

## Children's Services Planning: The Process and Implications for Wider Partnership Working

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**ABSTRACT** *Children's Services Planning is the multi-agency strategic planning process for vulnerable children, which is hosted by the four Health and Social Services Boards of Northern Ireland. This article sets out its legislative and policy framework, and examines Children's Services Planning in one Board area, in terms of the structure adopted and process issues arising. It suggests that Children's Services Planning offers lessons regarding process for wider partnership working, and, in particular, the regional strategy for children's rights and needs.*

### Introduction

Children's Services Planning is the multi-agency strategic planning process for vulnerable children, which is hosted by the four Health and Social Services Boards of Northern Ireland. This article draws on experience of Children's Services Planning in one Board area, and discusses the implications for a wider strategy that aims to address the rights and needs of all children and young people in Northern Ireland. The article is divided into four sections:

- Legislative and policy framework.
- Structure of planning framework.
- Process issues involved in planning.
- Implications for wider partnership working and the regional strategy for children and young people.

### Legislative and Policy Framework

Southern Area Children's Services Planning is led by the Southern Health and Social Services Board (SHSSB); one of the four bodies that plan and commission health and social care in Northern Ireland.

As with much policy covering Northern Ireland, the original impetus and legislative requirement for Children's Services Plans (CSPs) began in England and Wales, and was later incorporated into legislation and policy covering Northern Ireland. Therefore, some relevant guidance and direction originates in Northern Ireland and some stems from England and Wales.

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It is also relevant that the way in which Northern Ireland is governed has been changing. CSPs first became mandatory in Northern Ireland in July 1998, when functions such as Health and Social Services were managed directly by the UK Government, through departments of government in Northern Ireland. Following the international agreement between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement (1998) and the subsequent Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Northern Ireland Assembly was set up. At that point Health and Social Services became accountable to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, a Department of the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, at the time of writing, the Northern Ireland Assembly is not functioning, due to political instability, and accountability for statutory functions such as Health and Social Services has reverted to ministers of the UK Government.

Children's Services Planning was first introduced in response to a recommendation in the report *Children in the Public Care*, a review of residential childcare undertaken by Sir William Utting in 1991 (Utting, 1991). Government advised local authorities (the bodies that plan and provide social services in Great Britain) in England and Wales to begin to plan their services for children in consultation with other agencies.

The principal of joint planning was well received, but a study in 1995 (Social Services Inspectorate, 1995) showed that few CSPs contained strategic statements or plans for future action. An influential report into the co-ordination of community child health and social services for children in need published in 1994 by the Audit Commission entitled *Seen but Not Heard* (Audit Commission, 1994) found services to be poorly co-ordinated with a potential for confusion, duplication and waste. It called for central government to 'promote inter-agency co-ordination by raising the status of children's services planning, which should be joint and mandatory, and which should be published'.

Therefore, an amendment was made to the Children Act 1989 to make Children's Services Plans mandatory, (Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Children's Services Planning) Order 1996, 1996). This was accompanied by Guidance (DOH/DFEE, 1996) issued jointly by the two government departments responsible for health, social services and education.

This change in legislation was subsequently repeated in Northern Ireland, with a similar amendment to the Children (NI) Order (Children (NI) Order (Amendment) (Children's Services Planning) Order (Northern Ireland), 1998), which is normally referred to as the CSP Order. In broad terms this requires each Health and Social Services Board to:

- review the services provided in its area under Part IV of the Children Order (i.e. services to 'children in need');
- prepare a plan in the light of the review of services;
- consult with various bodies when carrying out the review and preparing the plan;
- publish the plan; and
- keep the plan under review.

This legislative requirement is limited in scope in that it covers only 'children in need', a group of children defined legally in the Children Order and further refined into certain categories in an agreement of the four Boards (Social Information Systems, 1996). These categories are relatively wide in comparison

with the way in which most English and Welsh local authorities have operationalised the 'children in need' definition; however, they would still, arguably, omit some children and young people who are vulnerable.

However, the Guidance to Boards on how to carry out Children's Services Planning (DHSS/DENI/NIO, 1998) encouraged Boards to agree with other agencies involved that vulnerable children and young people were to be addressed, even if this were to go beyond the Children Order definition, of children in need.

The Guidance (DHSS/DENI/NIO, 1998) sets out the aims of CSPs, which include to:

- promote the welfare of children;
- promote integrated provision of services and effective use of available resources;
- establish a high standard of co-ordination and collaboration between HSS Boards and Trusts and other agencies and organisations that have a contribution to make to the effective provision of local services; and
- facilitate joint commissioning by agencies when this is seen to be appropriate to meet the needs of children.

