

The Impact of Conflict Legacy Issues on Children and Young People

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Introduction

Thanks to CVS for the opportunity to speak on this hugely important issue
Wish them success on their 2 day conference

Role of NICCY

By way of context setting, the office of the Children's Commissioner was set up in 2003. Our purpose, as set out in our founding legislation, is to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people. As part of my remit, I have a duty to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children. In doing so, my Office must have regard to the rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We therefore view children and young people as rights holders who are entitled to a basic set of minimum standards and obligations in all aspects of their lives which the Government has committed to upholding through ratification of the UNCRC.

Strategy For Victims And Survivors 2009 - 2019

Given that this Conference is focusing on Reviewing the Strategy for Victims and Survivors 2009 – 2019, as my starting point I thought it would be useful to revisit what the Strategy says about children and young people. As well as suggesting that the Commission for Victims and Survivors may want to initiate further research into specific areas such as the impact of the conflict on children and young people in carrying out its comprehensive needs assessment. Para 38 of the strategy is explicit that the work to supporting victims

and survivors must also have regard for the future and crucially the impact on today's children and young people of living in families and communities so deeply affected by NI's Troubles.

In addressing current needs and examining the past the (Victims and Survivors) Forum must be aware that how it deals with those matters will have important implications for the future.

An important area to be addressed is likely to be the inter-generational impact of the troubles on children and young people and the need to promote cross-community work with children and young people.

The strategy then goes on to commit to the establishment of links between the Commission for Victims and Survivors and NICCY – a process which I am pleased to report has begun. We will be undertaking joint working with the common aim of achieving better outcomes for children and young people in Northern Ireland. So watch this space!!

Your Voice Matters

In considering the Impact of Conflict Legacy Issues on children and young people, it is important to examine the current reality of their lives. Since becoming commissioner in March 2015 my office has undertaken intensive engagement with over 500 young people aged 8 to 21 (in keeping with my remit) from across Northern Ireland and from a variety of communities and a range of settings in order to hear from them directly about the issues impacting on their lives. We asked them about the priorities that we had identified which are mental health, child poverty, education inequalities and of course their rights but also about what else was important to their lives. As you would imagine a number of issues were raised with us but one of the most consistent from across all of Northern Ireland was the impact of the “legacy of the conflict”. It was clear to me from talking to young people that despite the fact that almost all children in NI today were born after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, despite having grown up in a time of relative peace and stability and never having lived during the conflict as such, they feel its impact every day.

Research Findings

Research findings support this. Research commissioned by the Commission for Victims and Survivors and carried out by the University of Ulster in 2015¹ suggests that parents psychologically affected by the Troubles continue to affect the lives of children and young people today. The transmission of poor mental health and attitudes within families in combination with economic deprivation is detrimental to the development of children in their early years. It identified some groups of children and young people as particularly vulnerable specifically young men living in working class areas who continue to be exposed to interface violence and paramilitary threat and attack and the children of victims and survivors, ex-combatants and serving and ex-security force personnel due to their exposure to the negative consequences of the conflict.

Children's Lives In Northern Ireland

If we begin to unpack some of these issues we can hope to get a clearer picture of how children and young people's lives are being impacted upon growing up in Northern Ireland today. It does give rise to the question of who are "the children of the troubles".

I am not going to claim that today's children have the same issues and experiences as those growing up in the conflict, but I do claim that they are living with the consequences of that conflict.

We know that segregation and community division continue to be a part of daily life for many children and young people. Public housing is almost entirely segregated by religion, with over 90% of children attending segregated schools and leisure facilities and training courses in particular areas are out of bounds for some young people because of their location and perceived identity. While cross-community contact has increased, friendships

¹ Towards a Better Future Report: The Transgenerational Impact of the Troubles on Mental Health, UU, commissioned by CVS, March 2015

and marriages continue to be mainly 'in group'. Young people themselves constantly express their frustration with segregation in Northern Ireland.

“Segregated education is a massive issue which has to be urgently addressed.”

“Why do Catholics only play camogie?”

Many young people continue to have direct experience of sectarian abuse and harassment as part of their daily lives including on their journey to and from school, in town centres and when venturing outside 'their' community boundary. Low level and localised violence continues to occur, particularly in interface areas and young people are still subject to paramilitary threat, attack and intimidation from their homes.

