



Press Release

NI EXECUTIVE CHALLENGED TO INTRODUCE THE CHILDREN'S BILL – A MECHANISM TO ACHIEVE BETTER OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI), the regional umbrella body for the children's sector in Northern Ireland, have today called on the Northern Ireland Executive to support the Children's Bill being brought forward by the Green Party's MLA Steven Agnew.

The Children's Bill would compel all government departments to co-operate in achieving better outcomes for children and young people; compel relevant government departments and agencies, public bodies and local councils to work together in planning, commissioning and delivering services for children and young people; and help government departments pool budgets, share staff and other resources, as well as jointly commission services for children and young people.

Pauline Leeson CBE, Chief Executive, Children in Northern Ireland, discusses the importance of the Children's Bill:

"We believe that a revised approach to the manner in which policy, budgeting and spending are constructed is urgently needed to ensure the essential needs of children and young people are protected in a time of diminishing public resources. The overwhelming message from the Children's Sector is a plea to the Executive to support the Children's Bill."

"Experience has shown us that Government Departments approach their work with specific mandates, separate budgets and defined areas of responsibility, because of this there are limitations to how Departments are working in collaboration."

The needs of children and young people do not simply begin and end along the lines of departmental portfolios. It is only through genuine, collaborative, co-operative and joined up working that the true opportunity to maximise scarce resources in the best interests of children and young people can be achieved. There is less money on the table, it is

important therefore that we take this opportunity to look beyond departmental ways of working and press ahead with effective mechanisms for the development of legislation that meets the specific and individual needs and rights of children and young people.”

What is it like for parents when government departments fail to co-operate? A Mother with three sons all with special needs comments:

“I knew that the statementing process existed, and was difficult to access, but nothing could have prepared me for the colossal battle I have had to endure to get the right support for my sons' special needs. Parents are the ones coping daily with the special needs of our children. Why should we have to also strategically manage the coordinated sharing of information between all the professionals involved with our child? Many parents that I know in similar circumstances gave up their battle simply because they felt they were in a no win situation from the beginning, and couldn't find the emotional stamina required to get through the system. Indeed, if I had not had the support, advice and expertise of the Children's Law Centre, I too would have given up the fight, and my child who is gifted, would have been sitting at home wasting his life.”

Another parent, talks about the strain placed upon her daughter and the family when education and health did not co-operate, stating:

“It took two years and eight months, a Tribunal, threat of Judicial Review, suffering on my daughter and unbelievable strain placed on us as a family, before she was provided with Physiotherapy in school, which she now receives twice a week. I believe this Bill could have a huge impact in cases like my daughter's. Sadly it is too late for her, she is now in sixth form. Hopefully it will benefit others and her experience of Government departments not working together in the best interests of the child will become a thing of the past.”

Pauline Leeson, concludes:

“We must not rest while children (particularly those on the margins) have been effectively relegated to the side-lines by a failure of government departments to work in co-operation. I strongly advocate for everyone to support the Children's Bill to ensure that policy development and implementation processes are collaborative, efficient, productive and focused on best outcomes for all our children and young people.”

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Case Study:

The Children's Law Centre was asked to provide advice, assistance and representation for a child with excellent academic ability who has cerebral palsy and who attends a mainstream school. She uses a wheelchair and is able to walk with assistance. She requires regular daily physiotherapy in order to maintain her mobility and to access the wider curriculum. Due to the lack of cooperation between the Health and Education and the resource implications for the Education and Library Board of conceding that physiotherapy was an educational need in this case as well as a failure by the Health and Social Care Trust to provide for the child, this child was denied physiotherapy in a mainstream school, which she would have been able to access in a special school. She was expected to remain seated for 8 hours per day. This caused great distress and discomfort with the result that the child became acutely aware of her disability and her grades dropped considerably. The dispute carried on for over two years. The Children's Law Centre commissioned a private physiotherapy report as part of ongoing legal proceedings in which they provided legal representation. Ultimately, after several hearings and lengthy negotiation, the matter was settled and arrangements made for therapy input. The child is doing very well at school, achieving excellent grades and engaging with all aspects of the curriculum, in keeping with her true potential.