

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE!

A network of evidence-based practice, advocacy and research organisations across Ireland recently organised a dedicated conference to address if Ireland could develop a model of prevention and early intervention to steer disadvantaged young people on the right path, based on the approach taken by the UK city of Nottingham. Report by Lorraine Courtney.

A policy of prevention and early intervention has the potential to transform our society so that the next generation will grow into more responsible, less crime-prone, and better educated adults. We know what needs to be done to get those results, but politicians are not pushing it here in Ireland yet.

That could all change following recent calls for investment and stronger policy for early intervention by a network of 33 organisations, after the success of this approach in Nottingham was highlighted at a recent conference in Dublin.

The Prevention and Early Intervention Network (PEIN), whose member organisations all work with children and young people within their own communities, share a commitment to improve the overall outcomes.

"We're now opening up membership to individuals and organisations," according to Marian Quinn, Chairperson of PEIN. "There's a couple of strands to our work, from information sharing to networking, where people get together to talk, as well as more formal CPD (continual professional development) opportunities," she told 'Emergency Services Ireland' after the conference, which was held in Dublin at the end of April.

"We're working in a number of communities and neighbourhoods. Literacy and language development would be a core component, so we're involved in speech and language therapy and literacy programmes for children and literacy support for their parents."

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Youth mental health is another area covered by her network. "It's emerging in so many communities that it's an area of significant concern," noted Quinn. "We're also involved in relationship building and minimising anti-social behaviour, improving safety in relationships and restorative practices as a way of doing that. We give people strategies to avoid conflict and where it happens to minimise its effects."

Quinn claimed that generational cycles of disadvantage could be broken for thousands of children and families in Ireland by developing more comprehensive approaches to early intervention.

Taking Nottingham as an example, it's one of the most prosperous cities in Britain, yet it has the highest rate of teenage

pregnancies in the country and sends the lowest proportion of its youngsters to university.

Now a unique package of measures aims to break the cycle, which had condemned its poorest children to educational failure and a life of crime. The scheme identifies children at risk and help them at the earliest possible age, to stop them becoming Nottingham's future 'problem citizens'.

CITY-WIDE PARTNERSHIP

The conference also heard from Nottingham City Council Assistant Chief Executive Candida Brudenell who presented the experience of launching and then developing Nottingham as the UK's first 'Early Intervention City'.

"In 2008 we set out with a 20-year outlook to develop a city-wide partnership with all major social, health and education authorities coming together to apply early intervention approaches.

"Working together the city was able to secure funding, implement a wide range of approaches and measure its impact. We initially had a budget of £4m per annum, but this evolved after we applied for and secured £45m in National Lottery funding in 2014.

"The shared focus across Nottingham is to work intensively with 0-3 year olds and their families to support social and emotional development, communication and language, nutrition and to affect overall system change.

"We're a unitary authority. Bigger urban areas have control over their services like public health and social care and have a responsibility around education," Candida Burdenall told 'Emergency Services Ireland' after the conference.

However, she claimed that a lot remains to be done in the city. "There is significant deprivation in the area, characterised by high levels of unemployment, child poverty, and lower levels of attainment in school.

"So, inter-generationally these issues make it difficult to grow and prosper. But in 2008 we declared ourselves an Early Intervention City to try and start thinking differently about how to address the issues across the city."

City-wide investment, policy and services were prioritised on babies and young children up to three-year-olds to break the inter-generational cycles. She said that multiple studies have



Nottingham City Council's Assistant Chief Executive Candida Brudenell, PEIN Chairperson Marian Quinn and Dr Fiachra Kennedy, Department of Public Expenditure and Public Reform's Assistant Principal (Prevention and Early Intervention Unit) pictured outside Dublin's Gresham Hotel before the start of the PEIN Conference in late April.

shown that early intervention before the age of three can reduce anti-social behaviour and other adverse later outcomes in life.

DRIVERS OF THE MACHINE

"We saw ourselves as drivers of the machine we had created to change the city," she said. However, nowadays the council has more of a leadership role. "We've put together a programme such as 'Governance and Leadership', and we're joining at the top level to come up with a common way forward, focused initially on young children."

Nottingham City Council has also funded 14 pilot projects, which have been trialled and targeted to address specific issues. "For example, we're trying to tackle teenage pregnancy in the city, so we're working with schools to promote sex education, providing contraception services in the community and destigmatising the notion of teenage pregnancies. We put in targeted work with girls who were teenage mums, as we had found that early motherhood confounded their issues in terms of poverty."

The council has also rolled out a programme called 'Drug Aware', which educates teachers about issues around substance misuse. "We worked on research, developed more concrete ways of evaluation and looked at what we were spending so we could focus more on prevention."

"Common council services are really key in this whole thing," Burdenall said. "We operate by the broken window theory: if a house in a community is empty it tends to get worse, and people respect the area less and it snowballs."

"And yes, we recognise that communities don't define themselves by their issues, so councils shouldn't do that either. We all need to think how this feels to someone accessing our services."

LOCAL LEADERSHIP

"Local officers have leadership in their locality and their lobbying is so important," she said. "Nottingham's impressive list of results include an

PEIN'S RANGE OF PROPOSALS ON EARLY INTERVENTION

Having launched a new website www.pein.ie where information on prevention and early intervention in Ireland can be accessed, PEIN has also recommended the following:

- An increase in the number of early intervention staff in community settings (including speech and language therapists, child psychologists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists) to reduce waiting lists and make these supports available to all families who need them in a timely manner.
- The creation of a dedicated Child and Family Community Nursing Service to provide greater supports to all children and parents from pregnancy to the early years.
- Significant increase in state funding of targeted prevention and early intervention programmes.
- Universal access to parenting programmes during pregnancy and throughout childhood.
- Ring fence a dedicated budget in Tusla for the provision of preventative services.

PREVENTION & EARLY INTERVENTION

ongoing improvement in its national ranking on the percentage of children who are 'school ready', a reduction in teenage pregnancy rates among teenage girls, and a cost-saving of £10 million on children-in-care placements."

The conference was also addressed by Dr Fiachra Kennedy from the Prevention and Early Intervention Unit in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). Dr. Kennedy spoke about the consultation process being undertaken by the Prevention and Early Intervention Unit, and their plans to track Government spending across services.

In summing of the situation, PEIN's Marian Quinn said that politicians and policy makers in Ireland should also take a long-term view in order to deliver greater policy and investment which reaps the benefits of prevention and early intervention.

"Research in Ireland has suggested that every €1 invested in prevention and early intervention saves the State €4 in the long term. The National Economic and Social Forum has stated a return on investment of €4 to €7 for every €1 invested. UK studies have ranged a return on investment of £1.40 to £9 with an average of £4, while in the US studies have ranged from a long-term return of \$1.30 up to \$18.

"PEIN is calling on policy makers and politicians to

recognise the evidence which points towards significant further development of the sector. We know that this will benefit children, families and communities and is a better investment for the tax payer than reactive and crises services," she said.

For more information on prevention and early intervention in Ireland visit www.pein.ie

