



# Report of the Public Consultation

Executive Summary





As Minister of State with Responsibility for Children, I am delighted to publish the Report of the Public Consultation for the National Children's Strategy. The National Children's Strategy will set out the means to better support our children to enable them to enjoy their childhood and enhance their capacity to contribute to our society.

A critically important element of the development of the National Children's Strategy, which I was pleased to initiate, was to listen to what the children and young people themselves have to say. This has been an innovative new development in the formulation of government policy.

The response has been extremely positive and indicates a strong desire among children to be heard. I have immensely enjoyed meeting with hundreds of children, their teachers, care workers and parents over the past number of months to hear their views directly from them. I would also like to thank the hundreds of children, who sent letters and e-mails to me. In all some 2,500 children and young people took the opportunity to give their views. This report summarises the ideas and suggestions put forward.

The letters and meetings I have had from their parents and others who love and care for them and from the agencies providing the necessary supports and services to children and young people have yielded a wealth of ideas and proposals.

The consultation does not end here. It will continue as part of the implementation of the Strategy.

The next step will be the publication of the National Children's Strategy. This publication will fulfil the Government's commitment in our review of the Action Programme for the Millennium, which prioritised the need to put in place a coherent system of support to care for all of our children.

Bháin me an-taitneamh agus tairbhe as an gcaidreamh seo and táim thar a bheith buíoch do gach duine a chabhraigh linn.

Mary Hanafin T.D.  
Minister of State with Responsibility for Children



Based on a report compiled by Colgan & Associates

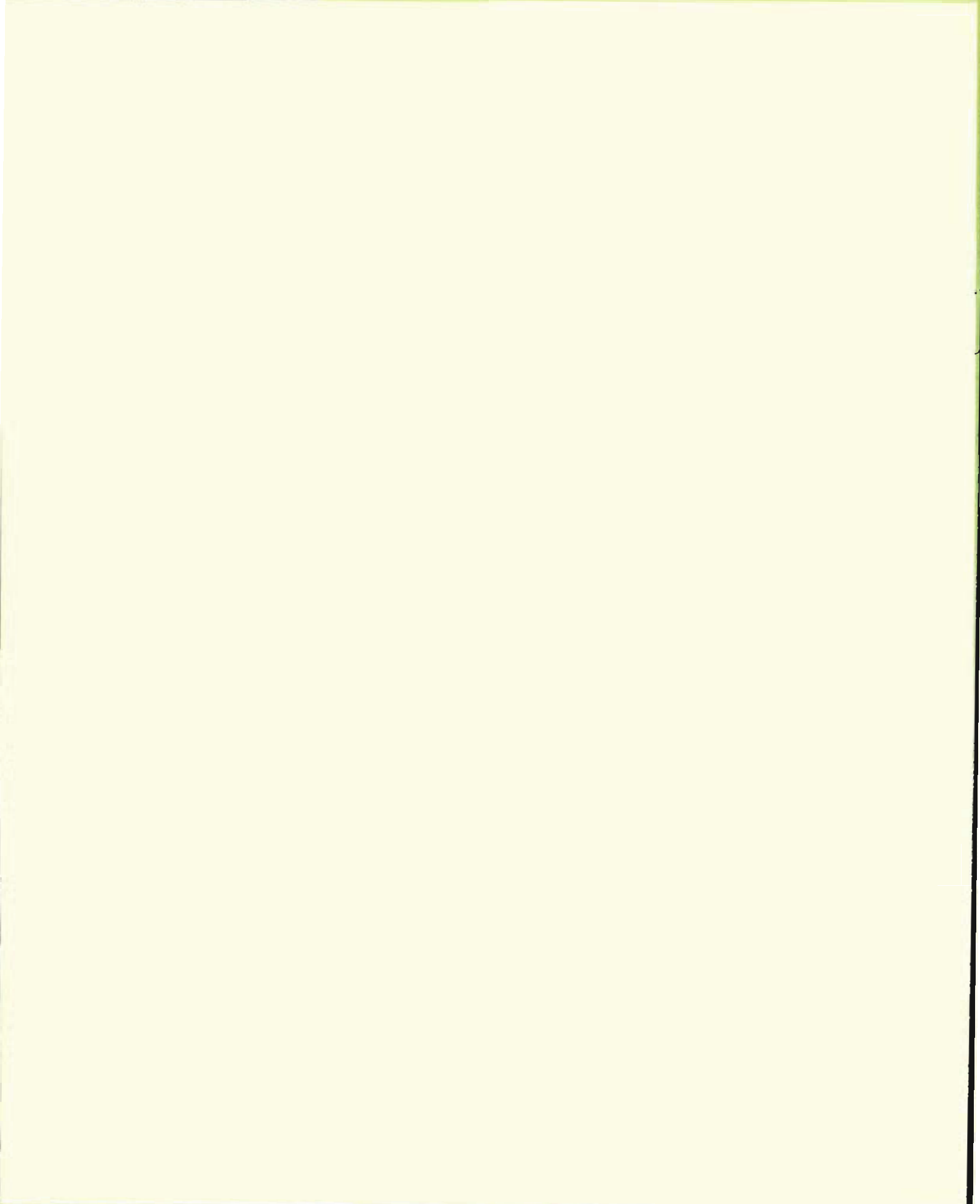
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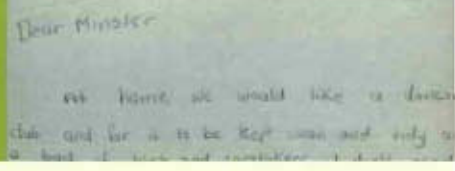




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# Introduction

## The National Children's Strategy

In July, 1999 the Government announced its decision to develop a National Children's Strategy. The purpose of the Strategy is to lead the development of supports and services for children up to eighteen years of age, to improve their quality of life over the next ten years and reflect the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

An Interdepartmental Group at Assistant Secretary level, representing the various government departments which are centrally involved in children's issues, was established under the chair of the Department of Health and Children to oversee its preparation. A cross-departmental team comprising civil servants from the Departments of Health and Children, Education and Science, Social, Community and Family Affairs and Justice, Equality and Law Reform was established under the Public Service Management Act, 1997 to support the development of the Strategy. An expert in child welfare from Queen's University, Belfast was brought in as a consultant to advise and assist in its development.

It was decided that key elements of the National Children's Strategy would be a more holistic, child centred perspective for thinking about the needs of children and young people growing up in Ireland today. This includes:

- Recognition that the best interest of the child is a first consideration;
- Recognition of the intrinsic worth of childhood and as a foundation for adulthood and citizenship;
- Promotion of the complementary relationship between the child, the family and the voluntary/community sector, the private sector and the State.

A central part in the development of the National Children's Strategy has been the wide ranging consultation process. Invitations for submissions through the national press sought contributions from parents and others who care for and work with children. A targeted consultation was carried out with children and young people with the assistance of various schools and voluntary organisations throughout the country and with the support of the Children's Rights Alliance and National Youth Council. Children also wrote or e-mailed the Minister of State with Responsibility for Children to give their suggestions, comments and observations on growing up in Ireland. The aim was to provide the young people with an opportunity to share in the development of the Strategy.

### Purpose of Consultation Report

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the various themes, concerns and issues raised by children, young people, adults and organisations during the consultation process. The success of the consultation, with children and young people in particular, whose insights are reported here, highlights the immense benefits that can be gained by directly consulting with them in terms of policy formulation and service delivery. This innovative departure of consulting with children and young people brings new demands to planning and evaluating supports and services. A range of mechanisms needs to be developed and put in place to support this new approach.

These measures, and others to provide new arrangements for continued involvement by the key stakeholders, will be developed within the National Children's Strategy, which will be published in the near future.





# Part 1

**Consultation with children and young people**







# Overview of the process

There were three strands to the consultation process:

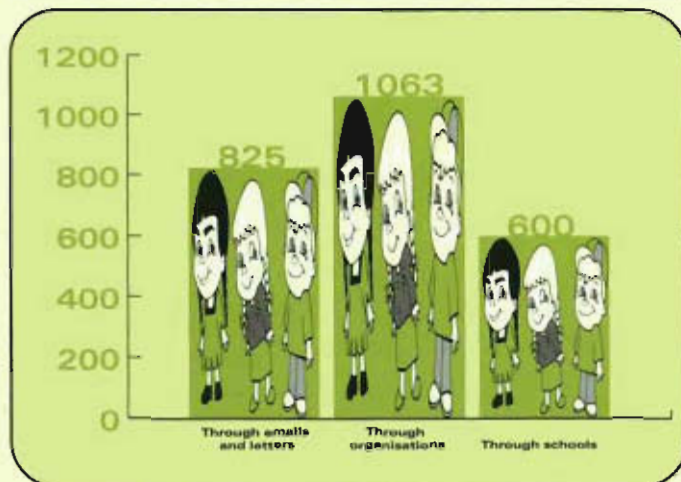
- Children and young people were invited to write letters or e-mails to the Minister of State for Health and Children, Mary Hanafin T.D. to give their views on the following questions:

Is Ireland a good place for you to grow up in? What's good about it? What would make it better?

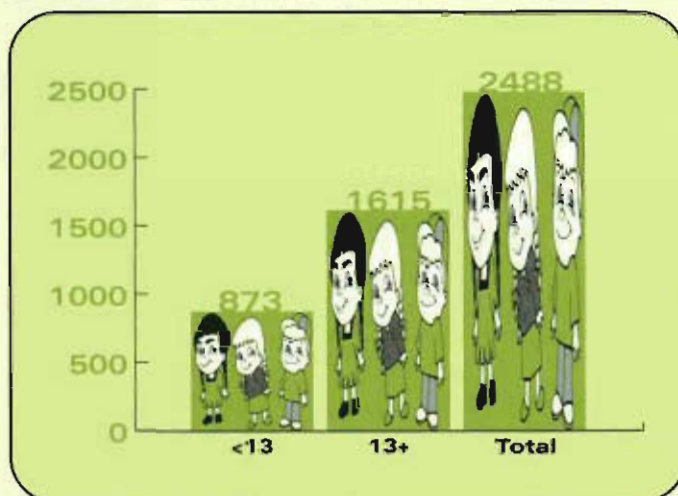
- The Minister of State visited five primary schools and five post-primary schools, meeting about 60 in each school and discussed a range of issues with them.
- A number of organisations (10) working with children and young people undertook in depth consultations with children and young people connected with their organisations.

A total of 2,488 children and young people took part in the consultation process (see Figs.). Sixty five per cent ( 65%) were thirteen and over and thirty five per cent ( 35%) under thirteen. Sixty per cent (60%) of respondents were girls and forty per cent( 40%) boys. The participants ranged in age from 3 years to 19 years.

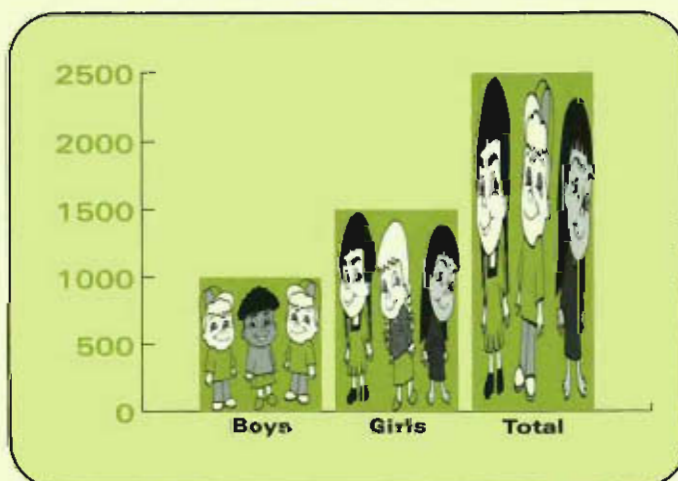
### Sources of Childrens Submissions



### Childrens Submissions Analysis by Age



### Childrens Submissions Analysis by Gender





# Chapter 1

## Is Ireland a Good Place for you to grow up in? What is Good about it?

### Introduction

In this chapter, we look at the responses to the question 'Is Ireland a good place for you to grow up in' which was posed to young people in public advertisements, on the Scoilnet and on the Department of Health and Children web site. Material on this topic is also drawn from the consultations with young people who engaged in consultations at school level or through organisations.

