

# **Promoting Children's mental health and Resilience**

**25<sup>th</sup> September 2007**

## **Introduction**

Thank you for inviting me to address the conference today and while this issue of mental health and resilience is timely it is with sadness that I speak to you today.

I Niccy I have a panel of 42 young people who help me to do my job and less than 2 weeks ago one of my youth panel decided to take his own life. He was a lively charming handsome 15yr old. Who would have been the last person we would ever have thought would have taken this action. After the immediate shock of the news I



asked myself was there something that Niccy could have done or was there signs we did not pick up on?

But you only have to lift any daily newspaper or listen to the news to get a sense of the huge amount of good work going on, across Northern Ireland by the voluntary, community and statutory organizations' these organisations are the people who are working with children and young people every day - to promote positive mental health, and prevent our young people harming themselves or, even worse like Vyishnu ending their lives.

But this work is not receiving sufficient support from all of government and just DHSSPS. The way the current service is provided lacks direction, strategy and without the proper funding the service is left fragmented.

While there is good practice in some areas of Northern Ireland – each community and individual child has



differing needs; and unfortunately at this time these needs are not being met.

### **NICCY Response to the problem:**

As Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People my job is described simply as:

Promoting and safeguarding the rights and best interests of children and young people to help them challenge and change the world in which they live. But most importantly- to give children and young people in Northern Ireland a voice.

And that's all children and young people up to 18 in Northern Ireland. Except in 2 exceptional circumstances of C&YP who have been in care or who are disabled and that's to the age of 21



When my office was first established, my predecessor, Nigel Williams commissioned Queens University to research the 'state of children's rights in Northern Ireland'. This research highlighted that more than 20% of children and young people in Northern Ireland suffer from mental health problems. The research found that children here experience higher levels of abuse and suicide than those in the rest of the UK and the problem of substance abuse is also continuing to grow. Despite this fact, support and therapy services are unable to provide an efficient and coherent service for all those who need to access it. One professional who was interviewed during this research summed up the current service provision saying;

*"Some of the most vulnerable young people in our society, children who have been exposed to indescribable levels of trauma and abuse, are*



*having clinical decisions made based on resource availability rather than need. We have worked with them for years but due to the present crisis in the service we can no longer keep them safe."*

The report outlined that only approximately 20% of children and young people with significant mental health problems or disorders receive specialist mental health services that means 80% of children and young people in desperate need of mental health services cannot access them). Many are going unrecognised. For those children who are referred it is estimated that between 60 and 70% do not receive appropriate early intervention.

In light of this Nigel was vociferous in expressing his concerns about young people's mental health needs not being adequately provided for in Northern Ireland. In



February, 2005, NICCY hosted a conference which highlighted the issue of self harm and suicide and also displayed best practice in the area of prevention.

This was followed by a NICCY campaign entitled “Message to the Minister” whereby young people were invited to place messages on the NICCY website to be relayed to the Minister for Health, detailing views on how self harm and suicide could be dealt with. In February, 2006, a report of the findings was delivered to Minister Shaun Woodward. Some of the difficulties that the young people highlighted with regards to the current arrangements for self harm and suicide prevention included:

- Difficulties identifying appropriate sources of advice and support.
- Unacceptable delays in accessing services.



- Inappropriate placement of adolescents in adult mental health units.
- Inappropriate incarceration of young people with mental health needs.
- Insufficient needs-focused training and education amongst professionals.
- Inappropriate responses from professionals approached for help.
- Continued stigma/negative societal attitudes.
- Under-funding of services resulting in continued insufficient service provision across the fields of education, health and social services.
- At the time the minister asked if there was one thing he could do for you people what would it be and they counseling in schools and



here we are almost 18 months later and we are still talking about it.

## **Current situation**

Since I came into post at the start of the year the serious mental health difficulties experienced by our young people have been brought into very sharp focus by the high number of suicides of young people in areas across the North such as in Lurgan, Derry and North Belfast; where a recent spate of youth suicide has both shocked and saddened the local community.

My office has supported many young people under 18 years who have been inappropriately placed on adult psychiatric wards.

Now I ask you to put yourself in the position of a 15 year old girl, already frightened and anxious, unsure of



what is happening to her as a result of her mental distress.

Now then, imagine they are placed on a ward with adults, who are mentally ill and finding life difficult already, how would this make you feel? Would it make you feel like you are a person who is valued and in a system that cared for you that was going to make sure you were safe and protected? - I think we all know the answer to that question.

