Children in Northern Ireland

Response to the Consultation on the NI Executive Disability Strategy 2025 – 2035

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Who we are

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella organisation for the Children's Sector in Northern Ireland. With over 130 members, CiNI is accountable for representing and giving voice to the experiences, views and aspirations of its members across NI to inform and influence those who make policy or plan and deliver services for children and young people. Our vision is to make Northern Ireland a society where all children are valued, treated fairly and are able to flourish. To deliver on this vision, CiNI has three strategic priorities:

- **Influencing**: through campaigning and engagement to ensure that children are at the centre of policymaking;
- **Learning:** capacity building across the sector and innovating best practice;
- **Collaboration:** working with others to increase impact.

We are the secretariat to the All Party Group on Children and Young People at the Northern Ireland Assembly and we are represented on the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) - a multiagency partnership that includes the leadership of key statutory agencies and community and voluntary organisations, with responsibility for improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. CiNI is also a member of Safeguarding Board NI, a statutory body constituted to safeguard and protect children.

CiNI offers a wide range of training to both individuals and organisations working within the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to develop their skills and knowledge through our high-quality and positively evaluated Children's Services Training Programme. We also offer bespoke training, tailored specially to the needs of organisations, both within the sector and beyond.

CiNI manages the regional parenting support helpline: Parentline NI. Funded by the Department of Health, this service offers free, confidential advice and guidance to Parents and Carers across Northern Ireland. Parentline also provides one-to-one support, practical workshops, online resources (including an award-winning podcast), and referrals to counselling services. CiNI also runs the Parent Participation Service and the Parents' Disability Forum, which are key platforms for parents/carers to have their voices heard and ensure that policymaking is informed by their lived experience.

At a community level, CiNI delivers the 'Gets Active Project', a range of healthy food and physical activity programmes aimed at addressing child food insecurity. Our Youth Advisory Group helps shape these programmes and gives young people a platform to influence policy making. We also work with a range of partners on specific youth participation projects, such as amplifying youth voice on online safety in collaboration with the NSPCC.

More information is available on our website: https://www.ci-ni.org.uk/

Executive Summary

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Northern Ireland Executive Draft Disability Strategy 2025–2035. This submission focuses particularly on disabled children and young people and is informed by CiNI's engagement with the children's sector, including discussion within the Children's Policy Forum, alongside new CiNI-commissioned survey evidence on the experiences of families of disabled children across Northern Ireland.

CiNI supports the Strategy's vision of an inclusive society in which d/Deaf and Disabled people can participate fully, free from discrimination, and welcomes the clear inclusion of disabled children and young people within Outcome 8. The Disability Strategy represents an opportunity not only to improve services, but to transform how disability is understood across Northern Ireland — using the reach, influence and leadership of government to embed the social model of disability and remove the barriers that prevent children and young people from fully participating in society.

Recent CiNI-commissioned research shows why this matters. A representative survey of 1,105 parents and carers found consistent and systemic inequalities across education, health, leisure, overall participation in society and their standard of living. Disabled children were significantly less likely than their non-disabled peers to have their rights fulfilled across every UNCRC domain examined. For example, 70% of parents/carers of disabled children said their child is often left out of social and leisure activities compared with 25% of non-disabled children; only 34% said mainstream school provision meets the needs of their disabled child compared with 84% of non-disabled children; and 65% of parents/carers of disabled children reported difficulties accessing healthcare compared with 36% of other parents/carers.

CiNI believes the final Strategy should therefore place stronger emphasis on social inclusion, meaningful participation, early intervention, accountability and alignment with wider reform programmes, particularly the Special Educational Needs (SEN) reform agenda in education and Children's Social Care Reform in health.

The submission also highlights the distinct role of the Department for Communities as policy owner of the Strategy. Alongside cross-government leadership, the Department has specific levers to address the economic barriers that disabled children and their families face. This includes using devolved welfare mitigation powers and advice infrastructure to reduce poverty, respond to the extra costs of disability, and support participation. A practical example is the Disabled Child Winter Fuel Payment recommended by the Welfare Mitigations Review Independent Advisory Panel, which was costed at approximately £3.3 million in 2022/23 and estimated to support around 16,000 households.