An inspection of English Children's Services Planning processes carried out in 1998 (Social Services Inspectorate, 1999) found that the Children's Services Planning was not an effective driver of real change in outcomes for vulnerable children. This was due to two critical factors. First, the plans were insufficiently inter-agency in nature; instead of being actively supported by agencies and integrated into their own planning systems, the plans tended to be driven by social services. Second, there was a plethora of plans relevant to vulnerable children and young people, with a lack of coherence between them.

Guidance (Department of Health, 2001) attempted to address these two deficits. First, it set out a vision of a 'single, unified planning regime for children'. It recommended that planning should be rationalised so that:

there are fewer separate plans;

those plans which remain are better co-ordinated and more coherent;

the planning process as a whole is more effective and demonstrably delivers better outcomes for children, particularly those vulnerable children who are at risk of social exclusion without some kind of service response.

Second, in terms of promoting multi-agency planning, the guidance was issued jointly by six government departments and the Cabinet Office, and advised local councils in England to:

Establish local Children's and Young People's Partnerships:

Develop a planning framework and a Children's and Young People's Strategic Plan around the needs of all children, and involving children, young people and their families:

With an increasing number of English local councils setting up such Partnerships, this thinking around the need for inter-agency, coordinated planning led to the document *Tomorrow's Children, A Discussion Paper on UK Child Care Services*

in the *Coming Decade* (Association of Directors of Social Services, 2002). This document suggested extending the concept of Children's and Young People's Strategic Partnerships to 'develop a "strategic organisation" responsible for commissioning all child care services — education, social services and youth services, for example'. It suggests that:

- such partnership arrangements should encompass communities;
- services should be joint funded for inter-agency initiatives; and
- services should be based on what works for children (i.e. child-focused outcomes).

The next step came with 'Serving Children Well: a New Vision for Children's Services', jointly published by the Local Government Association, the NHS Confederation and the Association of Directors of Social Services (LGA/NHS Confederation/ADSS, 2002). This extends the thinking on co-ordination to bring together services for all children (universal, including health services) and targeted services for vulnerable children (including for children in need), through a revised children's and young people's strategic partnership board. Such a board would also oversee joint commissioning of all services, to meet the needs of all children, based on shared outcome indicators.

The Victoria Climbié Enquiry Report (Laming, 2003) also sets out the need for co-ordination of planning and accountability for all services for children and young people, at linked government and local levels. Lord Laming recommends that 'a ministerial Children and Families Board should be established at the heart of government. The Board should be chaired by a minister of Cabinet rank and should have ministerial representation from government departments concerned with the welfare of children and families'. He also recommends a National Agency for Children and Families to coordinate services, which would operate through a regional structure. The Association of Directors of Social Services (2003), in commenting on the Victoria Climbié Enquiry, welcomed these recommendations, saying that the Children's and Young People's Strategic Partnerships had the potential to be the appropriate bodies for planning and delivering coordinated services for children and families on a local basis.

Children's Services Planning in Northern Ireland benefited from having been set up after its equivalent in England and Wales, so it was developed as a multi-agency process from its inception. The Children and Young People's Committees in each Board area, which oversee Children's Services Planning, are very similar to the Children's and Young People's Strategic Partnerships being set up in England and Wales.

Influences from within Northern Ireland that also pushed Children's Services Planning towards a robust multi-agency process included the Northern Ireland Assembly's repeated emphasis on the importance of inter-departmental co-operation and co-ordination, through its Programmes for Government (OFMDFM, 1999; 2002). A similar development, running parallel with Children's Services Planning, is the Investing for Health public health strategy (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2002). This strategy contains a 'framework for action to improve health and well-being and reduce health inequalities, which is based on partnership working amongst Departments, public bodies, District Councils and the social partners'.

In addition, two developments that stemmed from the Good Friday Agreement have direct relevance for Children's Services Planning. The first of these

are provisions (Northern Ireland Act, 1998), which require all public bodies to demonstrate that they have examined all policies to ensure that equality of opportunity is promoted, and to ensure that new policies do so.

Second, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 set up a Human Rights Commission, which was augmented by the Human Rights Act in October 2000. This Act, which applies throughout the United Kingdom, has incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law (Human Rights Act, 1998).

