

Reimagining Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland



BY **THE REIMAGINE CHILDREN'S COLLECTIVE**
November 2023



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**CHILDREN
ONLY
HAVE ONE
CHILDHOOD.
THE CLOCK
IS TICKING.**

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Professor Ray Jones

About the Reimagine Children's Collective

The Reimagine Children's Collective is a collaborative effort, led by major charities working with children, young people and families in Northern Ireland to advocate for the effective implementation of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services. We are ambitious for our children. We believe that Northern Ireland has the potential to develop and provide world class services to support children, young people and families. Now is the time to reimagine how we restructure and reform our children's social care services and how we can all effectively collaborate to bring about positive and lasting change.

About this Paper

The Reimagine Children's Collective have jointly developed this paper to summarise our response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services.

Section 1 of the paper identifies areas which we consider to be immediate priorities requiring urgent action. Section 2 outlines five overarching themes that we believe to be essential to reimagining and reforming children's social care services in the light of the recommendations of the Review. All organisations support the recommendations and will seek to influence and promote these positions both as a collective group and as individual organisations.

Introduction

Transformational change of children's social care services in Northern Ireland is urgently needed. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services, led by Professor Ray Jones and published in June 2023, has provided a real opportunity to reimagine how services are structured, planned and delivered on a regional basis. The direction of travel set out by the Review focuses on more attention and investment in early intervention and prevention for families, better use of the resources and workforce already there and significant structural reform to deliver children's social care through a single regional organisation instead of five Health and Social Care Trusts. The Review provides a careful and comprehensive analysis of the current state of children's social care in Northern Ireland and has provided a range of solutions through its 53 recommendations.



The Northern Ireland Context

The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services recognised the considerable strengths within Northern Ireland and its communities. This included the quality and commitment of its workforce and many services provided by both the statutory and community and voluntary sectors. Nevertheless, the report found that Northern Ireland faces unique challenges that create daily pressures for families. Professor Jones labelled this ‘the toxic trio’ which increased the demand for children’s social care services. This included:

1. The Impact of Poverty

The Review highlighted the prevalence of poverty in Northern Ireland and the detrimental effects it has on children and families. Poverty has been identified as a major driver of the need and demand for children’s social care services and is highly correlated with ill-health, including poor mental health and drug and alcohol misuse.

2. Legacy Issues from the Troubles

Transgenerational trauma is associated with poor mental health, misuse of alcohol and drugs and domestic violence. Coercive control by paramilitary groups continues to cause fear and trauma within Northern Ireland’s communities today.

3. Political Inaction

The impact of no functioning Executive for nearly two years on our children, young people and families should not be underestimated. Major policy decisions, strategic direction and the settling of budgets are stalled. Decisions about funding of statutory services, pay for those working within the services and grants to voluntary and community groups are limited and delayed.

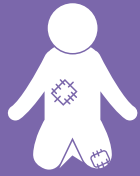
These already challenging circumstances are set in the backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis and extensive cuts to public services. However, the message both from this Review and frontline services represented by the authors of this report is that our babies, children, young people and families cannot wait for a stable national or local government or a better financial climate for change.

We must do all we can to maximise the resources and capacity we currently have while taking steps to build an infrastructure that adequately serves the needs presenting both now and into the future. The importance of getting the foundations right from the start both for our systems and our society as a whole is the heart of the message we hope to deliver in this paper.



SECTION 1:

Time for Change



22,875

CHILDREN IN NEED IN NORTHERN IRELAND¹



4,000

FAMILIES WAITING FOR ALLOCATION OF THEIR CASE²



2,251

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WAITING FOR AN INITIAL CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE (CAMHS) ASSESSMENT³

The current system for delivering children's social care services is not working. In 2022/23, there were 22,875 children known to social services as a child in need and the number of children in care reached a record high of 3,801 children⁴. High levels of staff vacancies in statutory children's social care services have led to unacceptable levels of delay and severe pressure on those providing services which in turn has a negative impact on children, young people and families. As the Review makes clear, there is a need for radical structural transformation in how statutory services are managed. The time to redesign the system, towards practical help and support and away from later interventions, such as child protection plans and young people being removed from their families, is long overdue. Children, young people and families need support now. We consider the following areas as immediate priorities and call for the return of a functioning NI Executive to tackle these challenges at pace:



Priority 1: Addressing Poverty

Northern Ireland urgently needs an Anti-Poverty Strategy. We need to invest in what we know works and implement measures to combat poverty such as affordable childcare, free school meals and community-based support for families experiencing poverty. Two significant recommendations in the Northern Ireland's Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Group's 2020 report⁵ should be implemented in the first instance to alleviate pressure on families. These are:

- **Remove the two child benefit cap:** Analysis conducted in 2021 suggested that removing the two-child limit would lift 6,000 children⁶ out of poverty in Northern Ireland;
- **Introduce a new child payment:** An additional £20 a week for every child eligible for means tested benefits, to supplement child benefit, would lift 27,000 children⁷ out of poverty in Northern Ireland.

¹ Department of Health (2023) [Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2022/23](#)

² Jones, R. (2023) [The Northern Ireland Review of Children's Social Care Services Report P62](#)

³ Department of Health (2023) [CAMHS Waiting Time Statistics for Northern Ireland \(June 2023\)](#)

⁴ Department of Health (2023) [Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2022/23](#)

⁵ See [Recommendations for an Anti-Poverty Strategy: Report of the Expert Advisory Panel](#) (2020)

⁶ Save the Children UK (2021) [Children Can't Wait Investing in Social Security to Reduce Child Poverty in Northern Ireland](#)

⁷ Save the Children UK (2021) [Children Can't Wait Investing in Social Security to Reduce Child Poverty in Northern Ireland](#)



Priority 2: Reduce Waiting Lists

The Department of Health should develop an Action Plan to reduce waiting lists for children’s social care services. The Review shone a light on long waiting lists for support services which are often too limited, heavily rationed or not available at all, particularly for children and families living in rural areas. There are also high levels of staff vacancies in statutory children’s social care services leading to large numbers of cases unallocated, with over 4,000 children and their families now waiting after having crossed an initial threshold for involvement with statutory children’s social care. There is an urgent need to address these waiting times and unallocated cases with targets, timescales and funding at a regional level.



Priority 3: Stabilising Service Provision

Amidst ongoing political instability, public finance contraction as well as the cost-of-living crisis, services that support children, young people and families are facing unprecedented pressures. Specifically, the disproportionate budget cuts endured by the community and voluntary sector have undermined our ability to maintain current levels of service despite growing demand. We believe this is fundamentally counterproductive to the strategic direction of the Review. To stabilise service provision, most organisations agree that the Executive Departments should suspend tendering/commissioning processes related to established provision until an Executive can approve multi-year budgets and more collaborative forms of contract agreements can be developed. This would conserve organisations’ resources and capacity to focus on effective service delivery and provide better security for our workforce amid an uncertain political and economic climate. We believe this kind of bold, but short-term measure could be instrumental in stabilising current service provision and achieving the longer-term ambition of the vision within the Review.



Priority 4: Tackling the Workforce Crisis

Action should also be taken to address the children’s social care workforce crisis. We acknowledge and welcome the work already underway through the Children’s Social Care Strategic Reform programme in the Department of Health. While more work is needed to recruit and retain children’s social care staff to reduce the number of vacancies across the system, it is possible to increase capacity by broadening the skills mix and extending the range of workers within frontline teams and services.



Priority 5: Improving Communication with children, young people and families

Better communication from statutory services is critical to improving the experiences of children, young people, parents and carers. This should begin immediately and include clear and regular communication about their case with a named contact person, face to face contact and ease of access to information. The development of co-designed, age-appropriate content to communicate with children and young people, including those with specific communication or language needs should now be underway to support better communication.



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THE REFORM OF HOW CHILDREN'S SOCIAL
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SECTION 2:

Reimagining Children's Social Care Services

The Review found that the difficulties facing children's social care services in Northern Ireland are both systemic and endemic. We agree with this assessment and recognise that there must be structural transformation on a regional basis to improve outcomes for children and their families. Within our group, there is substantial support for the recommendation to create a single regional Arms-Length Body (ALB) for Children and Families which would replace the current model of service delivery across

five separate Health and Social Care Trusts. An option to include other services outside the Department of Health such as the Education Welfare Service, Youth Justice Agency and EA Youth Service has also been made to increase coordination between closely related workforces. We recognise these are bold proposals that will require leadership, commitment and resources to implement. However, in our view, the potential of developing an effective regional model could deliver multiple benefits including:

Reimagining service delivery of children's social care will require a fundamental cultural shift that places the voices of children, young people and families at the centre of service provision.

