

**Speech delivered by Barney McNeany, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, at the launch of the 'Don't push me around!' Report on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2006.**

Children, Young People, Ladies and Gentlemen can I begin by thanking you all for being here today at the launch of the "Don't push me around!" report published by my colleagues and friends in Barnardos and Whizz Kidz.

As most of you will know this is an area that we at NICCY are very concerned about.

Most of you will know that in order to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of Children and Young People – the principal aim of NICCY we are also able to take forward complaints from individual Children and Young People – in effect to act as Ombudsman for Children and Young People. So it might interest you all to know that the largest subject of individual complaints to my office is around issues of disability, and special educational needs.

Those of us working with children and young people need to remind ourselves all the time, when we read a report like 'Don't Push Me Around' , that it refers to individual children... to another human being like you and me, who did not choose to be disabled, but is having to face up to their condition. What disabled young people tell me is that they are not looking for sympathy. They are simply looking for equal rights and the opportunity for them to play a full part in society.

So when we have received complaints from Children and Young People about their access to a decent and reasonable wheelchair



service I have, as the law governing my office requires me to, considered the UNCRC.

As Article 23 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child puts it disabled children *“should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community”*.

Let me just emphasise the key points in this article:

- A full and decent life
- In conditions which ensure dignity
- Promote self reliance
- And facilitate the child’s active participation in the community.

Now these are not just nice words or woolly sentiments. These words constitute a promise that our government has made to all children with a disability, whether physical or learning, in our society.

And Government needs to be reminded that it is all about that individual person I mentioned earlier. It’s not about a statistic on a chart, a table of waiting times, a media report or a debate in the House of Commons. While all those things are important the individual child is more important.

We know from the complaints we have received in our office and from the information my colleague Commissioners in England Scotland and Wales have given me, that these promises to this very vulnerable group of children and young people are not being kept. That’s why it is the first report of its kind to have the support of all four UK Commissioners for Children and Young People.

Overall, we have to conclude that “Don’t push me around” is a damning report, and that our current services fall far short of the promises made in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is



not a full and decent life for disabled children. This is not a description of services that ensure dignity or promote self reliance.

When we have received individual complaints about Children and Young People, waiting for two years for an appropriate chair only to die before receiving it, we as a society are not keeping our promises. When we hear, as I did recently when Laura, Catherine, Rosemary and I met with a representative of the DHSSPS, that the chairs Children and Young People are receiving are often so unacceptable to the Children and Young People they are designed for, so much so that they are often not being used – I know we have broken our promises.

We, as a society can do better, much better for all our disabled children and young people. We have to do better.

We in NICCY wrote to Shaun Woodward when he was here in Northern Ireland asking him to set targets – not impossible or unreasonable targets, for assessment and delivery of appropriate wheelchairs for Children and Young People with a disability. We were impressed with his ability to cut the waiting lists for hip operations when he set clear targets. So we asked him to do the same for this service. That has not happened. So after today I will write again to his successor – Mr Paul Goggins – to see if we can convince him of the need to listen to the voice of this mostly unheard group of Children and Young People.

This report has laid out a road map of what needs to happen. I hope that individual Trusts and Boards respond to the recommendations. They need to make changes and urgently. But some of the toughest issues are regional ones that the Department needs to address.

It is clear from this report we don't have enough of the right kind of provision to meet the needs of today's disabled young people.



I hope that this report will lead to significant and lasting change – and we won't have to wait for that process of change to begin. As Commissioner for Children and Young People, I want Northern Ireland to be known as a place where disabled children and young people are valued and cared for in a way that allows them to take their place alongside all other children and young people as equal citizens. I want their voice to be heard and responded to.

I commend again the Barnardos and Whizz Kidz team for their work on this report for allowing that process to be given further impetus. For my part, I want to assure you all that NICCY will be watching closely to see what happens to this report and will continue our campaign to ensure disabled children get a fair deal.

Thank you

