

'Making it r wrld 2'

-

**Response to
OFMDFM's Consultation on a
Draft Strategy for
Children and Young People
In Northern Ireland**

submitted by

Children in Northern Ireland

**February
2005**

Introduction

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the representative organisation for the voluntary childcare sector in Northern Ireland, providing leadership and support to its members and working to enhance the lives of all its children.

CiNI welcomes the publication of a draft Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland. It believes that a strategy is necessary to focus attention and resources over the next ten years on issues which are crucial to the quality of life of the children and young people who live here.

The publication of this draft strategy follows on from an extensive period of consultation within the sector on the shape and content of the strategy. It is widely acknowledged that the consultation processes used over the last three years were much more inclusive and innovative than had been previously the case, and therefore formed a solid base on which to build a sound strategy.

Methodology

CiNI have been asked by the Children & Young Peoples' Unit of OFM/DFM to facilitate a wide-ranging consultation within the voluntary childcare sector to ensure a comprehensive response to the draft strategy.

CiNI has consulted with the voluntary childcare sector throughout Northern Ireland with two general consultations held in Belfast, one in Derry and one in Enniskillen. Further, to ensure effective engagement with those representing specific multiple identity groups, targeted consultation was held with groups representing children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, Irish Traveller children and young people, and young lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. Finally an additional workshop was held on the issue of monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the policy, and the structures needed to do this. All sessions were well attended, and CiNI is confident that it has collected a rich and representative view of those working in the sector – both CiNI-members and non-members. A list of those organisations represented throughout the consultation process facilitated by CiNI is attached at Appendix 1.

CiNI has collated the responses and presents these in a format that reflects the priorities emerging from the consultation.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as the basis of the strategy

There was an overwhelming response during CiNI's consultation that the draft strategy's commitment to the human rights of the child had been significantly weakened since previous drafts and was a fundamental flaw in the document.

There was particular concern around the internal inconsistencies within the document in this regard. For example, one of the stated Operational Principles 'rights-promoting' is defined as 'to **carry** Northern Ireland **closer** to the principles enshrined in the UNCRC'; this does not align with the description in Chapter 5 of a '**rights-based** whole child approach'.

CiNI strongly contends that the strategy should be returned to its original intent as the implementation plan for the UNCRC. Accordingly the UNCRC must underpin the entire framework of the strategy. Implementation of the UNCRC must be headlined from the outset at the top level of the strategy, that is, in the strategy's vision, so that a Northern Ireland in which children and young people thrive and look forward with confidence to the future will be achieved 'when the principles and provisions of the UNCRC are **delivered** for all child and young people in Northern Ireland'. The vision must then translate throughout the strategy and be reflected and incorporated in the values; operational principles; key action areas; strategic outcomes; strategic objectives; draft actions and associated indicators.

A further concern of those consulted was the emerging emphasis on the 'responsibilities' of children and young people in the draft strategy. It is accepted that the concepts of rights and responsibilities are linked, perhaps most usefully in a manner where rights are delivered and exercised in a way that promotes and encourages responsibility; not in such a way that children's rights are contingent to exercising responsibility. CiNI believes that the profile given to 'responsibilities' in the draft strategy is in fact contrary to the links the draft strategy proffers to the UNCRC, as this concept of responsibility is not included in international standards on human rights and children's rights. We would therefore advocate strongly that all such references are removed.

Consultation response:

There was unanimous agreement that the draft strategy must be 'rights-delivering'. Government's aim – and that of the statutory sector in general - must be to develop the strategy as the implementation plan for the UNCRC to ensure full compliance at least within the timescale of the draft strategy. CiNI welcomes and supports the CLC/SC papers – 'Extent to which the Draft Strategy Addresses the UNCRC Committee's Concluding Observations 2002' and 'Evaluation of the Draft Children's Strategy against the standard of the UNCRC'. CiNI would advocate that in drafting the final strategy, which we trust will be the implementation plan for the UNCRC, that these papers will provide guidance in ensuring that the final strategy addresses the UN Committee's concluding observations and implements the principles and provisions of the UNCRC.

The Strategy Framework

The strategy comprises a vision, values, operational principles, five key action areas, strategic outcomes, strategic objectives, draft actions, associated indicators and cross-cutting themes. The vision and values were considered

broadly acceptable by those consulted, whilst there was widespread concern that the Draft Actions would not deliver on the strategic outcomes to which they were linked. It was also noted that the Draft Actions were not appropriately prioritised; did not necessarily reflect the major areas where change was necessary and were largely non-visionary in that they often recited policies which were already in place or merely committed the government to **'review / reflect'** on issues rather than **implement** strategies for change. Indeed the allocation of policy responsibility to specific lead departments did not suggest that the draft strategy itself was adhering to one of its own operating principles of a 'well-co-ordinated and collaborative approach' from Government.

