

**Briefing to the Employment and Learning Committee**  
**Inquiry into Young People Not In Education, Employment or  
Training**

**30 June 2010**

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## **1. Introduction**

NICCY was created in accordance with The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Under article 7(2)(3) of this Order, NICCY has a duty to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. The Commissioner's remit covers children and young people from birth up to 18 years, or 21 years of age where a young person is care experienced or has a disability.

In determining how to carry out her functions, the Commissioner's paramount consideration is the rights of the child, and NICCY is required to base all its work on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

NICCY welcomes the Committee Inquiry into Young People not in Education, Employment or Training and seeks to bring a perspective which focuses on young people's rights and best interests to the deliberations on this important issue. We acknowledge the commitment of the Committee in prioritising this issue and note the wide range of evidence witnesses have presented to the Inquiry.

NICCY appreciates this invitation to brief the Committee on what we believe are the key issues in safeguarding and promoting the rights of young people not in education, employment or training. Our submission will begin by reflecting on the relevance of the UNCRC to young people who are not in education, employment or training, before considering the steps that, in our view, must be taken to ensure that the Northern Ireland Executive and other statutory bodies are in a position to respond effectively and appropriately to the needs of these young people.

## **2. Children and young people's rights**

When the Committee are considering the needs and experiences of young people who are not in education, employment or training this often refers to young people aged between 16 and 24 years old. We would like to highlight that where young people are under the age of 18 they should be subject to the special protections afforded to them as children. Indeed, our concerns about the particular vulnerabilities of 16 and 17 year olds led NICCY to commission the Anti Poverty Network to research the rights and entitlements of this age group.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NIAPN (2010) The Rights and Entitlements of Young People Aged 16 to 17 Years Across Northern Ireland, (Belfast: NIAPN)



Further to this, such protections are extended to young people up to the age of 21 years where they are care experienced or have a disability. NICCY is concerned that such young people are overrepresented among those who are not in education, employment or training and face significant barriers in accessing these opportunities.

We would also highlight that when the Committee considers preventative and early intervention strategies to support those at risk of becoming disengaged from education, employment and training these will largely be targeted at children under the age of 18 years.

The UK Government, including Northern Ireland, is a signatory to the UNCRC and as such, has agreed to uphold the rights and protections which the Convention offers children and young people.

We would like to highlight the four UNCRC articles which are also known as the 'guiding principles' of the Convention:

- Article 2: children shall not be discriminated against in exercising any of their rights under the UNCRC
- Article 3: all decisions taken which affect children's lives should be taken in the child's best interests
- Article 6: all children have the right to life and to the fullest level of development
- Article 12: children have the right to have their voices heard in all matters concerning them.

These articles underpin the responsibilities which the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive have for the welfare and well-being of children and young people and should be at the centre of all legislation, policy and practice concerning children and young people.

In addition to the guiding principles of the UNCRC we wish to highlight further articles which have particular resonance when considering the needs and circumstances of young people not in education, employment or training:

- Article 26: extra financial assistance should be provided for the children of families in need
- Article 27: children have a right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs.

We would finally like to draw the Committee's attention the 2008 Concluding Observations of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) when they examined the implementation of the Convention across the jurisdictions of the UK



and highlighted that State Parties must do more to ensure that action is taken to end child poverty.

The CRC noted that this may include prioritising support for those children and families most in need and intensifying efforts to provide material assistance and support programmes for children. As we will outline, NICCY is concerned that young people who are not in education, employment or training are at greater risk of experiencing poverty.

### **3. Knowledge of young people not in education, employment or training**

As the Committee will be aware, there are a range of challenges in identifying the numbers and characteristics of young people in Northern Ireland who are not in education, employment or training. Examples of this include the absence of research programmes and services that provide information on young people (such as, the Youth Cohort Study and Connexions service in England and Wales) and the limitations of using data from the Labour Force Survey (for instance, this does not take account of participation in part-time education).

In response to an Assembly question, the Minister for Employment and Learning stated that in the period from July–September 2008 there were 45,000 young people aged 16–24 years old who were not in education, employment or training. While this figure is lower than those for other jurisdictions in the UK, it must be noted that this represents 19% of 16-24 year olds in Northern Ireland and is a higher proportion of young people when compared to many other countries within the EU.<sup>2</sup>

While more recent statistics may demonstrate a reduction in figures, with 41,000 young people not being in education, employment or training, it is important to note that significant numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training<sup>3</sup>. It is also important to recognise that these young people, because they are in Northern Ireland, are the only group across the UK who do not have a dedicated government strategy in place designed to support them.

Commentators have highlighted that the current economic situation is likely to disproportionately impact on youth unemployment and while we share these concerns, we would also highlight the fact that the issue of young people not in education, employment or training had arisen before the current economic difficulties.

