



Children
in Northern
Ireland 

**STRATEGIC
PLAN**
2026-2031





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INTRODUCING OUR STRATEGY

Chair and Chief Executive's Foreword



Marie Cavanagh
Chair



Natalie Whelehan
Chief Executive

Children, young people and families across Northern Ireland are living in extremely challenging times. Rising mental health need, persistent inequality, increasing risks posed by technological innovation, pressures within education and health systems, and financial strain across the community and voluntary sector mean that the environment in which children grow up – and services operate – is more complex than ever.

In this context, the role of Children in Northern Ireland has never been more important.

As the regional umbrella body for the children and young people's sector, we have both a responsibility and an opportunity: to convene, strengthen and champion the children's sector; to amplify the voices of children, young people, parents and carers; and to deliver lasting change through influencing the decisions, policies and systems that shape their lives.

This Strategic Plan 2026 - 2031 sets out a clear and ambitious direction for the next five years. It has been shaped by extensive engagement with children and young people, parents, members, staff, Board and partners. It reflects lived experience, frontline insight and a shared determination to build a stronger, more connected and more influential children's sector.

Our vision is that children, young people and families are supported, listened to, treated fairly and live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.

Our mission is to amplify their voices, champion and build the capacity of the organisations who support them and bring about meaningful change.

To achieve this, our work will focus on five interconnected priorities:

Our 5 Strategic Priorities



**EMPOWERING
CHILDREN, YOUNG
PEOPLE AND FAMILIES**



**BUILDING CAPACITY
ACROSS THE
CHILDREN'S SECTOR**



**ADVOCACY
AND SYSTEMS
CHANGE**



**COLLABORATION
AND
COMMUNICATION**



**SUSTAINABILITY
AND
GROWTH**

Across all of these priorities, meaningful participation and lived experience will be central.

We will be independent but not neutral - challenging inequality, championing fairness and keeping children's rights and wellbeing at the heart of public decision-making.

This plan is ambitious because the needs of children and families demand ambition. It is

practical because it is grounded in evidence, lived experience and sector expertise. And it is collective because lasting change can only be achieved through partnership.

We look forward to working with our members, partners, funders and, most importantly, children, young people and parents and carers to deliver this strategy and realise our shared vision for Northern Ireland.



||
WE REPRESENT
OVER 130 MEMBER
ORGANISATIONS
SUPPORTING CHILDREN,
YOUNG PEOPLE,
PARENTS, CARERS
AND FAMILIES ACROSS
NORTHERN IRELAND.

||

ABOUT CHILDREN IN NORTHERN IRELAND



Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is Northern Ireland's regional umbrella organisation for the children and young people's sector. We represent over 130 Member organisations supporting children, young people, parents, carers and families across Northern Ireland.

We strengthen, connect and champion organisations working with and for children, young people and families. Uniquely, CiNI bridges direct family support through Parentline NI and lived experience through youth and parental participation with sector-wide leadership, advocacy and campaigns. This integrated model enables us to combine frontline insight with strategic influence, operating at a whole-system level to shape policy, inform practice and reinforce impact at scale.

As the recognised convenor for the sector, CiNI brings together voluntary and statutory partners to enable collective action and a unified voice on the issues that matter most. We generate insight and evidence, amplify lived experience and provide trusted leadership to influence policy, practice, systems and public debate.

Through advocacy, participation, training, evidence-informed practice, locality-based children's services planning and direct family support, CiNI combines sectoral and thought leadership with practical, compassionate support. Our role is to build collective capacity, act as essential infrastructure for the sector, and ensure that the rights and wellbeing of children and young people remain central to public decision-making.

This Strategic Plan has been shaped by extensive engagement with children and young people, parents, CiNI staff, Board, members and other key stakeholders. It reflects lived experience, professional insight and a shared ambition for a stronger, more connected children's sector.

OUR CONTEXT

Children, young people and families are facing growing pressure: rising mental health needs, delays in accessing health services, an education system that does not work for everyone, increasing technological and AI-related risks, and widening inequality. At the same time, the community and voluntary sector is operating within an increasingly constrained funding environment.





435,536
children live in NI

At 31/3/2024
1,990 children were
waiting on a
CAMHS
assessment, with 52%
or 1,026 waiting more
than nine weeks.



In 2024 over
22,200 children
were on **WAITING LISTS**
for general **OUTPATIENT**
CARE, a 172% increase
over seven years and an
all-time high.



17,760 children of
compulsory school
age have an
AUTISM
diagnosis and
17,205 children are
waiting for an autism
assessment. For
almost every child
with a diagnosis, there
is another awaiting an
assessment.



