

National Children's Advisory Council

Mid - term Review of the National Children's Strategy 2000 - 2010

An Ireland where all children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential.

Lynne Peyton/Ken Wilson
28 January 2006

Peyton/Wilson Jan 2006

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Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the Council's Mid Term Review Report of the National Children's Strategy to the Minister at a time when children and young people, their needs and future have received a renewed commitment by Government by the creation of the new Office of the Minister for Children.

During the period of the Strategy there have been a great many developments in regard to children and young people, in keeping with a contemporary view of childhood, adolescence and the celebration of what it is like to be young. Various examples of young people's growing involvement in day to day decision making are commented on within the report. Such progress however brings with it many challenges not only for young people and their carers, but for those who work alongside them on a daily basis and for those who have a responsibility to fulfil the promise of the National Children's Strategy. While we have been creating mechanisms to enhance an understanding of children's needs, immigration has changed the profile of our child population. This is both a challenging and enriching opportunity for our nation.

This report provides a broad overview of how the Strategy has been implemented across the country, identifies some of the areas still to be addressed and makes a series of recommendations and suggestions for changes and structural developments. The report challenges us to consider how we can make best use of the next five years, utilise the range of expertise and skills available and build on the foundation created to date.


It seems appropriate and timely to revisit the rationale for and purpose of the Strategy and evaluate the extent to which Departments, individually and collectively have delivered, to consider the barriers to change and whether adjustments are necessary. Similarly it is important to look carefully at the political, Departmental, agency, collegiate and individual responsibilities involved in driving the strategy forward. In light of the knowledge and experience gained in the first five years, it is appropriate to consider if there are alternative ways forward in the remaining five years of the strategy to

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ensure maximum ownership by all stakeholders and that a renewed sense of common purpose is created.

Many of the issues raised in the report will apply to all sectors who work with, or on behalf of, children and young people. For many the challenge will be to renew their commitment to young people in our cities and rural areas. In partnership with the Office of the Minister for Children, members of the Advisory Board and the National Children's Advisory Council will need to review their roles and responsibilities to ensure that these are in keeping with what is required for the future. Robust mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of activities of the various partners implementing the strategy are needed. In addition to greater transparency and clearer communications, a commitment is required from all stakeholders to refocus on outcomes that will deliver the overall strategy in the remaining period.

A coordinated and focussed approach to implement the measures outlined in the strategy will benefit all the children of the nation.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter O'Brien". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Peter O'Brien

Chairman

Chapter 1

Executive Summary

Chapter 1

Executive Summary

The National Children's Advisory Council was asked in the summer of 2005 by the Minister of State with Responsibility for Children to undertake a Mid Term Review of the National Children's Strategy, 'Our Children - Their Lives' in order to identify progress to date and to consider how the Strategy might be refreshed for the remaining five years. The Council commissioned consultants with a background in multi-agency children's services planning and management to undertake the Review, with direction and support from a sub-group, representing the broad interest groups within the Council, including younger members.

The National Children's Strategy was launched by the Taoiseach in 2000 following widespread consultation with the full range of stakeholders and for the first time in Ireland, with children and young people themselves. It covers a 10 year period, 2000-2010 and draws together the challenges facing children in Ireland in all aspects of their lives and commits Government Departments and agencies to a range of objectives to address these issues. The Government pledges its support for 3 National goals:-

- To give children a voice by ensuring they are consulted about matters which affect them and enable them to participate as active citizens.
- To ensure that children's needs and the issues affecting them are better understood by collating information and conducting relevant research.
- To support children's optimal development in all aspects of their lives by providing them with quality supports and services, including additional supports for young people with special needs and those who will at times require additional help.

The Strategy recognises the importance of family and community life as the context for young people's development and emphasises the need to link the

Children's Strategy with other high level strategic initiatives including the National Development Plan, the National Youth Work Development Plan, the Social Inclusion Initiative and the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

In recognition of past criticisms and to promote effective coordinated activity across Departments, a comprehensive new structure, the 'Engine for Change', was established. A new office, the National Children's Office (NCO), was created with strong horizontal links to promote cross-cutting approaches, which would bring added value to each Department's contribution and which would also harness the knowledge of all those with a policy, planning or management role for services which impact on children as well as those working directly with children and families. Lines of accountability were through the NCO Board to the Minister and a Cabinet Sub Committee on Children.

The Review process began with an initial workshop with Council members in September 2005 during which they identified the progress achieved within the Strategy, highlighted the issues and barriers still to be overcome and made suggestions as to how the Strategy could be reenergised for the remainder of its timeframe and beyond. A sub-group, representative of the range of stakeholders including younger members, was established (see Appendix 1). Methodology included an extensive range of interviews and focus groups held in Dublin, Limerick, Donegal and Cork with those working in the areas of children's health, welfare, protection, education, youth justice, rights, sport, leisure, recreation and participation and citizenship. A wide range of reports and material was amassed and reviewed and questionnaires designed to harness feedback from parents and young people were circulated. Interviews were also held with Assistant Secretaries from each of the Departments represented on the NCO Board and other senior civil servants. Following the announcement of the new Office of the Minister for Children, a meeting was held with the Minister.

This process demonstrated that:-

- The Strategy is a coherent and comprehensive approach to addressing the needs and rights of young people which remains valid and can be readily updated to take account of new and emerging issues. There have been many notable achievements which provide a model for the delivery of remaining objectives. These have been most marked where there has been a strong Government mandate; inter-Departmental cooperation and dependence; a coordinated multi-agency national and local framework for delivery; incremental approaches; appropriate resources, based on concrete plans designed to achieve agreed outcomes; links into other national strategies and initiatives; a standards-based approach; and where monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are built in at the outset.
- Throughout the country there is real interest, energy and activity in relation to work with young people and in some areas of children's lives progress has been very rapid. At the time the Strategy was launched the baseline of many services for children and families was generally low and while much has been achieved there are still very considerable deficits and inequalities across the country. Infrastructure to support some of the developments is only now being established and increasingly attempts are being made to provide coherent frameworks which address issues such as quality, standards, outcomes, equality, and which provide mechanisms for information collation and analysis, monitoring and evaluation.
- Progress in achieving more of the objectives which require effective cross cutting work has been limited by the lack of integration of the Strategy into each Department's plans and by an apparent lack of clarity or negotiated agreement about the role of the NCO. The Strategy envisaged the NCO as "an independent body established under the Public Service Management Act 1997" whereas in effect it remained within the Department of Health and Children. It is not clear from records made available to the Review when or how this decision

was made and while some saw strong links with the Department of Health and Children as a benefit, there were many who considered it a disadvantage to be linked to any one Government Department. It was also noted that the Department of Health and Children had been preoccupied with a number of critical and very public issues throughout the life of the Strategy. Without budgetary control NCO can only negotiate the cooperation of other Departments and has demonstrated most effectively how this could bring effective outcomes for all concerned in the Play Strategy and Homelessness Guidelines as well as in the work to identify constraints to the implementation of the Children Act 2001. However it is the view of many Council members, endorsed by those interviewed within the Health Services Executive (HSE), Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and community sectors, that there has not in effect been a real driver for the overall Strategy. During the Strategy's development expectations were created among the statutory and voluntary sector that the NCO would be the main driver supported by its high level Board of Assistant Secretaries. In reality the NCO found it did not have either the mandate or the budgetary control and in the context of this limited authority and resources, has adopted a project-based approach to taking forward priorities. These were generally on issues considered to be important by young people themselves or identified as priorities by the Cabinet Sub-Committee.

- Several fundamental commitments in the Strategy have still to be met in a strategic and outcome-driven way with appropriate levels of recurring revenue being committed. These include tackling child poverty, protecting children from abuse and providing appropriate treatment to minimise the trauma of abuse, providing adequate child health services and providing supports for children with special needs. Excellent strategic approaches which have been agreed nationally have been only partially implemented, for example the Children First Guidelines and the approach to delivery of children's services in the Programme of Action for Children. Considerable variations in terms of

the levels and standards of health and social services for children were evident within the former Health Boards structure and it is important that the new Health Service Executive ensures a more coherent standardised and evaluated approach if it is to achieve its proposed performance management outcomes.

- NCO has provided the lead in reaching agreement on a set of well being indicators and in commissioning the National Longitudinal Study in conjunction with the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Social and Family Affairs. Awarding research scholarships to encourage research relevant to the strategy is an important way of linking in to the academic institutions. There is evidence of a strong commitment to research across all the areas of the strategy and within several Departments. However this may need to be further developed through the Children's Research Advisory Group, within a coherent research programme to support the Strategy. The Development of a National Research Dissemination Unit as envisaged in the Strategy, perhaps in conjunction with an appropriate partner, would be an effective central means for defining standards required for research and establishing protocols for effective dissemination. This unit could also ensure mechanisms are established to encourage sharing of good practice and communicating the extent and nature of developments across the country thus promoting opportunities to share, reflect and learn from each other's work. In light of some of the emerging issues a research agenda will need to be developed in conjunction with the wider sector.
- The appointment of an Ombudsman for Children is a significant milestone in the promotion of children's rights and in ensuring that issues and concerns raised by children are heard and addressed.
- Consultation with children and young people and their participation in decision making at national, local and project level across the country

has been greatly enhanced as a consequence of the Government's commitment to giving young people a voice in matters affecting them as required by Article 12 of the UN Convention. The Review draws on a range of reported experiences and on research commissioned by the NCO who have had a lead role on this goal.

- There was a sense that the energy, enthusiasm and awareness nationally as regards the Strategy has waned as a consequence of its lower profile in both the public and political arena. However there is also a tremendous commitment by those working with and on behalf of children to promote and implement the National Children's Strategy and to support the Minister and his new Office in this task. While there has been widespread support for the new enhanced structural arrangements there needs to be greater clarity as to:-
 - How the three core Departments of Health and Children, Education and Science, and Justice, Equality and Law Reform will link with other Departments with responsibilities for delivering the Strategy.
 - The structural arrangements envisaged for driving the overall Children's Strategy and the lines of accountability.
 - The additional resources to be made available.

The report makes a number of timely and achievable recommendations to refresh and re-energise the Strategy and to move closer to the Vision of "an Ireland where all children are respected as young citizens" who "enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential".

The key recommendations are:-

- The Government through the Cabinet sub-Committee and the Minister for Children must :-
 - Demonstrate renewed political leadership in validating the Children's Strategy and committing to its full implementation to

2010 and beyond.

- Ensure the Office of the Minister for Children has the mandate, authority and appropriate resources to drive the implementation of the Strategy.
- The Cabinet Sub-Committee should:-
 - Ensure that every Department fulfils its responsibilities within the Strategy, incorporates these into individual Departmental Strategies and secures appropriate levels of recurrent funding, linked to identifiable outcomes.
 - Review the “Engine for Change” structures in the light of experience and feedback and strengthen them to include clear terms of reference and lines of accountability which ensure they can deliver against the agenda.
 - Confirm the NCAC’s role and the mechanisms for monitoring progress against the Strategy’s business plan.
- The Minister for Children should:-
 - Establish a short-life taskforce with clear terms of reference to take forward the recommendations of the Review.
 - Set up a formal mechanism to review the Strategy in 2008/9 with a view to developing the second National Children’s Strategy for 2010 and beyond.
 - Reaffirm the commitment to actively progressing and further developing young people’s participation.
- The Office of the Minister for Children must, in conjunction with the Secretaries General:-
 - Urgently produce a three year, rolling business plan for implementing the Strategy which is outcome driven, costed and timetabled and identifies the responsibilities of each Department/Agency.
 - Ensure that responsibilities and commitments are reflected in

each Department's Strategy and that actions required by the Children's Strategy are incorporated into their individual business plans with resources identified and committed.

- Monitor progress against the business plan.
- Establish effective arrangements for reviewing progress and developing/refreshing the Strategy on a regular basis in light of developments and emerging issues.
- Ensure children's active participation is accomplished by further integrating young people's views into the work of central and local government and local agencies through further developing mechanisms such as Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg.
- Consider in conjunction with the HSE how planning for children's services can be linked into the CDB's planning arrangements and processes given that many of the issues affecting children such as economic development, housing, recreation and leisure, transport, childcare, and policing need to be developed within this joined up local government.
- Agree a coherent data collection and information management strategy.
- Establish the National Research Dissemination Unit and further develop the research strategy.
- Ensure that all new legislation, policies and strategies are in compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Consider and address the needs of black and minority ethnic children and include mechanisms for involving these young people and their families in the process.
- Develop a robust communications strategy comprising *inter alia*, mechanisms for efficient communication between the Office and other key bodies and individuals at both national and local level using available technology, existing communications networks and the media.

Chapter 2

What is the National Children's Strategy?

An Overview

2. Introduction - An Overview of the National Children's Strategy

This section summaries the National Children's Strategy. It covers the background to the Strategy and its roots in the UN Convention on the outcome of public consultations and the vision and goals for children. It sets out the objectives through which each goal will be achieved and describes the structures and coordinating mechanisms necessary to achieve this complex and multi-faceted vision for children in Ireland. For ease of reference the appropriate page numbers in the Strategy document are identified.

Background to the Strategy

The Strategy, which was launched by the Taoiseach in November 2000 and covers a 10 year period, provides a landmark in the history of Ireland's approach to supporting children. The adoption of a comprehensive national strategy for children was one of the key recommendations of the United Nations Committee, following Ireland's first national report in 1998 on its implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which it ratified in 1992. While the UN Committee recognised Ireland's positive performance in areas like education, social welfare and protecting children from sexual exploitation, it expressed concern about other areas such as the lack of research regarding children's lives, high rates of early school leaving, inadequate mental health services for children and the low age of criminal responsibility. Overall it was felt that Ireland's approach to addressing children's rights was fragmented and would benefit from a national integrated and strategic approach which would incorporate the principles and provision of the Convention. The Government's response was swift and considered, demonstrating its significant commitment to a transparent, informed and consultative approach. The Strategy acknowledges past failures, identifies the many barriers to addressing children's needs, and commits to helping all children regardless of circumstance to achieve their potential.

Consultation

The Vision, the 3 National Goals and all of the underlying principles and objectives of the National Children's Strategy were agreed following a unique process of widespread consultation with stakeholders at every level in Irish society and with support from international expert advisors. Most importantly, the then Minister for Children took a lead in actively engaging with children and young people to learn about the issues which were relevant to them, to listen to their views as to how their lives could be enhanced and to explore how young people can contribute to understanding the issues, and to influencing service development and provision in an ongoing and constructive manner. The main themes emerging from the consultation were:-

- The need to develop a more rounded view of children's needs as a basis for more effective policy development and service delivery.
- Recognition that children are citizens and their rights need to be strengthened in legislation, policies and practices and that they have a right to express their views.
- An emphasis on the empowerment and support of families and communities as the most effective way of supporting children.
- Identification of the main areas of children's concerns and needs which must be addressed as:-
 - Health and wellbeing
 - Learning and education
 - Play, leisure and cultural opportunities
 - Children in crisis
 - Child poverty and youth homelessness
 - Discrimination in children's lives
 - Supporting children with disabilities
 - Responding to and harnessing children's concern for the environment
- Better co-ordination between Government Departments at national level and locally between statutory and voluntary agencies.

- Better evaluation of the effectiveness of services, with investment directed to programmes which research identifies as likely to benefit children.
- The need for ongoing consultation and communication during the implementation of the Strategy to ensure the continued engagement of both children and adults.

The central role of parents and families in supporting children is acknowledged, as is the relevance of communities and the voluntary sector, as well as more formal provision by Government Departments and agencies.

