

# **CHILDREN IN NORTHERN IRELAND (CiNI)**

**Response to**

**Northern Ireland Draft Priorities and Budget  
2005 – 08 Consultation**

## **CHILDREN IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the umbrella body for the children's voluntary sector in Northern Ireland.

CiNI represents the interests of its 90 member organisations, providing policy, information and support services to members' in their work with children and young people. CiNI members are represented on the four HSS Board's Children and Young People's Committees and in this capacity were involved in the administration of the Executive Children's Fund to the voluntary and community sector. A significant proportion of CiNI members received support from the Children's Fund for the crucial work which they are doing for children and young people across Northern Ireland ranging from early years provision, disability, family support to children at risk of offending.

## **CONSULTATION PROCESS**

CiNI has been active throughout the consultation period raising the concerns elaborated on in this submission paper. We trust that these concerns have been taken forward and are being addressed in current priorities and budget negotiations, given that the final budget arrangements are to be agreed just one week after the close of public consultation. We are concerned at the tight time frame surrounding this current consultation and the potential it offers for real and meaningful public consultation.

We understand that there will be an analysis of the consultation submissions and that this analysis will be published. As part of this process CiNI would like feedback on how the concerns we have raised will be addressed in the final Priorities and Budget document.

CiNI believes that in future Priorities and Budget processes the children's voluntary sector must be involved from the outset in informing the development of priorities, given their knowledge and understanding of issues affecting children, young people and their communities on the ground.

This submission draws together CiNI's analysis of the Draft Priorities and Budget consultation document and has been informed by a roundtable discussion for member organisations with Department officials. CiNI continues to pro-actively lobby local MPs and MLAs to highlight our concerns and gain their support in taking forward work to address these concerns. CiNI continues to seek urgent meetings with the relevant Ministers' to discuss the implications of *Priorities and Budget 2005 - 08* for children's services in Northern Ireland.

## **GENERAL COMMENTS**

When devolved Government was suspended in 2002 the five priorities of Growing as a Community; Working for a Healthier Community, Investing in Education and Skills; Securing a Competitive Economy and Developing Relations, alongside their 35 sub-priorities were taken forward by the direct rule administration within its budget document *Building on Progress Priorities and Plans for 2003 – 2006*. The direct rule administration stated that Ministers were 'determined to build on the progress made during devolution,' and were of the view that the sub-priorities remained 'valid and important.' In fact many

of the commitments made under these sub-priorities have yet to be realised. Last year's *Northern Priorities and Budget 2004 – 06* continued the policy direction established by the Executive and the Government remained committed to retaining the five priorities as the basis of its work in the years ahead.

However, in the present *Draft Priorities and Budget 2005-08* the five priorities have been replaced by three over-arching themes: Economic Competitiveness; Building Equality and Community Cohesion; and Better Public Services. Each theme has a small number of priority outcomes.

We have been advised that the five priorities have been carried through into the three proposed over-arching themes. **This is not evident from the current consultation document which lacks the substance and detail of previous *Programme for Government and Priorities and Budget* documents.** CiNI would request that the final *Priorities and Budget 2005 - 08* document provide clarification as to how the Executive's five priorities have been incorporated into the three proposed over-arching themes, in particular CiNI would wish to see evidence of the inclusion of the commitments made in *Building on Progress Priorities and Plans for 2003 – 2006* that have not yet been realised, for example the development of a DHSSPS Children in Need Strategy.

CiNI believes that the concerns which have emerged as a result of the current consultation put in place a strong case for a Minister for Children supported by a dedicated budget for children within any future devolved Government. Within Government there is a need for resolute commitment and leadership on children's issues and accountability with regard to policy, legislation and service delivery for children and young people.

In reference specifically to the proposed theme of Economic Competitiveness, CiNI notes the commitment to making Northern Ireland a more competitive and productive region. We would contend strongly that Northern Ireland's future economic competitiveness is inextricably linked to the well-being of our children and young people. This is supported by research commissioned by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People on the state of children's rights in Northern Ireland. The Queen's University report entitled - 'An audit of the areas in which children's rights are ignored or underplayed in Northern Ireland in 2004' in considering implementation of the UNCRC stated that **there was a clear link between the economic well-being of the country and the extent of the duty to protect and promote the rights of its children.** To be a more competitive and productive region Northern Ireland requires a skilled and educated workforce. Many of preventative and support services provided by voluntary childcare sector to families in need and other vulnerable and socially excluded groups of children and young people intended to help and prepare such people to make best of education, training and employment opportunities.