### Responses from children and young people

The overwhelming thrust of the comments from children and young people about Ireland as a place to live is hugely positive. The recurring terms were 'brilliant,' 'cool,' 'a good place to grow up.' There was a strong sense of optimism and positive feeling running through the majority of contributions.

One of the notable features of the views about Ireland as a good place to live was the extent to which children compared Ireland favourably to other countries. These comparisons were made about climate, absence of natural disasters, clean environment and safety.

Several features of life in Ireland attracted positive comment. These were the scenic beauty of Ireland and the environment, Irish culture, heritage and talent, the services and the education system. The contributors were very positive about Ireland as a safe place to live and grow up in and a place enjoying the benefits of democracy and good government. The current prosperity of the country and the benefits coming from that prosperity were mentioned repeatedly. The other strong theme was the value and strength of close knit families and supportive communities. There was much positive comment about Ireland as a place where people are friendly and helpful, where family life is generally good and communities are healthy and supportive. Young people also welcome the fact that people are now more open about teenage pregnancy and more supportive of single mothers. They were glad also that the instances of child abuse are being addressed.

The freedom from natural disasters attracted much comment and children were very satisfied that Ireland did not experience the extreme conditions such as hurricanes, tornadoes and floods. Many spoke positively about the benefits of living in a country that was free from war and there was also much comment about the wish for peace in Northern Ireland. Children drew repeated comparisons with USA. The reports of school yard shootings and murders there have clearly made a powerful impact. Comparisons were also drawn with Africa, in relation to famine, Kosovo and other war torn regions and India, where child labour was seen as an unfavourable feature of life for children.

As well as being safe, being free and living in a democracy was mentioned as important by a number of young people.



Although there were several comments about good public services and some about good facilities for young people, it must be said that the comments about leisure facilities for young people were overwhelmingly negative. Children spoke positively about doctors, nurses, gardai and teachers. There were a good deal of positive comments about a range of other people who are helpful to children including traffic wardens, lollipop ladies and dentists.

While young people named very many positive attributes of life in Ireland, they were equally strong in pointing to their concerns about the negative dimensions. In the case of many of the facets of Irish life which they saw as positive, they also pointed to weaknesses and to threats to their future and the future of the country.

Children and young people were very clear about the fact that, while it is possible to make generalised statements about Ireland as a place to live, the reality is different for each individual and is shaped by many facets of their own lives - family, community, geographic location. Several contributors pointed to the fact that life can be good generally, for most children and young people, who have good family supports and access to life's advantages, while many other young people had a very different experience.

All of these qualifications were raised, highlighting the fact that that the answer to the question 'Is Ireland a good place to live' is a complex question and the honest answer must be 'yes and no.' However, in engaging in a process of balancing out the positives with the negatives and taking account of the qualifications, there appeared to be a consensus that the positive aspects of Irish life outweigh the negative and can continue to do so, provided we, as a society, take action to avert the threats and address the weakness.



# Chapter 2

## Issues and Challenges

Although the contributions ranged over a great many topics, there were some predominant themes:

- **Facilities and activities for children and young people**
- **The environment**
- **Respect, responsibility and having a say**
- **Children and young people's health, well being and safety**
- **Learning and education**
- **Social issues and concerns**
- **The experience of being a Traveller, being homeless, of living in care.**

There is considerable overlap and interconnectedness among these issues and the distinctions drawn often seem arbitrary. As well as raising issues, many children and young people proposed solutions to the problems that they identified.

### **Facilities and Activities for Children and young People**

The absence of leisure/recreation facilities and activities for children and young people was one of the most pressing issues raised in the course of the consultations. Young people clearly feel that facilities for them are a neglected aspect of the social fabric of our society. The 12-15 age group believes that they are particularly badly served. While young people want facilities and activities to enhance the essential quality of their lives, they are really clear that there is an intrinsic link between the lack of those facilities and a whole range of social and personal problems for teenagers. In particular, young people expressed the views that these problems then go on to manifest themselves as serious problems for communities and for society as a whole.

They speak of the lack of physical facilities - community centres, youth clubs, swimming pools, indoor and outdoor sports facilities. Among the many suggestions, there are proposals for skateboarding and roller blading arenas, water parks and theme parks, swimming pools and local rugby pitches. One contributor would like to see a space reserved for children in Lansdowne Road. Young people in rural areas argue that they are especially deprived - the absence of local transport makes their situation particularly difficult.

Younger children highlighted a major deficit in the provision of public playgrounds in housing estates as well as the absence of other facilities for their age group. One important issue raised by several children in relation to public playgrounds was the fact that in some areas, the amenities in parks and playgrounds has actually been removed by the local authority. This was not confined to just one area.

Leisure and recreational facilities need to be provided throughout Ireland as part of a coherent, planned and well resourced response to enabling children and young people to have a good quality of life, they felt.

Play and recreation are part of the fabric of childhood and young adulthood. Provision for them,

We need physical playgrounds for  
kids. ~~Feel safe in their~~  
homes. More bins. We need some  
up us amused.

they feel has been neglected. Without these facilities, the quality of life for children and young adults is impoverished. They argue these facilities are needed to allow children to enjoy a balanced life and their absence has serious social consequences too, for them and for their communities.

### **The environment**

The condition of our environment attracted a very high level of comment and criticism from young people. They identified a range of environmental problems, which they see as damaging the quality of life, being potentially damaging for the tourist industry, causing serious health risks, as well as posing a long-term threat to the environment itself.

The problem of litter was raised in almost all of the letters and e-mails with children being concerned about both the impact of the litter on the look of our areas and the health consequences. Broken bottles were seen as a very big problem, especially in playgrounds. Other problems identified included dog litter, dirty beaches and dirty swimming pools. Concern was raised about river, sea and air pollution, including references to Sellafield but most especially there were concerns about traffic pollution.

There were many concerns about tree felling and the non-replacement of trees arising from building and development. There were concerns too about major building programmes in small villages and about the building of dumps. The problem of boarded up houses was also raised.

Several solutions were posed for the problem of litter and dirt. Recycling was the most popular solution. One child questioned the wisdom of making recycling so expensive that children would not find it attractive as a solution.

The environment, locally and nationally, is precious to children and young people. They value it for themselves, for visitors and for future generations. They see it as under serious threat from litter, pollution, over development and vandalism. They want the Government to act to protect the environment. But they also want people to take on the responsibility themselves and take action. They do not appear to believe that the benefits of prosperity and development can outweigh the environmental costs that it is bringing with it.

### **Social issues**

There were some major social concerns to which young people referred. Drug use, early drinking, smoking and homelessness are a major concern for them, either as realities for themselves or fears for their peers.

The theme of personal safety was very closely linked to concerns about social issues. Children talked about their fears for themselves - on the streets, in their parks and in their communities. They were concerned about the ways in which their lives are being restricted on account of these fears and their parent's fears for them.

The children and young people responding to the consultation have a keen sense of the urgency of dealing with some pressing social issues. They have many ideas for addressing some of these issues. And they want Government to act.

They are also acutely aware of the problems of children in Third World and other developed countries.

### **Respect, responsibility and having a say**

The general view of the contributors was that adults in Ireland do not hold children and young people in high esteem. The view was that young people are labelled and that adults do not have a positive attitude to them.

The lack of respect was keenly felt by some young people, who live in an area that has a 'bad name'. They struggle with the burden of the fact that their area is, in their view, stigmatised by the media and that this leads to difficulties in getting work and being allowed into certain facilities.



Strong views were expressed by one group of children regarding the manner in which they are treated in shops. These views were reinforced by similar views from individual children.

For some children the issue of freedom and responsibility was focused on the use of free time, choosing clothes etc. Many of them linked this to the question of access to money. Those undertaking part-time work saw this as a means of having some independence.

The issue of consultation, involvement in decision making and participation was the subject of much comment from young people who want to be active participants in shaping their own lives, their educational experience and in their communities, as well as in the wider national life. They are seeking the right to be consulted, to be listened to and to have the means to influence the decisions that affect their lives. For some young people in care the issue of consultation was a very immediate one, requesting to be consulted and actively involved in the decisions that shape their lives. Several young people expressed appreciation about the fact that the Government has asked for the views of children and young people as a part of the work of the National Children's Strategy.

Children and young people identified three areas in which they believe they should be consulted and listened to:

- Where decisions affect them directly and personally at home and at school
- Where decisions are being made about local community issues and general school issues
- In political/national decision making.

Children and young people were very clear about the need for them to have a real say in matters that affect them. They believe that they have insight, knowledge and needs that they themselves are best placed to express. They identified several areas, at all levels where they can have a say and mechanisms through which they can express their views. For young people in care, having a 'say' in decisions that affect them had an added sense of immediacy. One group of young people took the view that they too must be proactive through lobbying, petitioning and meeting those in power.

### **Children and young people's health, wellbeing and safety**

Issues to do with health – both personal health and public health – were raised in many letters and e-mails, as well as issues to do with mental health and personal wellbeing.

In terms of young people's personal well being and emotional support, family and friends were the most significant people in their lives. For older children, there was a stronger emphasis given to friendships. For young people living in care or outside their home, the absence of family was spoken of with evident pain. Grandparents and extended family are also very important to young people. Pets were mentioned as being important and for one young person in care, not being allowed to have a pet was a disappointment.

Most of the children and young people who contributed to this consultation raised concerns about aspects of teenage health. Their main concerns were with smoking, drinking and the use of drugs. Many young people in second level schools spoke about the numbers of students of their age already smoking and drinking: they described the fact of being offered drugs at an early age. Many saw the problem as a social issue as well as a health problem. They linked drinking and drug use to vandalism, getting into trouble with the law and public health problems.

While a large number of contributors felt that provision of facilities for young people would help to address the problem of underage drinking and drug use, one at least was not convinced. But one group of young people was very clear that the influence of their youth club and their youth club leaders has been important to them in their decision to stay away from smoking, drinking and drug use.

For younger children, safety issues impacted on their independence in their free time. They



spoke about the constraint of not being allowed into town on their own and their parent's fears about attacks and kidnapping. Children living in the country were conscious of having somewhat more freedom, but in their case too, there were growing constraints.

Other health issues raised included teenage pregnancy, cancer, HIV, meningitis, poor diet, low levels of physical fitness and the fears about genetically modified food.

There were relatively few references to mental and emotional health. Some young people expressed the view that their mental, physical and spiritual needs were not being met in schools. This was linked to the absence of physical activity and the absence of school councils to voice their needs.

While children and young people did see Ireland as a much safer place to live than many other countries, for many their personal safety was connected to problems in their area – problems of vandalism and living in a poor environment. There were many calls for action about road safety, more footpaths, cycle lanes, pedestrian bridges, traffic lights and traffic wardens or lollipop ladies. Children were really concerned about their personal safety from attack. Many felt they were not safe walking on the streets or in the park.

### **Learning and Education**

There was a high level of satisfaction with the education system – its quality, the quality of teaching, resources and access. As with other facets of Irish life, these expressions of satisfaction did not mean that young people were completely satisfied and saw no room for change and improvement. There were many comments, concerns and proposals for change.

One group of very young children spoke of coming to playgroup and what they like there. Their responses highlight the intrinsic value of their experience for them in terms of play, socialising and learning. Older children and young people made the case for more computers in their schools and more extensive Internet access. The need for better playgrounds and more cheerful decorative schools was mentioned; one child was unhappy that on account of the small schoolyard, children were not allowed to run at lunchtime. Young people made the case for hot lunches in school, cafeterias and school lockers.

Several aspects of the curriculum at both primary and second level were raised. At primary level, they highlighted the need for PE every day, more time for creative writing and reading, lessons about drugs, smoking, bereavement, sex education and more class projects. At the post primary level, the range of curriculum issues included PE in sixth year, a new approach to teaching Irish and a wider range of subjects in girls and boys schools.

Some expressed concern about the attractiveness and relevance of second level subjects to young people who might be inclined to leave school early. Linked to this was the approval for the Leaving Cert. Applied. There were also strong views about exam pressure and the need for continuous assessment.

In relation to access to education, concerns were raised about costs and there was a view that people who have money have more opportunity to achieve in education. Access to education for children with disabilities was an issue, particularly in relation to finding a place in secondary school.