Coordination and Collaboration

The framework for implementing the strategy, “the Engine for Change”, is designed to promote full and effective collaboration between Government Departments, statutory and voluntary agencies, researchers, parents and young people themselves. It challenges those at both national and local level to work collaboratively to identify and address children’s needs. It establishes clear outcomes and provides the bodies to both drive and monitor progress against the objectives, namely the National Children’s Office and National Children’s Advisory Council. The appointment of a Minister for Children and the creation of a Cabinet Sub-Committee, chaired by the Taoiseach, was designed to provide political leadership and stewardship to promote collaboration between Government Departments and other partners in achieving this ambitious and cross-cutting plan.

Three National Goals

Goal 1: Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

Objectives:-

- To put in place new mechanisms in the public sector which achieve participation by children in matters which affect them.
- To promote and support the development of a similar approach in the voluntary and private sectors.
- To ensure that children are made aware of their rights and responsibilities.
- To support children and organisations to make the most of the new opportunities to be provided.
- To target additional resources and supports to enable marginalised children to participate equally.
- To support research into and evaluation of new mechanisms to give children a voice.

Critical to the achievement of the Strategy are the structures at national and local level to achieve participation by young people and the strategy proposes a number of measures to achieve this including:-

- Dáil na nÓg or Children's Parliament
- Local fora within County Development Board areas
- Office of Ombudsman for Children
- Measures within health and education and other national and local fora
- Family Group Conferencing
- Guardian *ad Litem* Service Review.
- Ratification of the European Convention on the exercise of Children's Rights.
- Representation and complaints procedure for children in care.
- Medical Consent in relation to children
- Children's Constitutional Rights.

In general a commitment is made that "Children's views should be represented wherever services important for their wellbeing are being planned or delivered" (page 33).

Goal 2: Children’s lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.

“The aim of this goal is to achieve a better understanding of how children grow up in Ireland, including their individual and shared needs” (page 38).

Research and information are necessary for the achievement of the other two national goals as well as to ensure maximum effectiveness of all resources. The Strategy recognises the need for “significant investment over the next 10 years” (page 38) and the need for an evidence-based approach to committing resources and evaluating their impact.

Objectives:-

- To build up a more coherent understanding of children’s development and needs among those working with children.
- To develop an evidence-based approach to decision-making at all levels down to the point of service delivery.
- To improve the commissioning, production and dissemination of research and information.
- To improve evaluation and monitoring of children’s services.

The measures identified to achieve this goal include:-

- National longitudinal study to examine progress and well-being of children from birth to adulthood.
- Children’s Research Programme.
- Better information systems which identify what information is needed on a cross-Departmental basis and how it can be pooled from existing Departmental databases.
- Children well-being indicators related to the whole child perspective set out in the strategy.

- State of the Nation's Children Report to be produced every two years – to provide regular updates on key indicators of well being and a report on the progress in achieving the goals of the strategy.
- National Children's Research Dissemination Unit to collate, share and promote access to research by users across the sectors working with children.
- Child Impact Statements – to be required by all Departments as part of their Departmental strategy statements
- Quality standards for children's services provision

Goal 3: Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

The key aim is to ensure that supports and services address the full range of children's needs and that they are accessible to all children and as far as possible are provided within local committees. Links are made with other strategies such as the National Health Promotion Strategy, National Anti-Poverty Strategy and the National Youth Work Development Plan. In particular the Strategy says that the National Development Plan in areas such as "childcare, recreational infrastructure, community development, family services, housing, roads and transport" ... needs to be "informed by the Strategy and advanced in ways that benefit children" (page 45). The need for prevention and early intervention is stressed particularly with the increasing numbers of young people with mental health problems and those "children in crisis – appearing before the courts" (page 45).

Objectives:-

Group 1 – All Children Have a Basic Range of Needs

These objectives recognise that all children should have the foundation of a good education, appropriate health services and access to a range of play and leisure experiences. "Special attention" is given to play and leisure

opportunities as consultation with young people identified a major gap in provision in their local communities.

- A Children's early education and developmental needs will be met through quality childcare services and family-friendly employment measures.
- B Children will benefit from a range of educational opportunities and experiences which reflect the diversity of need.
- C Children will be supported to enjoy the optimum physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.
- D Children will have access to play, sport, recreation and cultural activities to enrich their experience of childhood.
- E Children will have opportunities to explore information and communication technologies in ways which are safe and developmentally supportive.
- F Children will be safeguarded to enjoy their childhood free from all forms of abuse and exploitation.

Group 2 – Some Children Have Additional Needs

These objectives address the social exclusion and social disadvantage experienced by some children and “build on the Government's Social Inclusion Initiative and the National Anti-Poverty Strategy”.

- G Children will be provided with the financial supports necessary to eliminate child poverty.
- H Children will have access to accommodation appropriate to their needs.

- I Children with behavioural problems coming before the courts or in trouble with the law will be supported in the least restrictive environment while having their needs addressed.
- J Children with a disability will be entitled to the services they need to achieve their full potential.
- K Children will be educated and supported to value social and cultural diversity so that all children including Travellers and other marginalised groups achieve their full potential.

Group 3 – All Children Need the Support of Family and Community

Recognising the findings of the Commission on the family that experience of family life is the “single greatest influence on an individual’s life” these objectives support the Government’s commitment to “protecting the family through political, economic, social and other measures” (page 47). It also endorses the White Paper on “Supporting Voluntary Activity”.

- L Children will have the opportunity to experience the qualities of family life.
- M Children will benefit from and contribute to vibrant local communities.
- N Children will benefit from a built and natural environment which supports their physical and emotional wellbeing.

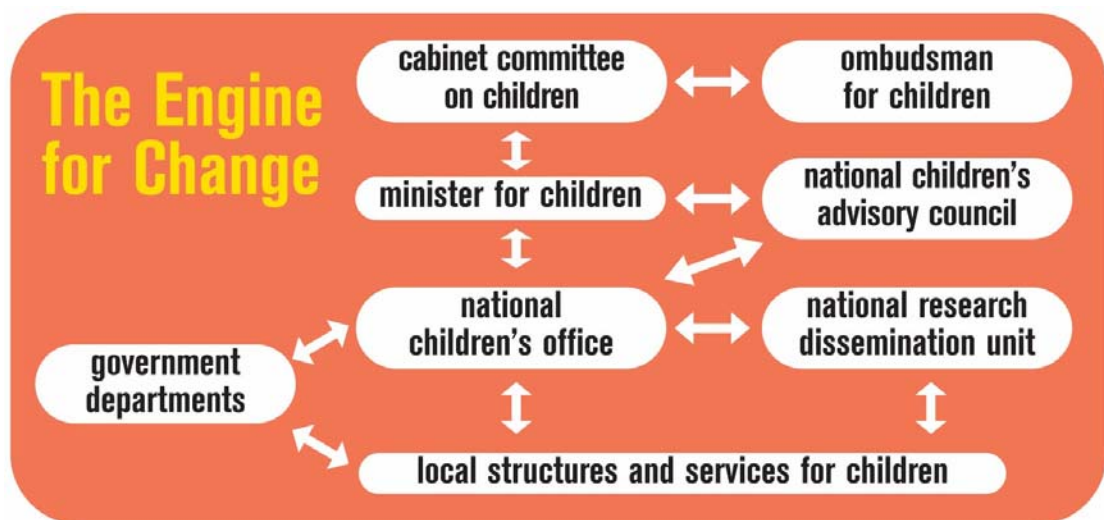
In order to achieve all of these objectives, the Strategy sets out a complex and ambitious agenda of actions covering legislative review, policy development, research, information strategies and systems, consultation, service design and delivery, development of standards, training and changes to the provision of state benefits. It recognises the need for action at both national and local level within a context of “existing Government commitments and policies” and “normal Government budgetary and decision-making processes” (page 48).

The Structures for Implementing the Strategy - The “Engine for Change”

The Strategy recognises that achievement of the goals requires changes in the way services for children are planned and managed.

The structures to deliver the goals and objectives of the National Children’s Strategy represent an important and radical approach. The Strategy recognises the complexity of the challenge and that to be effective national structures must provide for political stewardship of the design and implementation of policy and the involvement of key sectors and clear assignment of Departmental responsibilities.

The Engine for Change



The “engine for change” as outlined above is designed to facilitate more effective co-operation between Departments and ensure that the Strategy maintains a high profile at Government level. The role and responsibilities envisaged for each of the components of the delivery mechanism for the National Children’s Strategy is outlined in Appendix 2.

The Strategy envisages that the Cabinet Sub Committee will “bring the relevant Ministers together to set priorities”, “monitor progress and review how

effectively government Departments are integrating their efforts and resources to deliver priorities". A Minister of State, to be known as the Minister for Children will have overall responsibility for co-ordinating children's policy. The National Children's Office is established to provide "a major boost to managing cross-Departmental issues" and for driving the implementation of the cross-Departmental agenda. It will have the expertise and the significant budgetary resources necessary to enable it to provide administrative support to the Minister for Children and to act as a strong support mechanism for Departments in relation to the implementation of the Strategy. Established as an independent body under the Public Services Management Act 1997 its role is to problem solve and find solutions where better co-ordination between Departments and between agencies is required. In particular the NCO is to develop existing relationships and build new ones by encouraging and facilitating links between organisations. In addressing specific issues it can set up "Cross-Departmental project teams with local statutory and voluntary representatives, supported by commissioned experts".

The Office is headed up by a Board comprising Assistant Secretaries from the main Departments involved in implementation of the Strategy with links to local level public bodies. These Assistant Secretaries and local level representatives would have responsibility for ensuring the implementation of the Strategy in their own Departments and organisations. "The Children's Office will work to effect change through the Board, building on existing integration mechanisms". (page 85)

The Strategy recognises that in order to maintain a focus on children within each Department, that individual Departments need to retain responsibility for implementing the Strategy and to integrate it within their programme of work. It is envisaged that Departments would be supported by the NCO in preparing and implementing their detailed action plans to achieve the national goals.

Similarly, services will need to be better coordinated and more integrated at

local level through being linked with national structures, developments and initiatives and through more effective mechanisms for working together across sectors at local level. Consultation with children, families and committees is an essential element in addressing local needs and the Strategy emphasises the need for ongoing consultation with children and adults, as well as the role of the voluntary sector in delivering the agenda for children.

The County and City Development Boards (CDBs) which were set up in 2000 with representatives of local Government, local Development Agencies, the State Sector and the Social Partners to coordinate local level coordination, are seen as the vehicles for driving the Strategy at local level. CDBs have responsibility for drawing up strategies for economic, social and cultural development and it is envisaged that their structures and strategies will benefit the local coordination around children's issues. Incorporation of the 'whole child perspective' will be the role of the national coordinating structures through their respective agencies operating at local level (p89).

Finally, the National Children's Advisory Council (NCAC) is the means whereby the voluntary sector, research community and social partners are engaged in partnership with the Departments and statutory agencies to "shape the implementation of the Strategy" (page 85). The Council as an independent advisory and monitoring body reports directly to the Minister in relation to the implementation of the Strategy. (See Appendix 2).

Communicating and Monitoring Progress

The Strategy recognises the need for Government to make a strong start by setting up the relevant structures and by charging the NCO and all Departments to identify cross-cutting issues for inclusion in their individual Departmental business plans (page 94). In addition to funding the actions required to achieve Goal 3 through the appropriate Departments, the

Government makes a commitment to special additional funding through the NCO to support special initiatives including innovative ideas from local voluntary groups and clubs working with children. New streams of funding are identified to encourage structures and mechanisms to enhance participation, to promote research and to promote play and recreation for young people as part of the NCO's first annual work programme.

The Strategy identifies the Minister for Children and the NCO as having responsibility for the ongoing communication of the Strategy including within local communities. The need for the "two-way" flow of ideas is recognised and is to be promoted through websites, email and newsletters, encouraging schools, clubs and sports to contribute ideas and give feedback on their own initiatives.

In addition to monitoring by the NCAC, three yearly independent evaluation by an international panel and the report to the UN are seen as the additional mechanisms necessary to ensure the Strategy is effectively progressed.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3. Methodology

The National Children's Advisory Council was asked by the Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Children to undertake a mid term review of the National Children's Strategy – 'Our Children – Their Lives'.

Consultants with a background in planning delivering and reviewing multi-agency children's services were appointed to undertake appropriate consultation and prepare a report for Council.

In particular the project was to:-

- Review relevant material which outlines progress to date on the implementation of the Strategy.
- Draw on the experience and expertise of Council members in assessing progress, and work with a sub-group established to guide the project.
- Work with youth members on Council to ensure their views are represented.
- Draw on relevant research in regard to the implementation of key objectives achieved under the Strategy.

Methodology included:-

- An initial facilitated residential workshop in Galway, during which Council members reviewed their experiences of the implementation and progress of the Strategy, identified some of the barriers and obstacles to further progress and made suggestions as to how the Strategy could be refreshed for the remaining 5 years and beyond.
- Establishment of a sub-group (Appendix 1) representative of the range of stakeholders to inform, advise and support the Review process. Younger Members of Council were represented on the sub-group.

- Invitations to focus groups for Council members unable to attend initial workshop. Meetings with the Chair of the Council and a number of individual members.
- Consultation with young people through:-
 - Full engagement of younger members in the initial workshop and inclusion in the sub-group.
 - A separate meeting with younger members at which they highlighted the variable experiences of young people's participation across the country, and provided guidance as to how young people's views on their involvement, participation and contribution to the promotion of the Strategy, might be accessed.
 - Attendance at an Expert Advisory Group of the Donegal Youth Forum.
 - Visit to an environmentally friendly school in Letterkenny.
 - Attendance at the National Young People's Forum.
 - Informal follow up with younger members.
 - Development of structured questionnaires in conjunction with the Union of Secondary Students (USS) in Ireland for distribution to USS members.
 - Review of previous consultation exercises including those on Well-Being, Recreation, Student Councils, Comhairle na nÓg.
- Individual meetings with the Director of the National Children's Office Deputy Director, Principal Officers, Head of Research, Head of Communications and additional meetings with Assistant Principals and staff on specific aspects of the Strategy.
- Meetings with each of the Assistant Secretaries on NCO Advisory Board, representing Departments of An Taoiseach, Health and Children, Environment Heritage and Local Government, Education and

Science, Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Finance, Social and Family Affairs, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

- A meeting with the Ombudsman for Children and her Senior Officers.
- The collation of pre-review data to include monitoring and progress reports on the Strategy, along with reports from County and City Development Boards; and samples of research relevant to the Strategy.
- The collation of more specific data from specified Departments/agencies with responsibility for providing supports and services under goal 3. This included meeting with the National Director for Children's Services at Health Service Executive, representatives of the Department of Education and Science and with the Director of the National Educational Welfare Board; representatives of Justice Equality and Law Reform Equality Unit; representatives of the Local Government Policy Section of the Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government.
- More specific interrogation of a sample of reports, where there has been particular progress against the actions under the 3 goals of the Strategy, (National Child Care Strategy, National Play Policy, Participation Guidelines) as well as those areas where progress has been limited, or slow (children's services and family support services, early school leaving, services for children from minority groups).
- Meetings and telephone consultations with those working with minority ethnic communities, including Travellers, asylum seekers and refugees as well as the growing population of immigrant children.
- Site visits to Donegal, Limerick and Cork to assess knowledge and impact of the Strategy at local level, gain a rural as well as urban

perspective and determine how well services for children are coordinated on the ground. This included interviews and focus groups with local government officials, including Community and Enterprise Development Officers, Governing Bodies, Parents, Service Planners and Providers and Staff involved in children's work from statutory HSE senior managers/Youth Service Managers, voluntary and community organisations.

