Children's policy in Northern Ireland 1987–2008: progress and prospects

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The most important development for children in Northern Ireland during the last 21 years has been the end of major political violence and the emergence of a process of political and social inclusion (Cox et al, 2006). To be under 21 today is to be part of a new generation that has not had to spend the whole of childhood under the shadow of the 'Troubles' – as the region's violent contest over national identity and legitimacy of political structures is euphemistically known. One in four of the 3,601 people killed in political violence were aged 21 or younger (Smyth, 2004). Today's children and young people are the generation of the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

> 'Our vision is of a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society, firmly founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and the protection and vindication of human rights for all... Central to our vision for the future must be a focus on our young people. On their development lies our future and we need to ensure that our policies and programmes take account of their needs.' (OFMDFM, 2004: 5)

It is tempting to take those words as the cue for looking away from the past and just focusing attention on what opportunities lie ahead for realising the rights and enhancing the quality of life for children and young people. But to do so would be a mistake. To understand what prospects there are for advance in the next 21 years, it is important to learn from the last 21 years.

A clear agenda for children

Focus on Children, an all-Ireland grouping of voluntary organisations concerned with children's welfare, launched their *Blueprint for Children* (Kilmurray and Richardson, 1994) as a contribution to the International Year of the Family in 1994 – the year the IRA declared the ceasefire that opened the way to the peace process. The blueprint aimed to catalogue the problems encountered by children and offer constructive recommendations as to how they might best be addressed in keeping with both what was known about children's lives and the global agenda set by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The blueprint opened by drawing attention to the changing patterns of family life. It then considered what was known about both children's universal needs (material security, housing, health and education) and those children with special needs (disability, child protection, care, justice and cultural variation) and the implications these had for research, legislation and service provision. The picture given was one of a growing awareness of needs that should be met, not least because of the enquiring light being shone by the UNCRC. In the conclusion, entitled 'Moving from Rhetoric to Reality', it called for government to make 'all aspects of the development of children a much higher priority' (p140).

The blueprint noted that while it was 'inevitable that that the situation of children affected by political violence in Northern Ireland will be highlighted, the members of Focus on Children would want to balance

this with the violence, discrimination and infringement of their rights suffered by children, due, for example, to poverty, abuse, domestic and inadequate public provision' (Kilmurray and Richardson, 1994: 6). Today the weighting may have been reversed, as the immediate impact of the Troubles has diminished, but it is still necessary to hold that balance. More precisely, it is necessary to continue to interweave the broader political concern to maintain and build the peace with working on developing policies and services to meet a range of children's needs similar to those found anywhere else in the UK. Northern Ireland's 10-year government strategy, 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge', has clearly acknowledged that connection. Drawn up by the Children and Young People's Unit, the Strategy has as one of its underlying themes 'responding appropriately to the challenges we face as a society emerging from conflict and recognising that our children and young people are key to securing a more stable and peaceful future for us all' (OFMDFM, 2006: 13).

There are considerable needs still to be met involving not only children and young people directly affected through their families' continuing suffering caused by the conflict but also those living in neighbourhoods still unsettled by cross-community tension and violence (Smyth, 2004; Hannson, 2005). More generally too, sectarian division continues to run deep with housing, education, leisure and recreation, even holiday destinations, reinforcing segregated identities for children (Connolly et al, 2007). Building a society that can overcome that legacy is no short-term project – as the Children and Young People's Strategy recognises: 'This is a long-term strategy. We recognise that there are no quick fixes and that meaningful and sustained change will take time' (OFMDFM, 2006: 3). But is there the capacity and the will to sustain that long-term commitment?

'Our Pledge' is the Northern Ireland government's attempt, 12 years after the voluntary sector blueprint, to set out a clear unifying approach to children's policy (see Figure A). Like the blueprint, it is concerned to respond to the shifts in demographics. Despite declining numbers, children still account for one in four of the population. It recognised the continuing deep-seated patterns of social exclusion for children and young people in poverty, in rural areas, in minority ethnic communities (still a very small but growing proportion of the population – around 1%), for those with a disability and for those in families failing to meet their needs. It also noted the pace and new directions in lifestyles as setting the context of childhood – in just three years between 1999 and 2001, the proportion of children and young people owning mobile phones leapt from one in four to four out of five. These issues were clearly identified in the consultation document issued two years prior to the strategy (OFMDFM, 2004). Northern Ireland is a much less traditional and homogenous community than it was in the late 1980s and children's lives reflect the richness and the risks that have come with that.