### **Social Issues and Concerns**

The vast majority of children and young people want to see improved conditions for people, in particular for those who need help and support, including the children throughout the world who live in conditions of poverty, war, famine and exploitation. The main concerns were anti-social behaviour, the situation of refugees and asylum seekers, homelessness and begging, third world issues and public services.

Concerns about anti-social behaviour included crime, gangs and fights, stealing, joyriding and



vandalism. For some children the anti-social behaviour had a very direct impact, particularly the erosion of local facilities due to vandalism.

There were many observations about the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland and on the broader issues of tolerance for all people of different races. In the main and despite the mix of ideas, there was concern for refugees and asylum seekers and support for any actions by Government that would help them.

There was however no doubt among young people about the response to those who are homeless and begging. All those who raised the issue were sympathetic to the plight of the homeless and made the case for more refuges, houses and support for the homeless. It is worth noting that some children, who in earlier parts of their letters has described their own very poor living conditions went on to talk about their concerns for homeless people.

The situation of children living in developing countries was raised by many contributors, including their concern for famine, the threat of nuclear arms, lack of education opportunities and the absence of human rights.

The main issues raised in relation to public services were public transport, childcare, income support, health services and housing. Comments tended to be general, although some were drawing on children's own experience.

### **The Experience of being a Traveller, of homelessness, of being in care**

Some of the children who wrote spoke of their experience of being a Traveller and living on a halting site, being homeless and living on the streets and living in foster or residential care.

The Traveller children spoke of their pride in their culture, their views of living on halting sites and their experience of school. They referred to the bullying and the lack of respect for their cultural differences and their wish to be treated equally. These children were also aware of improvements since their parents grew up.

A small number of young people wrote of their experience of being homeless. One of their careworkers drew attention to their efforts to remain positive and hopeful, in spite of their experiences. The young people spoke of how they came to live on the streets and the use of drugs to kill the boredom and loneliness of everyday life, the ritual search for accommodation and hot food at night and their wish for a better life and better chances.

The young people living in care spoke of the negative and positive aspects of life in care. They identified what they would like to see changed including having a voice in their placements, how the homes are run and ways to make their lives better through allowing their participation in the everyday decisions that affect them. These included having more pocket money and living in smaller groups.

### **And the Future...**

In the course of the consultation, children and young people spoke about what they thought it would be like in 2010 containing a mix of the practical and the imaginative. One point to be noted is that whatever their views about the world, the young people tended to be positive about their own futures.

### **Expectations for the National Children's Strategy**

There were relatively few explicit references to the National Children's Strategy. However, there was a strong expectation, expressed very courteously at the end of the majority of letters, that, having asked for their views, the Minister and the Government will now take action on the issues which they have raised.

It is worth noting here that children and young people who wrote in response to the Minister's invitation received a personalised reply to their letter or e-mail.



# Chapter 3

## What the children and young people said....

"Children need a fun childhood because if they don't their whole life will be miserable and I would like a park"

"I think it would be good if we had a National Children's Day, where children have a really fun day at school, like play games and everything and get sweeties and get the special treatment just like mums on Mothers Day."

"Thank you for asking for my opinion"

"I think adults shouldn't make all the decisions for children, like education. Children should have a say in the way they are taught"

"Another thing about Ireland is children have equal rights and everyone pays attention to us and most of us are lucky to have kind, loving parents and we are allowed to enjoy our childhood and not have to get out and get jobs for measly wages."

"Despite all the cons I love Ireland and would never want to live anywhere else"

"I would like to hear from you with details of how you are going to improve this"

"We are a first year CSPE class and we are studying children's rights. We have discovered through our research that Ireland has no national policy on children. We as 13 year old young adults are quite concerned and disappointed about this issue"

"I would like you to write to me with some of your views on these ideas"

"People should think more about children's opinions.... I'm glad our Government is taking time out to listen to our opinions"

"In order for change you need to work and spend a lot of time at it but I believe that if you want it bad enough you can always achieve your goal"

"Thank you for taking the time to read my letter and best of luck in your long political years ahead. Always remember, Governments should do what is right for Ireland and not what makes their party popular. Feel free to contact me to discuss anything I have written"

"I live in \_\_\_\_\_ and I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. There isn't a lot to do here but my friends and I have a good laugh."

"I am so sorry to be writing to you, I am sure you have more important letters to read and reply to. But this is bugging me"

"I think there should be more beds in hospitals, more nurses and more churches all around the country, more doctors, no wars, no famine, more foster homes and more foster parents, no rape, no killers, more money for sick and poor people, no drugs, no alcoholics on the streets, more policemen and police women and more prisons".



"Thank you for your time"

"I would like to have a better community. I would like to stop drugs and robbed cars and bikes....I can not get to sleep at night because of the drunk kids. My road is in bits. I wish it could be better. If this can't be done, then could you get us a park and a better club, because it is cold inside and the toilets are smelly and we would like more equipment"

"I wish I could be safe on the street when I am on my own"

"I want that every child is loved like I am loved"

"The Government has created an Ireland to be proud of. However, I am very worried, I go to school and mix with a lot of young people every day. There are a lot of unhappy people. They do not have a fatal disease nor have their families been killed-but they are missing something. Most people make an effort and try to be nice, but a lot are hurting inside."

"The government, politicians and public servants are doing a fabulous job of running the country, but the quality of life of some people is quite disturbing. Maybe psychologists or music therapists could be built into the school curriculum.... At the moment, the youth need some kind of help and guidance"

"It would be good if the parents were nicer."

"Shopkeepers don't be so nasty"

"The boom of Ireland is (although the cause of great worry at the moment) a benefit to many people. The majority of people are getting richer at the moment. The reason for this, in my opinion, is that the majority of people in Ireland are 'middle' class; a term which I don't like using, but as it is one which most people are familiar with, I thought it the best one to use. The middle and higher class are the ones benefiting from Ireland's boom. This gives rise to the fear that Ireland's rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer. If this is what a boom in the economy does to a country, is it really such a good thing?"

"The only thing I would change [in Ireland] would be we would listen to our nation's children and young people much more as we are the next generation that will have to run the country. The voice of innocence can sometimes be wiser than a hundred years of experience"

"Is Ireland a good place to grow up? Yes, If you are from a loving family, with a decent income, supportive family network and nice community. Children as we know thrive in a secure happy family and social environment, where there are enough facilities to meet their needs. For most of the young population, life in Ireland is good. However, if you are less well off, have medical, learning or emotional needs and the family situation is unstable or plagued by drink, drugs or depression, things are quite different."

"I think Ireland is a great place to live in. It is good because the green's are lovely and it's fun. I still think you can change it to make it brilliant."

"There is a good education system here in Ireland."

"A lot of families live near each other and that is wonderful. All my family live around each other and they are always around if there's a problem."

"Irish people have a great sense of unity and children who grow up in Ireland feel like they belong to a community, something more than just a family."

"I have noticed that there are many bars, restaurants, museums etc. for adults to have a fun day out but there are no rollerblading parks or skate boarding parks for children like me to have fun in.."

"Bá chóir dóibh níos mó aiteanna a dhéanamh chun spóirt agus rudaí eile a dhéanamh."



"I feel sorry for all the children who live far away because the small towns do not have any facilities. The boys are not too bad because they get to play football as most towns have playing pitches and also indoor games."

"There are so many houses going up everywhere that the builders, government and the people moving into houses don't realise that in ten years there's going to be no trees, fields or animals and the pollution is going to be horrific."

"How can we make things better. Creating more after school activities would keep kids off the street but in order to do this, we need funding and children to advise on what they think is 'cool'."

"Please make it a law that builders must provide more space for a park and children's facilities and supply access to transport to the nearest shop and town centre."

"The worst thing though is the litter, everywhere is so dirty. My friends throw litter and they don't see it's wrong. We should learn more about the environment and keeping it safe for the future."

"Bheadh sé níos fearr dá gcuirfeadh siad níos mó boscaí bruscar gach áit."

"Ceapaim má athchúrsálann daoine a n-éadaí, plaisteach, gloine agus páipéir beidh an t-aer níos soiléire."

"Ireland would be better for grown ups to be less nasty to children."

"Not many people take kids seriously".

"I go to a special school and my mammy says I need a lot of care and attention. And I hope to see children listened to more and believed...and for social workers to listen to us and our families and not to blame my Mammy and care workers."

"I am not allowed to attend all of my 'placement review meetings'. I'm just brought in at the end to hear the decisions and be asked 'now, do you have anything to add?'"

"People should think more about children's opinions...I'm glad our Government is taking time out to listen to our opinions."

"Would you try to help the junkies get off drugs, because they are sitting on the streets doing drugs. And when they go they leave the drugs there for anyone and even sometime you would never know, it could be kids."

"One thing I would like to see in Ireland would be support groups that would listen to small problems. Such as if you were lonely or upset and wanted to talk to someone."

"I also think it is dangerous for children walking to school because there are a lot of cars going around, with people asking children to get in. They bribe the children by saying 'do you like sweets and get into the car and I will give you some'."

"I think the points system is quite unfair. I work hard at school yet I probably will never get enough points to pursue my ambition."

"I would like to see more done for disabled children in Ireland. My sister is very intelligent but when she gets bigger there is nowhere near for her to be educated. She needs 24 hour care because she is on a special diet and needs medication very often."

"I have a little Down's Syndrome brother. My Mum has tried but she cannot find a suitable school. Please make one available in the \_\_\_ area."

"I also don't like some people's attitude towards black people, they are just the same as us."



"It would be better if Ireland cut down on racism and had better opportunities for travellers and black people."

"One thing that really annoys me is that Ireland is taking in refugees and housing them but they can't house their own people. I don't have anything against refugees but I simply can't understand it."

"The amount of homeless people on our streets is disgraceful and it has not been helped by the number of refugees on our streets. There have been Irish people living on the streets for years and refugees have only been here for a couple of months and the Government are already building places for them to live."

"My Mammy takes me for counselling and we get two buses and travel a long way...we could be cold but we still get two buses there and two buses back. My Mammy has no help and I have brothers that my Mammy has to look after. The Government and Health Board needs to do a bit more for children like me."

"At the end of the day you can choose a lot of things in life but you cannot choose a family and it is a shame children must suffer because their family does not have a large income."

"They are nicer in England. They don't call us knackers and they ask us to play football and don't call us names."

"I would like settled people to agree with us, not agree with us but...I'd like to be treated equally."

" I have nothing to do and nowhere to go all day - I get bored out of my head, get fed up, take drugs to forget my problems and when that doesn't work you try to kill yourself....I just need a chance in life , a chance to show people who I really am and to reach my potential, a chance to have a nice life - a chance is not too much to ask for! "

