



Response

Education Related Actions  
In  
Programme for Government

November 2016

## **INTRODUCTION**

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) are the regional umbrella body for the children's sector in Northern Ireland. CiNI represents the interests of its 160 member organisations providing policy, information, training and participation support services to members in their direct work with and for children and young people. CiNI membership also includes colleagues in the children's statutory sector recognising that the best outcomes for children and young people are increasingly achieved working in partnership with all those who are committed to improving the lives of children and young people in NI.

CiNI welcomes this opportunity to provide some feedback and commentary on the Education Related Actions contained within the Programme for Government.

## **GENERAL COMMENTS**

### Working in Partnership

CiNI warmly welcomes the premise behind the Programme for Government to improve outcomes and work in partnership; it is our view that the best outcomes for children and young people can only be achieved through partnership working and co-operation.

In this regard, CiNI would highlight the need to ensure that the Children's Services Co-operation Act is fully embedded within these actions and not limited to a few.

The Children's Services Co-operation Act requires that every children's authority (including Government Departments) must co-operate towards the well-being of children and young people including:

- (a) physical and mental health;
- (b) the enjoyment of play and leisure;
- (c) learning and achievement;
- (d) living in safety and with stability;
- (e) economic and environmental well-being;
- (f) the making by them of a positive contribution to society;
- (g) living in a society which respects their rights;
- (h) living in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted between persons who share a relevant characteristic and persons who do not share that characteristic.

It is imperative therefore that as the Department of Education is the lead responsible Department that all aspects of the Act are contained within the PfG actions.

### **Children with Disabilities**

Not all children experience equal access to early years and childcare. There is a large volume of evidence to illustrate the positive outcomes for children when investment is targeted during the very early years, it is also important to note that some children and families will need additional supports and interventions at different points in a child's life.

The Department must have a sense of clarity and an agreed understanding of the concept of early intervention which must embrace early age and early stage intervention (irrespective of age). Indeed the Children & Young

People's Strategic Partnership sets out a position paper on early intervention and have an agreed definition which states:

***Early intervention is defined as, 'intervening early and as soon as possible to tackle problems emerging for children, young people and their families or with a population at risk of developing problems. Early intervention may occur at any stage in a child's life'.***

We would very much welcome the Education Committee adopting this definition of early intervention and encourage the Department of Education to do likewise.

There are a number of children and young people with disabilities who are often neglected within policies and frameworks, including children with a disability. Essentially there are limited actions within the document relating to children with a disability which we would like to see expanded, specifically transitions between primary and post primary.

Evidence clearly highlights that children with disabilities suffer from poor transition planning. All too often the transition of disabled young people causes stress, upset and disruption. Moreover, confusion for families in the transfer process can lead to ambiguity around the process as well as an increase in feelings of isolation within the family unit.

Transition difficulties for disabled young people can appear magnified; we would welcome further actions within the plan which will be of benefit to the child and their family.

## **Childcare & Child Poverty**

For all parents juggling work and childcare has become more complex, often involving the use of family and friends. Moreover, families with a disabled child have an increased likelihood of being in poverty which is linked to the increased costs of raising a child with disabilities and the loss of income as parents choose to look after their child. Findings indicate that the cost of raising a disabled child is approximately three times the cost of raising a non-disabled child.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to development of policy in respect of children with disabilities and childcare there is no real consideration given to their particular needs and circumstances. As an example, emphasis on area-based approaches to disadvantage and targeted areas of disadvantage has an adverse impact on children with disabilities who are geographically dispersed and will often experience difficulty accessing specialist provision in their local area.

In 2004, the Promoting Social Inclusion (PSI) Working Group on Disability identified barriers to employment, education, transport, housing, access to information and lifelong learning for children and adults with disabilities and made a series of recommendations.<sup>2</sup> One of the recommendations was:

- Early Years and Family Support: More childcare provision is needed for families with children with disabilities.

Children in Northern Ireland fully support the action contained within this document regarding childcare for children with disabilities however we are concerned it does not go far enough.

---

<sup>1</sup> Child Poverty Alliance (2014) *Beneath the Surface: Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: CPA.

<sup>2</sup> Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability (2009), Report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability, Belfast, OFMDFM

Childcare should be considered within two contexts: firstly, as contributing to a child's education and development and secondly as an economic issue, to facilitate parents to get in to and stay in work and an opportunity for job creation.

Government have long argued that the best route out of poverty is through paid work. However, in Northern Ireland, there is an absence of a childcare infrastructure to support parents to be able to get into work, education or training.

We really do need to see a childcare strategy that deals with the high costs of childcare; increases accessibility of childcare services, and greater information on what is available to help parents. We would particularly welcome a fundamental and long term commitment from the Department of Education to introduce a robust childcare strategy without delay.

## **Indicators and Data**

We wish to highlight that we have concerns regarding the extent to which the indicators and data source actually does inform and underpin the overarching outcomes. We believe that currently the document lacks specific detail to show how the actions will improve the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

In its report, 'Barriers to Effective Government Delivery for Children,'<sup>3</sup> NICCY stated that

*"Existing data is not always sufficiently disaggregated and insufficient data exists in respect of vulnerable and marginalised groups of children. There is a*

---

3

[http://www.niccy.org/uploaded\\_docs/2011/Publications/QUB%20Barriers%20Report%20-%203%20Nov%2011%20\(body%20pages\).pdf](http://www.niccy.org/uploaded_docs/2011/Publications/QUB%20Barriers%20Report%20-%203%20Nov%2011%20(body%20pages).pdf)

*limited amount of qualitative research conducted on the experiences of children and young people. The lack of good quality baseline data in some instances can make meaningful assessment of progress against the strategies, policies and action plans particularly problematic.”*

CiNI recognises that some work has been undertaken in relation to disaggregating data to consider specific groups of vulnerable children and young people. However we believe that there remains considerable work to be done to develop a comprehensive, holistic set of data. Clearly an extensive range of data sets will enable the collation of much important and valuable information. They would also provide a complete picture of children and young people’s progress toward realisation of the overarching outcomes.

## **CONCLUSION**

We wish to reiterate our support for the outcomes based Programme for Government that has the potential to improve outcomes for all children and young people; however it is somewhat disappointing that actions to improve the lives of some children and young people are limited in nature.

Finally, we trust that this feedback will be useful and beneficial to the Education Committee as it takes forward this work.

Ellen Finlay, Policy Officer

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI)  
Unit 9, 40 Montgomery Road  
Belfast BT6 9HL  
Tel: 028 9040 1290  
Fax: 028 9070 9418  
Email: [ellen@ci-ni.org.uk](mailto:ellen@ci-ni.org.uk)