

Views of Children and Young People communicated to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People during her final visits

Autumn 2014

Just as I started my time in office, eight years ago, getting out to meet with children and young people, this has also been a real focus in my final weeks. Since September I have been going out and about across Northern Ireland to meet with children and young people to hear directly what was important to them, what issues they faced and what messages they wanted me to bring back to the Executive Ministers. I met with several hundred children and young people, through 34 schools and groups. While each group of young people I spoke with over these visits raised their own issues, on reflection there were many common themes that emerged.

Growing up in communities

The children and young people talked a lot about how they felt **growing up in their communities**.

A major focus was on safety, with many children talking about **road safety**. They were worried about unsafe drivers, people driving too fast and parking dangerously. They said that traffic around school was particularly problematic, and it was sometime dangerous to walk or cycle to school. They wanted to see more traffic calming measures, zebra crossings and cycle lanes.

Their concerns about not feeling safe extended beyond this, however, to **general concerns about violence** within their communities. Children and young people talked about feeling scared of paramilitaries, of people hanging around drinking and swearing in public, people hanging around shops, disruption due to protests, and being attacked on the way home from school. They felt that CCTV, better pavements and lighting, and more community policing would help them feel safer.

Younger children sometimes felt intimidated by teenagers drinking, playing with fireworks or other **'anti-social' behaviour**. Young people also talked about this and the problem of

peer pressure, getting in with ‘the wrong crowd’. Many felt that young people were vulnerable to drug pushers, and to adults selling alcohol, cigarettes and fireworks. There was a lot of concern about young people who were drinking alcohol, smoking and taking drugs, and many spoke about the need to provide them support. Many commented on their environment being dirty, with a lot of litter, broken glass, and vandalism.

One of the most common themes was the need for more community **play and leisure facilities** for children and young people.

Children tended to either speak about how they loved their **parks or play equipment**, or about being unhappy that there weren’t any close to their home. Some spoke about the need for green spaces or green gyms, and there were requests for play parks that disabled children could access. Several children were upset about young people vandalising their parks or not letting them play on some of the equipment. Many children recognised that this was due to the young people not having anywhere else to go, and suggested that the government should provide more for teenagers to do.

This was perhaps the most common recommendation from young people. They felt that funding needed to be allocated to providing **better facilities for teenagers**. While there was a lack of provision across the board, many felt that 16-18 year olds were particularly disadvantaged. Many alluded to a connection between problems with antisocial behaviour, including drug and alcohol consumption and young people not having anywhere to go.

Specific suggestions included having more music venues, cinemas, sports equipment, drama groups, football activities, and swimming opportunities as well as other kinds of events. Others just spoke of **safe spaces** to socialise, feeling that this would help develop proper relationships rather than internet relationships. Young people with learning disabilities felt that they needed more social activities too.

Some children and young people, particularly those in rural areas, talked about feeling **isolated or lonely**, or about finding it hard to fit in. They felt that activities outside school were very important to help overcome this.

Being **judged negatively and discriminated against** seemed to be a common experience for young people. They talked about being asked to move on, or questioned by police, when in crowds in their communities. Shops and shopping centres were places

they were regularly discriminated against. In some, only two young people were allowed in at once, in others they weren't allowed in at all without an adult. Young people talked about being moved on, or followed around shopping centres by security guards. Buses were another place where young people had been treated negatively, with bus drivers being rude to them, being unhelpful about bus passes or refusing to let them on with £20 notes. They also spoke about buses driving past bus stops without stopping if there were a lot of young people waiting.

Many young people talked about the need for more support for young people with **mental health** problems, saying that there weren't enough services. Some talked about problems with young people dying through suicide, and others said that there needed to be more support for young people to come off legal highs and drugs. A few talked about schools being a good place to find help, either through peer support, or being able to talk through issues in class.

Bullying was recognised as being a problem, more so with some groups than others. Children and young people talked about bullying at school, on buses, in communities and through social media, and suggested that anti-bullying apps, peer support and better supervision could help address this.

Specific groups of children and young people were identified as **needing particular support**, including young carers, disabled children, children with special educational needs, young parents, children recovering from illness and bereaved children. There were concerns at the problems of funding the NHS, and also felt that it could be difficult to get access assessments for SEN or autism.

Experiences of education

I also talked to the children and young people about their experiences of **education**. There were many specific points relating to individual schools, including about inadequate facilities, needing more up to date IT and internet access, healthy vending machines and/or water coolers. Others talked about needing access to a wider range of subjects or therapeutic services. Some felt their schools were less well funded than others – particularly grammar schools, and others talked about their schools needing more money for school trips, clubs and updating pitches and play facilities.

The importance of young people with disabilities being able to access school trips was

mentioned, as was the importance of young people excluded from school being able to access educational facilities.

There was a great deal of talk about the **pressure** children and young people experienced in school. This largely focussed on examinations, including the transfer test, and too much homework. Some felt pressure from parents to get good grades, or to go to university and felt that it was very stressful having to make major life decisions at 16. They felt that adults didn't understand the pressure they were under.

Children and young people talked passionately about the **importance of having a voice** in school, and many felt that schools councils were a good thing. Some talked about feeling they were listened to, while others expressed annoyance that they weren't consulted in changes to education policies that ended up having quite a significant impact on them. Pupils at one special school felt quite aggrieved that they did not have a say in the school they attended, but that the Board just allocated them a space. Quite often disabled young people had to travel long distances to school, past a closer school.

A number said that they should learn more about **children's rights** and the Children's Commissioner in school.

Family life

Most groups of children and young people did not talk in length about their **families**, but where they did they largely talked about the impact of **austerity or family break up**. Where parents had separated or divorced, or in single parent families, some children and young people felt like they had to pretend everything was okay at home, when they really needed someone to talk to.

Several talked about their parents having lost their jobs or finding it difficult to get work. Some felt that **welfare reforms** were impacting on their families. One group argued for child benefit to be extended until a young person turned 18 to help them stay in further education, and others argued that there needed to be a higher minimum wage. More support for families looking after an elderly or disabled family member was suggested, along with a plea to address the rising costs of fuel. One talked about living in a cold, damp, mouldy house, and having to move.

A group of care experienced young people talked about decisions being made for them by

social workers without their involvement and that they felt they should be involved. They spoke about having too many **placement changes** and needing to be matched carefully with foster parents. At times they felt that matches were sometimes done quickly and reflected what was convenient at the time, rather than what the young person really needed. When in secure care, they felt very isolated from their communities and from the people and services who supported them.

Looking to the future

Finally, some of the teenagers, were looking forward to getting older and said that schools could prepare them more practically with lessons on sex education and financial planning. They felt **getting a part time job** would be good, but that these were hard to get. The fact that the minimum wage for 16-17 year olds was £3.72 per hour was felt to be unjust, as they were doing the same job as an adult. This was all the more unfair given that their costs were the same as an adult. Several spoke in support for **voting at age16**.

Conclusions

It is a challenge to summarise hours of conversation with hundreds of children and young people, but I hope that this has gone some way to outline the key issues that remain important to those I spoke with. It is disappointing to me that many of these issues were evident when I came into post eight years ago, although I was able to identify some changes including a greater awareness of children's rights, and more opportunities to have a say in school.

All the concerns raised above are within the power of the Northern Ireland Executive to make a difference. I call on all Ministers and MLAs to listen carefully to children and young people, both through these comments and in general, in designing policies, legislation and services to address the issues affecting them.



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