1 in 8 children and young people in
NI have a probable **MENTAL HEALTH**
CONDITION, a rate 25% higher than
in other UK nations. 45.2% of 16-year-
olds in NI report symptoms of mental
ill-health. Wellbeing for 11-year-olds is at
its lowest level since 2016.



At 31 March 2025, 22,243 children were known to
Social Services as a child in need. 2,283 were
on the **Child Protection Register**. 4,188
were children in care - the highest number since the
introduction of the Children (NI) Order 1995.

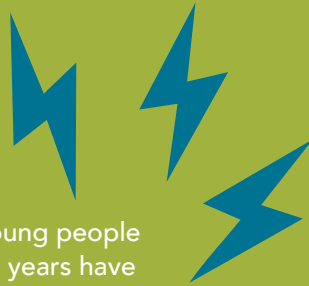
23% (104,000) of children are living in relative **POVERTY** (BHC) and 20% (90,000), are living in absolute poverty in NI.

Children are at a higher risk of living in poverty than the overall NI population in both relative and absolute measures.



20% or 70,213 children have **SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN)**.

8% (29,488) have a statement of SEN. 89% of children with SEN are educated in mainstream schools, while 11% attend special schools.



47.5% of young people aged 11-19 years have experienced at least one

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE (ACE).

Young people in the least deprived areas are much more likely to have experienced no ACEs (59.9%) compared to those in the most deprived (36.0%).

In 2023/24, 71.6% of young people achieved at least

5 GCSEs at A*-C including GCSE English and Maths. 51.8% free school meal entitled (FSME) children and 77% of non FSME children achieved at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C including GCSE English and maths.



One third (18,567) of those who are officially **HOMELESS** in NI are under the age of 18. Families make up over half (57% / 33,898 people) of everyone with official homelessness status. At November 2024, 5,378 children were living in temporary accommodation. This has doubled in the past 5 years (from 2,675 in Jul 2019).

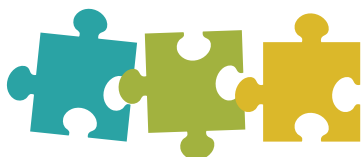


In 2025, over three quarters of Young Life and Times respondents spent at least three hours per day on **SOCIAL MEDIA**, whilst three in ten spent six hours or more. Over half experienced illegal and/or harmful behaviours via social media.

CiNI's role is both urgent and evolving: to act as a trusted bridge to support, a leader in safeguarding and trauma informed practice, and a strong, evidence informed advocate for children's rights and policy, practice and system change.

DEVELOPING OUR STRATEGIC PLAN

CiNI's Strategic Plan was developed over 2025-26 following a comprehensive programme of engagement, reflection and analysis. Our approach was grounded in three core principles that reflect who we are and how we work.



Outcome-focused

CiNI is committed to achieving meaningful and measurable change for children, young people and families across Northern Ireland. From the outset, we adopted an outcome-focused approach to strategic planning, ensuring that our priorities are clearly linked to the difference we want to make and how we will know if we are succeeding.

This approach aligns with the Northern Ireland Executive's outcomes-based Programme for Government and wider public service reform agendas. We have designed our strategy to be sufficiently flexible and responsive, recognising the interconnected nature of children's services and the multiple systems that shape children's lives. As a result, our plan has clear relevance across statutory, community and voluntary sector contexts, while remaining grounded in CiNI's distinct role and purpose.



Evidence-led

Our strategy is underpinned by a rigorous assessment of both the internal and external environment in which CiNI operates. We examined emerging trends, opportunities and risks affecting children, families and the children's sector, including funding pressures, workforce challenges, growing complexity of need, and the impact of technological innovation and societal change.

We critically reviewed where CiNI has the strongest impact, where we are best placed to add value as a membership body and thought leader, and where we must strengthen our sustainability and organisational resilience. Central to this process was careful consideration of the needs and experiences of children, young people and families, alongside evidence from research, policy analysis and sector insight to understand how those needs are likely to evolve over the lifetime of this plan.



Shaped by People

People are at the heart of this strategy. In developing our plan, we engaged with children and young people, parents, CiNI members, key partners, staff and Board members to shape our direction and priorities. This included dedicated participation and parental and youth engagement activity, a sector-wide member survey, staff and Board surveys, workshops and discussions.

This collaborative process provided insight, challenge and reflection, enabling us to make informed strategic choices about where CiNI can have the greatest impact, how we should work as a sector leader, and how we balance ambition with sustainability. It also ensured that this plan reflects lived experience, frontline reality and shared ownership across the organisation and the wider children's sector.

