

2025

**ANNUAL
REPORT**

Children
in Northern
Ireland



Our vision is to make Northern Ireland a society where all children are **valued**, treated **fairly** and are able to **flourish**.



INFLUENCING

putting children at the centre of policy making.



LEARNING

capacity building across the sector and innovating best practice.



COLLABORATION

working with others to increase impact.

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Chair & CEO Report

In another year marked by uncertainty and continued financial pressures on families, Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) and our members have remained steadfast in our mission; to place the needs, rights, and wellbeing of children, young people, and families at the heart of everything we do. Amid growing challenges across education, health, and social care, CiNI has continued to demonstrate leadership, collaboration, and innovation across all areas of our work.

We are proud to have achieved significant progress this year by:

- ✓ Strengthening Parentline NI, which supported over 7,000 parents and carers through calls, webchats, and workshops, helping families manage challenges around behaviour, school anxiety, and emotional wellbeing.
- ✓ Delivering high-quality Learning and Development programmes, training over 3,400 professionals across 212 events, with 97% rating our courses Good to Excellent.
- ✓ Launching new policy initiatives, including the Partnership for Inclusive Education and convening two Children's Policy Forums focused on Special Educational Needs reform and the Draft Programme for Government.
- ✓ Delivering impactful projects. 2024 saw the conclusion of a three-year grant from the National Lottery Community Fund for the Gets Active programme. During that time Get's Active supported over 10,000 children and 2,000 families to

access healthy food and physical activities, and the launch of Be Cyber Safe NI, a youth-led online safety initiative in partnership with NSPCC.

- ✓ Establishing the Parents' Disability Forum, amplifying the voices of parents of children with disabilities and identifying key areas for policy reform and research.
- ✓ Coordinating Locality Planning Groups across the Southern area, strengthening collaboration among statutory, voluntary, and community partners to improve local services for children, young people and families.

These achievements reflect the commitment and passion of CiNI's staff, members, and partners, who continue to adapt and deliver for children and families across Northern Ireland.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to our Board of Directors, staff, funders, and member organisations for their continued dedication and support. Together, we are building on a legacy of advocacy, learning, and collaboration that continues to strengthen our sector and improve the lives of children and families.

As we look ahead, we remain committed to ensuring that every child in Northern Ireland grows up safe, supported, and able to thrive, and that parents and carers receive the understanding, resources, and respect they deserve.



Marie Cavanagh
Chair



Natalie Whelehan
Chief Executive

23 Years of Leadership, Vision, and Dedication

A Tribute to Pauline Leeson OBE



In March 2025, CiNI marked the retirement of our long-serving Chief Executive, Pauline Leeson OBE, after an exceptional 23 years of leadership. Pauline's commitment to the wellbeing and rights of children and young people has shaped not only the direction of CiNI, but also the wider landscape of children's policy and advocacy across Northern Ireland.

When Pauline joined CiNI, she brought with her a deep conviction that every child deserves to grow up safe, supported, and valued. Over the two decades that followed, she transformed CiNI from a small coalition into a leading voice for the children's sector, a trusted advocate to government, a champion for collaboration, and a tireless campaigner for fairness and inclusion. Under Pauline's leadership, CiNI became a driving force for evidence-informed policy, cross-sector partnership, and child-centred practice. Her vision helped ensure that the voices of children, families, and practitioners were not only heard but meaningfully acted upon.

Pauline's impact extended far beyond CiNI. She played a pivotal role in shaping children's rights discourse in Northern Ireland and ensuring that children's wellbeing remained central to public debate and government planning. Her integrity, wisdom, and compassion have earned her the respect of colleagues across the voluntary, statutory, and political spheres. Yet, those who worked alongside her will remember not only her achievements, but her kindness, humour, and unwavering belief in the power of collective action.

As we look to the future, we do so on foundations built by Pauline's vision and values. Her legacy endures in CiNI's ongoing work and our commitment to advocate, collaborate, and make Northern Ireland a better place for all children.

On behalf of the Board, staff, members, and partners of CiNI, we offer Pauline our deepest thanks for her extraordinary contribution, her steadfast leadership, and her decades of service to the children of Northern Ireland.



