



# **RESPONSE TO DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT**

## **November 2024**

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# **NICCY’s advice to the NI Executive on ‘Doing What Matters Most: Draft Programme for Government 2024-27**

**November 2024**

## **1.0 Introduction**

The Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (“NICCY”) was established in accordance with The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order (2003) (“the Order”) to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland (“NI”). Under Articles 7(2) and (3) of the Order NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice, and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. Under Article 7(4) NICCY has a statutory duty to advise any relevant authority on matters concerning the rights or best interests of children and young persons.

The Commissioner’s remit includes children and young people up to 18 years, or 21 years if the young person has a disability or experience of being in the care of social services. In determining how to carry out his functions the Commissioner’s paramount consideration is the rights of the child or young person, having particular regard to their wishes and feelings. The Commissioner is also to have regard to all relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (“UNCRC”).

NICCY welcomes the Executive’s draft Programme for Government 2024-2027 (PFG), and the opportunity to provide advice in relation to it. In keeping with our remit, we will do this in relation to children’s rights and best interests. This paper has been informed by members of our NICCY Youth Panel, who considered what they thought the Executive’s priorities should be, and then reflected on the draft priorities included in ‘Doing What Matters Most’. Their input is incorporated in this document, in appendix 1.

## **2.0 A Programme for Government for children: general comments**

When the Commissioner met with the First Minister and deputy First Minister in August he talked about the importance of providing a clear commitment in the PFG to prioritising the rights and best interests of children and young people. Setting an ambition for children in

Northern Ireland to flourish should be something the Executive can easily agree, and we discussed the ambition of the Scottish Government that Scotland be the ‘best place to grow up’.<sup>1</sup> We note that the previous draft Programme for Government, having been informed by a thorough consultation process, had included a specific outcome for children. Having provided extensive advice in relation to this, it was deeply disappointing that this PFG was not then finalised or implemented due to the collapse of the Executive in 2017. **The fact that this new draft PFG does not include a specific priority relating to the wellbeing of children is a step backwards, and NICCY strongly advises that a priority focussing on children’s wellbeing should be included in the final version.**

## **2.1 The Children’s Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and Children and Young People’s Strategy 2020-30**

The Children’s Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 was a significant legislative development which aimed to improve the well-being of children and young people in a manner which realises their rights. The obligations under the Act should inform all of the work which Government Departments and agencies undertake to improve the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. The Act places a statutory obligation on Government to adopt a Children and Young People’s Strategy and places further obligations on departments and agencies to co-operate with each other in order to contribute to the improvement of outcomes for children and young people.

Eight areas are set out which define the well-being of children and young people and these include ‘living in a society which respects their rights’. It also states that in determining the meaning of well-being for the purposes of this Act, regard is to be had to any relevant provision of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The first Strategy under the Act was adopted by the Executive in 2020, and a three-year Delivery Plan published the following year. This ended in March 2024 and has not been followed by a subsequent Delivery Plan.

There are also obligations under the Act, on the NI Executive, to prepare a report on the operation of the Act, including statements on:

- the actions taken by the NI Executive, and Government Departments, for the purpose

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<sup>1</sup> [Scotland, the best place to grow up – making it real through rights: easy read - gov.scot](#)

- of achieving the outcomes set out in the Children and Young People’s Strategy;
- the progress made towards achieving those outcomes;
  - how children’s authorities and other children’s service providers have co-operated with each other in the provision of children’s services;
  - how children’s authorities have exercised their powers to share resources and pool funds; and
  - how the well-being of children and young people has improved.

The Act requires the NI Executive to prepare a report not more than 18 months after the date it adopted the Children and Young People’s Strategy however, due to the lack of an Executive, the report was delayed two years, only being published in July 2024.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, article 6 of the Act is particularly relevant to the development of any NI Programme for Governments:

6. - (1) *In preparing a programme for government, the Executive must take account of the most recent report published under section 5 of this Act.*
- (2) *In this section “a programme for government” means a programme referred to in paragraph 20 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement.*<sup>3</sup>

**The draft Programme for Government, in not clearly taking account of the findings of the report into the delivery of the Children’s Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, therefore breaches article 6 of the Act. This must be corrected in the final version of the Programme for Government. NICCY recommends that this is done through the inclusion of a priority to improve the lives of children as set out in the Act, through the delivery of the Executive’s Children and Young People’s Strategy.**

## 2.2 The UNCRC Concluding Observations 2023

In addition to the requirements in the Children’s Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, the PFG should clearly indicate how it will respond to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Concluding Observations following the examination of the UK State Party

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<sup>2</sup> [First Report on the Operation of the Children’s Services Co-operation Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2015 | Department of Education](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Children’s Services Co-operation Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2015.](#)

published in June 2023.<sup>4</sup> These highlight key concerns about how the UK and devolved governments are delivering for children, and provide a list of recommendations on actions that should be taken. These include specific recommendations on what the Executive should deliver for children across a wide range of issues affecting children in Northern Ireland, but also a set of recommendations relating to ‘General Measures’, that focus on how Government should deliver for children and young people. These are outlined below, along with comments on how these should be delivered through the PFG.

### **2.2.1 Legislation**

8. *The Committee recommends that the State party:*

*(a) Strengthen its efforts to fully incorporate the Convention into national legislation in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies and conduct a comprehensive review of all legislation to align it with the Convention and address any inconsistencies;*

*(b) Expeditiously bring forward the amendments necessary to enact the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill in Scotland;*

*(c) Reconsider its decision to replace the Human Rights Act with a bill of rights and ensure that any revision to the act protects all the rights of the child in the Convention, provides effective judicial remedies, ensures a child rights-based approach and follows transparent and participatory processes, including by ensuring the meaningful participation of civil society and children and publishing an impact assessment of the bill of rights;*

*(d) Enact a bill of rights for Northern Ireland;*

*(e) Develop mandatory child-rights impact assessment procedures for legislation and policies relevant to children in England, Northern Ireland and Wales;*

*(f) Assess the impact of the State party’s withdrawal from the European Union on the enjoyment of children’s rights.*

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<sup>4</sup> [Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland :](#)

These recommendations are key to the delivery of the Programme for Government.

**NICCY advises that the Executive should prioritise the Incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, along with the commitment to conduct child rights impact assessments on all new or revised policies, strategies, legislation and services.**

### **2.2.2 Comprehensive policy and strategy**

9. *Noting with appreciation the adoption of action plans on children in the overseas territories, the Committee recommends that the State party:*

*(a) Develop and adopt comprehensive policies and action plans on the implementation of the Convention, with the participation of children, in all jurisdictions of the State party, the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies, that encompass all areas covered by the Convention and include specific, time-bound and measurable goals;*

*(b) Ensure the effective implementation of policies and action plans on children and ensure that they are supported by sufficient human, technical and financial resources;*

*(c) Ensure that the action plans include a special focus on children in disadvantaged situations, including asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children, children belonging to minority groups, children with disabilities, children in care, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex children, socioeconomically disadvantaged children and so-called young carers, or children with caregiver responsibilities.*

These recommendations relate to the strategic delivery of the Executive in implementing children's rights, through the CSCA and Children and Young People's Strategy, as outlined in Section 2.1.

### **2.2.3 Coordination**

10. *Recalling its previous recommendations, the Committee recommends that the State party establish structures, such as a ministerial lead at the national level, with corresponding structures in the devolved administrations and territories, responsible for ensuring the effective monitoring and coordination of all activities relating to the implementation of the Convention across all sectors and at all levels.*

In 2016, shortly after the publication of the Children’s Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, the responsibility for coordinating the development and delivery of the Children and Young People’s Strategy passed from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (now TEO) to the Department of Education. NICCY expressed concern at the time that this would result in the Strategy being given a lower priority, making it more difficult to ensure a proactive, joined up approach to delivering for children.

Eight years on, where the two OFMDFM Junior Ministers had previously had the role of Children’s Ministers, promoting a joined-up approach across the Executive, including through a Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children, none of these structures now exist. The Strategy which should have been delivered in 2016 was delayed until 2020, and the first Delivery Plan has ended and not been replaced. The Children and Young People’s Unit has been subsumed into the Early Years section in DE, with resources diverted to developing and delivering the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. While in previous years DE has coordinated a biennial response to the Concluding Observations from across departments, the commitment to do this in relation to 2023 Concluding Observations has to date not been made.

**NICCY strongly recommends that the Children and Young People’s Unit, and with it the responsibility for coordinating the development and implementation of the Children and Young People’s Strategy, passes back to The Executive Office. In addition, the two Junior Ministers should once again take on the role of Ministers for Children.<sup>5</sup>**

### **2.2.3 Allocation of resources**

*11. The Committee recommends that the State party incorporate a child rights-based approach into the State budgeting process in all jurisdictions of the State party, the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies and:*

*(a) Implement a tracking system for the allocation, use and monitoring of resources for children, with a view to eliminating disparities and ensuring equitability, and*

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<sup>5</sup> For further information see: [NICCY-SOCRNI-3-Main-Report-2022-final-web.pdf](#), p18.

- assess how investments in all sectors serve the best interests of children;*
- (b) Introduce budgetary allocations for children in disadvantaged situations and ensure that children are not affected by austerity measures;*
- (c) Ensure that, in situations of economic crisis, regressive measures are not taken without meeting the requirements set out in paragraph 31 of the Committee's general comment No. 19 (2016) on public budgeting for the realization of children's rights, including that children participate in the decision-making process relating to such measures;*
- (d) Withdraw the budget for Northern Ireland for the period 2023–2024 and fully consider the equality and human rights implications for a new budget, taking all possible steps to mitigate any adverse impact on children's rights before issuing a revised budget;*
- (e) Ensure transparent and participatory budgeting in which civil society, the public and children can participate effectively.*

NICCY has dedicated considerable resource to advising each government department on protecting children from the devastating budget cuts over the last two years, including proactive advice letters to Permanent Secretaries and responses to EQIAs. The response has been extremely disappointing.

We note that the draft Budget 2024-5 was agreed by the Executive in April 2024 in the absence of a Programme for Government. While some Departments have conducted EQIAs and consulted on them, others have not. Without exception we have had to ask that EQIAs be revised to fully consider the specific impact of the budget decisions on children, and only TEO has undertaken CRIAs on the budget decisions. We have clearly advised that cuts should not be imposed where they will have an adverse impact on infants, children and young people, including through pooling of funds. Regrettably many of the cuts have been applied to critical services to children and young people. Cumulative impact assessments of the impact on children have not been conducted across Departments, so there is not a clear picture of how children are being impacted, or how the Executive are acting to protect them from the cuts.

