

## **The Institute of Child Care Research, Queen's University, Belfast**

The Institute of Child Care Research (ICCR) has been the University's flagship centre for children's research since 1995. Established with the aim of building capacity in children's social care research, the Institute has established an international profile for 'blue skies' research, alongside its high profile contribution to the shaping of policy and practice in Northern Ireland and beyond.

It is a multidisciplinary research centre, currently employing some 26 research staff.

### **Mission**

Our mission is to '*generate knowledge, through research, to serve children*'.

We believe that when it comes to addressing the needs of children and their families, we must understand them better. We must understand the nature and severity of problems they encounter and the consequences that may follow. We must be well-informed about how society - Government, communities, statutory sector and families - is faring in addressing these challenges, and help develop the evidence base for effective interventions.

We aim to be recognised internationally as a source of high quality research that helps to improve children's lives, collaborating with others to ensure that children grow, thrive, and take their place in an ever-changing world. We draw our strength from an experienced team of researchers from diverse backgrounds (including psychology, social work, nursing, statistics, and environmental planning), located within a multidisciplinary research environment in a University with an international reputation for excellence.

### **Objectives**

In pursuing our mission, we endeavour to:

1. Bring high standards of scholarship and intellectual resources to the challenges of policy-makers and service-providers.
2. Generate knowledge about the needs of children, the problems they encounter and the consequences that may follow.
3. Evaluate the impact of policy and practice on children's lives.
4. Assess the effectiveness of services and other interventions made in children's lives.
5. Be maximise impact through effective knowledge exchange and knowledge transfer.
6. Provide a 'rapid response' facility for policy makers.
7. Build capacity within the academy and the field.

These aims and objectives are underpinned by United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

## A unique resource

The Institute boasts expertise in a wide range of research methods, including longitudinal and experimental designs, systematic reviews and secondary data analysis (rare in social care, and a priority for the ESRC). It boasts two very significant, and internationally recognised, longitudinal studies of relevance to policy makers and practitioners. The *Care Pathways and Outcomes Study* and the *Belfast Youth Development Study* provide unique information about looked after children in Northern Ireland, and youth development, offering the capacity to answer important policy questions, and offering scope for collaborative endeavour and methodological innovation.

## In the beginning...

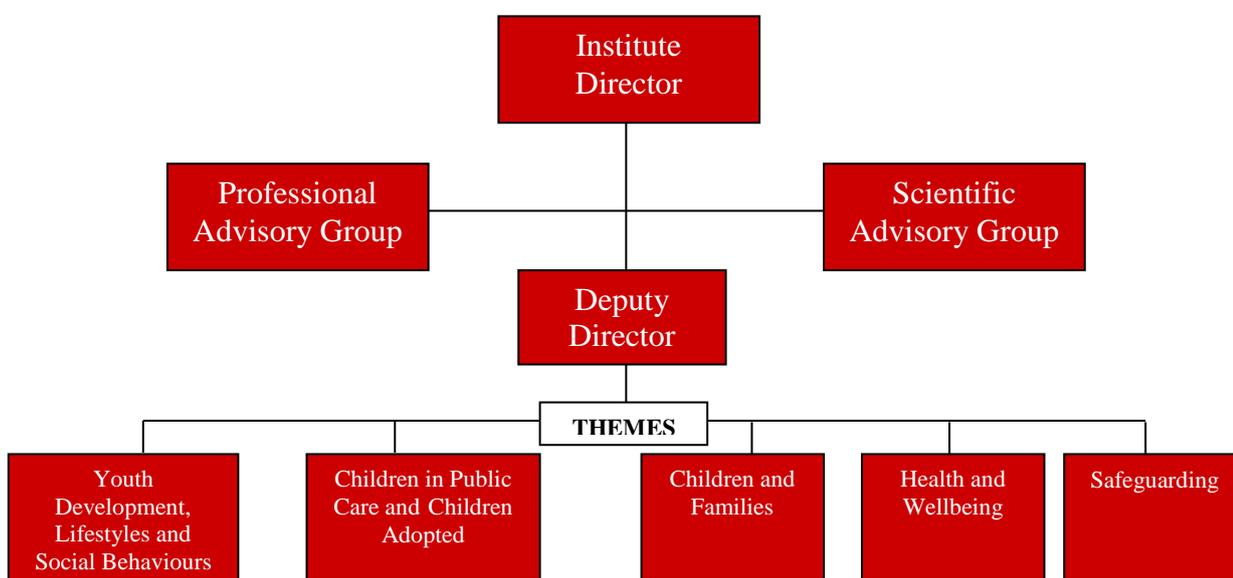
The stimulus for setting up the Institute for Child Care Research was the introduction of the Children Order (NI) 1995. As with similar legislation in the rest of the UK, the Children Order dramatically shifted the philosophical, legal, policy and ethical basis of the state's relationship with children and the family. Since that time, the key drivers for our work have been:

- the demand for research that can help policy makers and practitioners to improve children's lives;
- the need to build and sustain capacity in applied research, particularly within social care;
- opportunities to undertake significant and rigorous research that can deliver advances in our knowledge and understanding of children's lives;
- children's rights as set out in the United national Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## A sound investment

Our research now encompasses children and young people from birth to early adulthood, and is broadly organised around four themes (below). Our research is conducted in a variety of settings, such as homes (including adoptive homes), schools, health care settings, residential and foster care, community settings, and youth and criminal justice. The Institute therefore comprises an important part of the research infrastructure of Northern Ireland. Thanks to the investment in its development it offers a unique source of expertise and research capacity in children's research.

## Organisation of the ICCR



We were singled out as producing work of international excellence in the last Research Assessment Exercise in 2008<sup>1</sup>. We work to maintain this position by continuing a programme of cutting edge and applied research, and by continuing to invest in research training for staff and postgraduate students alike.

### **Cochrane in Northern Ireland**

The Cochrane Collaboration is an international organisation that produces, maintains and makes accessible systematic reviews of the effectiveness of health and social care interventions. These reviews are published in the Cochrane Library, ([www.thecochranelibrary.com](http://www.thecochranelibrary.com)). Cochrane reviews are widely regarded as a gold standard in evidence-based health and social care. In 2011, CDPLPG published 14 new reviews, 3 updated reviews and 28 protocols for future reviews.

The Institute of Child Care Research hosts one of the Collaboration's 54+ review groups - the *Developmental, Psychosocial and Learning Problems Group* [CDPLPG]. This group looks at 'what works' in relation to child development (both physical, cognitive and emotional); children and adults with learning disabilities, and youth justice.

The Director of ICCR – Professor Geraldine Macdonald -has been the Co-ordinating Editor of CDPLPG since its inception in 1998. In 2010, the Group moved to Queen's University Belfast and is now funded by the Research and Development Office of Northern Ireland.

### **Child Care Research Forum**

In 2004 the Institute founded – and continues to host – the Child Care Research Forum (CCRF). The overall aim of CCRF is to develop a crosscutting research culture between academics, policy makers and practitioners through collaborative action in Northern Ireland. The quality of this work is appreciated and given due recognition. For example, the R&D Office cited our work as an exemplar of good practice ((R&DO Today 2009).

Our CCRF conferences '*Made in Northern Ireland - local research with children and young people: an evidence base for policy and practice*' are welcomed by a multidisciplinary range of stakeholders. These conferences showcase pieces of research from NI, provide practical demonstrations, and a book of abstracts from researchers across NI, based around the six outcomes of the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People. Partners in that conference included the OFMDFM, NSPCC and the R&DO.

### **Responsive Knowledge Transfer**

Knowledge translation and exchange are firmly embedded in the work of the ICCR and has been singled out as exemplary by the Northern Ireland Research and Development Office. We collaborate with colleagues from policy and practice communities in organizing an extensive range of initiatives and events to ensure maximum use of our research findings.

Our extensive network enables effective knowledge transfer to five primary groups;

- practitioners and managers
- policy makers and regulators
- advisory bodies, consultants and child care specialists;
- children and families
- academics and researchers

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to the periodic review of the quality of research produced by UK universities

Our strategy aims to build strong relationships with each of our end-point user groups, to provide research evidence in ways that are accessible to each group, to reality test it against their experience, and to learn from each group what matters to them in order to inform our future work.