Learning & Development



CHILDREN'S SERVICES TRAINING

- ✓ 100 EVENTS
- ✓ 1,953 TRAINED



1-2-1 ORGANISATION TRAINING

- ✓ 112 SESSIONS
- ✓ 1,520 TRAINED



**OF ATTENDEES
RATED OUR CST
TRAINING OVERALL
AS 4-5 OUT OF 5
(GOOD - EXCELLENT)**

"The trainer was brilliant and made what is difficult training less difficult but still getting across the importance of the topic."

DESIGNATED OFFICER

"Thank you - [trainer] was a great facilitator and delivered a difficult course with a great, non judgmental and gentle manner."

CHILD PROTECTION

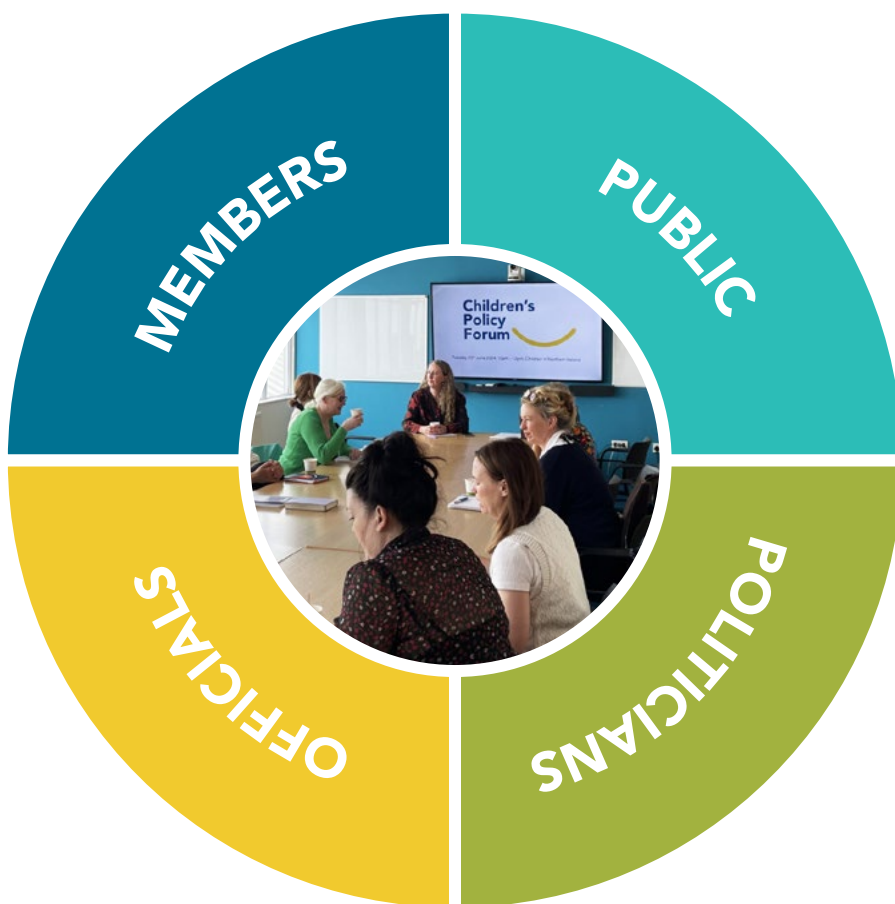
"Very informative training, well presented, plenty of opportunities to ask questions and gain clarity on anything."

CHILD PROTECTION CASE CONFERENCES

"Thank you - this was a fantastic training session. I found most helpful the great, contextually relevant and very up to date figures and statistics."

SAFEGUARDING IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Policy: What We Do



Members

- » Convened the Children's Policy Forum in June 2024 and November 2024 to discuss Special Educational Needs Reform and the Draft Programme for Government.
- » Launched the Partnership for Inclusive Education in October 2024, a group of CiNI members focused on policy and advocacy in the area of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
- » Supported NICCY's Equal Protection Working Group, including development of a Strategic Pathways roadmap to legislative reform.

