A Comparison of Policies Designed to Enhance Child Well-Being

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Contents

Background

UNICEF's Report Card 7 on Child Well-Being[1] summarised indicators of child well-being in OECD countries. The UK came bottom of the league table on child well-being. We knew from previous research, not least previous Report Cards produced by UNICEF, that the UK was likely to do badly on child income poverty, children living in workless families, teenage pregnancy, and some health outcomes. But what was more disturbing was the UK performance on some of the dimensions concerned with relationships with family and friends, subjective well-being and risk behaviour. The questions raised were why is the UK doing badly in these domains and what can be done about it? UNICEF UK (UUK) decided to commission a short piece of work, designed to establish whether it was possible to learn from other countries' public policies that led to them performing better on these domains.

Objectives

The objectives were:

- To identify government policies in other countries which have led to positive changes for children and young people.
- To outline the policies that are working well in countries that came top of the league but are absent in UK.
- To highlight where UNICEF and the UK Government can learn from the experience of other countries.
- To inform the 'child well-being' advocacy work of UNICEF UK.

Methods

The information was gathered by national informants in the selected countries. These were of two types. The first set of informants was academics with special interests in children and children's services who had assisted with previous comparative studies undertaken at the University of York. The other set of informants were UNICEF national committees who were recruited by UUK. A questionnaire was devised to illicit information from both of these informants in the countries to be studied. The questionnaires were completed independently by both sets of informants to ensure that all countries were covered and to permit a certain

[1] UNICEF (2007) *Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*, Innocenti Report Card 7, UNICEF: Florence.
Bradshaw, J., Hoelscher, P. and Richardson, D. (2007) *Comparing Child Well-being in OECD Countries: Concepts and methods*, IWP 2006-03, Florence: UNICEF.
http://www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/pdf/iwp2006_03_eng.pdf

degree of triangulation for each country. All the academic informants completed the questionnaire and three of the national committees provided a questionnaire.

The countries chosen

The countries included in the study were selected to represent a range of those that had done comparatively well on the subjective well-being, peer and family relationships and behaviours and risks domains. They were Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden. Table 1 compares the countries' performances on each dimension. It can be seen that all the countries came in the top third on overall well-being except Germany and Ireland. Germany was included because it is a large country that was doing better on subjective well-being, relationships and risk than the UK. Ireland was chosen because it is an Anglophone country in the top third on all those dimensions. The Netherlands was chosen because it has an extraordinary good profile across all those dimensions. Spain was chosen because it is a Southern European case doing well on all the dimensions. Sweden and Norway were chosen because they are Nordic welfare states with a contrasting pattern which is nevertheless much better than the UK. Looking across the rows in Table 1 it is striking how consistently the UK is doing worst (highlighted) in this selection of countries.

Table 1 Comparison of child well-being

	Ger	*Ire*	*Neth*	*Nor*	*Spa*	*Swe*	*UK*
Overall well-being: average rank out of 21	10	8	1	6	4	2	21
Subjective well-being rank out of 20	9	5	1	8	2	7	20
Rating health fair or poor %	14.9	12.9	17.2	18.5	9.0	13.2	22.6
Above middle on life satisfaction %	85.4	86.8	94.2	82.9	87.8	86.0	83.5
I feel an outsider or left out of things %	6.1	5.6	3.9	5.6	3.3	5.2	6.8
I feel awkward or out of place %	11.4	7.8	6.9	9.1	8.9	4.9	8.7
I feel lonely %	6.2	4.6	2.9	7.0	4.4	6.7	5.4
Liking school a lot %	29.5	22.3	36.4	38.9	22.8	21.6	19.0
Peer and family relationships rank out of 21	13	7	3	10	8	15	21
Children in lone parent families %	12.8	10.3	10.7	16.2	9.1	16.8	16.9
Children in step families %	9.2	3.5	6.1	12.5	3.0	12.7	14.5
Eating main meal with parents …%	81.5	77.1	90.0	87.3	83.4	84.1	66.7
Parents spend time talking …%	42.5	62.0	70.6	64.0	60.2	51.6	60.5
Finding school friends kind and helpful %	76.1	67.0	73.2	74.3	59.2	76.7	42.3
Behaviours and risk rank out of 21	11	4	3	13	5	1	21
Smoking cigs once a week %	16.4	9.6	10.7	10.1	12.8	7.0	13.1
Been drunk two or more time %	17.7	13.8	12.9	15.6	10.2	16.1	30.8
Used cannabis in last 12 months %	18.5	20.0	21.6		30.8	4.7	34.9
Adolescent fertility rate per 1000	14.0	15.0	5.0	10.0	9.0	9.0	28.0
Sexual intercourse by 15 %	28.0		22.9		16.4	28.1	38.1
Used condom last time %	70.0		77.9		89.1	65.3	70.2
Physical fighting in last 12 months %	28.1	39.8	36.3	36.9	40.4	34.8	43.9
Bullied in the last two months %	36.5	26.1	29.4	32.3	26.0	15.0	35.8
Eat fruit every day %	42.4	32.6	28.1	29.1	36.6	26.7	26.7
Eat breakfast every school day %	67.0	71.8	78.0	69.3	72.2	73.4	56.1
Mean number of days a week active	3.6	4.5	4.1	3.5	3.8	3.9	4.2
Overweight %	11.3	12.1	7.6	11.8	16.9	10.4	15.8

Source: *Child Poverty in Perspective*, pp. 42-45.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire is attached at Annex A and included questions about policies covering:

- Family relationships
- Peer relationships
- Children in society
- Subjective well-being
- Behaviours and risks
- Some final ideas.