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<sup>2</sup> AQW 4822/09 from Mr Storey

<sup>3</sup> Unpublished data for January-March 2010 obtained from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Statistics and Research Branch, 22 June 2010



The economic cost of youth unemployment is estimated to be £250 million per year in Northern Ireland, with this figure not accounting for the costs of additional services which correlate with groups who are not in education, employment or training, such as health and social services provision and community safety and youth justice services.<sup>4</sup> While such figures alone provide justification for the development of effective strategies that respond to this issue, we would draw attention to the health and wellbeing impacts associated with being outside of education, employment or training on individual young people.

UK research has found that this group of 16-25 year olds were more than twice as likely to feel down and depressed and less valued by the people around them as other 16 -25 year olds, and that more than one in three had felt suicidal.<sup>5</sup> There is no rationale for assuming that these figures would be significantly reduced in a Northern Ireland only sample. NICCY would ask the Committee when considering how the rights and best interests of these young people are promoted and how they can be supported to feel they have a positive role to play in our society to remain mindful of these findings.

A number of studies have drawn attention to the variety of groups within the broader category of young people who are not in education, employment or training and note that young people may move between these groupings and may or may not be outside of education, employment or training at different points in time. Groupings include young people who are 'transitional' such as those in gap years, who are 'floating' including those who are undecided in pursuing particular paths of study or career and who are 'core'. This last group may be outside education, employment and training for a prolonged period of time and face multiple barriers in accessing these opportunities. For instance, work in Wales and Scotland has noted that a significant number of young people with disabilities or illness are within this grouping.<sup>6</sup>

It is important that accurate and robust data about young people not in education, employment or training in Northern Ireland is available as this must form the basis of responses and interventions for these young people. We hope that the Department's

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<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Library Services (2009) Research paper 110/09: Young People Not In Education, Employment or Training, available at:  
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/researchandlibrary/2009/11009.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The Prince's Trust (2010) Undiscovered: The Prince's Trust You Gov Youth Index, (London: The Prince's Trust)

<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government (2006) More Choices, More chances: A Strategy to Reduce the Number of Young People not in Education, Employment or Training in Scotland, available at:  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/06/13100205/3>

Welsh Assembly Government (2009) Reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training in Wales, available at:  
<http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/090430youngpeoplenotineduen.pdf>



forthcoming scoping paper will explore this issue, and the challenges of gaining disaggregated data, in depth.

#### **4. Responses to young people not in education, employment or training and prevention**

Across these three groupings, young people's experiences will be shaped by different circumstances and the actions required to support them must therefore respond to their different needs. For example, where young people have made a positive decision to take time out before going on to further or higher education minimal intervention may be required to support them. For other young people access to programmes, such as, Training for Success or graduate support will provide the necessary guidance and help. Yet where young people have complex needs, a different and more holistic approach may be necessary. For instance, some young people will need to have accessed a range of tailored support before they will be at a point where participating in employability programmes or undertaking specific training and qualifications will be appropriate or effective.

We are aware the Committee has heard evidence from a number of service providers, often from the third sector, who are involved in delivering training, alternative education provision and more focused support programmes to young people. The provision offered across these areas may cover topics, such as, include essential skills, careers guidance and specialised training and more tailored interventions may include for example, child care support for young parents, increased social care help for young carers and support for young people on issues such as, alcohol and drug use.

NICCY is of the view that young people across these three groups of those not in education, employment or training should receive interventions that are both appropriate and proportionate to their needs. However, this briefing will pay greater attention to those young people facing a range of barriers. This reflects our concerns that these young people face the greatest risks to their rights and best interests by not engaging in education, employment or training and are least likely to benefit from increasing opportunities when economic growth is secured.

Work in other jurisdictions indicates that young people who have low levels of, or no qualifications and those who experience family disadvantage and poverty are at greater risk of not being in education, employment or training over a period of time. Studies also cite that particular groups of young people including those with disabilities, with limiting long term illness, who are care experienced or in contact with the youth justice system are among the most vulnerable. Many of these themes have been repeated in recent Northern Ireland research with young people experiencing



marginalisation and conflict which noted that specific groups were in particular need of appropriate and relevant post 16 education and training.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to ensure that analysis of which young people are more likely to be disengaged from education, employment or training considers the factors which place them at greater risk of this. For instance, the association between poverty and poor educational outcomes has been well established<sup>8</sup> and the particularly poor outcomes and participation levels for care experienced young people has led to PSA targets being set to focus action on improving these. The Anti-Poverty Network research noted that 16 and 17 year olds not in education, employment or training faced particularly high risks of poverty, particularly if they were in supported or independent living.<sup>9</sup>

Such concerns led NICCY to develop a specific call to Government asking them to tackle these particular disadvantages in January this year when we highlighted the issue of child poverty.<sup>10</sup> This included asking Government to address the disparity in access to benefit and minimum wage levels for 16 and 17 year olds and to ensure a strategy for those not in education, employment and training was developed. For example, we have heard from young people living independently who have been unable to participate in training due to the negative impact this would have on their entitlement to benefits and from others who have taken part in voluntary sector programmes but been unable to access Education Maintenance Allowance.