Officials

- » Responded to the consultation on the Draft Programme for Government, emphasising the role that the sector plays in partnership with government and outlining an alternative programme of investment and reform that would benefit children, young people and families.
- » Engaged with officials from the Department of Education on public consultations relating to Free School Meal eligibility and School Attendance. Also attended the Department's stakeholder engagement forum as part of the development of a new Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.
- » Submitted evidence on the Justice Bill, responded to the CYPSP's Children and Young People's Plan 2025-2028, and provided feedback on the implementation of the Children's Services Co-operation Act.

Public

- » Media coverage from BBC, Cool FM, and Belfast Telegraph as part of CiNI's campaign to restore Core Grant Funding for Voluntary and Community Sector organisations from the Department of Health.
- » Participated in a panel discussion at Parliament Buildings, organised by UNISON as part of their campaign for universal Free School Meals in Northern Ireland.
- » Published an article through Pivotal, the NI policy think tank, calling for a new Early Intervention Fund and linking this to tackling the challenges in children's social care.

Politicians

- » Met with the Minister of Health, Minister of Justice, Minister of Finance, and Minister of Education to raise key issues affecting children and families in NI, and the challenges facing the wider children's sector.
- » Hosted a General Election Hustings event in collaboration with Politics in Action, to support the Votes at 16 campaign, where young people questioned representatives from five parties on their key policies.
- » Issued Policy Briefing papers to MLAs on children's social care, core funding, and CiNI's role tackling child food insecurity through the Gets Active Project was acknowledged in an Assembly debate on 'holiday hunger.'

Projects: Our Impact

The Gets Active Project

Working closely with local delivery partners, including youth clubs and family centres across Northern Ireland, we continue to provide a range of food and activity programmes aimed at tackling disadvantage and food insecurity throughout school holiday periods. 2024 marked the end of a three-year grant from the National Lottery Community Fund, and during that time we recorded:



10,604

Attendees



37,950

Meals served



- » 10,604 attendances on our holiday programmes across Limavady, Carrickfergus and Downpatrick;
- » 2,166 engagements with parents, carers and family members as part of holiday activities;
- » 37,950 healthy and nutritious meals and snacks delivered during the holidays;
- » 3,546 food parcels distributed to families when children were not in school; and
- » 2,968 hours' worth of fun, physical activities including sports, games, and trips.

Our key food-related holiday activities included:

- ✓ Summer Scheme lunches, fresh fruit snacks during sports and activities;
- ✓ Information on healthy eating;
- ✓ Cookery classes, including slow cooker recipes, smoothie making etc.;
- ✓ Community 'banquets' and Family days/BBQs;
- ✓ Opportunities to grow food;
- ✓ Visits to food banks, community fridges and social supermarkets.

Our main fun and physical activities during holidays included:

- ✓ Couch to 5k, running, and mud runs;
- ✓ Basketball, volleyball, and football;
- ✓ Family walking challenge, fun fitness, and fitness for girls;
- ✓ Badminton, unihoc, and cricket;
- ✓ Boxercise and mixed martial arts;
- ✓ Footgolf and crazy golf;
- ✓ Bike rides, trips to parks, leisure centres, Splash NI, Escarmouche, the Coast, and Newcastle.

Some of the key skills and qualifications young people gained included:

- ✓ Mini chef course and Food Hygiene Certificate;
- ✓ Mini medic programme and First Aid Training;
- ✓ OCN NI Level 2 Award in Youth Leadership; and
- ✓ OCN NI Level 3 Certificate in Youth Work Practice.

The Gets Active Youth Advisory Group



Our regional Youth Advisory Group met monthly to shape the holiday programmes, discuss key challenges faced by young people, and develop tools to engage policymakers. In

August 2024 they also hosted UK-wide youth participation conference in Glasgow, to share our work highlighting recommendations to tackle child food insecurity and learn lessons from other young people engaged in campaigns in Scotland, England and Wales.

In February 2025, the Youth Advisory Group met with Danny Baker MLA to discuss his proposal for a Private Members' Bill that would reinstate the School Holiday Food Grant for families in Northern Ireland.

Be Cyber Safe NI



On 30 January 2025, Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) launched a new youth engagement and amplification project on online safety, in partnership with the NSPCC. The initiative links with NSPCC's Voice of Online Youth group and partner organisations in Wales and Scotland, creating UK-wide opportunities for young people's voices to shape the future of online safety.