Policy areas not covered by the study

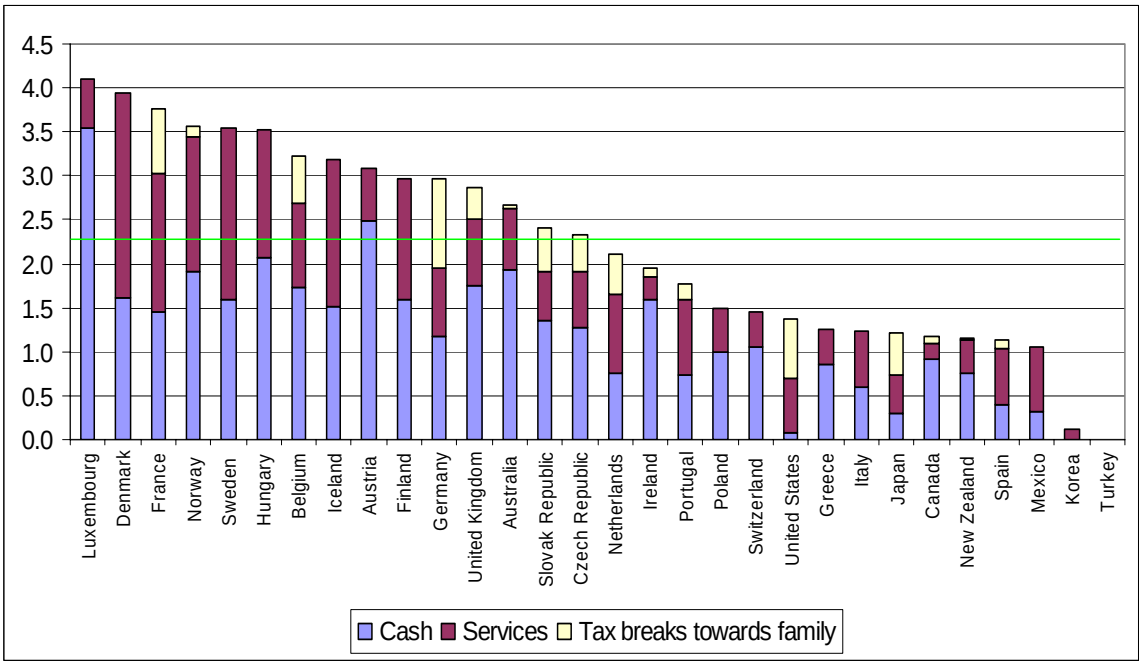
There are of course a host of other more formal policies which may have an impact on child well-being but which were not the focus of this study. We did not have the time or the resources to cover all these policies. But also we already know more about them. UNICEF asked us to provide a quick review of sources of information on these other policies.

Overall public policy effort on behalf of children

The main source here is OECD analysis of national accounts data. OECD publishes estimates of the proportion of GDP spent on families with children. Figure 1 gives the latest estimates for 2003 and this analysis is unusual in including the value of tax benefits for families, which is of course of increasing importance in the UK. This comparison does not include education spending but such data is available in OECD's *Education at a Glance*[2] along with a host of educational outcome data. Neither does it include health spending, which is much more problematic to disentangle for children - though *OECD Health Data* provides a host of relevant material. There is a WHO publication forthcoming which has some relevant material in it[3].

[2] http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=uN_IS_-vla4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=OECD+Education+at+a+Glance&sig=nmoRJoYWPPKp092VHrNZ55nF8_E.
[3] Spencer, N. (forthcoming) Poverty and child health in the European region, WHO.

Figure 1 Public spending on family benefits in cash, services and tax measures *Percentage of GDP, in 2003. Average OECD 24 2.3%*



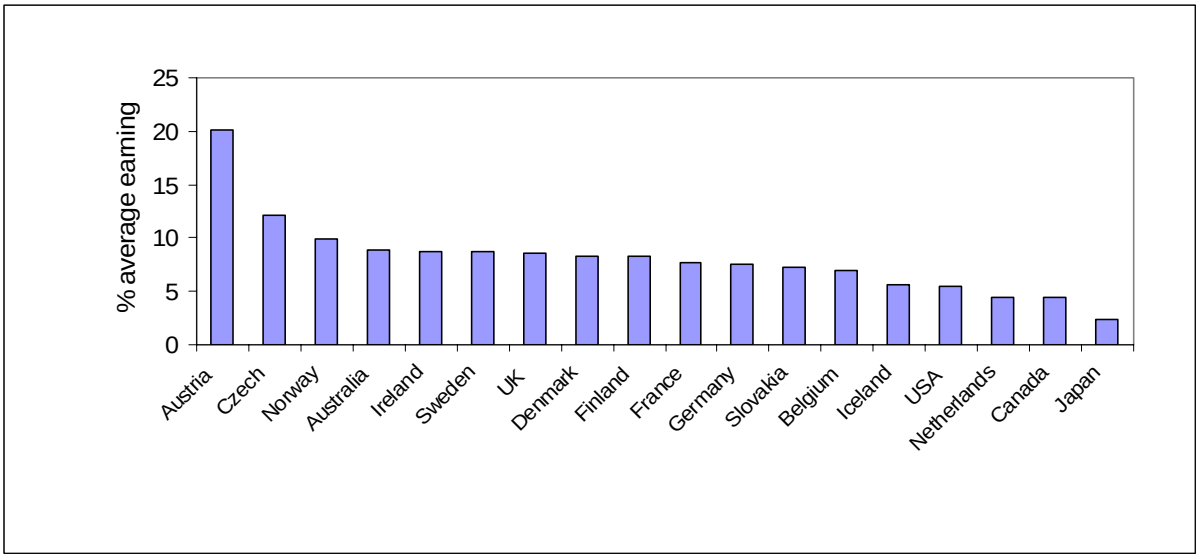
Source: OECD.

Comparing child benefit packages

OECD in its publication *Taxing Wages*[4] provides a comparison of the value of the financial support for children but only for a limited number of family types. Bradshaw has undertaken comparative studies covering a wider range of families and the latest is for 18 countries (all except Spain in this study) as at January 2004[5]. Figure 2 compares the average value of the package as a proportion of average earnings. The OECD is in the process of producing a comparison of investment in children by age.