Specific measures to effectively meet the needs of these young people must consider reforms across education, employment and training but they must also, therefore go beyond these. For example, in focusing simply on education and training, commentators have pointed to the importance of reducing the financial costs of this on young people and families, ensuring young people have access to effective, high quality alternative education and widening the availability of vocational pathways.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that the Welsh government strategy dedicates resources to supporting 11-14 years olds at risk of not continuing in full time education. The strategy has also built social procurement principles into regeneration programmes which ensures a link is made between training for young people not in education, employment or training and available placements or employment.

Yet, interventions must go beyond a focus simply on education, employment and training, to address the broader issues that have been noted as representing significant

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<sup>7</sup> McAlister, S. et al (2009) *Childhood in Transition: Experiencing Marginalisation and Conflict in Northern Ireland*, (Belfast: QUB, The Prince's Trust, Save the Children)

<sup>8</sup> NICCY (2008) *Children's Rights: Rhetoric or Reality, A Review of Children's Rights in Northern Ireland 2007/08* (Belfast: NICCY)

<sup>9</sup> NIAPN (2010) *The Rights and Entitlements of Young People Aged 16 to 17 Years Across Northern Ireland*, (Belfast: NIAPN)

<sup>10</sup> Information on NICCY's Make It Right Campaign is available at: [www.niccy.org/childrensrights](http://www.niccy.org/childrensrights)

<sup>11</sup> Kilkenny, U. et al (2004) *Children's Rights in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: NICCY)



risk factors, such as, experiencing poverty and care. This should draw on and seek to sustain examples of good practice, such as, the Going the Extra Mile scheme which provides continued placement stability for care experienced young people at a key transition time.

Earlier this year NICCY held a poverty workshop on the needs of 16 and 17 year olds. Participants from voluntary and public sector agencies who heard presentations from the Anti-Poverty Network and The Prince's Trust highlighted that to effect lasting change strategies must be holistic and include actions such as multidisciplinary family and early years support, ensuring the education curriculum was relevant to young people and that a culture of respect and valuing young people was embedded in education and training provision.

Such holistic approaches will require a fully inter-departmental response that draws on areas such as health and social services, social development and justice as well employment and learning and education.

## **5. Conclusion**

We believe the Committee Inquiry provides an important opportunity for Members to inform the work of the Northern Ireland Executive in this area and to ensure that they are responding adequately to the needs of young people who are not in education, employment or training.

We are concerned that, at present, not enough action is being taken to safeguard the rights and best interest of young people who are in this grouping, or who are at risk of disengaging from education, employment or training. The government must ensure that it meets its obligation to protect the UNCRC rights for these young people.

The following points summarise our view on how this work should be taken forward:

- The Northern Ireland Executive should develop an interdepartmental strategy to address the needs of young people who are not in education, employment or training. The Department of Employment and Learning should have lead responsibility for this. The strategy should have clear links with the Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement targets and the Strategy for Children and Young People.
- The strategy should be based on robust data and information concerning young people who are not in education, employment or learning. This must recognise the range of groupings, such as floating, transitional and core within the category and the factors which place young people at greater risk of not being



in education, employment or training. Data provided should be disaggregated across these categories and other categories.

- A mapping exercise which identifies current provision and practice against known need should then be completed. This, along with the data and information noted above, will provide the basis for ensuring interventions and programmes will be based on strategic overview and are located in relation to both geographic and thematic need.
- The strategy should be accompanied by a monitoring and evaluation framework that includes actions, such as, identifying the paths young people take when they disengage from education, employment and training and reflects the progress made by young people with complex needs. This should also seek to quality assure the nature and effectiveness of services and provision, for example, by assessing outcomes for participants and ensuring young people's participation is embedded in programmes.
- The strategy must work across a number of key areas where it both responds to the needs of those who are currently not in education, employment or training and prevents those most at risk of becoming disengaged from education, employment or learning.
- We again emphasise the importance of the strategy being responsive to the often complex needs of young people at greatest risk of not being in education, employment or training, such as those living in poverty, who have disabilities, who are care experienced and who are in contact with youth justice agencies.
- We are aware that the Committee is conducting its Inquiry at a time when there is great concern about the implementation and impact of budgetary cuts. NICCY is of the view that a perspective embedded in safeguarding the rights and best interests of children and young people requires the necessary resources to be allocated to this area. We are of the view that prioritising resources to support these young people will enable them to participate positively in their families, communities and in helping to grow the economy. This will be essential in moving Northern Ireland into economic growth and stability.

NICCY appreciates the opportunity to brief the Committee on the issues that we believe to have key significance for children and young people who are not in education, employment or training and will be happy to respond to any questions regarding our comments.