The vision and values have been widely consulted on and met with general acceptance. However there was some concern that certain key issues were not adequately reflected e.g. children and young people experiencing and witnessing domestic abuse.

Operational Principles

It was felt that the operational principles could provide a useful benchmark against which to measure the draft actions of the strategy. However, it was agreed that in some instances these were particularly weak. As referred to earlier it was felt that an operational principle requiring all actions to be **'rights promoting'**, bringing Northern Ireland closer to the principles of the UNCRC', was inadequate in enabling progress towards implementation of the UNCRC. Instead all actions must be firmly **rights-based** in line with the draft strategy's overall philosophy.

It was also agreed that there were other strong operational principles, for example, requiring actions to be 'well co-ordinated and collaborative', and it was in fact in relation to this operational principle that draft actions were found to be lacking, as Departments appeared to be working independently in their own areas of responsibility. CiNI would recommend that where necessary operational principles are strengthened, and that in developing actions for the final strategy these are demonstrated to align to the operational principles.

Strategic Outcomes and Objectives

CiNI believes that within the hierarchy of the draft strategy's framework there is a very clear danger that an important emphasis on outcomes for children will be lost.

Cross-cutting themes

The use of the categorisation 'cross-cutting themes' was of major concern to those consulted. This includes the three key issues of:

- Sectarianism, racism, good relations

- Transitions at different ages
- Additional needs of children and young people who are ‘especially vulnerable and / or disaffected’

By treating these issues as an ‘**add-on**’ element to the main Action Areas, the likely consequence is that some of the most marginalised groups in society will continue to be further marginalised through this strategy. There was widespread agreement that the core Draft Action Plans should deliver for **all** children and young people. Historically what has happened is that the needs of certain children and young people have been relegated to silos which do not best understand certain issues of provision e.g. issues affecting children and young people with disabilities are still primarily seen as the responsibility of DHSSPS, even where they relate to issues outside their remit e.g. housing. Regrettably, therefore, consultees considered that the need for effective joined-up government policy development and delivery has not been enhanced by the structure of ‘cross-cutting themes’.

Whilst there are some – although limited - references to children and young people who are disabled and from Traveller communities, there are further marginalised groups who seem to have been largely ignored. There are no specific actions relating to lesbian, gay and bisexual young people, despite homophobic bullying in the education system and confidentiality in the healthcare system being recognised as major areas of concern.

There is also limited reference to children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Those consulted found it difficult to reconcile the fact that while asylum seeking children continue to access the services delivered by departments and their agencies, as a result of immigration being an excepted issue, they are held outside the scope of the strategy. There was a strong belief that asylum seeking children must be brought within the scope of the strategy and that the concluding observations of the UN Committee in this regard are actioned.

Consultation response:

*There was widespread concern that the framework of the strategy caused some confusion. Whilst the vision and values were generally appropriate standards, the draft action plans did not reflect key priorities, were not co-ordinated, or sufficiently focussed and measurable. Of particular concern some of the most marginalised groups where most targeted work to achieve fair rights was needed, were either given subsidiary attention as a cross-cutting theme, or completely ignored. There was general agreement that the strategy should apply to **all** children and young people up to the age of 25 (in line with Youth Service provision) and that the multiple identities of children and young people should be explicitly recognised under the five key action areas. In this regard it was emphasised that it had to be explicitly recognised that not all children and young people had equal experiences, and therefore additional specific action – and resources – were needed to enable these groups of children and young people to achieve equality of opportunity. There needed to be specific child-centred indicators, with data disaggregated e.g. in*

terms of disability and race to facilitate measurement of progress towards strategic outcomes.

Draft Actions

UN Committee on the Right of the Child Concluding Observations (2002)

CiNI believes that as a starting point in the development of actions for the strategy that Government **must** defer to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations 2002.

The UN Committee states clearly in its General Comment Number 5 on General Measures of Implementation that national plans of action must address concluding observations issued by the Committee - "the Committee expects Government to take account of its concluding observations when developing national strategy"

The draft strategy provides a disappointingly brief synopsis of the issues raised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, focusing on areas where progress has been made and only briefly referring to the Committee's recommendations stating that the Committee 'recognised that there was still much work to be done and highlighted a number of areas where it would wish to see further action, for example, in relation to integrated education'.

Beyond this there is no substantive consideration of the UN Committee's concluding observations and recommendations within the draft strategy's actions. There are clear examples of where the concluding observations have not been addressed by the draft strategy actions, and others where the draft strategy actions are so vague that it is impossible to assess whether or not it will address the concluding observations.

CiNI would advocate that in line with the UN Committee's General Comment Number 5, that these recommendations are translated into actions for Government departments and their agencies. CiNI fears that if the UN Committee's recommendations are not clearly and explicitly addressed by the strategy that it will fail to tackle the most fundamental breaches of children and young people's rights and in so doing de-value and compromise the credibility of the entire strategy. In our commentary on the key action areas we have highlighted the Committee's recommendations.

