

Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association's (CPHVA) response to 'CREATING A VISION FOR ALL OUR CHILDREN'.

The CPHVA welcome the opportunity to respond to this timely document which, seeks to develop a strategy for the future of the children and young people of Northern Ireland. Our children are our greatest asset and the future of our society will reflect the way we nurture them to become responsible citizens in the next two decades and beyond.

We fully support the planned structure and underlying assumptions of the document and look forward to contributing to the ensuing consultation document in due course.

Our responses to the questions posed are as follows:

What does 'childhood' mean; why is it important; what are the implications for the different age groups involved?

- This can be described as a period of growth including personal, physical, social and emotional development from birth to early adulthood. During this period there is a need for nurturing, security, protection, and direction from adult carers. The child's future outcomes will largely depend on the care and resources available to him on a number of levels e.g. the home, local community and nationally. There is a need for adequate support and resources to enable parents, statutory services and communities to meet the needs of children encompassing those with ability and disability pre-conceptually through to adolescence. Parents need to be prepared for parenthood – and this should start in their own home setting but the school is also ideally placed to lay the foundations for teaching about the responsibilities of parenthood as part of the core curriculum. There are a number of key statutory services that have a significant part to play in supporting parents and children from birth through to adolescence. Community nursing services including midwifery, health visiting, paediatric nursing, learning disability nursing and school nursing services make a major contribution both in terms of support and intervention. Social services also have a key role in supporting families who are experiencing difficulties. Education and the youth service play an important role in the lives of young people outside the home setting. All these services are only a part of the overall input children need to grow up into healthy, well-adjusted adults. Community, voluntary and religious organisations also contribute largely to this process.

What are the key issues for children and young people in Northern Ireland today?

There are a number of key issues that are common to children across the UK and the rest of the island of Ireland and some that are specific to living here which relate to the 'troubles'.

Common themes across the countries include:

- High rates of teenage pregnancy
- Culture of drug and alcohol misuse

- Mental health issues including depression which may result in self-harm or suicide
- Inequalities in health depending on social class with a poorer outcome for children in lower socio-economic groups for low birth weight, infant mortality, accidental deaths and oral health.
- Bullying, particularly in schools can be a major source of stress for young people with sometimes very serious results including school drop out, low academic achievement, and self-harm or suicide.
- Child Poverty relating to high levels of unemployment and a low wage economy

Other issues that are specific to Northern Ireland relate to the political situation here over the past 30 years. A large number of our children and their parents have lived in a divided society. The consequences of the ongoing conflict and sectarianism experienced by many of our children is yet to be fully realised and will need further investigation and processes to be put in place to counter the worst effects of this situation.

The current education system (11 Plus Transfer System) here has given rise to much debate with many of its critics asserting that it is a two-tier system of education and that it is skewed in favour of children from higher socio-economic groups.

What is good about living in Northern Ireland for children and young people; what is not so good?

- Close knit Communities
- Strong emphasis on family values
- Relatively easy access to health and social services
- Good educational opportunities
- Good housing stock and low levels of homelessness
- Good infrastructure
- Temperate climate
- Easy access to amenities e.g. unspoiled countryside, clean air, beaches and both outdoors and indoor sporting activities.

Not so good;

- Political situation,
- Sectarianism,
- lack of employment opportunities leading to many young people leaving to seek employment elsewhere,
- low-wage economy.

What should the vision for children and young people be?

The vision for children and young people should encompass better outcomes for children in relation to health, education, employment opportunities and safe environment.

What actions could be taken to achieve the vision and by whom?

Parents need to have better access to a range of services including parent support for all families but specifically for those living in disadvantaged circumstances. More affordable quality child-care facilities are also needed for single parents and those mothers who wish to work outside the home.

Health visitors and school nurses have a key role to play in providing targeted pre-school and school health services including evidenced based public health initiatives that are based on a comprehensive needs assessment in partnership with other relevant childcare agencies. There are many examples of good practice initiatives by school nurses and health visitors that make a real difference to children's lives but because funding is not mainstreamed the service stops at the end of the funded term.