- Observation of and discussions with identified committees/fora specifically focusing on young people's rights, issues and use of services in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors including, Children's Rights Alliance Board, ISPCC National and Regional Managers, Barnardos National and Regional Managers, senior representatives of the National Youth Council of Ireland.
- Observation of a review workshop for the Community and Voluntary Forum in Donegal which provided insights into the breadth of the agenda for CDBs and the challenge in keeping children's needs on the agenda given competing priorities on resources.
- Development of structured questionnaires for eliciting information on parents' awareness of and views on progress against the 3 national goals. These were distributed through the executive of the National Parents Councils, Primary and Post Primary and administered by ISPCC with a focus group of parents in Dundalk. Feedback on issues raised by Traveller parents was also provided by Pavee Point, ISPCC's Leanbh project and Donegal Traveller's Support Group.
- Meeting with the Minister for Children to discuss the review and the implications of the Government's restructuring.

Office of the Minister for Children

Towards the end of the fieldwork stage of the Review the Minister for Children announced significant enhancements to the structures for supporting children and hence to the status of children within the nation. The establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children “places children at the heart of Government, giving the Minister a seat at the Cabinet Table and demonstrating the Government’s continuing commitment to children”. The restructuring builds on the successes achieved within the National Children’s Strategy and creates stronger mechanisms to maximise the coordination of policies and to provide focus on children’s issues at the highest level. This elevated Office situated within the Department of Health and Children brings together staff from the three Departments, Health and Children, Justice Equality and Law Reform and Education and Science. Headed by a Director General, the Office will be responsible for the programmes and activities of the NCO, for the Child Care Directorate and for Policy Work on Children’s Welfare and Protection. The Youth Justice Service of Department of Justice and the Early Years Education functions of Department of Education and Science are to be co-located in the new office. The Minister has indicated that the cross-cutting functions and the experience gained through the operation of the NCO would be given a renewed focus in the context of a more comprehensive strategic framework and simpler administrative arrangements.

The new structural arrangements enhance the political context however it will be crucial that the Office of the Minister has full access to cabinet papers in regard to legislative, policy and strategic developments which could potentially impact on children and families.

Chapter 4

Findings

Summary of feedback

4. Summary of Feedback

Introduction

A residential workshop with Council members in September 2005 consolidated the framework for progressing the Review.

It provided an amalgam of views across the range of interests and identified:-

- Areas of significant progress and the drivers/factors for success
- Blocks to the implementation of the Strategy and how these could be overcome
- How the next five years could be best utilised to ensure the Strategy's maximum effectiveness

Council members demonstrated considerable insight into the complexity of delivering on such a comprehensive strategy and a summary of their views is included in Appendix 3. As the Review progressed many of these views were confirmed and expanded upon by service providers and users of services while a range of other issues were also identified.

It was generally recognised that the development of a National Children's Strategy had been a very significant event for children in Ireland. The ethos of the Strategy was totally new and while there was a view among the children's voluntary organisations that the emphasis on children's rights could have been stronger, the Strategy does give life to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Ireland. It also moves from a welfare model to an "all children" approach focussing on the whole child and taking a holistic approach.

The concept of participation by young people at national and local government level and within statutory agencies was totally new and would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. Some of the models for participation are considered to be leading edge and will need to be continually supported and

developed.

During the course of the Review consultants were provided with an enormous volume and range of materials, information and insights into the progress, barriers and issues in relation to the implementation of the Strategy (Appendix 4). Additional information and evidence was obtained through visiting NCO, NCAC, Government Departmental and other websites. Interviews and focus groups at national and local level revealed the significant extent of activity relevant to the Strategy at county and community level and the need for mechanisms to collate and communicate these developments.

This section attempts to summarise progress and issues in relation to the achievement of each of the national goals, providing examples as appropriate. Under the 3 goals there are many other examples of achievements which demonstrate the real significance of progress and the way that individuals, agencies and organisations embrace the Strategy in both a conscious and unconscious way. It also considers the broader context of the Strategy's content and how it can be refreshed, communicated, implemented and monitored to maximum effectiveness.

Feedback on Goal 1 - Participation mechanisms

Key successes were identified as:-

- The establishment of a range of measures to promote participation by young people
- The promotion and expansion of student councils
- The appointment of an Ombudsman for Children and the involvement of young people in that process

Barriers and frustrations were identified as:-

- The lack of an effective Guardian *ad Litem* service.

- Structures for engaging young people remain limited,
- They have not been developed consistently across the country
- They are inaccessible to many young people

It is Government policy to give children a voice and to promote their participation in civic society at national and local level, in line with Article 12 of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child.

Several projects have been led by NCO to achieve this goal including the establishment of Dáil na nÓg, the National Youth Parliament. This provides a forum for young people to debate issues of concern and topics they have chosen to date have included play and recreation, educational disadvantage, the environment and drug and alcohol abuse. The first 2 Dáils for young people aged 7-18 were led by NCO and since 2003, this responsibility lies with the National Youth Council of Ireland, the National Youth Federation and Foróige who have worked in conjunction with the NCO, NGOs, County Development Boards and young people to prepare for and manage the annual event which is hosted by the Minister for Children.

On average 200 delegates attend Dáil na nÓg each year and are elected by local Comhairle na nÓg to represent the young people in their constituency. In recognition of the need to move from the Dáil being an annual event rather than a process, a Coiste na dTeachtai, a representative body of 22 delegates, has been formed to take forward the recommendations arising from the Dáil. As the 7-18 age range was too broad, Dáil na bPaistí was set up in 2004 to provide a forum for younger children in the age range 7 to 11 with Dáil na nÓg now catering for young people aged 12-18.

Comhairle na nÓg have now been established by all 34 CDBS to provide a local forum for young people to discuss local and national issues which are of relevance to them. The Comhairle elect delegates for Dáil na nÓg and Dáil na bPaistí.

Younger members on Council reflected at the outset concern about the significant variations in standards and activity of Comhairle na nÓg across the country. Their own experiences of being elected demonstrated that while some CDBs adopted a fair and democratic approach, others simply appointed young people to attend through schools and youth organisations. A review of Comhairle na nÓg commissioned by NCO and completed in May 2005 reveals the extent of variation of practice. Some Comhairle meet regularly and are working towards becoming a democratic and meaningful youth council linked to the local government while others appear to meet only once a year to elect/select representatives for the Dáil. Comhairle are supported by the Administrative Officers in the Community and Enterprise Section of the County/City Council within a number of other duties. Information from a range of sources suggested that the development of the Comhairle appears to be dependent on the level of support and funding they receive from the CDB and constituent organisations and on the interest, enthusiasm and time commitment of individual CEDOs. Some CEDOs feel there should be a full time Comhairle Development Officer as the process of engaging with young people and supporting their participation is time intensive and also requires particular skills in carrying out the direct work with young people. A number of Comhairle are dependant on securing relevant support through the NGO sector or link into the Youth Departments within their localities.

Concern was expressed that these structures may not actively recruit, support, develop and sustain the involvement of young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds, those from minority nationalities or Travellers and young people with disabilities, yet the Strategy gives a clear commitment to ensuring all groups are represented and commits to resourcing their involvement. The complexity of engaging this range of young people cannot be underestimated and the variety of inputs and support required to ensure they can participate in a meaningful way will require to be resourced. (p36). One of the most vibrant, inclusive and best organised example of a working Comhairle is the Donegal Youth Council which has been up and running since 2001, has a full time Youth Officer and is jointly funded and supported by the Donegal County Council and the Health Services Executive (North Western Peyton/Wilson Jan 2006

area). In response to numerous requests for help in setting up Youth Councils in other areas, Donegal Youth Council has produced a Code of Good Practice covering the core elements. Extracts from this document are included in Appendix 5. The Youth Council have been consulted on a wide range of issues including young men's health, sex education and services for young people, library services, alcohol-related harm and ways of reducing alcohol misuse by young people, recycling, underage discos, bicycle trails, family support, educational issues and local area development plans. Attendance at Donegal Youth Council's Expert Advisory Group demonstrated the benefit of having effective structures for the meaningful engagement of young people in problem-solving around significant community issues, for example in helping to reduce the number of road traffic accidents involving young drivers.

Arrangements to consult with and involve young people in the development of local strategies and services by HSE, Youth Service and NGOs has been variable throughout the country with clear commitment being demonstrated by some organisations, for example the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) which has a dedicated participation unit for young people, and little progress by others. Several national reviews including the review of the National Drugs Strategy have involved consultation with young people and a number of HSE areas have active projects focusing on participation by young people in health services. Feedback to Children's Services Managers by a Consumer Panel of Young People in Foster Care in Limerick resulted in immediate outcomes and agreement on longer term goals. The Irish Association for Young People in Care (IAYPC) has been funded to engage directly with young people in care across the country.

Participation by young people in school councils is advocated by the Strategy. Research sponsored by the NCO reviewed the experience of 11 student councils across the country and highlighted the important elements which can assist student councils to work. The essential success factors are a shared understanding of the role of the Council and a whole school ethos. The report makes a number of recommendations to schools and refers to the need for a Student Council Support Service although the lead role and location for this is Peyton/Wilson Jan 2006

not specified.

The Union of Secondary Students of Ireland, utilised appropriately, could make a greater contribution and engage a wider group of young people. The organisation operates in a business-like fashion, has elected members and links into international bodies. They have a structured and strategic approach to their business, allocate roles and responsibilities and have developed a costed business plan with timescales and outcomes and systems for monitoring progress.

At individual project level, many youth clubs, voluntary organisations and community projects have continued to promote and support young people's participation.

Ballyraine Community School in Letterkenny represents a microcosm of the Children's Strategy in action as it addresses all of the principles and demonstrates achievements in regard to each of the national goals. (See Appendix 6). It achieves Goal 1 in that young people are meaningfully engaged and enabled and empowered to participate in school life and spin off activities within the community. Goal 2 is addressed in so far as the activities and learning have contributed to a more coherent understanding of children's needs including the needs of young people with disabilities/special needs and those from a variety of different nationalities. Ballyraine meets Goal 3 in that the school has provided opportunities for young people to achieve against a number of objectives including exposure to a range of educational opportunities, access to cultural activities, promoting inclusion and valuing cultural diversity, contributing to vibrant local communities and benefiting from the natural environment.

The "Young Voices" Participation Guidelines produced by NCO, the Children's Rights Alliance and National Youth Council of Ireland are aimed at policy makers and decision makers in public sector organisations, youth led organisations and service-providing agencies and offer valuable practical guidance on facilitating participation by young people. In the foreword the Peyton/Wilson Jan 2006

Minister for Children states “the involvement of children and young people in decision-making improves the relevance and quality of policies and services”. The Guidelines also showcase participation initiatives from around the country and provide contact details for each of the contributing projects.

Young people’s active involvement in the appointment of the Ombudsman for Children represented a ground-breaking initiative to recruit to a high level public appointment. Sectors will watch with interest the nature and extent of the issues raised with the Ombudsman and the impact of the Office’s interventions. Although early days, it is not yet clear how the Ombudsman will facilitate access by children across the Country, given the location of the office in Dublin City Centre.

The absence of an effective Guardian *ad Litem* service was raised as a significant concern as this seriously impacts on young people’s rights to have a say in decisions which affect them. There are issues about the service being provided effectively and consistently in public law proceedings in relation to young people coming into the care system. Currently Guardians are not appointed in private law hearings in relation to custody and access arrangements as the 1997 legislation has not been implemented.

The picture overall is one of experimentation with a range of participation initiatives at different levels and in various parts of the country, rather than a coordinated attempt to meaningfully engage young people as partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Minister for Children should:-

- Reaffirm the commitment to actively progressing and further developing young people’s participation.

The Office of the Minister for children, should in conjunction with the Secretaries General:-

- Continue to take the lead role in implementing goal 1
- Ensure children's active participation is accomplished by further integrating young people's views into the work of central and local government and local agencies.
- Put processes in place as a matter of urgency to ensure children and young people are consulted appropriately on all public policies on issues that affect them. There should be recognition of the supports they will need to be fully engaged with this work and it should be linked to the process of child-impact statements and child-proofing required by Goal 2.
- Ensure the *Guardian ad Litem* service is fully established and the relevant legislative provisions are brought into force.
- Provide a national lead to achieve uniformity of approach by CDBs by developing a set of standards for all Comhairle na nÓg, drawing on experience to date and reflecting best practice.
- Ensure Comhairle na nÓg are appropriately resourced.
- Review existing models for participation within HSE areas and use the learning from these to drive a requirement for active participation by young people in all HSE areas.
- Ensure that the Strategy and its goals are communicated to and understood by young people of all ages across the country and that its role in promoting the UN Convention is more explicit.
- Extend existing mechanisms for young people to engage in debate on issues affecting them such as access to services, medical consent, physical punishment, Anti Social Behaviour Orders, and the age of

criminal responsibility.

- Where possible, harness the connections, networks and expertise of the voluntary and community sector to facilitate consultation and engagement with young people.

Feedback on Goal 2 - Research and Information to better understand children's lives.

Key successes were identified as:-

- The development of a set of national well being indicators.
- Research initiatives, e.g. research on youth homelessness, student councils and recreation.
- Research scholarships for studies relevant to the Strategy

Barriers and frustrations were identified as:-

- The delay in establishing the National Research Dissemination Unit due to caps on the numbers of public servants.
- Difficulties in agreeing an appropriate mechanism for child proofing legislation and policy.
- Lack of common, consistent and meaningful data.

A Children's Research Advisory Board has been established by NCO, involving the Departments and academic institutions. There is evidence of a strong commitment to research across all the areas of the Strategy and within several Departments. However this is often conducted in isolation and needs to be better coordinated through the Children's Research Advisory Group, within a coherent research programme to support the Strategy and which is linked to policy development.

Research into priority aspects of the Strategy has been commissioned and sponsored at Masters and PhD level and a scholarship placement programme established to provide research experience within NCO for post graduate

students. The Children's Research Centre at Trinity College Dublin was awarded core funding to develop capacity for children's research in the early years of the NCO. Most significantly, following substantial research and consultation, including with children and young people, a national set of child wellbeing indicators has been agreed and published. This will form the basis for data collection for the first State of the Nation's Children Report to be published in 2006. The Contract will be awarded shortly to take forward the national longitudinal study which is jointly sponsored by the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

There are perceptions that progress has been slower than anticipated. However some of the essential building blocks on which to build a comprehensive research strategy have been put in place. Frustrations expressed during the Review include a sense that only research which is centrally commissioned is viewed as valid and there needs to be greater acknowledgement of local research. The need was stressed for the urgent development of the National Research Dissemination Unit as envisaged in the Strategy as a centralised mechanism to collate and disseminate children's research, as apart from conferences, there is little opportunity to hear about research in other areas. A central unit could be an effective means for defining the standards required for research and protocols for effective dissemination. It could also ensure mechanisms are established to encourage sharing of good practice and communication of the extent and nature of developments across the country, thus promoting opportunities to share, reflect and learn from each other's work. Service providers also wanted to contribute to setting a national agenda for research which they hoped would include issues such as the impact of treatment services for sexually abused children; the need to focus on issues of neglect ; and on the appropriateness of current assessment methods to determine education plans for young people with disabilities.