Many of the UN Committee's Concluding Observations and recommendations delivered in 2002 have again been reiterated as requiring urgent action from relevant departments and agencies by the NICCY/QUB research on Children's Rights in Northern Ireland in 2004.

Rights and Equality

Whilst there is unanimous acceptance that this is a fundamental area for children and young people, it was equally agreed that the draft actions listed did not tackle the key issues of inequality and rights abuses, and in most cases those actions cited merely replicated measures already underway. A general criticism of the document was the absence of genuine visionary long-term action plans.

It was also noted that rights should not be compromised by a child – or young person’s – ability to comprehend, and that there needed to be a clearer focus on the state delivering these rights, rather than the enhanced emphasis on the responsibilities in this regard of children and young people.

Concerns were expressed that the commitments undertaken were weak – e.g. ‘ensure that rights ... are **reflected** in the implementation of a Racial Equality Strategy’. Some participants provided evidence that the Gender Strategy and the Racial Equality Strategy did not give specific attention to issues affecting children and young people. There was a general concern that these strategies tended to concentrate on issues affecting the respective adult populations and that children and young people’s issues were usually seen as an add-on. A stronger means of securing commitment needed to be developed.

However there was strong agreement that the draft action on proofing of new policies and legislation to ascertain the impact on the rights and best interests of children and young people, if developed [to include the proofing of existing policies and legislation], implemented properly and resourced adequately, would hold the key to addressing these concerns. CiNI would advocate that the draft strategy includes a commitment to developing a model for conducting child proofing of both existing and new legislation and policies. CiNI believes that such a model, utilised across all levels of Government from macro policies to local operational policies, offers the potential to fundamentally mainstream children and young people’s rights in Government.

As part of this discussion concerns were also voiced regarding the current operation of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, particularly with regard to the failure by some sections of Government to consult directly with children and young people on legislation and policies that affected them. These concerns were also articulated in the NICCY/QUB report, which noted that section 75 was currently the only method of evaluating the potential impact of policies on children’s rights. The research noted that the children’s voluntary sector and wider NGO sector did not believe that it was being implemented properly by statutory agencies.

There was strong agreement on the need for Government to implement, and other responsible agencies to enforce, the tools that were already available. There was a clear recommendation for action under the strategy relating to further and ongoing training for departments and their agencies on section 75, particularly with regard to consultation requirements.

CiNI and those consulted also welcome the draft action on 'provision of core training on UNCRC, children's rights and the 'whole child' approach for relevant employees in Government departments and bodies and the encouragement of the uptake of training amongst voluntary and community organisations'. However it was agreed that a more illustrative and comprehensive list of those targeted be included specifying which sectors and professional groups will receive core training on the UNCRC, with commitment included to initial and on-going, in-service training as recommended by the UN Committee.

CiNI also welcomes the draft action committed to developing and implementing an awareness-raising campaign to alert children and young people to their rights and how to deal with any breaches of them, in recognition of the fact that most children are not aware of their rights within the UNCRC. CiNI would advocate that this awareness-raising campaign is sensitive to the different age groups and identities of children and young people; and that the awareness raising campaign reaches all children and young people. It is thus important that it is not solely delivered through formal education mediums but reaches children and young people who are in the care of other Government departments, for example those children and young people in the care system and those in the criminal justice system.

Participants considered there were overriding inequalities which needed to be incorporated in the Draft Actions e.g. action to tackle relative underperformance in educational attainment e.g. amongst Travellers, boys and disabled children, tackling the issues of mainstreaming versus special schooling for both children with disabilities and Traveller children. Mortality rates of Traveller children under 10 are 10 times higher than in the rest of the population – this was surely a fundamental rights-based issue that needed tackling and specific action plans to that end. The absence of accommodations and freshwater supplies for some Traveller children seems perhaps one of the most fundamental abuses of human rights that have not been addressed. The quality of housing, education provision for children and young people in the criminal justice system all needed attention in this fundamental area. The concentration of the Draft Actions on issues where OFMDFM is the lead department suggests an absence of effective mainstreaming and ignores the most fundamental areas where children and young peoples' rights are abused or denied.

It was again emphasised that where the term equality was used in this regard there needed to be recognition that some groups required more support and resources to overcome institutionalised discrimination in the past and create a level playing field to afford a fair chance for all children. Indicators therefore needed to concentrate on eroding inequitable differentials as well as generally improving standards.

Consultation Response:

There was general acceptance that rights and equality were a fundamental priority. However it was noted that fundamental inequalities between different groups must be tackled and redressed whilst working to achieve an overall commitment to rights and fair treatment for all children.