OUR VISION AND MISSION



VISION

Children, young people and families are supported, listened to, treated fairly and live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.



MISSION

To amplify the voices of children, young people and families, champion and build the capacity of organisations who support them and bring about meaningful change.

OUR VALUES

Our six core values underpin our organisational approach and are central to how we conduct relationships internally and externally. We are guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and we strive to reflect our values in all aspects of how we carry out our role, make decisions, set priorities and present ourselves. Our staff are encouraged to bring our values to life in everything we do in CiNI, and the introduction of internal values based behavioural indicators will be a focus over the lifetime of this strategic plan. Below each of our core values are associated behaviours which define how we work and live our values at CiNI.



CHILDREN'S RIGHTS LED

→ grounded in the UNCRC and equality



COLLABORATIVE

→ empowering and partnership oriented



COMPASSIONATE

→ trauma informed and supportive



EVIDENCE INFORMED

→ guided by lived experience, research and data



IMPACTFUL

→ delivering meaningful and lasting change for children, young people and families



INCLUSIVE

→ accessible, welcoming and enabling

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

EMPOWERING CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES

WHAT WE WILL DO

1. Embed the meaningful participation of children and young people, parents and carers in our work and advocate for the inclusion of lived experience in the development of Government policy and practice.
2. Develop and widely disseminate expert, evidence-based resources and podcasts. Deliver high quality workshops and programmes to support and meet the needs of parents and carers.
3. Strengthen our Parentline service as a trusted, confidential, multi-channel front door to family support. Ensure accessible and timely support across channels and increase awareness of, and interaction with, the service.
4. Identify gaps in service use and develop effective outreach methods to ensure that our services are accessible to, and used by, everyone who needs them.
5. Work with partners to deliver and grow youth projects to address key children's issues, ensure the meaningful participation of children and young people and provide personal development opportunities, including our Gets Active Holiday Hunger project.



HOW WE WILL DEMONSTRATE SUCCESS

1. Children, young people, parents and carers can evidence that their lived experience meaningfully shapes CiNI's work and is visibly reflected in Government policy and practice.
2. Through the production and wide reach of high-quality, evidence-based content that increases knowledge, confidence and practical application among parents, carers and professionals. This will be evidenced through engagement data, feedback and evaluation.
3. Through sustained growth in multi-channel reach, increased trust and parenting confidence among users, and strengthened awareness and referrals. This will be evidenced through monitoring data, user feedback and digital analytics.
4. Through data analysis identifying underrepresented groups, targeted outreach, and measurable increases in service uptake among communities with unmet need.
5. Through strong and growing partnerships delivering impactful youth projects, such as Gets Active, that embed meaningful participation and achieve measurable improvements in young people's confidence, skills, wellbeing and civic engagement.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

BUILDING CAPACITY

WHAT WE WILL DO

1. Act as a central capacity building hub for the children and young people's sector through the development of innovative solutions to sectoral challenges.
2. Deliver high quality, trauma informed training and practice support aligned to member and sectoral need.
3. Develop and share resources, practical tools and policy information / intelligence through CiNI Connect, FYI Newsletter, digital and other platforms.
4. Plan and convene an annual conference which brings experts, knowledge and best practice from around the world to members and partners.
5. Use digital technology to amplify the voices and widely communicate the views of members, children and young people, and parents and carers.
6. Lead the sector through providing support and consultancy on safeguarding practice.

HOW WE WILL DEMONSTRATE SUCCESS



1. Through CiNI's recognised role as a trusted sector hub. This will be evidenced by strong engagement, innovative tools and solutions to emerging challenges, and measurable improvements in the capacity and effectiveness of organisations across the children and young people's sector.
2. Through the delivery of high-quality, trauma-informed training and practice support that is shaped by sector need, achieving strong participant satisfaction. This will lead to measurable improvements in professional confidence and organisational practice.
3. Through the consistent development and wide dissemination of high-quality resources, tools and policy intelligence via CiNI Connect, FYI and digital platforms. This will be evidenced by strong engagement and reach, positive member feedback and clear application in practice and advocacy.
4. Through the delivery of a high-quality, well-attended annual conference that brings international expertise to the sector, strengthens knowledge exchange and partnerships, and influences practice and policy development.
5. Through the effective use of digital platforms to authentically amplify and widely communicate the voices of members, children, young people and parents and carers. This will be evidenced by growing reach, meaningful engagement and demonstrable influence on policy and practice.
6. Through CiNI's recognised leadership in safeguarding. This will be evidenced by demand for consultancy support, high organisational confidence, and measurable improvements in safeguarding practice and governance across the sector.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