The 2006 children's strategy has at its core a vision 'that all children and young people living in Northern Ireland will thrive and look forward with confidence to the future' (OFMDFM, 2006: 5). It provides an outcomes framework that seeks to ensure all children are: healthy; enjoying, learning and achieving; living in safety and with stability; experiencing economic and environmental wellbeing; contributing positively to community and society; and living in a society which respects their rights (OFMDFM, 2006: 7). It also declares a number of core values, such as the dignity and uniqueness of children as active participants in their own lives (OFMDFM, 2006: 11). It pledges to take forward eight themes (OFMDFM, 2006: 13) that cut across all the outcomes. In addition to the one recognising the challenges of becoming a post-conflict society, the themes include: adopting a 'whole-child' approach; working in partnership, in particular with parents, carers and communities; emphasising prevention and early intervention; ensuring that the views of children and young people are routinely sought; ensuring services match needs and evidence about what works; and encouraging a rights-based approach. The document also outlines a range of mechanisms to be used to determine the success of the strategy over time, including a set of performance indicators and a number of implementation structures.

The Strategy emerged after four years of extensive consultation with both children and adults. It goes a considerable way to articulating the existing broad consensus about children's policy in both the statutory and voluntary sectors and connects with aspirations in the general population. It also shows both the progress that has been made in the last 20 years in developing children's policy and the complexity of doing so – administratively, politically and conceptually.

Figure A: 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge': a unifying policy perspective and framework
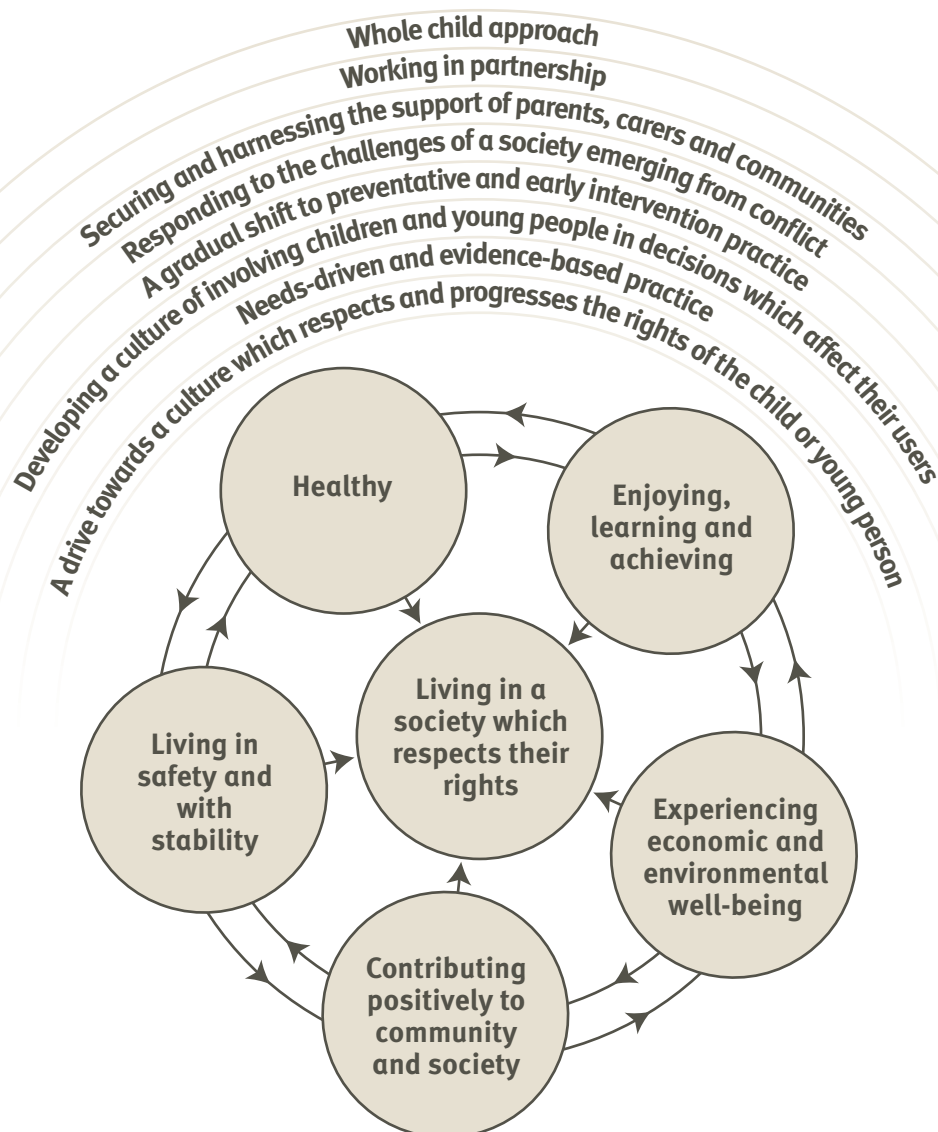
Source: 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge'
(OFMDFM 2006: 8)
www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/index/childrens-strategy.htm

