



**Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary
Outlook**

2018-2020

January 2018

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this briefing on the Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-2020. We have not used the budget briefing template for feedback and rather have drafted this response to enable us to focus our comments on issues of most relevance to VOYPIC.

We support the response made by CiNI (Children in Northern Ireland) and make reference to this throughout our response. In particular we support the view that the options outlined in the budgetary outlook lack sufficient information to allow for a reasoned and informed response about how the cuts will impact on the lives of children and young people and their families in Northern Ireland.

VOYPIC

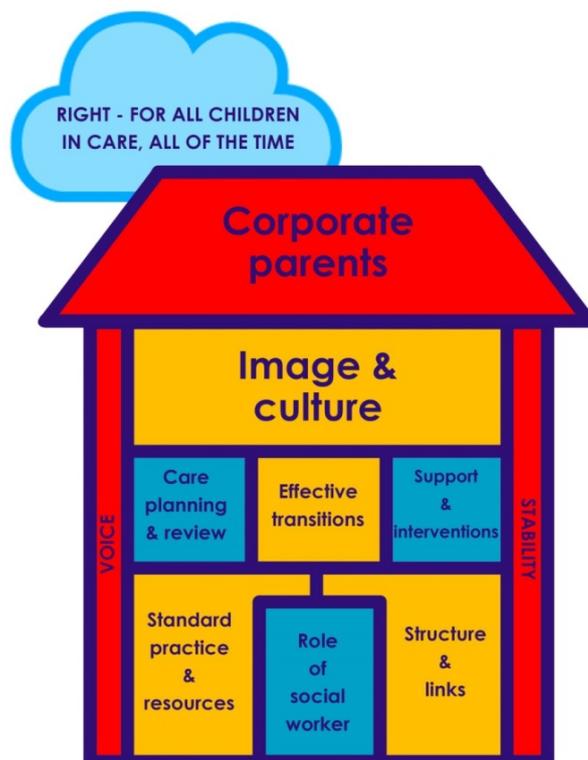
VOYPIC is a charity working across Northern Ireland promoting the rights and improving the lives of children and young people cared for away from home. They may be living at home in care; with foster or kinship carers; in children's homes; in secure settings; or in supported accommodation. They may be preparing to leave care or be care leavers. We respond to local, individual and changing needs to bring meaningful benefits to children and young people.

Between April 2016 and March 2017, 623 children and young people received support packages from VOYPIC. Some of the children and young people referred to VOYPIC may receive one service while others receive multiple services.

Specific comments

We endorse the view of CiNI and believe that opportunities are lost when sufficient resources are not made available to meet the needs of children and young people. The timeline of a child's life means that occasions for intervention are short and the consequences of absent, unclear, or inadequate policies can be significant. We need long-term, evidence and informed investment for children and young people.

The complexity of the needs of children and young people in care and care leavers is well recognised. All aspects of their lives, care and support must be addressed in the *Programme for Government*, the children's strategy and, as yet to be published, *Improving Children's Lives* - draft strategy for looked after children. These complex needs and key aspects of the process of caring for children and young people in care and care leavers are reflected in this graphic.



In VOYPIC's response to the pre-consultation for **Improving Children's Lives – draft LAC Strategy** we supported and endorsed the concept of “the corporate family”. We believe that the strategy requires commitment and contribution from every stakeholder within the corporate family for looked after children, be it a government department, an arms-length body or other partner agency or organisation. While the DoH may be the lead department for looked after children, the role of corporate parenting should not be confined to it. There are roles and responsibilities for all government departments to consider and respond to the needs of children in care and care leavers.

VOYPIC called on all departments to recognise and define their roles and responsibilities as corporate parents for children in care and care leavers. The Children's Services Co-operation Act (2015) can be an important mechanism for progressing this and promoting a sense of corporate family where all bodies and stakeholders recognise their role in supporting care experienced young people.

Furthermore, we support proposals in the draft Adoption and Children Bill to introduce statutory corporate parenting:

“A *definition of corporate parenting and the duties and requirements of a corporate parent should be introduced to the legislation* in Northern Ireland.

The responsibility of corporate parenting should be extended to bodies outside of Trusts, such as the PSNI, education and housing, as is now the case in Scotland, and all parties must acknowledge their role within the corporate family for children in care and care leavers”

VOYPIC uses the term corporate parent based on the concept of “the corporate family” as detailed under in current draft LAC Strategy. Whilst we understand that the term “corporate parent” is not currently defined in Northern Ireland, Article 26 of the Children Order requires every authority to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children in its care and to make available services that are available for children cared for by their own parents.

We believe any budget should be underpinned by an ethos of genuine user engagement and co-production with children and young people in care. We support and endorse the proposal in *Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together* which outlines a commitment to work in partnership with service users to design, develop and deliver services on the basis of co-production.

