



**BRITISH-IRISH  
INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY**

**COMHLACHT IDIR-PHARLAIMINTEACH  
NA BREATAINE AGUS NA hÉIREANN**

**REPORT**

from

**COMMITTEE D (Environmental and Social Committee)**

on

**LIFE CHANGES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE FROM THE  
ECONOMICALLY DEPRIVED AREAS OF BELFAST**

## 1. Introduction

1.1 Young people from communities with the highest levels of economic deprivation face difficulties that extend far beyond financial limitations. The Committee considered the life chances – young peoples aspirations and the likelihood of those aspirations to be achieved – for youth from the most deprived wards in Belfast. Large sums of money are targeted on people and problems in these areas, both mainstreamed and short term funded projects, but that funding is not making a sufficient impact. Unlike other parts of the City and other areas of Northern Ireland the 'peace dividend' has made relatively little discernible impact upon these communities, neither Nationalist nor Unionist, in parts of East, North and West Belfast. These issues are not limited to deprived areas in Northern Ireland. In Belfast the economic problems are made worse as many young people have had their lives affected by the Troubles. The deprived urban areas are often the centre of such troubles and they suffer even more as a result.

1.2 We learned that young people from the most deprived areas often suffer from:

- low attention span;
- low self esteem;
- low literacy rates;
- mental health problems;
- poor educational qualifications;
- poor employment prospects;
- issues with perceived authority;
- a lack of trust; and
- low motivation

Much work has already been undertaken to consider these problems, in much greater depth and with more local knowledge than we are able to consider in this short report. In particular we were impressed by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforces Report published in January 2002. The Committee were surprised that the Taskforces' report had not led to much more Government action in the relevant parts of Belfast. Recent British Government initiatives such as the cross departmental action plan "Renewing Communities" which includes measures valued at £33million with strategies to tackle areas of major dereliction such as the Lower Shankill, Inner East Belfast, Shore Road and Lower Oldpark show that there is finally some engagement with the problem but we are convinced that the issues identified and discussed in our report will only worsen unless significant action is taken to change the lives of young people from Unionist and Nationalist deprived areas. We call upon the British Government to take brave and wide ranging decisions.

1.3 As we were conducting our enquiry the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced that children and young people in Northern Ireland were to receive £61 million over the next two years "to help them get the best start in life". We recommend that the Children and Young People Funding Package is mainly targeted to assist those young people from the deprived areas to ensure that the best value

for money is for those who need it most. This financial assistance is warmly welcomed and badly needed but it should be noted that this funding is being provided as the education and library boards face significant and wide-ranging cutbacks. These parallel reductions in funding may also have long term implications.

## **2. Collapsed communities**

2.1 The communities we visited were those areas where paramilitary activity is high. Often in a disadvantaged area while Nationalist and Unionist communities live in close proximity these communities are still divided along strict geographical limits; we visited several areas which were separated by the peace line. Both communities share the disadvantages which we identified but while there is a disturbing level of segregation there is still shared use of public services.

### **Geographical ties**

2.2 In these areas geographical ties are so strong that many individuals feel unable to leave their own areas. This is social immobilisation on a significant scale with some people choosing not leave their areas at all, even for short periods of time or for the prospect of employment elsewhere. This impacts on the employment prospects of those unwilling to travel and it makes accessing services, such as health care and training facilities, extremely difficult. One suggested solution was to bring the services directly to those communities (we were told of a successful scheme which has enabled young women to access antenatal services provided in the local community) but this is a short term option as not all services can be provided directly in this way. If the life chances for young people from these areas are to be improved much needs to be done to encourage them to find work and access services outside their immediate communities.

### **Community and voluntary sector**

2.3 There is a strong community and voluntary sector in these areas. We had the privilege of meeting representatives from several community groups and the voluntary sector dealing with the problems which we describe. These groups do difficult work in the most challenging of circumstances. Much of the result of their success is due to the dedication of their staff. We commend them for their work. Many of the community projects we visited were based on good practice; they were aimed at one specific community. While these projects receive short term funding from a cocktail of sources the Committee are concerned that the uncertainty associated with short-term funding is not the best way to help these communities to break the cycle of deprivation. While we visited some excellent voluntary sector projects it may prove difficult to replicate these elsewhere. This is because these projects are led by individuals who are exceptionally entrepreneurial and inspirational and such leadership is hard to find. Nevertheless we believe the British Government should work harder to apply more widely the lessons learned from these projects. The British Government can, in partnership with community and voluntary projects, extend the lessons learned from these projects more widely.

