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## Lower Shankill Children Pioneer the Right to Play

The Lower Shankill Residents' Voice (a group residents from the Lower Shankill that includes both young people aged 5 to 12 as well as adults) hosted a pioneering event Thursday 12th February highlighting the barriers to children's right to play in their community.

Entitled "When Kids Decide: Realising the Right to Play in the Lower Shankill", the event featured international guest speaker, Dr. Jan Van Gils, Chair of the European Child Friendly Cities Network and President of the International Council on Children's Play.

Speaking about the event Dr Van Gils said: "Parents and children in the Lower Shankill are demonstrating how important it is for children to meaningfully take part in decisions that will impact on how their childhood is spent. These children are the ones who are able to pinpoint exactly what the problems in their area are, and how they can be addressed.

"All over the world many communities are exploring how to make their neighbourhood more child-friendly. The experience of the children and the parents in the Lower Shankill will be an inspiration for them to advocate to make the right to play real. Enabling their full participation in forthcoming decisions made about



(L to R) Catie Calderwood, Kurtis Ellis, Shannan Kincaid, Levi Kincaid and Aimee McKee at 'When Kids Decide' event on 12th February 2009

play in their community not only makes good sense, it is their human right."

Twelve-year old Shannan Kincaid, Co-Chair of the event discussed some of the issues that were raised: "Some of the problems in our community that stop young people from playing are very simple and could easily be fixed. But they simply aren't. The area is covered in broken glass that is very dangerous. Also, if we want to play in the playgrounds and parks, the lighting is broken and has been for many months.

"For children that want to play on the footpaths outside their houses

where there is lighting, they need to be careful because the traffic speeds through the streets. We just want to have a safe place to play, without constantly having to watch for traffic and without trying to avoid broken bottles."

Development worker, Frank McMillan, who has been actively working with the group since they first came together in August 2008, adds: "What makes this event unique is that it has come about through the hard work and desires of children. They wanted to see something done about opportunities for play in their local community.

“With the support of community residents, they have set out indicators that they can track to monitor the progress of change in line with international human rights standards. This will provide them with tangible evidence that can be presented to government and local authorities to ensure that they do what they are supposed to do – ensure children have safe, quality access to opportunities for play.”

The group is calling on OFMDFM to address these and similar issues in their play policy. Currently, the play policy does not consider quality of play in its analysis and does not offer standards for how participation of children and parents should take place. The group wants to make sure this is remedied for the future to improve the quality of life for children across Northern Ireland.

Local experts from the children’s sector, including Patricia Lewsley, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and Jacqueline O’Loughlin, CEO, Playboard, also spoke at the event.

The event was co-sponsored by the Participation and the Practice of Rights Project (PPR), the Lower Shankill Community Association, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and PlayBoard.

## Girdwood Barracks and Crumlin Road Gaol: A Golden Opportunity for Change?

“...my plea today in Belfast is for public duty bearers, for the national human rights institution and other supervisory bodies, for civil society, and the corporate sector, involved in the regeneration process for Girdwood, and other similar projects, to recognise the Residents’ Jury as an excellent example of how to build a culture for human rights and meaningful participation that can really constitute a golden opportunity for change.”

*Virginia Bras Gomes, United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights member*

The regeneration of Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood Barracks in North Belfast is uniquely placed to significantly improve the lives of residents in the most deprived communities in Northern Ireland. The 27 acre site in north Belfast will undergo regeneration over the next 10-15 years at an estimated cost of £231 million.

The Crumlin Road Gaol/Girdwood Barracks site borders 5 electoral wards in North Belfast; Shankill, Crumlin, Ardoyne, New Lodge, and Waterworks. According to government’s own Multiple Deprivation Measure Statistics 2005 these areas consistently rank in the top 5% - and often top 1% - most deprived wards in terms of housing, education, employment and health across all of Northern Ireland. While the communities are segregated along religious lines, the long-standing and structural inequalities they have suffered are parallel and affect their health,

housing, education and employment. These areas, and the people living in them, were also among the worst affected by the violence of the conflict. The Crumlin Road Gaol/Girdwood Barracks regeneration, alongside a number of others planned for the vicinity (North West and North East Quarters, Shankill, and Crumlin) will mean that government will focus unprecedented attention and resources on these areas. Established legal and policy requirements, including the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the St. Andrews Agreement and the Programme for Government all place government bodies under an obligation to address inequality and objective need throughout all of their processes, including the Girdwood regeneration.