- **Clarity of Purpose:**
Establishment of a single organisation would provide dedicated focus to plan and deliver social care services for children, young people and families;
- **Authoritative and Accountable Leadership:**
Provide strategic leadership and oversight on a regional level without other roles and responsibilities;
- **Improved Collaboration:**
Greater communication and coordination between statutory children's social care services with partners from other closely related services and service providers in the community and voluntary sector;
- **Efficient and Effective Services:**
Better use of available staff and resources including the reduction in duplication of functions would provide more integrated services;
- **More Transparency:**
Enhance clarity, transparency and accountability about children's social care processes and funding;
- **Better Outcomes:**
End the postcode lottery and simplify access to services for children, young people, parents and carers.

The success of this new regional model to transform services for children and families will depend on its implementation and ongoing monitoring and evaluation. We heed the warning in the Review that while structural transformation is necessary and provides a platform to build on, it is not the sole solution to the current crisis.

The reform of how children's social care services are planned and delivered within a new regional structure is central to effective transformation and providing better support to children, young people and families. Reimagining service delivery of children's social care will require a fundamental cultural shift that places the voices of children, young people and families at the centre of service provision. It will be necessary to adapt to proactively supporting families early and developing a fresh approach to investing in communities by collaborating with the community and voluntary sector. Fundamentally, this Review offers ambitious plans of reform and transformation that we, as a collective, are keen to facilitate as far as possible. To support this development, the Reimagine Children's Collective seeks to highlight five overarching and interrelated themes that are crucial to reforming service delivery.



Listening to Children, Young People and Families

Central to the successful transformation of how children’s social care services are delivered is the priority given to listening and acting upon the views and lived experiences of children, young people and families. Throughout the course of conducting the Review, Professor Jones and his team placed a high priority on speaking directly with children and young people, parents and carers. The ‘wisdom’ of children, young people and families has been ‘visible and valuable throughout the Review’⁸ and has informed the development of recommendations to support a range of specific groups (See **Supporting Specific Groups**). The establishment of the ‘Experts by Experience’ Reference Group⁹ and their role as an advisory forum for the Review, alongside the Review Team’s efforts to talk to children and young people with experience of children’s social care services, resulted in a set of Review recommendations which are very much informed by lived experiences. This model of inclusive children, youth and parental engagement must continue into the next phase of implementation. This engagement must be intentional and will require adequate investment in both time and resources. Government departments should genuinely commit to acting upon feedback from service users. New avenues of continued and sustained communication and feedback between relevant stakeholders must be developed and should include:

- **Inclusive Consultation:** Age, ability or background should not be a barrier to effective engagement. All children and young people can be enabled to have their voices and views heard, the challenge is to engage in a format which children and young people understand and are comfortable with. Key to this is the development of accessible documents and alternative forms of communication for all children and young people including those with a disability or English as a second language.
- **Experts by Experience:** The people who have lived through services are the ones who can shape a better future. They are the experts in how services both are delivered and received. Those with lived experience can identify the gaps in provision, the failings, the successes and the impact services make in reality. They are the experts on what needs to change to make things better. We must put service users’ views and voices at the heart of our services. This will not happen by accident but will require planning and dedicated resources.
- **Advocacy Services:** Too many children, young people and families feel that they are not listened to, respected or understood when it comes

⁸ Jones, R. (2023) [The Northern Ireland Review of Children’s Social Care Services Report](#). P18

⁹ Experts by Experience Reference Group included young people who are care experienced and other young people with experience of children’s social care services.

to how they interact with children's social care services. Children, young people, parents and carers have told us that navigating the system and working out how to get the right support at the right time from the right provider is often frustrating, overwhelming and sometimes disempowering. As a group, we support the specific need for independent advocacy for a range of groups such as parents, young people with disabilities transitioning to adult services, children in care and those young people leaving care. Independent advocacy services empower children, young people and parents, improves communication and provides a way to hold decision makers and services to account.

