



northern ireland commissioner
for children and young people

**Response to the consultation on:
Draft Priorities and Budget
2006 - 2008**

5th December 2005

1. Statutory Responsibility

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for children and young people (NICCY) was established in October 2003. Under the terms of its enabling legislation, the Commissioner for children and young people (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, Article 7 requires the office of the Commissioner to review the “adequacy and effectiveness of services relating to children and young people” and to advise Ministers and/or the Secretary of State accordingly.

As the pre-cursor and foundation to service provision the draft Priorities and Budget 2006 – 2008 clearly falls within the duties outlined at Article 7 (2) (3) & (4) of the Commissioner for children and young people (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

2. Background

Staff from NICCY have met with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for Children and the draft Priorities and Budget 2006 – 2008 and corresponded and met with officials from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to discuss the draft Priorities and Budget 2006-2008 in detail.

NICCY will continue to act on its duty under Article 7 of the Commissioner for children and young people (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, by making representations directly to Ministers and departments on matters more directly related to the specific Public Service Agreements (PSAs) and budgets of individual government departments.

This document will therefore serve two functions; as NICCY’s response to the consultation on the draft budget and priorities 2006 -2008 and as the basis for further representations to the Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State and senior officials in those departments with responsibilities for children and young people and in particular the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department for Education.

Our legislation requires NICCY to have due regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In late 2003 we commissioned Queen’s University to undertake a large scale research project comparing Northern Ireland to the standards of the convention¹. In general terms, the research demonstrates a significant disparity between the minimum standards outlined in the convention and the manner in which the rights of children and young people are currently being

¹ Children’s Rights in Northern Ireland, An Audit of the Areas in Which Children’s Rights Are Ignored or Underplayed in Northern Ireland in 2004, Queens University see www.niccy.org

met in Northern Ireland. The research also highlights specific areas with regard to those rights, where there are significant gaps in service provision directly impacting on children and young people in Northern Ireland.

In addition, our growing body of individual casework arising from our role as Ombudsman for Children and Young People and findings from our research, service review and participation activities informs us, in greater detail, of where and how the rights and best interests of children and young people are not being adequately met and where the services provided to them are neither adequate nor effective.

3. Strategic context and Principles

We welcome the thrust of the draft priorities and budget 2006-2008 and, in particular, the emphasis on the four interlinked themes of:

- Economic Growth
- Public Sector Reform
- High Quality Public Services
- And a society based on partnership, equality, inclusion and mutual respect.

We recognise and applaud the Government for their focus on the development of a competitive economy for Northern Ireland but we are concerned to ensure that the quality of the public services provided to children and young people remain at the core of the Government's agenda, in order to invest in a successful, inclusive and equal society for the future of Northern Ireland and to achieve a social policy framework that recognises the rights of all children and young people

4. Priority Funding Package for Children and Young People

We welcome the announcement in the Draft Priorities and Budget 2006 to 2008 that a fund of £25million in 2006 – 2007 and £25million in 2007 – 2008 is to be created to:

reduce underachievement and improve the life chances of children and young people by enhancing their educational development and fostering their health, well-being and social inclusion through the **integrated delivery of the support and services** necessary to ensure every child has the best start in life.

We commend government for the renewed focus on funding for children and young people. We were concerned at the loss last year of the Executive

Programme funds for Children and Young People and we are pleased to see the renewed focus on children and young people in this package of funding. We hope this heralds a renewed focus on children and young people, particularly as we enter a period of significant uncertainty and opportunity brought about the Review of Public Administration.

We are concerned that the fund is used appropriately in order to achieve the aims set out above. NICCY will wish to see a clear and transparent approach to how the fund will be used to achieve positive outcomes for children and young people. In that light it is regrettable that the strategy for children and young people is not, as yet, in place.

We have already made our views known to the Minister for Children and the Children and Young Person's Unit of the OFMDFM about the need to build on the outcomes adopted by the Children's Service planners. We believe the **tailored** adoption of these outcomes, to be an essential framework in ensuring the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. We believe the newly announced funding package can be an effective 'pump primer' to help achieve these outcomes and provide a positive kick start to the Children's strategy once it is published.

We are therefore concerned to ensure that this welcome development is not used by departments of government to plug gaps in existing funding arrangements and that it is used as an innovative process to achieve greater inter-departmental cooperation on services where children and young people currently fall between the cracks. We have pointed to significant deficits in a number of key areas, for example:

- Transition of young people with a disability between education and adult services
- Mental Health Service to Children and Young People
- Play and coherent early years provision
- Support for those most disadvantaged children and young people
- Provision of Allied Health Services including Speech and Language Therapy
- A range of preventative family support services

The Priority Funding Package for children and young people will not, of course, be able to address all of these issues. We will therefore wish to see a coordinated process developed between projects and services assisted by the fund and future mainstream funding across departments to address these deficit areas. We await the publication of the report on the Transition of Young People from Education to Adult Services, the Review of Pre-school provision and Government's response to the on-going review of Mental Health Services chaired by Professor Bamford,

specifically in relation to the recommendations of the sub-committee on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and the Family Support Strategy.

We will continue to review the adequacy of services provided to children and young people in these key areas and to press Government for significant improvements in these crucial mainstream areas for, often, the most disadvantaged children and young people.

We are also aware of the significant opportunity presented by the recent announcements from the Review of Public Administration. We believe any savings to be generated by the Review of Public Administration must be also ploughed back into services to children and young people to further help achieve positive outcomes for them. We fervently hope the reduced administration delivers significant improvements in many of these core services.

