The Children's Services Review and why it matters to youth work

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Anyone supporting children and young people will know that Children's Services are under severe strain. We are living in a perfect storm of workforce shortages, funding cuts, and a political vacuum at Stormont, whilst all the time the lives of children and young people become ever more complex. Emerging from covid has thrown up a myriad of challenges that have served to compound existing gaps and weaknesses in an already tired system that is in desperate need of investment, modernisation, and a long-term plan for transformation. We have the highest number of children in care since the introduction of the Children's Order in 1995, and an increasing number of children on the child protection register (Dept. of Health for Northern Ireland, 2022).

In February 2022, the then Health Minister, Robin Swann, announced a fundamental review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland. An Independent Review Team, led by Professor Ray Jones, was tasked with setting out a renewed vision of what high quality, equitable, and sustainable Children's Services in Northern Ireland could be. A series of engagement events were held to hear directly from children, young people, parents, carers, and staff from across a range of disciplines. October 2022 saw the publication of interim recommendations with a focus on the creation of one regional organisation for Children's Services to replace the existing Trust-aligned model of delivery. Across the board there is a sense that Professor Jones has genuinely sought to understand our system and engaged meaningfully around finding solutions as to what needs to change. The final recommendations will be published on 21st June 2023.

VOYPIC (Voice of Young People In Care) were tasked with engaging with children and young people with lived experience of Children's Services, on behalf of the Review Team, and young people aged 14 to 25 were invited to apply to be part of this group. To add to this evidence base, Barnardo's NI commissioned 'Stats & Stories' to consult with our staff and children, young people, parents, and carers. The central theme that emerged was the failure of Children's Services to respond to the individual needs of children, young people, parents, and carers. While parents and young people recognised that the combination of staff shortages and long waiting lists made it challenging for the social care workforce, many participants reported that it was difficult obtaining any type of support from Children's Services within a reasonable timeframe. This included support for children or young people with an assessed need or diagnosis. It was noted that this difficulty to access support was over many years. This will come as no surprise to youth workers who support young people and their families to navigate the system, and see these scenarios play out repeatedly. Constantly having to advocate for a service is exhausting and demoralising and places additional stress on young people and their carers.

Although the content of the report remains unknown for now there are a few themes to look out for:

A single agency for Children's Services – This poses both opportunities and threats. Will this address the problems that currently exist or shift them to a new body? Implementation and re-structuring of this scale is often slow and laborious which is concerning. Independent oversight will be crucial to ensure that children's rights are upheld throughout the process. Having been through the reorganisation of the Education & Library Boards into one Education Authority, many in youth work may be wary of this approach having seen the implications that this has had for youth work funding and governance. If we look South, to Tusla, there may be lessons here that can be applied as to which elements are working and more importantly which aren't.

Addressing current challenges – Although this review is focused on the future there are very real challenges that cannot wait for a reshaping of Children's Services or an influx of graduates into the system. Clear recommendations for immediate implementation are needed now particularly in areas such as waiting lists, communication with children and young people, and timely responses.

Funding and commissioning for the Community and Voluntary Sector – The valuable role of the CVS needs to be paid more than lip service. We need a long-term sustainable funding model to allow us to get on with the job of responding to the needs of children and young people as they present, while also focusing on early intervention to prevent the unnecessary escalation of situations and keep children and young people out of the system where possible.

The need for a multi-disciplinary workforce – What does this mean for youth workers? There is an important place for us in applying our skills to roles that have traditionally been the preserve of social workers. Youth work can play a role in Children's Services that is adequately recognised, resourced and appreciated.

It is imperative that we are vocal about the solutions that are within the gift of youth work as the time is now.

References:

Department of Health for Northern Ireland (2022) Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2021-22. Available at https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/publication-childrens-social-care-statistics-northern-ireland-202122#:~:text=At%2031%20March%202022%2C%2024%2C545,by%20the%20Police%20(36%25)

Barnardo's NI (2023), Reimagining Children's Social Care Summary Paper