

Achieving impact in public service: essays in Honour of Sylda Langford

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[Lynne Peyton](#)

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Written as a tribute to Sylda Langford, considered by many to be one of the most outstanding public servants of her time, this collection of essays by senior civil servants and academics provides a fascinating insight into the historical development of policy impacting children in Ireland since the turn of the century and the challenges which currently impede the vision for Ireland's children as set out in the National Children's Strategy (Citation2000).

After qualifying in social work from the London School of Economics, Sylda worked as a social worker and senior social worker throughout the 1980s before being appointed Principal Officer in the Department of Social Welfare in the early 1990s. In her subsequent role as Assistant Secretary in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, she led out on a range of quality issues and promoted a whole-of-government approach.

When the Office of the Minister for Children was established in 2005, Sylda was appointed Director General. Throughout her career, the consistent themes she pursued were; the need to develop evidence-based policies and services to improve the lives of children; to address social exclusion; and to do so on an interdepartmental, whole-of-government basis.

Drawing on the expertise of various champions for different aspects of what is a complex jigsaw of issues impacting the lives and wellbeing of children in Ireland, this book represents a summary of developments over the past 20 years and also identifies the ongoing challenges to providing integrated, interdepartmental approaches.

This is a fascinating read for anyone interested in any aspect of children's rights in Ireland, including access to early education, tackling poverty, maintaining a balance between welfare and child protection, and enhancing the youth justice system. Its contributors are civil servants, academics, and service providers, as well as champions for children's rights. Although specific to Ireland, the policy dilemmas will have resonance for other jurisdictions.

The book considers the significance and importance of the creation of a Department for Children and its successors but also identifies that key services such as health, education, income support and housing, in so far as they impact on children, remain outside its remit. While each author identifies opportunities for more integrated approaches, they remain cautious about the potential to achieve them.

Byrne argues that while policy measures to reduce child poverty among very young children have been successful, future policy actions should adopt a life course approach, and need a multidimensional and cross departmental strategy.

In particular, Kilkenny is concerned that the dilution of the Department's remit with the addition of disability, equality and integration and the abolition of the Youth Justice Service are concerning. McCarthy suggests that tensions between policy goals and different organisational requirements will continue to frustrate the continued potential for growth. Quinlan points out that creating a sustainable child protection and welfare system requires much stronger interagency cooperation with statutory requirements for sectors other than Tusla to take responsibility for their part in the protection of children, as well as promotion of a learning culture rather than a blame one, in this complex area of practice.

Finishing the book, I am left with a burning desire to create a high-level mastermind group bringing together all these knowledgeable academics with senior civil servants in key departments as well as leaders in Tusla, Health Services Executive and education to take up Sylda's challenge. The case is well made for a recreation of her passion for a whole-of-government, interagency approach to tackling both the recurring and emerging challenges impacting children in Ireland today.

REFERENCE

The National Children's Strategy. (2000). Our Children, Their Lives: Department of Health and Children, Ireland. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)