Both these sets of legislative requirements have strengthened commitments made in both the Southern Area CSP 1999–2002 (SHSSB, 1999) and in the subsequent Southern Area CSP, for 2002–2005 (SHSSB, 2002). First, the Plans prioritise the needs of children and young people from socially excluded groups. Second, the Plans use the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), as a set of standards to measure how well the rights and needs of children and young people are being met through the process

### **Structure of Planning Framework**

This section will describe the structure in its present state of development. The section on the process of planning will explore how this structure has developed.

This description covers two aspects of the planning framework:

- The approach taken to the strategic planning task.
- The planning groups, their remits and their relationship to each other.

#### *The Approach Taken to the Strategic Planning Task*

The challenge inherent in Children's Services Planning is to develop a multi-agency and multi-disciplinary strategic plan for services for vulnerable children and young people. Children and young people themselves, parents and carers, the community and the practitioners who provide the service must be involved in the process.

Some of these requirements come from the legislative and policy framework already described, particularly the Children's Services Planning Guidance, (DHSS/DENI/NIO, 1998). Some stem from an examination of reports and research on planning processes for services (Social Services Inspectorate, 1995; 1999; Audit Commission, 1994; National Children's Bureau, 1995; ADSS and NCH Action for Children, 1996).

There are two basic difficulties in the planning process: difficulties in collaboration or co-ordination across agency and sectoral boundaries; and deficiencies in knowledge, skills and experience of strategic planning.

The first difficulty experienced (i.e. the collaboration or co-ordination across agency and sectoral boundaries) is the lack of agreement on, not least, definitions of these terms (Weiss, 1991; Mulford & Rogers, 1982). Hallett and Birchall (1992) suggest that the definition of co-ordination can be broken down into three different components; 'in terms of the machinery, or organisational arrangements, as a process, and with reference to its outputs'. This separation is helpful for this examination of the CSP process in terms of its structure (machinery) and process issues. Hallett and Birchall (1992) draw attention to 'the significance of co-ordination not as a structure but as a process. The existence of co-ordination machinery does not necessarily mean that co-ordination exists.

The activities and decisions of those participating determine the extent to which co-ordination occurs ...'.

There is widespread agreement that working together across agency boundaries is difficult (Kahn & Thompson, 1971; Carter, 1976; Wilson & Akana, 1977; Norton & Rodgers, 1981; Challis *et al.*, 1988). These difficulties relate to trust, power, and lack of understanding of other agencies' perspectives. Such difficulties are only magnified when the barriers to be crossed are sectoral; that is, across the statutory, voluntary, and community sectors (Community Development and Health Network, 2000). Such barriers are multiplied when professionals are asked to listen to the views of children, young people and their parents/carers and give them equal weight to their own considered judgements (Family Rights Group, 1991; Allard, 1996).

The second difficulty relates to deficiencies in knowledge, skills and experience of strategic planning. Very few people involved in the CSP process had previous experience of strategic planning of services, and none had carried out this task across agencies and sectors.

Therefore, a strategic planning framework was needed that could help a wide range of participants work together on a very difficult and unfamiliar task.

Strategic planning has been variously defined. Bryson (1995) drawing on Olsen and Eadie (1982), defines it as 'a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organisation is, what it does and why it does it'. He goes on to say that 'To deliver the best results, strategic planning requires broad yet effective information gathering, development and exploration of strategic alternatives, and an emphasis on future implications of present decisions' (Bryson, 1995). Drucker (1992) puts it graphically: 'There's an old saying that good intentions don't move mountains; bulldozers do ... the mission and the plan ... are the good intentions. Strategies are the bulldozers. They convert what you want to do into accomplishment ... They convert intentions into action ... They also tell you what you need to have by way of resources and people to get the results'.

The Southern Area CSP 1999–2002 (SHSSB, 1999) expresses this as follows:

To plan strategically means:

To decide on the overall aim, e.g. 'to provide for the health and development needs of vulnerable children and young people in the Southern Health and Social Services Board area'

To work out what to do to achieve that aim.'

The strategic planning framework is explained as follows (SHSSB, 1999):

The strategic planning framework ... entails asking the following questions:—

Where are we now?

Where do we want to get to?

What do we need to do to get there?'

These are further broken down as follows;—

1. 'Where are we now?' Involves:—

Identification, audit and mapping of current needs;

Mapping existing services to meet these needs;

Identifying current legislative policies, strategies and objectives which affect planning and delivery of service for vulnerable children and young people.

2. 'Where do we want to get to?'

The goal is to achieve co-ordinated planning to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people, so that they develop into socially included adults.

This will be achieved by:

Deciding upon particular targets, which achieve aspects of social inclusion, in the short term.

Refocusing the multi-agency/multi-disciplinary planning process for meeting the needs of vulnerable children in such a way that social inclusion is automatically the outcome.