**In delivering on the Programme for Government, we recommend that:**



- **A children’s budgeting approach should be built into the NI Executive budget process. This should include the assessment of the cumulative impact of budget and resource allocations (increase, decrease or no change) on children and young people.**
- **The powers, as laid out in the Children’s Services Co-Operation (NI) Act 2015 should be utilised by departments where a potential negative impact on children and young people is highlighted. This should include the pooling of available resources.**
- **The NI Executive should agree a process for multi-year budgets to support longer term financial planning and allocation, aligned to the PFG priorities and targets.<sup>6</sup>**

#### **2.2.4 Data collection**

12. *Recognizing the large body of data available on children’s rights, the Committee recommends that the State party:*

*(a) Strengthen its data-collection system with regard to both qualitative and quantitative indicators to encompass all areas of the Convention and ensure that the data are disaggregated by age, sex, disability, geographical location, ethnic origin, nationality and socioeconomic background;*

*(b) Improve the collection and analysis of data, including in the overseas territories, on violence against children, mental health, food insecurity, malnutrition, education and the situation of children in disadvantaged situations, including children in alternative care, children with disabilities, asylum-seeking and migrant children and children of incarcerated parents;*

*(c) Regularly collect, analyse and publish disaggregated data on the use of stop-and-search checks, harmful devices, seclusion, restraint, solitary confinement and isolation on children;*

*(d) Allocate sufficient resources for the piloting of an administrative data-based system on children in the overseas territories;*

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the budget allocation towards social housing and new builds from the Department for Communities does not match the aspirations under the provision of more sustainable social housing and ‘boosting housing funds’.

*(e) Ensure that the data are shared among the devolved administrations and the overseas territories and among relevant ministries, professional groups and civil society organizations and used for the evaluation of policies and projects on children's rights.*

The collection and reporting of adequate, disaggregated data on children is one of the most consistently problematic issues NICCY encounters, across all areas and departments. This is again the case in relation to the Programme for Government's 'Wellbeing Framework' which is extremely poor for children. We note the domain 'Happy Children' only contains two indicators:

1. Children small for gestational age - Gap between percentage of babies found to be small for gestational age for those living in the most and least deprived areas (at birth); and
2. Children's Social Care - Percentage of care leavers who, aged 19, were in education, training or employment.

Incredibly, neither of these two indicators relate to children between the ages of 0 and 17. This is utterly inadequate. **The Executive must urgently develop a comprehensive dataset as part of the Wellbeing Framework to monitor the wellbeing of children and young people across all ages and the eight wellbeing domains outlined in the Children's Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. This should involve an extensive co-design process including involving children, young people and parents/carers.**

### **2.2.5 Independent monitoring**

13. *The Committee recommends that the State party:*

- (a) Ensure that the national human rights institutions or Children's Commissioners, as relevant, have the mandate and sufficient human, financial and technical resources to monitor children's rights and to receive, investigate and address complaints by children in a child-friendly manner;*
- (b) Continue to ensure the full compliance of all such institutions with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles), including regarding their funding and personnel selection and appointment processes.*

**NICCY recognises our role in monitoring, and advising on, the delivery of the Executive for children and young people, including through receiving and investigating complaints by children. As the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has indicated, this requires adequate resources and independence from government (outlined in the Paris Principles).**

### **3.0 Comments on specific priorities**

#### **3.1 Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy**

NICCY supports this priority, and the four areas of focus within it. We are pleased that there is recognition that not all in Northern Ireland are benefiting from the growth of the economy. This is a critical point: government intervention in relation to the economy must have a key focus on promoting socio-economic inclusion, and equality. Support must be provided to those who find it particularly difficult to access decently paid work, including people with disabilities, parents on low incomes, women returning to the workforce and many young people. The Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund is a positive step towards that, and we look forward to more information on the level of funding and the support that will be provided. We also welcome the new Skills Fund, and note that this comes in the wake of significant funding cuts to the FE sector that has significantly cut the opportunities for young people to study vocational courses. This is particularly important to ensure inclusion of disadvantaged young people, including young people with SEN.

We welcome the development of the Employment Rights Legislation and Good Work Charter to promote better quality jobs and a better work-life balance. We commend these initiatives to the Executive and urge that these are approved and implemented without delay.

#### **3.2 Deliver More Affordable Childcare**

A commitment in the PFG to Deliver More Affordable Childcare is very welcome, although NICCY believes it should sit within a broader children's wellbeing priority. We have been pleased to see progress made on this area over recent months, although there is still a long way to go to make a significant improvement in this area. NICCY looks forward to engaging with the development of an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, which should be fully costed and resources, with ambitious targets to ensure all parents can access and afford the

high-quality childcare they need to work, or to access education and training, while supporting providers to deliver this sustainably and flexibly. There needs to be more investment in early intervention and prevention, including through broadening Surestart provision.

As a member of the Co-Design Group for an Anti-Poverty Strategy, NICCY was involved in the development of recommendations in relation to a new childcare strategy,<sup>7</sup> which NICCY supports and included:

*As part of the Strategy:*

- *There should be a new funding model, directly funding childcare providers to offer an allocation of fully funded or subsidised early education and childcare to all families, targeted particularly when childcare is likely to be of most cost to parents and of greatest benefit to children, from ages 1 to 4. Public funding must support a move towards a system where overall access is fair, affordable, flexible, and high quality for all.*
- *The new funding model must invest in improving the quality of provision, supporting childcare providers to be sustainable, and enhancing pay and conditions for the workforce, ensuring it is properly valued. This model should address the additional costs of childcare provision for disabled children.*
- *Appropriate school age childcare should be available for families, facilitating a wide range of parental working patterns, both wrapping around the school day and during holidays.*
- *Flexible and affordable childcare should be available for families where parents work atypical hours and shift patterns.*
- *Ensure all parents are aware of the financial support they are entitled to with registered childcare costs, and that those not in paid employment because they are caring for their children know about National Insurance credits.*
- *Cut the five week wait for Universal Credit, and pay the childcare element directly to*

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<sup>7</sup> Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group, (Sept 2022), RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND Revised Version, p25.

*childcare providers, as with the new expanded ADF for upfront childcare costs*

- *Expand provision and availability of childcare for older children, particularly those who have a disability or additional needs.*
- *Ensure sufficient and disability-sensitive childcare as a statutory duty ;*
- *Staff within childcare settings should receive cultural competency and equality and human rights training.*
- *Recognise the role of grandparents in providing informal childcare, including raising awareness of Specified Adult Childcare Credits which can count towards their state pension entitlement if they leave work early.*
- *Give specific consideration to the needs of lone parent families, families who have a child with a disability, families living in a rural area, migrant families, and those from an ethnic minority background, including families who have no recourse to public funds and therefore may be unable to access financial support with the cost of registered childcare.<sup>8</sup>*

### **3.3 Cut Health Waiting Times**

It has been a matter of concern for NICCY that since the restoration of devolved government in NI, infants, children and young people’s healthcare services have been marginalised within political and policy developments. This unfortunately appears to have continued within the design of the draft PFG. We emphasise that, in accordance with Article 24 UNCRC, every child has the right to the highest attainable standard of health, and this includes being able to access and use appropriate facilities for treatment and care. It is vital children are not deprived of their right to health and have sufficient access to healthcare services and support; this also extends to babies and infants within an Early Years (EY) context. As such, it is important the NI Executive appreciate and take action to address the barriers posed to the access and enjoyment of the child’s right to health in the context of increasing waiting lists, and waiting times to avail of services.

The systematic issues impacting the healthcare system, such as increasing waiting times in

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

accessing outpatient appointments and treatment, raise concerns regarding delays in ensuring appropriate services and supports for children and young people. This includes waiting list delays, accessing CAMHS, Early Years and Early Intervention service provision, as well as supports for infants, children and young people with chronic needs and disabilities. Access to mental health services is a particular concern for NICCY, given increasing rates of mental ill-health including anxiety, emotional difficulties, and substance use and the intersection between mental health and physical health and social and emotional development. It is also important that children and young people are involved within the provision of their healthcare, and their experiences within the healthcare system are listened to and considered.

The draft PFG outlines as proposed actions to address waiting lists:

- Accelerating the transformation agenda and the reconfiguration of services to ensure performance improvement, productivity, and improvement in the quality of care;
- Continued engagement between Department of Health officials and HSCTs to deliver on best practice service improvements; and
- Focusing on addressing waiting lists for cancer services and time-critical waiting lists.

NICCY is concerned with the general approach adopted in the production of this section. It relies heavily on the delivery of the Transformation agenda as outlined within Delivering Together but does not state specific, clear targets or objectives in respect of realising delivery, including the document's vague reference to the acceleration of transformation and reconfiguration of services without contextualisation. There does not appear to have been full and thorough consideration or application of the Executive Departments' obligations to ensure the health and wellbeing of infants, children and young people. The omission of the aspirations and obligations of the NI Executive's Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 is disconcerting. A key objective of the Strategy is that, "Children and young people are physically and mentally healthy". This outcome identifies four key areas of need: 1) Infants and Early Years; 2) Children and young people's mental health and emotional well-being; 3) Children and young people with a disability and/or complex health needs, including life limiting conditions; 4) Children and young people living in areas of deprivation. These four categories should have been instrumental in the assessment of determination and design of health and social care provision objectives and in decision-making to address challenges and issues caused by increased waiting lists in relevant services and support.

Throughout the transformation “agenda” since the Bengoa Report, there has been limited consideration of children and adolescent health services, and specifically, the impact of the incorporation of the proposals of the Bengoa Report and the frameworks / outcomes of Delivering Together. “Ensuring that every child has the best start in life” is identified as a priority of Delivering Together and this should shape the delivery of the Transformation agenda, given its connection to the aims of enhancing early prevention and intervention. It is crucial that proposals for the advancement of delivery of Transformation and the reconfiguration of services take into account the corresponding impact for the delivery of healthcare services for children and young people. We therefore strongly advise the NI Executive, specifically the Department for Health, to develop clear, specific objectives in respect of the acceleration of transformation and its intersection with paediatric services.

