

Briefing to ENOC on the activities of the Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) – September 2007

This report is a summary of NICCY's key activities since September 2006. During that period Patricia Lewsley took over as the new Commissioner, taking over the reins from Barney McNeany who had been Acting Commissioner following the death of Nigel Williams.

During the year there have been significant changes to the political and legislative environment which affects the lives of children and young people, and how NICCY operates.

Most significant of these has been the return of devolved powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Previously power over children's issues rested largely with Ministers appointed from London. Northern Ireland now has 15 local Ministers. Already the Commissioner has met with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, and will continue a programme of meetings with Ministers and MLAs to influence policy and legislation.

As part of NICCY's work to see the full incorporation of the UNCRC into

Northern Ireland legislation NICCY works with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the NGO sector to secure this as part of a proposed Bill of Rights. **NICCY is one of the four accredited official observers of the Northern Ireland Bill of Rights Forum.**

While we have had significant change in our Government there is also a major change taking place in how Northern Ireland is administered. A 'Review of Public Administration' is changing the way services are delivered.

A review of the NICCY office has recently carried out. It examines the justification for the Office of the Commissioner on policy and other grounds and ensures that the Office is effective in its duties and functions. We would like to thank our colleagues who contributed directly to the review.

For further details of our work, including copies of reports, please see www.niccy.org or speak to Patricia or Barney for further details.



Communication & Participation

Participation with children and Young People

Throughout 2006/07 the Participation team has been working with children and young people and with other organisations, for example the Police, to develop participation. The team met with almost 6,000 children and young people throughout the year. At these meetings the work of NICCY and the UNCRC was outlined; and young people trained in their rights. Some of the resources can be found at:

<http://www.niccy.org/article.aspx?menuid=561>.

In order to promote NICCY's anti bullying guidance (<http://www.niccy.org/priorities.aspx?menuid=319>), staff worked with children and young people, as part of a pilot, in 40 schools.

We have also started a programme of rolling out NICCY's guidance on developing school councils,

completed earlier in the year. This school council initiative – Democra School – saw the guidance (<http://www.niccy.org/article.aspx?menuid=582>) endorsed by School Council UK. The Children's Minister launched the work at a landmark event, during which young people led the planning, presenting and disseminating of information.

In addition, staff continued to support the development of the NICCY Youth Panel, which includes 42 young people from throughout Northern Ireland. Notable during the year was panel members speaking to Government ministers directly.

To help make sure our Youth Panel works well for both its members and the organisation a review of how it operates was undertaken and will shortly be available on www.niccy.org.

Communicating at NICCY

The Communications team has worked to make sure that NICCY's activity is available in schools, in the media and in the hands of those who can help the organisation make a difference.

In a ground breaking piece of work every 11-year-old pupil in Northern Ireland received a key ring emblazoned with contact details for the office. And, our Annual Review – NICCY News – was circulated to **250,000 people**.



Making NICCY's work widely available was a key priority. Accessibility and publications policies have been produced.

Of major note was the ongoing success of our website (www.niccy.org). It attracted almost **150,000 unique visits** across the year, including 21,000+ in one month. More than 2,000 documents are downloaded each month.

While the media is consistently interested in NICCY and its work

(we received 250 media enquiries), the team also proactively encouraged and secured coverage, with the Commissioner completing 50+ media interviews on a range of issues.

During the year the Communications and Participation team won the Chartered Institute of Public Relations '**Gold Pride Award**' as **the Best In-House PR Team** in Northern Ireland.

Research, Policy and Service Review at NICCY

This year saw the Research, Policy and Service Review team undertake projects on:

Safer journeys to school

Research into how children travel safely to school was delivered to Government in June 2006. Many of our recommendations were adopted in September last year. This resulted in greater safety for children and young people travelling to school. You can see our research at <http://www.niccy.org/article.aspx?menuId=504>

colleagues throughout the organisation, **guidance** for schools on what makes a good school bullying policy, using children's expertise. See <http://www.niccy.org/priorities.aspx?menuId=319>

Bullying

One of the issues children and young people raise with NICCY consistently is bullying. After producing research looking at whether and how children and young people are involved in developing, implementing and monitoring school bully policies, the research team produced, with

Recruitment and vetting of staff

During the year we continued our work reviewing the effectiveness of policies and practice on vetting adults who wish to work with children (both as paid employees and volunteers). We have made recommendations about checking people who work in different countries, which are hugely relevant across Europe.



Child centred Care and Child Protection

We also undertook and published the finding of a review into how children and young people are involved in planning their own care. You can read more here:
<http://www.niccy.org/article.aspx?menuid=515>

Influencing Policy

We responded to more than 60 consultations, making sure that Government heard NICCY's position on key policy developments.

Reporting to the CRC

We have also been preparing, with UK Commissioner colleagues, for our shadow report to the UN, in preparation for the UK State party hearing by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2008.

