

‘Pathways for Change’

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**Response to the position paper
by the Task Force on Resourcing
the Voluntary and Community Sector**

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Response by Children in Northern Ireland

March 2004

1. Background

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 CiNI consulted with its members in the preparation of this response and it represents the views of a sector, which welcomes the opportunity to address the fundamental concerns around resourcing and sustainability which have such a profound impact on its work.
- 1.3 CiNI welcomes the opportunity to respond and will comment on issues of specific concern to the sector.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Children in Northern Ireland welcomes many of the developments in recent years to secure a greater recognition of the rights of children and young people, in particular through the appointment of the office of Commissioner for Children and Young People, the development of a Strategy for Children and Young People and the proposed Bill of Rights. In particular it also believes that the work of Children and Young Peoples' Committees and Children Service Plans has ensured a useful model for meeting the specific needs of children and young people throughout the country.
- 2.2 The voluntary childcare sector, however, experiences the problems of the voluntary and community sector in general in relation to resourcing. These include:
- the increasing disparity in salaries between the voluntary and statutory sector
 - the lack of sustainability which impacts on the ability to attract and retain quality staff and adequately reward the many high quality individuals involved in the sector
 - programmes that are effectively working and delivering have to be closed because of a 'drying-up' of funds
 - excessive time and effort is involved in evaluation of projects against a range of disparate standards
 - the accountability levels associated with receiving funds vastly outstrip those imposed on the public sector
 - partnerships tend to be imbalanced with power residing usually with the statutory partner
 - a limited amount of meaningful joined-up working delivering for the specific needs of the child
 - a tendency of funding to be allocated to those most adept and experienced at securing funding, rather than those who can most effectively meet need.
- 2.3 There is also evidence that funding bodies or intermediaries are reluctant to take risks, that projects are too short-term focussed, that evaluation concentrates on outcomes that are easy to measure, rather than the longer-term assessment of how specific interventions or processes have developed children and encouraged growth. It has to be recognised that there are many wider societal benefits from the range of projects underway, which by definition are not always immediately identifiable.
- 2.3 In welcoming the opportunity to participate in this consultation, Children in Northern Ireland is concerned at the low level of focus on the voluntary childcare sector compared to the community sector, and wishes to stress the need to ensure adequate funding for the voluntary childcare sector.

3. Coverage

- 3.1 The Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector was established by the Minister for Social Development to consider what action was required to enable the sector to continue to make a substantial contribution to the well-being of the Northern Ireland community.
- 3.2 As noted above, the voluntary childcare sector is concerned that there appears to have been a primary concentration on the needs of the community sector, which may result in a disproportionate emphasis on their needs in a way that fails to adequately recognise the specific needs of the voluntary childcare sector. It considers that, in particular, the needs of the voluntary childcare sector have not to date been adequately reflected in the work of the Task Force.
- 3.3 It considers that this may result in a failure to recognise some of the exemplars of good practice in addressing children's needs which may have broader applicability throughout the voluntary and community sectors.
- 3.4 The voluntary childcare sector are concerned that neither the DHSSPS nor the voluntary childcare sector has been represented on the Task Force, and that the concerns of the voluntary childcare sector – specifically in relation to the wide range of funding systems operating in that sector - are not therefore being adequately understood. There is therefore a concern that the NIO, Health Boards and Health Trusts are not adequately involved in the review of systems of funding, and not addressing the voluntary childcare sector's concerns. The voluntary childcare sector believes that this oversight in the work of the Task Force should be addressed as a matter of urgent concern.
- 3.5 The voluntary childcare sector also believes that there are issues of significant impact on children for which the Department of Education is the lead department. It also therefore considers that education and care issues should be more fully assessed as part of the review of sustainability in the wider voluntary and community sector.
- 3.6 This sector also believes that the work of the Task Force needs to more clearly articulate the lessons learnt from past models of funding. It understands that there have been sample models of practice where a 'social investment' approach has been adopted eg **NIACRO**, and it believes there should be a wider review of how these 'pilots' have worked – to clarify the potential advantages and pitfalls. It also believes that such pilots need to be analysed over time. Similarly the experience of the Childrens' Fund and its development of performance indicators should be examined. The sector also notes a specific concern about its lack of capacity to develop these over time.