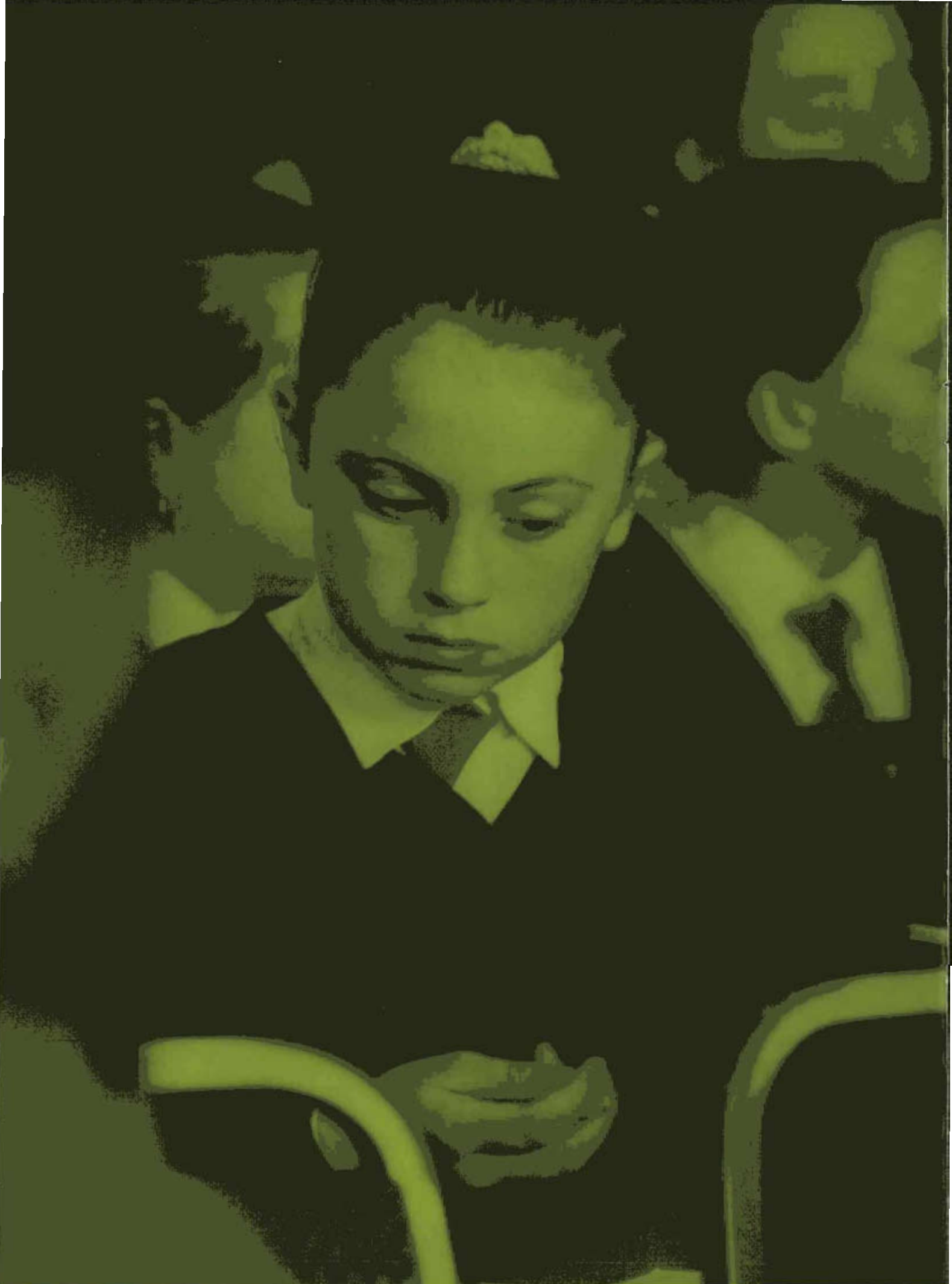
"I started taking heroin when I was 15 and was strung out when I was 16. I am now 18 and am going to a clinic since December....At the moment I am off it and everyone is telling me I look great. If I stay from drugs long enough, I am going to see if my aunt will take me back... All I have to say is if you are starting on gear, stay away from it because once it gets a hold of you, you're f\*\*\*\*d."

"I hate the street. It's not very nice on the streets. It's cold and lonely and you meet all sorts of people. It's not where I want to be. I want a home but I can't get one. I have nothing to look forward to and nothing to do."

"If I had a magic wand I'd like to turn back the clocks of all the children in care so that they would never have to go into care in the first place."

" I'd like to have a choice of when we go into care, where we go and what we do."

"I'd like to see more of my family."





# Part 2

**Consultation with adults and organisations**



# Overview of the process

The call for submissions was placed in newspapers in November 1999 and again in January 2000 and was placed on the Department of Health and Children web site.

Those making submissions were asked to organise their material around the following set of questions:

## Q.1. Towards 2010

What are the opportunities and challenges facing children and young people over the next ten years?

## Q.2 Provision of services and supports for children and young people

What works well and why? How should these be developed over the next ten years having regard to these opportunities and challenges?

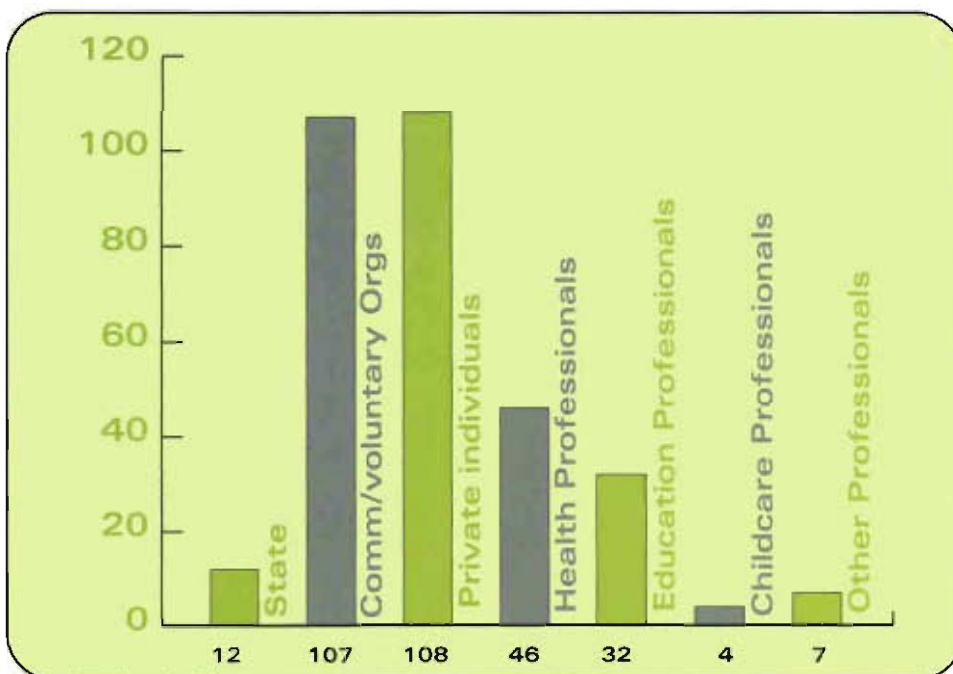
## Q.3 Delivery of services and supports for children and young people

What works well and why? What changes would improve service delivery over the next ten years having regard to these opportunities and challenges?

## Responses

Three hundred and sixteen submissions were received, ranging from hand written letters to substantial documents, many of which were supplemented with detailed policy statements about aspects of children's well-being.

Sources of Adult Submissions



Private individuals accounted for 34% of submissions, as did service providing organisations, including community development groups and representative bodies. Professional personnel in health, child care, education and related fields constituted 28% of contributors. State bodies accounted for 4%.

# Chapter 4

## Opportunities and Challenges facing Children and Young People

### Introduction

The material, which was presented, was very rich and provides extremely interesting 'snapshots' of how Irish society is being perceived by a wide variety of groups and individuals. Some of the submissions drew heavily on existing research and other sources, while most seemed to have been written from a more 'subjective' viewpoint with perceptions running along an optimistic/pessimistic continuum.

## 4.1 Opportunities

The main opportunities for children and young people identified in the submissions are presented here with some comments.

Table 1 **Hierarchy of Areas of Opportunity**

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 1  | Education  |
| 2  | Economic Prosperity  |
| 3  | Employment   |
| 4  | Health   |
| 5  | Information Technology   |
| 6  | Travel   |
| 7  | Leisure  |
| 8  | Acknowledgement of Children's Rights   |
| 9  | Growing Up in a Multicultural Society  |
| 10 | Better Nutrition   |
| 11 | Improved access/mobility for Children and Young People with Disabilities     |
| 12 | Children and Young People now living in a society where they are more valued |

### Education

There were far more references made to opportunities in education than any other area of children's lives. The aspects, which were most often highlighted, included:

- Increased focus on early and pre-school education
- Developments in relation to curricula at both primary and post-primary levels
- Easier access to education at all levels
- More flexibility in relation to education
- Increased awareness of the need for a wide range of educational opportunities for children of all ages and abilities
- Increased emphasis on flexible and lifelong learning
- Improvements in relation to educational provision for children and young people with disabilities



## **Economic Prosperity**

The highly successful state of the Irish economy was identified in many of the submissions as opening up opportunities for children and young people. It was also stressed that the present economic prosperity provides opportunities to work on the elimination of poverty and exclusion. While sizeable groups have been largely left behind by the general growth in prosperity, it was felt that the public finances can now permit an all out attack on the causes of poverty and exclusion and address specific needs.

## **Employment**

Many submissions highlighted the point that children and young people of today can look forward to far greater employment opportunities than previous generations. The main aspects of employment opportunities which were stressed included:

- availability of well paid employment
- more varied and wide-ranging choice of career
- greater employment opportunities for people with disabilities

## **Health**

Improvements in the area of health were identified as being highly important, especially by a number of health professionals and health organisations. The key points included:

- increased survival rates of babies
- increased survival rates of children undergoing organ transplants
- early detection of disabilities
- increased awareness of a holistic approach to health status
- advances in medical technology/treatments
- development of multidisciplinary teams for patient care

## **Information Technology**

There were many references throughout the submissions to the growing importance of information technology in Irish society and the world. Crucially too, technology was identified as having a major role to play in improving the quality of life of people with disabilities.

## **Acknowledgement of Children's Rights**

The main points which were made in relation to the growing acknowledgement of children's rights, in the context of providing opportunities over the next ten years, can be summarised as follows:

- Ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is a very positive step and provides an excellent basis for future development
- Irish children could achieve the status offered by the UN Convention if legal and constitutional changes were made
- Children are becoming more aware of their rights
- Children's rights and needs are more visible and recognised.

## **Growing Up in a Multicultural Society**

There were some very strong references within the body of submissions to the point that the developing multiculturalism of Irish society should be viewed in a very positive way. References were made to the opportunity to enrich our society culturally, economically and socially, potentially bringing new ideas and perspectives, which can challenge what has been an essentially homogenous and insular culture.

## 4. 2 Challenges

There was much more material in the submissions relating to the challenges facing children and young people over the next ten years than the perceived opportunities. The hierarchical listing which follows presents the main issues that were raised.

**Table 2 Hierarchy of Areas of Challenge**

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | Education                                 |
| 2  | Changing Family Structures                |
| 3  | Complexity and Changing Values in Society |
| 4  | Drug Abuse                                |
| 5  | Disability Issues                         |
| 6  | Multiculturalism                          |
| 7  | Health Issues                             |
| 8  | Sexuality                                 |
| 9  | Information Technology                    |
| 10 | Suicide                                   |
| 11 | Poverty                                   |
| 12 | Marginalisation and Social Disadvantage   |

The areas of poverty, marginalisation and disadvantage tended to underpin very much of what was written in relation to the other topics and this will become very clear in the discussion presented in section 4.3 below.

### Education

Challenges involving education were mentioned far more than those in any of the other areas with over 60 references to challenges in the area of education. Those most frequently mentioned included early school leaving, literacy problems, academic pressure on adolescents and access to mainstream education for students with disabilities. The difficulties of combining education with part-time work and the scarcity of pre-school places were also seen as significant challenges.

### Changing Family Structures

The point that family structures are undergoing major changes in Irish society was highlighted in many of the submissions. Particular attention was drawn, for example, to marital breakdown, separation and divorce, one-parent families and reconstituted or blended families. The advent of multiple families and the loss of support from extended families were also raised as significant challenges. References were made to the level of difficulties which children and young people experience around these changes including pain, disruption, fear and anger. The removal of security and of joint parental presence, love and support was felt to be a source of major upheaval for children affecting schooling, personality and development.

### Complexity and Changing Values in Society

It was stressed within many of the submissions that Irish society has become much more complex in recent decades and that there has been a major shift in accepted values and norms. The types of changes that were most frequently identified were:

- The demise of traditional society and increasing pace of life
- Greater urbanisation
- Decline in the influence of the churches and decreasing religious belief and practice
- Increasing materialism

## Drug Abuse

Although drug abuse was listed as a key challenge in many of the submissions, there tended to be little or no elaboration on the topic. The issue of substance abuse tended to be portrayed as the result of other pressures in the lives of children and young people. In this regard, peer pressure was noted as being of particular significance.

## Disability Issues

The submissions that dealt with issues relating to disabilities tended to come from organisations involved with particular disabling conditions. Consequently, some of the points made were very specific. More general challenges associated with disability, which were highlighted included:

- Need for support for all concerned when a child is diagnosed with a disability
- Need for clarity of words used around disability
- Difficulties in acquiring information on entitlements
- Problems with access and mobility

## Multiculturalism

The fact that Ireland is fast becoming a much more multicultural society was underlined in many of the submissions and there was a good deal of comment about the challenges which this presents both to Irish children and young people and to refugee children and families. The submissions which address the issue of multiculturalism from the perspective of Irish people tended to share the view that the main challenge lies in developing a much more tolerant attitude amongst the population generally, including children and young people.