The local communities that have lived daily with the consequences of inequality, are the experts both on the issues they face and how they can be addressed through the regeneration. It is vital therefore, that they are able to fully participate in the decisions taken about the regeneration.

### Starting the Process

The initial signs were far from auspicious. In September 2007, the DSD launched the Draft Masterplan for the Girdwood regeneration. The proposals contained in the document were decided on before any consideration was given to the inequalities of the surrounding wards, and therefore were not targeted at tackling those inequalities as required by statutory duty.

The communities in north Belfast visited areas in Dublin and Belfast,



*Members of Residents’ Jury at their launch of recommendations on 30th October 2008*

such as the Gasworks site, where regeneration did not lead to an improvement in the quality of life for existing residents. They became determined that Girdwood should buck the trend. It was clear to them that there was no direct correlation between investment and tackling inequality. Investment must be targeted and planned to produce equality.

In April 2008, the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, declared that she would be carrying out an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on the Girdwood regeneration. An EQIA is a tool designed to identify inequalities and involve communities in both preventing the regeneration from treating groups unfairly, and also drawing up ways in which positive change can be made. This move signaled a welcome change from the position of previous Direct Rule Ministers.

Concerns arose again however as the EQIA was carried out. The EQIA was carried out on the proposals already developed in the Draft Masterplan. Workshops held by the DSD indicated that instead of developing proposals based on positive action to tackle inequality, they instead focused on trying to ensure that the existing proposals – which do not reflect the needs of the community - do not discriminate. One of the massive gains won by the equality lobby and civil society during the Agreement was the enshrining in law of a **positive duty** to actively 'promote' equality, not simply avoid discrimination. Carrying out an EQIA on proposals that were developed in the absence of any equality considerations prevents the needs and inequalities which are part of local people's daily lives, being placed at the heart of this regeneration.

### **Residents Jury on Girdwood Barracks and Crumlin Road Gaol**

Within this context, a group of residents of the five electoral wards surrounding the Girdwood site started a six week development programme with the PPR Project in March 2008. They looked at core human rights themes of equality, participation and accountability – and how these relate to regeneration processes. They explored local



*New York City Comptroller, William C Thompson and New York State Comptroller, Thomas DiNapoli with Inez McCormack, Chair of PPR Project at Girdwood Barracks and Crumlin Road Gaol regeneration site during their visit to Northern Ireland*

deprivation and inequality, the legislation in place to address this, and the history of the Girdwood development to date.

Then on 28th May 2008, the residents, supported by the PPR Project, convened a unique Residents' Jury to hear evidence on how the Girdwood regeneration process can begin to reverse decades of institutional discrimination and make tangible improvements in the quality of life for existing, and future, residents.

The pioneering nature of the residents work to ensure their social deprivation was addressed and their human rights fulfilled was highlighted by the participation of Maria Virginia Bras Gomes, the Portuguese member of the United Nations Committee on Economic and Social Rights. Joe McNeely and Ron Shiffman provided invaluable information from the USA on what the government should be doing to ensure the regeneration process tackles social and economic deprivation, and gave concrete examples of how this has been done successfully elsewhere. Professor Richard Wilkinson from the University of Nottingham gave an in-depth presentation, drawing on international research, on how inequality in our societies is to the detriment of us all, not only those who are most deprived. Representatives from residents

groups in Fatima estate (Dublin) and the Gasworks (Belfast) shared their learning and cautioned against repeating the mistakes of the past, and a representative for the Minister for Social Development provided information on the process to date. Local residents from across the communities also gave video evidence on the impact the current education, health, employment and housing inequalities had on people in their area.

