

Ionad Uibh Eachach 24une 2015

* PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY *

Maidin mhaith!

I'm really pleased to be here

About me – My identity

Culture - Greek Cypriot living in London

Language and culture protected, nurtured and celebrated by my community.

Makes me proud to be Greek Cypriot - not better than anyone else.

Parents deliberately protected our language when we were young knowing what would happen.

The importance of my **culture** to me has meant that I have seen the importance of celebrating everyone else's and quite possibly this was the early roots for my belief in the rights of everyone.

Now to my **job** – I have been the **Commissioner** since March of this year.

What the Commissioner Does?

Promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people

- UNCRC (set of promises) – is a guiding document and gives paramount consideration

- Promote awareness and understanding of children’s rights particularly amongst children and young people themselves.
- Review adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services for children and young people
- Issues guidance on any matters
- Regard to the role of parents in the lives of their children

Next week the **Commissioners across the 4** jurisdictions will be publishing our analysis of our government’s performance on the **UNCRC** and the report will provide further evidence of why we in NICCY have chosen to focus on key priorities of

Priorities

- **Education inequalities** – there are massive inequalities in our education system
- **Reducing child poverty** - It is neither acceptable that there are 96,000 children in NI living in absolute poverty nor that they will be joined by approximately another 31,000 the next 5 years. Our government must as a matter of urgency implement a clear plan of measures that will dramatically reduce these figures or preferable eradicate them in order to meet our obligations to the Child Poverty Act.

- **Mental health and well-being of our children and young people** – we know that in NI we have the highest figures of suicide and self-harming by our children. Add to other issues that our families face.

We have a low level of **investment** in our children and young people’s mental health and well-being when compared to other jurisdictions on these islands and it could be argued that it should be the highest. We cannot ignore the fact that our children and young people continue to live with the consequences of a **conflict** *that was supposed to have ended before they were born.*

Too many of our children living in “disadvantaged communities” face a load of complicated and challenging issues at a time of diminishing funding. Children’s rights can assist here they are not some ideal pie in the sky “fluffy bunny” philosophy but can be used to guide everything that we do for our children.

Kofi Annan the former Secretary General of the United Nations who said:

"There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they can grow up in peace."

And the UN Committee gives us some clear ideas as to the mechanisms needed.

- **General measures of implementation**

- National Strategy for children
- Co-ordination and co-operation of implementation of children's rights
- Child impact assessment
- Data collection and development of indicators
- Children visible in budgeting decisions
- Training and capacity building
- Independent human rights institutions

The measures must be multi-faceted and are not simply about one thing or another. If we as a society genuinely want to make a difference than we have to take a child rights approach not by picking and choosing which rights we think our children should have but by ensuring that they have them all whilst recognising that at different times we may need to concentrate on some more than others.

Whatever issue we are talking about whether it's child poverty, succeeding in education, youth justice etc... everyone agrees that some of the general key factors to ensure success are early years, family support and community strength and cohesion all of which contribute to ensuring the child has the self-confidence, resilience, skills to become the active rights holder that they are.

Looking around here it is apparent that is what you are getting here. Ionad is about building a safe and healthy community around your children and family. There is a lot of talk about taking a holistic approach to children's lives – looking at the whole child and not putting family life into silos. That is why children's rights have to be seen as a whole.

Whole child, whole community plan – one plan. The joy of communities is West Belfast but it needs sustainable long-term funding.

My understanding is that Ionad is one of a network of community based providers offering a range of services to the local community including learning programmes for all ages, study support, family interventions and support for a range of local groups or communities of interest.

I said earlier - less money not no money

The UN committee has made it clear that children's rights are non-negotiable and have warned various states parties not to use the economic downturn or austerity as an excuse not to give effect to article 4 of the UNCRC where they are required to take the appropriate, legislative, administrative and other measures to realize the rights of all children.

A “The committee has continuously rejected financial hardship as a legitimate justification of states parties to “take any or enough of the required financial or technical measures”

Ensuring rights for children is about celebrating the whole child – I am who I am because of my culture, my language, my parents, my community which allowed my inherent strengths to shine and grow.

That's what the UNCRC is all about whether it talks about the best interests of the child, the importance of family, the alleviation of poverty, education, the right to language and culture as outlined in Article 30 or one of my favourite articles the voice of the young person.

It takes a village to raise a child but in this case it's a community and its network of organisations.

Thank you