Participation

This action area was agreed as fundamental to changing the experience of children and young people. Only if they are effectively involved in decisions affecting their lives will the relevant policies and services adequately meet their needs. Some considered this so important that rather than a separate action area it should be an essential element in all action plans.

Again there was disappointment that the Draft Actions concentrated on highly formalised forms of participation and that there was minimal commitment to long-term visionary actions.

Concern was also expressed that initiatives to date rarely secured involvement from the most marginalised groups of children and young people. Since participation had a key role in securing ownership, inclusion and self-worth, and as such played a key role in preventing further disengagement, much more effort was needed to involve representative cross-sections of children and young people.

Consultation Response:

There was a welcome for the profile given to participation although the caveat was added that the mechanisms used must be innovative and inclusive of those who were traditionally least likely to be involved.

Provision – Built and natural environment

Whilst recognising the importance of some of the issues in this action area a number of those consulted expressed surprise at the prominence given to it. Within that context it was generally regarded that high quality social housing and promoting action to remedy unfitness was the priority issue. This is a further example of an action plan without meaningful associated indicators to harness commitment to a target – no information is provided on the number of new houses to be built or numbers made fit, or by when within the lifespan of the plan.

Again there was some frustration that the issues being raised reflected action plans already well under way. Whilst action was committed in urban areas and rural areas, it is unclear if there was specific provision for provincial towns.

A number of those familiar with the key issues emphasised the need to introduce child-centred design to educational establishments, housing

developments, play areas and indeed more generally. There is no evidence that this fundamental change, which could do most to enhance the safety and promote healthier development for children and young people, is being incorporated in the plans referred to. The absence of reference to it in this action plan is very concerning.

Consultation Response:

The draft actions in this section should more fully recognise the need for designing the environment in a way which is more child and disabled-friendly. There is no evidence from this document that this will be done, so it is difficult to see how this will assist in children and young people living, working, travelling and playing in a more safe, clean, bright and sustainable environment.

Provision – Family and community support

The inclusion of family and community support as a key element in provision is welcomed. However the lack of detail in the draft actions and associated indicators was again a source of concern. For example, whilst welcoming a commitment to ‘provision of affordable and accessible childcare, after-school care and playcare’ there is no evidence of target dates for achieving this or indeed indicators of coverage.

The development of a parenting family support strategy was welcomed, although some concerns were noted. It was felt that the appropriate emphasis must be on family support as this includes but goes beyond parenting. The absence of reference to prevention throughout the document again leads to an emphasis solely on e.g. the ‘consequences of family breakdown’. It was felt the strategy must promote and ensure a cultural change across Government departments and their agencies which endorses the preventative approach in all work with and for children and young people.

It was also felt that the strategy should look to develop a range of appropriate practical home based services, as the preferred method of intervention in meeting the needs of children by building on strengths of families and carers.

In relation to the proposal on building on Sure Start there was agreement that this was a prime example of where Government must look to developments in England. Government policies in this area, and in other areas including the Children’s Fund, have not been replicated in Northern Ireland and although Northern Ireland, under the Barnett Formula does receive comparable increases in programme areas, the experience has been that when increases in spend for children and young people’s programmes come to Northern Ireland these are not spent on children and young people. There was agreement that the draft strategy must explicitly include draft actions for the development of children’s centres accompanied by appropriate resources.

Consultation Response

Whilst welcoming the profile attached to family and community support, again there is no evidence of the resources to be committed to projects, target dates for securing change - and of particular concern – the absence of preventative strategies to counter some of the concerns.

Provision - Achievement, learning and enjoyment

This Action Area concentrates on education and development issues. It is noted that the development of a play and recreation strategy for Northern Ireland largely covers issues that are dealt with under the 'Built environment' Action Area.

There seems to be an emphasis on buildings in education – e.g. mobile classrooms and out of hours usage - coupled with a range of other major reviews e.g. the Costello Report, pre-school education, which leaves the impression that the focus is on existing initiatives, rather than creative developments to maximise individual achievement for all children and young people.

There was strong consensus that issues affecting disabled children and young people in particular should not be dealt with as a 'cross-cutting theme', but properly mainstreamed in this Action Area. Equally, if not dealt with under the Rights and Equality Action Area, the underperformance of different children and young people should be specifically addressed in this Action Area.

A further concern is the lack of specific reference to children and young people with learning disabilities. Indeed, whilst the document frequently cross-refers to other Government strategies e.g. Gender Strategy, there is no reference to the major Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (NI) which is reaching completion. Development opportunities should be for all children, with a recognition that some groups may need more targeted resources to assist achievement.

Consultation Response

Achievement is key to the development of all children and young people, but the Draft Action plans must include specific target goals, beyond merely producing reports. Change will only come about as a result of meeting standards, which have regrettably not been set.

Provision - Research and Information

This Action Area highlights the importance of informed research and engaging children and young people in an appropriate way in undertaking this research.