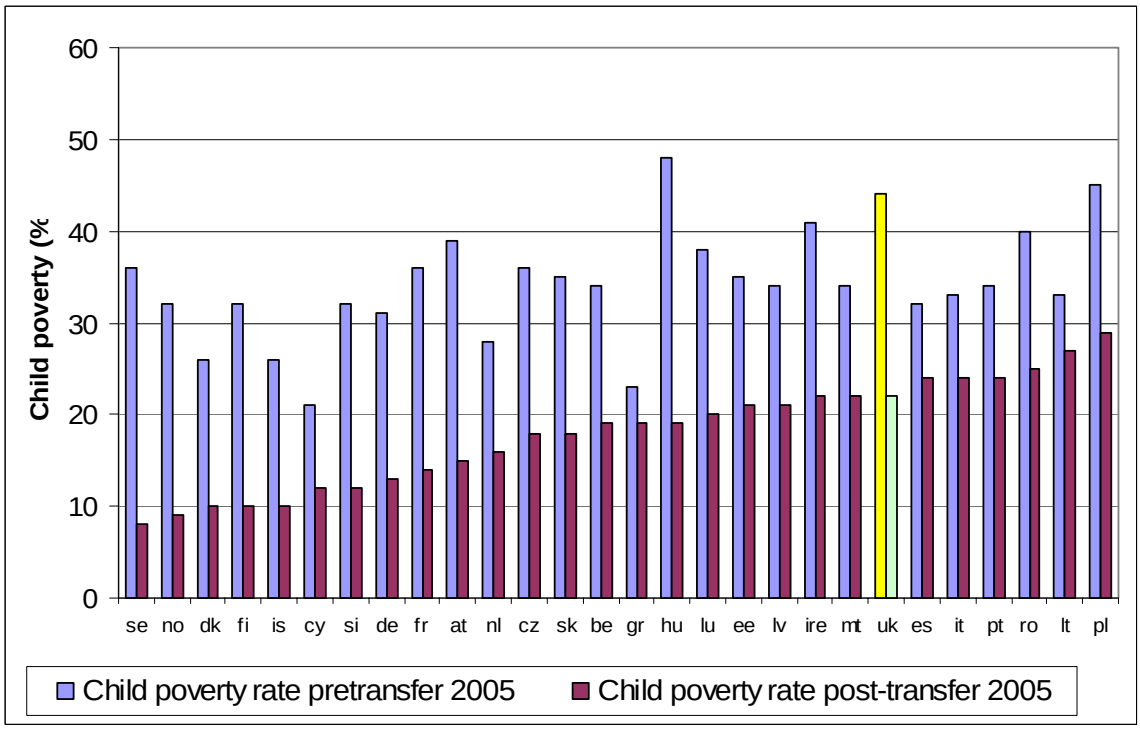
[4] http://www.oecd.org/document/17/0,3343,en_2649_34533_38148433_1_1_1_1,00.html.
[5] Bradshaw, J. (2006) Child benefit packages in 15 countries in 2004, in Lewis, J. (ed.), *Children, Changing Families and the Welfare State*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp 69-89.

Figure 2 Overall 'average' child benefit package after taxes, benefits, childcare and housing costs (difference from childless couple) % average earnings. January 2004



Another way of observing the impact of the financial package for families is to observe child poverty rates before and after transfers. The EU data is the most up-to-date analysis of this type (though OECD will be producing something similar in December 2007), though Figure 3 does not take account of tax benefits.

Figure 3 Child poverty before and after cash benefits 2005



Childcare

The next Innocenti Report Card is going to be on childcare provision in OECD countries and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in Dublin is heavily engaged in European studies of childcare provision. Meanwhile there is a comparison by Finch[6] of childcare policies in all the countries in this study except Spain.

Parental leave

The Finch chapter also covers parental leave for the same countries. There are other studies of measures to reconcile work and family life[7] and the OECD have a series of studies on this policy area Babies and Bosses which has covered all our countries except Norway, Spain and Germany[8].

Child support

Some aspects of contact and child support policy were covered in the questionnaire but this policy area has also been the subject of a recent comparative study by the Department for Work and Pensions in the UK[9]. This covers all the countries except Spain.

Findings from the questionnaire

Family relationships

Access to parenting education and training

All the national informants indicated that parenting education and training was available in their country, although the provision and availability varied widely, both between countries, and in some cases between regions. In Ireland the universal public health nursing service provides advice to parents of newborns and maintains some link via home visits or clinic developmental checks, until entry to primary school. After this parents may have access to information, education and advice through

[6] Finch, N. (2006) Childcare and parental leave, in Bradshaw, J. and Hatland, A. (eds), *Social Policy, Family Change and Employment in Comparative Perspective*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
[7] Gornick, J. and Meyers, M. (2003) *Families that Work: Policies for reconciling parenthood and employment*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
[8] http://www.oecd.org/document/45/0,3343,en_2649_34487_39699821_1_1_1_1,00.html.
[9] Skinner, C., Bradshaw, J. and Davidson, J. (2007) *Child Support Policy: An international perspective*, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 405, Leeds: Corporate Document Services. http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep405.pdf.

schools or local community services, but there is no systematic national provision. In Germany, parenting education and training has been regulated by federal law since 1990, but services are provided the local authorities and Bundeslander, and thus provision varies. In Spain, all parents have access to parenting education before a birth or adoption, although this is not obligatory. A similar system operates in Sweden, with additional support available for parents of children with special needs, as well as a system of 'open pre-schools' that parents attend with their child. In addition, informants from Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands referred to the availability of family centres, and their role in supporting parenting, but only in some regions.

Preparation for parenting in schools
None of the informants indicated that there was specific parenting education in schools, but most suggested that topics such as sexual education, gender, family relations, and household management were included within the general curriculum.

Other support for parenting
Informants from Norway, the Netherlands and Ireland mentioned specific initiatives.

The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (BUFdir) run courses known as 'good partnerships' (Godt samliv). These courses for couples expecting their first child are free of charge, last one day/two evenings, and are available in 290 out of 431 municipalities. The programme is administered through the health stations where all pregnant women/couples come for check-ups. The aim of the courses is to give couples 'tools to solve everyday problems and to improve communication within the relationship'.

In the Netherlands, supporting parenting stands very highly on the political agenda – certainly since the latest government which introduced a special Ministry for Family, and Youth and Family Centres.

In Ireland, the Family Support Agency was established in 2003 and has clearly defined functions and responsibilities in the area of family policy and services. Specifically, it brings together programmes and services introduced by Government since 1997, which are designed to: promote local family support; support ongoing parenting relationships for children; and help prevent marital breakdown. More specifically, Springboard is a targeted community based programme attempting to offer local integrated support to high need families. Currently, there are 22 local projects.

Relationship counselling before marriage
Some respondents made the comment that often the availability of counselling depends on local and regional policies, and also that cohabitation without marrying is quite common in their country and therefore counselling, where available, was available to married and non-married couples.