ADVOCACY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

WHAT WE WILL DO

1. Make a demonstrable, positive impact on policy, practice and legislative developments, improving the lives of children, young people, parents and carers.
2. Provide clear, credible and trusted leadership on issues affecting children, young people and families, using lived experience, member insight, frontline practice and research. This will shape public debate, inform policy and improve practice across Northern Ireland.
3. Convene policy forums and members events to develop robust, shared sectoral policy positions, facilitate networking and access to decision makers. Convene and lead issue specific policy forums with specialist member and partner organisations and actively engage in policy coalitions and sectoral working groups to support members, develop shared policy positions and progress meaningful, evidence-based change for children and young people.
4. Convene and provide the secretariat to the All Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People, ensuring widespread sectoral, member and political engagement on issues of importance to children and young people.
5. Champion the wellbeing of children, young people, parents and carers in our direct services delivery, project and policy work.
6. Convene a data and impact group to make best use of our data, collect new sources of insightful data and develop a framework to clearly demonstrate our impact to members, partners and funders.
7. Identify sectoral evidence gaps and carry out / commission research. Develop strong relationships with academia to build a comprehensive evidence base which will inform our advocacy work and that of the sector.

HOW WE WILL DEMONSTRATE SUCCESS



1. Through measurable influence on policy, practice and legislation, with clear evidence that CiNI's advocacy contributes to positive and lasting improvements in the lives of children, young people, parents and carers.
2. Through CiNI's recognised and trusted leadership on issues affecting children, young people and families. This will be evidenced by visible influence in public debate, policy and practice, and measurable improvements in outcomes grounded in lived experience and sector insight.
3. Through well-attended and inclusive policy and issue specific policy forums and member events. This will allow for the development of robust, evidence-based shared positions that strengthen the sector's collective voice, strengthen networking and collaboration, secure meaningful engagement with decision makers and deliver policy and practice change for children and young people.
4. Through the effective convening and secretariat support of the All Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People, ensuring strong sectoral and cross-party engagement. This will ensure active contributions to informed debate and meaningful policy progress on issues affecting children and young people.
5. Through the consistent prioritisation and measurable improvement of wellbeing outcomes for children, young people, parents and carers across CiNI's services, projects and policy work. This will be supported by strong evidence, lived experience and sector leadership.
6. Through the establishment of a Data and Impact Group that strengthens data quality, integrates new insight sources, and delivers a clear, organisation-wide impact framework. This will enable CiNI to evidence and communicate its impact to members, partners and funders.
7. Through the identification of priority evidence gaps, the delivery and commissioning of high-quality research in partnership with academia, and the clear application of evidence to strengthen advocacy and sector-wide policy and practice.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION

WHAT WE WILL DO

1. Work collaboratively with and support members, partners and broader networks to improve information sharing, strengthen the children's sector and maximise collective impact for children, young people and families.
2. Positively contribute to systemic change and improved practice in Northern Ireland through active membership of networks and key strategic partnerships.
3. Work closely with influential organisations in Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions to share learning, innovation and areas of best practice.
4. Evolve and develop our membership offering to respond to the needs of members and the external environment in which we operate.
5. Collaborate with external partners who can provide benefits and add value for our members.
6. Promote the work of members through spotlights, promotional videos, social media, podcasts, digital and other platforms.
7. Strengthen internal collaboration to improve brand clarity, visibility and ensure organisational wide responsiveness to emerging issues.
8. Work in partnership with parents, members and sectoral partners to lead on the delivery of a diverse and engaging programme of events to celebrate Parenting Week.
9. Develop an organisational Communications Strategy and communicate our work to members, partners and broader networks, reaching children and young people, families and professionals through channels they use.
10. Develop relationships with media personnel and proactively undertake media interviews on our work and issues impacting on the lives of children, young people and families.



HOW WE WILL DEMONSTRATE SUCCESS

1. Through strengthened collaboration and information sharing across members and partners. This will deliver coordinated, collective impact that improves outcomes for children, young people and families.
2. Through CiNI's active and influential participation in key networks and strategic partnerships. This will contribute to systemic change and measurable improvements in policy and practice across Northern Ireland.
3. Through strong and sustained partnerships with influential organisations locally and internationally. This will enable the exchange of learning and innovation that strengthens practice, informs policy and improves outcomes for children, young people and families.
4. Through a responsive and evolving membership offer shaped by member insight and sector change. We will collect evidence of high satisfaction, strong retention, growth in membership and increased engagement with CiNI's services and leadership.
5. Through strategic partnerships that deliver tangible, high-value benefits to members. We will collect evidence of strong uptake, positive feedback and enhanced opportunities that strengthen the sector.
6. Through the consistent and impactful promotion of member work across digital and media platforms. This will ensure increased visibility, strong engagement and tangible benefits for members and the wider sector.
7. Through strengthened internal collaboration that delivers clear and consistent messaging, enhanced organisational visibility, and timely, coordinated responses to emerging issues.
8. Through a collaboratively delivered and widely attended Parenting Week programme, co-produced with parents and partners, that engages diverse audiences, raises the profile of parenting support and strengthens connections across the sector.
9. Through the development and implementation of a clear Communications Strategy. This will strengthen brand clarity, increase reach across priority audiences, and deliver measurable engagement and influence through preferred channels of use.
10. Through strong relationships with media personnel and a proactive, credible media presence that raises awareness of key issues, shapes public debate and strengthens CiNI's influence.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