Whilst there was general agreement that any effective research and information strategy should include the draft actions outlined, there was a fundamental concern that existing research which had provided clear examples of priority issues was not being acted on. Reference was made to the Equality Commission's 'Practical Guidance on Conducting an Equality Impact Assessment' which states 'in all cases the lack of data should not be an excuse for doing nothing'. Whilst qualitative longitudinal research is in particular very rich and informative, there are concerns that in some specific instances the problem is evident, and what is needed is remedial action rather than further research, which can be seen as a means of merely delaying the urgent action that is necessary.

In particular, participants noted that the recent research commissioned by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People undertaken by Queen's University into Children's Rights in Northern Ireland contains a rich source of data which can be used to inform policy and service delivery. This research could usefully inform actions of the strategy and would also provide a useful starting point in identifying key research priorities on the rights and needs of children and young people.

In terms of data collection as a means of assessing progress under draft actions, there was consistent recognition that the draft strategy needed to address the collection of disaggregated data, e.g. in relation to the multiple identities of children and young people so that inequalities in the realisation of rights could be identified. Examples could include educational attainment in terms of disability and race, to facilitate measurement of progress towards strategic outcomes.

CiNI welcomes the draft action committing OFMDFM and DHSSPS to developing a system of child centred indicators, including child rights indicators. CiNI would advocate that work begins immediately in developing these indicators from the framework of the UNCRC, so that they can be applied to both the strategic draft actions in the strategy as well as to the overarching Children and Young People's Action Plan.

One of the consultees provided an excellent example of how a more inclusive approach to the strategy could lead to a more dynamic, meaningful model for achieving change. It was noted that change in the prevalence of migrant communities could happen very quickly within Northern Ireland e.g. most notably the growth of the Portuguese community in the Dungannon area in the last five years. This pointed to the need to chart demographic change in the populations of children and young people during the lifetime of the strategy and include a mechanism to adapt the strategic priorities accordingly. This would clearly have benefits beyond the issue of children and young people from migrant populations.

Consultation Response

Whilst recognising the value and importance of on-going monitoring of the experiences of children and young people in an inclusive way to reflect potential differential impact, concern was expressed that research was frequently perceived as being used throughout this document as a means of delaying action, even where it was generally agreed what remedial action was needed.

Provision - Physical, mental and emotional well-being

Most participants considered that this was the key Action Area under Provision which included a number of Draft Actions where greater emphasis on prevention was needed. To this end the Draft Action on developing and implementing a programme of age-appropriate education relating to building and maintaining healthy relationships and self confidence was welcomed.

However the commitment merely to 'Review the anti-bullying strategy' was not sufficiently robust. Bullying – frequently relating to some of the marginalised grounds covered in the 'cross-cutting themes' e.g. sexual minorities – requires urgent and strong action. Equally, action on implementing the teenage pregnancy and drugs strategies needs to be properly resourced and given priority.

CiNI notes that the draft actions relating to mental health services focus on including young people's issues in the mental health strategy, alongside an additional draft action to **consider** the need to establish specific health services for adolescents". Based on the consultation, CiNI believes that the draft actions are, not only extremely feeble, but unacceptable given the current crisis in child and adolescent mental health services. The crisis has been starkly presented most recently in the NICCY/QUB research on the state of children's rights where the 'neglect and under-resourcing of the service by policy makers and legislators' has produced an acute shortage of in-patient psychiatric places for children and adolescents in Northern Ireland, resulting in some children being admitted to adult psychiatric facilities, and others being forced to access facilities outside Northern Ireland. CiNI would strongly advocate not only that the draft strategy action the UN Committee's Concluding Observation recommending the need to "strengthen and make accessible mental health and counselling services for adolescents", but that as part of this over-arching action it includes specific actions to address the key issues raised in the NICCY/QUB report.

The commitment to publish the analysis of responses to the consultation exercise on physical punishment and explore issues with other interested departments is particularly weak and does not contain any commitments. The UN Committee is very clear in its recommendation on physical punishment stating that legislation must be adopted to remove the defence of 'reasonable chastisement' and outlaw physical punishment. The NICCY/QUB report has echoed this urging a continued, high profile drive for the removal of physical punishment in the home. CiNI would advocate, based on the comments of those consulted, that the UN Committee's recommendation is specifically

actioned in the draft strategy so that children are protected from all forms of physical violence, injury or abuse and maltreatment while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child (Article 19, UNCRC). Based on the consultation, CiNI would also advocate that the UN Committee's recommendation to promote positive participatory forms of discipline and carry out public education programmes on negative effects of physical punishment is actioned. This should be done through the development of a Family Support Strategy which will include support for parents, in particular parenting education, needs of new or expectant parents and encouraging positive discipline. Linked to the Family Support Strategy CiNI would recommend that the Government run a public education campaign around the negative impact of physical punishment.