## Health Issues

The challenges identified under this general heading were quite diverse and in some cases were very specific to particular illnesses or conditions. The key challenges that were highlighted can be summarised as follows:

- More sedentary lifestyles led by Irish children and young people
- AIDS
- Need for more health care with increased survival rates of children
- Need for more health education and promotion to enhance health of the young population
- Need for a multidisciplinary approach to the promotion of child health
- Need to provide adequate basic nutrition to all children in the nation
- Problems for children and young people in coping with physical or mental illness in their families
- The need for greater awareness of the seriousness of eating disorders.

## Sexuality

A number of topics emerged as being most appropriately classified under the general heading of sexuality. These include the challenges associated with:

- Sexual Relationships at an early age
- Teenage Pregnancies
- Child Prostitution
- Unhealthy/Unsafe Sexual Behaviour
- Correctly informing children about the facts of life
- Pornography

## Information Technology

The challenges were largely concerned with managing the developments around Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as a whole. The main points that were made in this

regard can be summarised as follows:

- The challenge of managing children's access to ICT's to ensure a child's experience is positive
- Development of critical faculties to cope with the multiplicity of information
- Impact of ICT on traditional play opportunities
- Importance of not becoming 'slaves to IT'
- Need to ensure that children and young people acquire skills to cope with developing technology
- Need for ethics to be applied to new technology.

### **Suicide**

The increasing rate of suicide among young people, especially young males, in Ireland was highlighted in many of the submissions as presenting major challenges. However, very few of the submissions looked in depth at this problem.

## **4. 3 The Relationship between Opportunities and Challenges**

Some submissions concentrated quite heavily on the connections between opportunities and challenges facing children and young people over the next ten years indicating the complexities of these situations. Some of the key points raised in this regard focused on social disadvantage, disability issues, children's welfare and play.

### **Social Disadvantage**

Some of the strongest writing in the submissions focused on the point that opportunities and challenges are by no means equally distributed in society and that many groups are in highly disadvantaged situations when it comes to capitalising on opportunities or trying meet challenges. In addition, the point is made that young people who are facing the most challenges are often those least well equipped to deal with them. The importance of Government now seizing the economic opportunity to target areas of disadvantage was highlighted in a number of submissions, with an emphasis on targeting resources towards disadvantaged areas.

### **Disability Issues**

The opportunities and challenges facing children and young people with disabilities are viewed as being inextricably linked. The importance of building on the work already begun in the whole area of improving provision and services for people with disabilities was highlighted.

### **Children's Welfare**

A number of the submissions that raised the issue of child abuse welcomed the developments that have occurred in recent years in terms of raising awareness of this issue and making provision to deal with it. The Strategy is seen as necessary to enhance the opportunities and reduce the challenges to protect against preventable illness and disability and also social and emotional harm.

### **Play**

A further example of the emphasis on the relationship between opportunities and challenges arose in relation to the issue of children's play, linking urban expansion to less green space and a diminishing opportunity for play and new developmental experiences.

# Chapter 5

## Policy and Service Delivery Structures

### Introduction

The following are the aspects of policy and service delivery that attracted most attention in the submissions:

- Policy development, planning and priorities
- Co-ordination in policy making and service provision
- Research, evaluation and service quality issues
- Legislative issues

## 5.1 Policy Development, Planning And Priorities

About a third of the submissions raised issues concerning the development of policies for children within the framework of the National Children's Strategy. The main concerns to do with policy development were the following:

- The place of children's policy within overall policy development
- The principles to underpin policies relating to children
- The range of areas where national policies and strategies are needed
- Targets and priorities
- Implementing policy.

### The Place of Children's Policy within Overall Policy Development

The submissions called for a stronger emphasis in all national policy-making on children's issues. They noted the absence of a focus on children in key policy documents, such as the National Development Plan and the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness. Proposals suggested that programmes on housing, estate management, public transport and national rural development within the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness should explicitly address children's interests, together with other forums such as the City/County Development Boards and the Arts Council. Attention is also drawn to the role of the commercial sector.

Within the specific area of social policy, concern is expressed about what is seen as the neglect of the general welfare of children and the emphasis on child protection.

## The Principles To Underpin Policies Relating To Children

Several submissions make proposals about the perspectives on children and childhood and the principles, that should underpin children's policy including:

- A holistic perspective, based on children's needs rather than on service delivery systems
- A children's rights perspective, involving a shift from a welfare based model to a rights model
- A developmental child centred approach.

A further principle that emerged was the principle of prevention.

## The Areas Where National Policies And Strategies Are Needed

Seventeen areas were proposed, where new policy is needed including:

- Children's health
- Play policy
- Leisure and sport
- Child protection
- Public art
- Children with disabilities

## Targets and Priorities

Several submissions identified priority or target areas for the National Children's Strategy. With one exception, all the proposed target and priority areas addressed the needs of children who are disadvantaged or marginalised.

### Child poverty

The need to address child poverty was most frequently mentioned. Submissions included proposals for targets on the elimination of child poverty to be set, within a specified timeframe, the establishment of an income adequacy standard for children and supporting institutional mechanisms. One proposal suggests the end to chronic poverty centering on a composite minimum income for children and greater employment opportunities for unemployed families. The groups identified as being at risk of poverty included those children whose parents are unemployed, children in lone parent households and children in larger families. Specific groups of children were also identified as having particular needs to ensure they do not fall into poverty.

### Educational Disadvantage

Educational initiatives to address the needs of children who are disadvantaged were also highlighted and within that, both pre-school children and young people leaving school were seen as most in need of support. A case is made for ten and twenty year targets for the development of pre-school services, pupil teacher ratios in primary school, staffing levels for counsellors and remedial teachers and for the development of play areas, leisure centres and other facilities.

### The process of setting targets

There was a consensus among those commenting on the need for targeting in favour of the child who is marginalised. However, targeting needs to happen in a manner which leads to inclusion, through a partnership of national policy makers and service providers and where needs are monitored and reviewed.

## 5.2 Co-Ordination In Policy Making And Service Provision

The importance of a co-ordinated and integrated approach to policy and services attracted a great deal of attention in the submissions. The material tended to fall under two headings, reflecting the levels at which co-ordination and collaboration needs to work so that children and families can experience seamless services.

### **Interdepartmental/National Level Co-Ordination:**

Many of the groups commenting on the need for policy co-ordination contented themselves with stating the need for this to happen. Others proposed structures and mechanisms to make it happen. At a broad governmental level, there was a proposal that the development of the National Children's Strategy is an opportune time to address fragmentation in administration and delivery including an examination of the current assignment of departmental responsibilities for children's policies and services.

#### **Specific co-ordination mechanisms**

The mechanisms proposed range from the appointment of a full Minister for Children in Government to the need for a process of proofing policies which impact on children's lives. Other structures and mechanisms include the clear allocation of departmental responsibility, underpinned by legislation and co-ordinated by an interdepartmental working group; an interagency body to tackle educational disadvantage; a national Early Years Development Unit to co-ordinate pre-school services and the establishment of a Childcare Authority as recommended in the Task Force Report of 1989. An institutional mechanism to underpin work on the broad issue of children's rights and welfare was mooted and that the National Children's Strategy should co-ordinate the co-ordinators.

### **Interagency Co-Ordination At Local Level**

The problems arising for children and families as a result of poorly integrated local service delivery evoked much more strongly worded criticisms and concerns. There were references to fragmentation of services, confusion, duplication and disjointed services.

#### **Services to be co-ordinated**

Providers and service users in a wide range of areas described the need for reducing fragmentation. The areas identified include paediatric services, child mental health services, family support services and services for children at risk. The need and value of a 'multi-system approach' to working with and supporting 'out of control' children and children who are out of home was raised.

#### **Benefits of co-ordination**

The benefits of co-ordination would, it was felt, be gained by children and families. The other benefits identified include more effective use of resources, sharing of data, better communication and more rational referral systems.

#### **Mechanisms**

As in the case of policy co-ordination, several mechanisms for solving this problem were put forward and there was an acknowledgement of proposals and processes already in operation. The need for service co-ordinators was identified, with the suggestion that a regional team of co-ordinators would benefit co-ordinated service planning. One submission moved beyond formal structures to look at the solution in terms of professional attitudes and role definition, suggesting that part of the solution lies in cultural and attitude change.

## Other Service Delivery Issues

### Local, community based service delivery

The need for local, community based service delivery, which is flexible and responsive to local needs was highlighted in several submissions.

To make this happen, it was suggested that services will need to be decentralised and delivered locally. The uneven dispersal in remote rural areas was acknowledged as a difficulty, with some contributors arguing that small towns and villages do not get a fair share of resources. Closely linked to the matter of local delivery was that of local planning. The need for partnership in planning, should, it was argued, be built into service agreements between state and other service providing agencies. A partnership among professionals and between professionals and families, was also highlighted.

### Prevention

The theme of prevention as the primary goal of service delivery was raised in many submissions followed closely by early intervention.

### Avoiding stigma

There was a view that services must be delivered in a manner which does not stigmatise children and young people. Services which are 'medicalised' or problem focused, should be avoided, as it was felt young people will not draw on them.

## 5.3 Research, Evaluation And Quality Services

Issues relating to quality of service received a lot of attention in the submissions, with about one fifth of contributors making comments on these themes. The topics raised included research, evaluation and standard setting.

### General Research Issues

A national longitudinal study of children in Ireland was seen as fundamental to the development of the National Children's Strategy. Attention is drawn to a recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on data collection and the development of indicators relevant to various child groupings up to eighteen years of age. The need for research to include a voice for children was highlighted, as well as the need for widespread dissemination.

### Particular Research Needs

There was a wide range of proposals for studies on particular aspects of children's lives including particularly children's health, children's income and juvenile justice. Other areas mooted concerned those children with special needs; research into children's experience of parental separation; living in a family headed by a lone parent or in a step family; a scoping study on the needs of young gay people and research into the life experience of 'non problem' families as a way of identifying family difficulties.

### Evaluation And Quality Standards

#### Indicators of quality

The proposal was made that, in regard to indicators of quality, the key indicator must be the quality of children's life experience. It was suggested that several services might have joint



performance indicators as a means of promoting interagency working. All indicators should inform professional and service development.

### **Evaluation processes**

One of the strongest themes emerging in the material on evaluation was the need to evaluate by finding out from people what works well for them. A further theme is that the emphasis in evaluation must be on the measurement of outcomes, rather than inputs. In learning disability services, the benefit of a system known as 'five values to practice' was noted as a successful approach to quality. These values ensure that services work towards maximising the child's opportunity for choice, being treated with dignity, sharing ordinary places with non-disabled peers, having access to meaningful relationships and contributing to family and community life.

## **5.4 Legislative Initiatives**

Several submissions made suggestions about the need for legislative change, or commented on some existing legislation including children's rights, child protection, juvenile justice and pre-school regulations.

# Chapter 6

## Responding to Children's and Young People's Needs

### Introduction

All of the submissions put forward concerns, proposals and issues relating to children's needs. The main areas of children's needs dealt with in the submissions are the following:

- Health and well being
- Learning and education
- Supporting children and young people with disabilities
- Supporting children and young people who are marginalised
- Play, recreation and development opportunities
- Child and young people as active citizens

## 6.1 Health and Well Being

### The Key Concerns Raised

About forty per cent of the submissions concerned health issues, which is not surprising considering the strong representation of health professionals who made submissions. These contributions put at least as much emphasis on children's mental health and wellbeing as on their physical health, a very strong focus on children's *experience* of health services, as well as inputs of professional expertise. There is a repeated call for a dedicated health service for adolescents. A second recurring theme is on mental health and mental treatment.

The main focus of the material on children's health and well being falls under the following headings:

- Children's general health needs and issues
- Children's mental health needs and issues
- Children in hospital and sick children.
- Information for children and young people

## Health Needs and Issues

The submissions made the case for adequate and effective health services for all children. The case was also made for specific measures for groups with particular needs such as Traveller children.

### Access

Proposals were made for widening access to free medical and dental services. There was a call for dental services to meet the particular needs of children with special needs and disadvantaged children. More broadly, there was a call for guidelines and recommendations to ensure that the rights of children with regard to health services are guaranteed.