It is disappointing that specific focus has not been provided in respect of increasing waiting times within paediatric services. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health’s 2024 report examining paediatric services found that between June 2016 and June 2023, NI saw an increase of 172.6% in paediatric outpatient waiting lists, and that by June 2023, there were 22,272 children on a paediatric outpatient waiting list.<sup>9</sup> Waiting list times have further increased in the context of Early Years services, including Speech and Language Therapy (SLT), with increasing demand for these services.<sup>10</sup> SLT services have also been impacted by staffing shortages. This raises significant concerns as to the impact on early intervention supports for children, and the consequences for their health, wellbeing, and development. NICCY’s 2021 research report, ‘More Than A Number’, aimed to inform and advise ongoing and future work plans to address the problem of growing health waiting lists, to ensure children are visible as part of this process and that their rights are considered at all stages.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> RCPCH. “Worried and waiting: A review of paediatric waiting times in Northern Ireland 2024” (2024). [online] available at: <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/worried-and-waiting-northern-ireland-2024.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> RCSLT. “We are the Village – Speech, Language and Communication in the Early Years”. (2024). [online] available at: [Early-years\\_We-are-the-Village-report\\_NI\\_April-2024.pdf \(rcslt.org\)](https://www.rcslt.org/early-years-we-are-the-village-report-ni-april-2024.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> NICCY. “More Than A Number: A Rights Based Review of Child Health in Northern Ireland.” (2021). [online] available at: [more-than-a-number-child-health-waiting-lists-in-ni-final-19-october-2021.pdf \(niccy.org\)](https://www.niccy.org/more-than-a-number-child-health-waiting-lists-in-ni-final-19-october-2021.pdf)

Our monitoring of the report has found waiting lists continue to present a troubling situation.<sup>12</sup> Waiting times were found to have continued to increase, with many more children waiting over a year for a first consultant-led outpatient or inpatient / day case appointment: an increasing number of children were found to now be waiting years for their first appointment with some services. NICCY is concerned by the limited consideration of waiting lists in children's services within political interventions and developments since the return of the devolved institutions. A child's right to health includes being able to access healthcare services and appropriate facilities for treatment and care, and we know this right is at risk with delays in the provision of paediatric services. We therefore strongly advise the NI Executive, specifically the Department for Health, to develop clear, specific objectives in respect of addressing waiting lists within paediatric services.

We welcome the NI Executive's appreciation of the matter of waiting lists across all services and the need to focus on cancer and critical care lists, but we are disappointed by the omission of consideration of the impact of waiting lists in respect of neurodiverse conditions, given the ramifications for a child's health, wellbeing, social and emotional development, and educational journey. As of 31 December 2023, there were 11,013 children on the paediatric ASD diagnostic assessment waiting list. The longest wait for an assessment was 4 years and 6 months. Comparative data for the timeframe 2021-2023 shows there have been significant increases in the number of children and young people seeking assessments, and a significant increase in the time they are waiting for an assessment, across all Trusts. The May 2024 Children's Quarterly Autism statistics showed that during the quarter ending 31 March 2024, there were 1,466 accepted children's referrals for an autism assessment in NI, which was an increase of 1.5% since 31 March 2023. The statistics also showed that during the same timeframe, there were 841 children's autism diagnoses. As of April 2024, 4,601 children were waiting on an ADHD assessment. 1,938 children (42.12%) were waiting over 52 weeks. 656 children (14.25%) were waiting between 0 to 13 weeks. We are concerned by the prolonged delay in addressing the absence of specifically commissioned ADHD services. Consequently, there are inconsistencies in services and supports across Trusts, and inconsistencies in pathways with evident service gaps. Trusts currently have limited capacity to meet demand

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<sup>12</sup> NICCY. "One Year Post Publication Monitoring Report 'More Than A Number' - A Rights Based Review of Child Health Waiting Lists 27 October 2022". (2022). [online] available at: <https://www.niccy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/niccy-monitoring-report-more-than-a-number-one-yr-on-27-october-2022.pdf>



for assessment and support services. We are mindful that NICE guidelines stipulate that assessments for ASD and ADHD should begin within 13 weeks and be completed within a timely manner. The Department of Health has stated its commitment to deliver ASD and ADHD pathways in accordance with NICE guidelines. NICCY is concerned that Trusts are failing to meet NICE guidelines, that waiting times are actively increasing each year, and action to address issues within these services has been limited to date.

We are disappointed by the omission to recognise and address mental health within the draft Programme for Government, particularly with regards to barriers within accessing mental health services including waiting times. The omission is particularly stark in the context of child and adolescent mental health data. A report published by the Mental Health Foundation and the Mental Health Champion in October 2023 found that one in eight children in NI have a probable mental illness.<sup>13</sup> It further found those living in the most deprived areas (30%) are more likely to have a probable mental illness compared to those in least deprived areas (20%) and poverty, particularly child poverty is a key contributor, with one in four (24%) children in NI living in poverty.<sup>14</sup> The 2020 NI Youth Wellbeing Survey found that 12.6% of children and young people experience common mood disorders such as anxiety and depression, which is approximately 25% higher than in other UK regions.<sup>15</sup> Almost 1 in 10 young people aged 11 – 19 years reported as having engaged in self-injurious behaviour, and roughly 1 in 8 reported have thought about or attempted suicide, with 6.6% of that figure having made a plan and 3.5% having made an attempt.<sup>16</sup> NICCY is concerned about barriers to accessing mental

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<sup>13</sup> Mental Health Foundation and the Office of the Mental Health Champion. 'Mental Health in Northern Ireland Fundamental Facts 2023' (2023). [online] Available at: [https://www.mentalhealthchampion-ni.org.uk/files/mentalhealthchampionni/2023-](https://www.mentalhealthchampion-ni.org.uk/files/mentalhealthchampionni/2023-10/Mental%20Health%20in%20MHF%20Northern%20Ireland%20Fundamental%20Facts%202023.pdf)

[10/Mental%20Health%20in%20MHF%20Northern%20Ireland%20Fundamental%20Facts%202023.pdf](https://www.mentalhealthchampion-ni.org.uk/files/mentalhealthchampionni/2023-10/Mental%20Health%20in%20MHF%20Northern%20Ireland%20Fundamental%20Facts%202023.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Mental Health Foundation and the Office of the Mental Health Champion. 'Mental Health in Northern Ireland Fundamental Facts 2023' (2023). [online] Available at: [https://www.mentalhealthchampion-ni.org.uk/files/mentalhealthchampionni/2023-](https://www.mentalhealthchampion-ni.org.uk/files/mentalhealthchampionni/2023-10/Mental%20Health%20in%20MHF%20Northern%20Ireland%20Fundamental%20Facts%202023.pdf)

[10/Mental%20Health%20in%20MHF%20Northern%20Ireland%20Fundamental%20Facts%202023.pdf](https://www.mentalhealthchampion-ni.org.uk/files/mentalhealthchampionni/2023-10/Mental%20Health%20in%20MHF%20Northern%20Ireland%20Fundamental%20Facts%202023.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Health and Social Care Board. 'Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey 2020' (2020). [online] Available at: [https://online.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/children-and-young-people/youth-wellbeing-prevalence-survey-](https://online.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/children-and-young-people/youth-wellbeing-prevalence-survey-2020/#:~:text=1%20in%208%20children%20and,common%20mood%20and%20anxiety%20disorders.)

[2020/#:~:text=1%20in%208%20children%20and,common%20mood%20and%20anxiety%20disorders.](https://online.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/children-and-young-people/youth-wellbeing-prevalence-survey-2020/#:~:text=1%20in%208%20children%20and,common%20mood%20and%20anxiety%20disorders.)

<sup>16</sup> Health and Social Care Board. 'Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey 2020' (2020). [online] Available at: [https://online.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/children-and-young-people/youth-wellbeing-prevalence-survey-](https://online.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/children-and-young-people/youth-wellbeing-prevalence-survey-2020/#:~:text=1%20in%208%20children%20and,common%20mood%20and%20anxiety%20disorders.)

[2020/#:~:text=1%20in%208%20children%20and,common%20mood%20and%20anxiety%20disorders.](https://online.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/children-and-young-people/youth-wellbeing-prevalence-survey-2020/#:~:text=1%20in%208%20children%20and,common%20mood%20and%20anxiety%20disorders.)

health support services. The February 2024 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) waiting time statistics found that at December 2023, there were 2,095 total waits for a CAMHS assessment in NI, and of which 1,104 were waiting for more than nine weeks (53%). Moreover, since a low of 1,107 total waits for a CAMHS assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic (September 2020), the number of children and young people waiting has been increasing. NICCY is aware and concerned with the ongoing issues with workforce capacity and impact of staff shortages within CAMHS services.

NICCY calls for:

- The incorporation of children's rights and best interests within transformation and the reconfiguration of services and interventions to address waiting lists to ensure children wait for the least possible time.
- Clarification as to the financial status and long-term stability of the Department of Health's Waiting List Initiative.
- The development of an Action Plan to address issues within the Autism and ADHD assessment and diagnosis pathways, which should include as a priority the commissioning of ADHD referrals.
- Specific attention to workforce planning, capacity, recruitment and retention in children and adolescent healthcare services is urgently needed to address paediatric waiting lists and ensure access to EY services.
- Continued recognition of infant mental health as a distinct sphere of mental health planning and implementation.
- Prioritisation of infant, children, and adolescent mental health services in the delivery of the MHS, including the development of substance use supports for children and young people.
- The increase of CAMHS funding to at least 10% of the adult mental health funding, and specific attention to CAMHS workforce.
- Greater improvements in the accessibility and quality of mental health data as outlined in 'Still Waiting'.
- The ringfencing of funding for programmes promoting emotional health and wellbeing in schools.
- The implementation of dual diagnosis services including age-appropriate facilities and

care.

### **3.4 Ending Violence against Women and Girls (EVAWG)**

We welcome that this has been identified as one of the immediate priorities in the PfG. In our submission to The Executive Office’s consultation the EVAWG Framework (The Framework) and Delivery Plan one of our Youth Panel members commented:

*“Because this is a long going problem that never seems to be solved many women and children die or end up severely injured due to the abuse or harassment they endure. They are left broken, traumatised, suicidal and numb.”* (NICCY Youth Panel Member)

The UNCRC’s Concluding Observations following the examination of the UK State Party published in June 2023 referred to their concerns about:

- 32 (a) *The high prevalence of domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, gender-based violence and other forms of violence against children, including in alternative care, and insufficient measures to investigate such cases and bring perpetrators to justice;*
- (b) *Insufficient measures to identify and support children at risk of violence at home;*
- (c) *Inadequate resources allocated to related services for child victims.*

The Committee specifically recommended the UK and devolved governments to:

- (d) *Strengthen measures aimed at tackling violence against children, including by implementing the recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales, the Gillen Review in Northern Ireland, the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry and other relevant inquiries and investigations conducted by independent bodies;*
- (e) *Develop measures aimed at preventing violence against children in alternative care, children with disabilities, asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children and children belonging to minority groups;*
- (f) *Ensure that all children who are victims or witnesses of violence have prompt access to child-sensitive, multisectoral and comprehensive interventions, services and support, including forensic interviews and psychological therapy, with the aim of preventing the secondary victimization of those children, and allocate sufficient resources for the*

*implementation and expansion of the barnahus and similar models such as the Lighthouse in London.*

*(j) Strengthen the implementation of legislation protecting children from “abuse of trust” in all environments and extracurricular activities in Northern Ireland;*

There was also specific reference to harmful practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation and violence committed in the name of so-called honour, and the requirement to develop national strategies including implementing legislative and statutory protections to eliminate and prevent such harmful based practices impacting particularly on girls.<sup>17</sup>

We very much welcome the commitment in the Framework to a child’s rights-based approach and urge The Executive Office to ensure that sufficient resources are in place to safeguard the rights of children who have experienced gender-based violence, abuse and harm offline and online- particularly those children who are already most vulnerable and to ensure the successful implementation of this Framework. As the Framework states, wellbeing for all is at the heart of what Government aims to deliver in this jurisdiction and violence against women and girls in all its forms is a critical obstacle to achieving this goal of wellbeing for everyone.