There is also a parallel process with learning disabilities which we know about and were we have seen some of our young people being inappropriately placed because of a lack of services with in the community to meet their needs. In my opinion our Government is failing these young people and contravening their rights.

I am currently working with our Minister for Health to try to ensure a positive outcome in this situation.



We also have many young people receiving treatment outside the jurisdiction as we do not have enough inpatient beds to meet the current demand. As a parent I can just imagine the stress, worry and heart ache of having to stand by and watch as your child is sent miles away to a strange place and at a time when they most need family support. And can you imagine, again, what the child or the young person feels like being isolated from their loved ones, at the most vulnerable time in their young lives?

With this in mind NICCY is developing a policy paper on mental health. This paper will set out what we see as the priorities for the mental health of children and young people and will make recommendations and will challenge the Assembly, to urgently improve the way services are provided.



We are currently undertaking a major piece of research into children's rights in Northern Ireland, in which we have spoken face to face with over 2000 young people as well as parents and professionals. We will be using the findings of this research in the development of our policy on mental health.

## **Changes needed to CAHMS**

We have seen the Bamford review reported last year, which made a series of important recommendations to improve how mental health services are provided. While certain recommendations have been carried forward and implemented, such as the 'suicide prevention strategy', the majority of recommendations have been left unattended. There is still no specific or, set time frame allocated to implement the recommendations that are so urgently needed to fill the gaps in CAMHS in Northern



Ireland. We seen yesterday at a suicide awareness event in the Long gallery at stormont the Ministers for and health and Education talking about what needs to be done but not giving strong commitment to doing it. The excuse often being the cost to implement but what question to all Ministers is how much is it costing you not to implement? How do you put a price on a young life all parents would say that life is priceless.

I believe that from the outset the recommendations of Bamford should have been implemented in line with the ten year strategy for children and young people, unfortunately this has not been the case. The action plan to implement this strategy for 2007-08 set its own targets for developing services for those children and young people experiencing mental ill health. The targets set in this action plan do not reflect the seriousness of the current situation. For example



- Provide a crisis intervention service for Child and Adolescent Mental Health by 2008
- Self harm support services in place in all Health and Social Care Trusts by March 2009

If the government is serious about addressing the high levels of suicide and self harm they would have set interim targets outlining the various services and supports that would be needed for young people who harm themselves and a series of implementation dates for all Trust areas, as opposed to a vague implementation date of March 2009.

I will fully support any policy, strategy or legislation which seeks to promote the social inclusion of children and young people with mental health difficulties. However what Northern Ireland does not need is another review or



strategy or task force. What we need is the Bamford review implemented in its entirety.

Most importantly we need to see an end of the admission of children and young people to adult psychiatric facilities. Northern Ireland needs proper in patient facilities for Children and young people with mental ill health that provides 24 crisis care and admissions.

Children and young people should no longer be admitted to inappropriate facilities, which are not designed to meet their needs, or the changes in the type of care needed, nor does it provide an advocate and voice for them at a time when they most need it.

The present situation regarding child and adolescent mental health service is of critical concern reflecting a serious deficit in what is being provided. Current



legislation 'Mental Health (NI) Order (1986) fails to recognize that the needs of children and young people differ from those of adults.

Given the fact that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern over the high rates of mental health problems experienced by young people in Northern Ireland we must press forward in our demands and in our resolve for major investment in a fully reviewed and expanded mental health service for children and young people.

## **Conclusion**

We can only tackle the issue of mental health in our children and young people by early intervention and prevention. It's not acceptable to continuously put a sticking plaster over this issue and wait for the next crisis.



We need now our own joined up Government with all departments playing their part. I applaud the minister for education for putting counseling in all post primary schools but we need them in primary and in some areas nursery schools. And when these counselors have assessed these young people are there services to pass them on to in many areas there isn't.

What happens after school hours if a young person needs help? We have projects delivering 12 hr rapid response in some areas. A young person cant wait 12hrs for help they need it immediately.

We need to map the models of good practice in individual communities that are addressing the real needs of our Children and Young people and add value to those projects. Not reinvent the wheel or decided that one project fits everyone.



We need to recognize the contribution that the com/vol sector make in communities, who in turn should and are working in partnership with the statutory sector and professionals so they all compliment each other and who together will then meet the individual needs of all of our young people.

Because they deserve no less!