Reports of activity by these non-state forces have been confirmed by young people across both communities who have stated that there is increasing recruitment to paramilitary organisations often through coercion or in payment for drug debts. Young people perceived to be involved in crime or anti-social behaviour continue to be assaulted and excluded from their communities. Regardless of what we believe the consequences of alleged criminal behaviour should be such behaviour must only be addressed through the formal child care and criminal justice systems. Punishment attacks or community justice are not terms that have any place in our society, these are assaults on children and perpetrators of such abuse cannot be allowed to continue with impunity. They have created more victims of the conflict. Article 19 of the UNCRC is quite clear – children must be protected from ALL forms of violence. Addressing this issue is complex and will involve a range of agencies including education, child protection and family support and youth services but also the relationship and confidence that communities and young people themselves have in the criminal justice system generally and our police service in particular.

One of the young people I spoke to reflected that, *“The conflict is not so much between communities, but within communities”*.

Children's Lives In Northern Ireland

There is a stark correlation between the areas most impacted upon by the conflict and the most socially deprived with the highest levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland in the West Belfast (32%), Foyle (32%) and North Belfast (29%) constituencies. There is recognition that some areas, particularly in Belfast, have not benefitted from the end of the conflict in the same way as others and is particularly true of those areas which are most economically deprived. Child poverty projections for 2020 predict a worrying rise in poverty rates. It is likely that the future for children and young people living in the most economically deprived areas, most impacted upon by the conflict will only remain in poverty with its negative impacts on their lives and so the cycle continues resulting with children living with the impacts of a conflict not of their making and which supposedly ended before they were born.

It is well recognised that factors associated with the conflict impact severely on child and adolescent mental health² yet there is very little recognition of the longer-term consequences of trans-generational trauma or of the impact on children of living in deeply-divided, sectarian communities. Evidence consistently shows that between 20 and 30% of children in Northern Ireland will develop mental health problems before reaching their 18th birthday. Northern Ireland is estimated as having a 25% higher rate of mental illness than England and the highest rate of suicide on these islands. Research has found that traumatic experiences and exposure to violence can lead to adverse mental health not only for the person themselves, but also for their children and grandchildren, resulting in a trans-generational cycle. The effects of violence, traumatic experiences and social segregation impact upon parenting practices which affect early attachment and the capacity of the child to self-regulate, thereby increasing the risk of mental disorders, behavioural problems and suicide. Despite this, child and adolescent mental health services in Northern Ireland are severely underfunded.

Educational under attainment places young people at a significant disadvantage when it comes to securing further education and employment. The areas most impacted upon by

²A Vision for a Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service – The Bamford Review November 2005.

the conflict are also the most socially deprived. Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME) is an indicator of social deprivation and is highly correlated with lower levels of educational attainment, with pupils entitled to free school meals being more likely to have special educational needs; be excluded from school; be persistent truants; at risk of becoming involved in anti-social behaviour; and, as a consequence, when they leave school they are more likely to be unemployed or earning lower salaries. This lack of opportunity and disadvantage is compounded when you consider the fact that the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training are considerably higher here than the UK average, as is youth unemployment.³ Research has shown lack of opportunity to have a severe impact on mental health.

Where children get their information about the conflict is also an issue to consider. Evidence shows that the three main influences in children's lives are their parents, school and relatives. Stories passed down through families as well as mural and commemorations serve as constant reminders of the past and the impact of the conflict on 'their community'. Research carried out for the Commission for Victims and Survivors by Queens University Belfast particularly highlights the culture of silence regarding the conflict beyond the family into mainstream society. The report notes that, "*silence regarding the Troubles is pervasive in Northern Ireland*" and highlights this as a key mechanism which contributes to the transmission of trans-generational trauma. The young people I engaged with picked up on this issue and many expressed a willingness to talk openly about the conflict and its impacts and to 'get things out into the open'.

The Profile of Children in Northern Ireland

Traditionally the focus when examining the profile of children and young people in NI in the context of conflict legacy issues has been children from the two main communities only. We know that this is not an accurate reflection of all of the children and young people who live in NI which has become an increasingly diverse society. Numbers of newcomer children registered in schools in Northern Ireland have risen year on year, with a 110%

³ Oct – Dec 2015, published Feb 2016 Labour Force Survey Figures, DETNI 16-24 year olds NEET – 13.8% NI and 11.8% UK Average, Youth Unemployment 17.8% and NI 11.7% UK Average.