## **EXECUTIVE PROGRAMME FUND FOR CHILDREN (CHILDREN'S FUND)**

The Executive Programme Fund for Children was originally set up with the overall aim of 'improving the life chances and citizenship of vulnerable children and young people by providing additional resources to those provided by mainstream programmes.' In 2001 when consulting on proposals for the Children's Fund the Executive stated that it recognised that it had inherited a situation where many key statutory services for

children were insufficiently funded. The consultation document stated that 'the need to increase resources in this area [statutory services for children] was the main rationale for the establishment of the Children's Fund.' The DHSSPS, in 2003, noted in its document on *Developing a Strategy for Children in Need*, that 'it was estimated that expenditure per head of the under 18 population on family and child care services in Northern Ireland is about 25% lower than in England.' This supports CiNI's belief that the Children's Fund remains central to the future development of services for children.

In *Building on Progress Priorities and Plans for 2003 – 06* there was a commitment that by 2004/05 the Government would have 'reviewed the operation of the Children's Fund to assess its effectiveness and ensure it supports the new cross-departmental strategy for children and young people.' (Page 20) In reporting on progress toward delivery of this commitment the *Annual Report for 2003/04 - Progress in Implementing Building on Progress – Priorities and Plans 2003 – 06* stated that the Government was on track to achieving this, and that work was continuing on this commitment.

Subsequently in last year's budget document *Northern Ireland Priorities and Budget 2004 – 06* the Children's Fund was identified as the only Executive Programme Fund which was to continue in existence. **The document stated that 'there is a strong case for continuing with an element of the existing fund which would be open to bids from non-governmental organisations, in addition to the statutory component, and remain as a distinct allocation that can be used to maintain the strong focus on children's issues established by the Executive and which has been maintained by, for example, the appointment of a Children's Commissioner.'** (Page 41)

The current consultation document, *Draft Priorities and Budget 2005 – 08*, makes no reference to the Children's Fund nor is there any evidence of such monies within the draft budget figures. During the consultation period when CiNI raised the absence of allocations for the Children's Fund we were informed that any remaining monies in the Children's Fund were to be mainstreamed. **CiNI is requesting evidence as to how the 'strong case' that existed just twelve months ago for the retention of the Children's Fund, as a distinct allocation to focus on children's issues, has now dissipated to the extent that the Children's Fund is no longer required to support and protect Northern Ireland's most vulnerable and at risk children?**

CiNI would contend that no decisions on the future of the Children's Fund should be taken until there is a full and public review of the Fund as was committed to in *Building on Progress*. Furthermore this review should examine how the Children's Fund could support the new cross-departmental strategy for children and young people which has been launched for public consultation. Indeed given that the Children's Fund was an Executive and Assembly lead initiative any decision on its future must be taken within the context of devolved Government.

A decision not to proceed with the Children's Fund would seem to be at odds with the Minister's public statement which accompanied the launch of *Draft Priorities and Budget*. In his statement Ian Pearson identified as a **priority "improving priority frontline services so that they are focussed on delivering excellent and efficient services for those who need and use them"**. The Minister's press release notes that he "pledged that Government will continue to work with the voluntary and community sector, taking account of the conclusions of the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector."

Should the Children's Fund be discontinued a major source of funding to the voluntary sector will disappear. This is contrary to the Task Force's vision of increased involvement of the sector in the delivery of services. **The Task Force report states "If services are cut back by Government, the voluntary and community sector should not be the first casualty by default, rather decisions should be based on the needs of users and the quality of service provision."** All voluntary and community sector projects funded through the Children's Fund have set clear outcomes and developed monitoring processes to assess effectiveness. Any decision to cease funding these services without reference to this evidence base would be a clear example of just the sort of approach the Task Force were stating should not occur.

The Task Force Report reminds us of the centrality of the Compact between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland to partnership arrangements. In the compact Government commits itself to assessing the potential impact of policy changes on the sector and to consider where possible the scope for mitigating any unintended negative impact. Considering the significant impact the ending of the Children's Fund will have on the sector CiNI is asking whether such analysis has taken place?

CiNI does not believe that the position of children and young people in Northern Ireland has changed sufficiently since the establishment of the Children's Fund to justify it being discontinued at this point in time.

