***”
- “***It's not safe at all if you live on an interface.***”
- “***I don't like living in East Belfast because there are loads of riots.***”
- “***I got kicked out [by paramilitaries] because I had friends from the other side.***”

Young people talked about dangers in parks:

- “***Broken bottles and glasses lying around.***”
- “***Wee child could pick up needle, some of those places have loads of needles, glass and drugs and all.***”
- “***And there is glass all over the ground.***”
- “***Botanic Gardens is a very bad place in the summer – with drink and all. People end up getting hurt – they take the knives out.***”
- “***You can't go to the local park.***”

3. Which children are particularly at risk?

There was a general feeling that young people with mental health problems could be more at risk and more vulnerable to being exploited and self-harm or suicide.

- “***There are more mental health issues when you are a teenager.***”
- “***My wee brother has ADHD and I'd worry that he'll grow up and take drugs. I worry about his safety.***”

Young people in care were also seen as being particularly at risk. This level of risk was seen to be due to number of different factors – because of the lack of control a young person has over what area they are placed in and how this could impact on their personal safety or more generally because of the changing personal circumstances they are having to deal with, leaving them more vulnerable and at risk of harm.

- “*Young people in care drink more and take more drugs. You’re away from home, depressed, you’re with people you’ve never seen in your life before.*”
- “*Getting abused”*
- “*Yes, I’m more vulnerable. I’ve been in care – risk from wee lads and drugs. I have depression and get stressed.”*

Children and young people who live in disadvantaged areas were regarded to be more at risk than those living in more affluent areas.

- “*Depends where you are from. If you come from one of those private estates like you will be ok.”*
- “*It depends on the area you live in.”*

Girls were cited as sometimes being more at risk of abuse than boys.

- “*Some girls are more easy going, they take a few drinks and it’s easy to manipulate them.”*
- “*Girls are more vulnerable than boys.”*

Children and young people with disabilities were seen to be more vulnerable generally and less able to speak out about feeling unsafe.

- “*Ones with disabilities are at risk of sexual assault and bullying – they can’t stand up for themselves and don’t want to say anything.”*
- “*You’d be worried about children who are vulnerable or people who are slow – they wouldn’t know how to protect themselves.”*

Young people who misuse drugs and alcohol:

- “*If you are on drugs you will do anything to get them.”*
- “*I’m more at risk than my sister because I used to take drugs.”*
- “*Drugs nearly killed me, you get paranoid on them, you can be violent.”*
- “*You’re more vulnerable when you are on drugs because you don’t know what you are doing.”*

As part of the consultation on Hidden Harm in 2009, Include Youth conducted focus groups with young people to assess what impact having a parent with an addiction can have on children and young people. We are conscious that this work was completed a number of years ago but as Strategic Priority 3 of the SBNI Strategic Plan is to ensure effective safeguarding arrangements for children and young people who are living in circumstances where there is parental alcohol and drug problems,

we thought it was worth recounting the views of the young people. Young people whose parents have addiction problems:

- ***"Mental health is damaged straight away. You can tell kids heads are lit by the time they're about five, if their family's drinking and smoking dope all the time."***
- ***"It could kill the wee'un – if the parents exploded when they're drinking or on drugs."***
- ***"My Ma and Da were scrapping a lot, so we were in and out of Women's Aid hostels. They would drink and they'd fight. They'd drink and Da would lose his temper, smash a phone or something, then Ma and us would go to a hostel for a bit – and that was before I went into care."***
- ***"There's more trouble with the cops if the Ma and Da's drinking or taking drugs – 'cos they see it happening and start to do it themselves. Start smoking fags at 9 or 10, drinking at '12 or 13, then drugs at 14 or 15."***
- ***"The effects of the drugs makes them neglect their kids."***

4. How do young people react when they feel unsafe?

The young people offered a range of reactions which they felt were most likely for young people who felt unsafe or at risk. These included:

Run away:

- ***"If you feel unsafe at home, you'd go on the run."***
- ***"If you're having a rough time at home, it's good to go away for a while."***

Taking drink and drugs:

- ***"Go and get blocked, take drugs and forget about it."***

Act up at school:

- ***"If you're having trouble at home you might show it in school through anger, or being depressed or something."***
- ***"Take it out on people at school."***

Show aggression:

Young people recognise that abuse, adversity and feeling unsafe often manifests itself in challenging behaviours in children.

- ***"Sure if a child in one house is reading a book, and is a wee nerd or something. Then a child in another house is getting beaten by the***

parents. Then when the one who gets beaten by the parents goes outside, they might be angry and beat the other one, for being a wee nerd. So the child at risk at home might be a risk to others on the street.”

- “**Get into trouble with the police.**”
- “**Might get their anger out and go and hit someone.**”

Mental health suffers:

- “**Self-harm.**”
- “**Scared.**”
- “**On the edge.**”

Many of the young people saw no real threat from using the internet and believed that they had to take steps themselves to stay safe while using it. They seemed confident in using it and were aware of the risks.

