

**Speech delivered by Barney McNeany, Northern Ireland
Commissioner for Children and Young People, at the
Young Carers – Crossroads Conference on 9th June 2006.**

Brief: How do young carers fit in with NICCY's

(a) strategy/priorities and (b) plans for the future?

What will NICCY be doing for these children and young people?

The Office of Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was created in accordance with 'The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order' 2003. NICCY's principle aim is to 'safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people' and we have been structured into the following areas to reflect the duties under our legislation:

➤ **Casework and Legal Advice**

We have one team specifically focused on our role as Ombudsman for children and young people dealing with both individual casework and providing legal and general advice and assistance where necessary.

➤ **Research, Review and Policy**

This team is tasked with providing the evidence base for our work, undertaking and commissioning research and reviews of service provision, developing policy positions based on the rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and coordinating NICCY's role in advising



Government on the adequacy and effectiveness of the law, practice and services to children and young people;

NICCY uses all its research/review output to develop clear policy positions and advise Government on the adequacy and effectiveness of services as set out in the NICCY Order.

➤ **Communication and Participation**

The Communication and Participation team develops methods and strategies for communicating with children and young people and is also focused on developing a culture of children's rights and participation. This includes directly training children and young people in their rights and setting up networks with both statutory and NGO bodies to promote the development of the participation of children and young people in decisions affecting their lives

Within NICCY's work on behalf of children and young people up to 18 years old and 21 years old for those with a disability or in care, there are a number of priority areas ranging from health, welfare and material deprivation to education, family life and alternative care. Issues relevant to young carers are cross-cutting throughout many of NICCY's main priorities.

Research with young carers highlights that the stress and emotional pressures of looking after loved ones can put them at risk of depression and self-harming. Undoubtedly, young carers have more to cope with in their daily lives than most other children and young people and are at increased risk of social exclusion and isolation. As part of our work, NICCY continues to raise awareness about suicide



and self-harm amongst young people and we have actively represented young people's views, including getting Ministers to speak directly to children and young people directly affected and advised Government of the urgent need for improved services and support mechanisms for young people who need help coping with various problems and life changes.

The range of pressures and responsibilities for young carers are wide-ranging, where practical tasks in any given 24-hour period can include toileting, washing and putting someone to bed, administering medication, carrying out domestic chores, childcare for brothers and sisters and extended family, and shopping. This is all underpinned by the key role carers often play – sometimes the most demanding - providing other people with emotional support and companionship.

And of course key to all of this is that children and young people who are carers are most often also **taking care of themselves** – something they have to do at a greater level than most other children and young people.

While young carers might agree that they are giving up part of their childhood, they generally want to help and care for the people they are looking after, often not aware that they are doing anything notably different from other children and young people, or are keen to avoid the attention of statutory agencies for fear of unwanted or sometimes unwarranted intervention. Research carried out in Northern Ireland highlights that, despite a feeling of having to grow up quickly, many young carers regard what they do as being a positive and rewarding experience for them – they are proud of being able to provide the necessary care



to a parent who needed support. However, in order to assist them in the vital care they provide it is imperative that they get the right support, therefore there is a need for increased respite care, counseling and advice.

Indeed, it is NICCY's view that young carers also need help too and more consideration should be paid to the needs and **rights** of the children and young people themselves who are trying to fit in school, homework, exams and their own social lives with caring responsibilities. It is also a requirement of the legislation governing NICCY, that the Commissioner bases all his work on any relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Young carers are often more vulnerable and at risk of not being able to enjoy their rights on an equal basis, particularly with regards to family life.

The specific provisions of the UNCRC with most relevance to young carers are Article 9 (right to live with his or her parents unless it is deemed incompatible with his or her best interests); Article 26 (right to benefit from social security); Article 27 (right to an adequate standard of living); Article 31: (right to rest and to engage in leisure, play and recreational activities); and Article 32 (protection from engaging in paid or unpaid work that constitutes a threat to their health, education or development). There are also further associated rights under Article 2 (protection from any form of discrimination); Article 3 (due regard to their best interests); Article 6: (survival and development); and Article 12 (right to an opinion and to be involved in decision-making).

So the UNCRC has a lot to say about young carers and their lives and rights.



Young carers must have time to be themselves; in other words they are entitled to have a childhood and all the things that come with that, e.g. fun; play; relaxation and hanging around with friends; enjoying being a teenager. Having opportunities to engage in leisure, play and recreational activities is a fundamental right under Article 31 of the UNCRC. This is another very important issue for NICCY and we continue to be active in highlighting the need to increase opportunities for play and free time and lobbying government for a national play policy. This is an area where the needs of young carers can also be considered - without the requisite support, young carers' opportunities for play and to have fun are more limited.