CiNI has established a new youth advisory group – Be Cyber Safe NI (BCS NI) - in Northern Ireland, giving young people a platform to share their lived experiences, priorities, and concerns with key decision-makers. Through regular meetings, workshops and events, participants will help influence policy, practice, and solutions designed to protect children in the digital world.

The initiative is youth-led, with participants identifying topics, designing advocacy materials, and creating solutions. Early contributions from young people highlighted concerns about online dangers, privacy and personal data, and app controls.

When asked why they signed up, some of our young people responded:



"I wanted to try something new and get more experience. I want to make a

difference and have an impact [while] building my confidence and working with other young people from all around the UK."

Matylda, 15, from Portadown



"My opinion on online safety is that it's really safe, but [it's] not good that really

young children are using it."

Maria, 14, from Portadown



"I think there's too many dangers online."

Iona, 13 from Limavady



"There aren't enough safety precautions set up for young people online. I was invited by my leader to get involved in a positive

and relevant project, and I want to meet new people, boost [my] confidence, and have my voice heard."

Jamie, 17, from Limavady

Through extensive engagement with children and young people, the initiative will explore what online safety currently looks like for them, the effectiveness of controls and responses to harmful content/behaviour, as well as other concerns such as Artificial Intelligence, online advertising, privacy and education. The project is also about influencing real change, and bridging the gap between young people and decision-makers, so it will aim to shift narratives, inform policies and improve the role that we all play in online safety.

Parents' Forum for Children with Disabilities

Over the past year, CiNI successfully established the Parents' Disability Forum, bringing together parents and carers of children with disabilities to share their lived experiences, identify gaps in support, and shape key recommendations for policymakers.

With the support of our Parent Advocate, Angie McCabe, the Forum has developed a clear advocacy plan, which we will take forward next year through the commissioning of new research. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to Angie for her commitment and dedication in facilitating the Forum.

Angie has now moved on to a new role with another organisation, and we wish her every success in this next chapter.



Locality Planning

'FYI' Newsletter



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Thanks for this. It is proving really useful as I link in with parents of children on waiting lists.

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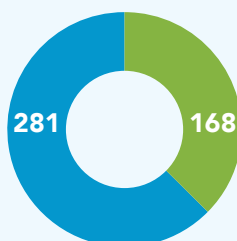
Southern Area LPG Meetings 2024-2025

29

LPG Meetings

449

Practitioners Attended



- Statutory Representatives
- Community & Voluntary Groups Represented



Uplift of 15% in Overall Attendance at LPG Meetings

//

I always take away so much from the meetings, your organisations are a gold mine of information. Thank you.

//

//

You are the most welcoming bunch, and I cannot recommend being part of the LPGs enough and that's down to you!

//

Key Successes During 2024/25

FEEL GOOD ARMAGH



“

It was run fantastically. Our service is difficult to reach people with so very useful!

”

“

Great to find out what exactly other organisations do so that we can collaborate on projects.

”

PHA-FUNDED SELF-CARE SESSIONS

“ I will be more aware that self-care opportunities are important for my overall wellbeing and how that impacts on those in my family, my community and in my job. Thank you for today. ”



Scan this QR code to access the above resources and reports, along with all our information and latest edition of our fortnightly 'FYI' newsletter.





Advice . Support . Guidance



MISSION

Every parent will feel **valued**, **respected** and **nurtured** on every call and are encouraged to both spend time **connecting** with their children and treating themselves with **care** and **compassion**.

2024-25 PARENTLINE CONTACTS WITH PARENTS/CARERS



7,070

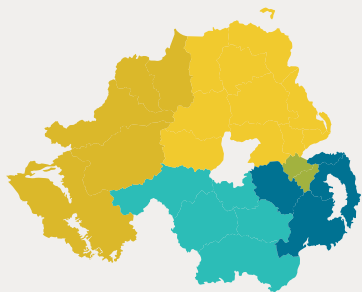
Contacts made via phone,
webchat, email



122%

Over achieved with 122%
of annual targets met

2024-25 GEOGRAPHICAL REACH PER TRUST AREA



● NHSCT: 1,643
● BHSCT: 1,931
● SEHSCT: 1,195
● WHSCT: 1,281
● SHSCT: 1,003
Other/ Unknown: 17
Total: 7,070

SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Contact with
Parentline NI
prevented;



2,673 calls to
Health Care
professionals

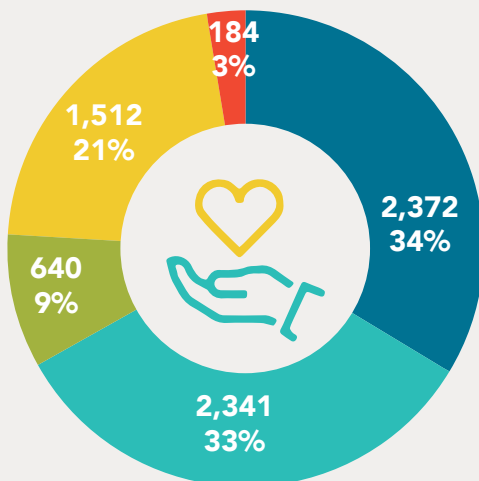
2,928 calls to
schools/EA

1,447 calls to
social services



SIGNPOSTING

135 parents were
signposted to 9+
local services



2024-25 Presenting Issues

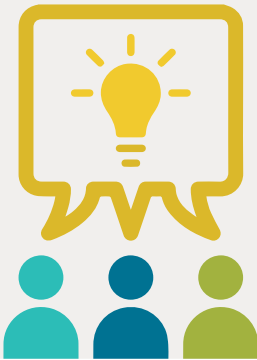
- Behavioural
- Emotional
- External States
- Health
- Harmful

DISCUSSION GROUPS (PEER SUPPORT)

3 Parent Discussion Groups
Delivered – ADHD, Mobile
Phones, Worry to Wonder

19 parents registered

10 parents attended



WORKSHOPS

11 online one-off workshops delivered

4 two-part small group workshops delivered

954 parents registered



MOBILE PHONE RESOURCE PACK

132 requests for a copy of
Can I Get a Phone? Pack



PROFESSIONAL REFERRALS RECEIVED

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	TOTAL
BHSCT	15	7	8	4	34
SEHSCT	1	0	2	0	3
WHSCCT	17	1	3	0	21
NHSCT	11	5	11	9	36
SHSCT	0	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	44	14	24	13	95

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT



8.1K
followers



1.6K
followers

TESTIMONIALS



"Thank you. You have really helped already and I'm very grateful. You are absolutely wonderful at your job. Thank you! I'll get looking at all of these resources. What I've briefly looked at already seem fabulous."

**17/9/24 HELPLINE CALL FROM MUM
OF RECENTLY DIAGNOSED CHILD**



"This is such a relief, everything makes sense. I can't believe your help today. This is a completely different perspective. I have been putting this off for so long. I thought nothing could change. Now I'm looking forward to xxxxx coming home this afternoon instead of dreading it. I feel I can manage now thank you so much."

**20/03/25 FEEDBACK FROM MUM'S FIRST
CALL TO US REGARDING CHILD'S ANGER**



Parent Participation Service

DEVELOPED RESOURCES

- ✓ Emotionally Based School Avoidance
- ✓ Supported parental involvement in School Based Anxiety: Best Practice Guide for schools.
- ✓ Collaboration with Family Support NI survey.
- ✓ Collaboration with FODC, WHSCT, PHA and CYPSP in designing and developing an isolation study for Parents and Carers in Fermanagh area.
- ✓ Presentation on Feedback in relation to gaps in support for families experiencing school avoidance and distributed to all Locality Planning Co-ordinators and CYPSP.



DIRECT PARTICIPATION

EXPLORING SCHOOL AVOIDANCE: A Collaborative Approach



72
Attendees

13 parents
59 professionals
(EA, EWTS, Health, Schools, Community & Voluntary Orgs)

10 PARENT CHAMPIONS RECRUITED



With an additional 6 professionals contributing to the development of resources to support ongoing work around school avoidance.

SCHOOL AVOIDANCE: Moving on Together



114
Attendees

30 parents
84 professionals
(EA, Schools, FE Colleges, Health, Community & Voluntary Orgs)

Joined the Southern Area Outcomes Group Emotional Health & Wellbeing Communication Network and the Western Area Outcomes Group Emotional Health & Wellbeing & Emotional School Avoidance Group.