- “**There’s no risk at all.**”
- “**It’s up to you at the end of the day. Like don’t put your phone number on Facebook, that’s just asking for it.**”
- “**I just don’t think about it, but I feel safe on the internet. I know who adds me, and I would accept a friend request from strangers or whoever.**”
- “**It’s definitely not safe.**”
- “**A paedo can make a profile, and they could be a sex offender, they give a different name and then the girls meet them, and then rape and abduction and all that.**”
- “**Cyber bullying – people get bullied over the internet.**”
- “**You shouldn’t add anyone you don’t know.**”
- “**People like to bully people on Facebook.**”

The risks of using mobile phones were similar to those posed by using the internet.

- “**It’s just as bad as the internet.**”
- “**People can give your number out.**”
- “**Cyber-bullying.**”

However, the young people said they felt safer because of having a mobile phone and the benefits outweighed the risks.

- “**I was 9 when I got a mobile. I was texting and ringing my friends and I could let my Mum know when I was on my way home.**”

- “*It’s good to get a mobile phone when you’re a child - your family feel that you are safer.*”
- “*Having a mobile phone makes me feel safer.*”

5. How can we better protect children and young people from harm?

The young people did not underestimate how difficult it is to keep children safe, especially from sexual exploitation, and in some instances, they were almost fatalistic about the fact that regardless of any actions taken, some children will always be at risk.

- “*It’s not something that can be easily talked about.*”
- “*They [politicians] can use all their own experience and bring out all these laws, but it still won’t stop. It’ll keep happening anyway. There is only so much they can do.*”

But they also had numerous suggestions on how things could be improved.

- “***Person they can talk to.***”
- “***Someone they trust.***”
- “***Phone lines.***”
- “***More TV and radio ads.***”
- “***Tell probation, youth justice, Include Youth, Opportunity Youth.***”
- “***Tell neighbours.***”
- “***The police should be more reliable, it takes them too long to come out.***”

One young person referred to the need for those professionals working with young people to strike the right balance.

- “***If you have too many police and social workers and stuff in the care homes, that’ll make things worse. You need to find the right balance between the police and social services or whoever.***”

The need for staff training on the issue was also highlighted:

- “***Depends what the staff are like, if you’re going to be believed or if they’re trained properly, or if you trust them. They have to tell the police, that’s why people don’t talk to them.***”

With regards to keeping children safe at school:

- “**More cameras to catch fights.**”
- “**Teachers there to supervise.**”
- “**Or security guards in school.**”

Young people had some ideas on how to make the streets safer:

- “**More youth clubs in areas, more to do.**”
- “**Keep them off the streets.**”
- “**A drop-in because then we wouldn’t be out on the streets all the time.**”
- “**Or have somewhere quiet to drink – somewhere safe.**”
- “**If you got all the paramilitaries out.**”

More support for parents:

- “**Try and get help for the Ma and Da to help them stop drinking.**”
- “**Get social services to help with school, like even picking them up to take them to school.**”
- “**Help to help your Ma and Da out, to help them from stopping taking drugs – help to be able to talk to your Ma and Da to get them off it.**”

With regards to keeping children safe on the internet:

- “**More supervision.**”
- “**Need checked more often.**”
- “**It needs filtered or blocked, when you say bad things.**”
- “**Young people need to know better how to be safe on the internet.**”

Conclusion

Include Youth supports the priorities that have been set by SBNI in the Draft Strategic Plan and strongly urge that it adds an additional one addressing the lack of a strategic framework for young people who sexually harm.

It is clear from the quotes above that the young people Include Youth works with have much insight to offer in relation to how we get better at protecting our most vulnerable young people. They have highlighted the multiple sources of risk that exist for young people and have widened the discussion out beyond a narrow child protection debate, challenging us to recognise the daily dangers they face at home, on the street, at school and in the wider community. We welcome the SBNI’s recognition of the need to consider in particular the safeguarding arrangements for young people in care. The young people have identified a number of risk factors

which exist for young people in care, and most significantly for young people in residential care. We also welcome Strategic Priority 3 to ensure safeguarding arrangements are in place for children and young people who are living in circumstances where there is domestic violence, parental mental health problems and parental alcohol and drugs problems. The young people's views confirm the importance of targeting this group of children and young people. They have also identified the importance of working with children and young people who have addiction problems, since alcohol and drug use appears to consistently place them in situations of risk. The political context in Northern Ireland presents us with a unique challenge when it comes to safeguarding children and young people and the legacy of the conflict and its impact on children and young people must be recognised. Young people clearly experience significant risk from paramilitary attacks and intimidation and their relationship with the police challenges any notion that they may regard the PSNI as guardians of their safety.

Include Youth is looking forward to continuing to work with and support SBNI in its work.