In our casework role in NICCY we come across some excellent practice in Health and Social Care and we know that the vast majority of Health and Social Care staff are providing a high quality service often in very difficult and demanding situations. However NICCY is particularly concerned that Health and Social Services are not consistently providing adequate or effective support for some young carers, for example, the necessary respite care; relevant information; and teaching of the necessary skills and first aid to care for a person with an illness or disability.

Young carers have highlighted that in order to maximize the levels of advice and support received by social workers, it is important for them to have the same social worker over a period of time to build a rapport and trust, something that is not the case at present. The issue of a revolving door of social workers in and out of some children and young people's lives is unfortunately not unique to Young



Carers and it is a problem that NICCY has highlighted in other fields of work as an area that needs to be urgently addressed.

The patchiness of this provision is made worse by the the lack of reliable and up-to-date statistics about children’s lives in general is an area that NICCY highlights in much of its research and policy work. In relation to this, NICCY is concerned about the inadequacy of official data collated with regards to young carers in Northern Ireland. This information is absolutely vital in order to plan and effectively deliver services that are equipped to meet the needs of families and young carers, of whom the average age is estimated as being only twelve years old.

Another significant problem is that, compared to adults with caring responsibilities, young carers under 16 years old are excluded from social security benefits, specifically receipt of carer’s allowance. This in effect means young carers are being denied access to benefits that would make their own life easier and is despite the fact that they are carrying the burden of adult responsibilities. Caring for family members with a long-term illness or disability is a form of work, and as already outlined, while it can be rewarding and young carers doundertake their caring role with a heart and a half, it is also demanding and often difficult work.

Further research with young carers has indicated that they do not get as much support from social services as they would like, for example, home assessments not resulting in help for young carers and their families. Through NICCY’s own complaints work, it would appear that if a young carer appears to be coping and “doing a good job” then social services can be reluctant to provide them with



assistance. Now I consider this to be back to front – as we all know of the benefits of intervening early in such circumstances.

Research has also highlighted that 25% of young carers leave school with no GCSEs and that there needs to be better education support for them. Education – with its range of associated issues - is another area that NICCY is focused on, notably at present in relation to bullying, Travellers and schools councils, and where we can raise aspects of particular relevance to young carers. Schools need to be aware when a pupil is also a young carer in order to provide them with further help and support at the right times, i.e. when they are dealing with a crisis at home whilst also trying to complete schoolwork. Young carers have highlighted situations where teachers do not understand why they are sometimes tired in school or homework is late, or that they have to miss days at school as a result of their caring responsibilities; and also that they can be the target of cruel jibes from other children and young people about their family situation, especially where a parent requires care as a result of mental illness or drug/alcohol problems. As a result of their commitment to their caring responsibilities, many young carers are unable to participate in extra-curricular sports clubs and other activities, sometimes compounding feelings of isolation at school. Views from a young carers workshop in England ('Being a Young Carer') suggested that alongside other important issues such as sex education and drugs awareness, schools should be raising the awareness of children about people with disabilities and the invaluable role young carers play.

NICCY highly commends the valuable support given to young carers through the provision of various projects and organisations, such as "Crossroads" that offer a



break from caring and an opportunity to meet and make friends and share with other young carers. As well as organizing a range of activities such as sailing and drama and trips out, projects such as this also provide professional help and advice on accessing practical support and financial resources from social services and other agencies.

Turning lastly to how we as an organisation can help I would emphasise that NICCY's Legal & Complaints team can deal with cases in the immediate instance. Indeed, the issues facing young carers has recently been brought to NICCY's attention through this process - therefore we would encourage young carers who are having difficulties accessing the requisite services and social benefits to contact our Office who can take up their concerns with social services or other children's services on their behalf. The issue of increased provision of respite care and counselling is one that NICCY will be pursuing through our casework.

It is also important that NICCY continues to raise awareness about the need to facilitate young carers access to information about their rights and to existing services – often the information is not given as readily to a child or young person or it is not in a child-friendly format. Through our policy consultation work, NICCY will also continue to raise awareness and promote the issues impacting upon young carers and highlight their needs and rights across all the relevant areas of our work, including in play; education; health and well-being; family life and alternative care. In doing so we will be fulfilling our legislative duty to inform Government of the adequacy and effectiveness of services to children and young people.



I would also like to see a Young Carer represented on our Youth Panel and I would ask for your assistance in making sure we have this source of advice available to NICCY.

In these areas NICCY will continue to support young carers and their invaluable contribution to our society. Thank you for listening.