## **Problem parenting**

2.4 We were told that there are three generations of people from the most deprived areas who are disengaged from societal norms. Particularly within the Unionist population generations have been dissuaded from seeking educational opportunities and without apprenticeships and other training opportunities there are few alternative career choices available. The Committee learned that in the most deprived areas young people often regard social security benefits as the key source of their income as soon as they leave school and they see few benefits from education. Children's aspirations follow their parents' and suffer from the same cycle of deprivation. The problems of very low educational attainment are outlined below but this issue extends far beyond education. Often the children of long-term benefits claimants go on to become the next generation of long-term benefits claimants. Socially disengaged parents in general do not produce socially engaged children. Some young people are considered to be out of control before they leave primary school.

2.5 On a positive note the Sure Start and the Pre-school education programmes are ideal methods of assisting parents to improve their parenting skills and we warmly welcome the expansion of these programmes within deprived areas of Belfast.

## **Family breakdown**

2.6 Throughout the United Kingdom the family unit is much more disparate than ever before. This is no more apparent than in the most disadvantaged areas of Belfast. This has more wide ranging implications as it impacts upon a person's support network, reduces the availability of low cost childcare and therefore the possibility of whether a parent, in particular single parents, can find employment.

## **Benefits culture**

2.7 Northern Ireland has a strong benefit dependent culture. In these areas many adults have no interest in future employment prospects. Often the only employment options available are low skilled and at the minimum wage level. Those on long term benefits see no additional value from going out to work as they would earn little more than their benefits income if they were to take an unskilled job. Individuals are also concerned that their benefits will be lost if a temporary job is not made permanent. We learned that projects in the South of Ireland had success in getting the longer term unemployed back to work by providing benefits subsidies to cover the period of time when an individual moves from benefits based income to employment, thus giving an unemployed person the confidence to move from benefits dependency back to work. The Government should investigate whether the Irish scheme to assist the long-term unemployed move into employment through a benefits subsidy scheme would encourage the long-term unemployed back to work in Northern Ireland.

## **Paramilitarism**

2.8 Well before they reach 16 some of these young people are attracted to joining the paramilitaries and we are concerned about the strength of paramilitary groups in the most deprived areas. Paramilitary groups have no interest in improving life chances for the young people from the most deprived areas as they are able to exploit the damaged communities more easily and exercise further control. Young people also are frequently exposed to the violence of paramilitary beatings and are the target of paramilitary group recruitment campaigns.

### **Black economy**

2.9 We heard anecdotal evidence that there is a strong dependence on the black economy in the economically deprived areas of Belfast. This is considered to be a further source of income to add to benefit income. The black market, often of smuggled goods, links directly into paramilitary activity in these areas. This proves that there are young people with an entrepreneurial spirit living in the deprived areas but this is being lost to criminal behaviour.

## **3. Low educational attainment and low career aspirations**

### **Education**

3.1 There are two separate areas which need to be addressed in schools:

a. **Pre-Primary provision** needs more capacity in order to make a difference in young peoples' lives from the earliest stage. This was identified as theme 2 in the Children and Young People Funding Package as the key time at which to break the cycle of deprivation. Sure Start and the Pre-school education programmes and additional funding for pre-school places recently announced by the Secretary of State are the ideal methods of focussing on this age group but these projects need to be mainstream projects rather than a short term 3 year solution. It will take several years to see any changes as a result of these plans but the Committee are convinced that they provide the best opportunity for the children who need it most. Indeed we would urge the British Government to give the highest possible priority to expanding pre-primary provision as the most effective long term way of tackling serious disadvantage among young people.

b. We were told that the hardest to reach children are those beyond primary age, specifically those **already disengaged from school and from society**. This group of young people, often those already involved in paramilitary activity and the proceeds of smuggling need additional assistance to enable them to engage in society.