Developing accurate information and knowledge on the needs of vulnerable children and young people, as they relate to social inclusion, on the basis of agreed localities, so that services can be targeted accurately.

Information will also be used to monitor the success of services according to an agreed set of criteria, which relate to social inclusion.

3. What do we need to do to get there?

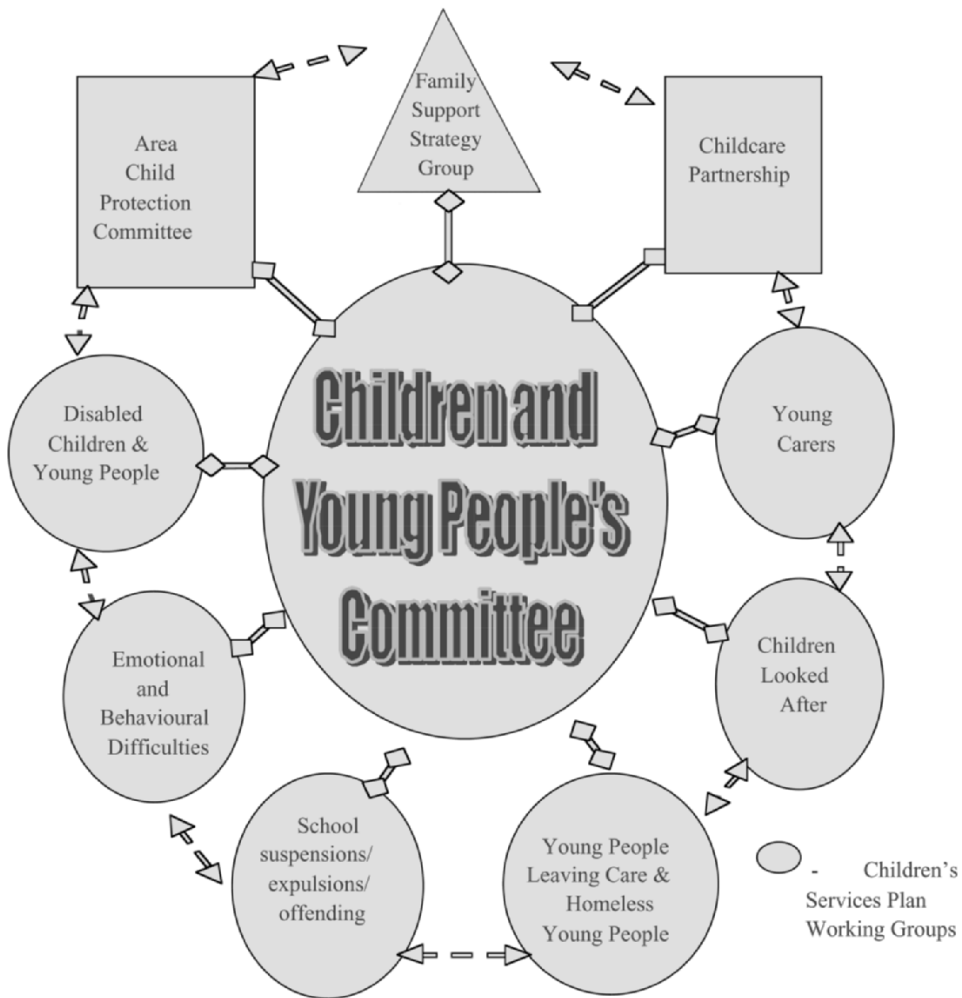
The above goal will be achieved by the work of the Children and Young People's Committee, the Working Groups, the Reference Groups and other consultation, and through setting up a system of using information to support the Plan.

The second aspect of the planning framework, the planning groups, will now be described.

*The Planning Groups*

Most theoretical work on strategic planning, unlike Children's Services Planning, refers to planning within one organisation. However, Bryson (1995) addresses the multi-agency situation usefully: 'When applied to a function or network that crosses organizational boundaries or to a community, the process probably will need to be sponsored by a committee or task force of key decision makers, opinion leaders, "influentials" or "notables" representing important stakeholder groups. Additional working groups or task forces will probably need to be organised at various times to deal with specific strategic issues or to oversee the implementation of specific strategies'.

This describes well the structure of planning groups set up to develop the Southern Area CSP. The Children's Services Planning structure is as follows (see Figure 1 for a diagrammatic representation of planning groups).



