

Geraldine McConaghy remembers the beginning

I cannot believe that VOYPIC has now reached such a momentous milestone. It seems very recently that we were meeting in a Barnardo's building in University Street to discuss the need for such a service.

At that point I was working with NIACRO co-ordinating their youth justice projects. The link between children becoming involved in the justice system from the care system was a huge concern and therefore the idea of giving children in the care system a chance to have their voices heard was very important and one which NIACRO, even with its focus on the criminal justice system, was committed to. At that point the main individuals involved were Vivian McConvey (clearly!), Nuala Ferris Magennis (Barnardo's), Sheila Mc Caughan (Barnardo's) and Mary Ryan (MACS).

Once the initial idea of the service took hold, we clearly then wanted to involve children and young people. We wanted to ensure that this new service had meaningful participation as opposed to being tokenistic. We approached staff in a number of children's homes in the greater Belfast area (both statutory and voluntary) and invited them along to a meeting in the Barnardo's flats on Annadale Embankment. This really set the seal on the work as the young people clearly were calling out for their voices to be heard.

We very clearly recognised however that to exclude children living in care situations outside Belfast was not being inclusive. For this reason, we organised a seminar for children from all of the Trust areas and at this we agreed some values, mission statement and I think the structure.

Working groups were set up and young people and adults worked together to drive and develop the finer detail. I was involved in the recruitment and employment working group which resulted in contracts and terms and conditions being drafted. I was also involved in the development of the constitution for the service. We went on then to recruit the first Director and operational staff. The first office space I think was on Great Victoria Street as we wanted to be close to the main transport links. We had a practice working group in the early days as well as we were very conscious that we were working with a group of vulnerable young people whose needs and wellbeing still needed to be safeguarded.

I have a strong memory of running across Ormeau Avenue with Vivian to get to a live interview with Paddy O'Flaherty on Good Morning Ulster to promote a seminar we were having. We nearly didn't make it as a car nearly hit us. We laughed about it a lot and when I think of Vivian, I remember that day very vividly. The interview was a huge success!

The time, energy and enthusiasm invested in this piece of work by all involved was immense, motivating and rewarding. The Trust staff engaged, the young people developed and flourished, and the voluntary sector staff worked in partnership to ensure that the time and resources needed to get where the young people wanted to be was available. There were frustrations - staff needing to see the importance of slowing the pace down a bit and being reminded of the importance of involving all young people in the decision making no matter how big or small that decision was. And a frustration for staff was young people not being available for meetings as other things had come up for them.

This has been a real trip down memory lane and personally, I am very proud of the work which the young people and adults did at that time. I withdrew from the committee due to maternity leave and then I went back to study, but I have always followed the development of VOYPIC as it is a service which is very close to my heart. I wish you every success in the future, as you continue to grow from strength to strength.

Best wishes
Geraldine