Government, rightly in our view, were previously critical of the process whereby projects funded under the Executive Programme Children's Fund, even if evaluated as effective, were not brought into the mainstream of services to children and young people. This has led to a situation whereby a number of effective and innovative projects will not be continued despite evaluation demonstrating real and on-going success in ensuring positive outcomes for children and young people. This has led to a loss of innovative services to children and young people and significant disappointment and frustration to those staff and agencies involved in these projects as many were *'addressing underachievement and improving the life chances of children and young people by enhancing their educational development and fostering their health, well-being and social inclusion through the **integrated delivery of the support and services**'².*

It is therefore essential to ensure that a clear exit strategy is in place for those services and projects funded under any new arrangements to ensure that projects deemed to be successfully ensuring positive outcomes for children and young people are adopted early into mainstream services.

We therefore believe that criteria need to be set in place and rigorously applied to ensure that outcome focussed, integrated services receive priority. We welcome the focus of the Draft Priorities and Budget 2006 – 2008 on:

- Child Protection and inter-agency cooperation
- Children's Centres and extended schools
- Looked after Children and Young People's educational improvement
- Early Years, especially for those children who are disadvantaged

² Draft Budget and Priorities Consultation Document 2006-2008

An approach must be developed which avoids a piecemeal approach to these issues and clearly integrates with other policy areas derived following consultation with a wide number of stakeholders which must include children and young people.

For example we would not wish to see developments which bolster the early years provision³ but which does not address the current disparity between Nursery provision, on the one hand and voluntary and community playgroups provision, on the other. In our view this has led to a fragmented approach to supporting early year's provision. We would not wish to see the development of a further strand in of provision, funded under the Priority Funding Package for Children and Young people, without there being a revision in the overall approach across departments and agencies and the voluntary and community sectors.

5. DHSSPS

We welcome the increases in the allocation to DHSSPS overall and to the personal social services in particular recognising the pressures on Health and Social Services Trusts and Boards in a number of key areas.

However we are also concerned to note the lack of targets set for improvement in the department's social care responsibilities for children and young people, especially given its central role in ensuring the provision of high quality services to children and young people who are looked after, who have a disability, who have difficulties with their mental health or who require the services of a health professional because of their special educational needs. It is regrettable that the PSA does not set out where the department wants to make improvements in services to children and young people especially as a number of key areas of deficit outlined by NICCY over recent months fall squarely within the department's remit.

We are concerned to see an imbalance in targets. There appears to be a significant effort to identify and, by implication, drive up the quality of access to Acute Hospital and Primary Care Services. This is being done through target setting which identifies, for example, maximum waiting times for in-patient, out-patient and primary care based services. There are not however a balancing set of targets for services provided to children and families either by way of waiting times or impact of preventative services.

³ For more detail please see the Commissioner's speech at the Down and Lisburn Childcare Partnership Conference on November 25th 2005 available at www.niccy.org

We do not see how improvements can be made to a number of key areas for children and young people, unless an equivalent approach is adopted, particularly as there are a significant number of targets available which measure similar services provided by local government in GB which could be adopted for use here in Northern Ireland.

We would welcome further discussion with Minister Shaun Woodward on this key accountability issue.

6. Education

In our responses to the Budget and Priorities 2005 – 2008 we welcomed the increases signalled (more than £22million) for services to children and young people with Special Educational Needs. We are disappointed to note therefore that there does not appear to be any specific targets set for these vulnerable children and young people by way of access to specialist help and services.

In our role as Ombudsman for children and young people the majority of our caseload of individual cases continues to involve children and young people with special educational needs, and their parents, seeking redress on a wide variety of issues. Of these many are based on problems with the assessment process and/or the provision of services e.g. speech and language therapy.

We welcome the commitment given last year to increase services to this group of children and young people, such as classroom assistants and educational psychologists. We had hoped that with this substantial investment the department would now be in a position to meet the standards set in its own guidance on special educational needs assessment.

Our experience as Ombudsman for children demonstrates that this is often not the case for this most vulnerable group of children and young people and their parents. We are therefore very concerned not to see targets setting out minimum standards for access to these services in the PSA for the Department for Education.

7. The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

The Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for children and young people has keenly awaited the publication of the draft 10 year Children's strategy from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

The aims of the strategy have our full support:

- To give children and young people a higher priority
- To address the gaps in information about children and young people
- To enable organisations to work together for children and young people
- To help realise the rights contained in the UNCRC

We welcome the continued commitment of government to build a society where the rights, interests and contribution of children and young people are recognised, upheld and promoted.

We continue to note with some concern that there does not appear to be a matching commitment to fund the strategic outcomes contained within the strategy.

Last year we recommended that Government allocated specific resources and a concomitant commitment over the lifetime of the strategy to help achieve these aims. We continue to encourage government to do so and to this end we hope the Priority Funding Package for Children and Young People will allow government to commence the process of linking strategic outcomes, to be included in the forthcoming strategy, to service developments for children and young people on the ground.

We also welcome the clear commitment and targets set to eradicate poverty.

8. Conclusion

We welcome the renewed focus on children and young people that this draft Priorities and Budget 2006 - 2008 brings.

We remain concerned that, despite considerable investment, a number of services significant in the lives of children and young people remain inadequate and ineffective, particularly those specific to disadvantaged children and young people.

We recommend that in order to begin to address such deficits government departments set clear, rights based targets for access to services for children and young people and for the achievement of outcomes.