In CiNI’s view, the final Strategy and Action Plan should combine transformational ambition with concrete action: changing attitudes and systems, but also reducing the practical financial barriers that continue to limit disabled children’s rights, wellbeing and participation.

Transformation Through Inclusion

The draft Strategy rightly adopts the social model of disability, recognising that disabled people are disabled by barriers created by society rather than by medically diagnosed conditions or impairments alone. CiNI strongly supports this framing.

For disabled children and young people, those barriers are often experienced in everyday settings: school, healthcare, leisure, transport, community activities and public attitudes. Social inclusion is therefore not a peripheral issue; it is the central test of whether the Strategy succeeds. It requires action not only on services, but on culture, environments, systems and expectations.

Government has a unique role in driving this change. Through education, public services, community investment, communications and welfare policy, it can influence how disability is understood and how inclusion is practised. The Strategy should therefore be used to challenge stigma, improve awareness, model inclusive practice and remove structural barriers that continue to restrict participation. This should include a coordinated programme across government to improve disability awareness, embed the social model of disability and support sustained cultural change across public services and wider society.

Parents and carers’ experiences underline the scale of the challenge. As one parent described, *“Most parents of children with disabilities in Northern Ireland have to unfortunately exhaust every avenue to have their children included in society, whether that be leisure or education.”*

Evidence of Systemic Inequality

CiNI’s recent survey evidence adds weight to what disabled children, families and VCS organisations have been saying for some time: the inequalities experienced by disabled children are not isolated or occasional; they are systemic. The survey, conducted by Social Market Research between October and November 2025, was based on a representative sample of 1,105 parents and carers across Northern Ireland.

Across every UNCRC rights domain examined — education, health, participation, play and leisure, and standard of living — disabled children were significantly less likely to have their rights upheld than non-disabled children. Only 61% of parents/carers of disabled children believed their child's right to education was being met compared with 82% of parents/carers of non-disabled children; 54% believed their child's right to health was being met compared with 72%; 59% believed participation rights were being met compared with 81%; and 55% believed play and leisure rights were being met compared with 85%.

The findings also show that exclusion from ordinary childhood experiences remains widespread. Disabled children were three times more likely to struggle to access play and leisure services, and parents/carers were much more likely to report social isolation, exclusion from activities and negative impacts on emotional wellbeing.

Taken together, these findings point to a persistent gap between rights on paper and rights in practice. The Strategy should acknowledge this more explicitly and use it as the starting point for action.

System Reform and Early Intervention

CiNI believes the effectiveness of the Disability Strategy will depend in large part on how well it aligns with other reform programmes affecting disabled children's lives. Most importantly, the Strategy should be closely connected to the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reform agenda and the reform of Children's Social Care. Disabled children and families do not experience policy in departmental silos; they experience the combined effects of education, health, social care and community systems, especially when those systems fail to join up.

This is particularly clear in the evidence. Our parents and carers' survey found stark inequalities in education: only 34% of parents/carers said mainstream school provision meets the needs of their disabled child, compared with 84% of parents/carers of non-disabled children. Parents and carers also reported higher rates of anxiety at school, bullying, unmet needs and delays that are harming education.

The healthcare picture is similarly concerning. Parents and carers of disabled children were far more likely to report difficulty accessing healthcare, long waits for assessment and treatment, and negative effects on education, wellbeing and quality of life. In many cases, delays in healthcare support were directly undermining participation in education and daily life.

The Children's Policy Forum discussion echoed these themes, raising serious concern about younger children and families reaching crisis before support is provided, fragmented pathways across agencies, and the absence of effective early intervention. Members emphasised that SEND reform and the

Disability Strategy must work together to prevent escalation rather than respond only once children and families are already at breaking point.

The final Strategy should therefore make much clearer how it will connect with and influence wider reform processes so that disabled children experience a more coherent, preventive and rights-based system.