*“The ability to form and enjoy healthy relationships is central to individual wellbeing and vital to building better, more connected communities and a society where everyone can thrive.”*

We therefore recommend that The Executive Office works with other departments in exploring the potential for building a Budget for Children’s Wellbeing that is rights based, preventative and participatory linked to The Children’s Services Co-operation (Northern Ireland) Act 2015 & The Children and Young People Strategy (2020-2030).

Young people play a critical role in advising, strengthening and holding the NI Executive to account in implementing this vision. This needs supported and resourced for the long term.

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<sup>17</sup> [Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#) :35 (a), p.11

We therefore very much welcome TEO’s commitment to investing in the genuine participation of children and young people in the development and implementation of this Framework and subsequent delivery plans. This will not only lead to better decision making & outcomes but can also contribute to healing and recovery. The converse is also true; poor participation can lead to re-traumatisation. Genuine participation takes time, money and is a long-term process and NICCY welcomes the opportunity to work with TEO and others to ensure that young people’s voices and experiences are given space, are listened to and are acted upon, as appropriate to ensure that this Framework’s vision is realised in the daily lives of all girls and women.

*“As woman and children deserve to be able to go about their normal life's without having to worry about violence and aggression. Especially in the home, families, communities and workplaces. We need to make it normal to call out and report and we need to plan to end it as children growing up in this surrounding will think this is normal and the loop of violence will continue.”* (NICCY Youth Panel Member)

In June 2023, we welcomed the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 introducing a mandatory requirement for the inclusion of age appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, for adolescents in the NI curriculum. NICCY is, however, extremely concerned about the approach taken to implementing the parental opt-out provision within the Regulations, which we consider contrary to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Inquiry report and to the UN Committee’s recommendations made in their 2023 Concluding Observations.

*44(b) Integrate comprehensive, age-appropriate and evidence-based education on sexual and reproductive health into mandatory school curricula at all levels of education and into teacher training and ensure that it includes education on sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights, responsible sexual behaviour and violence prevention, without the possibility for faith-based schools or parents to opt out of such education;<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> [Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#) :44(b), p.16.

Going forward, it is crucial that young people are involved in a meaningful way in the development of policy relating to RSE and that robust and timely monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Regulations is undertaken. To facilitate this, mechanisms for the collection of disaggregated data collection must be put in place now.

NICCY calls for:

- The EAWG Delivery Plan to include an indication of the budget allocated to support the children and young people’s engagement architecture and TEO should ensure that sufficient resources are ringfenced each year over the next seven years.
- The Children’s Services Cooperative Act (CSCA) 2015 should be referred to in the ‘joined up’ approach referenced in the PfG.
- The relevant recommendations in the ‘Growing Up Online Children’s online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report’<sup>19</sup> to be included in the Framework and Delivery Plan.
- TEO to take cognisance of OFCOM’s work in preparing for an online Safety Regime as well as scoping out the value of legislative changes in Northern Ireland to strengthen the safety of young people online.
- The government to bring forward legislation ensuring that children under the age of 18 are not subject to any form of child marriage or civil partnership in Northern Ireland.
- The strengthening of systematic data collection and recording of information on violence against children, including domestic violence, and gender-based violence, abuse and neglect, in all settings, as well as information sharing and referral of cases among relevant sectors.
- DE’s forthcoming RSE guidance should adopt a rights-based approach and provide clear direction to schools to ensure all young people are given appropriate opportunities to input to decision making about their participation in RSE, particularly in the context of the parental opt-out provision.
- The RSE curriculum and teaching resources should be co-produced with children and young people, and other stakeholders, to ensure they are inclusive, relevant, scientifically accurate and comprehensive. DE must ensure that teaching staff are provided with adequate training and professional development to ensure that they are

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<sup>19</sup> [Growing Up Online in NI: new report highlights children’s online activities, dangers and opportunities - Stranmillis University College | A College of Queen’s University Belfast](#)

confident in delivering RSE topics, including those relating to sexual and reproductive health, in a way that is inclusive, scientifically accurate, comprehensive and reflects the needs of all pupils

### 3.5 Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs

NICCY welcomes the inclusion of SEND as a priority in the PFG, however the narrow framing of this around ‘better support’ and ‘sustainable services’ in the priority area and proposed action is disappointing. Transformation of the education system should be aimed towards inclusive education, which is a fundamental right of all children.<sup>20</sup> A number of critical reviews have identified that Northern Ireland’s whole education system, including the school environment, curriculum, teaching methods, teaching resources, extra-curricular activities, progression pathways, communication systems, specialist expertise and more, is not structured to meet the diverse needs of pupils with SEND.<sup>21</sup> Enabling children with SEND to meet their full potential requires significant systemic reform aimed towards a fully inclusive education system, including changes to culture, policy and practice. We draw attention to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) General Comment on ‘The Right to Inclusive Education’, which sets out the minimum standard and core features of an inclusive education system.<sup>22</sup> These include a whole educational environment; a whole person approach; supported teachers; respect for and value of diversity; a learning-friendly environment; effective transitions; recognition of partnerships and monitoring. **We strongly advise that the PFG takes a comprehensive and holistic approach to SEND reform that works towards ensuring high quality inclusive education is available to all pupils with special educational needs and/or disability, without discrimination and on an equal basis with others.**

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<sup>20</sup> CRPD Art 24; CRPD Committee, General Comment No 4. Article 24: Right to Inclusive Education, September 2016, CRPD/C/GC/4; CRC Committee, General Comment No 9: The Rights of Children with Disabilities.

<sup>21</sup> [niccy-too-little-too-late-report-march-2020-web-final.pdf](#); Northern Ireland Audit Office (2020) *Impact Review of Special Educational Needs*; Public Accounts Committee (2021) *Report on Impact Review of Special Educational Needs*; Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (2021) *Call for Change – Time for Action*; Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Service and Processes in Northern Ireland. IPSOS; Independent Review of Education: Investing in a Better Future. December 2023.

<sup>22</sup> [CRPD-C-GC-4.doc](#)

We welcome the reference to enhanced cross-departmental collaboration and consider this critical to effectively meet the needs of pupils with SEND and support meaningful participation in an inclusive education system. Currently, gaps in cross-collaboration in our education system present considerable barriers to children with SEND, many of whom are disadvantaged by multiple inequalities including an increased risk of poverty, over-representation in Care and Justice systems, a greater risk of bullying and discrimination, poorer physical and mental health outcomes and educational inequalities.<sup>23</sup> Collaborative working on policy development, service delivery, and funding across multiple departments including Education, Health and Social Care, Economy and Justice, is fundamental to improving outcomes for children with SEND.

NICCY's 'Too Little Too Late' Review clearly identified a lack of early identification and intervention as key barriers that prevent children with SEND from fully experiencing their right to an effective education.<sup>24</sup> We welcome recognition in the PfG that systemic reform must work towards enabling children's needs to be identified at the earliest opportunity. However, we note that there is no specific reference to investment in Early Years SEND, despite clear evidence of the importance of this for children with disabilities, including those who have delays in their cognitive and adaptive skills, and often face multiple inequalities.<sup>25</sup>

NICCY's 'Too Little Too Late' Review highlighted the challenges faced by Early Years settings and called for the establishment of processes to ensure that children with SEN in both statutory and non-statutory early years' settings can avail of the services and support they require.<sup>26</sup> In 2021, A Fair Start Report and Action Plan made recommendations to address gaps in Early Years settings relating to measures to identify and support children with special educational needs, prior to and during their pre-school year, so that appropriate support is

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<sup>23</sup> O'Connor, U., Mulhall, P., McElroy, E., Murphy, J., Taggart, L., Adamson, G., Ferry, F. R., & MCCONKEY, ROY. (2021). *A profile of special educational needs and disability in Northern Ireland using educational and social data*; [Disability and the Labour Market \(ulster.ac.uk\)](https://www.ulster.ac.uk); [Special educational needs and their links to poverty | JRF.](#)

<sup>24</sup> [niccy-too-little-too-late-report-march-2020-web-final.pdf](#)

<sup>25</sup> Challenging Behaviour Foundation (2022); [Creating Brighter Futures - Mencap NI Briefing Paper No1 January 2018.pdf](#); [EARLY-INTERVENTION-REPORT-A4-FINAL.pdf](#); [Early-years\\_We-are-the-Village-report\\_NI\\_April-2024.pdf](#)

<sup>26</sup> [niccy-too-little-too-late-report-march-2020-web-final.pdf](#)



put in place earlier and more quickly. **The PfG should identify investment in Early Years SEND, including identification and support provision across statutory and non-statutory settings, as a priority action.**

The draft PfG rightly acknowledges the importance of data and the involvement of health professionals in early intervention programmes. However, there is no reference to persistent barriers to early diagnosis that exist within the health system, such as Autism and ADHD assessment waiting lists, which impact significantly on the education of children with SEND.<sup>27</sup> **We recommend that the PfG draws greater attention to the critical role of Health and includes actions to address the provision of a holistic support in schools and nurseries, both before and after a formal diagnosis is made, to ensure children are supported as early as possible.**