A stark illustration of the circumstances of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in Northern Ireland is provided by a forthcoming research report commissioned by Save the Children entitled 'Severe Poverty in Northern Ireland' which reveals that '8% (32,000) of children were living in severe poverty in Northern Ireland in 2002/03 with a further 42% of children living in non-severe poverty. The report discusses three measures of poverty and a high proportion of children who were poor on all three measures were lacking what was described as basic necessities: meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent at least twice a day (22%); fresh fruit and vegetables (20%); three meals a day (14%); a comic/magazine once a week (52%); educational games (23%); new clothes when needed (42%); new not second hand clothes (29%); and, at least seven underpants/knickers in good condition (19%).

Also the NICCY/QUB report into the state of children's rights in Northern Ireland has identified egregious breaches of children's rights in Northern Ireland, in particular areas where children were being exposed to physical and mental harm.

Furthermore CiNI believes that for some of our most vulnerable children and young people their circumstances are likely to become even more difficult resulting in the need for greater support. The implementation of measures to tackle anti-social behaviour in Northern Ireland is awaited with much trepidation by the children's sector. If the experience in England and Wales replicates itself to Northern Ireland we will have children and young people in greater need of the support projects and programmes funded by the Children's Fund. The Independent reported on 31 October 2004 that as many as one in three children in youth jails in England and Wales are there for breaching an Anti-Social Behaviour Order.

CiNI is deeply concerned that the emphasis on protecting priority frontline services which features as a key message throughout the consultation document is in fact not the reality of the situation on the frontline at this present time. CiNI has learned that despite the fact that the *Draft Priorities and Budget 2005 - 08* document is still the subject of public consultation, the process has been circumvented and already some projects funded under the statutory element of the Children's Fund have been informed that their funding is stopping within the next six months. A significant proportion of these projects provide early intervention and preventative services which when adequately resourced and supported reduce the demand on acute resource intensive services at crisis points. The Government's focus on efficiency savings in the short-term is likely to bring significant costs in the long-term if these services are lost. Lose of these projects and programmes will also mean that the knowledge and skills invested in staff from these projects will also be lost.

The Chancellor's Children's Fund in England was initially allocated £450 million and looking ahead to the period 2005 – 08 an allocation of £410 million has been ring-fenced for the Fund. Given that Northern Ireland under the Barnett Formula gets a population share of any change in spending on a comparable programme in England CiNI seeks information as to how much this share amounts to and, if it has not come to the Children's Fund here in Northern Ireland, what is it being spent on? CiNI does not believe that there is a more worthy source of investment for this money than Northern Ireland's most vulnerable and at risk children, who have experienced some of the most acute disadvantage, living in a society emerging from over thirty years of political conflict. We understand that it is at the discretion of the Secretary of State and his Ministerial team as to how these monies are to be spent, and we are calling on them to use their discretion to ring-fence this money for children and young people here in Northern Ireland.

The existing Executive's Children's Fund must be protected in the final Priorities and Budget agreement and provision must be made for the continuation of these services beyond their present three year funding cycle which ends in 2006 - 07.

## **EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

CiNI is particularly concerned by the equality implications of *Draft Priorities and Budget*. CiNI would contend that in reference to the Equality Commission's revised *Guide to the Statutory Duties* (2004) that DFP, in line with their section 75 duty to promote equality of opportunity, must engage in consultation about the likely impact on the promotion of equality of opportunity of any decision on the future of the Children's Fund and conduct an equality impact assessment into such a decision. Furthermore, in line with Section 75, DFP must consult directly with children and young people on the future of the Children's Fund.

## **OFMDFM'S CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S STRATEGY**

CiNI welcomed the recent launch for public consultation of the Draft Children and Young People's Strategy. Almost four years after the Executive announced that Northern Ireland was to have its own Strategy for Children and Young the public consultation represents the culmination of much dedicated and committed work by the voluntary child

care sector in partnership with Government. However, the launch has been subdued given that there is no evidence of any monies to support the implementation of the strategy in the consultation document.

All of the strategy's well developed outcomes, objectives and actions offer little to children, young people and their families if they are not accompanied by a robust implementation and monitoring plan, reinforced with adequate and appropriate resources.

The UK Government is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and as such is obliged to take measures to give effect to the rights in the Convention and ensure that these enable children to enjoy the rights set forth in the Convention. CiNI believes that the Draft Children and Young People's Strategy must be the Government's plan for implementation of the UNCRC in Northern Ireland.

The Convention clearly states at Article 4 that in implementing the social and cultural rights of the Convention state parties must do so to the 'maximum extent of available resources'. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its most recent consideration in 2002 of the UK Government's progress in implementing the UNCRC expressed its concern that the Convention is not being implemented to the 'maximum extent of available resources and recommended that the Government 'ensure transparent analysis of sectoral and total budgets across Government and the devolved administrations to show the proportion spent on children, to identify priorities and to allocate resources to the maximum extent of available resources.'