The lack of common, consistent and meaningful data, and the collation and availability of information for planning purposes was expressed as a significant concern for both the statutory and voluntary sectors. Mechanisms need to be developed to link existing data sets and to quality assure the

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information provided. Reliable information should be collated across Departments and agencies and be made more accessible to those involved in planning and reviewing children's services.

Many contributors to the Review gave examples as to how new legislation and policy can be detrimental to young people and their families because there is no mechanism for child proofing. Considerable work has taken place to identify reliable mechanisms for child impact analysis and research commissioned by the NCO has identified a number of difficulties. Nevertheless there is a clear need for structures and protocols to child-proof new legislation and policy and to ensure that it is in compliance with the UN Convention. While there has been increasing consultation with young people and the Recreation policy and Student Councils work are good examples, consultation by Government Departments is by no means standard practice.

RECOMMENDATION

The Office of the Minister for Children should urgently:-

Review the obstacles to achieving the outstanding measures and objectives under Goal 2 and develop a prioritised action plan to address them, and in particular:-

- Agree with all Departments a timescale and appropriate methodology for achieving child proofing of all new policies and strategies, such as Child Impact Statements.
- Establish the National Research Dissemination Unit and put in place mechanisms to ensure that local research is supported and valued.
- Ensure that all new legislation, policies and strategies are in compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Feedback on Goal 3 – Quality Supports and Services

Key successes were identified as inter alia:-

- The Development of a Play Policy
- The Children Act 2001 and the associated structures and initiatives.
- Increased levels of Garda vetting.
- The establishment of the National Educational Welfare Board.
- The significant increases in the quantity of child care places under the National Childcare Strategy.
- Local Sports Partnerships

Barriers and Frustrations were identified as:-

- Lack of identified resources to take forward the various objectives.
- Delay in implementing many of the objectives, resulting in ongoing failures to meet the needs of many children, for supports and services, especially children in marginalised groups.
- Inconsistent implementation of 'Children First' child protection guidelines.
- Historical variations in service levels and quality across the former Health Board areas and the challenges facing the HSE in giving clear direction.

As noted earlier, there was widespread acknowledgement of the many achievements under goal 3, and Council members and others involved in the Review specifically identified the significant increase in the quantity and quality of child care places and the structures/systematic approaches in place to plan and deliver these; the development of the play policy and the resourcing of new playgrounds across the country on a planned and partnership basis; the project to tackle early school leaving and the establishment of the National Educational Welfare Board (although concerns

existed about the delays in resourcing this service); expansion in the number and accessibility of Family Resource Centres; the Youth Justice initiatives, including the setting up of the Youth Justice Service, raising the age of criminal responsibility from 7 to 12 (with some exceptions where the age is 10) and the establishment and early successes of diversion schemes and Garda conferencing.

Local Sports Partnerships demonstrate cost effective ways of developing a range of sporting opportunities within communities and in so doing can promote the inclusion of Travellers, migrant children, young people with disabilities and other marginalised groups. Success is dependent on real partnerships at local level with, for example, CDBs, Vocational Education Committees (VECs), Youth Councils, health promotion departments of the HSE and voluntary organisations.

There was a lack of awareness among many outside of the statutory agencies of some of the very significant developments in health and education. Throughout the review there was a strong and general disappointment that the Strategy had not been adequately driven or resourced nationally. While there has been a marked increase in expenditure on children's health and social services and family support measures there are still significant gaps and inequalities in provision and in access to services. Concerns were expressed that within existing HSE budgets, expenditure on children's services has not been extrapolated and hence cannot be protected and secured on a revenue basis. Within the former Health Boards for example, the baseline for children and families services was generally low and while there have been significant numbers of additional staff appointed in recent years, current levels appear to be insufficient to address the ever increasing legislative demands, and emerging needs of the changing population of children. One significant recent pressure on HSE resources particularly in Dublin is the requirement to admit into care and accommodate separated refugee children. These are very vulnerable young people and organisations working with them are concerned that many of these children cannot be adequately safeguarded within current arrangements.

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Other examples quoted where services and supports are not available to meet needs included the lack of treatment services for children who have been physically abused or sexually assaulted, some of whom may wait up to a year for treatment. Services for young people with disabilities are also patchy and examples were quoted of young people being unable to attend events or resources because a wheelchair bus was not available or because the facility itself was not accessible. Following assessment, the services required by young people with special needs are often not available and the lack of coordination between education and health services was frequently commented upon. There are also significant variations in levels and adequacy of community based resources to support families, many of which are run in cooperation with NGOs throughout the country. Particular pressures on services within socially disadvantaged areas such as inner city Dublin were reported. As regards the quality of services and supports, concerns were raised about the lack of external monitoring and/or inspection of frontline children's services, particularly in relation to the completion of assessments and investigations.

Differential responses, availability and standards of services within the former Health Boards was identified as a major concern by many of those who participated in the Review and there was little evidence of improvement to date within the new HSE. Managers within the HSE were frustrated at the bureaucracy, the year to year basis of some funding which made long term and strategic planning very difficult and by the risks they often had to take to find creative ways to address pressures on services. Nationally, HSE representatives raised the need for resource allocations to be appropriately weighted on the basis of economic and social disadvantage. Particular concern was expressed during site visits at the failure within the new HSE to integrate the Programme of Action for Children initiative and to build on successes achieved. The model was devised to ensure consistent delivery across the former Health Boards and apparently remains valid.

The vacuum between strategy development and implementation and the
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absence of clarity around national priorities and expected outcomes has led to significant variations, standards and approaches. Examples of effective leadership at local level were often underpinned by belief, vision, enthusiasm and networking skills and in many areas the service was sustained by staff goodwill and dedication to practice and their clients. It is intended that the HSE will provide strong national leadership and direction to promote, implement and monitor consistent approaches across the country, based on agreed standards. The scale of this task cannot be underestimated and there will need to be significant additional investment in many aspects of children's services.

Interfaces with other organisations such as Education, Gardai and CDBs were often reported as problematic and this was exacerbated by the lack of common boundaries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government through the Cabinet sub-Committee and the Minister for Children must :-
 - demonstrate renewed political leadership in validating the Children's Strategy and committing to its full implementation to 2010 and beyond.

- The Cabinet Sub-Committee must ensure:-
 - every Department fulfils its responsibilities within the Strategy, incorporates these into individual Departmental Strategies and secures appropriate levels of recurrent funding, linked to identifiable outcomes.

- The Office of the Minister for Children, in conjunction with the Secretaries General, must:-
 - Demonstrate a clear national lead to implement the Strategy across Departments in an incremental, outcome-focused and

evaluated basis.

- Strengthen mechanisms to engage the NGO sector on a partnership basis in the implementation of various objectives.
- Develop meaningful and agreed standards for services, along with performance measures.
- Agree a coherent data collection and information management strategy.
- Promote and agree evidence-based approaches and evaluated schemes.
- Commission reviews of long established services, to ensure that they are cost effective and are achieving desired outcomes.
- Consider ways of establishing co-terminous boundaries between local Government, HSE and Garda other relevant organisations.
- Identify appropriate task groups to review and prioritise objectives and to take forward areas in which there has been a lack of progress.
- Consider and address the needs of black and minority ethnic children and include mechanisms for involving these young people and their families in the process.

The Council members and all of the agencies who participated in the Review considered that the launch of the Strategy had been an important milestone for children in Ireland and that it was timely at this mid point stage, to review how far the aspirations had been realised.

In addition to considering progress against the 3 National Goals it was important therefore to consider the Strategy in its broadest sense and to assess achievements within the wider context. The Review considered therefore the appropriateness of the content of the Strategy and its continuing relevance, whether it needed to be updated to take account of national trends and developments, to what extent young people, parents and agencies working with families are aware of the Strategy and the extent to which it influences and impacts upon their day to day situations, how effectively progress is communicated and to what extent the mechanisms and structures

for coordinating, implementing and monitoring the Strategy are proving to be appropriate.

Generally there was enthusiasm for the Minister's intention to revitalise and refresh the Strategy and those who engaged with the Review gave freely of their time and opinions as to how to ensure the Strategy has a major impact on the lives of children in Ireland for the next 5 years and beyond. The Review process has provided many insights and suggestions which the Minister and the new Office of the Minister for Children will want to consider and address if they are to ensure maximum achievements for the remaining years.

The next section summarises some of the issues and concerns raised during the Review and provides recommendations as to how they can be addressed.

Content of the Strategy

The Strategy provides the framework for policy development and service delivery in all areas of children's lives. It attempts to set out Government policy in a rights-based way in line with the UN convention, confirming young people's entitlement inter alia to health, education, protection, participation, identity and justice. It recognises the lead roles and responsibilities of each Department for certain aspects of policy implementation and service provision, and emphasises both the need for Inter-Departmental relationships on specific areas as well as the importance of working closely with the NGO Sector and academic institutions. It promotes the inclusion of parents and young people as active partners in all aspects of the Strategy including policy development, implementation and review as well as in the identification, development and delivery of service requirements.

Evidence from fieldwork in various parts of the country highlighted the enormous support for and agreement on the continuing relevance of a Strategy for Children which identifies their rights and needs and provides a coherent framework for addressing these. "The Strategy gives the policy

mandate”, “this is a hugely important and very well structured document” commented professionals who could recall the excitement, vibrancy and national pride which accompanied its launch as well as their personal sense of hope about the commitment that Ireland was making to its children. While most of the strategic objectives remain relevant, some of the actions have been achieved, many others need to be updated, and some new actions are needed to address evolving issues. While the strategy acknowledges that some children will need special help to achieve their full potential in all aspects of their life because of special health, educational, social or cultural circumstances, the Strategy preceded the massive levels of immigration into Ireland from a diverse range of cultures with differing perspectives on many aspects of children’s rights and needs. It also says little on the rights and needs of separated and asylum seeking children and does not adequately address, through coordinated strategic approaches, the levels of drug and alcohol misuse among young people.

RECOMMENDATION

The Office of the Minister for Children should in conjunction with Senior Officials use the existing monitoring process for the current year to:-

- Confirm the status of each action.
- Sign off actions that have been achieved and where appropriate agree the next steps.
- Identify actions where progress has been limited, address the barriers and issues and agree an implementation plan.

Current Knowledge and Awareness

The Review has demonstrated that knowledge of the Strategy is patchy among civil servants, statutory organisations and agencies, voluntary and community groups, parents and young people. The following section gives a perspective of the level and extent of awareness and relevance of the Strategy for different groups.

Awareness among Departments

While Departments continue to implement objectives and actions which form part of their own core business, they do not always appear to see this activity within the broader context of the Strategy. Although Departments were conscious of the need to equality proof against the nine agreed criteria, they were less clear about the need to childproof new policies and strategies. The commitment made within the Strategy for Departments to undertake child impact statements and include child impact analysis within their Departmental strategy statements has not yet been implemented although research has been commissioned by NCO to consider how best to advance this. It is unfortunate that this aspect of proofing has fallen behind the substantial developments in other equality areas as it would have provided a means of keeping children's rights and needs on the agenda for all the Departments and helped to maintain the profile of the Strategy and link it into other key policy areas. When the issue was raised with officials in various Departments there was an acceptance of the need for child-proofing and a readiness by many to consider how this could be addressed.

For some organisations working with or on behalf of young people and in receipt of substantial funding, there is little sense of accountability or responsibility to deliver against relevant objectives within the Strategy. The need to link funding to outcomes is an issue that must be addressed by all Departments who fund services for young people and their families as well as by those agencies who seek such funding.

Awareness among Statutory Agencies

The Strategy appears to inform the service planning work of professionals within the Health Services Executive, particularly the Directors and Managers of Children and Families Services. However many of the objectives and actions required by the Strategy have not been translated into business and service imperatives at national level. While managers in some areas have been creative in developing responses which promote the Strategy's

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principles and goals in respect of participation, research and service provision, there is no consistency of approach.

The new arrangements within the HSE commit to a national strategic approach to the planning and delivery of services, which are informed by an agreed set of principles based on the UN Convention, The National Children's Strategy, the National Health Strategy and childcare legislation. The HSE can only succeed in this goal if there is a strong lead from central government, and an integrated, co-ordinated and adequately resourced strategic approach to roll out those aspects of the Strategy for which the HSE has responsibility.

Awareness among Voluntary Organisations

There was generally greater awareness of the Strategy among Children's Voluntary Organisations with a policy role and those agencies working directly with children. These organisations, while recognising the achievements to date and acknowledging the complexities involved, were generally disappointed that there had not been a more coherent approach to implementation and were strong advocates for the Strategy to be fully and systematically implemented on a planned and costed basis. They would also have liked to see it more widely used as a mechanism for promoting children's rights as was envisaged at its launch in 2000.

Evidence provided by many children's organisations clearly indicates that the Strategy underpins all their activities, is utilised to support the development of projects and is reflected in internal business plans, public information leaflets and annual reports.

At local level it appeared that organisations working within the youth sector were less familiar with the Children's Strategy as a whole and this was also the case for representatives of community fora and coordinating bodies at County level. There is a broad general awareness of the national goal for

giving children a voice and the youth participation agenda but this is not always directly connected to the Strategy. Not surprisingly, given their links to County Childcare Committees, there was generally greater awareness of the Childcare Strategy than the Children's Strategy and a lack of recognition that although it preceded it, the former is a component part of the broader Children's Strategy. (See Appendix 7)

Awareness among Parents

NCAC members indicated that in their experience parents had little awareness of the Strategy and the Review confirmed the lack of mechanisms for consulting with and engaging parents in taking forward the various elements of the Strategy.

Generally parents' representative groups are education based (National Parent Councils) and they felt that there is little attempt by Government Departments to engage with them on anything other than purely educational issues. Both the Primary and Post Primary Councils are reviewing their own organisational arrangements and strategies to more effectively respond to the needs of parents and their children and to liaise more effectively with the Partners in Education on issues of concern. Within the National Parents Council Primary, a number of special interest groups are looking at ongoing issues such as Traveller education and inclusion and the Council is exploring ways of promoting inter-culturalism and inclusion of non national groups. Awareness of the Strategy among the Parent Councils has been greatly facilitated by the fact that both Councils have representatives on the National Children's Advisory Council and their Executive Committees receive regular feedback. While they feel that the Strategy covers all the issues of relevance to them such as assessing and supporting young people with special educational needs, those from minority black and ethnic communities and children with behavioural issues, they feel these needs are not being adequately addressed. Concerns were cited about the nature and delays of assessments, the need for training for parent representatives and the need for

mechanisms to extend membership to all parent associations and individual parents.

ISPCC, Barnardos and other voluntary organisations regularly try to obtain feedback from parents through their work in family centres and parent support initiatives. ISPCC distributed and administered the Review's parent questionnaires through a project in Dundalk and responses from 16 parents were returned and analysed. These demonstrated that parents had little awareness of the Strategy but would like to have opportunity for greater involvement. They felt that parents could be more fully engaged through leaflet drops, the media, particularly television and through school-based initiatives. Several parents felt that there had been some progress in opportunities for children's consultation and participation, primarily through local youth clubs, community centres and to a lesser extent through schools. An issue raised by parents and those who work with them is that where consultation occurs parents need feedback and to see outcomes and actions. Parents in Limerick suggested that considerable work is needed to support young people's active participation in local issues in some areas. They described a student consultation initiative, supported by parents and youth leaders, which highlighted the needs and wishes of young people in the area and the considerable processes involved in having the young people's work acknowledged.

In refreshing the Strategy it will be important to strengthen the context of the family in addressing children's needs and rights and new mechanisms are needed which more fully engage the experiences, knowledge and skills of parents. The Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative demonstrates the benefits of engaging with parents, children and the community as active partners in attempting to improve outcomes for children (Appendix 8).