The commitment to improve the health and well-being of children and young people in rural areas and aim to alleviate stress is welcomed and fully supported, although the Draft Action looks somewhat strange in isolation and prompts the question why there are not similar commitments for children and young people in towns and urban areas.

Again there was a strong feeling that differential inequalities in health provision should be profiled and identified as Action Areas here. As noted above the mortality rates for Traveller children or the well documented poor quality of health care for children and young people with learning disabilities (well described in the Learning Disability Review) are two obvious examples of fundamental rights-based priority issues.

Consultation Response:

Most consultees considered this the key Action Area, and felt that there needed to be a stronger emphasis on prevention and resources, as well as targeted action for those most marginalised and often forgotten in mainstream strategies. If the strategy is to be rights-based a strong commitment should be given on the unacceptability of physical punishment.

Protection

Particular concerns were expressed about some aspects of this Action Area. Domestic violence – and its impact on the lives of children and young people – was regarded as an area that received minimal attention in the strategy. Indeed many felt it had been relegated to a minor issue compared to violence and abuse directly associated with the conflict. There was a strong feeling that given its prevalence a stronger Action Plan had to be developed in this area. The current commitment to evaluate the extent and impact of domestic violence on children and young people was seen as derisory, as data was readily available which showed that at least 11,000 children and young people in Northern Ireland are living their lives in a domestic violence situation. There was agreement that the draft strategy must implement the Tackling Violence at Home Strategy for addressing domestic violence and abuse in Northern Ireland and that it must be analysed to assess its impact on children and

young people and include child specific actions underpinned by the rights of children and young people.

The commitments in relation to how children and young people were portrayed in the media and what was targeted at them through advertising was welcomed as an important area of new work.

CiNI and those consulted are gravely concerned at the draft strategy's response to children and young people in the criminal justice system, where one out of the two single draft actions focuses on the juvenile justice estate. Consultees expressed their alarm at the absence of draft actions aimed at diverting children and young people away from the criminal justice system and protecting those children and young people who are in the criminal justice system. The second draft action requires implementation of the Criminal Justice Review recommendations relating to young people in line with the current published implementation plan. Of itself this draft action will not address some of the most fundamental breaches of rights experienced by children and young people in the criminal justice system. Based on the consultation response, we would advocate that the recommendations, which are noted in the UN Committee's Concluding Observations, and more recently in the NICCY/QUB research, are specifically implemented with the ultimate outcome being that children and young people in the criminal justice system realise their rights under the UNCRC.

Furthermore the draft action on the Criminal Justice Review recommendations relating to young people does not take cognizance of the current most significant development which potentially could see more children and young people enter our criminal justice system. The Anti-Social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 is soon to be rolled out across Northern Ireland. Based on the consultation response, CiNI would advocate that in response to this particular piece of legislation actions are developed to support and promote alternatives to tackle anti-social behaviour.

Consultation Response

There was agreement that protection of children and young people was fundamental to the strategy, but it should include further reference to prevention and an enhanced profile and commitment to tackle domestic violence and its consequences for children and young people.

Poverty

Those consulted agreed that tackling poverty effectively would be one of the most likely ways to remove much of the disadvantage experienced by large numbers of children and young people throughout Northern Ireland. It was noted that this was one of the few outcomes in the draft strategy which actually set a target date to measure progress (to eradicate child poverty by

2020). Unfortunately since the target date lies outside the 10 year plan for the strategy, and no interim target levels have been set, it again will be impossible to measure progress within the plan.

It was noted that OFMDFM had commissioned research on child poverty which would include recommendations for the most suitable measure for monitoring child poverty, while also making specific policy recommendations. There was agreement that a formal Government response to this research would be beneficial in directing action.

Whilst the issues raised in the current Draft Actions were all welcomed, the commitments are too loose, or are already substantively underway. Again the general absence of significant long-term commitment undermines the potential effectiveness of the strategy. In particular the commitment to 'assess the quality of accommodation, including owner-occupied, social housing, traveller sites, and specifically targeting the needs of homeless young people' is too weak. An Action Plan to eradicate poverty in these areas is required within the lifetime of the strategy.

It was felt that when looking at the issue of homeless families that specific consideration was required on the impact of homelessness on children with actions to address their needs as their environment and home circumstances change.

The commitment to 'address the barriers to services particularly in relation to health, social services and education' is of course welcome, but is potentially vast. As noted frequently above, fundamental rights, equality, achievement and well-being are all dependent on these. This Draft Action in particular needs fully developed within a multi-disciplinary framework of key indicators to radically alter some of the most fundamental measures of deprivation experienced by children and young people.

Consultation Response

Poverty is acknowledged as one of the most fundamental measures of disadvantage impacting on the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. All of the measures reveal that it affects a disproportionately large percentage of the population here. The Draft Action plans in this area must be further developed in relation to housing, health, social services and education to ensure fundamental change during the lifespan of the strategy.