The event attracted a large amount of media attention, and featured prominently in both the printed and broadcast media.

### **The Next Steps - Measuring Progress**

Since the event in May, the Residents' Jury members have been doing outreach in the community to collect evidence from other residents and community organisations. They deliberated on the evidence collected and on October 30th they launched human rights indicators and benchmarks to measure whether the next stages of the regeneration process met their human right to participation, accountability and equality. These indicators are linked to international human rights standards signed up to by both the UK and Irish government and will measure the extent to which these international commitments

are being adhered to on the ground. The Jury have been monitoring the process since May, including the EQIA issued by the Department against these indicators and will launch their findings in the coming months.

The relentless efforts of the local residents who give up their time to work on the Jury has captured attention both locally and globally.

## The Seven Towers: Second Evidence Hearing on the Right to Housing

On 23rd January 2009 current and previous residents of the Seven Towers high rise in New Lodge took part in the Second Evidence Hearing on the Right to Housing in North Belfast

At the ground-breaking first Evidence Hearing in June 2007, residents had named concrete changes they wanted to see in their housing conditions over a twelve month period. They presented their human rights indicators and benchmarks to a panel of international housing rights experts who validated their approach and made recommendations for how the group should carry their campaign forward. Over the next twelve months, residents continued their action research – using photos, surveys and focus groups to monitor whether or not positive changes were occurring.

Over the year, the residents work had led to the pigeon waste being removed from the communal landings, a new sewage system put in to stop the backflow, and a large reduction in families housed in the flats (almost a 50% reduction). However issues such as dampness, response to reported problems and involvement of residents in decisions about their houses either had not changed or had gotten worse.

The Second Evidence Hearing was a chance to report on the developments since the previous Hearing. The group had achieved many successes for the residents of

Their work has been described as a 'pathfinder' and drawn the attention and support of individuals such as Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and founder of Realising Rights: The Ethical Globalisation Initiative, and Bill Thompson, the New York City Comptroller. The Girdwood regeneration offers a one-off opportunity to ensure that the long-standing deprivation of the

surrounding communities is recognised and tackled, for the benefit of all. As Joe McNeely states, a new approach is required if the benefits are to be felt by these communities:

*"If we are going to change the way development is done so that we get different benefits, then we are all going to have to learn a different way to do it"*



*International speaker Gunilla Backman at the Second Evidence Hearing on the Right to Housing on 23rd January 2009*

the Seven Towers, but their work had also revealed the deeper structural issues e.g. the lack of participation and accountability in how decisions were made, that had led to the deterioration of their housing conditions, and the lack of change over time. The Hearing provided the opportunity to explore how these issues could be addressed in order to ensure the changes won by the residents were not allowed to slip away.

A number of international speakers on housing and human rights took part in the Hearing. Leticia Osorio (Brazil), Gunilla Backman (Sweden) and Lorna Fox-O'Mahoney (England) all praised the work of the residents as groundbreaking and extremely important. Crucially they also committed to lending their expertise to helping the residents on their journey. Patricia Lewsley (Commissioner for Children and Young People), Monica McWilliams (NI Human Rights Commission), representatives from the Scottish Human Rights Commission and Caral Ni Chuilin (local MLA), were in attendance along with a large delegation from the south of Ireland to show support for the

residents and learn about their work.

In addition local housing activists, such as Liam Wiggins from St Patricks and St Josephs, talked about the need to tackle the big issues of housing shortage in nationalist north Belfast, which are the reason why so many North Belfast residents are housed in sub-standard housing conditions in the Seven Towers. It was made clear that options exist to tackle the lack of social housing proposals, such as the Sailortown Urban Village scheme. What is required now is the political will to take these opportunities.

The resident's next task is to recruit new members of their group to take part in a housing rights programme and set a new agenda for the forthcoming year. Encouragingly a number of residents groups from outside North Belfast attended the Second Evidence Hearing, including Old Warren in Lisburn, who indicated their wish to work with the residents to try the same approach in their own community. The Seven Towers residents look forward to working alongside them over the next couple of months to increase their own learning, maximise pressure and achieve real change.

