

Starting From Scratch

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ABSTRACT *The following is a full account of a paper presented at the conference 'Think Global Act Local' held on 29 November 2002 to mark the launch by the four Health and Social Services Boards of the Children's Services Plans 2002–2005. In this paper, I provide a voluntary sector perspective on the changes in the past 3 years in the process of children's services planning, the unique contribution this planning process has to make and the challenges ahead.*

Introduction

My perspective on Children's Services Planning is a voluntary sector one. It is based on my experiences of working closely with the four Children's Services Planners during the time that I was chair of the regional umbrella group for voluntary children's organisations Childcare Northern Ireland (CCNI). CCNI has worked hard to develop a partnership between the statutory and voluntary sector in the planning process and I think that the success of that partnership can be illustrated by a number of examples. First, the fact that the voluntary and statutory sectors were able to agree a joint position on the Northern Ireland Executive Programme Fund — Children's Fund and, second, the fact that the Children and Young Peoples Committees expanded their voluntary/Community sector representation from one to nine people.

This paper is intended as an overview of where the Children's Services Planning process has come from and where it is going over the course of the next 3 years. There are three general areas I would propose to look at:

1. Where we are now compared with 3 years ago.
2. The challenges facing Children's Services Planning.
3. The unique contribution of the Children's Services Planning process.

Where we are Now Compared with 3 Years Ago

It would be my view that the Children's Services Planning process is in a much better place now than it was 3 years ago. Clearly there have been frustrations, not least in respect of funding, but I believe there is plenty of evidence to support the view that this process has achieved a great deal. If you consider, for example, the Southern Board's work on 'Involving Disabled Children and Young People', the Western Board's work on 'User Involvement-Young People', the Eastern Board's work on 'Childcare Needs of the Chinese Community' or the

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Northern Board's work on the 'Education of Looked After children', the potential of this process becomes apparent.

I would first like to outline the changes in how the planning process has incorporated the role of children and young people.

Planning for Children to Planning with Children

At the time of the original plans there was almost inevitably a focus on children and young people as the subjects of the planning process. The key activities were information gathering, and beginning to co-ordinate and understand the different perspectives each organisation involved in the process had in relation to children 'in need'. The understanding of children as key actors in this process was underdeveloped. Now I believe there has been significant movement towards the participation of children and young people in the planning process. I have described this as the shift from children as the subjects of planning to children as key participants in the planning process.

I would also argue that how we have conceived of the nature of the problems faced by children and young people has also changed.

From a Welfare Perspective to a Social Inclusion Perspective

I believe that the process has moved from a narrow perspective on the welfare of children 'in need' to a much wider perspective on the social inclusion of children young people and their families. Underpinning this is a move away from a 'deficit' model of understanding children's needs to a more holistic one that focuses instead on the social inclusion of children. This change was underlined by the adoption by the four Children and Young Peoples Committees of the paper on social inclusion and the agreement to have 'promoting social inclusion' as one of the four strategic objectives.

With this different conceptualisation of how to address the needs of children and young people has come a change in how the process conceives of the potential supports that exist for them. The thinking about family and community and the fundamental role they play in Childrens lives has developed.

From Families in Crisis to Family Support

Turning first to family support. I believe that we have moved from focusing on how specialist services can 'rescue' vulnerable children and young people in crises to a view that is more appreciative of the range of supports that can help children and young people develop within their family and community. In particular, the Children's Services Planning process has, alongside the voluntary sector, championed the development of thinking on the issue of family support. The four plans contain, as an agreed strategic objective, the development of coherent and integrated family support. Related to this has been a strong belief in the value of prevention and the understanding of the need to locate services for vulnerable children within the context of universal services.

From Community as a Context for Planning to Community as Central to Supporting Families

Alongside the widening perspective on family support I believe that the understanding of the importance of community has shifted from one that saw community as a context to one in which community is seen as central to the task of supporting families. The potential strengths of communities are more clearly recognised. This is evidenced by a recent initiative by the four area committees to involve community-based organisations more strategically in the Children's Services Planning process through membership of the Children and Young Peoples Committees.

From a Board Perspective to a Regional Perspective

Not surprisingly at the outset of this process there was an understandable concern about 'getting it right' at Board level as each committee attempted to meet the challenges of the new planning process. There is now a much clearer sense of the four area committees attempting to work more co-operatively together to produce a coherent regional approach. The four chairs now meet together on a regular basis and have developed a common approach on the children's fund and the current plans contain four agreed strategic themes.

Focus on Activity to Focus on Outcome

I believe that the emphasis on activity and process that I referred to earlier has been replaced by a focus on delivering outcomes for children. The plans are much more focused on making a real and measurable difference to children's lives. The whole process has now developed a clear priority on formulating measurable outcomes.