We understand the budgetary pressures facing a Northern Ireland Executive. Achieving better outcomes for children and young people in care and care leavers does not always mean we must spend more, it does, however, mean we should look at the system and how we can review or use it to work more effectively. We need to think laterally and creatively to ensure that we utilise and maximise all opportunities for children and young people in care. We believe that all departmental and related budgets need to be proofed against the needs of children and young people in care and care leavers.

In **Health and Wellbeing 2026** the Department of Health states that it wants to create a care system that aims to be “as ambitious for children in care as we are for our own children”¹. A review of the care system is currently underway in Scotland looking at the underpinning legislation, policies, practice, culture and ethos of the care system, taking into account the views and evidence of care experienced young people in order to bring about real and lasting change.

Health

VOYPIC delivers an advocacy service to children and young people in Beechcroft Child and Adolescent Inpatient Unit so we welcome the additional funding committed to investing in mental health services over five years, in particular:

- Drug, alcohol prevention and substance misuse
- Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and infant mental health focusing on early prevention
- Enhancement of Recovery model and co-production framework

Children and young people in care and care leavers can suffer health neglect which may lead to unhealthy lifestyles and mental health problems. Health may be compromised by abusive and neglectful parenting but public care may also fail to repair and protect children's health. Children's mental health is of particular concern.

Unlike the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland has not yet benefited from a large-scale prevalence study of the mental health of the looked after population. VOYPIC would like to see a comprehensive regional assessment of the mental health needs of children and young people in care and care leavers.

¹ Department of Health (2016): *Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together*

Education

Although some do well, looked after children as a group can have poor experiences of education compared to that of their peers. Reasons for poorer levels of achievement may include coping with trauma and emotional difficulties; lower levels of attendance or difficulty maintaining school placements. There is a growing interest in redressing these poor educational outcomes and on paying greater attention to developing strategies that promote achievement as well as further and higher education.

It is positive to note that we have continued to see a steady increase in the number of children and young people in care achieving five G.C.S.E.s or more. There is a discrepancy, however, between the number of children and young people in care gaining five or more G.C.S.E.s at A*- C compared to the general population. The majority (84%) of the general population is gaining five or more G.C.S.E.s at A*- C compared to less than a third (29%) of children and young people in care.

Education is a basic right for all children and young people. Year on year, however, children in care are not attaining as well as their non- looked after peers.

Justice

We support the proposals highlighted under the Department of Justice chapter to deliver a greater welfare based approach to children engaged in offending behaviour. It is estimated that looked after children are around five times more likely to become involved with the justice system than those outside the care system.² We need to reduce the criminalisation of young people by preventing and resolving the behaviour and incidents which give rise to it including the misuse of alcohol and drugs.

Our annual Care Question Time in November 2017 was on the theme of "Care and Crime - Let's Talk Justice". This event focused on the interface between care and justice and the over-representation of care experienced young people in the juvenile justice system in Northern Ireland. In particular we discussed a welfare based approach versus a criminal justice approach to looked after children engaged in offending behaviour.

According to the Youth Justice Agency Annual Workload Statistics for 2016/17, the proportion of young people involved with custodial services that were looked after increased to 39% in 2016/17 from 29% in 2015/16. The proportion of movements within the JJC involving young people subject to care orders (20%) or in voluntary accommodation (19%) reached its highest level since 2012/13 in 2016/17 at 45%.

Of particular concern is the number of young people in care who are becoming involved in the criminal justice system for incidents that, had they taken place in a family home, would not have resulted in police action. In particular, young people in residential children's homes have told us that there is often excessive police presence in their homes. Therefore, some young people in care enter the criminal justice system inappropriately.

² Northern Ireland Audit Office (2017): Managing Children who offend

The Howard League for Penal Reform (HL) reports that children and young people in England and Wales living in children's homes are being criminalised excessively.

The Howard League for Penal Reform claims that children aged 16 and 17 living in children's homes are at least fifteen times more likely to be criminalised than other children of the same age. The recent Northern Ireland Audit Office Report (NIAO) reported that looked after children are disproportionately represented amongst children who come into contact with the justice system. They represent less than one per cent of the population under 18 years old, but between 2009-10 and 2013-14, they accounted for between 9 and 17 per cent of referrals to Youth Diversion Officers in the PSNI.

It is vital that funding is protected to facilitate a greater welfare based approach to children engaged in offending behaviour. We need to prevent the unnecessary criminalisation of children and young people in care.

The Audit Office report (2017) *Managing Children who Offend* examined the cost of youth crime, and what is being done to try and reduce it and reported a cost of £324,000 a year to keep a young person in custody. The report also said that the Youth Justice Agency spent £17.4m and employed 277 staff last year. This added to the significant resources deployed by the courts, PPS and PSNI on children and young people make a compelling economic reason for diverting children away from the system as soon as possible.

Conclusion

The complexity of the needs of children and young people in care and care leavers is well recognised. To ensure the best outcomes, we need investment in prevention, diversion and cooperation mindful of the corporate responsibility there is across all key departments for children in care and care leavers.