In 2020, we called for improved collaborative working across health and education services and made specific recommendations including the establishment of ‘localised, specialised, multi-disciplinary teams across Northern Ireland’.<sup>28</sup> This is fundamental to effective early-intervention, tailored support programmes and ensuring that children with SEND can fulfil their full potential. The lack of progress in this area is disappointing and it is of great concern that, at a time when school leaders are reporting an increase in the complexity of children’s needs in both special and mainstream schools, allied health professional (AHP) support has diminished considerably across these settings. Serious concerns have been raised by education staff and other stakeholders about the lasting impacts of Covid restrictions on children’s early development, including delayed speech and language development, and the lack of support available from AHPs.<sup>29</sup> **NICCY calls for a strong commitment to investment in multidisciplinary team working involving Health, Education and Social Care professionals across all educational settings, including Specialist Provisions in Mainstream Schools (SPiMs).**

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<sup>27</sup> [Health and Social Care Briefing – July 2024](#)

<sup>28</sup> [niccy-too-little-too-late-report-march-2020-web-final.pdf](#)

<sup>29</sup> [rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Early-years\\_We-are-the-Village-report\\_NI\\_April-2024.pdf](https://rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Early-years_We-are-the-Village-report_NI_April-2024.pdf)

The prolonged crisis in SEND placements is wholly unacceptable and a serious violation of the rights of children with disabilities. While we note the references to allocation of timely school placements and ensuring that children with SEND are educated in an appropriate learning environment, a more robust commitment is needed. Children who face delays, or no access at all, to an appropriate placement are being denied their fundamental right to education, as well as important opportunities to play, socialise and form friendships in their formative years. The isolating effects are often compounded by the exclusion that children and young people with SEND experience in their local communities due to multiple barriers that impede their participation in recreational and extra-curricular activities. The lack of strategic response to the unknown number of children with SEND who are not in school due to factors such as delayed and inappropriate placements, failures in implementing reasonable adjustments, school-based anxiety and/or reduced timetables is hugely concerning. NICCY has been made aware of the deleterious impacts on children and families, including on children's learning and development, mental and physical health, family relationships, family income and risk of poverty, with some parents/carers forced to leave paid employment to care for their child. While we appreciate that steps have been taken by relevant authorities to increase capacity across the system, visits to educational settings, including Special Schools and Specialist Units in Mainstream Schools (SPiMs), have raised serious concerns about the quality of provision in some cases. **We strongly call for a clear commitment in the PfG to implementing a SEND first model, that ensures pupils children with SEND are not treated as supernumerary, as soon as possible.<sup>30</sup> This must be coupled with sustainable planning and investment in the quality and quantity of inclusive placements for children with SEND and regular scrutiny of this issue going forward.**

We note the commitment to place children and young people and their families at the heart of the significant programme of reform. While this is very welcome, **NICCY would like to see a**

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<sup>30</sup> [Independent review of special educational needs will drive forward change for children and young people | Department of Education](#)

**more clearly defined role for the involvement of parents and carers, as experts in their children’s lives, and potential partners in their education.** <sup>31</sup>

We note the PfG’s reference to post-school transitions, with a commitment to ‘*ensuring clear pathways of opportunity for further training, education or employment at post 16 and post 19*’. Currently there is a dearth of suitable pathways for children with disabilities who face considerable barriers in accessing good quality employment opportunities, and are under-represented in the labour market, further and higher education. While we welcome the focus on transition pathways for children with SEND, the narrow focus of this action is not reflective of the heterogeneity of this group. **We call for a range of pathways that include transitions pathways and legal protections for school leavers with the most complex and/or acute needs, and are developed collaboratively by Education, Health and Social Care, Economy and other Departments, as appropriate. Transition pathways should be developed in partnership with young people, their families and relevant agencies.**

### **3.6 Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing**

The draft PfG states that there will be three key actions relation to the provision of more social, affordable and sustainable housing, as follows:

- We will unlock the combined skills and resources of government, the private and third sectors, finding solutions and creating opportunities to transform supply and improve quality across the whole housing system;
- We will ensure that the planning system supports the delivery of the appropriate supply of housing, creating sustainable and inclusive spaces, and work with NI Water to help facilitate housing growth; and
- We will deliver a Northern Ireland Housing Supply Strategy to provide a long-term framework for the policies and actions required to increase the supply of homes across all tenures and reduce housing stress.

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<sup>31</sup> [CRPD-C-GC-4.doc](#)

Whilst NICCY supports the inclusion of this priority and the key actions within the dPFG, without the necessary funding, a strategic, holistic approach and the allocated resources, we consider that housing insecurity and homelessness will continue to impact on children and their families in NI. There are no new tangible or practical actions or goals contained within the dPFG which NICCY considers to be a gap, instead the three key actions appear to be those already being undertaken or agreed to by relevant Departments and Authorities. NICCY also encourages the Executive to deliver against these housing priorities within a child's rights framework, utilising the recommendations made by NICCY through the 'A Place to Call Home' Report. Furthermore, the impact of poverty must be considered here and reflected through any actions and priorities under housing and to address homelessness.

Homelessness and housing insecurity in NI has been noted as a concern by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee has, and continues to, highlight particular concerns regarding households with dependent children, many of whom are young children and infants living with family in temporary accommodation. They have also noted concerns with regard to young people facing homelessness, as well as children seeking asylum in their most recent Concluding Observations from June 2023.

#### *Standard of living*

46. *Noting with deep concern the large number of children living in poverty, food insecurity and homelessness, the Committee recommends that the State party: (...)*
- (b) Address the root causes of homelessness among children, strengthen measures to phase out temporary and contingency accommodation schemes and significantly increase the availability of adequate and long-term social housing for families in need, with a view to ensuring that all children have access to affordable, quality housing;*
  - (c) Ensure that the best interests of the child are given primary consideration in all eviction matters, that evictions are not targeted at families belonging to minority groups and that any evictions are always subject to adequate alternatives;<sup>32</sup>*

The number of households presenting as homeless from April to June 2024 was 4,197 which includes 1,222 families. 2,608 households were accepted as homeless as Full Duty

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<sup>32</sup> [Concluding observations on the combined 6th and 7th periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#):46(b), (c) p.17.

Applicants, 947 of those being families, with accommodation not being reasonable or loss of rented accommodation as the two biggest factors. Most recent figures show that there are just under 48,000 applicants on the social housing waiting list, an increase on the last quarter, with just over 35,000 in housing stress, according to the latest Department figures released on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2024.<sup>33</sup> Figures released in October 2024 from the NI Housing Executive show that 433 young people leaving care presented as homeless from 2019/20 to 2022/23.<sup>34</sup>

The draft PfG highlights that there are 47,000 households on the social housing waiting list, including 35,000 experiencing housing stress. However, this does not fully consider those children, young people and families who are ‘hidden homeless’ or in housing insecurity that have not registered with NI Housing Executive (NIHE). NICCY is extremely concerned about the levels of children and young people who are homeless, and at risk of homelessness and the lack of detail within the draft PfG relating to this.

There are also well documented issues with people trying to access the private rented sector, with rental pressures including availability and affordability, putting pressure on the social housing waiting list. This means many families and young people are in housing stress, or are homeless, and are waiting for allocations longer, pushing people further into poverty and impacts all other aspects of their lives. Private renting is associated with a significant increase in poverty levels after housing costs particularly for people aged 16 to 24 years old. Cumulative impact of housing stress and homelessness on children and young people in terms of health and mental health, social impact, employment, education has not been fully considered here. There is an absence of plans and strategies to ensure that people are supported through the social security system for example, in relation to their housing needs. NICCY supports the calls from the Cliff Edge Coalition,<sup>35</sup> and that support is needed for those renters affected by the Local Housing Allowance. Additional access to a grant to meet shortfalls between housing costs paid through benefit and contractual rent is required.

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<sup>33</sup> Department for Communities, ‘Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin April - June 2024’ (2024) (Available at: [Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin April - June 2024 | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](#), accessed on 23/8/24)

<sup>34</sup> Belfast Telegraph, ‘433 young care leavers presented as homeless in last five years, figures show’ (2024) (Available at: [433 young care leavers presented as homeless in last five years, figures show | BelfastTelegraph.co.uk](#), accessed on 29/10/24)

<sup>35</sup> [Cliff-Edge-Coalition-Working-Group-Response-to-the-draft-Programme-for-Government.pdf](#)

NICCY is aware of ongoing issues within the planning system in NI and understands that the Department for Infrastructure is prioritising the enhancement of the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system. We continue to be concerned about the lack of engagement with children and young people throughout the planning process in general. CYP's built and natural environment around them impacts their health, well-being and future life chances. Good planning should aim to meet children's needs as part of an inclusive and integrated society and reflect their rights, including voice and participation. We need to ensure that CYP are involved in and actively engaged in plan making and the design process, inclusive of their rights, through public realm, play and access to quality, outdoor spaces. The NI Audit Office (NIAO) and Public Accounts Committee reports indicate that the planning system is not delivering for people or the economy or the climate and nature.

NICCY encourages the NI Executive to ensure that the planning system to be more child and young person friendly and to reflect their relationship to the built environment, collection of views, use of space, especially public realm. We recommend that children's rights training is undertaken at all levels of the planning system, including through the use of CRIAs, by the Department for Infrastructure and all local authorities. This could include the introduction of guidance and updated policy in relation to planning decisions, as well as the methods by which the system engages with children and young people and encourages participation in consultation and decision making. We recommend that in the development of the Local Development Plans are assessed through a children and young people's rights lens by local councils. Whilst we appreciate the need to ensure that the planning system supports the delivery of the appropriate supply of housing, creating sustainable and inclusive spaces, and that work is required with NI Water to help facilitate housing growth – this must not be at the expense of the needs, voices and experiences of children and young people.

NICCY wishes to draw attention to comments made to the Department for Communities relating to the EQIA on the draft Budget 2024-25, as mentioned within our introductory comments. We consider that the budget allocated towards housing provision and tackling homelessness is entirely insufficient and will have a damaging impact on children and young people directly and indirectly at risk or experiencing homelessness and poor housing quality. Without adequate, sustainable, multi-year budgets allocated by the Executive to address the housing crisis, the ability to meet the draft PfG will be limited. Constraints on the NIHE's ability to borrow are a long-standing issue, as well as the continuation of the rent to buy

scheme, neither of which are detailed within the draft PfG. There is also an absence of information relating to the number of new homes to be built and made available, and the repurposing of ‘brownfield’ sites and building for those on the social housing waiting list or who are homeless and NICCY is aware that targets set by Government have not been met. There must also be the introduction of Homelessness Prevention legislation for the NIHE and funding allocated to the Youth Homelessness Action Plan, when launched.