In Norway, counselling is available through public family counselling offices, but few couples would think of contacting an office like that unless they had specific problems that needed to be solved. In addition, couples who wish to improve their communication and generally 'work on their relationships' can seek out 'couple's courses', of which PREP-courses ('Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program') are the most common. Many of the suppliers of PREP-courses are government-sponsored, but the programs are not government-funded, and the user fee is relatively high (NOK 2.500 – app. £250 – plus course material). Courses are open to married and unmarried couples.

In Sweden, the Netherlands, and Germany, counselling services are not centralised, but provided by either the municipality or private organisations. In Spain, if a couple are seeking a Church wedding, there is obligatory relationship-counselling with the Catholic priest before the wedding.

Relationship counselling before divorce
Counselling or mediation was available in all countries, although sometimes availability varies by region, and except in Norway where children are involved this is voluntary.

In Ireland, the Family Mediation Service is a state run service staffed by professionally trained and accredited mediators. It was set up in 1986 and now operates under the auspices of the statutory Family Support Agency. There are over 14 offices located around the country. This service is for married and non-married couples.

In Norway, if a couple have joint children under 16, mediation is mandatory before divorce or the break-up of a cohabiting relationship (divorcing couples won't get their divorce certificate unless they do this, cohabiting couples who split without mediation will not have full benefit rights as lone parents). Mandatory mediation is limited to one session (45 minutes), with the aim of finding a working agreement regarding custody and contact for the children involved. Up to seven sessions are offered for this purpose. Mediation is offered by specially trained mediators, most of whom are family councillors, social workers, psychologists or priests. In addition, public family counselling offices are open to everybody, free of charge. This is where couples with severe problems, including couples who consider divorce, should turn. Except for the special case of mandatory mediation, counselling is entirely voluntary and dependent on the initiative of the couple themselves. In Germany, the youth departments (Jugendämter) at the local level offer a counselling before divorce, to parents with under-aged children. In these cases issues like the best interest of the child, the participation of children in the process of defining the responsibilities of the parents vis-à-vis the child and securing the child's claim on alimony play a central role.

Contact arrangements for absent parents
Arrangements are subject to local and regional policies in Spain, and the Irish informants could locate no policies regarding contact arrangements for absent parents. On the other hand, co-parenting is compulsory after divorce in the Netherlands (since 1998), and is the norm in Sweden and Norway.

In Germany there exists a right and duty to parental care. The parents of a child are obliged and have the right to preserve and encourage the physical and emotional needs and the economic interests of their child/children. Similarly, the Children Act in Norway says that children have a right to have contact with both parents. Levels of child maintenance are lower for non-resident parents who maintain high levels of contact. Public attitudes strongly support continued parenting from both parties.

In the Netherlands, parenting arrangements are negotiated during the process of divorce, and one of the main goals of the above mentioned mediators is to work out workable arrangements with the divorcing parents. Child judges monitor these and ensure arrangements are kept.

In Sweden, traditionally the mother was given sole custody in case of separation and the father was given a so called ‘right of access’ (umgängesrätt). During the 1990s the legislation was changed and shared custody is now the ‘default’ in cases of separation. If custody is not shared, the parent without custody still has the right to meet with the child(ren). It has become increasingly common that children live ‘part time’ with his or her parents after a divorce. Where parents cannot agree about custody, they are offered counselling by the social welfare office. The second step is a court decision taken by the Primary Court after an investigation by the social welfare office. It is mandatory to listen to the child and consider the child’s views before taking any decision.

Policies on smacking
Smacking is illegal in Norway, the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden. It is legal but clearly discouraged in Ireland, and legal but controversial in Spain.

Sweden was the first country to legislate against the use of physical violence against children. The law against ‘barnaga’ was passed through parliament in 1979. People that in their professional activity encounter a child that they suspect is a victim to abuse, violence or any other type of serious mistreatment are obliged to report to the social welfare office, which then has an obligation to make an investigation and if deemed necessary hand over the case to the police. This rule is not restricted to professionals that work with children; it covers all professionals that are dealing with human relations as for example psychologists, family adviser, people working in with criminal care etc. Private individuals are not obliged to report mistreatment of children but they are urged to do so. There are similar rules in the Netherlands.

The punishment of children within the home is currently permitted in Ireland by the existence of the common law defence 'reasonable chastisement'. This punishment cannot be administered 'for the gratification of passion or rage or with an instrument unsuited for the purpose'.

Peer relationships

Policies to discourage bullying
The prevention of bullying appeared to be fairly high on the political agenda of all the countries studied, and all the informants discussed individual programmes and policies designed to tackle bullying.

In Norway, anti-bullying programs have been implemented nationally, and have demonstrated good results. The most widely used is the Olweus-programme, named after Dan Olweus, who is a professor at the University of Bergen. This was offered to all Norwegian schools in 2001, in a massive effort to reduce bullying, and was implemented in more than 400 schools. A report from 2004 (written by none other than Dan Olweus) showed very good results of this initiative, reducing the proportions of children who reported they had been bullied by 34 per cent in eight months. An evaluation of preventive efforts in school in 2006 hailed the Olweus-programme as one of the better initiatives, well-tested and with documented results.

In the Netherlands there is a 'Nationaal onderwijsprotocol tegen pesten' (National School protocol against bullying). Many schools in Sweden, both primary and secondary, have programs against bullying, such as 'friend-supporter' (kamratstödjare) which is a system where an older pupil is made responsible for one or more younger children's well-being in school.

Policies designed to promote positive peer relationships
Several informants referred to the promotion of after-school and other informal activities. In the Netherlands the Brede (all day) school is well-established and integrates formal and informal education, by combining school with crèche, child centres and neighbourhood resources. Informants from both Sweden and Norway mentioned the role of the voluntary sector in providing opportunities for children and young people to interact, such as sports, music, and theatre activities.

In Ireland, peer relationships were considered to be of particular importance. This is particularly visible within the education sector, where the issue of friendships also receives attention through the implementation of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in primary and post-primary schools (Department of Education and Science, 2001). This SPHE programme is part of the curriculum and supports the personal development, health and well-being of young people and helps them to create and maintain supportive relationships. The Education Act emphasises that

schools should promote the social and personal development of students and provide health education for them (Government of Ireland, 1998). Peer relationships also take place outside the educational setting. There is an increasing acknowledgement that national policy should take account of the need of children and young people to interact with each other in informal settings. This is addressed in Teenspace: A National Recreation Policy for Young People launched by the Office of the Minister for Children in 2007.