**Figure 1.**

*The Children and Young People's Committee.* The remit of the Children and Young People's Committee (CYPC) includes:

- Set the overall aim of the Children's Services Plan, which is 'to meet the needs of children and young people who are vulnerable, so that they can reach their full potential and be socially included members of the community, as children and as adults' (SHSSB, 2002).
- Agree a joint set of standards or principles to guide the strategic plan. The CYPC has agreed that the UNCRC should perform this function for the plan (SHSSB, 1999; 2002).
- Oversee the detailed work carried out by the Working Groups.
- Ensure resources and changes in practice are made available to implement the joint priority proposals arising from the Plan.
- Develop a set of measures of success to test whether the aims of Children's Services Planning, as developed by the Working Groups, are being achieved.
- Use these measures to monitor the success of the Plan.



- Review the Plan.

The Committee includes representatives from:

- The HSS Board (chair).
- The three community HSS Trusts within the SHSSB area.
- The Southern Education and Library Board.
- The Probation Board of Northern Ireland.
- The Police Service of Northern Ireland.
- The Probation Board for Northern Ireland.
- The Juvenile Justice Agency.
- The Northern Ireland Housing Executive.
- The child care voluntary sector groups, one of which is the umbrella body, Child Care Northern Ireland.
- Three community sector groups.
- Two minority ethnic sector groups.

This committee is made up of senior representatives, who can commit their agency to the process.

*Working Groups.* These groups (see Figure 1) carry out the detailed planning to meet particular needs of children and young people.

These Working Groups are addressing: disabled children and young people; and children and young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

*Looked After Children.*

- Young people leaving care, those requiring after care services and young people who are homeless.
- Children and young people suspended or excluded from school/children and young people who have or are likely to offend.

*Young Carers.* In addition, the Southern Area Child Protection Committee and the Southern Area Childcare Partnership, both of which were previously stand-alone multi-agency partnerships, now feed into the Southern Area Children and Young People's Committee. These committees address, respectively, the co-ordination of child protection, and childcare and family support provision. In addition, a further co-ordination process was added in 2003 (i.e. the Family Support Strategy Group), which aims to develop a co-ordinated and integrated family support strategy, bringing together all relevant local processes. The Family Support Strategy Group will also oversee the collection, analysis and dissemination of information about family support services, to all agencies and organisations and the public through websites.

Each working group is made up of representatives of the key statutory and voluntary agencies concerned with the particular need. One Working Group, at present, includes parents. Each Working Group is developing a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary plan for children and young people with a particular need.

*Task Groups.* Short-standing or longer-standing Task Groups contribute to the planning carried out by Working Groups. These groups consist of key staff from each agency who have in-depth knowledge of the particular need.

*Reference Groups.* A number of Reference Groups have been set up, which each consist of members of community groups, relevant voluntary organisations and parents/carers, who feed into the planning. This model was chosen in order to provide an opportunity for ongoing involvement, rather than consultation at fixed points, which is criticised by the community sector as tokenistic; for example, discussion at the Stronger Families, Stronger Communities Conference (Area Child Protection Committees, 1998).

*Participation by Children and Young People.* Examples of involving children and young people in the strategic planning of services are few. One innovative example is the Durham Children's Services Planning process, which includes a parallel planning process for children and young people called Investing in Children. This is a collection of projects in which young people advise on changes to practice and services, and subsequently advise the Children's Services Planning process as a whole (Durham Children's Services Plan, 2000–2003).

Another example is the Northern Ireland Children's Law Centre, which has developed a young people's group, which advises on the direction and practice of the Centre (Geraghty, 2000). Central messages from these and other good practice examples indicate that for such involvement to be successful, support, training, time and resources are required for real involvement in planning.

In the first Southern Area Children's Services Plan (SHSSB, 1999) a consultation framework was set out, which set out how children and young people, their parents and carers, organisations representing them, and the community would be involved in the process.

Each Working Group has the responsibility to involve children and young people directly in the planning work. Some Working Groups have achieved limited involvement and some are still to attempt this task. For instance, research has been carried out with Children Looked After and those who have left the Looked After System (Southern Area Children's Services Plan Review) (SHSSB, 2000). Both of these examined how well young people have been prepared for independence and adulthood. The Voice of Young People in Care, an organisation that promotes the views of young people in care (Looked After) or who have left the Looked After system, has also had ongoing input to Children's Services Planning.

Two groups for Young Carers were canvassed regarding the needs of young carers. Their responses have formed the core of a needs assessment of the Young Carers Working Group (Southern Area Children's Services Plan Review) (SHSSB, 2000). This needs assessment, in turn, was used as evidence for a successful application for Executive Programme Funding, which has led to two new young carers groups, and the continuation of a third, the Southern Area Children's Services Plan Review 2003 (SHSSB, 2003).