4. Partnership

- 4.1 The voluntary childcare sector acknowledges the importance of partnership working to successful delivery. This can draw on the strengths and different skills of the different partners, and different motivations from different perspectives which can lead to greater project ownership and better delivery. Artificial partnerships do not work; capacity and infrastructure are key to effective delivery.
- 4.2 However, the sector also considers that in its experience the potential of partnership is hampered by the current imbalanced interaction between different parties within partnerships. The lack of respective players all operating on an equal footing causes confusion, and does not lead to effective operation at present.
- 4.3 In the case of SureStart and the Childrens' Fund projects, which have been effective in many ways, there was a feeling that these were not always natural partnerships – some have been artificially manufactured to allow statutory bodies access to funding which was not otherwise available to them.
- 4.4 More work is required on needs identification. The example of Children Service Planning was considered to be an example of good practice. The CSP process involved local users in identifying the relevant priorities. This approach needed more coherence and follow-through as an appropriate model with wider application, but its strengths were that it was local, systematic and established agreed priorities for action.

5. Good practice examples

- 5.1 The voluntary childcare sector has been involved in developing a number of similar highly effective initiatives which show that the sector can deliver better services and better meet the needs of children with effective partnerships.
- 5.2 One effective example of this work in practice is the co-operation between **Linden House** and the NHSSB which has remained faithful to the needs of children. Partnership working is a core element of Linden Extern, where the organisation works with children and their families, the Health Board and Trusts and agencies in the wider community. This model of partnership working provides a holistic approach to meeting the needs of the children and is based on the belief that all those involved in the care and education of children, at whatever level, must work together in the best interests of the children. Models of good practice like this should be used to influence the development of partnerships. The sector believes that this is a good example of risks having been taken with the project which have paid off over time. As a

project it also emphasises the added value of what the voluntary sector can bring to service delivery meeting specific needs.

- 5.3 A further example of good practice cited in this area was Strabane **Surestart** led by Barnardos NI which systematically looked at need, took a risk in the processes involved, with the end result that it better met the need of specific children. The programme is particularly sensitive to the needs of the community, and views the involvement of the community as a central element of the programme, creating a community owned programme. The strength of the partnership meant that it was able to face the challenge of removing the barriers which the community and parents faced in getting the support they needed to care for and bring up their children.
- 5.4 There are also good practice examples in relation to the development of services for children with disabilities. The **Cedar Foundation** in partnership with the Ulster Community Hospital Trust developed an Outlook Programme, a programme of outreach that promotes the social inclusion of children and young disabled people throughout Northern Ireland. The success of the programme was such that it has now been mainstreamed with the roll out of 7 programmes regionally.
- 5.5 Similarly the work of organisations such as **Include Youth** is successful because considerable effort is devoted to the participation of children and young people, asking what works for them, and integrating this into programmes. This is 'added value', ensures that projects are more genuinely outcomes-focussed and is an example of the type of work which requires effective resourcing under a new proposed model.
- 5.6 As well as service delivery partnerships, the sector has also engaged in partnerships focused on advising on the rights and needs of children and young people. **Children in Northern Ireland** chairs the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) Forum, a unique partnership between the children's voluntary sector and government, namely OFMDFM's Children and Young People's Unit. The NGO Forum has played a vital role in ensuring that the voices of children and young people positively influence the government agenda in Northern Ireland. The Forum made a significant contribution to the development of the Children and Young People's Commissioner legislation, and is now developing the experience and knowledge gained from that process to actively engage in the development of the over-arching ten year Strategy for Children and Young People.

- 5.7 The voluntary childcare sector is however concerned that examples of good practice are limited – most have come from the voluntary, rather than the public sector. There is a perception that government tends to look after its own interests. There are however some examples of good practice eg Childrens' Trusts in England, bringing in education issues involving a range of partners, which would benefit from wider analysis.
- 5.8 There needs to be a sharing of models of good practice, space to reflect on the key issues of success in delivery – the obsession with short-term deliverables must be changed.

6. Core funding

- 6.1 The need for core funding on a sustained basis over time to allow projects to build critical mass is essential for the sector, especially where the positive results may take some time to ascertain.
- 6.2 There was a strong identified need for constant lobbying, and advocacy to change peoples' attitudes and build capacity to enable them to participate adequately. The **4 Nations Child Policy Network**, a project managed by Children in Northern Ireland, was highlighted as an enabling tool to facilitate capacity building for effective advocacy and lobbying. It is a central information service spanning across the voluntary, statutory and private sectors, enabling information exchange and empowering users to engage in key policy debates.

Regardless of service provision it was crucial to establish a critical dialogue to challenge the status quo. Advocacy must therefore be a 'core' activity and be assigned funding accordingly. This is particularly important in specialist areas such as the needs of children and young people.

- 6.3 Similarly there is a need to ensure that project funding includes appropriate funding for administrative support to ensure effective project delivery and support of staff engaged in project work.
- 6.4 The sector considers that special attention needs to be paid to the relationship between core funding and service level agreements and determine where improvements can be made in their interaction.