Policies designed to promote positive relationships between children and adults
This was one area where most informants struggled to think of specific policies or initiatives, with high reliance on the voluntary sector to provide opportunities. In Norway, homework initiatives have been established by organisations like the Red Cross and Save the Children, with financial support from local communities. Adults supervise children and young people, and older students help and supervise the younger ones, and these initiatives are popular among young people from immigrant backgrounds. The Irish informants referred to funding for sporting bodies, many of which rely heavily on and attract high levels of voluntary activity. These organisations typically support and promote high levels of inter-generational interaction. In Germany there are thousands of initiatives and projects in which young people offer services and activities for adults/the old, as well as initiatives and project in which adults/elderly offer something for young people. For example, in the project 'Young meet the Old' (Jung trifft Alt e.V. in Mainz) pupils, teachers, and parents from the Frauenlob-Gymnasium visit inhabitants of an old people's home. This project aims at sharing the rich life experiences of the elderly with young people and to give young people the opportunity to take over social responsibility and to learn about the life worlds of old people. This is seen as part of the educational process of the school and as an opportunity to strengthen the links between the school and the wider community.

Children in society

Policies to promote positive social perceptions of children
This was another area where informants generally did not mention any specific policies or initiatives, with the general perception that such policies were not needed. The Norwegian informant actually felt that 'negative perceptions of children are not considered a problem in this country, and I can think of no policies designed for this aim', with a similar comment from the German informant. The only other significant comment came from one of the Dutch informants, who felt that the Netherlands is traditionally a child-friendly society.

Policies to enable children to enjoy unstructured play
Informants generally commented that although there were no policies in place regarding unstructured play directly, other policies were underpinned by the notion of

access to unstructured play activities. In the Netherlands there is a special foundation whose main aim is to provide outside play facilities (playgrounds) and offer vacation programs for (mainly needy) children in the open air. This foundation is co-financed by the national lottery and is very popular. In Ireland, a national play policy is in place, with initiatives by local authorities to provide playgrounds for children. Informants from both Sweden and Norway referred more generally to day care and after-school care as places where free play is enabled.

Policies to enable children to enjoy structured play
On the whole, informants referred positively to the domains of pre-school childcare, after-school, and holiday activities. Only in Ireland did the informant feel that 'these areas are lacking in government policy to guide any kind of quality provision'.

In Norway, the national nursery coverage rate for children aged 1-5 is 80 per cent. Things are not quite as positive in Spain. 'The most controversial child-care issue in Spain at the moment is pre-school care and especially what is called "educación infantil" concerning children from 0 to 3 years old. Spain has reached the EU Barcelona Targets on child-care regarding children aged 3 to 5, more then 90 per cent of Spanish children at that age goes to school (6 years old is the mandatory school age in Spain) but lies far behind regarding the target on 33 per cent of children 0-3 years old in child-care (Spain has approximately ten per cent of children aged 0-3 years old at pre-school or day-care centres). This is not only a child rights issue in Spain; it is also a women emancipation issue since women are those who traditionally take care of children in Spain and they need to employ someone else or depend on grandparents in order to cope as mothers and professionals. In cities such as Madrid there is an enormous lack of day-care centres'.

After-school care is well catered for in the Netherlands and Sweden, although in some cities in the Netherlands there are long waiting lists. In Norway, children attending first to fourth grade are given the opportunity to participate in supervised after-school activities, *skolefritidsordning* (SFO). This is a programme designed to provide care and supervision, both before and after school. Since 1999, all municipalities have been obliged to offer such programmes. The purpose is to bridge the gap between the end of the school day and the end of the parents' normal workday. In 2004, 69 per cent of all first-graders in Norway participated in SFO for six hours or more per week. Participation falls gradually by age, down to 28 per cent of fourth-graders. In several countries, holiday activities tend to be organised more locally, relying heavily on the voluntary sector.

In Germany, local authorities are responsible for provision in this area, and thus services differ in quantity and quality. Furthermore, there is a discrepancy concerning services for children and families between Eastern and Western Germany. Due to the tradition in the former GDR the provision of child care and educational facilities is much better in Eastern than in Western Germany. The provision rate for the under-3

year olds in Eastern Germany is 40 per cent and in Western Germany is less than five per cent. There is a new law concerning the expansion of early child care for children under 3 years of age (Tagesbetreuungsausbaugesetz). With the help of this law, the Federal Government intends to realise a coverage rate for children under 3 of at least 20 per cent (750.000 places) by 2010 – an attempt to meet the international standard. Due to a federal law from the first half of the 90's the provision rate for the 3 to 6 year olds (before enrolment in school) is nearly 100 per cent in both parts of Germany (but only on a part-time basis). The provision rate for after school education and care in Eastern Germany is 68 per cent and in Western Germany seven per cent.

Policies which create opportunities for adults to play a positive socialising role with children and young people

Here, informants again stressed the important role of the voluntary sector, and therefore the lack of (need for) official policies. In particular, volunteering by adults in coaching or leading sports activities were mentioned in both the Netherlands and Norway. In addition in Sweden the social welfare office employs adults as 'contact persons/families' for children that need support from adults outside their own family. Norway, in particular was very proud of their volunteering history, with the informant stating that 'we are probably the most "organised" people in the world! Some years ago, it was calculated that Norway had 16 million members in organisations (of a population of just over four million) – rates are probably somewhat lower now, but you get the picture. An estimated 50 per cent of the adult population participates in voluntary work in a given year, which is a very high figure compared to other countries'.

Whether policies are checked against the UN convention on the rights of the child

The UN convention is entrenched in law in all the countries studied, although the degree to which informants thought it was adhered to varied. In Sweden 'in every instance, no matter what kind of decisions that are made, authorities, on all levels, are obliged to make an investigation about the consequences for children. When there are conflicts between children's interests and interests of other groups, priorities should always be given to children'. And in Norway, 'the convention of children's rights now has a very strong status in Norwegian legislation'. In Germany, as a consequence of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, many institutions and activities promoting children's rights were established like the Children's Commission of the German Bundestag, 'Ombudspersons', Children's Offices, children's and youth parliaments, Children's Commissioners in some 'Bundesländer' and at the local level.

