

**Speech for launch of report into safer travelling to school, delivered by Barney McNeany, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2006.**

Good morning children, young people, ladies and gentlemen. I'm delighted to welcome you to the Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. I hope you take the opportunity to meet NICCY staff and hear what we do here. I am also particularly pleased to welcome you to the launch of this report following research into travelling safely to school.

Over two years ago, when we were starting out on our journey at NICCY, into safeguarding and promoting the rights and best interests of children and young people, I along with the Commissioner at the time Nigel Williams and other members of the senior team, spent time out and about in communities, schools etc to listen to what children and young people in N. Ireland had to say about their lives. I had the pleasure of visiting the school council in St Mary's school in the Creggan in Derry, where I was greatly impressed with the young people. I was very impressed with how they clearly articulated their views on children's rights, education and life in general. At the time they left me with a concern, which later grew into the research which is being presented today. After our meeting they asked me to come out to see the fleet of buses being filled to the brim with children and young people many of them standing in the aisles of the bus. One of the young women there asked me a very direct question. She said what does it have to take to get change, will some of us have to die in a road accident before anyone will listen that what is happening here is a dangerous situation.



So we asked children and young people across Northern Ireland if they had similar experiences. They too expressed concerns about their journeys to school; presenting a picture of overcrowded buses, where standing for long periods was the norm, bullying on buses, waiting on dark country roads in all weathers for their buses which sometimes passed them by and walks home on lonely country roads without streetlights or footpaths or other places to walk safely.

Now these concerns are not new. They echoed concerns uncovered in research carried out into the State of Children's Rights in N. Ireland by QUB for NICCY in 2004.

The key criticism of the current transport arrangements, as voiced by the children and young people in the QUB research was that they were badly targeted and often do not assist those who need it most. The walking distances were considered to be unrealistic and the transport guidance did not take account of the realities of many children's situations. One consequence was that parents of limited means may not be sending their child to school because they did not have bus fares, while the parents of children with bus passes were being taken to school by car. Other concerns identified in the research included:

- Children in rural areas often have long walks to bus stops on unlit roads with no footpaths
- Children attending Irish-medium and integrated schools having particular difficulties with access to suitable transport due to the wider spread of these types of schools.
- ELBs generally limiting assistance to children living outside what they consider reasonable walking distances with no clarity about whether the ELB or DHSSPS should make provision for other 'children in need'.



- EWOs expressed concern about children living in families with low income being unable to afford bus fares: “The child would miss school maybe for two days before the benefit arrives. It was unrealistic because of sectarian areas to expect the child to walk to school” (EWO).
- Difficulties ensuring transport for looked after children when there are multiple placements.
- The lack of a dedicated strategy to protect children from bullying on buses.
- There is a range of safety issues, all of which were highlighted in a Report of the NI Assembly’s Environmental Committee. These include: the rule which allows three children to share a double seat; the fact that many children have to stand; and the limited availability of seat-belts (NI Assembly, Committee for the Environment, 2001)
- Additionally a number of children spoken to, who attended special schools in Northern Ireland considered that their journeys were often too long and that the yellow buses were stigmatising. Typical comments include:

“We don’t come home at the right time, it’s too slow the banana bus... we’re embarrassed on that bus. We hide under the seats” (Girl, aged 14)

“Get rid of the custard bus, its embarrassing” (Boy, aged 15
- The Assembly’s Environmental Committee has recommended that ALL schools buses should be yellow, clearly marked and have flashing lights so as to warn drivers that children might be embarking or disembarking.
- As more children are educated in mainstream schools, school transport will have to be adapted to make it accessible. There is a concern about the fact that adapting buses reduces their capacity and that the resources do not exist to expand the fleet.



So that's what children and young people had to say in 2004. That research and issues highlighted within it, helped to set NICCY's agenda in terms of identifying priorities for further work. We followed this up with the more in-depth research which you will hear about in a moment from Professor Julian Hine from Ulster University.

In setting out to develop this research we entered into a partnership with the General Consumer Council who have campaigned for improvements in home to school transport for many years and the Department of Regional Development's Road Service who wish to encourage the value of independent school travel for children and young people.

Together the agencies developed a route map to obtaining the views of children, young people, their parents/ carers and a range of professionals on how safe are children and young people's journeys to school.

Those of you who have been involved in the research will know that it was led by Professor Hine, Dr Banihan Gunay and Dr Scott MacKay from the University of Ulster, **ably** assisted by a group of young researchers who supported the lead team in carrying out the fieldwork.

I therefore wish to pay particular thanks to Ellie Lavan, Daniel McGlade, Niall Bole, Victoria Keast, Swapnil Patra, Ciara Rehill, Deborah Curley and to the schools, organisations, youth groups and parent groups who so freely gave their time and views to make this research a success. I would also like to thank Conor Fitzpatrick who helped steer the research in his capacity as young advisor on the steering group, helping out at a workshop on this issue in February of this year, and of course to him for supporting this launch today. Whilst I know what we hear constantly from the media would lead you to



believe that all children and young people are anti-social nuisances we see the very opposite much of our work and the involvement of all of these young people in this research is but one of many examples we have of the positive impact young people have on everyday matters if they are given encouragement to participate. Well done to all of you. **ROP**

I do not intend to steel Professor Hine's thunder by going into the detail of the research or findings, but I would like to conclude by asking you all, particularly those in a position of power to take away and consider carefully the nine recommendations made in this report. It is my hope that this invaluable research helps set a clear pathway for ensuring children and young people travel to school much more safely. Before he left office in N. Ireland, in his role as children's Minister and Minister for the Environment, Lord Rooker agreed to launch today's report. It is now my intention to write to his successors to ask for the recommendations of this research to be accepted and actioned in full. We cannot allow another two years to pass before action is taken to protect our children and young people in their journeys to school.

Can I thank you for listening.