3. Increase our earned income through membership review and growth, development of Parent Well at Work, increased training provision and media production support, including podcasting and videos.

4. Ensure robust systems of operational, financial, strategic, administrative, facilities and human resources management.

5. Develop our staff team and identify and invest in the staff capacity required to deliver on this Plan. Align organisational growth with staff capacity and wellbeing.

6. Prioritise and invest in digital infrastructure, robust governance and data security.

7. Support the work and development of CiNI's Board of Directors and ensure up to date and relevant organisational policies and procedures are in place and stringently adhered to.

8. Maintain our organisational ability to respond expediently, and with agility, to emerging issues.

9. Prioritise equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and belonging, develop an EDI policy and gain workplace EDI accreditation.

10. Retain a skilled, supported and motivated workforce, with high levels of continuity, wellbeing and organisational knowledge.

SUSTAINABILITY AND GROWTH

WHAT WE WILL DO

1. Strengthen organisational sustainability and efficiency through diversified income, streamlined systems and effective resource management, ensuring CiNI has the capacity and resilience to deliver its strategic priorities.

2. Grow and diversify income through development of relationships with new and existing funders, actively seeking and securing a range of new sources of income.

A large, teal, abstract shape on the left side of the page, resembling a stylized leaf or a drop with a wavy edge. It contains the text 'HOW WE WILL DEMONSTRATE SUCCESS' in yellow, bold, uppercase letters.

HOW WE WILL DEMONSTRATE SUCCESS

1. Through sustained organisational resilience evidenced by diversified income streams, efficient systems, strong governance and a skilled, supported workforce with the capacity to deliver CiNI's strategic priorities.
2. Through sustained growth and diversification of income, supported by strong relationships with new and existing funders. Successful securing of a broad and resilient range of funding sources aligned to CiNI's strategic priorities.
3. Through sustained growth in earned income driven by membership expansion, development of Parent Well at Work, increased training provision and monetised media production support, including podcasting and videos. This will strengthen CiNI's financial sustainability and resilience.
4. Through strong governance and management systems across operations, finance, HR, administration and facilities. This will be evidenced by compliance, financial stability, effective risk management and a well-supported workforce.
5. Through a workforce plan aligned to strategic growth, ongoing investment in staff skills and leadership, and strong staff wellbeing and retention. This will ensure that CiNI has the capacity and resilience to deliver this Plan.
6. Through investment in modern digital infrastructure, strong governance frameworks and robust data security systems. This will ensure organisational resilience, compliance and stakeholder confidence.
7. Through an effective and well-supported Board of Directors, underpinned by up-to-date policies and procedures that are rigorously implemented, ensuring strong governance, compliance and strategic oversight.
8. Through CiNI's ability to respond rapidly and strategically to emerging issues, delivering timely, evidence-informed action that supports service users and members and influences public debate and policy.
9. Through the development and implementation of an EDI policy and action plan, measurable improvements in inclusion and belonging across the organisation, and achievement of recognised workplace EDI accreditation.
10. Through high staff retention, strong staff wellbeing and engagement, sustained organisational knowledge and ongoing professional development. This will ensure a skilled, supported and motivated workforce.

DELIVERY AND REVIEW

This strategy will be delivered through annual operational plans with clear accountability, outcomes and review points. Delivery of the commitments in the plan will be monitored using a monitoring framework which clearly details how we will demonstrate that we are achieving the ambitions in our plan, using clear indicators and evidence sources. Children, young people, parents and carers will continue to be involved in shaping our work.

We will review this strategy regularly to ensure it remains relevant, responsive and ambitious.

OUR COMMITMENT

CiNI is committed to working alongside children, young people, parents, carers and partners to ensure that this strategy leads to real, positive change. We will remain reflective, compassionate and courageous in challenging systems that do not serve children and families well, while building a more inclusive and supportive future for all.





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