

Thank you Chloe.

Hello ladies and gentlemen, my name is Matt Carlin.

The first issue I would like to talk about is **negative stereotyping** of children and young people. This has been a matter of concern for the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People since the establishment of the office. This is a shared concern of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The Committee in its 2008 Concluding Observations to the UK Government stated that the climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children, including young people in general, may be often be the underlying cause of further infringements of their rights<sup>1</sup>.

The NICCY Youth Panel - which provides advice to the Commissioner - has constantly identified this as a key issue. During 2010-11 the panel planned and implemented a campaign to challenge negative stereotyping with our "Disable the Label" initiative.

As part of this, the Youth Panel worked with the NICCY staff to draw up a series of questions for inclusion in the ARK Young Life and Times survey 2010. The results of the survey showed that 85% of the young people who took part said that they believed that they were judged negatively because of their age. Another finding from this survey was that 87% of the young people said they had experienced discrimination because of their age.

The Youth Panel - to mark International Youth Day in 2010 - looked into the stereotyping of young people, in particular how children and young people are portrayed in the media. Over a 4 day period, the Youth Panel looked at coverage in the main Northern Ireland newspapers and identified articles as positive, negative or neutral towards both children and young people.

The Youth Panel found that almost 75% of the coverage portrayed young people over the age of 11 in a negative light, whereas for children under the age of 11, 80% of their coverage was positive<sup>2</sup>.

Eva Beattie, a Youth Panel member who was part of the project said "As soon as a child leaves primary school they don't automatically become bad, so why is this image being portrayed in some of our newspapers". She also added "We just looked into examples of media stereotyping of young people but we know negative stereotyping exists in politics and in our local communities.

On a daily basis we are faced with problems when trying to socialise in public spaces or access shops".

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<sup>1</sup> Concluding observations: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2008), Committee on the Rights of the Child (pg 6)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.niccy.org/News/archive/Newsfrom2009/DontLabelMe>

Another Youth Panel member Charlotte Higgins, felt that the headlines often missed the good work of young people.

We are pleased to note that the Youth Panel's "Disable the Label" campaign has been recognised and referenced by the UK government in their recent draft periodic report to UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Young people frequently experience age-related discrimination in everyday life, with the most basic example I can use would be in local shops.

Again, from the 2010 ARK Young Life and Times survey - a group of young people were asked whether they had ever experienced age-related discrimination in shops or shopping centres. The results showed that almost 60% had been told to leave school bags outside a shop leaving them vulnerable to such acts as theft and vandalism. 66% had said that staff treated them with suspicion. In each case the young people believed this was age-related discrimination.

In addition to this, many young people have been discriminated whilst out on the streets as they have been with friends talking and not causing any disruption but have been asked "to move on". Young people when asked has this ever happened to them, responded by 57% agreeing to the statement.

Indeed a recent media article in the Guardian<sup>3</sup> quoted Jacqui Cheer, Cleveland's Chief Constable 'Growing up' behaviour is too often labelled antisocial, and that there was a growing intolerance of young people in public spaces.

But where must all these young people go? What is the solution to this?

This brings me to the next issue young people and children face within Northern Ireland - **Goods, Facilities and Services anti- discrimination legislation.**

The Northern Ireland Executive has said that it will develop and consult on proposals to improve age discrimination legislation so that it covers the provision of goods, facilities and services.

While this may appear to be a positive development, NICCY and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland are concerned, based on information coming from the Assembly, that children and young people under the age of 18 may not be covered by the proposed change to the law.

You might ask why is it important to include children and young people in the proposed extension of the law? Well it is important as there is clear evidence that children and young people experience less favourable treatment because of their age when accessing goods,

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/nov/11/antisocial-behaviour-police-chief-young-people>

facilities and services. It will also help challenge the negative stereotypes and attitudes of children and young people and will help create a culture where young people are respected and valued when receiving a service.

The Northern Ireland Assembly already has a number of policies in which they have agreed to protect Children's Rights. This will give them the opportunity to lead the way in making sure that rights of children and young people are promoted and protected. It would also build on and extend the existing responsibilities on public bodies towards children and young people under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998).

NICCY has received and correlated a number of case studies from children and young people who feel they have been discriminated against. Some of these scenarios are based on actual cases which have now been resolved through NICCY's casework service. Others are based on research and information that has been fed back to NICCY from other organisations through our engagement.

I will only read out 2 as there are many examples – the others can be found on NICCY's website.

*"I'm Kelly and I'm 16. A while ago I went into a jewellery shop in Victoria Square to buy my mum a bracelet for Christmas that I'd been saving up for. When I asked to look at some of the bracelets the shop staff were really rude. They assumed because of my age that I couldn't actually afford to buy anything in the shop and that I was just messing about. I was told to leave the shop by the security guard and escorted out in front of everyone, which was really embarrassing. It made me really angry that they were treating me like a criminal because of my age, even though I'd done nothing wrong."*

And, because this new legislation has the potential to affect more than just young people in shops, here's another example...

*"I'm Claire and I'm four and a half. I'm going to go to school soon but I'm scared in case the other children laugh at me because I only have one hand. My mummy took me to the doctors and he sent us to the hospital to get a plastic hand but the people in the hospital said they only make plastic hands for big people. My mummy told them they have to give me one too, so they gave me a big giant mummy size hand. It looks really silly. All the big people have a plastic hand that matches their real hand. All the children are going to make fun of me – I don't want to go to school."*

Put your hand up in this room if you have a son, daughter, nephew, niece, grandchild or any young person or child who is close to you?

Now ask yourself this - can you imagine how that child or young person would feel if they were being treated like this? Just take a minute to think about that.

And consider this - should an anti-discrimination law discriminate against almost a quarter of the population - that is 430,700 children and young people. Is that acceptable?

On this issue, we at the NICCY Youth Panel continue to do everything we can to make lives better for children and young people by creating and signing various petitions and messaging Ministers. But there is only so much we can do... but with the help of everyone we can ultimately do a lot more and make the lives of children and young people a lot better. Children and young people are vulnerable - that is just an accepted fact of life - so I leave you all with this question.

Why make it more difficult?

Thank you