From Committee Attendance/Compliance to Active Engagement

Finally I believe that we are also beginning to see a shift away from organisational thinking towards the beginnings of 'system' thinking. By this I mean the move away from thinking narrowly about organisational priorities and responsibilities to a wider view that develops partnership priorities and partnership responsibilities. The broadening out of the committees to include a wider range of voluntary and community sector organisations has strengthened this trend. What we see developing is a genuine partnership between voluntary/community and statutory sectors.

The Challenges Facing Childrens Services Planning

The second theme of this paper is about the key challenges facing the Children Services Planning processes.

Making a Reality of the Participation of Children and Young People

The right to meaningful participation is set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is given prominence in Northern Ireland in the *Draft Programme for Government*:

Our goal is to promote a culture of respect for children's rights that permeates every aspect of society, and a system of governance in which consideration of the rights, interests and views of children and young people is second nature not second choice. (Northern Ireland Executive, 2002, p. 33)

Making this work is an immense challenge not least because it needs time and resources in a period when both are scarce. We are also acutely aware that we all work with some of our most disempowered children and young people whose experiences of services to date may not make them natural converts to the concept of participation. There may well be a temptation to regard participation as a marginal activity. To do so I believe would be a grave mistake as participation is central to the success of the development of the concept of planning with children. We have plenty of research evidence to support the notion that to build high-quality effective services requires the participation of service users. Part of this challenge is about bringing participation directly into planning and service delivery as a routine activity rather than as one-off events.

Measuring Outcomes

We need to be sure that what we are doing not only works, but also is making a measurable difference to vulnerable children and young people.

The current United Kingdom Government (2002) *Children at Risk-Cross Cutting Review*, for example, notes:

That many of the more far reaching and ambitious proposals to improve services will depend on the effective rationalisation of planning for children's services behind an outcome based approach.

However, this is not an easy task. Kendall and Harker, in the Institute of Public Policy Research publication *From Welfare to Well Being*, remind us that:

Social care, like many of our public services, has been poor at focussing on outcomes to date. (2002, p. 6)

Developing Family Support

This has not been an easy concept to operationalise. Making the transition to a family support model means investing in prevention services and will undoubtedly involve difficult decisions in terms of resource allocation. And yet, as the United Kingdom Government *Children at Risk Cross-Cutting Review* reminds us:

Many children and young people can be vulnerable to risk factors at some point in their development which, without the support of preventative and effective services, can lead to crisis and in some cases to lasting effects which perpetuate the cycle of deprivation and poverty. (2002)

Part of the challenge in developing family support services has been the issue of seeing child protection almost as a separate service. This theme was picked up in the Department of Health publication *The Children Act Now — Messages from Research*:

The current system of separating child protection enquiries and family support assessment is ineffective and counter-productive to meeting the needs of children and families. The studies suggest that, by separating the two systems, some children have missed the value of early intervention to prevent more intrusive and intensive activity at a later stage. Conversely some children who need safeguarding because of neglect are slipping through the net of family support services because these services fail to address the importance of safeguarding children's welfare. (Aldgate & Statham, 2001, p. 144)

Mainstreaming Equality/Human Rights

Equality, human rights and social inclusion are key themes for our times. They underpin so much of the new developments in work with children and young people whether it is in regard to the Commissioner for Children, or the new Strategy for the rights and needs of children. This is set out clearly in the *Draft Programme for Government*:

Equality of opportunity and human rights are fundamental to our work. We are committed to promoting them through strong legislation and effective public policies. (Northern Ireland Executive, 2002, p. 32)

These issues are central to the business of Children's Services Planning and are integral to the new set of plans. However, much like the theme of participation, there can be a temptation to regard this as a marginal concern to the core business of the committees. However, is it not entirely appropriate that those organisations whose concerns are the well-being of some of our most vulnerable and marginalised children and young people should be totally committed to challenging inequality and standing up for the rights of all children and young people?

Developing Collaboration to Achieve Added Value

There are a number of dimensions to this challenge. How do we make the best of the new expanded committees, to ensure that they become not just bigger but also better? Furthermore, how do we reconfigure the committees to ensure that we get the best out of the experience and perspectives that the new members bring? Clearly the committees have been changing. The voluntary sector are prepared to meet this challenge head on; Child Care Northern Ireland, for example, has begun a support and development programme with the voluntary sector committee members to ensure that they are enabled to fully participate.

The second part of this challenge is building in alignments with other planning processes and strategies. This is important not just because many organisations are struggling to understand and engage with the range of multi-agency initiatives, but more importantly because we need to recognise that the complex needs of our most vulnerable children and young people require such integrated approaches if they are to be effective.

