

**Submission by the Commissioner for Children and Young People to  
the Committee for the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister on  
'Still Vulnerable: The Impact of Early Childhood Experiences on  
Adolescent Suicide and Accidental Death'  
14 February 2013**

## **Introduction**

The office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (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. The age remit of the office is children from birth up to 18 years, or 21 years of age if a child is care experienced or has a disability. NICCY references its work within the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other relevant child rights instruments.

## **Background to Still Vulnerable report**

The UNCRC requires government to protect children's rights across all areas of their lives, including their rights to life, to health and welfare and to protection from all forms of abuse, harm and violence. The vision of the Convention is not simply that government meets minimum standards but that full implementation of the UNCRC enables children and young people to live in families, communities and societies where they can grow and flourish and where their individual dignity and physical integrity is safeguarded and respected.

NICCY's statutory duty to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to children and young people is central to the Commissioner's principal aim of safeguarding children's rights and best interests. As part of this work NICCY, in collaboration with the Health and Social Care Board, has considered information from Case Management Review (CMR) reports. CMRs are most often conducted following the death or serious injury of a child where abuse is known or suspected to be a factor and the review process is in place to ensure there is proper reflection and learning from these difficult and distressing cases. In undertaking this work NICCY has been concerned to assess if reviews highlight groups of children who are particularly at risk and to examine how recommendations have been taken forward. The significant number of adolescent deaths due to suicide documented in CMRs led NICCY to commission



the 'Still Vulnerable' report in order to further explore this complex and sensitive area.

The loss of a child or young person due to suicide or accidental death is a tragedy and NICCY is deeply aware of the profound impact of this loss on everyone it touches. Sadly in recent years many stories of teenage suicide and death have been reported in our media and Northern Ireland continues to experience higher rates of suicide among adolescents and young adults than other parts of the United Kingdom. Adolescent suicide and accidental death must also be understood as affecting our wider communities and society as we struggle to reconcile ourselves with the loss of such young life. Further to this, it challenges us to reflect on how we are currently seeking to meet the needs of vulnerable young people and to consider how we can strengthen arrangements to support and protect them.

### **Still Vulnerable key findings and recommendations**

In conducting the research Queens University Belfast in conjunction with the NSPCC examined the growing evidence base on the enduring impact of adverse experiences on children's lives. Importantly, the definition of adversity while including child abuse also takes account of other significant factors such as domestic violence, parental substance misuse or mental health difficulties and the loss of a parent. The report pays particular attention to the relationship between children's exposure to multiple adversities, often experienced over a number of years, and their reduced resilience and increased vulnerability in adolescence. The research highlights that this shapes young people's underlying and ongoing needs for support and that adversity and maltreatment is associated with poor outcomes in later years, including suicide in teenage years.

'Still Vulnerable' examines a small number of Northern Ireland cases and United Kingdom reports in order to assess whether across these reviews into the tragic deaths of young people, valuable learning about how to better support children can be identified. A range of key themes were noted as emerging across these cases including:

- While agencies often had long standing involvement in young people's lives this was often episodic and in response to crisis rather than offering ongoing support;
- Thresholds for assessing when intervention was needed could present barriers to young people and families receiving help at an earlier stage;



- At times organisations perceived young people as being troublesome or troubling presenting with challenging, risky and dangerous behaviour rather than recognising that they were troubled and highly vulnerable;
- Provision, such as mental health services, was not always accessible or responsive to young people's needs and should, for example, follow up where a young person does not attend.

The report raises a number of important concerns which should inform the planning and delivery of services for children, young people and families. Central to these is ensuring that a holistic approach is taken to understanding the needs of each young person. This must recognise how experiences of adversity in earlier years can reduce resilience in adolescence and impact on young people's underlying needs for support. 'Still Vulnerable' points to how this requires an approach which is not simply focused on responding to immediate crisis or presenting issues but instead looks beyond this to identify how young people can be supported and their life chances improved on an enduring basis.

The research highlights that:

- Young people should have access to services which are individually tailored and responsive to their needs;
- Support should be provided from an early stage and delivered in a sustained and properly coordinated manner;
- Professionals and others should not simply equate older years in adolescence with increased resilience and a reduced need for help;
- As children become older this should not divert attention away from their needs for support and protection.

As well as outlining concerns that should shape how we seek to support and protect vulnerable children, the report reminds us of the importance of the work undertaken by front line professionals, often in difficult and challenging situations, and of the need to ensure they are also effectively supported. 'Still Vulnerable' identifies five key recommendations based on the research findings and designed to support statutory agencies in fulfilling their duties to safeguard vulnerable children and young people. These are as follows:

1. Assessment: introducing an additional decision making tool to enhance the assessment of young people's needs to ensure underlying as well as presenting needs for support are identified;



2. Case planning: improving the coordination of services provided to young people by appointing a lead professional and agreeing a written intervention plan;
3. Identifying depression: ensuring that suicide prevention training addresses the need to identify and effectively respond to adolescent depression;
4. Impact of adversity: while addressing immediate concerns about a young person's safety or welfare also providing interventions that will reduce the enduring impact of adversity and maltreatment;
5. Pathways to impact: investigating outcomes for young people known to different services to gain a better understanding about which interventions and services improve young people's life chances.

## **Concluding comments**

'Still Vulnerable' is concerned with the most precious and fundamental rights that children and young people should be afforded – the rights to life, survival and development. It is vital that we seek to learn from studies such as this and make sure that our arrangements to safeguard children and young people respond to emerging research and evidence. This report is an important contribution to that debate and in taking this work forward NICCY is engaging with government, statutory bodies and others to progress the implementation of the research recommendations and ensure that we can effectively protect and support young people vulnerable to suicide and accidental death.

Finally, NICCY asks that any reporting or debate about this research reflects the sensitive nature of these issues and is respectful of the children, young people and families whose lives have been touched by adolescent suicide and accidental death.

The Commissioner welcomes the opportunity to present the research to the Committee on 20 February 2013 and will seek to respond to other issues relating to children and young people which Members may wish to raise during this session.