KEY OUTCOMES

- ✓ Increased awareness of the difficulties families are facing in relation to School anxiety and distress and additional support that is required.
- ✓ Key outcomes from School Avoidance: Moving on Together:
 - » Have a clear sense of local community resources and gaps identified
 - » Actionable steps identified for future follow up
- ✓ New connections formed between families and organisations, strengthening local networks and collaboration.
- ✓ Work ongoing in developing a Peer Support Group Network.
- ✓ Directory of Resources in relation to School Avoidance.

FEEDBACK

Thank you for a much needed, well organised event. You have provided a safe place to reflect and honestly critique my own practice. Your parent speakers were especially impactful. I really enjoyed the activities. Well done to organisers and all involved."

I thought it was amazing! I loved that there was almost this multi-disciplinary approach to it, and that we got to share ideas and link in with a variety of people. It was an excellent and informative session, with some great ideas I can put into my own teacher practice."

PARENTLINE PODCAST



15k downloads

This year, the Parentline podcast continued to grow its audience and deepen engagement with parents and carers across Northern Ireland. Hosted by Kerry McLean, the podcast provides a trusted space for honest conversations, practical advice, and shared experiences that reflect the real challenges families face today.

Highlights from this year's episodes include:

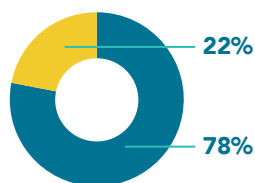
- » Supporting Parents and Carers in Northern Ireland: Kerry chats to the Parentline Team
- » Managing Anxiety-Based School Avoidance – from the Voices of Parents and Professionals
- » Empowering Parents: Navigating Dyslexia with Confidence and Compassion

Finances

Statement of Financial Activities

INCOME

for the year ended
31st March 2025



INCOME	AMOUNT
● Grants	£742,610
● Other Income	£209,071
Total Funds	£951,681

EXPENSES

for the year ended
31st March 2025

EXPENSE	AMOUNT
Salaries, Pensions & Social Security	£539,890
Project Materials	£149,993
Legal, Professional & Trainers	£96,132
Property Rent & Upkeep	£63,438
IT Expenses	£33,590
Utilities	£21,200
Publications & Promotion	£5,678
Sundries & Other	£4,226
Insurance	£5,708
Stationery, Printing & Postage	£4,875
Travel Expenses	£6,803
Subscriptions	£1,146
Room Hire & Catering	£7,312
Total Expense	£939,991
Net Surplus	£11,690

CiNI Staff & Board of Directors 2024/25

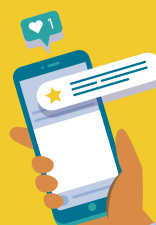
STAFF

Pauline Leeson	Chief Executive (Outgoing)
Natalie Whelehan	Chief Executive (Incoming)
Ernest Purvis	Policy Officer
Roger Gowdy	Finance & Office Manager
Susan Wallace	Learning & Development Officer
Hayley Brydges	Office & Training Coordinator
Darren Curtis	Locality Development Officer
Joanne Patterson	Locality Programme Support Officer & Office Coordinator
Laurel Littlewood	Digital Marketing & Engagement Coordinator
Angie McCabe	Parent Advocate - Children with Disabilities
June Onyekwelu	Head of Service, Parentline NI
Olivia Garrett	Service Manager, Parentline NI
Tricia Monroe	Service Manager, Parentline NI (Maternity Leave)
Gemma Robinson	Service Coordinator, Parentline NI
8 Parent Support Officers	
2 Community Connectors	
2 Parent Participation Workers	

BOARD MEMBERS

Marie Cavanagh	Chairperson
Paul Morgan	
Alison Beattie	
John Hunsdale	
Brenda MacQueen	
Liam Hannaway	
Colin Hayburn	(Resigned Nov 24)
Leslieann Scott	(Appointed Jan 25)

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT



8.5K



1.5K



712



8K

No. of followers

Children in Northern Ireland



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Children-in-northern-ireland

20 25

**CHILDREN IN NORTHERN IRELAND
THANKS OUR FUNDERS FOR THEIR
CONTINUED SUPPORT**



Delivered by
**THE NATIONAL LOTTERY
COMMUNITY FUND**

