

Annual Event Speech - Chief Executive

20 November 2013

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Good morning everyone – you're all very welcome to the Annual Conference of the NI Commissioner for C&YP. I know today is going to be an interesting and enjoyable day.

We, as you know, hold this annual conference to coincide with International Children's Day and the anniversary of the UNCRC. We are also marking the progress of Children's Rights in NI as we celebrate the 10th anniversary of NICCY this year.

As you reflect on this I want to extend a very warm welcome to our Speakers - Heather Stevens who will be giving us 'an Official's perspective on the establishment of the Office 10 years ago; our keynote speaker from Norway, the 1st country in the world to establish an Ombudsman for Children's Office - Trond Waage – who will be speaking on his recent work 'Commissioners for Change', Professor Laura Lundy and Dr Bronagh Byrne from Queen's University will be presenting on the joint work with ourselves on developing draft options for CR legislation in NI. I also want to give a special welcome to the members of the Commissioner's Youth Panel for their commitment and input throughout the day.

Last year at our inaugural annual conference I said we were launching the joint process of developing options for CR legislation in NI. Much of the work of NICCY has been 'evolving' to bring us to this stage – where the natural progression of our work is to see CR legislation – we are therefore launching those draft options as the next stage in achieving this. Later on you will be given a presentation on these which will inform your roundtable discussions and we look forward to your input and feedback.

As a Human Rights Institution we take seriously our responsibilities in safeguarding and promoting the Rights and Best Interests of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland in having due regard to the UNCRC - Article 4 of which sets out States' requirements to 'take 'all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the CRC'.

Last year we heard of the legislative developments in rest of UK and Ireland – From Tam Baillie, Scotland’s Children’s Commissioner on their ‘Children and Young People Bill’ (2013), From former 1st Minister of Wales Rhodri Morgan on the ‘Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure’ (2011) and from Emily Logan the Republic of Ireland’s Ombudsman for Children on the Constitutional Amendment (2012) following the November referendum.

It is vital that we in NI do not let our C&YP down by lagging behind on enshrining their rights in legislation – we should aspire to lead the way – be a model of good practice – incorporating the UNCRC into domestic law.

Today we want to work through the ways we can harness the growing impetus and indeed imperative to achieve this ensuring that by the time of our next Assembly (and indeed other) elections, there already are in place the mechanisms putting the Convention at the heart of the legislative process (PfG).

I hope that when the Northern Ireland Executive looks at developing proposals for incorporation of C&YP’s rights into domestic legislation that they will recognise this as a positive and progressive step - a step they can take to fulfil their commitments to children; - a step that the Executive can take to make sure Northern Ireland is a place where children KNOW they are valued, respected and supported to flourish and realise their potential.

Having worked over many years as a ‘practitioner’ on the frontline as they say with young people whose rights were being denied / whose access to appropriate services and support was seriously curtailed / whose best interests were being ignored / and whose life outcomes were unacceptably limited, I know how vital it is that we progress such protections for them and by doing so support our parents/guardians and carers to ensure successful life outcomes for their C&YP. The Rights and responsibilities of parents/guardians and carers are better served by ensuring C&YP’s rights AND best interests in all spheres of their lives are protected.

It is now more crucial than ever that we, as a society, send and indeed live that message – promoting it with our C&YP, NGO colleagues, politicians, ministers, decision makers. In taking this forward we will work with our stakeholders and partners across the statutory, community and voluntary sectors including our Child Rights Implementation Group and other Fora.

If the measure of any society is in how well it protects its most vulnerable citizens then our Executive need to embrace CR legislation and act on it. This will send a signal to countries across the world.

In ending I quote from Pablo Cassals and Marian Wright Edelman

“You must work (I must work) - WE must all work to make the world (NI) worthy of its children. If we don't stand up for children, then we don't stand for much.”

Thank You.