We welcome the facilitation of retrofitting of existing housing stock through sustainable funding and partnership models to help meet the net zero 2050 target under the Climate Change (NI) Act 2022 (and meet the stated aims under the draft PfG) but would welcome more explicit detail on how this will positively impact children and young people. We would also welcome the inclusion of a new Fuel Poverty Strategy and encourage the Executive to consider the impacts of living in cold and unsuitable homes on children, young people and their families. There is a commitment outlined that in 2025, the Executive ‘will review the Energy Strategy to ensure the remaining 5 years to 2030 uses up-to-date data and insights, bringing a renewed focus on affordable renewable energy’ however makes no mention on how this will create positive change either on climate goals, energy and fuel poverty and impacting on children, young people and families. Similarly, whilst there is a commitment to an Energy and Resource Efficiency Support Scheme and investment of a further £75 million via the Invest to Save Fund into the public sector’s transition to net zero, there is no mention on budget allocation to the proposed domestic retrofit programme. Any large scale retrofit programme should support green jobs through the just transition principles and include education, training and apprenticeships for young people.

### **3.7 Safer Communities**

The draft PfG states that a central role of government is to protect its citizens. By keeping communities safe we enable them to have the confidence they need to live productively and engage fully in society. NICCY welcomes the inclusion of this priority in the draft Programme. We note that the Executive state that they ‘acknowledge the levels of trauma in our post-conflict society’ and that they will work across the Executive to embed trauma-informed, responsive systems; systems that help people to easily navigate and access the support they need, when they need it, and for however long they need it for. In terms of action, the draft PfG focuses on the following areas as actions:

- Speeding Up Justice Programme;
- Investment in digital capabilities;
- Sufficient number of police officers in line with NDNA commitments;
- Necessary prosecution resources;
- Cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending; and
- Strategic Framework for Youth Justice.

NICCY notes the inclusion of the Strategic Framework for Youth Justice within the ‘action’ areas, however children and young people are largely absent from the ‘safer communities’ section of the draft PfG. We also have concerns about the implementation of the Strategic Framework and the delays in achieving many of the outcomes, particularly in relation to the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR). Any policy and legislative change must also fully reflect, and be embedded in, children and young people’s rights.

NICCY also notes the lack of reference to hate crime within the draft PfG and encourage the Executive to consider this. Tackling hate crime, including sectarianism, Islamophobia and xenophobia, which must be a priority for the Executive to tackle and challenge, including through various strategies on education, engagement, learning and the criminal justice system. We must ensure that newcomer families, children and young people are supported by government at all levels, including asylum seekers and refugee families.

We wish to draw the Executive’s attention to the 2023 Concluding Observations issued by the UN Committee, which contained specific recommendations for Government in relation to youth justice, and violence against the child and the administration of child justice. Some of the most relevant are summarised below:

- Prohibit the use of harmful devices, including spit hoods, plastic bullets and tasers, strip searches on children, the use of solitary confinement, isolation, seclusion and restraint;
- Implement the Gillen Review recommendations and the Barnahus model;
- Raise the MACR;
- That detention is used as a measure of last resort, and for the shortest possible period of time, with a view to its withdrawal;



- That the child justice system is applied to all children who were below the age of 18 years when the offence was committed and that rehabilitation periods are determined on the basis of the date the offence was committed.
- Prevent and combat gang-related violence and knife crime and protect children from such violence, including by addressing the social factors and root causes;
- Putting an end to the recruitment of children as informants for law enforcement and intelligence bodies; and
- To effectively enforce the prohibition of the use of non-statutory stop and search checks against children, prohibit their use in NI and ensure that the statutory use of stop and search checks are proportionate and non-discriminatory, alongside mandatory training for law enforcement officials, and improve the monitoring of such checks.

NICCY urges the NI Executive to legislate on these matters in this mandate and seek to include priorities for youth justice and realising children and young people's rights on justice within the draft PfG. To enable this to happen, and to ensure outcomes are based on actual needs, not presumed needs, the Executive must establish processes to listen to the voice of young people and more proactively, consider their thoughts, ideas and opinions. The Youth Justice Review (2011) made several recommendations to address failings in NIs youth justice system. A number of significant actions remain outstanding. The Executive must ensure full implementation of the Youth Justice Review, the 2022 Youth Justice Framework.

The legacy of the conflict adversely affects children and young people in NI through social division, segregated housing and education, sectarianism, and ongoing paramilitary violence. In communities disproportionately impacted by the conflict and its legacy, high rates of poverty and deprivation, low investment and educational under-attainment create particular conditions of vulnerability and detrimentally affect children's life chances. The presence of paramilitary-style groups in certain communities is an ongoing legacy of the conflict. NICCY is deeply concerned about the harm these organised groups inflict on children and young people, through coercive control, intimidation, sexual and criminal abuse and exploitation. In tackling this, children and young people must be treated through a safeguarding lens. NICCY is aware that children and young people are being 'recruited' by so called paramilitary and organised crime gangs for criminal and/or sexual exploitation, often under coercion. They are therefore victims of Child Criminal Exploitation and/or Child Sexual Exploitation. NICCY

recommends that the NI Executive prioritise the implementation of a unified strategic response to protect children from harm including abuse, violence, coercion and exploitation by organised gangs and groups, embedded in a safeguarding and child protection approach within our communities and consider this within the draft PfG as a priority. Paramilitary harm is referenced within the draft PfG in that it ‘continues to affect too many adults and young people’ which NICCY agrees with and is referenced through the estimated cost to our economy, set at £750 million per year. NICCY is disappointed that the reference to ‘cost’ of paramilitary harm is seen solely through an economic lens, rather than a cost to society, cost to communities, cost to children and young people. We are unclear how the proposed aims will fundamentally tackle paramilitary harm without further detail. The impact of poverty must also be considered by the Executive. Early intervention is crucial, and NICCY encourages the Executive to ensure that this is fundamental in government action going forward.

We note that the draft PfG states that the Executive ‘will refresh our Good Relations Programme, Communities in Transition, Together: Building a United Community, Urban Villages, and Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime, and the introduction of a strategic approach to racial equality’ alongside ongoing support for the PEACE PLUS programme and Safer Communities. NICCY would welcome further information on the ‘refreshment’ and how this will impact on children and young people and being safe in their communities and how this impacts on the existing Executive strategy on tackling paramilitarism and organised crime.

We welcome the acknowledgement of the levels of trauma in our post-conflict society and that the draft PfG aims to work across the Executive to embed trauma-informed, responsive systems. While children and young people in NI today have been born and are growing up in a time of relative peace and stability, the impact of the conflict is still heavily felt. Segregation and community division continue to impact on daily life for many children and young people. Research clearly shows unacceptable levels of child poverty, mental ill health, educational and health inequalities in the areas that have suffered most as a result of the NI conflict. To sustain a stable and more peaceful future requires cognisance of the reality of children’s lives and the continuing impact of the legacy of the conflict on young people growing up in NI

today.<sup>36</sup>

### **Keeping Children Safe**

Violence against children occurs in schools, homes, streets, churches, in places of work and entertainment, and in care and detention centres. Perpetrators online and offline include family members, teachers, neighbours, strangers in close by and in other parts of the world, ministers, caretakers, law enforcement authorities and other young people. Some children can be particularly vulnerable because of gender, disability, race, ethnic origin, social status. And as the UN World Report on Violence Against Children states, the consequences of violence can be devastating from terrible physical and emotional scars. to death.<sup>37</sup> A wide range of UNCRC articles addresses safeguarding and, together, these provide a full and integrated set of rights to protect children from all forms of harm and violence and ensure that they are afforded access to redress and recovery.<sup>38</sup> It is important to acknowledge that this range of articles set out some of the most fundamental rights that should be afforded to all children and young people in Northern Ireland: the rights to life and protection from harm, abuse and violence. This places a heavy obligation on the government to ensure that children's rights and best interests are fully realised across these areas<sup>39</sup>; this includes preventing child sexual abuse and child exploitation, addressing female genital mutilation, ending all forms of physical punishment against children<sup>40</sup>, addressing harmful sexual behaviour among young people, and ensuring that children and young people's digital rights are upheld and that they are safe online. The failure to meet this obligation will undermine the vision and goals of the PfG.

NICCY calls for:

- A 'Barnahus' for victims of child sexual exploitation ensuring a child-centred response to victims of child sexual abuse by providing child protection and medical, therapeutic and criminal justice processes within a single child friendly location. This needs to meet the Barnahus quality standards and be shaped by the participation and voices of

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<sup>36</sup> NICCY provided advice to government to The Executive Office's (TEO) 'Strategy for Victims and Survivors of the Troubles in 2024. Available at: [Response to TEO on the 'Strategy for Victims and Survivors of the Troubles/Conflict' consultation - Niccy](#) , accessed on 29/10/24

<sup>37</sup> [UNVAC World Report on Violence against Children.pdf](#)

<sup>38</sup> [NICCY-SOCRNI-3-Main-Report-2022-final-web.pdf](#) p.67

<sup>39</sup> [NICCY-SOCRNI-3-Main-Report-2022-final-web.pdf](#) p.69

<sup>40</sup> [Equal Protection - Niccy](#)

victims and survivors.

- Sustained investment in the support services delivered by community and voluntary groups. Genuine citizen and neighbour led family community care needs noticed, understood and nurtured.
- The integration and centralisation of the data collected by all agencies should take place to gain a comprehensive, accurate profile of the problem in Northern Ireland to aid policy and practice developments.
- The full implementation of the Gillen Review recommendations.
- Multi-agency partners improving on how the views of children in assessment and planning are evidenced.

### 3.8 Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment

NICCY welcomes that Climate Action and Lough Neagh are one of the immediate priorities of the draft PfG. The slow death of the Lough in an economic system that has used nature to extract from and dump in has focused our attention on the direct link between the health of the rest of the natural world and our own health and wellbeing and it is vital that the plan goes beyond focusing just on symptoms such as the blue-green algae. The 2022 Joint Public Health Conference, Healthy Planet, Healthy People,<sup>41</sup> highlighted the impacts of climate change on population health in Ireland and NI and the need to put health at the heart of our climate response. Climate change impacts health directly through the impact of extreme weather events. It also impacts health indirectly through food and water insecurity and quality, increasing transmission of infectious diseases, disruption of the health care systems, displacement of communities and negative impacts on mental health. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health in their recent Position Paper on air pollution in the UK<sup>42</sup> stated that children are especially vulnerable to air pollution because they inhale more air than adults in proportion to their body weight, breathe closer to ground-level sources of air pollution such as vehicle exhausts, and are less able to control their exposure than adults.