A User Involvement Project was set up in 2002, to promote the involvement of disabled children and young people in the Southern Area CSP. Using lessons learned from research carried out by the Working Group on the needs of disabled children and young people and the University of Ulster (SHSSB and University of Ulster, 2003), this project is currently involving a number of groups and individual young disabled people. These young people, as well as feeding into the Children's Services Planning process, have met with Judith Karp, of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee included their views

in its comments to the UK government on how well the UNCRC is being upheld.

However, to involve young people in the whole Children's Services Planning process requires dedicated time for this purpose, as secured by the Western Area CYPC, on a temporary basis, with the result that the confident young people's group Making a Difference TODAY are now actively feeding into the Children's Services Planning process (Western Health and Social Services Board, 2003)

*The Interagency Information Forum.* The central importance of information in strategic planning for services for children and young people has been underlined by much literature (Ryan, 1997; Social Services Inspectorate, 1999; Department of Health, 2000). Research in this area has indicated that planners require resources and a framework in which to use information in order to make sense of and integrate the diverse range of needs and interventions required to meet those needs (Hearn & Sinclair, 1999; Social Services Inspectorate, 1999).

The Southern Area CSPs have set out the collaboration between agencies to use information to support the planning process as follows (SHSSB, 1999; 2002):

- Identify and define routine information collected on children and young people by each Key Agency ... and set up multi-disciplinary and multi-agency based information sources.
- Establish an Interagency Information Forum, to look at Information relating to children and young people across all agencies, and agree a common and consistent approach to the definition, compatibility, reporting and management of Information relating to Children's Services.
- Identify new Indicators, (measurable factors) that can be used to indicate the needs of children and young people particularly in relation to their becoming socially included adults.
- Use these Indicators, and existing information, to identify particular areas that require services to enable vulnerable children and young people to develop into socially included adults.
- Use these Indicators to measure the success of services and processes (set up through the Children's Services Planning process) in promoting the health, development and social inclusion of vulnerable children and young people.

The inter-agency information forum is made up of representatives of all agencies that provide services for children and young people, and is carrying out these tasks.

### **Process Issues Involved in Planning**

This section will describe and analyse the main process issues, which have arisen in the planning work. In the forthcoming discussion 'process issues' refer to how people do what they do as opposed to the content of what they do, or the structure in which they do it.

The relationship between structure and process is crucial to the success of a multi-agency strategic planning project. It is important to remember that setting in place the structure, and giving planning groups their remits, so that the required tasks are clear, cannot achieve anything without attention to process issues. Bryson argues that 'strategic planning is simply a set of concepts, procedures and tools. Leaders, managers and planners need to be very careful

about *how* they engage in strategic planning ... The process will only work if enough key decision makers and planners support it and use it with common sense and sensitivity to the particulars of their situation' (Bryson, 1995; emphasis added).

Analysis of the Southern Area Children's Services Planning process (SHSSB, 2000) has demonstrated that this multi-agency strategic planning process cannot succeed unless the people involved:

- are clearly mandated by their own organisations in this, often, unfamiliar role;
- are supported by their organisations with an acknowledgement of the planning task in their work schedules;
- are provided with training and development opportunities to help them develop expertise in strategic planning;
- are helped with the task of communicating about this complex task with their own colleagues and staff, as well as others in the other parts of the process understand the whole multi-sectoral context of the work;
- are supported in working with others across sectoral, agency, disciplinary boundaries — this includes receiving help with joint decision-making;
- develop joint ownership of the process;
- are provided with resources, such as research assistance and information support; and
- are given facilitated time and support — to stand back at intervals to review their work.

Some of these issues relate to clarity of role and the availability of resources, such as information support. However, all also relate to process; that is, how the process works, especially with regard to the people within the process.

#### *Role of the Children's Services Planner in Supporting the Process*

Supporting the CYPC and the Working Groups has been critical. The first step for each of the Working Groups was for members to understand the nature of their task. The difficulties of this cannot be underestimated, as this kind of strategic planning was new. The members of the Working Groups are operational managers, for the most part, of statutory and voluntary agencies. They are accustomed to managing front-line services rather than long-term planning. In their experience of managing services, usually in a context of scarce resources, they may have frequently wished that services were better planned. Many, certainly, suffered the difficulties that the lack of co-ordination has brought to services for vulnerable children, but had never before been asked to address the planning deficit themselves.