increase recorded between 2007 and 2014.⁴ We know very little about the impact of the conflict on children and young people who do not traditionally come within one of the two main community groups. Racist attacks and racially motivated crimes are being reported in Northern Ireland with increasing frequency. NGO's working with children from minority ethnic communities highlight racism as an issue for children which impacts on their right to play. The 2014 Young Life and Times Survey found that 39% of the 16 year olds taking part in the survey had witnessed racist bullying or harassment in school.⁵ Difficulties have also been reported in placing newcomer children in Belfast based schools due to a fear of racist attacks when travelling to school.⁶ OFMDFM's Racial Equality Strategy acknowledges that racism in our society is, to an extent, shaped by sectarianism. It also states that the Northern Ireland conflict has created patterns and attitudes, such as residential segregation and heightened territorial awareness, which now impact upon minority ethnic communities. It acknowledges the link between sectarianism and racism and states that we cannot hope to tackle one without tackling the other.

Inclusion of Children

It is vital in ensuring that children and young people have a role in contributing to a peaceful and stable future in Northern Ireland that they are included in decisions which impact on their lives. Young people repeatedly raise with me their exclusion from decision making structures within their communities and beyond.⁷ One of the young people I talked to expressed his frustration with the lack of willingness of adults to listen to young people and said,

“Adults don't listen to each other so why would they listen to young people”.

Young people express the view that adults aren't interested in what they want or think and that their views are not respected by their community. Research also highlights the

⁴<http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/PivotGrid.aspx?ds=6317&lh=42&yn=2007-2014&sk=130&sn=Children%20Education%20and%20Skills&yearfilter=>

⁵ 'Young Life and Times Survey 2014' ARK.

⁶ 'The integration of newcomer children with interrupted education into Northern Ireland schools – A Belfast based case study,' Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership, September 2014.

⁷ *Ibid.*

frustration of young people about their exclusion from community meetings where they were regularly the focus of attention.

NICCY research has found that children and young people are not routinely consulted with in decisions which impact on their lives, despite the Government being under a statutory obligation to ensure that they are.⁸ Nor is there any evidence that where engagement with children and young people takes place that this has any impact on the development of policies, strategies, legislation and services. We have a woeful lack of formal process by which to do this with the establishment of a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly a low priority and that ongoing austerity measures make the prospect of such an Assembly even less likely.

Government Policy

There has been and continues to be very little focus in the Northern Ireland peace process on the impact of conflict on children and young people. Children are not mentioned in the Good Friday Agreement and young people are mentioned only once where the Agreement states,

“The participants particularly recognise that young people from areas affected by the troubles face particular difficulties and will support the development of special community-based initiatives based on international best practice”⁹

In light of the levels of child poverty, child and adolescent mental ill-health and educational inequality in those areas most impacted upon by the conflict, it is difficult to see how there has been any consistent attempt to deliver upon this commitment.

In relation to the Government's, 'Together Building A United Community' Strategy,¹⁰ the Strategy talks of the need to, '*improve attitudes*' among young people so that they can

⁸ P. Keenan, Commissioned by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, (2014) "Participation in Government: Walking or Talking Participation".

⁹ The Good Friday Agreement: Agreement reached in multi-party negotiations, April 1998.

¹⁰ 'Together: Building a United Community' Strategy, OFMDFM, May 23 2013.

play a full and active role in building good relations. The implication of the use of this language is that it is the attitudes of young people which prevents them from being able to play an active role in building good relations. There is no other group singled out under the Strategy in this manner. The problems of division, segregation and sectarianism require a much more comprehensive solution other than improving the attitudes of young people.

While young people have a vital role to play in moving towards a more peaceful and stable future, it is adults and the Government who must ensure that they are included and facilitated to play it. Central to this is the need to urgently address the serious disadvantage many young people face as a result of living with the legacy of a conflict which is not of their making but which is extremely pervasive in their lives.

Conclusion

In making my closing remarks, it is clear that there are many challenges for us all in addressing the serious conflict legacy issues which impact on the lives of children and young people. All children and young people in Northern Ireland have the right to develop to their maximum potential and thrive and we are all under an obligation to ensure that they do. Given what I have outlined in relation to the reality of children's lives in Northern Ireland there is a clear need for much greater investment to address legacy issues including child poverty, high rates of mental ill-health and educational under-attainment. Similarly, the reality of violence and sectarianism must be addressed and all children must be safe from harm. We need to have an open and honest conversation which includes children and young people about the impact of the conflict and how we as a society move forward in peace and stability. Adults and Government need to facilitate young people to have their say and also to listen and act. I look forward to working with the Commission for Victims and Survivors further to secure a better future for all of the children and young people on Northern Ireland.

Thank you for your attention.

Koulla Yiasouma