Additional Draft Actions relating to Cross-cutting Themes

As noted throughout this response, the strongly held view of those consulted was that the draft strategy should mainstream issues affecting all children and young people. Reference to issues affecting children and young people from the Traveller community, from ethnic minority communities, in the criminal justice system, who are disabled, or lesbian, gay or bisexual has therefore been made in the body of this response. This is the recommended format for

the draft strategy as there is a real risk – evidenced in the document - that to do otherwise will mean that these groups are overlooked. It is also of fundamental importance that there is recognition that this will sometimes involve extra resourcing to ensure equality of experience.

Monitoring and evaluating the draft strategy

As noted already assessing the effectiveness of the strategy will be significantly hampered, because neither the draft action plans nor the associated indicators have been sufficiently specific to identify the relative success or failure in delivering against the strategy. Following this consultation the Draft Action Plans must be revised to reflect priorities identified to set meaningful challenging targets, and then to decide which indicators can be used or developed to measure whether the plans are succeeding over the lifespan of the strategy. The associated indicators presented will not measure progress toward the achievement of outcomes; the emphasis is on quantitative indicators which will not capture children, young people and their families experiences of implementation of the strategy. There must be a balance between quantitative and qualitative monitoring so that the reality of children and young people's experiences is captured.

Indeed any revision might usefully look at other models which have provided a structure for change. Some such models are centred around a series of high level outcomes with meaning for the population at large and which provide a focus for Government Departments to work separately and collaboratively as necessary to the achievement of these common aims. One model is the five high level outcomes outlined in the GB Government's Green Paper Every Child Matters; a further is the Vermont Model. The Children's and Young Peoples' Committees here as part of the Children's Services Planning process have developed a Northern Ireland version of nine high level draft outcomes to facilitate focus and effort on primary areas for collective change. CiNI believes that the structure adopted in these models seems to have proved effective elsewhere and uses a structure and language which is more readily understandable than that proposed in the consultation document and would recommend the model developed by the Children's Services Planning process.

Furthermore we note that the draft strategy proposes children's services planning committees as one of the local delivery mechanisms for the strategy. If these mechanisms are to be retained and in recognising that they are adopting an outcomes-based planning process which has a proven track record of assisting multi-agency and multi-sectoral planning and the achievement of significantly better outcomes for the population we would advocate that the focus must be on outcomes for children where the action areas of rights and equality, protection, provision, participation, poverty could be addressed under these areas to the extent that they assisted in achieving the overall strategic outcome. It has also been shown that approaches which have informed the outcomes focus of the children's service planning process have stimulated preventative action. Consultees had consistently expressed

alarm that prevention was not explicitly recognised at a high level of the strategy.

The role and purpose assigned to the proposed Strategy Review Panel is not clearly defined. Its stated remit 'to consider progress, discuss any mutual problems and share experience' is too vague to be an effective monitor. To be effective it must have credible, strong representation of informed individuals from the voluntary and community sector and have a clear remit which specifies its role in assessing and reviewing progress on implementation, and in recommending remedial action, as appropriate, to secure achievement of the strategic objectives.

It is essential that there is effective monitoring at local level through the relevant bodies who directly experience the consequences of the implementation of the strategy. The mechanisms developed to involve children, young people and their parents in monitoring the implementation of the strategy must be representative and inclusive of all children, young people and their parents. Creativity and innovation is required to ensure the involvement of children, young people and their parents who have direct experiences of exclusion and marginalisation. In relation to the voices of parents there was support for developing and supporting existing arrangements such as the Parent's Forum that exists as user participation models for the Children and Young People's committees.

The key principles for effective monitoring include meaningful data on progress, produced regularly, the power to recommend strategic change, and monitoring carried out by those independent of the process of delivery. To that end it is recommended that the NGO Forum has a crucial role to play. Both at the frontline and at strategic level, they will command credibility within the community affected and have the level of independence needed to effectively assess change and its impact.

Resourcing

It is unclear as to whether the strategy will have priority status to enable it to compete alongside other departmental priorities for resources. Overall there is a lack of clarity and transparency in relation to resourcing of the strategy. This inspires little confidence particularly in the current climate with the ending of the Executive Children's Fund and threats to statutory services for children and young people. It is difficult to foresee meaningful implementation of the strategy at a time when the very projects, programmes and staff necessary to carry forward implementation are being axed.

To be effective the strategy must be a priority outcome for the Government – which must be demonstrated through ring-fencing of funding for the implementation of the strategy.

