

## Response to the Department of Education consultation on the Children and Young People's Strategy Initial 3-year Delivery Plan 2021-2024

March 2022

### Introduction

[Children in Northern Ireland](#) (CiNI) is the regional umbrella organisation for the children's sector providing policy, information, training and participation services to our 150 members across Northern Ireland. Our vision is to create a society where all children are valued, treated fairly and are able to flourish. To achieve this, we campaign for changes to legislation, policy and practice to promote and protect the rights and needs of children. We also provide advice and support directly to parents and carers through [Parentline](#) - our free, confidential and multi-channel regional parenting support helpline.

CiNI welcomes the [consultation](#) on the Children and Young People's Strategy draft Delivery Plan and the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to delivering on the eight outcomes specified in the [Children's Services Co-operation Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#) (CSCA). We thank officials for the depth and breadth of work that has gone into producing the Plan and for transposing the detail to excel, creating a database which allows for greater functionality. In general, the sections on each outcome are well structured, reflecting many of the relevant actions. We agree with para 5.4 and stress the importance of identifying and incorporating the actions which progress children's rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). We are pleased that children and young people have been consulted on the draft Plan and welcome the accompanying easy-read consultation document.

In responding to this consultation, we outline some opening comments, followed by suggested additions and updates.

### Comments

We appreciate that the context for the Delivery Plan is like no other. Critical resourcing shortfalls cannot be easily fixed, and there is a debilitating gap in understanding how investment for the delivery of public services and policies will be found. The absence of an Executive has upended the severely needed multi-year budget, blocking approval and consequently, immediate allocation of funding for services in the coming financial year. CiNI are particularly concerned about funding to improve mental health services for children and young people; and that plans to

continue school holiday food grants<sup>1</sup> have been stymied, depriving families of around 98,700 school pupils who live in hardship.<sup>2</sup>

More broadly, the lack of a multi-year Budget not only creates uncertainty for government departments, but these challenges cascade to all organisations funded by them, especially the voluntary and community sector. The spectre of the Executive not forming after the Assembly elections in May is a matter of grave concern to our sector.

We note from the Department of Education's (DE) [evidence](#) to the Education Committee on 2 March 2022 that, "*there may be a need to flex and adjust priorities based on ultimate budget outcomes*". Moving forward, we suggest that each Executive Minister, in advance of their tenure ending on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2022, urgently review and identify what necessary adjustments are needed to the Delivery Plan; to ensure accurate reporting on the operation of the CSCA, ahead of report publication in June.

Finally in this section, CiNI use this opportunity to draw attention to our ongoing frustration that the [Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership](#) (CYPSP) has not yet been placed on a statutory footing. The issue was subject to [consultation](#) in 2017; and some 75% of respondents to the exercise agreed that the partnership should be established in statute.<sup>3</sup> CiNI ask for the CYPSP to be placed on a statutory footing as soon as the legislative opportunity arises in the next Assembly mandate.

### **Additions and updates**

We appreciate that the Delivery Plan does not contain all the policies, programmes and services which departments provide for children and young people in Northern Ireland, but rather, focuses on the areas of greatest priority. In this context, we have set out some suggested additions and updates for consideration. Please note, the list is not exhaustive.

- The Health Minister commenced a 16-month [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) in Northern Ireland, starting in February 2022. The review will be a fundamental examination of Children's Services, with a focus on quality, equity, resilience and sustainability. The Delivery Plan should reference the Independent

---

<sup>1</sup> [Draft Budget](#) at p67.

<sup>2</sup> According to data provided by DE to CiNI on 20 January 2022, the school holiday food grant payment over Christmas 2021 was made to the families of almost 98,700 school pupils.

<sup>3</sup> [doh-acb-consultation-summary-of-responses.pdf](#) at p69.

Review of Children's Social Care and agree delivery and resourcing of the Review's recommendations.

- The Department for Communities (DfC) is leading on the [development](#) of the Executive's Disability Strategy. It should include support for children with complex health needs and/or life limiting conditions, and their families, including:
  - Early identification, diagnosis, help, support and intervention;
  - Better collaboration between health and education sectors to meet their educational needs;
  - Joined-up services and information sharing across disciplines and organisations;
  - Consideration of children and young people's particular needs at key transition points in their lives;
  - Promoting greater awareness of the need for suitable play and leisure facilities and activities;
  - Improving the information provided to parents and families about the pathways, financial and other supports available to the child and families;
  - Providing appropriate health and well-being support, tailored to the needs of children and young people with a disability; and
  - Ensuring the needs of children and young people with a disability are taken into consideration in the development of policies and strategies.<sup>4</sup>

As part of the Delivery Plan's review progress and for reporting purposes, it is essential that sitting Executive Ministers provide assurances that work continues to develop the draft Disability Strategy, to enable the incoming Executive to move expeditiously to public consultation in the next Assembly mandate.