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<sup>41</sup> <https://healthyplanetconference.org/>

<sup>42</sup> RCPCH (2024) Position statement on air pollution in the UK [Air-pollution-position-2024-quick-read.pdf](#)

This has been echoed by the Lancet 2023 report on health and climate change.<sup>43</sup>

The UNCRC has explicitly noted the link between climate change and the health of children and young people through General comment No. 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change.<sup>44</sup> As the General Comment states, the extent and magnitude of the triple planetary crisis, comprising the climate emergency, the collapse of biodiversity and pervasive pollution, is an urgent and systemic threat to children's rights globally. The efforts of children to draw attention to environmental crises created the motivation and were the momentum behind this general comment.<sup>45</sup> The cause in the rise of eco-anxiety among young people is the fact that there is not enough anxiety in adults.

NICCY calls for:

1. The Green Growth Strategy to be explicit in its understanding that the Northern Ireland economy functions within the boundaries of the living world and that the purpose of a thriving economy and growth is to invest in human and planetary wellbeing.
2. A clear statement in the PfG that the NI Executive has a duty to uphold children and young people's rights to a clean and sustainable environment as part of the promises it has made to children and young people through the UNCRC.
3. The NI Executive to invest in the meaningful participation of children and young people including the right to information, to protest, challenge and access legal complaints mechanisms as we progress in the implementation of the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022.
4. Effective and regular Child Rights Impact Assessments to be conducted to understand (and resolve) how government decisions about the environment will impact (or are impacting) children – paying special attention to how children of all ages and backgrounds might be impacted differently.
5. Disaggregated data with regard to the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on children and young people.

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<sup>43</sup> The 2023 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: the imperative for a health-centred response in a world facing irreversible harms; [The 2023 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: the imperative for a health-centred response in a world facing irreversible harms - The Lancet](#)

<sup>44</sup> [CRC/C/GC/26: General comment No. 26 \(2023\) on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change | OHCHR](#)

<sup>45</sup> [CRC/C/GC/26: General comment No. 26 \(2023\) on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change | OHCHR](#)

6. The recognition that the Children’s Services Cooperation Act (CSCA) requires government departments to work together to consider the wellbeing of children which incorporates considering children’s rights in all decisions made about climate change. This includes a coherent and sustained inter-departmental approach to delivering on the Lough Neagh Action Plan.

### **3.9 Reform and Transformation of Public Services**

#### ***Reform and Transformation Unit***

In May 2024, a deal was reached on the interim Fiscal Framework for Northern Ireland (NI) which included plans for a new Public Service Transformation Board, comprising officials from the NI Civil Service and UK Government supported by independent experts. The Board was to provide approval on £235 million ringfenced funding for the purpose of public sector transformation.

In June 2024, it was announced that for this financial year, £47 million was available to allocate (recurring annually until FY2028-9), and that on 9 May, the NI Executive agreed to a proposed approach for making ‘quick progress’ on the use of the funding, and that Departments had been invited to submit bids for transformation proposals. These would then be assessed, and recommendations made by the Board for projects that could be supported by the funding.

It remains unclear however on the assessment criteria that would be used by the Board, or indeed the Departments in submitting the proposals. It is also unclear, crucially, how the needs of children and young people will form part of these bids to transform public services would be required as part of this process.

NICCY is calling for the publication of:

- The assessment criteria used by Departments in selecting projects for bids to the Transformation Fund, if any;
- The assessment criteria used by the Board in making recommendations on projects that could be supported by the funding;
- An outline of the decision making process from when a bid is submitted to the Board to the final decision being taken, and who has authority at each stage;

- How the needs of children and young people have been considered throughout this process and if any Children’s Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) have been conducted in the assessment process; and
- Information on how final decisions on funding allocations would be made by the NI Executive.

### ***Transformation and the healthcare system***

Whilst we welcome the focus on the role of transformation and reconfiguration within healthcare services in the draft PFG, we reiterate our concern that the consideration / positioning of children and young people’s healthcare services and needs has been limited in comparison to the focus towards adult service provision. Given the importance of early intervention and prevention within the transformation agenda, and the role of a good start in life within public health promotion and as identified within the Healthy Child, Healthy Future framework, we encourage the NI Executive, specifically the Department of Health, to ensure clear and direct linkage between the delivery of the transformation agenda and the protection and promotion of the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

We recognise that transformation delivery is now being spearheaded through the design and delivery of individual strategies namely: i) the Cancer Strategy; ii) the Mental Health Strategy; iii) the Urgent and Emergency Care Strategy alongside the Elective Care Framework. NICCY is concerned that there has been no direct reference to children’s services and support specifically within this context since the return of the institutions. NICCY is concerned that the current budgetary context suggests the Department of Health cannot implement new arrangements of Strategies such as the Mental Health Strategy, given the implications for the delivery of these Strategies and the broader transformation context.

We are concerned that the Mental Health Strategy is underfunded and full implementation of its provisions is struggling in the absence of multi-year budgets, particularly given the importance of early intervention and prevention for infant, children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing. We reiterate our disappointment at the absence of mental health considerations and corresponding targets and commitments within the draft PFG, given the importance of mental health services reform within the Transformation agenda.

We welcome the role of the Cancer Strategy for NI 2022-2032 within the rollout of

Transformation, and appreciate the role of Theme Two and specifically Action 33. The Cancer Strategy is however resourced to only £12m, a deficit in what was needed, and needs recurrent funding. Consequently, there are gaps in the context of mental health support and psycho-social support, and access to fertility support is underfunded, denying appropriate supports and services for children and young people. Further, the Cancer Strategy provided that there would be 13 inpatient beds for haematology and oncology and an eight-bedded unit within the new children's hospital, which is expected to open in 2027. However, the status of the build of this new hospital remains unclear. Moreover, we advise the NI Executive to ensure the full implementation of the recommendations outlined within the 2023 report of the Review of Provision of Cancer Services for Teenagers and Young Adults in NI was commissioned following the publication of the Cancer Strategy.

It remains unclear however how children's healthcare services will be addressed and incorporated into the new Integrated Care System, and what relationship it will have, if any, with Children's Services Planning. NICCY is concerned about the absence of a specific Children's Lead including for those with SEND, particularly in contrast to existing practice in England which is underpinned in both statute and statutory guidance.

NICCY calls for:

- A full review of the child health system, which enables both health and social care reform to be undertaken on an evidential needs-based basis, conducted in a manner which complements the transformation agenda's objectives and mainstreams children and adolescent health services. This review should be cognisant of existing implementation plans relevant to the reform and redesign of children's health services and care pathways, and address gaps in knowledge about individual child health services, including services experiencing waiting list demands.
- Delivery and resourcing of sufficient children and adolescent services as a key priority in the Cancer Strategy.
- The progression of a Disability Strategy which includes clear, targeted and actionable aims and objectives for children and young people with disabilities, and associated outcome focused action plan.
- The needs of children included within ICS, including through the introduction of designated leads with responsibility for children and young people, and enabling the participation of children and young people within area planning, emulating the model



in operation in England.

### ***Transformation of Children's Social Care System***

There are 436,622 children living in Northern Ireland. On 31 March 2024, 22,450 of these were known to Social Services as a child in need. Furthermore, 2,334 were on the Child Protection Register and 3,999 were children in care of the HSC Trusts (a looked after child).<sup>46</sup>

Some of the systemic issues that led to the commissioning of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care<sup>47</sup> include:

- There has been an increase of nearly 65% in the number of children in care since 2011.<sup>48</sup>
- There is a 40% vacancy rate in some Trusts in relation to Children's Social Work teams.
- The increase in the number of unallocated cases with the largest number of unallocated cases relating to a child with a disability.
- 77% of children and young people have no personal advisors allocated in the Leave Service.
- 83% of Looked After Children are in foster care with 419 Foster carers deregistering in 2023.
- Early family support has been cut or stayed at the same level since 2010.
- Children living in the most deprived areas are almost six times more likely to be on the child protection register than children in the least deprived areas. And four times more likely to be looked after.
- Having a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) continues to be more prevalent among the children in care of school age (28%) compared with the general school population (7%).<sup>49</sup>

Our Formal Investigation Report or 'Vicky's Story' issued in January 2023 showed that:

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<sup>46</sup> [Publication of 'Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24' | Department of Health](#)

<sup>47</sup> [Report of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland | CSCS NI Review](#)

<sup>48</sup> Department of Health (NI), Northern Ireland Children's Social Services Data (provisional) – August 2024: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/ni-childrens-figures-august2024.pdf>;

<sup>49</sup> [Publication of 'Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24' | Department of Health Reimagining Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland | Barnardo's Reform of Children's Social Care | Department of Health doh-cscs-delivery-plan-2024-25\\_0.pdf](#)

*“Systemic failings and breaches of Vicky’s rights, at the various stages of her life, eventually resulted in her being placed out of Northern Ireland. From the outset of her life, planning for Vicky’s care was not based on her best interests. Instead, there was a lack of appropriate response by the relevant authorities and a failure to develop ‘tailored’ support structures and services to effectively meet her needs as corporate parents. The approach appeared framed by how Vicky could ‘fit into’ existing processes and structures rather than focusing more on meeting her specific needs. Vicky should have had her rights upheld and respected. However, as set out, the evidence shows where these rights have been breached.”<sup>50</sup>*

There is acceptance across the board and no more so than for children, young people and their families that the current children’s social care system is not serving children and young people well. The profile and needs of children’s services are not prioritised in comparison to health and social care adult services in planning processes, alongside a lack of clarity and variation in the strategic planning and accountability for children’s services. This has a grave impact on achieving the desired improvements intended for children and families.