Children with Disabilities

WE commissioned two pieces of research, one on Asperger's Syndrome, which was published in March; and another one into Advocacy arrangements for disabled children with complex

needs. More information on each can be found here:

<http://www.niccy.org/article.aspx?menuid=311>

Spending on Children

At the start of July we also produced a report on how much Government spends on services to children and young people compared to similar spending in England, Scotland and Wales. The report showed that in some areas significantly less is spent, especially in personal social services. See
<http://www.niccy.org/article.aspx?menuid=607>

NICCY established an Ethics Committee, which ensures our work has a sound ethical base.

In 2004 NICCY published ground breaking research into children's rights in Northern Ireland. Over the past four months of work we have focussed on updating this children's rights research. The views of more than 2,000 children, young people, families and professionals gathered as we move towards setting NICCY's priorities for the next three years.



Legal and Complaints

The key focus this year has been NICCY's legal challenge to Government legislation on physical punishment. We are challenging a law introduced to Northern Ireland which allows a defence of "reasonable chastisement" to some forms of physical punishment of children. The Final Hearing takes place from 19-22nd November 2007; we hope to have the Court's decision and Judgement shortly after.

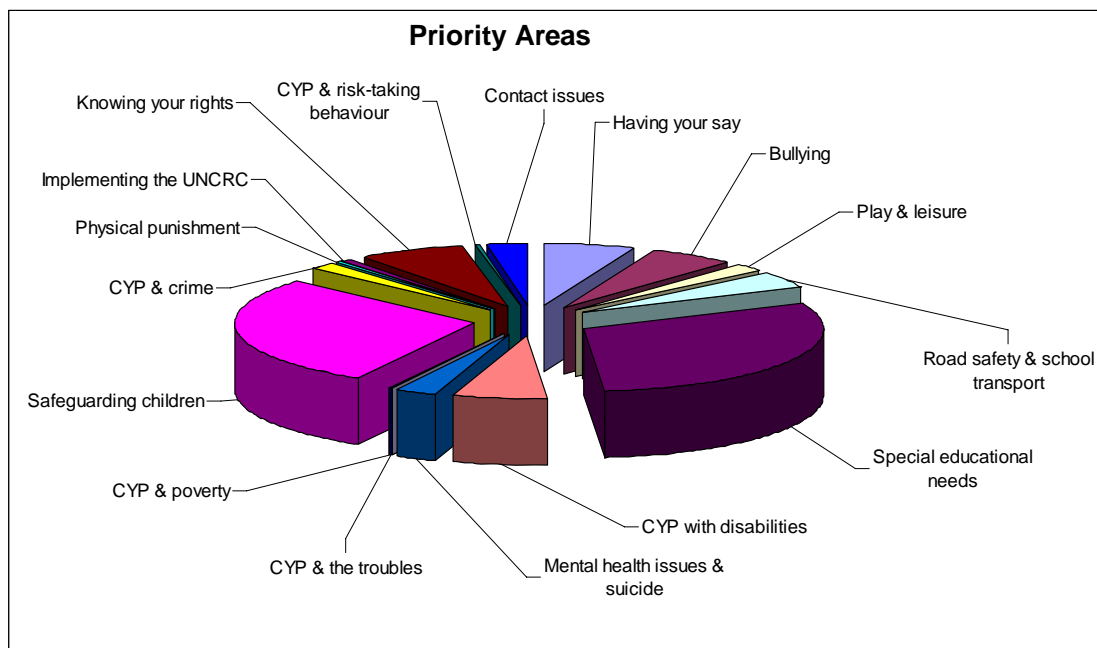
We have also considered legal action on the poor provision of Speech and Language therapy for children in special schools.

We have also had an increasing number of young people contacting us for advice or guidance about legal issues or processes that have a direct impact on them.

The team saw an increase in activity throughout 2006/2007. Below are graphs showing the nature of the work. Real case studies of issues dealt with and some of the feedback received throughout the year are available in our annual review

<http://www.niccy.org/article.aspx?menuId=220>

This table shows how the complaints received are broken down across our 15 key priority areas.



Corporate & Leadership

Major achievements included, with colleagues from the Communication and Participation team, making sure that children and young people from the NICCY Youth Panel continued to take part in all staff recruitment.

In line with the ethos of the organisation to be family-friendly Corporate Services provided support for staff seeking more flexible working arrangements, which resulted in NICCY being awarded the **'Employer of Choice'** quality mark. This together with our LEXCEL accreditation emphasises our continued focus on **Quality**.

Also, Corporate Services undertook a lead role in child protection. During the year we signed off on the NICCY Child Protection Policy, trained all staff and dealt with 11 number of referrals. Corporate Services makes sure that each new NICCY employee is checked using the measures set out in the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Act (POCVA).

