



Response to
Department of Health
Strategy for Children who are Looked After:
Improving Children's Lives

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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 on the **Strategy for Children who are Looked After: Improving Children's Lives**. We trust that our comments will be positively used to inform the next step in the process.

Comments

Children in Northern Ireland welcome the 10 commitments by the Department of Health, and the format of the strategy in terms of its adherence to the eight outcomes listed within the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015. We would like to make the following points:

1. During the Social Work Wards Ceremony on 18th November, Joseph Brennan (care leaver) talked about him being a child who was looked after and not a looked after child (LAC). The point he was making was that he was a CHILD FIRST who was receiving a looked after service. We very much support his view and ask that you consider amending the title to recognise the needs of the child first who is in receipt of a looked after service. This rights-based approach will ensure that all policy and legislation relating to children who are looked after and care leavers will enable them to fully realise their rights under the UNCRC.
2. We feel the commitments could be more focused and more child centred. It is important to promote ambitious outcomes for children who are looked after and who are care leavers to ensure they reach their full potential.

3. There are other interactions with policies which will ensure the outcomes are delivered, namely the Families Matter Strategy. We would welcome information on how this strategy fits with Families Matter and how the Department is interacting with the Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership in relation to these outcomes?
4. We very much welcome the focus on outcomes, we would like to see promotion of the positive role of the care system.
5. Furthermore we would like to see a commitment to ensure that all partners from across central Government, local Government, statutory services and the community and voluntary sector are working towards and accountable for this outcome focused approach. It is vital that these outcomes are embedded within all systems so that we are focused on making a difference in the lives of children and young people who are looked after and not just tinkering with the processes. It is not just about the relationship between the child and the social worker but the relationship with the child and everyone that comes in to contact with the child.
6. Foster and kinship carers provide stability for 77% of children and young people that are looked after, therefore we would like to see support for foster and kinship carers more evidenced in the document given the pivotal role they have in the stability of the care system in NI. To achieve this the system needs to be adequately resourced and a plan in place for the future in terms of recruiting more foster carers and ensuring that they are adequately supported and remunerated. Foster and Kinship carers need to be included in the discussions of children's futures and given their place as a key member of the team surrounding the child.
7. We fully support in principle the desire to reduce the number of children entering the care system however this will require a fundamental shift in culture and a commitment to sustained resources in terms of earlier

intervention and early help. Moreover, further consideration needs to be given to ensuring the right services are in the right place at the right time for each child and that funding is sustainable in the long term.

8. Outcome 3 – Physical and Mental Health, we would like to see recognition of the Domestic Violence courts and the impact this has on children and young people. We also wish to highlight the important role of short breaks for families, particularly those who have a child who has a disability. Short breaks are important to ensure stability within the family unit and should be viewed as a necessary support to prevent entry into care as an Early Intervention and Early Help action.
9. Outcome 5 – Learning and Achieving. We would like to see a commitment to reinforcing universal services and ensuring that children who are looked after are included in all aspects of policy making and not just an afterthought.
10. Outcome 6 – Play and Leisure. The importance of Oracy – the ability to express oneself fluently and grammatically in speech should not be underestimated. We are therefore asking the Department to ensure that children who are looked after are provided with the learning to ensure their Oracy skills do not fall behind their non-looked after peers.

We commend the approach and commitment of DoH to the needs and rights of children and young people who are receiving looked after services. We particularly commend the layout of the document in terms of the 8 Outcomes listed in the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015 and believe that it could be used as a good practice model for all future policies and strategies for children, young people and their families.