This draft strategy regrettably provides limited evidence of joined-up thinking and collaboration across Government; in particular the Draft Actions reflect Departments working independently. This makes it all the more difficult for OFMDFM's Children and Young People's Unit to assume, as is proposed, 'overall responsibility' for driving the strategy forward, and monitoring how departments deliver on the draft actions. In reference to this proposed role for the CYPU the NICCY/QUB report noted concerns stating that 'while the work of the CYPU is to be commended, there is concern that it is neither a statutory body and that its mandate does not include the co-ordination between government departments of either the Convention's implementation or service delivery' adding that 'it does not meet international standards as it does not have the high level authority, influence or resources of an inter-departmental statutory committee or a Minister for Children.' It is therefore the considered view of Children in Northern Ireland, following this consultation, that a co-ordinated approach will be most effectively achieved through a Minister for Children who can provide authority and accountability for the strategy at a high level. A **Minister for Children** would also ensure political commitment to drive the implementation of the strategy and co-ordinate joined-up working across Government. A number of consultees specifically highlighted concerns that the monies allocated to children and young people were not always being delivered to these groups; again a senior Government Minister with a clear remit in this area should ensure accountability for the appropriate spending of tax-payers' monies in this area.

Conclusions

Children in Northern Ireland have carried out a comprehensive consultation on the draft strategy for children and young people within the voluntary childcare sector. It involved consultation throughout Northern Ireland and targeted at specific marginalised groups and on issues of specific technical importance.

There was widespread recognition that the consultative process up to this final consultative stage had been creative, involving and effective. However, the draft strategy has been received with considerable disappointment since the emerging ideas are not well reflected in this plan.

Whilst there is general agreement with the strategic vision and the underpinning values for ten years, the substance of the document – as evidenced in the Draft Action Plans – is seen to lack vision, long-term challenge, and a new approach to ensuring joined-up delivery against a meaningful set of standards for children and young people.

Of most profound concern is the renegeing of the commitment to develop the strategy as the basis for implementing the fundamental human rights of children and young people as outlined in the UNCRC. There is internal confusion in the document as to the strategy's status vis-à-vis the UNCRC; however an analysis of the Draft Action Plan suggests that implementation is not a priority.

There was also general concern that the Draft Actions rarely prioritised the key issues. Of further concern was the use of 'cross-cutting themes' to address the issues affecting some of the most marginalised children and young people in society. There was strong agreement that this only served to marginalise these groups further. All children and young people needed to be mainstreamed in all areas of policy development and service delivery, and where additional resources needed to be targeted at specific groups to ensure historical institutional discrimination was removed, the extra resources needed to be found.

The absence of an identification of specific resources to deliver on the strategy called into question the commitment of government, especially at a time when funding was being withdrawn. There was strong support for a Minister for Children for all children and young people up to 25 to ensure cross-Government commitment and accountability. Independent monitoring of the strategy by those not responsible for delivery, but informed by direct experience of the consequences at local and regional level pointed to the need for effective NGO involvement in the evaluation process.

The structure of the Draft Action Plans and the associated indicators did not carry clear commitments nor meaningful methods of measuring progress. This is the area which most frustrated those asked to respond to the document. It was generally agreed that to ensure joint ownership of the strategy the Draft Action Plans needed to be reprioritised and amended to reflect the key areas where, if change was achieved, this would result in meaningful delivery on the strategic vision.

Because of the good consultation practices to date, much hope had been invested in the draft strategy for children and young people. The specific Action Areas, Draft Action Plans and associated indicators have however betrayed a lack of commitment and vision for change.

The draft strategy should be the Implementation Plan for the UNCRC. This would ensure that by 2015 we could justly celebrate a Northern Ireland in which children and young people thrive and look forward with confidence to the future, as outlined in the vision. CiNI is committed to working actively with government to revise the draft strategy to ensure that this can be achieved.

APPENDIX 1 – LIST OF CONSULTEES

Altnagelvin Trust
Barnardos
Belfast Travellers
BLVB
Childrens Law Centre
CiNI
Contact a Family
Contact Youth
Contact-a-Family
Derry Children's Commission
Disability Action
Down Lisburn Childcare Co-ordinator
Down Lisburn Trust
Elmbrook Special School
Fermanagh Early Years Partnership
First Housing
FNNI
Foyle Women's Aid
Foyle Women's Information Network
Gingerbread
Home-Start Lakeland
Human Resources & Equality Consultant
Include Youth
Inner City South Belfast Sure Start
Kesh Development Association
Knock Child Contact Centre
Liberty Consortium, Foyleview School L'Derry
Lifestart Mid-Ards
Mencap
NCH
NDCS
NIACRO
NICMA
NICVA
NIMBA
NIPPA
Northern Irelands Woman's Aid

Off The Streets Project Derry
Parents Advice Centre
Positive Futures
RCN
RNIBNI
Salvation Army
Sargent Cancer Care For Children
Save The Children
Simon Community
South Belfast Highway to Health
Sperrin Lakeland Health & Social Care Trust
Stepping Stones
Sure Start/Mencap
The Health & Disability Team
Traveller Movement NI
Volunteer Development Agency
VOYPIC