### Needs of particular groups

The case was made for particular attention to be given to the health care needs of teenagers, referred to in one submission as *'the forgotten population'*. Within that group there was a call for an understanding of the health needs of the young gay community and evaluation of the accessibility of services to that community. There was concern about the isolation of children in rural families.

### Safety and positive health

Various dimensions of children's safety and well being were raised. The issue of road safety was raised, with a request for immediate action on child safety in cars. Food and nutrition issues were also raised, with a call for nutrition guidelines for various age groups and free or subsidised food in schools and crèches.

### Children and the media

It was proposed that the portrayal of children in the media should be the subject of ethical guidelines and advertising aimed at children should be banned or the subject of restrictions.

### Staffing

In addition to issues of access, issues of staffing and staffing specialities were raised. School nurses were proposed and more paediatric nurses and special needs nurses working in communities.

## Children's Mental Health Needs and Issues

The material on this topic covers issues concerned with the maintenance, promotion and restoration of good mental and emotional health, with a strong emphasis on the provision of psychiatric services for children and adolescents.

### Service provision

Both hospital and community psychiatric services for those with acute difficulties were seen as in need of major development, together with community based supports for dealing with the issues and traumas of childhood and adolescence.

### Needs of particular groups of young people

The absence of residential services for children under twelve years outside the Dublin area was a concern and the view was expressed that young people's services are too far from families to allow active engagement in therapeutic work. A number of submissions addressed the particular health care needs of young people who are drug users. It was felt that the best process for offering support is to provide services as part of a designated community health facility.

### Counselling

The submissions appear to indicate a pressing need for counselling services for groups of

young people. Counselling related to bereavement, bullying, adolescence and where parents are separating or divorcing were identified as necessary.

### Prevention

Preventive measures were also discussed in the submissions. Among the strategies mentioned as likely to promote positive mental health were self-esteem programmes, access to supportive and stable relationships, relationship education and social and personal development education. The significance of access to the arts in promoting healthy psychological development was mentioned.

## Children in Hospital, Sick Children

Again, children's experience of service, as distinct from the quantum of service, gets attention in submissions. The need for family centred hospital care, partnership with children and parents in decision-making about treatment and information sharing were raised as part of the need for a quality service.

### Access

Equality of access to both in-patient and out-patient treatment was seen as being denied to children, on account of delays and waiting lists for public hospital care.

### Consent to treatment

A further issue raised is the issue of children's consent to treatment. One submission suggests that the principle of true voluntary consent from children is paramount in children's services. A further submission suggests that the age of consent to treatment should be lowered, so that young people can be consulted at an earlier age about their wishes.

## Information For Children And Young People

The key to accessing services is to know about those services. The information needed by children and young people, according to the submissions, is the range of information that adults also need, but specifically geared to the needs and issues of young people.

## 6.2 Learning and Education

Education was seen as the key to tackling child poverty with contributors offering detailed plans and strategies for addressing educational disadvantage. About one third of all contributors commented on matters to do with children's learning and education. The general thrust of the comments were on the importance of equal and free access to education for all children coupled with support for those likely to need extra help to reach their learning potential.

The main issues raised were:

- What children and young people need to learn and know
- The nature of schooling/teaching and its responsiveness to the unique needs of individual children
- Interventions to help those young people experiencing difficulty
- Resources for learning in school
- Young people leaving school early
- Early learners
- The child as partner in the teaching/learning process.

In relation to school learning and curricula, virtually all the focus was on skills of personal and social development - there was little comment on any area of 'academic' learning, beyond

challenging the 'academic focus' of schooling. The support and interventions sought are mainly focused on difficulties that fall into the remit of the psychologist rather than the remedial services. There was a strong emphasis on the experience of schooling.

## **What Children And Young People Need To Learn And Know**

### **Life skills**

The strongest emphasis was on the need for children and young people to learn life skills, confidence and self-esteem through personal and social development programmes and health education programmes. The need for education to give young people skills in systems thinking, experimentation and collaboration is raised. Children need to learn how to make rules for themselves, to take personal responsibility and learn the limits and boundaries of what they can have.

### **Access to the Arts**

A surprising number of submissions spoke about children's need to have free access to the arts, music, drama, literature and writers. There was a concern about equality of access for those who cannot afford to give children these chances and also for those living in parts of Ireland where access to the arts may be limited.

### **Inclusion**

Several submissions highlight the need for school based programmes which equip young people to respect minorities and respect the rights of others. They referred to the need for disability awareness, human rights education, education preparing young people for a multicultural society, with an 'anti-bias' approach and education about responsibility to others and their property.

### **Other issues**

The learning and teaching of the Irish language was raised in a small number of submissions, as was the teaching of information technology skills. Only one submission made explicit reference to the teaching of religion, religious values and the need for a religious ethos in schools.

## **The Nature Of Schooling/Teaching And Its Responsiveness To The Unique Needs Of Individual Children**

Several submissions raised a critique of schooling and the capacity of schools to respond to the individual needs of young people. This material was distinctive, in that it raised questions about the ethos of schooling which shapes the child's learning experience, rather than the content of teaching and learning. These submissions made points about the culture of schooling, teaching methodologies, the impact of examination-based assessment mechanisms on young people and with what is perceived as failure to serve the needs of the less academic child.

## **Interventions To Help Those Experiencing Difficulty**

Submissions highlighted the difficulties facing school personnel who want to help young people who are particularly disadvantaged. A wide range of interventions were identified as necessary to support young people who are experiencing difficulty with learning and the schooling context to address learning difficulties, behavioural difficulties, poor self-esteem and psychological or psychiatric problems.

### **Counselling and psychological support**

The need for psychological support for students, teachers and parents was given a high priority in the submissions. Other interventions identified include systems for early detection and screening for learning difficulties, alternative learning programmes and assessment mechanisms

and the mainstreaming of successful projects to address educational disadvantage.

### **Current strategies**

There is some critique of current strategies to address educational disadvantage highlighting the need for greater clarity and strategic focus in many of the current intervention projects. The need for systematic evaluation over time on the impact of such projects on children, parents and the local community was also identified. Concerns were expressed about suspensions and expulsions from school. There was a call for measures to 'bridge the gap' between school and 'out of school' as a result of suspension or expulsion.

### **Needs of particular groups of students**

Groups identified as needing additional support are young mothers, children from ethnic minorities and children with disabilities. In relation to the schooling system, the case is made for embedding an equality focus in the work of schools through the school planning and the Whole School Evaluation process. A Traveller education service, with tracking systems to monitor their progress was proposed, as one of a series of measures to ensure equality.

## **Resources For Learning In School**

Additional resources in terms of class teachers, remedial and resource teachers, guidance counsellors and psychologists were mentioned as being required. In addition, the need to follow through on psychological assessment was highlighted. A small number of submissions called for a school social worker for all schools. The need for trained classroom assistants was also mentioned.

## **Early School Leaving**

Although there was relatively limited discussion on this theme, there is a proposal that school leavers should continue to be the responsibility of the education system, until they have received a qualification or skill and that literacy and numeracy programme should be part of a community training workshop setting.

## **Early Learning**

The distinction between early learning and early care was an arbitrary one and there is some overlap between the material described here and later material on childcare.

### **Access**

The call was for all children between 3-5 years to have access to early education with a substantial increase in state support. One submission called for improved supports and expansion of the network of naonrai (Irish medium pre-schools).

### **Programme content**

It was argued that national policy on early childhood education must be developed based on a holistic approach to the developmental needs of children and on the principle of equality of opportunity and access with a strong emphasis on play as the vehicle for early learning.

### **Staffing**

There was variation in the range of views about professional inputs to early education. Qualified teachers, trained play leaders, psychologists, play therapists, occupational therapists were all mentioned as being appropriate contributors to delivery of early education.

## **The Child as Partner in the Teaching/Learning Process.**

The case was made in a number of submissions for the child to be recognised as a party to the schooling process and a partner in that process. The submissions mentioned several areas of school life and education more generally, where children and young people could have active involvement. The need for participation of young people in areas of educational policy and

decision-making, involvement in the evaluation process in schools and in school planning was raised. A number of submissions drew attention to the provisions in the 1998 Education Act for the involvement of children and young people in school life.

## 6.3 Supporting Children and Young People with Disabilities

About fifteen percent of the submissions raised issues concerning the supports needed by children and young people with disabilities, covering educational opportunities, service co-ordination and delivery.

### **Educational Opportunities For Children And Young People With Disabilities**

#### **Inclusion**

It is interesting to note that the only educational option given serious consideration in the submissions on the matter of the educational provision for children with disabilities was inclusion in mainstream schools. The same levels of access and service should be available to a child with a disability in any part of the country, it was argued, with specific concern raised on availability of pre-school services - both mainstream and specialist pre-schools. The need for schools to plan in an explicit way for the inclusion of children with disabilities was mooted with the School Plan being seen as the appropriate vehicle for this. The integrated provision of support for children's health and their learning/teaching was raised.

#### **Co-ordinated local services**

The need for local delivery of these integrated services was stressed in the submissions - the need to bring the service to the child rather than the child to the service. In the context of schooling for children with disabilities, the additional rationale was about reducing the stigma for children of having to leave school regularly for appointments and the fatigue experienced by children with disabilities when having to travel long distances to services. It was proposed that children should be assigned a key worker or a children's resource co-ordinator to identify and provide access to all educational and care support services for the child with a disability and their family.

#### **Learning programmes**

There was relatively little specific comment on the content of learning programmes for children with disabilities apart from alternative teaching strategies for Physical Education, sex education materials in accessible formats for deaf children and deaf parents and more imaginative, creative, learning programmes.

#### **Particular needs**

There was an emphasis in one of the submissions on the right of access of deaf children to their own language and cultural identity. The particular needs and issues of visually impaired children, children with behavioural difficulties and children with diabetes were also raised.

## 6.4 Children And Young People Who Are Marginalised

The main focus in this material was on the supports needed for four groups - children in need of care and protection, homeless children, immigrant children and children and young people in trouble with the law. There was a call for greater focus on prevention and early intervention, to reduce the need for crisis intervention.

### Children In Need Of Care And Protection

Among the issues raised about children in need of care and protection are the following:

- The legal framework for child protection and the rights of the child who is removed from the family
- The accommodation needs of children who are not with their family
- Children with learning disabilities
- The operation of the Courts

#### Legal frameworks

The rights of adults and families are much stronger, it was argued in the context of child care, than the rights of children. Constitutional and legal changes were seen as necessary in order to remove the constitutional invisibility of the child.

#### Children who are not with their families

The issues raised include the need for the following:

- More suitable hospital setting to accommodate children needing care
- Increased numbers of smaller and improved residential facilities
- Exploration of the possibilities of open adoption
- Potential of local fostering addressed
- 'Respectful' access for the parents of children who have been removed from their family setting.

The particular needs of children and young people leaving care were raised. In the light of experience about their vulnerability, it was argued they should be given intensive supports, both in preparation for leaving care and afterwards.

#### Children with learning disabilities

Children and young people with learning disabilities were identified as being particularly vulnerable to abuse and neglect, due to factors of social isolation, poor communication and social skills, a high dependence on adult carers and limited mobility.

#### The operation of the courts system

The importance of the Guardian ad Litem service was stressed and a fully comprehensive service was sought. The experience of children in the court system was discussed; in particular waiting times for hearings were seen as damaging for children. The need for child friendly court procedures was stressed.

### Homeless And 'Out Of Home' Children And Young People

While there are references to homelessness in several submissions, the main material was contained in a small number of submissions from agencies who have a particular remit in supporting young homeless people. The needs of young homeless people were identified as



going well beyond accommodation provision - aftercare, housing, health, education and employment needs have to be addressed in a holistic way. The reality for homeless young people of having to live independently of family at an earlier age than the majority of young people was highlighted, as well as the need for participation, increased personal control and responsibility and empowerment for young people out of home who are using services.

### **The Needs Of Immigrant Children**

Several submissions wanted to see improved resources and facilities for immigrant children. The supports range from family support workers, to practical matters of telephones that can be used by ethnic minority children, to getting help, interpreters and language teaching. Voucher systems should not be used, it was argued, except to supplement allowances. There was a call for particular support for unaccompanied minor refugees. Many submissions called for staff training and development programmes to address multicultural issues.