The NICCY/QUB report provides clarification on the Government's responsibility to implement the Convention rights to the 'maximum extent of available resources' stating that 'this does not mean that lack of resources is a defence to the failure to implement children's rights standards, but rather ensures that wealthy nations, like the UK, spend more because they can afford to do so.' Furthermore the NICCY report supports the point highlighted earlier of the link between economic competitiveness and the well-being of our children and young people contending that 'implementation of the Convention is not a relatively expensive exercise, and would undoubtedly lead to long term economic efficiency.'

None of the concerns raised in this submission should be viewed as distinct or separate, each has a knock on effect on the other, and in their entirety they represent the most serious threat to the future well-being of children, young people and their families that has been witnessed in Northern Ireland in many years. A decision not to continue with the Children's Fund, for example, would mean that the necessary projects and programmes would not exist to deliver on the outcomes of the Children and Young People's Strategy.

CiNI would request that in the final Priorities and Budget agreement adequate and appropriate resources are allocated for implementation of the strategy so that the consultation period is real and meaningful for all those engaged in the process.

- **DHSSPS PRIORITIES AND BUDGET**

CiNI would also like to raise grave concerns regarding the proposed DHSSPS budget.

In last year's *Northern Ireland Priorities and Budget 2004 – 06* the DHSSPS Public Service Agreement stated that the budget would 'allow more investment in children's services;' in contrast the current proposed DHSSPS Public Service Agreement places emphasis on the new contracts for hospital consultants, the new GP contracts, as well as Agenda for Change. CiNI would contend that after honouring these commitments there will be reductions in the monies available for core children's services, which are already over-stretched and under-resourced.

CiNI is requested that core services for children and their families are protected in the final Priorities and Budget agreement.

Another glaring absence within the consultation document is the lack of commitment to Sure Start. In both *Programme for Government 2002 – 2005* and *Building on Progress Priorities and Plans for 2003 – 06* the DHSSPS Public Service Agreements set targets to increase the numbers participating in Sure Start initiatives. The following year in *Northern Ireland Priorities and Budget 2004 – 06*, the DHSSPS Public Service Agreement, again highlighted the Government's commitment to Sure Start stating that 'it continues to provide better life chances for children.' CiNI would request that the final Priorities and Budget document demonstrate continued support for Sure Start initiatives.

## **POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

On the whole CiNI would advocate for much greater clarity and transparency in the final Priorities and Budget document in relation to all of the policy and legislative initiatives that are currently being planned or are already being taken forward, for example the Draft Special Educational Needs and Disability Order; the Children (Leaving Care) (Northern Ireland) Act 2003; and the ongoing Mental Health and Learning Disability Review. The Government must visibly demonstrate its commitment to supporting and resourcing such legislation and policy.

## **SUMMARY**

1. CiNI would request that the final Priorities and Budget 2005 - 08 document provide clarification as to how the Executive's five priorities have been incorporated into the three proposed over-arching themes.
2. CiNI is calling for the establishment of a Minister for Children within future devolved Government, supported by a dedicated budget for children.
3. CiNI notes the NICCY/QUB research which states the clear link between the economic well-being of the country and the extent of the duty to protect and promote the rights of children.
4. CiNI is requesting evidence as to how the 'strong case' that existed just twelve months ago for the retention of the Children's Fund, as a distinct allocation to focus on children's issues, has now dissipated to the extent that the Children's Fund is no longer required to support and protect Northern Ireland's most vulnerable and at risk children?

5. CiNI is calling for the reinstatement of the Executive Children's Fund and for a full and public review of the Children's Fund as was committed to in Building on Progress Priorities and Plans 2003 – 06 within the context of devolved Government.
6. CiNI is calling on Minister Pearson to clarify the Government's definition of frontline services, as it would appear that it is those priority frontline services that are "delivering excellent and efficient services," that the Minister pledged to protect which are now under threat.
7. CiNI would call on the Minister to ensure that the final Priorities and Budget agreements are informed by the Task Force 'Investing Together' report which envisages greater involvement of the voluntary and community sector in the delivery of public services.
8. CiNI seeks clarification on how much money has come into Northern Ireland for the Children's Fund, and what this is now being spent on?
9. CiNI would request that full and adequate resources are made available for the implementation of the Children and Young People's Strategy.
10. CiNI would request that core services for children, young people and their families are protected in the final Priorities and Budget agreement.