RECOMMENDATION

- The Office of the Minister for Children should set up a forum

representative of the relevant stakeholders to consider ways of effectively engaging parents in the implementation and review of the Children's Strategy and the initiative should be widely publicised.

Awareness among Young People

The Review found that those young people who are directly involved with NCO-led participation initiatives, such as the Daíl na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg, had a sound knowledge of goal 1 and had been involved in developing some of the policies and initiatives to assist in achieving aspects of goal 3 including play and recreation. It was not clear how much young people, other than those who were members of NCAC, knew about the overall strategy. Research commissioned by ISPCC in 2003 found that 95% of 1400 young people interviewed were unaware of the Strategy and in fact had much greater awareness of the UN Convention.

Comprehensive recommendations for more effective and comprehensive communication and engagement of young people are set out under Goal 1 above.

Communicating the Strategy

When the Strategy was launched there was a comprehensive awareness raising and communication strategy which included road shows, publications and media coverage to promote its key messages and content. While one of its main strengths is its comprehensiveness and multi-faceted approach to enhancing all aspects of children's lives, this creates some difficulty from a marketing point of view as the concept is a difficult one to sell to both the media and through them to parents and the general public. Nevertheless the Strategy needs to be kept vibrant and meaningful for the whole range of audiences for whom it has relevance and they need to have a vehicle for finding out what is happening at national and local level as well as for sharing their own experiences and achieving recognition and support for their

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contribution. There are some simple steps that could enhance the linkages.

The NCO newsletter could be further developed as a means of communicating with localities. A database should be created of all existing newsletters and publications, within which progress against the Strategy can also be included.

Much could be done to develop existing websites of the NCO and NCAC to provide more extensive information about the Strategy, create more extensive links to other relevant websites and to encourage the sharing of practice noted above. Obvious links could be established to each of the Departments and to the range of units and centres conducting children's research as well as to the organisations represented on the NCAC, each Comhairle na nÓg, and the Union of Secondary Students.

Fieldwork in Limerick, Donegal and Cork demonstrated a range of good practice initiatives which were driving various aspects of the Strategy often on a locally coordinated and joint agency basis and these need to be highlighted. An interesting example is the e-forum in Donegal where young people's involvement in the design and marketing has been invaluable. This project has also developed safe communication processes with young people including supervised chat rooms/discussion boards.

NCAC members and others identified successful projects and developments in Dublin and in other parts of the country and Consultants were informed of numerous examples of young people's participation and of relevant research projects. However there were no obvious mechanisms, other than conferences, for sharing the learning from local practice or for sourcing information on initiatives elsewhere.

As stated above, the Review uncovered some challenging, innovative and creative practice, which built on policy work led by NCO, much of which has not been shared outside the context in which it takes place. Consequently there is no assessment of how these initiatives meet the objectives of the Peyton/Wilson Jan 2006

Children's Strategy or whether they could influence practice on a national basis. There is obviously a need for a two way flow of information and mechanisms whereby localities are encouraged to share their initiatives and communicate progress regularly to the NCO.

An excellent example of showcasing good practice is the Participation Guidelines produced by NCO in conjunction with the CRA and National Youth Council which acknowledges and describes participation initiatives around the country. Other examples are included in Appendix 9 and include a play brochure with instructions for simple home and street games as well as research into the need for play amenities, coordinated by young people in Limerick. All of these could be made available on the NCO website which could in turn be linked into every CDB website.

The importance of a consistent rolling communication strategy and associated action plan which includes how standards will be met and reviewed cannot be overstated. Communication is a time consuming and challenging aspect of the work which, if carried out in a structured manner, will influence efforts and keep enthusiasm at an optimum level. It can be the means to supply the ongoing maintenance required to energise, refresh interest and provide the impetus for progression.

RECOMMENDATION

The Office of the Minister for Children should:-

- develop a robust communication strategy comprising the following elements
 - A communication plan and targets.
 - Mechanisms for facilitating timely Inter-Departmental communication in relation to progress on all aspects of the Strategy.
 - Mechanisms for efficient communication between the Office and other key bodies and individuals at both national and local level using available technology, existing communications networks and

the media.

- Identify innovative ways of engaging young people and relevant others.
- Channels to ensure appropriate feedback from local areas, organisations and partnerships on local initiatives and projects.
- Agreed standards for communicating the Strategy and agreed protocols for referencing the Strategy as appropriate.

Leadership and Joint Working/Shared Responsibility

The Strategy clearly identifies the political commitment to achieving effective co-ordination at national and local level and the mechanisms for achieving this. The Review found that while there are some good examples, this coordination has not always been achieved in practice.

The cross cutting nature of the Strategy means that many objectives can only be delivered on an inter-Departmental and cross agency basis and therefore the responsibility for their achievement is shared. For many of the actions there has not been a clear mandate for action by a lead Department or agency nor clarity about the responsibilities of the various Departments. This is a fundamental weakness which needs to be understood and addressed through a business planning approach.

Generally there is a perception among children's health professionals, the Ombudsman's Office, and the Non-Governmental Agencies, that NCO had the remit and responsibility for coordinating and driving inter-Departmental activity and implementing the Strategy as a whole, through the Minister and the Cabinet sub-Committee on Children. The Strategy on page 85 clarifies that "Assistant Secretaries and local level representatives will have responsibility for ensuring the implementation of the Strategy in their own Departments and organisations". However while the NCO was envisaged as "an independent body established under the Public Services Management Act 1997" when the Strategy was drafted, in effect it remained part of the

Department of Health and Children. NCO representatives have clarified that because of legal and technical issues, the setting up of the NCO as an independent statutory agency was not proceeded with. One explanation for this could have been that in the early 2000s the establishment of a new body in the Health Sector would have been seen to run counter to attempts by Government to rationalise and reduce the number of public bodies already existing. It would appear that no formal decision was made *not* to establish NCO as an independent body but rather that the situation drifted and it remained part of the Department of Health and Children, by default. This also had implications for the 'Board', comprising Assistant Secretaries which became known as an 'Advisory Board' and does not appear to have viewed itself as having governance responsibilities for implementing the Strategy.

It is imperative that responsibilities and authority issues are resolved so it is clear how the Strategy is to be taken forward from 2006 onwards.

RECOMMENDATION

- The Government, through the Cabinet Sub Committee on Children and the Minister for Children, must:-
 - Ensure the Office of the Minister for Children has the mandate authority and appropriate resources to drive the implementation of the Strategy.

Where there has been a clear mandate, NCO has coordinated some notable and visible successes involving several Departments working together towards a common purpose. For example:-

- The Play Policy
- Youth Homelessness Strategy
- Participation Guidelines

The production of the Play Policy and Youth Homelessness Strategies are

good examples of how Departments and agencies with a common agenda, interest and clear outcomes can work together to produce a framework which can be operationalised across the country. There are a number of critical success factors which appear to make the initiatives work.

- Clear measurable outcomes and products
- Each Department has an identified interest and timeframe for involvement.
- The product contributes to individual Department's strategies.
- Departments and agencies can be clear about the level of resources they are committing.
- They can identify how resources have been used and plan for future requirements.
- There is a clearly identified driver.
- Each agency is clear about the timescales and contribution required from them.

It is worth noting that some of the Departments who have been major players in taking forward these policies did not start out from a children's needs perspective but were addressing their own agenda, for example, the built environment, housing strategies or other family and community initiatives which happens to embrace children. This demonstrates the reality of the task of helping Departments and agencies to see their responsibilities towards children within their overall actions and strategies.

Perhaps one of the best examples of the principles of the Strategy in practice and one which demonstrates the need for inter-reliance and coordination at national, regional, local and individual project level as well as the necessity of effective 2 way communication and liaison between all levels, is the National Childcare Strategy. The development, coordination, phased implementation, resourcing and reviewing of the complex multi-million National Childcare Strategy provides a model for all Departments in taking forward their

objectives in a cross-cutting way. Although the scale is very much larger the key success factors are similar to those noted above and additionally include:-

- National and international imperative in relation to equal opportunities in employment through access to child care.
- Clear mandate from Government.
- Clear terms of reference.
- Very high profile initiative.
- Whole country approach reflecting the urban/rural dimensions.
- Of interest and benefit to people at all levels of society.
- Multiple stakeholders including all the Social Partners.
- Demonstrates the importance of integrating children's needs and rights within the broader responsibilities and rights of parents.
- Funding dependent on plan being approved by an Appraisal Committee
- Linked and connected to other relevant national strategies.

Implementation of the Childcare Strategy has been driven by the Department of Justice and to a large extent has happened alongside and separate from the Children's Strategy. NCAC, while acknowledging the need to capitalise on the agenda for supporting women's return to employment, would want to see urgent action to enhance the quality of childcare provision.

Individual Departments have provided evidence as to how they have been progressing developments which contribute to meeting the aims of the Strategy. These are included in the Annual Monitoring Reports compiled by the NCO. In interviews with Senior Officers in Departments it was evident that there are additional relevant developments which are not always linked to the Children's Strategy. This progress is not reported and communicated effectively.

In education for example there have been significant developments in enhancing the provision and quality of services to children with special educational needs. New legislation the Education for Persons with Special

Education Needs Act (2004) sets out the range of services to be provided and includes assessments, individual educational plans and support services. This shift towards a child centred approach is significant and while there are waiting times for the assessment of children with more complex needs, the acknowledgement that each school will have a number of children with special needs and the appointment of 6000 additional staff within primary schools ensures a level of support for children with dyslexia and mild learning difficulties which was previously unavailable. However in practice the impact of the legislation is patchy and the provisions have not yet been applied to young people in out of school provision.

Because baselines have been so low, the positive outcomes on a year to year basis are not seen by parents to be impacting quickly enough and many children are still not able to access the additional services to meet their assessed needs. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is constrained as regards staff recruitment and waiting lists for assessment can be lengthy. Education is however a prime example as to how significant developments are often not acknowledged because of the level of continuing unmet need and the new issues coming to the fore and having to be tackled. Appendix 10 demonstrates some of the innovative developments within Education and the commitment to working collaboratively with students and staff to address issues within a whole school ethos.

Measures to tackle early school leaving have been greatly welcomed but there is considerable frustration as to why the National Educational Welfare Board has not been funded appropriately to discharge its responsibility across the country. At present the service has only been able to recruit less than half the staffing quota originally estimated and is unable to cope with the demands for support.

Within the HSE staffing levels in children's services have increased substantially over the past few years. However, the level of resources available and the extent of service provision for children is still regarded by managers as inadequate because:-

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- The baseline was so low to start with.
- There is no adequate assessment of the level of need, or mechanism to assess the impact of provision on levels of need.
- Development funding is not secure and has to be bid for on a year to year basis.
- The lack of ring-fenced funding for children's services challenges local capacity for planning.
- Services have to respond to new demands such as courtwork with young people charged with offences, accommodating separated children, providing family support for non-nationals.

As regards to measures for supporting diversity and helping marginalised groups achieve their full potential, feedback from a group of Traveller parents revealed that their children were often excluded from community events in their area and were generally involved only in Traveller specific activities. They reported that their sons do not have enough access to sport and younger children had limited access to play as there are few facilities on halting sites. Parents were also limited in that they had little understanding or awareness of children's rights and few opportunities for group activities or parenting programmes. Those working with separated children were concerned that some of the most vulnerable young people have gone missing from HSE hostels and may be sexually exploited at the hands of traffickers. The Stockholm Agenda for Action against Sexual Exploitation of Children has not been implemented and there has been no research into the needs of refugee and other migrant children.

Structures and Accountability

The Engine for Change as identified in Chapter 2 above, sets out the framework for achieving more effective coordination between the Government, its Departments, Local Government bodies, Service Providers and the NCO.

It has taken time for the value of this approach to be acknowledged and the examples used in the report indicate that there have been real efforts, commitment and co-ordination which have brought tangible outcomes and added value to the process. There is evidence of greater confidence in and understanding of what cross-cutting models can achieve. The interdependence of Departments is becoming more clearly recognised and there is a greater willingness to apply the learning more generally and therefore create more effectiveness in achieving desired outcomes.

However as noted earlier a lack of clarity about roles and mandate and the absence of a strong political drive to implement the Strategy has limited overall progress. It is important that these issues are identified and addressed to ensure progress is accelerated over the next 5 years.

The National Children's Office

The NCO's core role as set out in the Strategy is to drive and oversee the implementation of the Strategy by ensuring inter-Departmental co-operation, promoting better co-ordination and developing and facilitating stronger links between organisations and agencies. Delays in the appointment of a Director and in identifying staff secondments from the other core departments (Departments Of Health And Children, Social & Family Affairs, Justice Equality & Law Reform) as well as recruiting research and communications personnel meant that a year had elapsed before the Office was up and running.

NCO has provided leadership on a range of projects demonstrating the value of cross cutting work and creating ownership among a range of Departments and the NGO sector eg National Play Strategy, Participation Guidelines and Youth Homelessness Policy. There are however some fundamental issues that it is timely and important to address. Although the NCO was in effect given the job of co-ordinating the Strategy there are significant deficits which have to some extent, mitigated against the Office fully achieving its aim. The

NCO had a staff of approximately 20 whole time equivalents. It operated on the basis of goodwill from other Departments. To fulfil some of its tasks it was dependent on the expertise of others outside of the Office, individual relationships and a Department's interest in the particular activity. It did not see itself as having a mandate to compel others to become engaged in implementing some of the more complex aspects of the Strategy. As noted earlier there was also concern that the Office was an adjunct of the Department of Health rather than the independent body envisaged within the Strategy. Going forward it is critical that the Office of the Minister for Children is not perceived in the same way and is seen as independent from any single Department and able to command resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Minister for Children should:-

- Establish a short life taskforce with clear terms of reference to take forward the recommendations of this Review.

The Office of the Minister for Children must at an early stage:-

- Demonstrate its authority and leadership role to achieve greater coherence in the development and implementation of policy and assist Departments and agencies to achieve a more cohesive framework for children's services.

The NCO Board

Feedback during the Review suggests a lack of clarity about the role of the NCO Board in ensuring the implementation of the Strategy both within their own Departments and through corporate responsibility. The Board had no explicit Terms of Reference. There was an expectation from the non-statutory sector and from local service providers in all sectors that the NCO, through its Board, would define the priorities, set the agenda and agree plans and

timeframes for thematic inter-Departmental approaches to implementing the Strategy in a planned and considered way. Discussion with members of the Board indicates that this role had not been explicit.

Throughout the review there was a willingness by Departments to participate and a sense of greater awareness of and commitment to the need to work more collaboratively and strategically on children's issues drawing on experiences of implementing other inter-Departmental strategies such as the social inclusion initiative.

During the Review many organisations raised the need for a full Minister to ensure children's needs and rights were consistently addressed at Cabinet level. They recognised that this could not be achieved without a separate Department for Children. While the new arrangements appear to considerably strengthen the status and influence of the Minister for Children, this is still not a full Cabinet position and confirmation is needed that the Minister will have the necessary authority to influence all Government policy which could impact on Children.

Clarity is also required on the criteria for inviting the Minister for Children to Cabinet meetings and as to whether the Minister has access to all Cabinet papers so that he can determine their relevance for children. The appointment of a Director General to lead the extended Office of the Minister for Children will ensure direct contact with senior counterparts in the relevant Departments on a day to day basis, to ensure that children's issues and needs are taken account of in both individual and cross-cutting strategies.