## **Capacity Building**

ICCR staff have always played a key role in supervising research students studying for Masters Degrees or PhDs. In 2008, the Institute developed a professional taught doctorate in Childhood Studies (DChild), which is now delivered by the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, with ICCR staff making significant contributions, including the supervision of a number of DChild students, alongside PhD research students.

## **Examples of ICCR's research**

### **1. Children and Families**

This theme focuses on childhood and adolescent development and later life course. We use quantitative, qualitative, longitudinal and mixed methods approaches to carry out our research. There is a focus upon the development of innovative and engaging approaches to conducting research with children and young people.

***Sexual health and education needs for young people in care in the Republic of Ireland (SENYPIC)*** - this study aims to describe the sexual education and sexual health needs of young people in care. This will be achieved by carrying out qualitative field work with professionals/staff working in the field, young people, parents and carers alongside an e-survey.

***Lifestart*** - this randomised controlled trial is aimed at evaluating the impact of the Lifestart parenting initiative, a five-year programme, on parent and child outcomes. 424 parents and children aged less than 12 months have been recruited from across Ireland and randomly assigned to either the intervention or control group. Families in the intervention group are receiving the Lifestart programme for five years and the control group are not receiving the programme but continuing as normal.

Both groups are being tested on a range of parent and child outcomes at three time points during the six-year evaluation.

***Ready to Learn*** - Barnardo's Ready To Learn Programme delivers an afterschool literacy programme for children with a parallel parenting programme for their parents and carers in Years 1-3. The programme has a specific focus on nurturing children's literacy skills and parental engagement with a long term aim of raising their achievement. We are using a randomised controlled trial methodology to evaluate the programme across sixteen schools over a three year period.

***Parenting UR Teen*** – a randomised trial of the effectiveness of a parenting programme offered by Parenting NI. This was a 'first' for the UK, and the results – very promising – are now being followed up with additional investment in the programme, and plans for further research.

## 2. Children in Public Care and Children Adopted

The key objective of research within the foster care and adoption theme is to conduct rigorous research that will inform local (and national) policy makers about what works well, and not so well, for these vulnerable children, and for this to be translated into practice in a way that enhances their health and well-being

### *Current projects include:*

***Care Pathways and Outcomes*** This study has tracked the placements for a population of children who were under the age of five and in care in Northern Ireland on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2000. The study is following the progress of children, and their parents/carers, in relation to the different placements provided, adoption; foster care; kinship (relative) care.

***Guilty as Charged*** is a study of the quality of assessments provided prior to and in the course of Care Proceedings.

***Mind Your Health*** is profiling the types of health problems (mental and physical) that

Looked After Children and Young People (LACY) in Northern Ireland are experiencing, and the range of initiatives being undertaken to improve health outcomes for this group.

***Regional Variations*** is a study examining the extent of regional variation in Northern Ireland in planned long-term placements for children in respect of whom Care Orders were made 4-6 years previously; and the reasons for apparent variations.

## 3. Youth development, lifestyles and social behaviour

The common feature of studies in this theme is their attempt to shed light on the causal mechanisms that can lead to problem behaviour and mental health problems.

***The Belfast Youth Development Study*** (BYDS) is one ICCR's flagship studies. This longitudinal study of adolescence and emerging adulthood examines the onset, development and desistance of drug use and the developmental pathways to problem use. BYDS has collected extensive information that allows us to investigate the development of other behaviours and their long-term consequences. – e.g. mental health issues, anti-social behaviour.

Over 5,000 adolescents in Belfast, Ballymena and Downpatrick took part and information was collected yearly from age 11 to age 15 and when participants were aged 16 and 21. Interviews with parents and older siblings were also collected in

sub-sample of participants. The scope and depth of information collected over a long period and on a large sample makes this study unique in the UK context:

### ***Alcohol and The Affluence Paradox***

This Study (funded by Alcohol Research UK) uses the BYDS dataset to examine why young people from less affluent backgrounds are more likely to drink heavily. It also aims to examine why heavy drinking is associated with higher risk of alcohol related problems in more, rather than less, affluent adolescents.

***Parental Alcohol Use and Resilience*** This Bamford implementation study looks at parental use & family, peer and schools processes in the development of resilience

to drinking among young people within the context of parental alcohol use.