The emphasis in the current plans on building linkages to the 'Investing in Health' strategy is a clear example of this happening. (Southern Area Children and Young People's Committee, 2002, p. 64)

Resourcing the Strategy

To date a major criticism of this process has been the absence of dedicated resources to make a reality of the planning activity. If we are to avoid a crisis of confidence in this process then this needs to change. However, this is not just a debate about attracting additional resources (as in the Children's fund), but also one about how the statutory organisations can begin to direct resources already at their disposal into Children's Services Planning priorities.

The Unique Contribution of the Children's Services Planning Process

Finally I would like to turn to the possibilities that exist if we get this right. Working together remains a significant political imperative both here and for the other administrations on these islands.

The *Draft Programme for Government* talks about:

Identifying new ways of working that will bring real benefits. (Northern Ireland Executive, 2002, p. 18)

The current Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland poses the question:

How can we best facilitate the interconnectedness between key public services? (Northern Ireland Executive Review of Public Administration, 2002)

It identifies a range of desirable characteristics of public administration for the future including equality and human rights, community responsiveness and partnership working, co-ordination and integration of public services and efficiency and effectiveness.

I believe that the Children's Services Planning process is responding to this agenda, and can and should contribute to this debate in the following areas.

A Planning System that is Locally Responsive and Sensitive to Changing Need

Children's Services Planning has the potential to address the dilemma of reconciling centrally driven change (with a focus on consistency) with the need for local flexibility and responsiveness. It can build local support for key services through user participation and needs-led planning. Kendall and Harker point out:

If we want people to accept and value social care they are more likely to do so if they have a sense of common ownership and benefit. (2002, p. 4)

Anne Davis, in an article entitled 'Structures and accountability', reinforces this argument:

The authority which social care must have cannot depend on the force of law but is instead derived from its democratic legitimacy, its 'connectedness' to the community serves. (2002, p. 102)

A Process that can Demonstrate Real Collaborative Advantage between Agencies and Sectors. The *Draft Programme for Government* sets a task of looking at:

New ways of promoting partnership working between the public sector and our social partners in business, the trades unions and the voluntary and community sector. (Northern Ireland Executive, 2002, p. 24)

Children's Services Planning is able to demonstrate processes and structures that effectively model just this sort of partnership working.

A Process that Provides an Alignment between the Priorities of the Executive and Local Need

Although the Northern Ireland Assembly has been in suspension, the direct rule ministers adopted the priorities for the devolved administration as set out in the Programme for Government. The Executive has identified tackling social need and social exclusion as a key challenge. It has been concerned to develop a:

More integrated approach to tackling social need and social exclusion, using the whole range of government policies and programmes in a way that can bring about real and effective change. (Northern Ireland Executive, 2002, p. 26)

Within the current set of plans is a shared strategic objective; that is, to tackle social exclusion in children and young people and promote equality and human rights.

These plans demonstrate a clear example of bringing equality and human rights considerations, section 75 (Northern Ireland Act, 1998) responsibilities and Targeting Social Need into service planning and delivery.

A Process that can Clearly Demonstrate Outcomes and Effectiveness

We need to be particularly mindful that despite a culture of continuous change it is important to hold onto what we know is working. An outcome focus enables the Children's Services Planning process to be clear about what it is trying to achieve in a tangible way that makes sense to a number of important audiences. First, to the users of the services, second to the communities whose support for the services is vital, and third to politicians whose support in delivering the resources that underpins this work is essential.

A Process that Supports Families and Strengthens Communities

The current plans promote preventative work, family support and community development.

Many commentators have argued that this is the future of social care provision. The Institute of Public Policy Research, in the new book *From Welfare to Well Being*, argues that:

More investment in preventative services, a greater focus on community involvement and a substantially enhanced role for the voluntary sector will be vital over the coming years. (Kendall & Harker, 2002, p. 10)

The importance of supporting communities and community development can-

not be underestimated and, as Gerald Wistow has argued, community capacity building is strongly linked to ensuring good outcomes for individuals.

‘Good’ social care outcomes at an individual level require, at the collective level, therefore, the existence of communities that care or otherwise facilitate individual wellbeing. (Wistow, 2002, p. 54)

A Final Thought

Kendall and Harker argue that the role that those working in social care could play in influencing and delivering wider policy initiatives, such as combating social exclusion, tackling child poverty and reducing inequality, is rarely given the attention it deserves considering their focus on society’s most vulnerable and excluded groups.

The perception (and often reality) is that social care does not have a strong voice in national debates or contribute as much as it could to key policy initiatives on the ground. (Kendall & Harker, 2002, p. 2)

If wider public and political support for Children’s Services Planning is to be developed then I would encourage the four Committees to speak out more about what is working in this process, and in particular to continue to build alliances with the voluntary sector and service users to influence policy-making.

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