The Secretaries General of the three core departments will have a key role in ensuring their Departments are signed up and in creating effective interfaces with the Secretaries General in the other key Departments, in particular the Departments of Social and Family Affairs, Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet Sub-Committee will need to:-

- Ensure the Minister for Children and his Office has a mandate for the development of an appropriate business plan to fully implement the Strategy.
- Ensure the Minister is in attendance at Cabinet meetings.
- Review the “Engine for Change” structures in the light of experience and strengthen them to include clear terms of reference and lines of accountability which ensure they can deliver against the agenda.
- Issue explicit statements as regards accountability and governance arrangement and clarity as to how annual business plans for the new Office will be monitored.

National Children’s Advisory Council

The Council is representative of all the key stakeholders including young people, parents, the research community and the voluntary and community sector. Its remit is to advise the Minister on all aspects of children’s lives, and on the coordination of children’s services. It has a remit to monitor implementation of the strategy and through the Chair has direct access to the Minister.

While the model of a multi-interest group of influential representatives is sound in theory, the Council has struggled with its role and members are frustrated that they appear not to be operating at a sufficiently robust level. This is, however, a difficult challenge for a number of reasons and it would appear that these sometimes mitigate against achieving a collegiate and high level strategic view on the progress of the Strategy and on the Council’s role in ensuring its development and implementation. It is important to recognise the issues with which the Council struggled in order to ensure these are addressed in any review of structures to refresh the Strategy in the forthcoming period.

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Overall there is a lack of opportunity for interest groups on children within Ireland to contribute to multi agency and cross-cutting fora. There is no other formal representative body for the combined children's services sector (Departments, statutory and voluntary agencies, academics, parents and young people) which can advise the Government and therefore at times there were attempts to progress individual agendas through the Council.

The commitment of individual Departments and organisations was variable and consistent attendance by members was difficult to achieve. Members lacked clarity in their understanding of the Council's role and as with other elements of the Strategy the reality of what is involved in implementing such an extensive and comprehensive initiative is only now being recognised. The broader dilemmas in regard to accountability and governance as highlighted above have also had an effect on how the Council functioned.

The lack of cohesion between Departments, fragmentation and differential delivery of services across the country and the absence of accountability arrangements has frustrated the Council's capacity and opportunity to undertake a more active monitoring role. Members are high level busy people who are fully committed within their own agencies and therefore need to see outcomes for the efforts expended in servicing the Council.

The Council has not been staffed as envisaged in the Strategy and therefore has been reluctant to establish a comprehensive work programme which it does not have the staffing capacity to deliver. In effect the Council has had to rely on part time secretarial support from the NCO. The impact of this has been twofold. On the one hand there is simply no one to do the work and on the other there are clear conflicts of interest for the NCO staff providing the secretariat. For the Council to be effective as an advisory and monitoring body it will require a dedicated officer at an appropriate level to develop and drive forward the agenda within a focused and programmed action *plan*.

The Council has, through its links with the NCO and the Minister's Office, been asked to contribute to the Strategy by responding to requests from the Minister for advice on specific issues affecting young people including, participation, play, vetting, implementation of the Children First Child Protection Guidelines and alcohol misuse among young people. These reports have been perceived as providing valuable and significant advice and have been used by individual agencies to promote progress on the various issues. However with the exception of the advice on Garda vetting and on play, they do not appear to have impacted in any significant way and Departments have not been held accountable for progressing the recommendations. Council has also attempted to respond to the Annual Monitoring Report produced by NCO but this has been limited due to the absence of concrete business plans.

One of the Council's most significant achievements is that it has successfully integrated young people and supported their active participation at meetings and in all of the business of the Council, through a range of actions and standards for the conduct of proceedings Younger members have been actively involved in all of the consultation exercises including this Review.

RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet Sub-Committee should:-

- Review the terms of reference of the National Children's Advisory Council and develop new mechanisms for using members' expertise in a more constructive way eg selected members could contribute to relevant task forces.
- Clarify the Council's interfaces with the Director General and the Office of the Minister for Children.
- Confirm the NCAC's role and mechanisms for monitoring progress against the Strategy's business plan.
- Resource NCAC with a dedicated Development Officer.

- The Council should ensure the developments made in engaging young people are harnessed and developed.
- Ensure that relevant expertise is included for the implementation of agreed actions and developments to meet the Strategy's aims and objectives.

Local Coordinating and Delivery Mechanisms

The CDBs were asked to play a role in co-ordinating the National Children's Strategy at local level at a time when they were in their infancy and trying to progress the broader social and economic issues which are their core business (see Appendix 2). It is clear from evidence gathered for this Review that there are considerable challenges and difficulties in keeping children's interests on the CDBs' agenda. The participation agenda for engaging young people is generally taken forward by the Directors of Community and Enterprise and their staff. One example of how this responsibility appears to have been successfully embraced is Donegal CDB which has jointly funded with HSE (North Western Area) a dedicated Youth Officer for the Youth Council. In addition as recognised in the Fitzpatrick's Associates Review of CDB Strategies (2003), "a key determinant of the ultimate success of the CDB model is commitment, support and flexibility at central Government Department and Agency level". In essence therefore, it is essential that the relevant agencies at national level support their organisations on the CDBs to deliver on the National Children's Strategy at local level.

An opportunity for such national support for local agencies will arise in the context of the Review carried out by each CDB of their 10 year Strategy for Economic, Social and Cultural Development. These reviews are being published in the first quarter of 2006.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Office of the Minister for Children should:-

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- Engage directly with Government Departments and national organisations to ensure that their local agencies can deliver the National Children's Strategy at local level.
- Examine how best to use the existing structures on the ground to advance and progress the National Children's Strategy. In this context, greater synergies between the CDBs and the County/City Childcare Committees could be explored.
- Consider in conjunction with the HSE how planning for children's services can be linked into the CDB's planning arrangements and processes given that many of the issues affecting children such as economic development, housing, recreation and leisure, transport, childcare, and policing need to be developed within this joined up local government.

Monitoring and Reporting on Progress

Annual monitoring reports are compiled by the NCO from information supplied by the various Departments in a template format. These contain a significant amount of information and demonstrate broad progress on a year on year basis by identifying achievements against the various objectives and 141 actions. However information made available by the different Departments to form the composite report varies considerably in the detail provided and does not always reflect the meaningful and progressive initiatives and actions which have taken place under the auspices of each Department, as noted above.

This method of obtaining updates is time consuming for both the NCO and the Departments and is largely an administrative exercise as the information provided does not appear to be challenged or analysed. Its value is therefore limited. An overview of progress in relation to the Strategy is prepared by the NCO for the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Children and the Annual Monitoring report is made available to the NCAC. However there is no formal feedback mechanism to Departments which acknowledges achievements within each objective nor any means for challenging Departments for the lack of progress.

The NCAC has a formal responsibility to monitor progress but this is difficult in the absence of an annual business plan with measurable outcomes. There is little sense that the report is used to inform planning for the following year. Therefore this approach makes it difficult to obtain a coherent sense of the overall progress of the Strategy and its impact on the lives of children.

As noted earlier, reporting mechanisms are top down and there is no mechanism for linking into locality efforts and measuring local level implementation. Consequently projects which are models of good practice and innovative activity occurring in various parts of the country are often not reported.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Office of the Minister for Children in conjunction with the Secretaries General, must:-

- Urgently produce a 3 year rolling business plan for implementing the Strategy which is outcome driven, costed and timetabled and which identifies the responsibilities of each Department/Agency. It should specify:-
 - Which Department has lead responsibility for each objective.
 - The outcomes to be achieved.
 - The actions required by each Department, sector and agency/organisation at national and local level.
 - The timescales for each aspect.
 - The resource implications.
 - The reporting mechanisms.
- Ensure that responsibilities and commitments are reflected in each Department's Strategy and that actions required by Departments are incorporated into their individual business plans with resources identified and committed.
- Ensure that Departments require their agencies at local level to include appropriate targets within their own plans.

- Monitor progress against the business plan.
- Establish effective arrangements for reviewing progress and developing/refreshing the Strategy on a regular basis in light of developments and emerging issues.
- Set up a formal mechanism to review the Strategy in 2008/9 with a view to developing the second National Children's Strategy for 2010 and beyond.
- Agree a coherent data collation and information management strategy.

Departments must:-

- Agree how to collect accurate and meaningful information to enable a constructive measurement of progress.
- Identify in their monitoring reports, achievements against objectives, the issues/ barriers to be overcome, where adjustments/refinements are required and specify the further actions to be taken in the incoming year. They must also incorporate these actions into their Departmental business plans in an out-come focused, costed, and time-specific way.
- Identify a named person with responsibility for taking forward each of the agreed actions, review progress and collate information.
- Sign off reports provided to the Office of the Minister for Children at Secretary General level.

The Cabinet Sub Committee should:-

- Consider mechanisms for reviewing progress against the 3 National Goals on an ongoing and cumulative basis.
- Develop protocols for Departments to advise the Sub Committee of blocks to achieving objectives/actions and ways of overcoming these.

The development of this 'SMART' approach would facilitate each Department in tackling specific objectives, and the Office in compiling a meaningful annual monitoring report linked to and capable of being translated in to an ongoing work plan.

Resourcing the Strategy

One of the key concerns identified by NCAC and confirmed by representatives of all the sectors and at all levels of administration was the inadequacy of resources to take forward implementation of the Strategy. The National Dissemination Unit which is a critical component of the Strategy has not been established due to the cap on public sector numbers.

Allocation of new resources as well as consideration of a redistribution of existing resources is obviously essential for each aspect of a national initiative and needs to be linked to clear plans, achievable outcomes and agreed timeframes.

Many important initiatives have been 'pump primed' by external funding and this has been a particular issue in the Border Counties where managers have been creative with European Union Peace and Reconciliation monies. As these funding streams end lack of agreement as how to mainstream activities and provide recurring funding, leaves projects vulnerable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government through the Cabinet Sub-Committee must:-

- Review the financial implications of resourcing the Strategy.
- Individual Departments must include funding for their aspects of the Strategy within their Departmental strategies and there must be agreement and coherency across Departments about the funding arrangements for cross-cutting initiatives.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

5. Conclusions

The Review Process has endorsed the National Children's Strategy 'Our Children-Their Lives' as continuing to provide a relevant and appropriate framework for promoting and addressing the needs of children in Ireland. While the challenge of keeping it dynamic and responsive will have to be addressed as will the need to ensure it is more closely aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, there is much to celebrate at this half-way mark.

There is much greater awareness of young people's rights to have a say in matters affecting them and to make representations and complaints when their rights have not been upheld.

The Ombudsman for Children is an appropriate acknowledgement of the Government's commitment to promoting young peoples rights.

Models for encouraging young people's participation at all levels are being developed and evaluated.

A set of national well being indicators has been developed and the national longitudinal study is about to commence. The importance of research as a means of informing policy development has been acknowledged and research projects of relevance to the Strategy are underway.

The Play Policy and Recreation Policy have been developed as a direct response to young people's concerns about the lack of facilities and opportunities within their local areas. Local Sports Partnerships have piloted creative schemes and initiatives to facilitate greater opportunities for young people to engage with an increasing variety of sporting and cultural activities.

The development of these policies and their ongoing implementation has required effective inter-departmental and inter-agency collaboration and this

has been achieved through a range of working groups with clear and agreed outcomes and appropriate membership. Where appropriate the contribution of the voluntary sector and academic institutions has been included and there is a greater acknowledgement of the skills and experience that other non statutory agencies bring to the table.

There is evidence that much has been achieved, confidence has developed and many models exist for further promoting and implementing various aspects of the strategy for the remaining five years and beyond.

Progress can be enhanced and accelerated if there is acknowledgement of some of the issues that have frustrated progress and if there is a willingness to address factors which are seen to be barriers to implementation.

Feedback at all levels reflected an uncertainty about the current status of the Strategy and the Government needs to restate its commitment and provide the necessary political leadership. Implementation is achievable and much will be asked of the Office of the Minister for Children in providing strong and focused leadership, building on the achievements of the NCO.

The comprehensive recommendations included in this review are an attempt to secure the best possible outcome in terms of the Strategy's implementation and by so doing enhance the lives and opportunities of the nation's children.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Membership of the National Children's Advisory Council

Name	Organisation
Mr Peter O'Brien	Chair
Mr PJ Breen	Department of Education and Science
Ms Maria Corbett	Children's Rights Alliance
Mr Seamus Mannion	HSE
Mr Denis Drought	Children and Young People's Forum
Ms Eimear Fisher	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
Ms Norah Gibbons	Barnardos
Mr Paul Gilligan	ISPCC
Ms Geraldine Graydon	National Parent Council – Primary
Ms Méabh Healy	Children and Young People's Forum
Mr Charlie Hardy	Department of Health and Children
Mr David Hopkins	Ministerial Nominee
Ms Anne-Marie Hughes	Irish Sports Council
Mr Jim Jackman	National Parents Council – Post Primary
Mr Michael O'Connor	Focus Ireland
Mr Diarmuid Kearney	National Youth Council of Ireland
Mr Anthony Keigher	Children and Young People's Forum
Ms Marie Kennedy	Office of the Minister for Children
Mr George Maybury	Ministerial Nominee
Mr Heber McMahon	Department of Social and Family Affairs
Ms Mary Meaney	National Disability Authority
Mr Finbarr Murphy	An Garda Síochána
Ms Collette Murray	Pavee Point
Dr Saoirse NicGabhainn	National Children's Research Advisory Board
Ms Sheila O'Donnell	Children and Young People's Forum
Ms Jean O'Dwyer	The Arts Council
Sr Catherine Prendergast	CORI
Dr Dermot Stokes	Ministerial Nominee
Ms Máire Uí Aininn	National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee
Ms Jennifer Wallace	National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism
Mr Eamon Waters	Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government

Subgroup Membership

Mr Peter O'Brien – Chair NCAC

Mr George Maybury – Public Service Executive Union, Ministerial Nominee

Dr Saoirse NicGabhainn – Health Promotion Unit, National University of Ireland

Ms Maria Corbett – Children's Rights Alliance

Mr David Hopkins – Ministerial Nominee (younger member)

Dr Dermot Stokes – Youth Reach, Ministerial Nominee

Ms Marie Kennedy – National Children's Office

Mr Dairmuid Kearney – National Youth Council of Ireland

The Engine for Change- Roles and Responsibilities

National Children's Office (NCO)

The role of the National Children's Office is to provide a major boost to managing cross-departmental issues.

The NCO will be an **independent body** established under the Public Service Management Act 1997.

It will have the expertise and significant budgetary resources to enable it to provide:

- Administrative support to the Minister for Children.
- To act as a strong support mechanism for Departments in relation to the implementation of the Strategy.

The NCO will be the catalyst for ensuring **inter-departmental co-operation** and the integration of activities on children's issues.

It will have a strong focus on solving problems and promoting better co-ordination between departments and between agencies.

The Office will bring together time limited, cross-departmental project teams with local statutory and voluntary agency representatives supported by commissioned experts.

The Office will be headed by a Board comprising Assistant Secretaries from the main departments involved in implementing the strategy.

There will also be links created to local level public bodies. **These Assistant Secretaries and local level representatives will have responsibility for**

the implementation of the strategy in their own departments and organisations.

The Children's Office will work to effect change throughout the Board building on existing integration mechanisms.