However, informants were less clear on examples of policies which have been checked against the convention.

Subjective well-being

Why children like school a lot
There were differing opinions amongst the informants as to why children in their country would like their school a lot. In the Netherlands, 'the schools are very much child-oriented, joyful, playful, there is much attention for the "individual child", its capacities and character'. The small size of many primary schools in Norway was also felt to improve 'school well-being. The high levels of school well-being may be related to the fact that small schools feel safe, the parents of all the children know each other as well as the teachers, and there are relatively high teacher-student ratios. It's a community thing: nothing causes an outrage in an otherwise docile part of the countryside than a proposal to shut down the local primary school!' The 'refreshing lack of obsession with measuring children's progress' was felt to enable children to enjoy school in Ireland.

Patterns of interaction between schools and parents
Most the informants referred to the interaction between schools and parents being limited to meetings between the teacher and parents once or twice a year. In Norway, there is a mandatory 'parents-school co-operation committee', consisting of some staff, some parents, some students, and some members of the community. The committee has the right to voice an opinion on all school-related matters. There is also a parents' council, of which all parents with children in the school are members. A similar, formal system of interaction is present in Germany, with each class electing a parents' spokesperson for the school year. The rights and responsibilities of these spokespersons are regulated regionally by the Bundeslander, but in general their role is quite limited. In the Netherlands many parents participate in school activities, for example, 'reading' mothers, all kind of DIY activities, excursions etc.

Is social and emotional education in the national curriculum?
In Sweden, Ireland, and Norway, there was a national curriculum, but only in Ireland did this include social and emotional education in it's own right, in the form of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). In both Sweden and Norway, it was felt that there was an emphasis on the value of critical thinking, tolerance, sensitivity and values.

In Spain, although the curriculum is determined locally, some parts of the curriculum are obligatory throughout the country. 'Educación para la ciudadanía', citizenship education has recently been introduced into the curriculum. In Germany, the Bundeslander are responsible for defining the curricula, but in general social and emotional education is part of this, but plays a minor role in relation to cognitive skills. In the Netherlands, there are performance indicators but each school decides what methods and curriculum they use. The informant felt that 'there is a lot (too much?) attention for social and emotional education. Universities and high schools complain

that this goes at the cost of cognitive skills. Teachers are less and less equipped to train cognitive skills'.

Behaviours and risks

Healthy eating policies
Initiatives, such as encouraging schools to run breakfast clubs, media campaigns to promote healthy eating, 'five-a-day' campaigns, free fruit and vegetables provided through schools, were mentioned by all the informants. Free and healthy school meals have been provided in day care, preschool, primary, and in most cases secondary schools in Sweden since the 1960s. In Ireland, A National Nutrition Policy is currently being developed which will provide strategic direction on nutrition for the next ten years. The target group is young people, 0-18 years, and the priority actions are obesity and food poverty. A national consultation has taken place and the policy will be published shortly.

Promoting physical activity policies
Several informants complained that although sport/physical activity is part of the curriculum in schools, the number of hours is too few, or has decreased in recent years. There is also widespread support of sporting activities and clubs outside of school hours, but most provision is through the voluntary sector. Informants from both the Netherlands and Germany stated that whilst most children in their country are involved in sports clubs, participation is lower by those from ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic status.

The most developed policies appeared to exist in Ireland. 'There are three main areas around which structured physical activity for children and young people can take place - the physical education curriculum in schools, extra-curricular sports played in schools and sports played outside the school (Fahey *et al*., 2005). Each of these areas is supported by Government policy and a number of different Government departments are involved. Ready, Steady, Play! A National Play Policy (2004) and Teenspace: A National Recreation Policy for Young People (2007) provide frameworks for building on existing provision and for the creation of new public play/recreation opportunities for children and young people. Physical activity is an important focus within these policies'.

Policies to tackle obesity
Obesity amongst children and young people was recognised to be an increasing problem by all the country informants. In Ireland, 'the National Taskforce on Obesity was established in 2004. A key role for the Taskforce was to set out a strategic framework that would: encompasses the determinants of overweight and obesity; identify best practice for prevention, detection and treatment; and create the social and physical environments that makes it easier for children and adults to eat more

healthily and be more active on a regular basis'. Similarly, in Spain 'the strategy for nutrition, physical activity, and prevention of obesity (NAOS strategy) was launched in 2005, and addresses obesity through a series of working groups. These groups focus on different areas, including: targets for a healthy diet and physical activity; the environmental and genetic determinants of obesity; preventative health care measures; and scientific research. The approach is positive, participative and proactive'. Various initiatives to tackle obesity were also mentioned by the other informants.

Legal age of purchasing cigarettes
In the Netherlands, cigarettes can legally be purchased from the age of 16. In Spain, Sweden, Ireland, Germany, and Norway it is 18. In both Spain and Germany, the age-restriction has recently been increased from 16 to 18.

Policies to tackle under-age smoking
Under-age smoking was certainly recognised to be a problem in the Netherlands, Spain, Ireland and Germany, less so in Spain and Norway, where smoking rates amongst young people have been declining in recent years.

The main policies to tackle under-age smoking were to enforce the age limits on selling cigarettes. In Germany, cigarette machines have to be equipped with electronic age-verification, using the EC-card.

Bans on smoking in restaurants, pubs and other public places have been introduced in Norway (2004), Ireland (2004), and Spain (2006). In the Netherlands smoking in general is forbidden in official buildings but not (yet) in all restaurants and cafés. Other policies noted by the informants included information campaigns about the negative effects of smoking, and anti-tobacco programs in schools.

Legal age for purchasing alcohol
The legal age for purchasing alcohol varied across countries, and in some cases for light and strong alcohol, as shown in the table below.

Table 2 Legal age for purchasing alcohol

Country	*Light alcohol (beer and wine)*	*Strong alcohol (spirits)*
Netherlands	16	18
Spain	16 or 18, with regional variations	
Sweden	18	20
Ireland	18	18
Norway	18	21
Germany	16	18

Policies to tackle under-age drinking

Under-age drinking was recognised as a problem by all country informants. As with smoking, the key policy mentioned was enforcing the restrictions on selling alcohol to those under-age. In Sweden and Norway, there are restrictions on where and when alcohol can be bought (state monopoly), and on prices. The German Federal government intends to fight the consumption of alcohol by young people by introducing special taxes on 'mix drinks', such as alcopops. Alcohol awareness programs and strategies were also mentioned.