Participation and Inclusion

Disabled children and young people must be recognised not only as service users but as rights holders whose views should shape the policies that affect them. This is required by both the UNCRC and the UNCRPD. The Strategy's implementation should reflect that clearly.

CiNI is concerned that participation in the development of the draft Strategy has not yet been strong enough. The Child Rights Impact Assessment notes that no children or young people were directly involved in drafting the new Disability Strategy, although consultation responses from children and young people were anticipated at a later stage.

The Children's Policy Forum also expressed strong concern that co-design processes had not sufficiently involved children and young people and that children's organisations had to work hard to secure adequate focus on disabled children's rights.

The Strategy should therefore strengthen its participation framework and commit to ongoing, accessible and meaningful engagement with disabled children and young people during implementation, monitoring and review.

This is not only about formal participation structures. It is also about culture. Forum members highlighted the need for sensory-safe spaces, disability-aware practice, supportive school and service environments, and greater understanding of autism, ADHD and access needs. Too often children are labelled, sanctioned or excluded rather than understood and supported.

A transformational Disability Strategy must therefore support cultural change across schools, public services and communities so that inclusion is experienced in practice, not only stated in principle.

Poverty and Disability

While many of the barriers facing disabled children sit across departments, the Department for Communities has a distinct and critical role. As lead department for the Strategy and the department responsible for social security and welfare mitigations in Northern Ireland, it has specific levers to address the economic barriers that undermine inclusion.

CiNI's research, support services for parents/carers, and engagement with member organisations shows that families of disabled children face greater financial pressure, reduced work opportunities and significantly higher stress. Parents and carers of disabled children were far more likely to report financial impacts, difficulty making ends meet and reductions in working hours. In our recent survey, only 65% of parents/carers of disabled children believed their child's right to an adequate standard of living was being met, compared with 83% of parents/carers of non-disabled children.

These findings matter because poverty and the extra costs of disability are not separate from social inclusion; they are one of the key mechanisms through which exclusion is experienced. Higher energy bills, transport costs, equipment costs, reduced earnings and the cost of accessing activities all affect whether a child can participate fully in family, school and community life.

The Department for Communities is therefore well placed to use its devolved powers to reduce these pressures. One clear example is the Disabled Child Winter Fuel Payment recommended by the Welfare Mitigations Review Independent Advisory Panel. Modelled on Scotland's child winter heating assistance, the panel estimated this would support around 16,000 claimants, at a cost of approximately £3.3 million in 2022/23 rising to £3.7 million by 2024/25. The rationale is straightforward: families caring for severely disabled children face particular pressures on household fuel bills, and the payment could be made automatically using existing benefit data.

More broadly, the Welfare Mitigations Review already provides a menu of child- and family-relevant measures within the Department's gift, including Better Start grant-type payments, carers recognition measures, targeted winter heating support, strengthened advice provision and improved support through Universal Credit transitions.

CiNI believes this thread of support should run through the final Strategy: reducing the economic barriers associated with disability is not ancillary to inclusion; it is essential to it. Alongside the Disabled Child Winter Fuel Payment, the Department should also look at how it can strengthen benefit take-up, independent advice, support for carers, and practical measures that help disabled children participate in community life. Parents and carers' experiences show why this is needed. As one parent put it, *"It is not clear how to get the support from government."*

These financial pressures are closely linked to wider structural barriers that limit families' ability to participate fully in society. Access to appropriate and inclusive childcare is a critical but often overlooked barrier for families of disabled children. Evidence from CiNI's engagement on the Early Learning and Childcare

Strategy highlights that many families are unable to access suitable provision, particularly where children have additional needs. In practice, this means that parents and carers — most often mothers — are frequently unable to remain in or return to employment, not by choice but because appropriate childcare is unavailable.

This has significant implications for both child and family outcomes. Limited access to inclusive childcare restricts children's opportunities for early learning, social development and participation, while also increasing the risk of poverty for families. These challenges are compounded by gaps in provision, workforce capacity constraints and a lack of alignment between childcare, education and health systems. Addressing these barriers requires a more explicit focus within the Disability Strategy on inclusive childcare provision as part of a wider approach to early intervention, family support and social inclusion.