- **Formal Mechanisms:**

There must be formal mechanisms in place through which the voices and experiences of children, young people, parents and carers are represented around decision making tables and given equal value as those of duty bearers. This will mean building capacity for service users, young and old, to meaningfully participate with the Implementation team, at Board level or through service reference groups. To support this, we propose adopting the Lundy Model of Child Participation, which provides a robust framework to ensure that children's participation complies with their rights. This model is currently being used by national and international organisations and seeks to empower children by ensuring that their voice is given space and is heard by an audience who is receptive and that they have influence to make real change.

- **A Family Charter:**

We believe that the intention to listen to the voices of children, young people, parents and carers should be clearly set out in a co-designed Family Charter. This would establish a formal social contract between statutory organisations, young people and families. The Family Charter would outline the commitment of agencies to meet the needs of their service users, including the type of services and quality of provision they can expect to receive, how their views will be considered and what the complaints process is when they believe those standards are not met.

Supporting Specific Groups

The Review makes a number of recommendations to support specific groups who use children's social care services. We welcome these recommendations which include:

- **Children with Disabilities:**

There is a need to increase support services to families with children with a disability. Increased capacity for respite care, short breaks and opportunities to be cared for away from their families is urgently required. Greater flexibility between the ages of 18 and at least 21 years old to plan transition from children's services to adults' services would enable decision making that serves the best interest of individual children and young people.

- **Young Adults Leaving Care:**

While the Adoption and Children Act 2002 extends support to care leavers up to the age of 25, further work is required to make this a reality through expanding access to accommodation to young people post 18 years old.

- **Foster Carers:**

The experience and expertise of foster carers should be valued. This could be achieved through greater collaboration with statutory agencies and by increased representation through the implementation process. Support for foster carers should include updating the policies to support their work and addressing disparity in allowances on a regional basis.



Supporting Early Intervention and Prevention

The Review's recommendations and emphasis on early intervention and prevention clearly strike a chord with other strategic frameworks and workstreams across different Executive Departments. It firmly indicates that there is an urgency required to move beyond accepting early intervention and prevention as a concept in theory or purely an ambition for a distant future¹⁰.

We endorse the Review's recommendation that there should be a shift away from the current dominance of crisis-based and protection-orientated services towards a greater focus on early family support. The recommendation to develop emotional health and wellbeing services separate from clinical CAMHS is a positive example of how to refocus on early intervention by providing alternative ways for families to receive support in the community. As a collective of community and voluntary organisations, it was an encouragement that the Review recognised and acknowledged our significant role and substantial expertise in these areas and made specific recommendations to fully include the Children's Sector in the reform process and future planning. Together, our services work in ways that drive down pressures on child protection and children in care numbers which are currently at urgent and unsustainable levels (Figure 1). This could look like home visiting for vulnerable parents, school-based programmes promoting social and emotional learning, short breaks for families with children with disabilities or providing accommodation and support for young people leaving care. It is also the case that there are many positive examples of effective multi-agency collaboration between statutory agencies and the Children's Sector with Sure Start being a prime example of this. Further development of multi-agency frontline teams would enhance coordination and increase the presence in local communities.

FIGURE 1

THE COST TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR OF LATE INTERVENTION IN NORTHERN IRELAND IS ESTIMATED AT £536 MILLION PER YEAR.

THIS IS EQUIVALENT TO £288 FOR EVERY NORTHERN IRELAND RESIDENT, OR £1,166 PER CHILD.¹¹



¹⁰ Jones, R. (2023) [The Northern Ireland Review of Children's Social Care Services Report](#). P271

¹¹ Fitzsimons, P. and Teager, W. (2018) [The cost of late intervention in Northern Ireland](#) Early Intervention Foundation

Sure Start

An Example of Early Intervention and Prevention

There are currently 38 Sure Starts across the region which are targeted to support children under the age of four living in the most disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland. Sure Starts offer a range of services focusing on early childhood development, parenting support and family well-being. The Review has identified Sure Start for the significant and effective contribution it has made to early intervention and prevention at a regional level. This is supported by 93% of parents¹² who agreed strongly that Sure Start has had a positive impact on them and their family. Our organisations also recognise and value the multi-agency support families receive from Sure Start and strongly endorse the recommendation that access to Sure Start services is extended to all 0 – 3 year olds in Northern Ireland. Further investment and additional staff are required to extend the service. This could be further supported by an increase in partnership working and the use of satellite venues to reach communities outside the current catchment areas.

