



Response to

**Department of Health and Department of
Education**

**Strategy for Looked After Children:
Improving Children's Lives**

June 2018

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 convenes a Residential and Looked After Children Sub-Group for those members involved in direct service delivery to looked after children and young people. The Sub-Group provides a forum for members to jointly consider and inform the development of key strategic policy initiatives affecting looked after children in Northern Ireland drawing on knowledge and expertise gained through direct service delivery.

Children in Northern Ireland co-chair the Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance (CDSA) alongside Disability Action (DA) which brings together 26 organisations from across the children's sector and the disability sector. CDSA wants to ensure that policy impacting on the lives of children and young people with disabilities is informed by their needs and circumstances.

CiNI welcomes this opportunity to provide some feedback and commentary on the Strategy for Looked After Children: Improving Children's Lives.

General Comments

We are delighted that the Strategy has taken the high-level outcomes of the Children's Strategy and firmly anchored them within the document. We are also delighted that the Strategy is outcomes based and is underpinned by children's rights guiding principles of non-discrimination, best interests of the child, and the voice of the child.

Short Breaks

While short break placements are a popular option for disabled children and young people and their families, there is evidence that shows the availability of short break provision is insufficient to meet the demand for such services. Many families prefer small-scale, family type short break settings rather than larger or hospital facilities. For children with disabilities the choice is often limited. We would like to see facilities that cater for children with disabilities and available Northern Ireland wide.

Extend age for Looked After Children

The literature shows that disabled children are less likely to be adopted than their non-disabled peers and are more likely to achieve permanence with foster parents. There is poor outcomes for both looked after children and looked after children with a disability with a high incidence of mental health difficulties. Added to that the new challenge of leaving care and moving to adulthood, makes it even more difficult for looked after children to cope. We would like to see the age of this policy extended to 25 to cater for the needs of all looked after children particularly at transition points in their life.

Scope

We would very much welcome the scope of the Strategy making specific reference to children with a disability. We believe including a reference to children with a disability will ensure actions are incorporated to help those children who face multiple barriers to services. Especially since children who are looked after and with a disability represent 14% of the looked after children population.

Outcome 1: Living in a Society Which Respects Their Rights

We are delighted that the voice of children and young people who are looked after will have their voices heard and valued. However, we would like to see evidence that the voice of children and young people who are in care and who have a disability have been listened to throughout the process of this strategy.

It is important that children with a disability are provided with meaningful mechanisms to give their views on the strategy but also give feedback on their experiences of care. Looked after children must be seen as the experts within this process and in their lives.

We would particularly welcome actions that fundamentally change the way in which looked after children are often viewed by society. We would particularly welcome the establishment of a campaign to promote a positive image of children in care and a way to challenge myths surrounding this particular group of children and young people.

Outcome 2: Living in a Society Which Equality of Opportunity and Good Relations are Promoted

Looked after children should have the right to the additional support they need to ensure equality of opportunity with their non-looked after peers. This should be included in the Strategy and should be planned out to secure improved outcomes and stability for the young person.

Outcome 3: Physical and Mental Health

Departments should consider how they can make more cost-effective spending decisions that support better mental health outcomes for looked after children. It is too often thought that wellbeing and mental health is the responsibility of specialist mental health teams such as CAMHS. This is not the case. We need a whole system that prioritises the emotional and mental wellbeing of children in care that embeds supporting children and young people throughout the system and at different times. This should be a proactive and a preventative approach. More funding should be earmarked for early intervention and sustaining the good practice that already takes place. Good practice already exists with the Family Support Hubs and the early intervention initiatives carried out by the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. This work is essential in preventing family breakup and supporting children and young people at the edge of care.

In terms of a stable home, we must continue to support and empower foster carers and residential care workers to develop trusting and strong relationships with children and young people. It is also important that we understand that children and young people in care have different needs so professionals should be given the support they need to support children and young people's mental health needs.

CiNI also firmly believes that the mental health and emotional wellbeing of looked after children is given the priority it deserves within the Strategy. We would like

to see a clear workforce development plan to ensure that looked after children receive high quality support from their carers, social workers and other professionals. A cornerstone of this approach must be the further development of a CAMHs model that prioritises and meets the needs of looked after children.

Outcome 4: Living in Safety and with Stability

Above all, children and young people who are looked after need consistent relationships with adults who can offer them a loving and stable home. Unfortunately not all children will experience stability and children who have disabilities often find it difficult to find a loving and supportive home. We would like to see further information on how this Strategy will help children who are looked after and who have disabilities find suitable placements in the medium and long term. This means a service that will meet the individual needs of each young person and promote placement stability.

Outcome 5: Learning and Achieving

CiNI warmly welcomes the positive initiatives focusing on improving education provision and support for looked-after children.

It is important that an outcomes approach is taken as it would enable and support identification of where current initiatives could be extended and further developed to meet need. Furthermore, it would support comprehensive delivery of outcomes for children in care as well as having the potential to highlight and share good practice. Moreover, it would enable the identification of ongoing gaps in provision for children in care, where new and additional service provision is required.

We strongly recommend a consistency in approach and service delivery therefore we would like to see more detail on how the Department of Education will improve outcomes for children who are looked after. We would also like to see an examination of educational pathways and outcomes for disabled, looked after children.

Outcome 7: Experiencing Economic and Environmental Wellbeing

Strategic policy initiatives particularly in the areas of financial capability, money management and life skills for independent living need to be incorporated within the Strategy to ensure a robust provision of money management and financial capability for children and young people in care, at each stage of their lives from early years through to the transition to adult life. These life skills coupled with the extension of this strategy to age 25 will ensure the transition for looked after children runs smoothly and they feel supported throughout the process.

Conclusion

Children in Northern Ireland commend the departments for the start you have made on this strategy. With regard to disabled children becoming looked after, many are likely to experience the same range of pre-care experiences leading to decisions to them becoming looked after as their nondisabled peers. However, disabled children are at greater risk of neglect, abuse and violence than non-disabled children therefore the needs of looked after disabled children and their families require increased practical and emotional family support. They require adequate and sufficient offers of short breaks and they need their voice to be heard.

It would have been helpful if the parenting and family support strategy had been developed in parallel to this Looked After Strategy as it is imperative that we put

our efforts and resources in to supporting families and parents to prevent children and young people going in to care in the first place.

We do hope our comments will be actively advanced so that a firm foundation is in place upon which to develop and take this strategy forward.

We are happy to discuss the contents of this response.

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