- Aligned to many of the actions, the DOH's ten-year [Mental Health Strategy](#), published in June 2021, takes a whole life approach and a whole system focus to ensuring long-term improved outcomes for people's mental health.
- Linked to the identified Racial Equality Strategy, the Executive Office (TEO) is leading on the development of a Refugee Integration Strategy 2022-2027. The [draft strategy](#) sets out how the Executive will support refugees and asylum seekers, including children and young people, to ensure they are treated fairly, do not suffer injustice, can live here as valued members of our community and have every opportunity to realise their full potential.

---

<sup>4</sup> As set out in the [Children and Young People Strategy](#) (Dep of Education, 2021) at p39.

- DE are leading a Review of Free School Meals and Uniform Grant Criteria. We are aware that the Review will consider a number of options for free school meals and uniform grants. The Delivery Plan should reference the Review and agree delivery and resourcing of the Review's recommendations.
- The Department of Health (DOH) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) are jointly leading on the successor to the [Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy](#) framework to address domestic and sexual abuse among adults, children and young people.
- TEO is leading on the development of an Equally Safe Strategy to tackle Violence against Women and Girls. The strategy aims to tackle the root causes of violence against women and girls, recognising that must be intersectional and focus on all forms of violence, with a particular emphasis on behavioural and attitudinal change.
- The DOJ leads on the [Victim and Witness Strategy 2021-2024](#). The strategy sets out a three-year programme of work to understand and meet the needs of victims and witnesses by providing information, services and support. It includes strategic commitments that specifically relate to child victims and witnesses.
- To support children and young people who experience domestic violence and abuse in the home, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland (SBNI), the Education Authority and schools are rolling out [Operation Encompass](#) on a phased basis.
- DE published [Policy on Deferral of School Starting Age](#) in January 2022. It is expected the policy will be updated to reflect legislative change in the [School Age Bill](#), which reached its Final Stage on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022.
- The [Healthy Child, Healthy Future Framework](#) for the universal promotion programme in Northern Ireland, was published by the former OFMDFM in 2010. Accordingly, the DOH publish annual review [statistics](#) reporting on the Framework.
- The DOJ are leading on the development of a new Strategic Framework for youth justice which would seek to build on the internal 'Transitioning Youth Justice' document, which was developed in 2019.

- DE published [Breastfeeding - A Great Start A Strategy for Northern Ireland 2013-2023](#); and associated [mid-term review](#). Moving forward, we anticipate a successor Strategy will be consulted and published.
- DOJ published [Improving Health Within Criminal Justice Strategy](#) and action plan in 2019. It aims to ensure that children, young people and adults in contact with the criminal justice system are healthier, safer and less likely to be involved in offending behaviour.
- For update, the Executive's [Child Poverty Strategy 2016-2019](#) was extended to May 2022, but the expectation is that the Executive's new Anti-Poverty Strategy, being developed by the DfC will cover all age groups. As part of the Delivery Plan's review progress and for reporting purposes, it is essential that sitting Executive Ministers provide assurances that work will continue to develop the Strategy, to enable the incoming Executive to move expeditiously to public consultation in the next Assembly mandate.
- For clarification and update, the publication of the Executive's Childcare Strategy has been a longstanding and protracted policy intention,<sup>5</sup> yet the [Draft Budget 2022-25](#) failed to outline allocation - we are unsure if this was an oversight. The Minister for Education has explained that the pandemic paused progress, but that they "*remains committed to doing everything possible to build the case and bring forward costed options.*"<sup>6</sup> We ask for clarity on whether ringfenced funding will be allocated in the multi-year Budget, and for agreed timescales to be reflected in the Delivery Plan.
- For update, the pre-consultation for the Family and Parenting Support Strategy took place back in August 2018 and progress has since stalled. We note the Minister of Health's commitment to issuing the draft Strategy for public consultation in late 2022;<sup>7</sup> and suggest the identified timescales in the Delivery Plan are revised.

---

<sup>5</sup> The former OFMDFM undertook public consultation on [Towards a Childcare Strategy](#) in December 2012. The then NI Executive consulted on [draft Childcare Strategy](#) in July 2015 and the [Summary Report of Response to the Consultation](#) was published in May 2018; and in January 2020, The [New Decade New Approach](#) deal included the following commitment: "*The Executive will publish a Childcare Strategy and identify resources to deliver extended, affordable and high quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged 3-4.*" (P9).

<sup>6</sup> [Official Report for AQO 3137/17-22](#)

<sup>7</sup> [AQW 29105/17-22](#)

- For update under Outcome A, policy development on the successor strategy to [A Fitter Future for All](#) 2012-22 commenced in July 2021.
- For update, the [Online Safety Strategy](#) and action plan was published in February 2021; yet funding for its delivery has not been released.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, the timescales for the completion of year one actions should now move to the 2022/23 financial year.

## Conclusion

CiNI hope our comments are useful to the Department and we look forward to supporting officials as the Delivery Plan progresses. For additional information or discussion please contact Orla O'Hagan at [orla@ci-ni.org.uk](mailto:orla@ci-ni.org.uk).

---

<sup>8</sup> [AQW 24510/17-22](#)