The Review recommended that Sure Start along with other family support services is also expanded to include children aged 4-10 years. While recognising the needs of this age group differ in significant ways from those aged 0 – 3 years old, we believe that the Sure Start model offers a useful way to provide holistic support for children aged 4 – 10 years old on a regional basis. Further exploration of the available workforce and the capacity of schools, community youth work organisations and other family support agencies to support this expansion would be needed.

¹² Health and Social Care Board (2021) [Sure Start Annual Report Card 2020/21](#)



93%

OF PARENTS AGREED STRONGLY THAT SURE START HAS HAD A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THEM AND THEIR FAMILY.

However, it is our experience that the depth and breadth of family support or other early intervention provisions targeting children, young people and families provided by the community and voluntary sector are not well understood within political discourse. But for so many, these kinds of services create a vital, local access ramp through which children of all ages and their parents can easily access a range of non-stigmatising, holistic and preventative services. Work is needed to build more capacity to provide family support in an effective way that meets the needs of local communities. Strategic, long-term prioritisation of early intervention and prevention within our communities should be supported in the following ways:

- **Sustained and Ringfenced Funding:**
Investment is needed to reset and refocus children’s social care services towards practical help and early family support. The use of short-term funding undermines the ability to maintain current levels of service, respond to emerging needs and plan for the future. This is fundamentally counterproductive to the strategic direction this Review offers for improving Children’s Services in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, we recommend that funding for family support is ringfenced to ensure investment in early intervention is prioritised and protected.
- **Utilising the Expertise of the Community and Voluntary Sector:**
The unique role of the community and voluntary sector with its focus and

expertise in early intervention and prevention must be properly recognised, valued and resourced. Our presence in local communities provides vital infrastructure to support early intervention and prevention. We deliver non-stigmatising, flexible, practical, relationship-based services encompassing both specialist provisions and universal evidenced-based models of early intervention such as Sure Starts, Family Support Hubs and Youth Services. This work needs to be sustained and not displaced by newly revamped frontline statutory services. We believe a cross-sectoral response provides the most effective way to deliver early intervention and prevention services in communities and will work to build trust and develop relationships that support and enhance multi-agency collaboration.

- **Better Co-operation and Collaboration:**
The development of multi-agency early intervention and prevention services in local communities should be supported by the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Under this legislation, every Children’s Authority has a duty to co-operate with other service providers in order to contribute to the well-being of children and young people, including through the pooling or sharing of resources. Unfortunately, the potential of this framework has never been fully realised. A refreshed, updated mandate to support and improve effective collaboration between all service providers is required.

Investment is needed to reset and refocus children’s social care services towards practical help and early family support. We recommend that funding for family support is ringfenced to ensure investment in early intervention is prioritised and protected.



Valuing the Role of the Community and Voluntary Sector

As highlighted above, the Review recognised the essential role the community and voluntary sector play in service delivery and supporting government departments fulfil their statutory duties. The Review also acknowledged underinvestment and funding cuts had inflicted long term damage to the sector leading to staff redundancies, closure of services and ultimately less support for families. This was described in the Review as “wasteful, demoralising and damaging for communities and for children and families.”¹³ We endorse this view and believe that greater consultation by statutory partners is needed to increase awareness of the negative accumulative impact of funding cuts to the community and voluntary sector.

As a group, we value multi-agency collaboration and know that building strong and strategic partnerships is key to supporting children, young people and families. The Review has provided the opportunity to explore different ways to reset the relationship between statutory funders and the community and voluntary sector. The Reimagine Children’s Collective would like to highlight two areas for change to strengthen and encourage effective multi-agency working and to move away from the current transactional relationship:

1. Representation:

Representatives from across the Children’s Sector should be participating in both the Children’s Social Care Strategic Reform programme and be part of the Implementation Team and Board overseeing the restructuring of children’s social care services. This would allow the Children’s Sector to share their expertise and skills and provide a potentially alternative perspective from statutory colleagues.

2. New Funding Model:

We support the Review’s recommendation that longer term funding arrangements are put in place and agree that this would be beneficial in terms of offering greater stability and certainty for both the workforce and children, young people and families. The development of a new funding model to support the work carried out by the community and voluntary sector should include:

- Multi-year contracts for community and voluntary organisations;
- Ability to respond to emerging challenges;
- Investment in early intervention and prevention;
- Proportionate scrutiny of the community and voluntary sector;
- Full cost recovery to promote financial sustainability.