3.2 The schools in these areas are doing a good job under difficult circumstances. We were surprised to learn that while there is a surplus of school places in the deprived areas of Belfast, few school closures have so far been announced. The threat of closure hanging over a school can only be to the detriment of pupils, school

staff and the local community as they result in unhappy teaching staff with low morale in those areas which are most in need of quality teaching and consistency. We were told that one in eight school places are empty in these areas and we appreciate that to close a school is always a difficult decision. Nevertheless the Committee would encourage the British Government to resolve these issues, to allow for long term future funding and to improve morale in schools.

3.3 While there are some excellent teachers in schools located in the deprived areas of Belfast we feel more needs to be done to encourage the best teachers and head teachers to work in them with financial rewards for doing so.

3.4 Schools in these areas need to do much more than just educate the children; they also have to provide counselling, social work and particular care for those children who are looked after by the local authority. Schools are also the ideal place to focus additional intervention programmes. When the Committee spoke to Head teachers they called for communities to make more use of their facilities - to make a school the centre of the community - where parents and children can access services and facilities and this has been supported by the Government as it is the first theme of the Secretary of State's funding package for children and young people. If the aim is to make the school the centre of the local community it is essential to ensure that the services which are available within the school gates offer a wide range of options to help young people and the local community in general to develop new skills and to find solutions to the problems which they face. The Committee learned about one project on the dangers of joyriding which had been particularly successful when it was linked to schools. The model could be adapted for other problems such as suicide and alcohol and drug addiction. The young people from these areas have low educational attainment levels and they are also likely to fail to find employment when they leave school, many are disengaged from education long before they are 16 and legally allowed to end their formal education.

3.5 We were told of the Schools Completion Programme by Mr Aidan Savage, National Coordinator in Ireland. The School Completion Programme is supported by a team that is comprised of a National Co-ordinator and Assistant National Co-ordinators. It is the co-ordinators' task to advise on and monitor the development of local multi-agency plans and targets that provide for a range of specific additional services for targeted young people who are deemed to be at risk of early school leaving. There are currently 82 coordinators to link schools and voluntary programmes in the most deprived areas. These projects provide assistance for 12,000 young people aged 5-18 in Ireland and has been going for some three years. We recommend that this programme is piloted in the deprived areas of Belfast.

3.6 The Committee have already highlighted the need for better parenting skills. It is clear that the low level of parenting skills has a detrimental effect upon children and their educational attainment can suffer as a result; for example if a child has little parental influence children will often spend their evenings outside of their parent's control and have extremely late bed times; tired children will find it harder to learn the next day in school. There is evidence of very low educational attainment from

children in these areas. For example in the Shankill area only 5-6% of children pass the eleven plus examination compared to a Northern Ireland average of 72.9% achieving a grade C or above. We were told that there may be two or three generations in one family who have little or no reading skills - we were given one example when leaflets were sent to young mothers they were ignored because the recipients could not read them. We also heard anecdotal evidence that some young people were so illiterate they were unable to complete benefits application forms on leaving school at 16.

3.7 At present the most deprived areas are seemingly ignored by their more prosperous neighbours, for example in East Belfast no business leader in that area sits on the Board of Governors for schools in the deprived wards. Schools could learn much from outside assistance, especially if their role is to expand to allow them to be the centre of the community. We call on local community leaders and business people to help in this new challenge.

### **Employment Opportunities - Poverty of opportunity.**

3.8 The young people from these areas appear to have two main career paths - paramilitarism or benefits dependency. We heard anecdotal evidence that children as young as eight years old aspire to be paramilitary members when they grew up.

3.9 Once a young person leaves school, if they have very low literacy and numeracy skills they obviously find it very difficult to find permanent employment. Training facilities should be aimed at young people who are not academically gifted but could enter trades which are practical and with high demand for example plumbers and bricklayers.

3.10 We saw much investment in local infrastructure and facilities in Belfast and we were interested to hear more about the plans for the new Titanic Quarter in East Belfast but it is clear that these investments are not making the most of the local labour stock. The Committee suggest that all new development projects should provide training for local young people in a range of skills from design, to building and running those buildings. It is important that young people from the most deprived areas can aspire to jobs consistent with their abilities and which require skills beyond those of cleaners and caretakers. We would like to see Invest NI make this a priority and for that organisation to do all that it can to encourage the small and medium sized firms within Belfast to provide training and employment for young people from the most deprived areas.