Policies on advertising for tobacco and alcohol

Policies varied in the different countries, and are summarised in the following table.

Table 3 Advertising for alcohol and tobacco

Country	*Alcohol*	*Tobacco*
Netherlands	Permitted	Not permitted on TV, in cinemas, magazines, or newspapers
Spain	Prohibited during children's TV timeslot (6pm to 10pm). Billboards have to be 500 metres from schools and sport centres	Banned on TV, radio, in cinemas, outdoors, print, point of sale, sponsor, or internet
Sweden	Allowed, but not to be directed at people under the age of 25. Must be accompanied by a warning text	Banned, since 2005
Ireland	Currently legal, but under review	Not permitted
Norway	Illegal	Illegal
Germany	Allowed, but if on TV/films only after 6pm	Allowed, but if on TV/films only after 6pm

Policies to prevent teenage conceptions

Sex education was widely available in schools in all respondent countries, although was criticised in Norway for being too 'technical' and for being dependent on what individual schools wanted to teach. Contraceptives were cited as being freely available in the Netherlands, Spain (subject to some regional variations and criticism by the Catholic Church), Sweden, and Norway. Availability of abortion services varied: in the Netherlands abortion services are available for free and the parents will not be informed; in Sweden, free abortion is offered up to week 18; in Norway abortion is available on demand before the twelfth week of pregnancy, but if the pregnant woman is younger than 16, parents have a right to be informed about her request for abortion.

Final questions

Key government policies that have made a significant difference to child well-being

This question asked informants to showcase their countries' most important polices in relation to child well-being. On the whole responses are given verbatim.

Netherlands

A. The stimulation of (and support for) **De Brede School** (The broad school).
B. The initiative for pre and early school learning; this programme does not work very well despite good intentions, but a start has been made and it will develop more professionally in the near future. It focuses on children (mainly from ethnic minorities) whose parents are not capable of preparing their children well for school.
C. Activation of neighbourhoods in problem-ridden areas.
D. The youth and family centres might gain a leading role – but it is too early to judge that.

Spain

A. Two weeks of paternity leave (will be extended to 30 days within the next government term if the Socialist Party PSOE wins the elections). This policy forms part of the Law for equality between men and women approved in the parliament in December 2006.
B. -2500 euros at every child birth from 1 July 2007 (this is a family target that has been criticized since you can't assure that the money goes to the children in the family, anyhow, it's at least a start.
C. The 'Plans d'entorn' (Social Environment Plan) in Catalonia. Coordinated by social services and school centers, this plan has basically two aims: to offer services from a community perspective; to promote social and educative integration of the migrant community.

Ireland

A. The development of a National Children's Strategy which then lead to the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children.
B. The lifecycle approach taken in Towards 2016: the ten-year framework social partnership agreement also facilitated a more holistic approach to responding to need and supporting well-being.

Norway

A. The incorporation of the UN Child Convention in national law is a major step forwards, in that it gives activists for children's rights a great advantage. Actual

changes as a result of this incorporation have been few and of importance only to a minority, but anyone wishing to extend children's rights can always point to the Convention. This keeps the issues on the agenda.

Germany

A. Decision makers hope to reduce the stress situations for young parents by making the reconciliation of work and family easier, making it more attractive for fathers to play a more important role in the care and education of their children and to improve the life chances of children by reforming the early child education and by introducing all-day-schools. However, empirical studies are rare and existing studies are ambivalent. Whether all-day-schools are attractive for pupils or not is hard to say and whether the well-being of toddlers can be increased by more childcare facilities for the under three year olds is debatable. It seems to be that new trends to introduce ambitious educational goals into nursery schools and kindergartens increases the pressure on children to be active and effective. There is an increasing expectation of societal actors with respect to the learning activities of children and youth.

One policy the UK could implement

Several suggestions were made, although it is worth noting that some of these are already in place in the UK (marked *):

- Good facilities, regulations and labour conditions for part-time work.
- Mixed gender education.
- Stimulate good care education (including sex education) at school.
- Compulsory visits to consultation offices directly after childbirth with qualitatively good medical and educational information for young parents.
- Coordinating help for young people and parents on a local level, making it as low threshold as possible and combining it with as many participation offers as possible.
- The establishment of an office of the minister for children*.
- The introduction of an Ombudsman for children*.
- Legalisation against the use of violence against children.
- Implementing the right to education without violence (physical sanctions, slapping)*.

Conclusions

This short piece of research has sought to discover what (public) policies may be having an impact on the subjective well-being, personal relationships and behaviours of children. Two sets of informants in six countries, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, and Spain were asked to complete a questionnaire on policies relating to child well-being.

Of course public policies are only one factor that might be having an impact on these dimensions of well-being. We know for example that at an international level GDP per capita, social expenditure per capita and expenditure on families with children are all positively associated with child well-being. Also there is a fairly strong relationship between child well-being and the level of relative poverty and inequality. Family structures, – the proportion of children living in lone parents and step parents –, does not appear to be associated with overall well-being at the international level. However there may be a trade-off – countries with large welfare states do well and countries with strong families do well – countries with neither do badly.

Then there are a set of possible influences which may broadly be described as cultural. The Anglophone welfare states, including the UK, the US, Canada and New Zealand, did not do well on child well-being. Australia did better than these but perhaps it is no longer Anglophone, having had large inward migration from southern Europe and South East Asia. Ireland is a mixed case.

The general argument here is that these societies with their emphasis on personal liberty and individualism do not perform well in relation to children. Anglophone countries are less solidaristic, favour individual freedom over the state, competition over consensus, and are less inclined to interfere in the private sphere of the family. As a result children tend to be ‘seen and not heard’, considered a disruption to adult life, even a threat. This is reflected in the welcome we give children in, for example, hotels and restaurants, on public transport, even in cities, towns and neighbourhoods.

So there are other factors that may influence child well-being apart from public policy and the public policies we have covered in this study.