To signal a fundamental reset in multi-agency collaboration we seek the creation of a formalised framework with statutory agencies to outline minimum standards and expectations for all parties and to provide an effective way to collaborate together.

¹³ Jones, R. (2023) [The Northern Ireland Review of Children’s Social Care Services Report](#). P177



No Privatisation of Children’s Social Care Services in Northern Ireland

Professor Jones rightly highlighted that the strong public service commitment with little privatisation and commercialisation of children’s social care services was a positive aspect of the system in Northern Ireland. We see no place for the privatisation of care of children and strongly support the position outlined in the Review. It is essential that decision makers in Northern Ireland learn from mistakes in England and elsewhere, where privatisation has led to “poorer and less well planned services” according to the Lead Reviewer.¹⁴

Research commissioned by several of the Reimagine Children’s Collective UK counterparts called ‘The Well-Worn Path: Children’s services spending 2010-11 to 2021-22’¹⁵ found that there has been exponential growth in the use of private sector providers of residential care in England over the past 12 years. Findings indicated that since 2010-11, £9 out of every £10 (90%) has gone to private sector providers for residential care. To meet spiralling costs of high-cost placements, local authorities have tended to divert funding from early intervention which fell by 46% during the same time period. In addition to cost, evidence which analysed 13,000 children’s



home inspections by Ofsted in England found private providers are statistically significantly more likely to be rated of lower quality than both public and third sector services.¹⁶ We cannot allow providers to prioritise profit margins when children’s futures are at stake. Guarding against this trend in Northern Ireland will require leadership and due diligence.

¹⁴ Children & Young People Now (21 June 2023) ‘[Regional organisation could fix child protection crisis, Northern Irish care review finds](#)’

¹⁵ Franklin, J., Larkham, J., and Mansoor, M. (2023) [The well-worn path Children’s services spending 2010-11 to 2021-22](#)

¹⁶ Bach-Mortensen, A. M., Goodair, B., and Barlow, J. (2022). [Outsourcing and children’s social care: A longitudinal analysis of inspection outcomes among English children’s homes and local authorities](#). Social Science & Medicine, Volume 313.



Increasing Accountability

Accountability is a key theme throughout the Review. The lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities has resulted in blurred lines of accountability amongst the leadership of children’s social care services. We are hopeful that new governance arrangements within the Department of Health will address this and improve accountability across the system. It is also necessary that additional safeguards are put in place to ensure accountability and permit effective monitoring and evaluation of children’s social care services. We have identified three key areas which would support this:

1. **Quality Assurance:**

It is alarming that the Review was unable to access current, accurate budget and expenditure data relating to children’s social care services. This has serious implications in terms of financial transparency and accounting of how public money is being spent. In our view, it is necessary to develop new quality assurance and development processes, including independent participation within the processes, to increase accountability and transparency.

2. **Effective Use of Data:**

The lack of accurate, up to date and publicly available data on children in Northern Ireland has been repeatedly identified by numerous sources as a problem.^{17 18}

New governance arrangements provide the opportunity to develop a region-wide data collection and monitoring system that could address both: (i) the lack of disaggregated data on children and young people and; (ii) performance monitoring data around service provision. Effective use of this type of data would identify trends, determine which interventions work for different groups of children and inform decision making for planning services at a regional level. A new system should also record feedback from children, young people, parents and carers as a way to monitor and evaluate children’s social care services.

3. **A Minister for Children and Families:**

The Review recommends the appointment of a Minister for Children and Families. This position would give political leadership and focus to the intentions of the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and would serve as a children and families champion across government and alongside the Children’s Commissioner. We urge that this appointment is made by the next Northern Ireland Executive. This role should not be symbolic or limited to a political spokesperson, but should encompass decision and policy-making powers to drive forward change, implement reform and ensure accountability within children’s social care services.