### **Children And Young People In Trouble With The Law**

A comprehensive strategy to prevent young people from getting into trouble with the law would, it was proposed, involve a co-ordinated approach in which youth services, clubs and projects would play a major part. The Probation and Welfare service was identified as having an important preventive role to play at community level. The success of the juvenile liaison scheme in helping young people to avoid conviction was noted as significant.

A radically new model of juvenile justice is proposed in one submission. According to that submission, such a model would effectively remove most young offenders from the garda/courts/juvenile liaison office system, into a clearly defined welfare response. Urgent action to address gaps in the provision of residential places is highlighted.

## **6.5 Play, Recreation And Development Opportunities**

The problem of drawing distinctions between care and learning has already been noted in the material on early learning. A similar issue came up with the material on play, recreation and youth work. The learning dimensions of both play for children and youth work for young people were highlighted in submissions. The material falls mainly under the following headings:

- **The role of youth work**
- **General facilities and resources for play recreation and development.**

### **The Role of Youth Work and The Resourcing of Youth Work**

The important part that youth organisations play in this level of non-formal education is highlighted in the submissions which promote it's recognition and resourcing. The case is made for improved connection between this informal system with other more formal education systems.

#### **Resource issues**

The submissions mentioned a number of resources needed for the work of youth organisations, including a professionally managed youth resource centre in every community, core funding and recognition of the value of the work through giving time off work for certain youth work activities.

## **General Facilities And Resources For Play, Recreation And Development**

A large number of submissions call for play, recreation and leisure facilities to be built into local authority planning and estate design in every community. School buildings, facilities and school transport should be available for use by those working in informal education, it was argued. The experience of some UK local authorities in providing skate-parks was highlighted as a success. There was concern about the use of 'insurance difficulties' as an argument for not providing local authority playgrounds. Rural children and young people need to have these facilities, as well as children in large towns, it was argued.

## **6.6 Children And Young People As Active Citizens**

The concept of the child as an active citizen was quite strong in the submissions. The case is made for the strengthening of children's rights in our laws, policies and practices. Some dealt with the issue of rights in detail; others noted the UN Convention as an important development and commented about its implementation. The main thrust of the comments was that young people need to be respected and valued, with the right to express views on all matters that affect them and to have those views heard. One dissenting view is that 'autonomy' for children can easily lead to disastrous results for children and for their families. There was a call for more public debate about children's issues and several proposals about the areas of public life where young people should have a say and be equipped to play their part as citizens in an effective way.

### **The areas where children and young people should have a say**

In general, there was a view that all children through their representative groupings should be consulted at the planning stage where services are targeted at, or for the benefit of, children. Specific areas that received mention are education, health services, local authority planning - in particular in the new local planning and consultation structures being established by the Local Authorities. The School Plans, required by the Education Act, 1998, were identified as being one mechanism to provide for participation in the organisation of schools. A youth forum in Dáil Éireann, a Dáil na nÓg and a National Youth Forum were also proposed.

### **Supporting children and young people's participation**

To participate effectively, it is argued young people need skills and role models. It was envisaged that training modules for adults and professional staff would be an essential support for young people's participation. Other support systems, such as independent complaint procedures, feedback and information and in particular the establishment of an Ombudsman for Children, were mentioned.

# Chapter 7

## Enabling Families, Communities and Professionals to Support Children

### Introduction

The main areas addressed in this section are:

- **Childcare**
- **Family and parenting support (including support for communities)**
- **Professional and staff support.**

Since families and communities are the primary support systems for children, it is not surprising that the submissions raise issues about ways of assisting them. Almost 40% of submissions refer to family support needs. The role of community is interwoven through the material on family needs, with a good deal of the approaches to supporting families located in a community context. There is quite a strong emphasis on ways of supporting professionals in their work with children.

## 7.1 Childcare

The comments on childcare could be summed up as a call for high quality, safe, affordable childcare for all parents. A further theme was that of flexibility to meet varying needs and the need to offer choice to parents. The childcare/early education issue is seen as having special significance for promoting social inclusion. The need for information and training for parents on what to look for in choosing a childcare service was identified. As well as these general matters, the following were the main areas of concern which were raised about childcare:

- **Approaches to provision**
- **Funding for childcare**
- **Quality**

### Approaches to Provision

The three main forms of provision discussed were workplace provision, community-based provision and childcare in the home. The greater focus was on community and home based provision.

#### Workplace provision

The material on employer support for childcare was dealt with through two approaches - the availability of part time working, flexi-time and job sharing arrangements on the one hand and,

on the other, the provision of workplace crèche facilities. Both approaches seek to support stable and secure relationships between parents and their children.

### **Community-based provision**

The case for supporting childcare provision by local community groups is made in several submissions. To offer a quality service at a low cost, it was argued these providers need various forms of state assistance to function effectively. There were proposals that childcare centres should be attached to all national schools, that they should be available through Irish and that mobile childcare services are available for rural areas. The particular needs of older children were raised in several submissions with calls for the development of after-school facilities and to cater for school holidays.

### **The Childcare (Pre-school) Regulations**

The impact of the Childcare Regulations was seen as negative for family-based providers. This sector, it is argued, is particularly important for older children who will not be looked after in workplace crèches or playgroups. In addition, reference was made to the impact that these regulations have had on the economic viability of crèches.

### **Childcare in the Home**

The view was expressed in a number of submissions that care by the parent in the home is the most effective and appropriate form of care for children. There was concern in these submissions that economic policies or childcare policies should not undermine that role. Attention is also given in several submissions to the need to support and recognise the particular role of family based private day care and those who provide it. The role of grandparents in the childcare area was highlighted in a small number of submissions.

## **Funding For Childcare**

The issue of both direct and indirect forms of funding was raised.

### **Direct State funding for providers**

Capital funding, funding for equipment, to enable pre-school providers to meet the requirement of the pre-school regulations, for set-up costs and training for play-leaders and playgroup assistants were the main funding areas identified in the submissions.

### **Indirect funding**

Tax relief for private minders was proposed. There was a suggestion that a Government sponsored insurance scheme should be established and that the provider would be insured, rather than the venue, so allowing private minders to work in children's own homes. There were also suggestions about tax reform and subsidies to enable parents to pay for childcare. The lack of recognition of childminding expenses was seen as a source of severe strain on parents. Proposals included the award of non-contributory social insurance credits for parent's childminding at home equivalent to Class A PRSI payments. There were several criticisms of the provisions for individualisation of taxation and their impact on full time parents.

## **Quality**

There was a call for transparent and unambiguous standards to underpin the inspection of facilities countrywide. While the new regulations are seen as addressing some dimensions of quality in physical facilities there is a need, it is suggested, to go further and focus on excellence in childcare provision.

'Non punitive' registration of carers was also proposed.

## 7.2 Family And Parenting Support

As well as occupying that pivotal caring role, parents are seen as essential role models for children and young people. Support for parenting and for families was seen in the submissions as an important ingredient in the strategy for supporting children. Articles 5 and 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child were quoted as the basis for an obligation on Government to support parents in fulfilling their essential role as primary caregivers. The submissions identified additional supports for parents and families, with the main emphasis on families who are disadvantaged or marginalised but also including families of children with disabilities and children who are ill.

In this section we look at the observations on the following themes:

- **Services and facilities for vulnerable families**
- **Support for separated and divorced parents**
- **Support for going to work, training or education**
- **Income support**
- **Supports for families of children with disabilities and children who are ill**
- **Support for communities**

### **Parenting programmes**

Parenting programmes were the most frequently mentioned forms of support. The view in the submissions was that these programmes should be available to all parents, to support them in all stages of children's development beginning as part of antenatal care. There were suggestions for maximising access to parenting programmes and the take-up of these. The issue of standards in parenting programmes was raised.

### **Family resource centres**

Family resource centres are seen as being a very important part of the family support process. There was an acknowledgement of the worth of the various initiatives to set up such services and a call to continue their development. The possibilities for community based family support, organised around a family resource centre was put forward.

### **Other forms of parenting support**

Among the range of approaches mentioned on parenting support (in addition to formal programmes) were mother and toddler groups, information on child development, video material, sex education materials for parents, more frequent visits to new mothers by public health nurses and regular visits in the pre-school years. The community mother's scheme was seen as a most effective form of support for parenting. The role of fathers in parenting was mentioned in a very small number of submissions. The need for more research around that role was proposed, as well as greater encouragement for fathers' involvement in parenting through improved paternal leave.

### **Parents as partners with service providers**

Support for parental involvement in education and in the development of good home-school links was mentioned in a number of submissions. There is a request for greater flexibility by schools to enable lone parents who are working to participate in parent teacher meetings.

In relation to children's health an active partnership with parents was suggested in relation to planning services, support for breastfeeding, in screening and surveillance and the maintenance of health record forms from when the child is born.

### Legal initiatives

The implementation of the Law Reform Commission's recommendations for a period of public education on parenting without physical punishment should be commenced urgently, it was argued, with a view to a full legal ban.

## Services And Facilities For Vulnerable Families

Contributors suggested that systems and strategies to help troubled and vulnerable families need to be innovative, intensive and sustained. Reference was made to the need to focus on the whole family and all aspects of the family's well being and that support services should be available continuously and not only during office hours.

### Community mothers programme and community nurses

Among the range of support programmes that would make a difference, the community mothers scheme was consistently mentioned as being of particular value to new mothers, single mothers, mothers and families under pressure and the expansion of the scheme is recommended. The support of the community/public health nurse was also seen as very valuable.

### Information

It was suggested that a well resourced information service would be a further strand of service to meet needs. The value and importance of self-help groups as a form of mutual emotional and practical support and information including the use of a website was highlighted.

## Separated and divorced parents

The submissions identified separating and separated/divorced parents as having particular needs. Access to counselling, parenting skills for their circumstances and relationship skills training are mentioned among the kinds of interventions needed. It was argued that there was a need for information about mediation, as well as access to mediation services all around the country. The submissions raised the issue of housing for separated families and the challenges that arise because both parents need the kind of housing which allows them to have their children stay with them. Linked to this was the identification of the need for a network of community facilities where both parents and grandparents can meet children in a safe, child friendly and inexpensive environment. A new and more child friendly language should be promoted around litigation issues, it was proposed, with terms such as 'contact' and 'residence', replacing 'access' and 'custody.'

## Support For Going To Work, Training Or Education

The importance of offering parents in marginalised groups opportunities to go to work, training, or further education was mentioned in several submissions. The absence of affordable childcare was seen as one of the biggest barriers here.

## Income Support

Many of the comments about improved income support for children focused on universal support. However, the need to address child poverty was a strong theme. While the ways of addressing this are multi-dimensional, basic income support was seen as one important aspect of an anti-poverty strategy, to include an increase in child benefit and a new childcare supplement via child benefit.

## Supports For Families Of Children With Disabilities And Children Who Are Ill

The issues for families of children with disabilities and children who are ill mirror very closely the issues for other families with particular needs. They cover parenting support, services, information and income support.

The parenting support needs identified include disability awareness training for parents, support at the time when a child's disability is diagnosed and co-ordination of the approach to families. As with other groups, mutual support groups were seen as particularly helpful. Support for families with an ill child was referred to, as well as outreach nursing support, oncology social workers for families of children with cancer and support for self-help groups and organisations.

### Support For Communities

The theme of community runs through much of the material in submissions - the emphasis was on local delivery of services, locally based resource centres and community 'ownership' of services.

#### Physical facilities for communities

The need for community facilities for after school care, sports, leisure activities, childcare and play facilities, were among those noted. The physical facilities are seen as an essential catalyst for harnessing voluntary effort in support of young people and capital funds should be made available by the exchequer, it was argued.

#### Community-based planning

The importance of consultation with communities about local needs was highlighted over and over in the submissions. Linked to this point was the value that comes from the co-working of community, statutory and voluntary agencies, as a way of enhancing local skills.

#### Communities in disadvantaged areas

Submissions from a number of youth organisations highlighted their role in promoting and developing community leaders and argued for support for that role for youth organisations working in disadvantaged areas.

## 7.3 Professional And Staff Support

The importance of training and development for professional personnel and service staff in securing good outcomes for children was underlined. Almost 30% of submissions raise issues on this matter. This reflects to some degree the fact that organisations and professionals were the main source of these submissions. The focus of the material on professional issues is on the following areas:

- Training and Development
- Staffing
- Qualifications

### Training And Development

The submissions addressed both general issues and specific training needs of staff groups.

