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21 O'Donovan Road
Culmore
Derry
BT4 8PS

02/08/02

Patricia Lewsley, MLA
Parliament Buildings
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Dear Patricia

Re: Consultation on Private Members Bill on ACPC Regulation

The Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association (CPHVA) welcomes the opportunity to provide views on the above Private Members Bill.

The views expressed in this response are as a result of wide consultation with our membership who are at the forefront in providing support to children and families in Northern Ireland.

Health visitors and school nurses' witness on a daily basis the difficulties experienced by parents as they struggle to bring up their children. They provide emotional and practical support to parents in areas such as parenting, mental health problems, in particular postnatal depression, domestic violence and child abuse.

Community nurses and health visitors recognise the importance of co-operating with other agencies both statutory and voluntary to safeguard the welfare of children in the broadest sense.

We are pleased to offer these comments to assist in ensuring better outcomes for children in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely

Briege Coyle
Professional Officer
CPHVA
Northern Ireland

Response by the CPHVA, Northern Ireland

Consultation on Private Members Bill

1. The concept of placing ACPC's onto a statutory basis:

We welcome the proposal to place ACPC's onto a statutory basis.

It is our opinion that this will increase accountability and responsibility within these committees. This is vitally important to ensure that the work carried out by them is given the recognition and resources necessary to implement effective child protection policy at strategic level. It is our opinion that this could best be achieved by having one regional ACPC with subgroups in each of the Boards. A Regional ACPC with statutory status could ensure that policies and relevant legislation are interpreted in a standard format throughout Northern Ireland.

2. Areas that the Bill may or may not cover:

We welcome the proposal that the Bill intends to build upon the functions and remit of ACPC's as set out in the draft *Co-operating to Safeguard Children*.

There is no doubt that in the past the findings from 'case management reviews' were not always disseminated widely to the relevant stakeholders so that lessons could be learned and future mistakes avoided. It is therefore important that this aspect of practice be enshrined in any future Bill.

We welcome the proposal that the Bill will set out accountability arrangements for both the ACPC and for individual members. This should ensure that members have 'permission' and responsibility for carrying out their designated roles within that Committee. It will place an onus on Health and Social Services Trusts to afford members the time and resources to implement the policies and procedures as laid down by the ACPC.

4.2 Chairing and Composition of ACPC

The proposed appointment of an independent chairperson is to be welcomed. This should ensure that other relevant members of the ACPC have a sense of ownership and involvement within the Committee and enhance their contribution accordingly. The position of chair should also be rotated amongst members of the ACPC to avoid 'elitism' and enhance democracy within the ACPC.

It is very important that those members on the ACPC should have sufficient seniority to make decisions but it is also important to stress that these 'senior' representatives have expertise in the field of child protection. For example it may not always be appropriate to have a senior nurse manager on the Committee if she does not have a background in child protection. In this case it may make more sense to have the designated Child Protection Nurse represented on the ACPC. Her level of expertise could ensure that her input would be from a well-informed position and she should possess the relevant skills/responsibility to instigate any proposed actions from the Committee.

It is important to involve others, from a range of backgrounds with responsibility for the welfare of children and families, in the work of the ACPC as traditionally it has been viewed by many as the sole responsibility of Social Services. User groups have an important contribution to make to the ACPC's, particularly those from parenting organisations.

4.3 Funding

Funding to enhance the role and function of the ACPC is key to the future success of any proposals for change and improvement in this area.

(1) The appointment of a professional advisor would be an important step in ensuring that one person could have responsibility for providing standard and expert advice on a range of childcare issues. This person could take responsibility for initiating research and collaborating with the other UK countries to enhance evidence based approaches to child protection services.

(2) We welcome the proposed appointment of an ACPC training officer. A vital component of this role should be the development of more interagency training and education both at initial training of professionals and subsequent updating following qualification.

(3) Research and audit are important elements of developing a quality service for the protection of children. However it is important that this should be multi-agency so that a broad range of health and social care professional could input into this process, as child protection is not the sole remit of any one profession or group.

4.4 Co-operation between ACPC's

As discussed earlier, we believe that better co-operation could be achieved by having one Regional body with responsibility for formulating policy and guidance. Subgroups at Board level could then implement these policies to ensure a consistent approach to child protection strategies throughout Northern Ireland. This would avoid duplication of many present functions and ensure best use of resources.

4.6 Child Protection Panels

Acute Hospital Trusts should have Child Protection Panels as well as Community Trusts. This should enhance the Acute Trusts' awareness of and responsibility for child protection services.

Guidance should be issued to Trusts/Boards for those members attending the ACPC as there may be a conflict of interest between their roles if they are deemed to be accountable to the relevant ACPC. More clarification is needed about the roles and responsibilities generally of members of the ACPC and the degree of power they have to ensure agreed policy is implemented at Board/Trust level.

4.7 Case Management Reviews

We welcome the proposals for the DHSSPS to make regulation in relation to Case Management Reviews. In particular we welcome the proposal to disseminate key findings of case management reviews by ACPC's at local level. However we also believe that these reviews could be disseminated in a confidential manner to a wider network so that lessons could be learned and similar mistakes avoided in the future.

5. Human Rights and Equality issues

This Bill if passed would appear to have the potential of making a valuable contribution to equality of opportunity for safeguarding the rights of young children and vulnerable families.