The involvement of such professionals in strategic planning is clearly supported by the research into Children's Services Planning processes in England and Wales (Social Services Inspectorate, 1995; 1999), CSP Guidance documents (DHSS/DENI/NIO, 1998; Department of Health, 2000) and other literature. For instance Hudson argues that 'a clearer sense of strategic purpose will be of little avail unless it connects with front — line practice and the real lives of users and carers' (1997). Similarly, Hassard and Shaifi suggest that 'top-down approaches to strategic planning may yield changes that are relatively easy to bring about but difficult to sustain, resulting at best in only overt compliance' (1989). Hudson underlines the point thus: 'The planning challenge is to create owner-

ship of the plans in the sense of teams of people owning the responsibility to make things happen ... it is important to use the experience and knowledge of front-line staff who may otherwise feel alienated, and to base planning on the lives and experiences of children and families' (1997).

Other theoretical work on strategic planning agrees. Drucker says that he has often been asked whether dedicated planners should be employed to do the forward thinking for an organisation. He advises that planning should not be separated off as a specialised activity, as, without those who provide the service, crucial factors can be overlooked (Drucker, 1992).

Encouraging this group of people to take responsibility for the planning has been therefore a central role for the Children's Services Planner (hereafter referred to as the planner). A large-part of the role of the planner has been to encourage and support members to transfer their experience of planning in general to long-term strategic planning.

The first coherent way to support the Working Groups was to help them structure their strategic planning process. Each Working Group was responsible for developing a planning framework that includes: identifying the children and young people it wished to address (i.e. the scope of the work); and what should be done (i.e. the aim and how the aim was to be achieved).

The resulting planning framework can be seen in each of the eight chapters in the Southern Area Children's Services Plan, in which each Working Group sets out their part of the overall Plan (SHSSB, 1999).

In April 1999, a 3-day review was instituted, for those carrying out the planning work (i.e. the members of the CYPC and all the Working Groups). The purpose was to assess the benefits and disadvantages of the structure and process that had been adopted, and to use the opportunity to attempt to reach a shared understanding of the overall task. The review was also to be used to enable the Working Groups to translate their chapters of the plan, which were essentially blueprints, into action plans for the coming 2 years.

Each Working Group produced an action plan, the CYPC refined the process, and there was a general agreement that it was useful for everybody involved in the process (some 60 people) to meet together to acknowledge the large task they were undertaking and to recognise their achievements so far.

One important aspect of the planner's support to Working Groups has been encouragement to spend the available time on strategic planning and to avoid deviating into the detail of particular service provision reflecting day-to-day concerns.

In addition, the planner has supported the CYPC to develop the link between the Children's Services Planning process and the service development or commissioning process of each of the constituent agencies of the CYPC. Members of CYPC have shared information on how services are developed within their own agencies. This was a first step in breaking down barriers to sharing decision-making on allocating resources, which is crucial to the future success of coherent services.

#### *Annual Review of the Children's Services Plan*

The CSP Guidance (1998) requires that the Plan be reviewed annually. This has been carried out each year (SHSSB, 2000; 2001; 2003) between the production of the three year plans (SHSSB, 1999; 2002). As well as these written reviews, each

year there have been gatherings of those involved in the process, in order to share learning from the experience. Some of the challenges of strategic planning in the multi-agency, multi-disciplinary context that arose early were process issues, as follows:

- Lack of trust across agency, discipline and sectoral barriers.
- Lack of listening to each other.
- The pushing of pet projects.
- Internal tensions inside organisations.
- Funding conflicts.
- Lack of communication across different parts of the process.
- Frustration re. lack of resources to carry out funding tasks (Review Papers, 2000).

In addition, training needs and the necessity for further clarification of roles arose, as follows:

A need for training and development support in carrying out the strategic planning tasks

A need for a clearer mandate for the members of Working Groups from their agencies that they can carry out strategic planning on behalf of those agencies. (Review Papers 2000)

In May 2000, this led the CYPC to start to grapple with how the Plan could be operationalised in each agency and could be prioritised jointly by all agencies. At that time the CYPC started to change from a formal 'signing off' type process to a working, co-operative process.

One result of this change was that the Committee commissioned a strategic planning consultant to help it develop. At a resulting workshop in 2000, the CYPC achieved a significant move forward in taking ownership of the process, agreeing a process for prioritising parts of the Plan, and for clearly asking for commitment of constituent agencies for resources to put the Plan into action.

Another outcome of the first annual review was the agreement of the CYPC to provide a training programme in strategic planning for those involved in the process.