¹⁷ Report of the Children’s Commissioners of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2022) [Examination of the Combined Sixth and Seventh Periodic Reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#)

¹⁸ Children’s Law Centre (2022) [Close the Gap Key priorities for the NI Assembly to protect children by closing the gap in children’s rights](#)

Reimagining Children's Social Care Services:

Summary of Priorities and Recommendations

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services has provided a catalyst to initiate change to children's social care services across Northern Ireland. The Reimagine Children's Collective see enormous opportunities amidst the challenges which have been well documented. We know that change on this scale will take hard work and a willingness to adopt new approaches which can be uncomfortable. We also know that the current system is unsustainable and that radical transformation is urgently needed to reform services which are fit for purpose. As a group, there is substantial support for the creation of an ALB as a way to deliver this transformation on a regional basis. It is our view that the development of an ALB must be done in parallel with immediate actions to improve service delivery. Our driving motivation is to develop effective services which children, young people and families can access when they need to and we offer our support as willing partners at the start of the implementation process. **Now is the time to act.**

Below is a summary of the key priorities which require urgent attention and recommendations related to service reform we have made throughout this paper.



Priority 1: Addressing Poverty

Northern Ireland urgently needs an Anti-Poverty Strategy.



Priority 2: Reduce Waiting Lists

The Department of Health should develop an Action Plan to reduce waiting lists for children's social care services.



Priority 3: Stabilising Service Provision

NI Executive Departments should seek to stabilise current service provision by temporarily suspending tendering/ commissioning processes related to established provision until an Executive can approve multi-year budgets and more collaborative forms of contract agreements can be developed.



Priority 4: Tackling the Workforce Crisis

Action should be taken to address the children's social care workforce crisis.



Priority 5: Improving Communication with children, young people and families

Better communication from statutory services is critical to improving the experiences of children, young people, parents and carers.

THEME

RECOMMENDATIONS



Listening to Children, Young People and Families

A Family Charter is needed to establish a formal social contract between statutory organisations and children, young people and families.

Access to Information: Co-designed and age-appropriate content should be developed by the Department of Health to inform children and young people, including those with specific communication and language needs, about using children's social care services.

Advocacy Services: Independent advocacy plays a vital role in facilitating meaningful representation and participation in decision making of children, young people and families and provides a way to hold services to account. Advocacy services are needed for specific groups like parents, young people with disabilities, children in care and those leaving care.



Focusing on Early Intervention and Prevention

Local Solutions: Greater access to practical help and early support on issues such as parenting, mental health and substance misuse is needed for families within their local community.

Investment: There should be a renewed focus and commitment to invest in current family support services and to increase capacity on a cross-sectoral basis by allocating budgets for early intervention and prevention work.

Expansion for Sure Start: A fully costed three-year expansion and workforce plan for the current 38 Sure Starts for the existing age group target (0-3s) should be developed using analysis of need information by each existing local project as part of Service Development planning.

Supporting 4 – 10 year olds: Further exploration of how the Sure Start model can be adapted to offer holistic support for children aged 4 – 10 years old on a regional basis is needed.



No Privatisation of Children's Social Care Services

We are opposed to the privatisation of children's social care services in Northern Ireland. Evidence indicates that the use of commercial companies in children's social care is both expensive and does not provide better outcomes for children or young people.

THEME

RECOMMENDATIONS



Valuing the Community and Voluntary Sector

Partnership Framework: The creation of a framework to formalise collaboration and support interdependence between the statutory, community and voluntary sectors is needed to foster a shared vision for children’s social care services, improve equity and provide a way for the Children’s Sector to influence policy and practice. This framework should outline minimum standards and expectations of all parties and provide mechanisms to effectively collaborate together.

Representation: Increased inclusion of Children’s Sector representation on both the Children’s Social Care Strategic Reform programme and the Implementation Team and Board would provide expertise and insight and support fair and well-informed decision making.

New Funding Model: A new funding model for the community and voluntary sector should include multi-year contracts, flexibility to address emerging challenges, investment in early intervention, fair scrutiny, and full cost recovery for sustainability. Funding should be specifically allocated to the Children’s Sector to support children, young people and families in local communities.



Increasing Accountability

Checks and Balances: Quality assurance processes, including independent assessments, are needed to improve transparency and accountability and permit effective monitoring and evaluation of children’s social care services.

Effective Use of Data: A new region-wide data collection and monitoring system should be developed that could address both: (i) the lack of disaggregated data on children and young people and; (ii) system performance monitoring data around service provision.

A Minister for Children and Families: The appointment of a Minister for Children and Families would give political leadership and focus to the intentions of the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and act as children and families champion across government and alongside the Children’s Commissioner.



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