***Offending behaviour among Youth People*** Funded by OFMDFM this study investigates the nature, extent and variation in offending behaviour among young people in the BYDS sample, the risk and protective factors to this behaviour and how offending can contribute to social exclusion.

***Parenting & school level effects*** This Alcohol Research UK funded study examines how parenting and school

environment effects drinking among school children.

***Restorative justice conferencing for reducing recidivism in young offenders (aged 7-21)*** Just completed - a Cochrane review examining the effects of restorative justice conferencing programmes for reducing recidivism in young offenders. The results indicate a current lack of high quality evidence in the area, and that effects may potentially be more evident for victims than for offenders.

#### **4. Health & wellbeing**

This theme aims to examine the extent and nature of mental health problems and disability amongst children and young people, and the quality and accessibility of current services provided to meet this need. A major focus is the occurrence of multiple and co-occurring needs, such as co-morbid mental health problems, and the impact that this has on the longer term outcomes for the child and the types and effectiveness of direct services and wider policy initiatives provided to address their needs.

***Wellbeing in the Lives of Disabled Adolescents*** This qualitative piece of work was developed at the request of a group of disabled young people in Northern Ireland, who argued strongly that their top research priority was an exploratory study of their needs in relation to wellbeing, particularly their emotional wellbeing.

***The GRIEF Study*** This ESRC-funded study uses linked-administrative data to investigate factors such as age, gender, family support, employment and religion affect how people cope after bereavement.

***Bamford Rapid Review of mental health & learning disabilities***

ICCR completed one of five Rapid Reviews in the areas of Children & Young People, Patient Outcomes, Learning Disability, Primary Care and Psychological Therapies. These reviews were designed to be useful to service providers, commissioners and policy

makers as well as to flag up areas in which further research is required.

***What works for disabled people*** – Three systematic reviews on the state of evidence regarding Personalisation; Supported Decision Making and Health Insurance.

***MeASURE: Measurement in autism spectrum disorder under review*** Funded by National Institute for Health Research, Health technology Assessment Programme. A team of experts in ASD and in systematic reviewing are currently working to identify the main constructs of interest in relation to monitoring progress in Autism Spectrum Disorder, to identify the tools used to measure these constructs, and finally to review studies of measurement properties within the identified outcome domains using the COSMIN methodology, with an ultimate aim to propose a battery of tools for future use in intervention studies and monitoring of progress.

## 5. Safeguarding

The ICCR and wider school of Sociology Social Policy and Social Work have significant expertise in the area of child abuse and neglect. Safeguarding is also an important component of that work. The ICCR is proud to host the first funded post between QUB and the voluntary sector. The NSPCC helps fund a Reader in Safeguarding within the Institute.

### ***Learning from Case Management Reviews***

In 2008 the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS) commissioned QUB and the NSPCC to evaluate the case management review (CMR) system into non-accidental child deaths and serious child abuse. Findings from the evaluation have resulted in revisions to the policy guidance and processes of case management reviews (CMR) in Northern Ireland and the development of new training programmes for staff involved in the process

***Physical Abuse and High Risk Families*** A scoping review (funded by NSPCC) to provide an evidence base to identify and help High Risk Families. The findings will increase our understanding of risk, analysis, impact, learning and the current landscape of service delivery in relation to the Physical Abuse in High Risk

***Adolescent Suicide*** An exploration of what is known about the impact of adverse experiences (e.g. child maltreatment, parental substance misuse and parental bereavement)

on children's lives, particularly adolescents who commit suicide. The study raises important questions about how to best engage with young people and families; what could usefully be done to better meet their needs, and draws attention to a number of concerns which should inform how we plan and deliver services.

### ***Perinatal Maternal Disability and Domestic Violence***

The study is part of on-going collaboration between the University of Dundee; Queen's University Belfast; NHS Fife; NSPCC and Scottish Women's Aid. This study is funded by 'Wellbeing of Women' and aims to address some important gaps in our knowledge about the perinatal health and wellbeing of disabled women and their infants who have experienced domestic abuse; and the relationship between disability, domestic abuse and access to maternity healthcare.

***Evidence Synthesis*** of what works for maltreated children.