Increasingly the emphasis should be on prevention and early intervention to reduce the need for costly less effective interventions at a later stage.

For example, midwives and health visitors should use the time spent with mothers ante-natally and in the child's early years to improve detection of peri-natal mental health disorders to reduce the negative effects that this may have on the child's future emotional, cognitive and social development. These health professional could not only use the time spent with mothers to provide counselling intervention for those mothers with mild to moderate depression but can alert the mothers' GP if her condition warrants more specialised intervention.

Currently there is a wide range of agencies services both statutory and non-statutory that provide health and social services for children who frequently operate in isolation from one another. There is a clear need to have a national service framework for children's services based on a multi-disciplinary, multi-agency assessment of need that also includes the views of children. In taking a whole child approach, there is a need to improve links with other departments within government to ensure shared responsibility and 'joined-up working' to make this vision a reality.

What should the government's priorities be in relation to children and young people?

- **PRIORITIES:**

The government's overarching aim should be to improve the life chances for children in Northern Ireland. This can be achieved by a targeting a number of areas.

There should be increased support systems at the start of life for children.

This should include easy access to a range of acceptable, evidenced-based parenting courses for new parents.

Improved nutrition for children at all stages in development; e.g. more support for breastfeeding, standard weaning advice, access to fresh, healthy affordable food both in the home and in the school setting.

Health and education services should forge closer links to assess the need of all children starting school so that each child is treated as an individual and has services put in place to meet the identified need of the individual child. School nurses who have health records on each child should work more closely with teachers and others to ensure that each child has their individual health, social and educational needs met. Children with educational difficulties need to have access to psychological assessment at the earliest possible opportunity to

receive early intervention and reduce the impact of any disability on future educational outcomes.

Pastoral care in school should encompass a range of disciplines so that problems are not looked at in isolation and programmes are put in place based on a school profile looking at a range of health, social and educational issues.

School nurses should work closely with teachers and others to address problems like teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse and bullying.

What values and principles should underpin the strategy?

Equity of service provision, partnership approach to planning and delivering services across relevant agencies and government department, targeting of resources to identified need and respecting the human rights of the child should underpin the values and principles of the strategy.

What issues specific to Northern Ireland need to be addressed?

- The stark divisions that are inherent in our society in terms of where people live and are educated dependent on religious and political affiliation leading to mistrust and lack of respect.
- High levels of child poverty and deprivation due to higher than the national average levels of unemployment and a low wage economy.
- Rurality – resulting in poor transport systems leading to inaccessibility of services in those areas.

How can children and young people be encouraged and enabled to participate in decision-making processes; what mechanisms need to be established?

Children should be encouraged to express their views on the services that they would like to have in a range of forums. These could include the use of focus groups; within school settings and youth clubs and in national forums to which they have been selected/elected to represent their particular age grouping or locality. User groups could be set up to elicit feedback on services already in place. Satisfaction surveys could also be used to gather information on this issue. However it is important for young people to be well informed about the relevant issues affecting them prior to any discussion or submission of views.

How can service delivery for children be improved?

- Increased opportunities for cross community participation in a range of activities and services including health, education and sport to improve relationships and enhance understanding and respect between the different groups in our society.
- Community development approaches to tackling public health problems; so that those people at community level, who are acutely aware of what the issues are for them and who may also have the solutions on how these issues can be addressed, can contribute meaningfully to the decision-making process.
- Built-in quality assurance measures and impact assessment studies on service provision.

- National standards- national service framework (NSF) for children so that Health and Social Services Trusts and other statutory agencies are clear about their responsibilities with regard to children.

What would make Northern Ireland a better place to grow up in?

- An end to all conflict so that our children could grow up in a peaceful environment free from the worry of violence and sectarianism on all sides of the political divide.
- Safer roads
- Devolved government to improve accountability and transparency.
- Better employment opportunities
- Health and education services that promotes equality of opportunity and access for all our children

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