The Office will be engaged in:

- Preparing an annual work programme to translate the three National Goals and objectives into detailed plans for action and the preparation of progress reports for presentation by the Minister for Children to the Cabinet Sub-Committee on a six-monthly basis.
- Ensuring that co-ordinated and integrated action takes place by identifying priority cross-cutting issues to be progressed on a two to three year cycle and supporting cross-departmental action by, inter alia, co-funding new and existing initiatives which are innovative and adaptable and which encourage cross-departmental actions.
- Monitoring implementation of the Strategy in departments and public agencies.
- Promoting capacity building through encouraging and supporting training initiatives.

The Primary functions of the Director will be:

- Supporting and advising the Government and the Minister for Children in relation to the implementation of the Strategy and promoting the role of the Children's Office.
- Guiding the Children's Office in all aspects of its operations, in particular, progressing the further actions proposed and directing the

preparation of action plans in consultation with government departments.

- Facilitating the continuation of the consultative and participative process through the National Children's Advisory Council.

The Director will be responsible for creating linkages between the Children's Office and the other elements of the new organisational structures (The Engine for Change).

The NCO and Family Affairs Unit of the Department of Social and Family Affairs will be jointly responsible for the management of the National Longitudinal Study.

National Children's Advisory Council (NCAC)

Membership of the Council reflects the partnerships of interest and includes children's representatives, representatives of the social partners, the research community and the voluntary sector as well as the NCO.

The Council creates a strong link between the Government and Non-Government sectors and strengthens the role of the NGO sector in the policy development and implementation processes. Representation on Council by the NGO and research sectors acknowledges the need for their involvement in the implementation of the strategy and their capacity in influencing and effecting change.

Functions:

- To advise the Minister on all aspects of children's lives, including the development of child wellbeing indicators.
- To advise the Minister on the better co-ordination and delivery of

services to children.

- To contribute to monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Strategy.
- To undertake and advise on research and to advise on training in relation to the Strategy.
- To advise on the development of mechanisms to consult with children.

Cabinet Sub-Committee

The Cabinet Sub-Committee is chaired by the Taoiseach and includes relevant Ministers.

Its role is to monitor progress and review how effectively Government Departments are integrating their efforts and resources to deliver these priorities.

A Minister of State, known as the Minister for Children will have lead responsibility on behalf of the Government for the implementation of the National Children's Strategy.

The Minister for Children will have overall responsibility for co-ordinating children's policy. The Minister will report routinely to the Cabinet Sub-Committee on the implementation of the strategy and drive implementation of the cross-departmental agenda.

The County and City Development Boards (CDB's)

The CDB's are quadripartite parties from local Government, local Development Agencies, the State Sector and Social Partners.

The CDB's' function is to identify gaps/overlaps in service provision and secure coherent delivery arrangements by agencies operating locally. CDB's will draw up strategies for economic, social and cultural development for each County/City to which the whole state sector at local level will subscribe. The CDB's structures and strategies provide the vehicle for local articulation of the National Children's Strategy.

The National Children's Strategy will give direction to the CDB's strategies in relation to children and the whole child perspective as well as the three National Goals will inform the thematic development of CDB's strategies.

The NCAC Perspective: Summary of Council Members Workshop, September 2005

In reflecting on their experience of advising the Minister and monitoring the Strategy's implementation, Council members identified the:-

- Areas of significant progress and the driver's/factors for success
- Blocks to the implementation of the Strategy and how these could be overcome
- How the next five years could be best utilised to ensure the Strategy's maximum effectiveness

The Key Successes

Members felt there had been significant successes in the following areas:-

- Appointment of an Ombudsman for Children as one of the key mechanisms for promoting children's rights, with involvement of children in the recruitment process.
- The establishment of Student Councils in Schools.
- The National Child Care Strategy and significant increase in the quantity of child care places.
- The development of a Play Policy in partnership with a range of Departments and agencies at national and local level.
- The establishment of a range of measures for consulting with young people and supporting their participation in decision-making at national and local level.
- The establishment of the National Education Welfare Board.
- Agreement on a set of national well-being indicators for children and other research initiatives.
- The creation of structures to drive the Strategy including the Cabinet

Sub Committee, NCO and NCAC.

- The expansion of Family Resource Centres.
- The Children Act 2001 and the associated structures, diversion programmes and initiatives.
- The Youth Homelessness Strategy developed on a cross-cutting basis.
- Increased levels of Garda vetting of those working with children.
- The creation of advertising standards in relation to children.

In recognising and commending these developments, members were conscious of the many issues that have still to be addressed to achieve full and effective implementation of many of the actions.

They were also concerned about the limited progress on a number of actions including:-

- Review and extension of the Guardian ad Litem service.
- National Research Dissemination Unit.
- Child Impact Statements.

Blocks to the Implementation of the Strategy

A number of significant barriers and constraints were identified including:-

- No allocated funding specific to Strategy implementation and a sense that action taken by Departments to date would have been motivated by factors other than the Strategy.
- Actions are not costed and often lead responsibility is not clear. The Strategy is competing with other priorities within Government Departments and to be taken forward actions must be costed and integrated within Departmental business plans.
- The value of the annual monitoring reports in progressing the Strategy is questionable.
- The cap on public service numbers.

- The general vision/ethos has not been adopted and fully integrated by Government Departments.
- Links between the National Children's Strategy and other strategies have not been made explicit, eg Social Inclusion Review.
- The lack of joined up thinking and integration at Department level.
- Queries as to whether the voluntary sector has successfully adopted the Strategy. NGO's were involved in planning but do not feel involved in implementing the Strategy.
- Issues and difficulties in relation to consultation arrangements with young people and parents:-
 - Structures for engaging young people are limited and not developed consistently across the country.
 - There are no mechanisms for consulting with or empowering parents
 - Gaps in knowledge and information for parents about the Strategy, no mechanism for engagement in important issues which affect their children.
- Children are competing with other client groups for service.
- An apparent ongoing conflict of philosophy regarding children at a national level between support and punishment which may prevent assigning of resources eg debate on age of criminal responsibility and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs).
- The lack of progress in collating information and data to inform planning and developments to meet children's needs.
- The lack of public awareness of the Strategy.
- Public apathy and stereotypes about young people.
- The uneven implementation of family friendly policies with more progress in public service and ongoing resistance within private sector.

Making the Most of the Next Five Years – How to Refresh the Strategy

NCAC Members felt that many of these barriers to implementation could be overcome and identified the need for progress in the following areas:-

- Revitalising and reaffirmation of commitment of departments and agencies to the National Children’s Strategy and integrating it into every individual Department and agency strategy.
- Objectives and actions must therefore be included in business plans with clear outcomes, costs, lead role, timescales and accountability.
- Rebranding, further awareness raising and marketing the Strategy taking account of current issues, cultural changes and developments in structures for service delivery.
- Driving the Strategy at the highest level of Government. Cabinet approval and dynamic leadership for the Strategy is essential.
- Committing adequate resources on a longer term and recurring basis.
- The need for full resourcing and implementation of the Children Act 2001.
- Reviewing and strengthening of the existing structures – “the engine for change”.
- Reviewing the role of the National Children’s Advisory Council in monitoring, the extent of responsibility.
- Systems for NCAC to evaluate the Strategy and recognition that whilst individual members experience is highly important, there is a need to work from a collective and wider strategic perspective through the NCAC.
- Need for a project plan which is action focused and time bound so that progress can be monitored and adjustments made on the basis of evidence.
- Recognition of major new social issues in Ireland in recent years, including migration within Ireland and immigration from countries in Easter Europe. Huge issues about capacity to meet needs of foreign national children must be addressed on an Inter Departmental basis.
- Linking the Children’s Strategy to Government priorities regarding Social Inclusion.
- Tackling child poverty through services and supports as opposed to a purely income-driven approach.

- Ensuring the Child Care Strategy is child-centred with Child Care training and Quality Parenting programmes properly rolled out across the country.
- Effective quality control/quality assurance mechanisms for initiatives under goal 3.
- Child Impact Analysis and equality proofing of legislative and policy initiatives.
- Greater transparency as to what Government Departments can achieve and recognition that agreed agenda have to be reviewed to respond to new issues which may have to be addressed as a priority.
- Evaluation at the end of each year and a recovery plan where departments are not meeting their targets. (Illustrated by practical examples such as 18% increase in Youth Service budget – only able to implement 40% of the National Youth Development Plan).
- Better research and data collection, which is essential to inform strategic development.
- Retaining the expertise of the NGO sector in implementation of various actions and initiatives on a full partnership basis.

Documents Considered in the Review

The Review was informed by the following documents:-

- ACET, Educating and Caring: Sex, Drugs, HIV.
- Ag Súrgradh le Chéile, Promoting Active Play for Children and Parents.
- Castletroy College Students, Recreation Research 2005.
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- Department of Education and Science, An Evaluation of Curriculum Implementation in Primary Schools.
- Department of Education and Science, Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act 2004.
- Department of Education and Science, Fifty School Reports: What Inspectors Say.
- Department of Education and Science, Guidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools.
- Department of Education and Science, Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners.
- Department of the Environment and Local Government, Review of the County/City Development Board Strategies, March 2003.
- Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Planning for Diversity, the National Action Plan Against Racism.

- Donegal County Development Board, An Straitéis, Donegal County Strategy 2002-2012.
- Donegal Youth Council, The First Two Years: 2002-2004
- Donegal Youth Council, News 2005.
- Health Promotion Department, “their you know whats”, The changing perceptions of primary school children (4-13 years) of growing up and loving. A research project funded by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency and carried out by the Health Service Executive – North Western Area.
- Health Service Executive, Consumer Panel of Young People in Foster Care, From US 2U 2005.
- ISPCC, Citizen Child – Strategy 2005.
- ISPCC, My Right to Know.
- ISPCC, Valuing Childhood 2005.
- Limerick Youth Service, Strategic Plan, Celebrating Young People 2005-2010.
- Mid-Western Health Board, Review of Childcare and Family Support Services 2004.
- Minister for Finance, Mr Brian Cowen, TD, Extract from Budget 2006 Speech.
- National Children’s Advisory Council, Advice to the Minister on Alcohol and Young People (2003).
- National Children’s Advisory Council, Advice to the Minister on Child Protection and Vetting (2002).
- National Children’s Advisory Council, Advice to the Minister on Play
- National Children’s Advisory Council, ‘Voice of the Child’ advice.
- National Children’s Office/Children’s Rights Alliance/National Youth Council of Ireland, Young Voices – guidelines on how to involve children and young people in your work.
- National Children’s Office, Children’s Understanding of Well-Being.
- National Children’s Office, ‘Review of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg (August 2005).
- National Children’s Office, Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005).

- National Children's Office, The Development of a National Set of Child Well-Being Indicators, Executive Summary.
- National Children's Office, Ready, Steady, Play! A National Play Policy.
- National Children's Strategy, Our Children – Their Lives.
- National Children's Strategy, Report to Children on the Public Consultation.
- National Children's Strategy, 2004 Progress Report.
- National Conjoint Child Health Committee, Best Health for Adolescents – Get Connected, Developing an Adolescent Friendly Health Service.
- National Council for Special Education, Information and Guidelines for Primary Schools in Processing Applications for, Resources for Children with Special Educational Needs on and from 1 January 2005.
- National Education Psychological Service, Working Together to Make a Difference for Children, Information for Parents.
- National Education Psychological Service, Working Together to Make a Difference for Children, the NEPS Model of Service.
- National Educational Welfare Board, Pre Budget Submission 2006, Highlighting the Cost of School Absenteeism.
- National Youth Council of Ireland, Budget 2006: "Youth Forgotten". Post-Budget Analysis.
- National Youth Work Development Plan.
- North Western Health Board, Draft Adequacy Report in relation to Child Care and Family Support Services.
- Schools and the Equal Status Act, 2nd Edition
- The Childhood Development Initiative & Dartington Social Research Unit, How are our Kids? Executive Summary.
- Trinity College Children's Research Centre on behalf of the National Children's Office, Second Level Student Councils in Ireland: A Study of Enablers, Barriers and Supports.
- Trinity College Dublin and Special Needs Section, DES, Supporting Inclusion: Strategies and Accommodations for the Primary Classroom.

- Union of Secondary Students, Your Guide to the Union of Secondary Students.

Donegal Youth Council Code Of Conduct : Aims And Objectives Of The Youth Council

Aim: To establish an elected Youth Council, which will support young elected representatives to become involved in democratic decision making in a meaningful way regarding issues that affect young people.

Objective 1: To develop an effective platform for addressing important issues for young people through the Youth Council. This would be achieved by:-

- Representing young people in Youth Council meetings.
- Identifying the issues and needs relevant to young people in their respective areas.
- Enabling Youth Councillors to take action for the needs of their constituents through projects and planning.
- Assisting Youth Councillors to feedback to their constituents regarding the progress of their projects and in return gather information on relevant issues.

Objective 2: To enable Youth Councillors to engage with County Councils, Health Boards, Community and Voluntary Organisations etc regarding the effectiveness of services, plans and policies throughout the County. This would be achieved by:-Helping Youth Councillors to develop the Youth Council as a recognised consultative body on issues effecting young people.

- Assisting Youth Councillors in identifying gaps in services provided for young people and to seek improvements where those gaps exist.
- Supporting other agencies and services to gather information on issues young people find important such as Health Boards, Library Services, County Councils, Counselling Services, and local business people on issues such as physical, mental and sexual health, alcohol forums and non-alcoholic discos.

Objective 3: To develop a fundamental understanding of the needs of young people in each area. This would be achieved by:-

- To promote research, in all of the various methods used.
- To conduct research on the needs of young people aged 13-18, including early school leavers, students in mainstream education and students in training.
- To examine how best to include “marginalised” young people (early school leavers, members of the travelling community, those who are differently abled, asylum seekers and refugees, young people affected by conflict) and attempt to include them in participating with the Youth Council.

Objective 4: To develop comprehensive training programmes and strengthen links with other Youth Councils. Such training schemes would include:-

- Media skills training.
- Research.
- Presentation skills.
- Strategic planning for projects.
- IT training.
- Peer leadership.
- Committee.
- Teambuilding.

Set Up:

- Contact schools/youth groups stating intentions of Youth Council and requesting permission to make a presentation about the idea of Youth Council.
- Make presentation about the prospect of a Youth Council, explaining the work intended as stated in the Aims and Objectives. Gauge interest from students and record names of those interested.

- Facilitate internal elections, ie choose from the interested students the candidates who will run for election in one of the following ways:
- Secret ballot. Students who are interested in running choose amongst themselves the candidates they wish to see run for the Youth Council election. For instance, if there are three candidatures available and seven students interested, each of those students writes down the names of the three students they want to run.

OR

- Prospective candidates make a presentation explaining why they would like to run and what they would do once in office. Students would be chosen on the merit of their presentation by secret ballot.

Electoral Process: To ensure representation of all views, the method of Proportional Representation should be used.

Ballyraine Community School

This represents a microcosm of the Children's Strategy in action as it addresses all of the principles and demonstrates achievements in regard to each of the national goals.

Ballyraine Primary School in Letterkenny is very much integrated into the community and has demonstrated all of the principles of the Children's Strategy in the activities and way it has developed children's participation in school life and activities in the community. Starting from a democratic approach to the inclusion of 7-12 year olds to become the Green School Team planning and implementing an environmentally friendly school programme, the school has moved through a process which has extended to another school, included parents and engaged the wider community. The activities have included:-

- Linking the school with the Tidy Towns and European Green Flag Schemes.
- Linking with a Special School and developing a Buddy system to create vegetable patches in each school, outcome was integration of children with special needs into the community school.
- Linked marginalised children with children with other difficulties making significant differences to each one's school experience.
- Linking with older people in a residential setting and patients in a hospice to create a courtyard garden, and engaging with the local Garda to supply transportation.
- The Green Team Committee planning and making decisions about the content of the garden and devising a work plan.