### General training and development needs:

The following were among the main areas of training and development noted as being essential for all those working with children:

- Learning how to listen and talk to children
- A commitment to the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and education about the Convention
- Support for the development of more Irish medium professionals
- Involvement of young people themselves in delivering training about their needs

### Specific training needs

Several specific training needs were noted:

- Training to apply the 'Children First Guidelines for Protection and Welfare of Children'
- Health promotion modules in all training/education courses for staff working with children
- Training about the importance of play
- Training regarding children with special needs and to ensure culturally sensitive practice.

For teachers, the additional training and development areas mentioned related to:

- Skills to implement programmes for children of different abilities and non academic abilities
- Training in supporting emotional development
- Modules relating to children's rights and status in education
- Training in operating participatory mechanisms for children
- Support for policies on inclusion
- Support to effect curriculum change.

There were many calls in the submissions for quality training for playgroup leaders, playgroup assistants and childcare workers. Training for Gardai in dealing with domestic violence for youth workers and for judges dealing with child sexual abuse cases were among the other areas identified in the submissions.

## Staffing

### Staffing levels

Several groups indicated that there were deficits in staffing levels in particular professions. One submission expresses concern about the impact of delays and gaps in therapeutic support.

### Staff support

There were a small number of general points made about staff well being. These included the need for affirmation and encouragement for staff, the need for salary levels and structures that reflect the value and importance of the roles that particular groups play.

## Qualifications

Some very profession-specific matters are raised about qualifications. The professional qualification for paediatric nurses was raised, with a call for the re-introduction of a three year paediatric training programme. There is a call for the discipline of sick children's nursing to be included in a four year degree programme. There were many contributions about the need for a standardised approach to qualification and certification in the childcare area and a number of proposals for training to be standardised to diploma and degree level and for a system accreditation of prior learning.



# Chapter 8

## What the Adults and Organisations said...

"Children are not just consumers of services: they also need genuine opportunities to relax, have fun, exercise their imagination and cultivate a sense of the aesthetic. The quality of children's experience growing up has developmental implications for the individual, shaping their destiny in different ways. But the quality of children's experience collectively, also has economic, social and cultural implications for the quality of life in society generally."

"The development of the National Children's Strategy presents a unique opportunity for consultation and strategic policy development on all aspects of lives of children and young people."

"Proficiency with technology can allow people (including children) to be treated on an equal basis with the so-called 'normal' population. The introduction of a technological society can therefore be a great leveller for those with disabilities."

"The current education system contributes to promoting competitive individualism. This is sometimes at the expense of the greater good. There is a serious challenge to create a more caring society with a greater emphasis on co-operation rather than competition."

"Béim níos mó a chur ar chláracha forbairt phearsanta agus shóisialta do dhaoine óga mar aon le breis aitheantais agus maoiniú dá réir a thabhairt do chlubanna óige, spóirt agus caitheamh aimsire."

"Family difficulties and separations cause pain, disruption, fear and anger to children and young people. The removal of joint parental presence, love and support can be a source of major upheaval for children...this can affect their personalities and their development."

"The so-called problems caused by the increase in non-nationals only serve to highlight already existing problems such as housing and hospital waiting lists and a National Children's Strategy must ensure that our children grow up understanding this and welcoming these people."

"The increased incidence of suicide among young people in Ireland is the most complex and worrying social concern in Irish society. The upward trend has rightly caused widespread concern. Suicide, particularly among young people, has become a most pressing issue, particularly in the light of the fact that we still do not fully understand the causes."

"Taken as a whole Ireland (the 'Celtic Tiger') is growing more prosperous by the year, but a distinction must be made between the wealth of the country on the one hand and the poverty of significant groups within the country."

"The challenge over the next decade is to target resources so there is equal opportunity for all."

"Both the opportunity and challenge centre on the increased awareness of child abuse, neglect, discrimination and injustice. The Strategy must act upon this knowledge to protect against preventable illness and disability but also to eliminate or at least minimise social and emotional harm."

"Less green space, trees, hills and ditches and the fear of parents to allow their children to roam and explore the area have resulted in indoor play. Social interaction with nature and the out of doors are critical to the development of young people."

"The harsh reality is that, despite comprising almost a third of the population of the State and Ireland's commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are remarkably invisible in many areas of policy which nevertheless impacts hugely on the quality of their lives."

"While viewing a child as an integral part of a family unit and engaging and involving relevant systems in making change for children is crucial, the key focus of support services must remain on the child as an individual with developmental capabilities, limitations and tasks. Any shift to viewing the family and carers as the primary focus of services will lessen the impact in children and in many cases fail to make a real change for these children."

"In order for services to be directed more towards prevention, it is important to consider child welfare as part of a broader remit. Changes are required at a number of different levels, including National Policy level in relation to prioritising prevention, at agency level in relation to mandating and prioritising such work and at individual level in relation to providing adequate supports to staff such as supervision and training to facilitate this work to be carried out."

"...the economic status of children, the developmental significance of childhood and the distinctive contribution the arts can make to self-realisation, are all factors which, allied to the particular demographic realities of Ireland, underline that Irish children have a particularly pressing claim on arts provision funded from the public purse."

"I've come across many parents who are not seen to be disadvantaged, but would have difficulty coming up with the necessary fees for childcare due to high mortgage expenses etc. These people should not be excluded from the 'affordable childcare plan'."

"Any strategy for children must try to itself bring together all these other integrative structures with a view to bringing together and co-ordinating the often mystifying array of proposals emanating from the various statutory and voluntary organisations."

"The lack of integrated locally based services means that people in crisis are sent to a range of different offices to access their entitlements. This causes extreme frustration and militates against the good relationships and co-operation with professionals so necessary when sorting out crises."

"The absence of a collaborative culture between and within organisations results in isolation and an absence of professional peer support for practitioners that emphasises the gaps between services operated by different agencies."

"Delivery of services need to be flexible, focused and need to be regularly evaluated in order to ensure that needs and targets of specific groups are constantly being recognised and met."

"If services are to be used by young people they must be viewed by them as catering for all young people and not specifically for 'people with difficulties'. Combined with this factor, research would suggest that young people find it easier to discuss difficulties or problems with other young people rather than with other adults. This factor should be integrated into service provision and delivery."

"Policies must prioritise and be assessed by commitment to quality of each child's daily living experience growing up in the home, school, neighbourhood and beyond. This consideration of quality of life must embrace diverse aspects of childhood."

- "The needs of the child must be catered for in an holistic sense. The emotional, physical, educational, societal and cultural needs should be looked at in the context of the family and the community. The creation and building up of a sense of belonging, of being a valued member of the community, should be incorporated into all services."
- "The research showed that adults do not know what is right for young people and will keep on getting it wrong if they don't ask them directly."
- "An anti-bias approach, unlike a multicultural approach, incorporates cultural issues that broadens to the areas of class, language, religion, gender, disability etc.... the underlying intent of an anti-bias approach is to foster the development of children and adults to become critical thinkers and be active in building a more caring, just and diverse community and society for all."
- "The main focus of education in the coming years is to value each child's gifts and intelligence and thereby build up self-confident and respected learners, each in his own field and discard forever the theory that all children should be educated in the same way."
- "It is recommended that the terms of reference for the school plan...should be broadened to include an overall equality/social inclusion strategy that outlines specific policy within each school relating to social disadvantage, gender, equality, children with special needs, children with disabilities and children from ethnic minorities (including travellers). The implementation of such a framework should be one of the criteria examined under the Whole School Evaluation process."
- "Children who experience democracy in practice, will incorporate concepts of equality, difference and respect into their world view. The earlier this occurs, the greater the impact on their cognitive and social development."
- "By youth development we mean, the development of knowledge, the development of ability and the development of those specifically human qualities which characterise what is best in human nature...It is the development of human potential so that the individual may achieve personal fulfilment and take his/her place as an active and valued member of society."
- "We want the National Children's Strategy to foster and promote co-ordination provided by the statutory agencies and genuine partnerships between the voluntary and statutory sectors in the future development of the Youth Service."
- "Aitheanas le cothromaíocht a thabhairt do thuismitheoirí atá ag tógail páisti le Gaeilge agus na seirbhísí tacaíochta chuí a bheith ar fáil tré mheán na Gaeilge."
- "The issues of childcare are not stand alone issues but an integral part of all community development...Childcare also plays a fundamental role in encouraging people to go back to training, education and work."
- "There is a need for achieving a better balance between the demands of employment and the requirements of family life, particularly the needs and rights of children...This requires radical innovation and much greater flexibility in employment structures, in effect a reversal of the current situation where it is the family requirements which are expected to adjust to the needs of the job market."
- "The society that they are now living in has become so self centred and selfish that the children are now not placed first in the list of priorities of parents. They must have their jobs, their annual holiday abroad, their nights out etc."
- "Parents find it increasingly difficult to parent effectively. They do not have the support structures to call on within extended family...support should be available at all stages to empower parents to maintain a family environment where children can be nurtured and encouraged to reach their potential."

"There should be ongoing available support to families throughout the childhood years and beyond. The widespread availability and normalising of access to this type of help would have major spin off effects in helping both individuals and families access help earlier and with less resistance when and if a more serious need should arise later in life."

"I am left out of this part of my child's life, which makes me very sad. I have spoken with other parents and there are many of us out there would like to be more involved with our children's school and would like to be regarded as a resource rather than as a nuisance to be kept away from the school. Research has shown that when a parent is involved in a school, the child is more likely to do well in school and isn't that our goal - to have our children do well in school."

"No amount of counselling and parenting programmes is going to help to get the dishes washed, the kids off to school, the bills paid, the clothes cleaned, the shopping done. The number of family support workers should be increased dramatically and it should be possible for stressed parents to receive support on a daily basis when required... This is of course the same for children."

"One of the huge challenges for a substantial number of children is having opportunities to achieve their potential, particularly in low income families."

"Professionals and agencies need training in communication and attitudinal change so that they can convey a non-judgmental attitude to families in difficulty. This training should include community development methods of involving, consulting and engaging parents and children in the solutions to their problems."



# Part 3

Consultation Forum

# Chapter 9

## Report on the Consultation Forum

The Minister of State with responsibility for Children, Mary Hanafin T.D. hosted a consultation forum in June to review the findings of the consultation process. Those invited to the morning session were some of the younger children who made submissions through their organisations and schools, with over one hundred attending. Those invited in the afternoon included older children, adults and organisations who made submissions.

The younger children worked through drama workshops with members from both the National Theatre Education Outreach and The Ark. They reviewed some of the findings of the consultation with children and were helped to prioritise the themes raised in the submissions. Their priorities for the National Children's Strategy were:

- Children need to be given more opportunities to work with their organisations and different children from their own schools
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A draft, age-appropriate version of the consultation report was given to each of the children. The children spoke with the Minister throughout the session.

In the afternoon, the Minister and senior civil servants from the relevant government departments met with over two hundred attendees to hear a presentation by the researcher who analysed and compiled a report on the submissions. A draft copy of the report was made available. There was also a presentation detailing how the consultation process will inform the development of the National Children's Strategy. A period of time was taken to allow attendees to review and discuss the findings. During this time facilitated workshops were offered to all attendees, which were taken up by most of the young people who attended. On resumption to a plenary session, representatives from each of the young people's groups were invited to give their comments, which included:

- The need for quality accessible sports and recreational facilities for all age groups and in all areas of the country.
- With reference to schools, the issues of resources or support classes and the need for consultation with schools were raised.
- All types of education should be funded.
- The Consultation with young people was welcomed and it was hoped that it would continue.

A significant number of attendees spoke, broadly welcoming the Government initiative for a National Children's Strategy, the consultation undertaken and the engagement of children and young people.

Other points addressed the consultation process and the expectations from the National Children's Strategy. Many of the points reiterated contributions made in submissions to the Strategy and their perception of how individual concerns were treated in the draft report. Some of the issues raised included:

- The importance of the family and community in supporting children's lives
- The need for more consultation in preparation for the Strategy
- The need to focus on children with disabilities in the Strategy. There was specific reference to the needs of deaf children and their families.

Attendees were given an additional three weeks for their comments before preparing the report for publication.

In the weeks following the Forum, additional comments were made and further submissions received. All of the points made at the Consultation Forum and received subsequently will be considered in drawing together the National Children's Strategy.







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