Further shifts in the process were reflected in the second Southern Area Children's Services Plan (SHSSB, 2002). These included a major enlargement of the CYPC, which changed from a partnership of largely statutory organisations with one voluntary sector partner (Childcare Northern Ireland) to its present membership as listed earlier. This change took place alongside similar shifts in the three other CYPCs in Northern Ireland, which also reflected another significant step forward in the process — that of the four CYPCs working more coherently together than previously. This is shown by the inclusion in the four Children's Services Plans, of four agreed strategic overarching objectives:

- Promoting social inclusion.
- Equality and human rights
- Needs-led planning and resourcing.
- Coherent and integrated family support (SHSSB, 2002).

Alongside this increased working together across Northern Ireland came a shared understanding of the conditions necessary for the success of Children's

Services Planning. This shared understanding is indicated in a number of joint papers, which include *Promoting Social Inclusion in Services for Children and young people* (SHSSB, 2001), 'Response of the Four Children and Young People's Committees to Proposals for the Allocation of the Executive Programme for Children' (SHSSB, 2002b) and a joint presentation to a consultation day held on 10 April 2002 on the Regional Strategy for the Rights and Needs of children and young people (Western Health and Social Services Board, 2002).

These papers argue, among other things, for the necessity of a coherent planning process for children and young people's needs at Government level, to parallel the CYPC process at local level. This paper will not go into the arguments for such a process in detail, as these can be found in other papers in this edition of the journal. However, this paper demonstrates that, for such a multi-agency process to work, much attention must be paid to process. The enlargement of the CYPCs, to take the most recent example, came about as a result of a process of mutual respect and growing understanding between Health and Social Services Boards, as the leaders of the Children's Services Planning partnerships, and the voluntary childcare sector, over a period of many months. This occurred while both sectors were working out responses to proposals for allocation of the Executive Programme for Children. At the end of this process, all sectors responded with a unified voice, which boded well for future collaboration. This process also resulted in the enlargement of the CYPCs.

The development and expansion of the newly enlarged CYPCs was facilitated, through arrangements made by Childcare Northern Ireland, and has resulted in meaningful discussions about the blockages to partnership that could exist across sectors. One example of such a blockage is the relative power differentials between large statutory sector agencies and small community and voluntary groups. These same agencies and groups may also be, in other contexts, commissioners and potential providers of service. This issue has been acknowledged and it has been agreed that it must be tackled by all members, if it is not to present a barrier to trust and real partnership.

Member agencies, after 3 years of Southern Area Children's Services Planning, are reporting greater trust and inter-agency working (Southern Area Children's Services Plan 2002–2005; see SHSSB, 2002). The learning from this process is relevant for the regional strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland, which is being developed at the time of writing. If such multi-agency and cross-sectoral working is to exist within the regional strategy for children and young people, much attention must be paid to the process. The strategy will depend on all departments of government coming together and with others to address children and young people's needs. Similarly to agencies and organisations at local level, departments have differing cultures, aims and objectives. Nadler and Tushman describe the culture of an organisation as 'the values, beliefs, customs and practices which underpin the behaviour of people in the organisation. The culture refers to who has power and influence, how things are achieved outside of the formal arrangements, which networks exist, the informal rewards and punishments, the informal relationships and how the "grapevine" operates' (Nadler & Tushman, 1977).

One way forward through these differences would be to bring departments and other groups together around particular needs, as the CSP process has done, with a view to addressing these needs. Much support and facilitation of the process would be required, but the experience of Children's Services Planning

would suggest that regional agencies and Departments could unite in partnership to focus more effectively together on outcomes for children and young people.

## Conclusion

This paper has described the structure and process of Children's Services Planning in one area. It suggests that the centrality of process issues (relating to how people are carrying out Children's Services Planning) has been increasingly understood and addressed. Initially, there was hesitation and uncertainty in the planning work, as a result of the extreme difficulties and unfamiliarity of the task. In addition, there were the well-known difficulties of cross agency and cross-sectoral working. Moreover, the cultures of the organisations of the participants in the planning process were very different. Therefore, facilitating reviews and providing joint training have been necessary for the development of politically and strategically strengthened CYPCs, and projects that are being resourced following joint needs assessment.

The Children's Services Planning process provides a model for multi-agency working in other contexts. In particular, this model could be taken into account in the setting up of structures and processes to take forward a regional strategy for children and young people which, by its nature, will be multi-agency and multi-sectoral. Partnership building, with time and attention to process, is essential for an effective strategy to address all children and young people's needs, at the Northern Ireland level, as it has been, at local level, for Children's Services Planning.

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