



Response

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

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 the Programme for Government. The Children's Services Co-operation Act requires that every children's authority (including the Executive) 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 the Executive takes the lead to ensure that all aspects of the Act are embedded in to policy and practice.

Outcome 1: We proposer through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy

We chair the Child Poverty Alliance; we believe there is insufficient reference to child poverty within this outcome. There are social, economic and environmental factors that contribute to the high levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland, there is a need then under this outcome to address issues surrounding low wages, zero hour contracts and childcare.

The first childcare strategy for Northern Ireland was published in 1999, entitled Children First. The Strategy highlighted a number of challenges that needed to be addressed. One was the high cost of childcare; others were the number of parents who did not have access to childcare services, childcare services not being appropriate, and insufficient information services for parents. Those issues were identified in 1999, and they are still very relevant today.

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 need a firm commitment from the Executive within the Programme for Government to implement 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 Executive within the PfG to improving the life chances of children by developing a strategy that covers a period of at least 10 years with built in critical evaluation at specific periods along the way.

Reduction of child poverty figures should also be a specific outcome within the Programme for Government and the Executive should explicitly commit all Departments to eradicating child poverty as a key outcome within this strategy. Eradicating child poverty is would be an effective tool in enhancing well-being, increasing social capital and delivering on the existing UK child poverty targets.

Outcome 3: We have a more equal society

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 and the educational needs of children and young people with a disability.

There is substantive evidence that clearly shows the barriers to learning faced by those who have special educational needs. Specifically we would refer you to a report by the Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance – which we co-chair – outlining that many children and young people and their parents are not receiving the educational support they are entitled to.¹

We would like to see further actions contained within this Outcome to ensure that children and young people with disabilities enjoy their right to full inclusion within the education system and that their development is not obstructed. This will ensure they are able to meet their full developmental potential.

Moreover, transition difficulties for disabled young people can appear magnified; we would welcome further outcomes within the PfG which will be of benefit to the child and their family beyond child to adulthood but from primary to post primary. We strongly urge the Executive to list outcomes that will be of direct benefit to all children and young people with disabilities to enable them to reach their full potential and to achieve full inclusion within society.

If outcomes and actions are not priorities within the Programme for Government then funding will not flow towards dealing with these inequalities, resulting in government failing to achieve the outcome of having a more equal society.

¹ Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance: The State of SEN Statements 2015

Outcome 4: We enjoy long, healthy lives

There is a large volume of evidence to illustrate the positive outcomes for children and young people 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.

We very much welcome the commitment from the Executive to the Early Intervention Transformation Programme. However, we would welcome the Executive committing to a definition of early intervention. We would therefore recommend the Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership's 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.

Outcome 6: We have more people working in better jobs &

Outcome 8: We care for others and we help those in need

According to official statistics over 60 per cent of children experiencing poverty here live in households where at least one member of the family is in work. We can no longer assume that any job is a route out of poverty. We are therefore disappointed that the PfG has not made reference to improving low pay, progression and insecure working conditions. Indeed earnings

within Northern Ireland are still failing to keep pace with increases in the costs of essential items.

Moreover, if work is to offer a route out of poverty then the PfG needs to contain outcomes relating to same and address the barriers faced by many parents in balancing work with caring responsibilities, notably the difficulty relating to the high cost of childcare. It is this issue which is a particular problem in Northern Ireland due to the inadequate childcare infrastructure and lack of policy direction.

With more children living in working from working households it is imperative that the Executive commits to eradicating child poverty as conventional approaches are not working. We would therefore welcome actions that will address low pay, insecure work, progression in work and balancing work and caring responsibilities.

It is our strong view that in light of the obligations of the Child Poverty Act, the Executive must deliver a special focus on eradicating child poverty and reducing inequalities within the Programme for Government framework.

We very much welcome the outcome relating to caring for others and helping those in need. However we would like to draw your attention to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Children in Northern Ireland firmly believe that the legislating of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 allows for the promotion of equality of opportunity for all children and young people. We would therefore welcome the acknowledgement within the PfG to protect vulnerable groups of children and young people which is required by law.

Furthermore, we would very much welcome a detailed full equality impact assessment to ensure there is a clear strategic overview of how these outcomes will impact upon everyone living in Northern Ireland, but particularly the most vulnerable.

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.

We would like to know what consultation the Executive has conducted with children and young people directly. Obviously this Programme for Government will have an impact upon children and young people. We suggest that consultation should be carried out with children and young people. We would highlight the Ask First principles which have been endorsed by Government departments. The principles are underpinned and informed by the UNCRC and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). Ask First principles are the Northern Ireland standards for children and young people's participation in public decision making. The standards were developed by the Participation Network to assist public authorities to establish effective direct engagement with children and young people. The standards set out the various elements, which together, ensure that the involvement of children and young people in public decision making is both meaningful for them, and effective for the public authority with whom they are engaged.

Such consultation is essential not only in ensuring compliance with Section 75, but also in ensuring the Government's compliance with Article 12 of the UNCRC, one of the principles of the UNCRC - Respect for the views of the Child. In examining the government's compliance with Article 12, the UNCRC Committee recommended that the government,

*"...take further steps to promote, facilitate and monitor systematic, meaningful and effective participation of all groups of children in society."*²

² Para 30 CRC/C/15/Add.188

Also, the Equality Commission's, "*Guidance for Implementing Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998*" states that consultation should take place in accordance with its stated Guiding Principles on Consultation,

"...specific consideration is given to how best to communicate information to children and young people..."^[3]

We do not believe cost nor time is a satisfactory reason for not complying with the Department's legal obligations.

We are a little perplexed that the EQIA states that "the impact of the Programme for Government on equality and good relations will be positive." How can you come to this conclusion when vulnerable groups have been omitted from or actions are limited?

There is a need for full and proper adherence to statutory equality duties and to the common law duty to consult, including adequate time for full public consultation and engagement, particularly with affected groups and individuals to ensure that proper consideration is given to how potential adverse impact for equality categories can be effectively mitigated.

We wish to reiterate the need for compliance with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and for the Executive to take action and advice on how to conduct a proper EQIA.

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