Residents want to make sure that **any** decisions made about the Towers are subject to proper involvement of residents. This will require different ways of working by the NIHE and DSD. Residents have shown that they are up to the challenge.

# Mental Health Rights Group achieve Success in Campaign for Follow-up Appointments



Carol McCartan, Grace Cassidy and Gerard McCartan from PIPS and Greater Shankill Bereaved Families Rights Group meeting Mary Robinson, Former President of Ireland and UN Commissioner for Human Rights

Since October 2006, PPR has been working with a number of individuals from suicide/self harm support groups in north and west Belfast, including PIPS (Public Initiative for the Prevention of Suicide) and Greater Shankill Bereaved Families (formerly RAYS – Reaching Across to reduce Your risk of Suicide). Early on in their work, the PIPS-GSBF Rights Group highlighted follow up appointments for mental health service users as an important issue to focus on. Many group members or their families had direct experience with this issue – waiting months for a follow up appointment that sometimes never came. The group felt the distress caused to patients and families from not knowing when or whether further treatment would be received could be avoided by making simple improvements to the current appointment systems.

Through their research the group became aware that the NHS had agreed standards on what should happen when those who have

received mental health treatment are discharged from hospital.

*“All discharged patients who have severe mental illness or a recent (less than three months) history of deliberate self harm should be followed up within one week.”<sup>1</sup>*

The group also learned that this guidance had been specifically included in the discharge procedures for their local hospital, the Mater.

While the group were keen to ensure that discharged patients attend a follow-up appointment within one week as the standard stated, they recognized that this change would not happen overnight. As an initial step towards this goal, they recommended a ‘card before you leave’ appointment system be introduced. Such a system would provide those discharged after receiving mental health treatment with the date and time of their follow up appointment before leaving the premises. The group were aware that those with mental illness are statistically at greatest risk of suicide in the days immediately following discharge. Receiving the details of their follow up appointment at this stage would ensure that the patient was reassured that they were still tied into services and would be seen again. Even if that appointment did not take place within one week as required, having a ‘card before you leave’ with the appointment’s date and time would ensure the patient knew she was still tied into services.

After hearing this recommendation and others from the group in November 2007 at the group’s event ‘Rights in Action: Changing Mental Health Services’ the international panel of human rights and mental health experts gave the following advice to the government in their findings published in February 2008:

*“The panel strongly urges the Minister to work with the group to ensure that mental health patients discharged from hospital receive an appointment before they leave in order to fulfill their right to access health care. This is low-cost and simple requirement but one which would be of considerable benefit to vulnerable individuals.”*

On this basis, the PIPS-GSBF Rights Group launched a campaign for a ‘card before you leave’ appointment system to be implemented across Northern Ireland. Such a change, they thought, offered both an effective and efficient use of public resources, as well as a policy change that could immediately save lives.

After a concerted campaign during which the group put pressure on the Minister of Health, the Northern Ireland Assembly Health Committee and service delivery agencies, Minister Michael McGimpsey announced both the Northern Ireland-wide adoption of a ‘card before you leave’ appointment system<sup>2</sup> as well as a decision to make follow up care for mental health patients within one week a Priority for Action for 2009-2010 (one of 12-15 annual priorities for his department that are monitored by the Minister and his office).<sup>3</sup>

The PIPS-GSBF Rights Group wish to thank everyone who helped with this campaign and hope to draw on their continuing support in the next stages of their work to lobby for the increased participation of service users in decisions that affect them, in order that low-cost changes that would save lives, such as the Card Before you Leave, continue to be brought to light.

<sup>1</sup> Recommendation from Safety First: Five year report of the National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness, Department of Health UK, 2001

<sup>2</sup> This was explained in a letter to the PIPS-GSBF Rights Group in a letter dated June 17, 2008 and reiterated by the Minister in an article about the work of the PIPS-GSBF Rights Group in the Belfast News Letter, “Anti-suicide group seeks urgent action over mental health,” October 21, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Confirmed by a letter to the PIPS-GSBF Rights Group on January 30, 2009.