These actions in turn created a perception in the community of a caring ethos in school. The structure of school began to change and the 'Parents in the Classroom' Scheme included both mums and dads in the day to day work of Peyton/Wilson Jan 2006

the curriculum.

Other initiatives included Multi Cultural Week whereby each class adopted a country which led to recognition of the range of cultures in the school. The overall outcome was the parade of nations and celebration of difference event which influenced how non-national families became further involved and integrated into school life and activities. The local radio station and newspapers covered some of the activities which had the result of national television taken interest to an entirely different level. A four week Anti-bullying Programme led to children entering into contracts with each other to tackle bullying.

The outcomes of the project were that school became more child-centred and children were more fully integrated with the wider community; parents felt more included and school became more family orientated. The school also became much more culturally inclusive and children's participation in decision making, and in taking forward action plans increased.

National Childcare Strategy

The development of the Childcare Strategy offers an alternative model for an integrated means of engaging relevant and interested parties in the production and implementation of a national strategy. The Strategy had to address a variety of opinion and needs, address an extensive rural and urban agenda which demanded very different things for particular areas and circumstances. It required the commitment of a range of departments, had huge financial implications and challenged many of the traditional views on family, women and children and engage both the public and private sectors to deliver

The partnership established through this national agreement involved an extensive range of stakeholders in developing and agreeing a shared understanding of the key mechanisms and relationships with the specific aim of formulating and implementing policy. The process used reflects the inter-disciplinary and multi-department and multi agency dependence between the partners. Underpinning the success of the Childcare Strategy was the understanding and agreement of the importance of and necessity for the partnership because no one department or agency could achieve its goals without a significant degree of support and commitment from others.

This particular partnership embraced a problem-solving approach whereby various interest groups addressed joint problems. It involved trade-offs both between and within interest groups, and the process incorporated various and at times different participants, departments agencies and individuals on particular agenda items. These ranged from agreeing the principles, understanding national macro-economic policy right through to the specifics of local development.

Expert Working Group on Childcare

The Expert Working Group was established under Partnership 2000 to

develop a strategy which would integrate the different strands of the arrangements for the development and delivery of childcare and early educational services. The group, chaired by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law reform had wide ranging terms of reference and over seventy members representing the relevant Government Departments, social partners, statutory bodies, non-government organisations and parents.

Key elements which assisted the process included the engagement of representatives from different parts of the whole country, local bodies and importantly the support of influential senior individuals in relevant Departments. There were clear terms of reference, required outcomes were defined and leadership was highly visible. The large membership required a multi-level working process involving plenary sessions attended by all members, eight subgroups, each focusing on a particular issue and a steering group.

The Expert Working Group examined the social context of childcare provision, agreed the age range to be considered, carried out a wide ranging consultative process, agreed the elements to be addressed by the strategy as a result of a comprehensive survey of the public.

Working Methods

The large membership and work process required that the Expert Working Group operate at three levels. These were:-

- Plenary sessions attended by all members.
- Eight sub groups, each focusing on a particular policy issue.
- A Steering Group which comprised the Chairperson, Secretariat chairpersons of each of the subgroups, and representatives from ADM and the Department of Education and Science.

Subgroups we re-established: to consider the following areas:-

- Financial and employment implications of an integrated approach to the provision of childcare facilities in Ireland.
- Registration, training and qualifications of childcare workers.
- Resourcing and sustaining of childcare within urban disadvantaged areas.
- Resourcing and sustaining of childcare within rural areas.
- Regulations and standards.

Educational aspects of childcare services:-

- The needs and rights of children in relation to a national framework.
- Equality of access and participation in relation to a national framework.

Terms of reference and detailed objectives were agreed for each subgroup.

The National Childcare Coordinating Committee (NCCC) was established in late 1999 and as stated was chaired by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Membership comprised representatives of the statutory and non-statutory sectors including the Government Departments and Agencies with an involvement in childcare, the Social Partners and the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations.

The NCCC was tasked as follows:-

- To advise in relation to the development of a childcare infrastructure.
- To advise the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform in relation to childcare under the National Development Plan.
- To develop a coordinated national approach to childcare provision over the life of the EOCP.
- To assist in the initiation and establishment of appropriate structures for

the delivery of the Childcare Measure in the National Development Plan.

- To assist in the development of the City/County Childcare Committees.
- To initiate research into childcare provision at both national and local level.

Advisory Group to the NCCC

An Advisory Group was established to examine the work of the NCCC with regard to the childcare needs of children with special needs and children of minority ethnic origin and children from the Traveller Community and to proof the work of the sector on issues such as poverty, equality and diversity.

The NCCC continues to provide a forum through which the participants can raise issues and concerns about aspects of childcare delivery in Ireland and keeps other stakeholders apprised of developments which impact upon the sector. The Committee met approximately six-weekly in 2003 and every second month in 2004. These meetings were complemented by activity in the Sub-Groups.

Coordinating Role of the National Children's Office

NCO facilitated a High Level Inter-Departmental Working Group addressing issues of co-ordination on both childcare and early education. This built on OECD work on early childhood care and education which was commissioned by the Department of Education and Science and focuses on the current separation of responsibilities for early childcare and early education and the relative states of development of each element. A key point to consider was that this action brought together the Departments of Justice, Equality and Law Reform; Education and Science; Health and Children; and Social and Family Affairs.

Local Structures for Childcare – City/County Childcare Committees

The Expert Working Group on Childcare recommended the establishment of a county based structure for childcare. As a result, City/County Childcare

Committees (CCCs) have been established in 33 counties and cities to develop a co-ordinated strategy for childcare provision within their area. Financial support for the CCCs and for the implementation of their Annual Development Plans was made available from Measure 3 - Quality Improvement of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. The remit of the 33 CCCs is to advance childcare service provision within the local areas through:-

- Development of a co-ordinated strategy for childcare provision in the area based on analysis of needs and overseeing effective implementation against targets set by the Committee.
- Development of an information strategy concerning the provision of childcare within the county which also updates and develops the baseline data provided in the National Childcare Census.
- Development and support of local countywide networks and initiatives which target all categories of childcare providers.

The membership of the CCC is expected to be broadly based and intended to be representative of the key stakeholders in the childcare sector in each county. It was recommended that the structures be balanced to include representation from the Statutory sector, the Social Partners, Local Development Partnerships, National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, Parents and Providers of Childcare. The establishment process was facilitated by the then health boards, now the HSE.

Each CCC was asked to prepare a five year Strategic Plan for the development of Childcare services to address the specific Childcare needs of its own area. The Strategy set out the framework for the development of childcare based on a shared vision and analysis of the needs within the county. Each Strategy was thoroughly appraised prior to its being approved by the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee.

The County Childcare Strategy is implemented through a series of annual action plans, which are again subject to a thorough appraisal before the

applications are approved for funding by the Minister through the Programme Appraisal Committee structure. The CCCs are engaged in a wide range of developmental work aimed at advancing the availability of quality childcare within the county. They are encouraged to work closely with the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations to promote quality services and in the local delivery of childcare training.

The DJE&LR can request the County Childcare Committees to undertake particular tasks and they have for example assisted with the completion of a nation wide survey to determine the supply of childcare available on the ground.

The role of the CCCs evolved quickly to the point where the CCC now plays the key role at local level envisaged by the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare.

Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative

Experiencing Childhood Citizenship

The Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) is a consortium of groups, residents and professionals working and living in Tallaght West and this project is part of a ten year strategy to improve outcomes for children in four areas in Tallaght West. A key part of the initiative's work was to design and implement creative processes for consulting with children. The project clearly fits with Goal one of the Children's Strategy and also progresses the rights of children as envisaged in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Researchers visited seven schools and worked with 140 children with a variety of needs, interests and capacities. The children were representative of the mix of cultures, religions and backgrounds present in Tallaght West, with children from Settled and Traveller, Irish-born and International backgrounds all taking part. Over a four month period, using a story "Christy's Dream" (a boy and his horse) adapted to suit what interested children in the area and the medium of process drama, the children were invited to engage in role as the "Friends of Christy Kelly", in consultations about:-

- What is important to them in relation to their community
- How their lives can be improved
- How their needs can be met
- Who they think is responsible for bringing about the envisaged change.

Underpinning this approach was the belief that active participation and the development of skills would ultimately assist the children to develop responsible citizenship and the accompanying values of empathy, interdependence, respect for self, others and diversity. Alongside these elements the processes used focused on encouraging the children's

commitment to social justice, equality and human rights, democratic principles and learning from others. Other aims included encouraging the children to interpret information to communicate and negotiate with others, to work co-operatively, to develop language to express opinions and to make balanced judgements in the interests of the wider community, as well as the self.

Throughout the process the emphasis remained on the fictional story, finding solutions to the problems of the story's main character and at times the children were encouraged to consider their own areas.

After analysis of the children's views, six key themes emerged:-

- The need to increase children's opportunities for recreation
- The need to keep people in the community, particularly children, safe from dangers that exist in the community
- The need to promote a cleaner community
- The need for more community facilities and supports to be made available in the area particularly for parents and other adults
- The need to upgrade accommodation in the area, particularly for those families that can't afford to do so themselves
- The need for a fair and happy school environment

Researchers offered the view that adults can learn immeasurably by listening to the views and insights of children from the area and that the children's insights do not largely differ from those of their adult neighbours. Children understand the roles to be played by themselves, by their parents and other adults living in the area, by public services such as schools and the Garda and businesses located in the area so that quality of life can improve.

Examples Of Good Practice Initiatives

The review identified a number of statutory, voluntary and community initiatives which achieved the principles of the National Children’s Strategy in that they are child friendly, family focused, action orientated, outcome driven, equitable and promote integration. Several of these achieved all three national goals by incorporating participation, research and service delivery and provide models of good practice.

Project/Initiative	Goal Achieved
“Young Voices” Participation Guidelines - NCO, CRA & NYCI	1
Donegal Youth Council and substructures - links to County Council - Expert Advisory Committee - Inter-Country Initiative	1
Play for all/Home-based Play Initiative – Donegal	3
Ballyraine “Green” School. – Microcosm of issues facing the nation	1 + 2 + 3
Galway Gaf – Youth Café	1 + 3
Tallaght West – “How Are Our Kids?” Childhood Development Initiative - Integrated Partnership Approach to researching need and providing a solutions-based response.	1 + 2 + 3
From US 2 U 2005. Consumer Panel of Young People in Foster Care	3
Castlefoyle School Limerick – Play Research Project – student led consultation and proposal	1 + 2 + 3 HSE (Mid-Western)
Union of Students in Ireland	1 + 3

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expert Board - Structure and Business Plan - whole Country approach 	
ISPCC Participation Strategy	1 + 2 + 3
National Play Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cross Departmental - NCO lead 	1 + 3
Health Boards' Review of the Adequacy of Child Care and Family Support Services. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - identifies connected thinking - inadequacies - collates information - informs planning 	3
Travellers Education Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - due to be published shortly 	1 + 2 + 3
National Child Care Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Effective national and local structures - Implementation plan 	1 + 2 + 3
Restorative Conferencing – Carlow, Kilkenny	3
National Well-Being Indicators	2
Foster Care Standards/Residential Care Standards	3
Disability Legislation and Strategy	3

Department of Education and Science

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

This action plan puts in place an integrated, strategic approach to addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through to second-level education (3 to 18 years) It is anticipated that the plan will build on the success of existing measures for tackling educational disadvantage, will identify and address the issues that reduced overall effectiveness in the past. The plan is one element of a wider continuum of interventions to address disadvantage. Other actions include “Second Chance” education and training, a focus on access measures for adults to increase participation by under represented groups in further and higher education. A further element of this continuum is the ongoing development of provision for pupils with special education needs in light of the enactment of the Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act (2004) and the establishment of the National Council for Special Education.

The plan’s core elements comprise:-

- A standardised system for identifying and regularly reviewing levels of disadvantage
- A new integrated School Support Programme (SSP) which will bring together, and build upon, existing interventions for schools and school clusters/communities with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage. The differences between urban and rural disadvantage will be taken into account in targeting actions under the programme.

In addition supports will continue to be provided for schools where the level of disadvantage is more dispersed. The plan will be implemented on a phased basis over five years and will involve additional investment of some 40 million euro on full implementation. About 300 additional posts will also be created

across the education system generally and existing measures will be streamlined and integrated.

The plan will also complement and support provision for students with special educational needs. It will include targeted supports for Traveller students and for students for whom English or Gaeilge is not their first language, and supports for second chance education and training.

The plan sets out the key actions involved, it identifies how existing schemes and programmes will be integrated into SSP on a phased basis over the implementation period and outlines the benefits for individual schools and communities served.

Education Addressing concerns about Student Behaviour

The interim report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour begins to outline the phenomenon of student disruption or challenging behaviour in schools as a matter of concern in countries other than Ireland. The Task Force also highlights the level of goodwill towards its work, a further indication of the wish of those who work on behalf of children and young people to seek and find solutions to issues and concerns for children.

The report makes an important comment about early findings “It should be stressed that while there was serious concern about disruption levels in some schools, there was also encouraging and positive evidence that the majority of students in the school system are engaged and compliant”.

Significant changes in how disruptive behaviour is viewed is commented upon and demonstrates developments in understanding and changes in attitude so that behaviour once classified as serious or “high level” disruption is now being classified as “low level”.

It also highlights that serious incidents are rare but in effect are more easily dealt with because they require decisive action and in some instances the

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involvement of the Garda as criminal behaviour has occurred. Early interpretation of data indicates that it is only between 5% and 10% of the school population that engage in disruptive behaviour and that this includes a very low percentage of extreme behaviour. What is important is that this can make heavier demands on school personnel and may affect whole school populations.

The report also comments that the National Educational Psychological Service refers to the difficulty in determining the prevalence of children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulty (EBD) as definitions and thresholds may vary.

What can be concluded is that disruption impedes and impacts negatively in some situations more than others.

Examples of the negative impact of disruption include;

- Morale and efficiency diminishes.
- Disruption becomes infectious
- Students become intimidated or disheartened resulting in low attainments
- Teacher morale and sense of efficacy being diminished
- The curtailment of innovation
- Parents and community evaluate school negatively
- Time investment in processing issues of disruption
- Key personnel devote substantial time to a minority of pupils and less to the more compliant

Effective Measures Which if Followed Will Assist in Dealing With the Problem

- The ethos and culture of the school --- empathic to the needs of students but firm and consistent in it's code of behaviour , owned by all

and with clear chains of command to ensure its implementation.

- Leadership where staff, students, and parents are valued and where students, have a voice and staff and students work in a collaborative and mutually respectful way.
- Strong, meaningful parental involvement in a spirit of partnership.
- Good communication patterns.
- School reaches out to and includes the wider community.
- Structures evaluated and continual growth and development of teaching methodologies and extra curricular activities which suit the learning needs and capabilities of a diverse cohort of students.
- Provision of support for a minority of student not available in the mainstream classroom.

The report also recognises that there are demanding and multi layered roles and particularly comments on those of management and governance, vision, and openness for innovation. It adds that the solution must come from the total education community including enabling students to play a responsible and democratic role in school life. This is endorsed through the report on Second Level Student Councils in Ireland (2005) produced by the NCO. There is a recognition that there are a wide range of resources required to meet the requirements of all students equally. Many of these need to be accessed on a cross-sectoral basis and must come from agencies and departments outside education.

The final report was presented to the Minister in January 2006 and is to be published shortly.