3.11 The Committee visited a Job Assist Centre which provides training for young people and help them to find jobs. This and other projects we visited were of a high quality and did commendable work. We were also told by officials that these projects were costly to run and expensive to replicate more widely. The present situation places a high social and economic cost on these communities when compared to the costs of these training programmes. Too many young people are

leaving school without the basic skills for life and fail to find permanent employment with good prospects.

3.12 As many young women from these areas are lone parents we recognise that childcare facilities must be improved in order to encourage young mothers into the workplace. We visited one childcare centre on the peaceline in North Belfast and were impressed with the facility and its staff; however we were told that the project was a rare example of quality childcare being provided for young mothers from the locality. This is perhaps another facility which might be associated with a local school.

#### **4. Health problems and Personal issues**

4.1 With socio-economic deprivation comes depression, anxiety and unease, but these are just a few of the mental health problems which are apparent in the most deprived areas of Belfast. Young people who experience social isolation, social disintegration, unemployment, low levels of education, a lack of a coherent family structure, poverty and a lack of opportunity and hope were much more likely to suffer from mental ill health.

4.2 Statistics show that young people from the most deprived areas suffer from mental illness and low self esteem. One aspect of great concern is the high number of suicides committed by young men from the deprived areas of Belfast. We were troubled to learn that there is only one facility for young people at commit suicide risk and that is outside of the geographical boundaries of all the deprived areas of Belfast. We were also concerned to hear that the unit did not have enough staff and as a result was not always available for the most vulnerable young people.

4.3 Drug addiction in these areas is a significant problem especially with Class A and prescription drugs. Again we were surprised to hear of the lack of facilities available to provide addiction counselling for adolescents. This must be improved as a matter of urgency.

4.4 Geographical limitations (see earlier) prevents access for those people who need health care services. The Committee was told of a successful home treatment service which had worked to remove this problem for people with mental health difficulties. The Committee were pleased to learn that a new 18 bed adolescent inpatient mental health facility for 13-18 year olds is planned as part of the Children and Young People Funding Package. We suggest that this facility should be based in the centre of the area for which it is most needed.

4.5 Children from the most deprived areas often engage in the most risky behaviours - they are sexually active earlier than most young people and that is reflected in the high teenage pregnancy levels. They are more likely to experiment with alcohol and other non-prescription drugs and they are targeted by paramilitary groups as future members. The Committee were particularly impressed with the peer education work which was going on with young people on sexual health issues

and on the 'Heads away? Just say' campaign to inform young people about options when they were experiencing significant mental health problems.

4.6 The Committee was impressed with the youth clubs we visited and the youth workers we met - they are working under very difficult circumstances to attempt to turn young people from paramilitarism and crime and yet their greatest obstacle lies with the failure to obtain long-term funding for successful projects. Many youth workers were forced to spend their time seeking additional finance in order to maintain the projects.

## **5. Lack of political momentum**

5.1 All the politicians whom we met were in agreement on the problems faced by young people from the economically deprived areas. They also agreed that a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly is essential. Local politicians from these deprived areas are limited by their position while the Assembly is suspended. There was tendency to blame Ministers based in Westminster for the problems faced in these areas. Bureaucracy, a risk-averse civil service and a lack of understanding of the local issues compounded this attitude.

5.2 There is no good reason why the findings of in-depth inquiries, in particular the Report of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforces published in January 2002, have not been taken forward. The Taskforce reports identify the key changes required for those areas (getting more people into employment; creating jobs; intermediate labour markets: the social economy and transitional employment opportunities; education and training needs; a preventative approach; infrastructure and planning processes; and specific proposals for each area). The Taskforce reports end with a reminder of the urgency of suggested actions, they warn that "there was natural scepticism at the outset that this initiative would be different from the many previous studies and reports that have gone largely without implementation" and the Committee consider that scepticism to have been well-placed considering the lack of action there has been since the reports were published. The Government need to take the report seriously and act on its conclusions.

## **6. The future**

6.1 We are delighted that the Secretary of State has announced a substantial funding package to help young people get the best start in life. We recommend that this extra funding should be focused on the most deprived areas to improve the opportunities young people with adequate emphasis on those of school age. Funding decisions need to provide more than just a short term solution, they need to provide for the long term. The Committee would like to see an additional focus for the Children and Young People Funding Package for disengaged young people. Too often these young people fail to re-engage with society and this has long term implications as the cycle of deprivation continues from generation to generation. Funding must be aimed at the youngest children and at the disengaged. These are long term projects which will take some years to show results.