From parity to subsidiarity

In 1994, Focus on Children had reported an absence of any vision for children and the fragmented, inconsistent and piecemeal development of provision. All policy was reactive rather than proactive To break this pattern, the blueprint had urged that the opportunity provided by the anticipated 1995 Children Order be used to address the needs of children 'in an integrated and co-ordinated manner which both articulates a long-term vision and identifies the interim actions necessary for its achievement' (Kilmurray and Richardson, 1994: 139). Orders in Council were how legislation was made for Northern Ireland following the 1972 suspension of the regional assembly by the UK government in response to the escalating crisis on the streets and in the political institutions. This period

of direct rule, during which time executive powers were exercised by a team of Northern Ireland Ministers from Westminster under the Secretary of State, amplified what had been the underlying principle of government since the establishment of Northern Ireland – parity. 'The people of Northern Ireland pay the same taxes as the rest of the United kingdom for the same cash benefits and, with regard to the other services, the aim is that provision should be of a similar standard to that attained elsewhere, but they need not be identical' (Evason, quoted by Kelly and Pinkerton, 1996: 41).

From a parity perspective, the Children Order (which is almost a carbon copy of the English and Welsh Children Act of 1989) could simply be seen as a delayed extension of a necessary piece of child welfare reform that could indeed provide an opportunity for

advancing child-centred family support delivered through well-planned collaborative services. That, however, was not to be. Despite great hopes and extensive in-service training, social services, health and education all remained pretty well within their own limiting boundaries – despite the first two being formally an integrated service since the early 1970s. The opportunity was lost in part due to the enormity of the task (Higgins et al, 1997) but also because of the policy environment. Although concern was expressed in lobbying by the Children Order Group (which had both statutory and voluntary sector membership) that the new legislation was not sufficiently grounded in Northern Ireland realities, a centralised view of policy making and impact held sway. Such a view was almost inevitable in the years of Direct Rule, with Ministers primarily concerned to manage the conflict and administer the region efficiently. In children's social policy terms, this encouraged a minimalist approach to reform, as reflected in the limited number of initiatives taken. It also allowed senior civil servants to play a much stronger role in what policy formulation did occur (Carmichael and Osborne, 2003, cited in Collins and Pinkerton, 2008).

A notable characteristic of this period was that while it provided reasonable resources for maintenance and development of services, along with considerable access by professionals to civil service decision makers, it retarded the necessary engagement with those in whose interests policy was being made (Cochrane, 2006). For example, the 1980s had seen social services with children and families turned into an effective, well-managed and resourced multidisciplinary child protection system. This was a relatively strong position for the professionals involved amidst the turbulent organisational context created by the pursuit of a quasi business environment with its purchaser–provider split and commissioning. But it was also a position that distanced those providing children's services from the families and communities with whom they worked and who in other circumstances would have been the natural allies with whom to pursue the family support opportunities of the new legislation. An exception to this was in the early years' sector where closer community connections were maintained and significant resources were accessed from the European Union.