The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector

The VCS is central to the success of the Strategy. Across Northern Ireland, specialist organisations provide advocacy, play and leisure opportunities, family support, advice, training and trusted relationships that families often cannot find elsewhere.

CiNI's research and the Children's Policy Forum discussion both underline the point that, in practice, voluntary and community organisations are often helping to fill gaps in statutory provision. They also play a vital role in improving benefit take-up, helping families navigate complex systems and supporting inclusive practice in schools and services.

The Strategy should recognise these organisations not as peripheral stakeholders but as delivery partners. That means involving them meaningfully in action planning, implementation and monitoring, and ensuring that funding and commissioning arrangements support sustainability rather than short-term patchwork provision. This is especially important where the Strategy seeks to improve social participation, access to information and support for families in rural or underserved areas.

Data, Monitoring and Accountability

A stronger evidence and accountability framework is essential if the Strategy is to deliver meaningful change. The Child Rights Impact Assessment acknowledges significant evidence gaps, including a lack of detailed disaggregated data, limited direct input from disabled children and young people, and insufficient evidence on intersectional experiences.

The Children's Policy Forum raised the same concerns, noting the absence of baseline data on disabled children, inconsistent data collection across departments and weak alignment between outcomes, indicators and actions.

The draft Strategy includes indicators and commits to annual progress reporting and an Action Plan, but the final Strategy should go further. It should publish a costed Action Plan with clear departmental responsibilities, timelines, milestones and reporting arrangements. There is a risk that, without clearer and more ambitious commitments, the Strategy may primarily reflect existing and ongoing activity rather than driving the level of transformational change required to improve outcomes for disabled children and their families.

CiNI's survey provides a useful baseline from which to begin measuring change. The final Strategy should take the opportunity to strengthen its monitoring framework so that progress on disabled children's inclusion, participation, access and wellbeing can be tracked meaningfully over time.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: disabled children in Northern Ireland continue to experience systemic inequalities across education, healthcare, participation, leisure and standard of living. Those inequalities reflect not only gaps in services, but wider structural barriers — including poverty, the extra costs of disability, poor coordination between systems and exclusion from ordinary community life.

The challenge now is to ensure that the ambition of the Strategy is matched by action that delivers real and measurable change in the everyday lives of disabled children and their families.

In practical terms, CiNI believes the final Strategy should:

- place social inclusion at the centre of implementation, recognising that barriers in attitudes, systems, environments and household income all affect disabled children's participation;
- show clear alignment with SEND reform and Children's Social Care Reform, with a stronger emphasis on early intervention and joined-up support;
- strengthen the meaningful participation of disabled children and young people in future development, implementation, monitoring and review;
- recognise the distinct role of the Department for Communities in reducing poverty and the extra costs of disability, including through targeted mitigations and concentrated efforts on benefit take-up;
- treat the VCS as a key delivery partner in support, advocacy, inclusion and advice;

- publish a clearer Action Plan and accountability framework, supported by stronger disaggregated data and transparent reporting.

The Strategy needs to do more than describe an aspiration. It should drive a whole-system response that aligns reforms across education and health, strengthens children's participation, improves accountability, and uses the distinct levers available to the Department for Communities to reduce the economic barriers that prevent inclusion. In that context, targeted measures such as a Disabled Child Winter Fuel Payment, stronger benefit take-up and advice, and more effective support for carers are not peripheral issues; they are part of what makes participation possible.

Achieving this transformation will also depend on strong partnership between government, public services and the VCS organisations that provide vital support to disabled children and their families. Disabled children are rights holders under both the UNCRC and the UNCRPD. If strengthened in these ways, the Disability Strategy could play a genuinely transformative role in ensuring that disabled children grow up in a Northern Ireland where their rights are realised, their voices are heard, and the barriers to their full participation in society are actively removed. This includes making full use of the levers available to the Department for Communities to address poverty, reduce the extra costs of disability and support participation.