6.2 The Committee was told about the numerous government policies: an anti poverty strategy, skills strategy, neighbourhood renewal and children and young people 10 year strategy and yet the results have been disappointing.

We appreciate there is a significant cost to our proposals. But this must be set against a high social and economic cost of not acting on the recommendations.

## **7. Summary of recommendations and conclusions**

1. The Committee welcome the Children and Young People Funding Package announced in March 2006. If this funding is carefully applied to the deprived areas of Belfast it should prove to make a real difference.
2. The Sure Start and the Pre-school education programmes are ideal methods of assisting parents to improve their parenting skills and we warmly welcome the expansion of these programmes within the deprived areas of Belfast.
3. The Government should investigate whether the Irish scheme to assist the long term unemployed move into work through a benefits subsidy scheme could in some way be applied to Northern Ireland encourage the long term unemployed back to work.
4. Pre-Primary provision needs to be given the highest priority in order to make a difference in young peoples' lives from the earliest stage.
5. The young people who are already disengaged from society (often those already involved in paramilitary activity and the black market) need additional assistance to enable them to engage in society.
6. The Committee would encourage the British Government to make early decisions on school closures. This would allow for long term future planning and to improve morale in schools.
7. The Belfast Education and Library Board needs to act to encourage the best teachers and head teachers to work schools in the deprived areas. We suggest that the most successful teachers should be encouraged to apply to those schools which deal with the hardest children (and they should be rewarded financially for doing so)
8. The Committee learned about one project on the dangers of joyriding which had been particularly successful when they were linked to schools. The model could be adapted for other problems such as suicide and alcohol and drug addiction.
9. We recommend that schools should, where possible, play a wider role in their communities and become the centres providing a broad range of support activities such as counselling and social work. Schools are also the

ideal place to focus additional intervention programmes in order to improve life chances.

10. The Schools Completion Programme introduced in Ireland some years ago might have lessons for the deprived areas of Belfast; we urge that this be investigated.

11. We call on leading businessmen and local community leaders to engage with schools in the most deprived areas, perhaps by joining the Board of Governors.

12. Training facilities should be aimed at young people who are not academically gifted but rather provide trades which are practical and with high demand for example plumbers and bricklayers.

13. Childcare facilities must be improved in order to encourage young mothers into the workplace.

14. The lack of facilities available to provide addiction counselling for adolescents must be improved as a matter of urgency.

15. The new 18 bed adolescent inpatient mental health facility for 13-18 year olds planned as part of the Children and Young People Funding Package should be based in the centre of the area for which it is most needed - North West Belfast.

16. The recommendations of the Report of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforces must be taken forward.

17. Funding decisions need to provide more than just a short term solution, they need to provide for the long term.

18. We recommend that the Children and Young People Funding Package is specifically targeted to assist those young people from the deprived areas to provide the best value for money for those who need it most.

### **Minutes of Proceedings relating to the Report**

Members visiting Belfast on 13 January 2006:

Lord Dubs (Chairman)

Johnny Brady TD

Speaker Tony Brown SHK

Jeff Ennis MP

Jim Glennon TD

Senator T Leyden

Dr Dai Lloyd AM

Arthur Morgan TD

Chris Ruane MP

Iain Smith MSP

Members visiting Belfast on 9-10 March 2006:

Lord Dubs (Chair)

Johnny Brady TD

Speaker Tony Brown SHK

Jeff Ennis MP

Senator Terry Leyden

Arthur Morgan TD

Eddie McGrady MP

Iain Smith MSP

Members visiting London on 19 July 2006:

Lord Dubs (Chair)

Senator Mary O'Rourke (Co-Chair)

Dr Dai Lloyd AM

Speaker Tony Brown SHK

Jeff Ennis MP

Joe Sherlock TD

Ordered, That the Report be made to the Body.

The Committee is indebted to Baroness Blood for her assistance and advice throughout the inquiry. The Committee would also like to thank the individuals and organisations they met when they visited Belfast.