The complex interplay between government strategies for managing the Northern Ireland conflict and administering it in a manner that took account of social policy development elsewhere in the UK moved into a new phase when the peace process led to the 1998 Belfast Agreement and the establishment of a new Assembly with a power sharing Executive. Over the last 10 years, despite the faltering development of these structures, concern to promote an inclusive equality culture has prompted a more outward looking, vibrant, ambitious approach to policy for children – as represented by an increasing number of initiatives and in particular by 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge'. It has also seen important institutional advances such as the establishment of a powerful Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (www.niccy.org) and the inclusion of Junior Ministers for Children in the Executive. Information and research has improved and strong integrated children's services planning has been developed below regional level (McTernan, 2003).

However there is cause for concern that the potential within 'Our Pledge' will, like the Children Order, turn out to be a missed opportunity. Again there is the sheer enormity of the task. This had been detailed in the definitive report *Children's rights in Northern Ireland*, undertaken on behalf of the Children's Commissioner (Kilkelly et al, 2004) and the review of children's circumstances commissioned by the Children's Law Centre to inform the children's dimension of the debate on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland (Horgan, 2005). Both suggest a considerable distance needs to be travelled before the expectations of the UNCRC are realised within Northern Ireland.

Rightly, the size of the task raises questions over the adequacy of resources. Within New Labour's promotion of devolution lies not only long-overdue constitutional reform but a means to enforce financial constraint in the face of rising demand through passing on the burden of political responsibility to the regional Assemblies. The first Northern Ireland Executive's Programme of Government had a focus on social inclusion and development in which children were a core concern. The present programme looks much more like a narrowly economic investment state strategy in which the needs of the private sector are privileged in expectation of 'trickle down' gains for the socially excluded. What capacity there will be to manage what resources are available to the public sector awaits the working through of a major managerial restructuring following the comprehensive Review of Public Administration (www.rpani.gov.uk).

The process of policy making itself also needs attention when thinking of the future prospects for children. Despite the extensive and elaborate consultations, the drafting of the Northern Ireland

Children's Strategy in its end phase seemed to be driven more by a need to reflect the New Labour agenda for children in England than to express the aspirations and commitment of a regional constituency for change. Although this happened during a period of the Assembly's suspension and when there were changes in key civil service personnel, it still sent out a warning that the habits of top-down government with an external parity agenda die hard. What is needed in the new conditions of devolution is an approach of inclusive governance based on subsidiarity – 'the need to ensure that political decisions are not taken at any higher level than they need be' (Millan, quoted in Pinkerton, 2003: 259). Driving that logic down through the system to where children and young people actually live out their lives would also promote the creation of enriched social and physical spaces for them rather than the constraints or irrelevance of many adult-determined and delivered services. As Moss and Petrie have cogently argued, real change for children requires not just more but different (Moss and Petrie, 2002).

From rhetoric to reality

Change must be the central theme of children's policy in Northern Ireland over the years to come – to both redress existing patterns of inequality and keep up with emerging social and economic trends. Northern Ireland has tended to be protected by its particular circumstances from the worst of the short-term, politically expedient 'policy churn' seen in England. It is important that the Northern Ireland Executive does not now fall into a similar approach as it has to face the hard politics of contending interests and decisions on policy and spending priorities, with the associated media glare. Focus on Children, back in 1994, called for the rhetoric of policy to be translated into the reality of improved lives for children. For 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge' to meet that challenge, it must be implemented and developed as part of Northern Ireland's post-conflict potential. That is possible if the experience, knowledge, skills, energy and optimism that exists both among children and young people themselves and those who care and work for them get the necessary sustained support from legally mandated, consistent, strategic planning based on information and research and backed by the necessary finance.

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