Given the limitations of time and resources in this study we need to be wary of drawing too confident general conclusions. However:

- Consistent and reliable after-school care, often in the form of extended schools, appears to be important in some of the countries studies. This provides parents with childcare to support their working hours, and provides children with opportunities for peer-interaction and play activities.
- The prevention of bullying seemed to be fairly high on the political agenda of all the countries studied, with informants referring to a number of strategies and policies aimed at discouraging bullying (the programme in Norway may well be worth further study).
- In Ireland Social, Personal and Health Education is part of the curriculum and may be that we could benefit form looking at its success, as social and emotional education is being implemented in the UK.
- Child-centred, small, and friendly schools were considered to be the reason why children in some of the countries studied might particularly enjoy school. Also the absence of pressure from exams.

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is entrenched in law in all the countries studied, and is used to raise both the profile and interests of children. For example, the Swedish informant stated that 'in every instance, no matter what kind of decisions that are made, authorities, on all levels, are obliged to make an investigation about the consequences for children. When there are conflicts between children's interests and interests of other groups, priorities should always be given to children', which clearly illustrates the emphasis that is placed on children's well-being.
- We did not find clear or consistent results in respect of parenting education – it appears to be very variable. However we were struck by the Irish Family Mediation Service and the Norwegian mandatory mediation service at the breakdown of relationships. In general the rights of non resident parents seem better protected in the countries studied than in the UK.
- Smacking is now illegal in all countries outside the home/family. It is heavily discouraged in Ireland and Spain inside the home but not yet illegal. It is firmly outlawed in the other countries - but not in the UK.
- Ireland seems to be a model on physical activity and perhaps its strategy for obesity needs to be investigated.
- In Germany they use technology to stop teenagers buying cigarettes in machines.
- We are better and worse than some countries on rules about tobacco and alcohol advertising.
- In respect of policies to prevent teenage pregnancy we are clearly failing comparatively and there is much to learn from other countries. But this has been the subject of a special study by UNICEF[10], which is probably a better source of data on the mechanisms that work.

There are obvious limitations to a short research project such as this. The informants' responses have not provided a decisive answer to the question of why the UK does less well than other countries on child well-being - there is no magic bullet. But the research has provided some useful suggestions that might be worth following up to inform policy developments here.

[10] http://www.unicef-irc.org/cgi-bin/unicef/Lunga.sql?ProductID=328.

Annex A

National Informants

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Annex B

Child Well-being: Policy Questionnaire

THE UNIVERSITY of York

spru | Social Policy Research Unit

Child Well-being: Policy Questionnaire

When the UNICEF report Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries (http://www.unicef- icdc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf) was published there was an outcry in the United Kingdom because we came bottom. Since the publication of this report, many in the UK have been asking why other countries appear to be doing better than the UK with regard to child well-being. In order to help answer this question and highlight good practice in other countries that the UK might learn from, UNICEF UK has commissioned research into policies relating to child well-being in the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Spain, Ireland, and Germany.

To help us answer these questions we would be grateful if you could complete this questionnaire, in relation to your own country. Please type your responses after each question, providing as much information as possible.

We are interested mainly in central government policies, programmes and initiatives, both general and specific, in the areas detailed. Policies instigated by local government and non-governmental organisations may also be relevant.

For each policy, we would like to know:

- What problem the policy sought to address?
- Who devised and initiated the policy? (e.g. government department, NGO etc).
- Is the policy universal (for all children) or targeted at a specific group? (e.g. socio-economic group).
- Date of introduction/operation.
- Whether still in place.
- Any evaluation which took place.
- Whether there was any measurable success or change (positive or negative) observed.

Family relationships

1. Do all parents have access to parenting education and training?

2. Is there any preparation for parenting routinely taught in schools?

3. What other policies support parenting? Is this universal or targeted support?

4. Is government-funded relationship-counselling available before marriage?

5. Is government-funded relationship-counselling available before divorce?

6. What, if any, arrangements exist to encourage absent parents to maintain contact with their children after separation?

7. Are there any policies on smacking/chastisement of children by parents?

Peer relationships

1. Are there any programmes in place in primary/secondary schools to discourage bullying?

2. Are there any policies in place to promote and support positive peer interactions between children/young people in schools?

3. Are there any policies in place to promote and support positive peer interactions between children/young people in the wider community?

4. What about policies aimed at driving positive relationships between children/young people and adults outside their families?

Children in society

1. Are there any formal policies which aim to promote positive social perceptions of children and their role in society?

2. What policies exist to enable children to enjoy unstructured play?

3. What about more structured activities, such as pre- and after-school care, and holiday activities?

4. Are there policies which create opportunities for adults to play a positive, socialising role with children/young people in their community, for example through volunteering schemes?

5. Are new policies for children and young people checked against the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to ensure that they are consistent before implementation? Are there examples of where new policies have been amended to ensure consistency?

Subjective well-being

1. Can you think of any reasons why a child in your country would like their school a lot?

2. Describe the typical pattern of interaction between schools and parents.

3. Is there a national curriculum in primary and/or secondary schools? Does it include any social and emotional education?

4. Are there other policies which support the development of children's social and emotional well-being?

Behaviours and risks

1. Are there any policies specifically aimed at increasing healthy eating amongst children/young people?

2. Do policies exist to promote physical activity amongst children/young people, both in and outside of schools?

3. Is childhood obesity a problem in your country? Are there policies to tackle this?

4. At what age can young people legally purchase cigarettes in your country?

5. Is illegal/under-age smoking a problem in your country? Are there policies to tackle this?

6. At what age can young people legally purchase alcohol in your country?

7. Is illegal/under-age drinking a problem in your country? Are there policies to tackle this?

8. Are advertisements for alcohol and tobacco permitted in your country – on TV, in the cinemas, in magazines, and in newspapers?

9. What government-funded services exist to prevent teenage conceptions/births (for example contraceptive services, sex education in schools, and abortion services?)

Final questions

1. What are the two key government-led policies or initiatives that have made a significant difference to the well-being of children and young people in the last five years in your country?

2. If you could recommend one policy/initiative, based on the experience of your country, that the UK should consider implementing what would it be?

3. Are there any other policies which particularly enable children and young people to flourish, and feel valued members of the community?

Please save your completed questionnaire and return to the researchers:

- Dr Linda Cusworth (lsc501@york.ac.uk).
- Professor Jonathan Bradshaw (jrb1@york.ac.uk).