7. Evaluation

- 7.1 The sector is very conscious that evaluation is crucial to establish whether funding is achieving the results it intends. It is however concerned that, like accountability, evaluation becomes obsessively process-driven, and fails to measure the real change which may not be immediate, but may nonetheless be key to delivering real societal change.

- 7.2 The sector believes that evaluation must be proportionate and that common / standardised systems of evaluation and methods of analysing impact must be developed. A major difficulty at present is that different funders require different measures of the same factors and issues.
- 7.3 In the voluntary childcare sector common standards for child impact statements need to be developed, and shared across the range of potential funders. Measures need to take account of where children's rights have been breached, and a set of common standards in this regard could easily be developed based on relevant international standards.
- 7.4 There also needs to be more effective partnership throughout the life of a funded project. There was substantial evidence from the sector that funders were actively engaged in the process of determining whether to award funding, but in the past there was virtually no on-going monitoring throughout the process, which contributed to a feeling of disengagement, and undermined the sense of partnership until the evaluation stage. Part of the process of involving stakeholders should include agreeing the process and the development of indicators.
- 7.5 In the case of children in particular there needed to be on-going monitoring throughout their lives, seeing links across all services and identifying which initiatives and interventions in particular had worked.
- 7.6 However, the experience to date with the Childrens' Fund where the voluntary childcare sector and Children and Young Peoples' Committees have been involved from the beginning, is cited as a best practice example.
- 7.7 The sector is specifically concerned that the level of scrutiny that it is subjected to differs considerably from the level of scrutiny applied to the public sector. The sector believes profoundly that accountability, specifically in relation to the dispersal of public funds, is crucial to public confidence. It is committed to delivering on that level of confidence. However, it believes that the level of scrutiny should be more equitably shared between the public and voluntary and community sectors, and not be at such a level that it significantly inhibits the effective delivery of the objectives of the project.

8. Staffing issues

- 8.1 The frequently short-term and uncertain nature of funding has a profound effect on staff within the sector. It creates problems in recruiting and retaining quality staff. It also significantly undervalues the esteem accorded to those staff in the sector generally; this is particularly so where they are engaged in service delivery – on behalf of the public sector – and are receiving a lower scale of benefits for

their level of contribution and commitment than their co-professionals employed directly in the public service. This is inherently unfair and affects their perception of self-worth, contributes to higher levels of stress, as well as conditions the public to lower levels of expectation.

8.2 In practical terms, if the increments awarded to statutory social work staff generally are not specifically provided for in the voluntary childcare sector, this is likely to result in the loss of staff in voluntary sector projects. If government is serious about capturing the benefits of service delivery through the voluntary sector these issues of establishing a two-tier pay structure for professional staff must be addressed.

8.3 The sector also believes that effective partnership between the public and the voluntary and community sector would be significantly enhanced by providing secondment opportunities between both to enable an effective understanding of the work involved.

9. Issues of general concern

9.1 Many in the sector want to see genuine evidence that the government is serious about making a commitment to funding the sector - through a social investment model or otherwise.

9.2 The social investment model on the face of it has potential benefit – in the form of longer-term funding that is more outcome-focussed. However such changes could result in greater bureaucracy if not carefully managed. There needs to be a number of pilots of the application of this model in the voluntary childcare sector. These need to focus at regional, local and specialist level on the specific needs of children and young people. This is especially necessary given the limited consideration of these specific needs in the Task Forces' work to date. The sector strongly considers that a unitary social investment model where 'one size fits all' is unlikely to work.

9.3 There are concerns that the areas and issues which need the relevant pilot schemes may not receive them, perhaps because other areas / issues have greater developed infrastructure, and will be able to develop effective partnerships more quickly. It is therefore crucial that the sector receives more focussed assistance in this process.

9.4 The short-termism inherent in current funding arrangements restrains the work that can be effectively delivered at present. The general view in the sector is that whilst there will still be scope for short-term funding in specific projects, the need for greater certainty to achieve sustained and meaningful outcomes requires a standard funding period of at least 7 years (a figure of 12 years being the norm for certain projects in Great Britain).

- 9.5 The current system of different methods of providing funding eg between different Health and Education Boards, where there are different systems of communicating the availability of slippage funding, causes major difficulties for the sector and leads to a system that is inconsistent and lacks transparency. The need for greater consistency of approach and standardisation is again strong.
- 9.6 In the children and young people's sector particular emphasis needs to be placed on early years work and the changes that can occur in a short period – one year funding does not work. It is considered that preventative services targeted at an early stage are a better use of funding in the children and young peoples sector than funding of structural projects.
- 9.7 The sector welcomes the proposal to negotiate outcomes as a means of the Government engaging more effectively with the voluntary and community sector and building more effective partnerships.