A radically new approach to design and implementation is required. Any change to the structure and delivery of children’s services however must focus on creating the best conditions needed to enable success in improving the lives of the children, young people and families who need the support of services. As the draft PfG acknowledges, transformational reform programmes are complex because they involve multiple systems and factors, and there is a need to understand how these interact with one another. In relation to children’s health and social care services, structural reforms are one aspect but the success of these are dependent on, for example, changes in organisational and professional cultures and practice, consistent public expenditure levels, and workforce recruitment and retention levels. Without attention to these, the factors that helped trigger the reform programmes will continue.<sup>51</sup>

NICCY welcomes the Children’s Social Care Strategic Reform Programme and we hope that this programme is informed by the principles of accountability, transparency and progress

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<sup>50</sup> [Looked After? - Niccy p.9](#)

<sup>51</sup> [Childrens Services Reform Research reports :: Celcis](#)

with the voices and participation of children and young people at its heart and we look forward to the published costed plans for each workstream to both ‘steady the ship’ and ‘allow the system to change course’. NICCY believes the children’s social care system should be calibrated to Prevention, Early Intervention and Family Support, as outlined in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. This will require consistent and strategic leadership, transparent governance accountable to children, young people, their families and carers and a radical new approach to design and implementation. It will also require long term investment in a social safety net ensuring that at a community level, families have a foundational system of mutual aid, care and agency, emergency and crisis support and practical help and advice to stop problems deteriorating. We need to build on the lessons and learning of the Early Intervention Transformation Programme (2014-2020) which calculated that the annual cost of late intervention in Northern Ireland is £536 million, the equivalent to £1,166 per child.<sup>52</sup>

NICCY calls for:

- The embedding a child right’s framework driving the transformation of our children’s social care system aligned with the Children and Young People’s Strategy (2020-2030) - the guiding framework for the NI Executive Departments,
- The recalibration of our children’s social care system adoption of a definition of ‘early intervention’ as meaning both intervening in the early years of children’s lives to give them the best start in life and intervening early and as soon as possible to address problems that are emerging for children and young people at any point in their lives.
- A long -term investment in the existing ‘early intervention’ architecture such as the Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership and Locality Planning Partnerships, Sure Start and the Family Support Hubs.
- The creation of an ‘independent monitoring’ role for the Children’s Social Care Services Reform Programme with the development of a set of measures, outcomes and indicators in place to monitor the implementation and/or impact of the reforms on the lives of children and young people.
- The regulation of all forms of placements for children in care, as well as ensuring the equity of high-quality provision across NI to prevent differential services for children and young people depending on Trust area.

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<sup>52</sup>The Early Intervention Transformation Programme | Department of Health

- The strengthening of the legislative framework of the RQIA to ensure the RQIA can monitor compliance with recommendations of its inspection reports to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people.
- The implementation of all the recommendations in *‘Looked After?: A Formal Investigation into the Life of a Child in the Care of the State’*.

#### 4.0 Omission of ‘Eradicating Poverty’ from the Priorities

We have outlined above how it is important that there should be an overarching Priority on Child Wellbeing. In addition to this, there is one further extremely problematic omission from the priorities: ‘Eradicating Poverty’.

We note the draft PFG states that it will ‘take action to address poverty’ but includes no details of these plans. In addition, while there is a reference to social inclusion strategies there is no specific commitment to an Anti-Poverty Strategy. Poverty is a pervasive, persistent problem that underlies a great deal of disadvantage within our society, and can only be tackled by concerted, determined action across departments and agencies. In addition, it cannot be addressed by minor adjustments, but will require significant resources to make a real difference on the ground. None of this is possible unless it is clearly articulated as a priority of the Executive. Moreover, Section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as amended by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 places a statutory duty on the Northern Ireland Executive to “adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need”.

As a member of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group, NICCY endorses the Co-Design group’s submission, and in particular the recommendations:

- *This group recommends that the final Programme for Government should include an additional priority of ‘Eradicating Poverty’. We recommend that this priority includes a commitment to adopting and implementing an Anti-Poverty Strategy, based on objective need.*
- *The Programme for Government should detail that this priority is the responsibility of all government departments, and that action on poverty should be a collective effort. (...)*
- *The ‘Eradicating Poverty’ priority should reflect that Northern Ireland departments will*

*work closely alongside civil society in delivering on this priority. The expertise and relationships held by civil society will enhance the development and delivery of an Anti-Poverty Strategy. The work of the Co-Design Group should be used to inform the development of the draft strategy.*

- *The Programme for Government should specify that the Anti-Poverty Strategy will contain specific, measurable, time-bound targets, identifying the responsible department for delivery. The Programme for Government should also note that the Anti-Poverty Strategy should be accompanied by an action plan, detailing specific actions to be taken, the responsible department and relevant partners.*<sup>53</sup>

Within a priority on ‘Eradicating Poverty’ there should be a significant focus on addressing child poverty. It is entirely unacceptable that around one in four children in Northern Ireland live in poverty. Poverty blights their childhoods, and their futures, with a pervasive impact on all aspects of their lives.

The Co-Design Group, including NICCY, identified five priority actions that should be included in the forthcoming Anti-Poverty Strategy to reduce child poverty by half, on the way to eradicating it by 2040:

1. Introduce a new weekly Child Payment to all children in poverty;
2. Restore the value of key social security benefits for children to levels prior to austerity cuts;
3. Reduce family outgoings, and make education cost-free;
4. Deliver a new Executive Childcare Strategy providing all parents with accessible, affordable, high quality, flexible and sustainable childcare;
5. Provide targeted interventions for children with specific additional vulnerabilities.<sup>54</sup>

The Northern Ireland Audit Office published a report in March 2024 on the previous Child Poverty Strategy 2016-2020 (extended to 2022) and it concluded that it was largely ineffective

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<sup>53</sup> Consultation on the draft Programme for Government, 2024-2027: Submission by members of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group (November 2024).

<sup>54</sup> Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group, (Sept 2022), RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND Revised Version, p18.

at reducing child poverty levels in Northern Ireland. It is essential that the learning from this report and the subsequent Public Accounts Committee Inquiry are fully taken into account in the development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

While the Executive has responsibility for most of the policy areas relating to child poverty, some rely on the UK Government to take action, notably in relation to taxation and social security. The recent announcement of the UK Government in relation to the development of a UK Child Poverty Strategy, to be published in Spring 2025, is extremely timely in allowing a joined-up approach to addressing the full range of actions required to reduce child poverty. While some of the actions that will be included in the UK Child Poverty Strategy will relate to the reserved areas of taxation and social security, others are likely to relate to devolved areas, so Barnett Consequential funding will be released to the devolved governments. Scotland and Wales already have Child Poverty Strategies in place with provisions that are not in place in England or Northern Ireland, for example the Child Payment in Scotland. **It is critical that the Northern Ireland Executive has equivalent actions ready to implement, for example introducing a ‘child payment’ akin to that in place in Scotland, to which the funding can be allocated without unnecessary delay.**

## 5.0 Conclusion

NICCY recognises that these are difficult times for government and public services in Northern Ireland. We don't underestimate the challenges ahead. The publication of the draft PFG is welcome, but the Commissioner is disappointed that the Executive hasn't sufficiently prioritised children and young people. NICCY recommends that the priorities are reviewed and that a new one is added, focussing on delivering improvements in the wellbeing of children and young people, in keeping with the statutory duties set out in the Children's Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

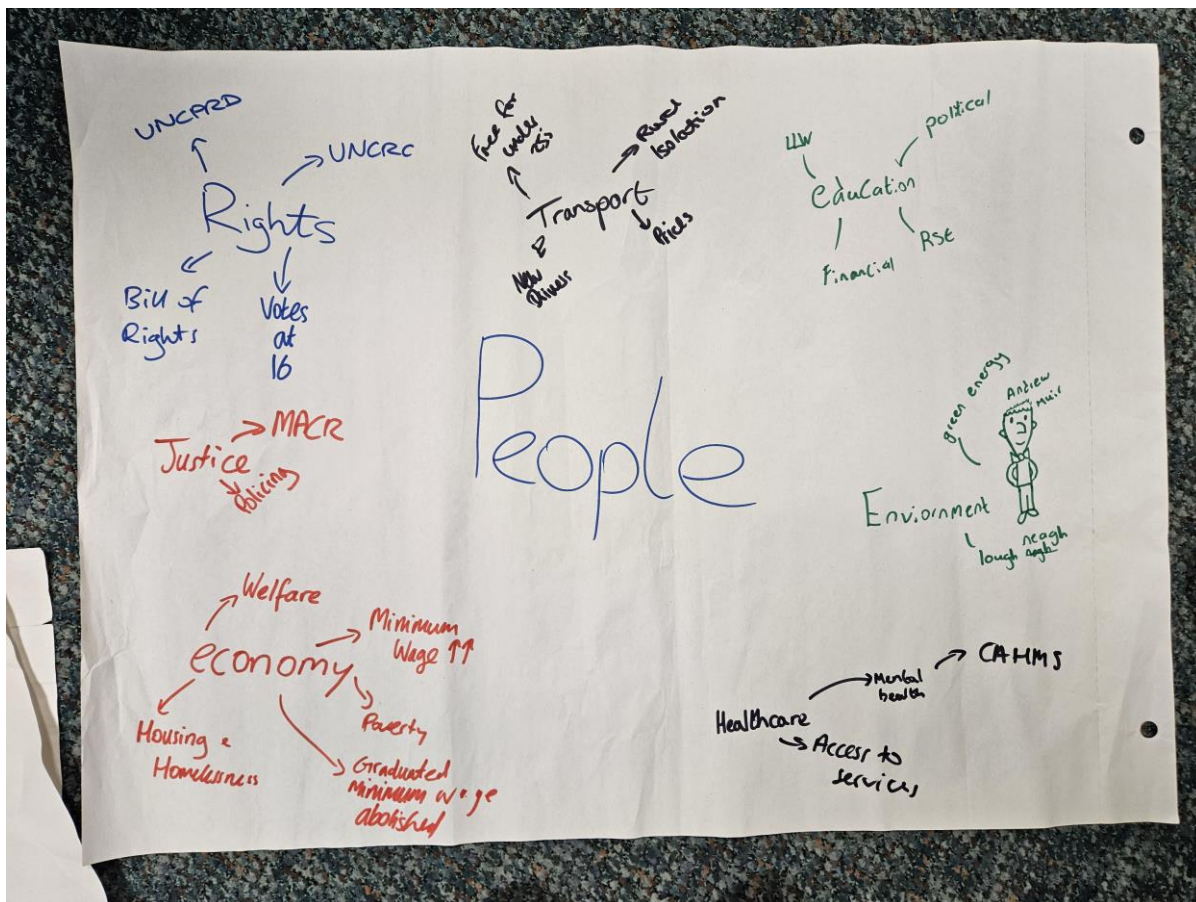
The draft Programme for Government, in not clearly taking account of the findings of the report into the delivery of the Children's Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, breaches article 6 of the Act. This must be corrected in the final version of the Programme for Government, which should clearly outline how it will deliver on the UNCRC Concluding Observations 2023 and link in directly to the Children's Strategy and Delivery Plan.

In addition, a priority ‘Eradicating Poverty’ should be included, to be delivered through the development and implementation of the Anti-Poverty Strategy. This should have a significant focus on eradicating child poverty, and draw on the considerable work of the Expert Panel and Co-Design Group.

This paper has provided extensive advice in relation to each of the proposed Priorities, and the actions that should be taken forward under each of these, and we have also reflected the views of our NICCY Youth Panel in the appendix. We trust that this will prove informative, and if you should like to discuss any element of this in more detail, please contact Alex Tennant at [alex@niccy.org](mailto:alex@niccy.org).

## Appendix: Notes from NICCY Youth Panel discussions

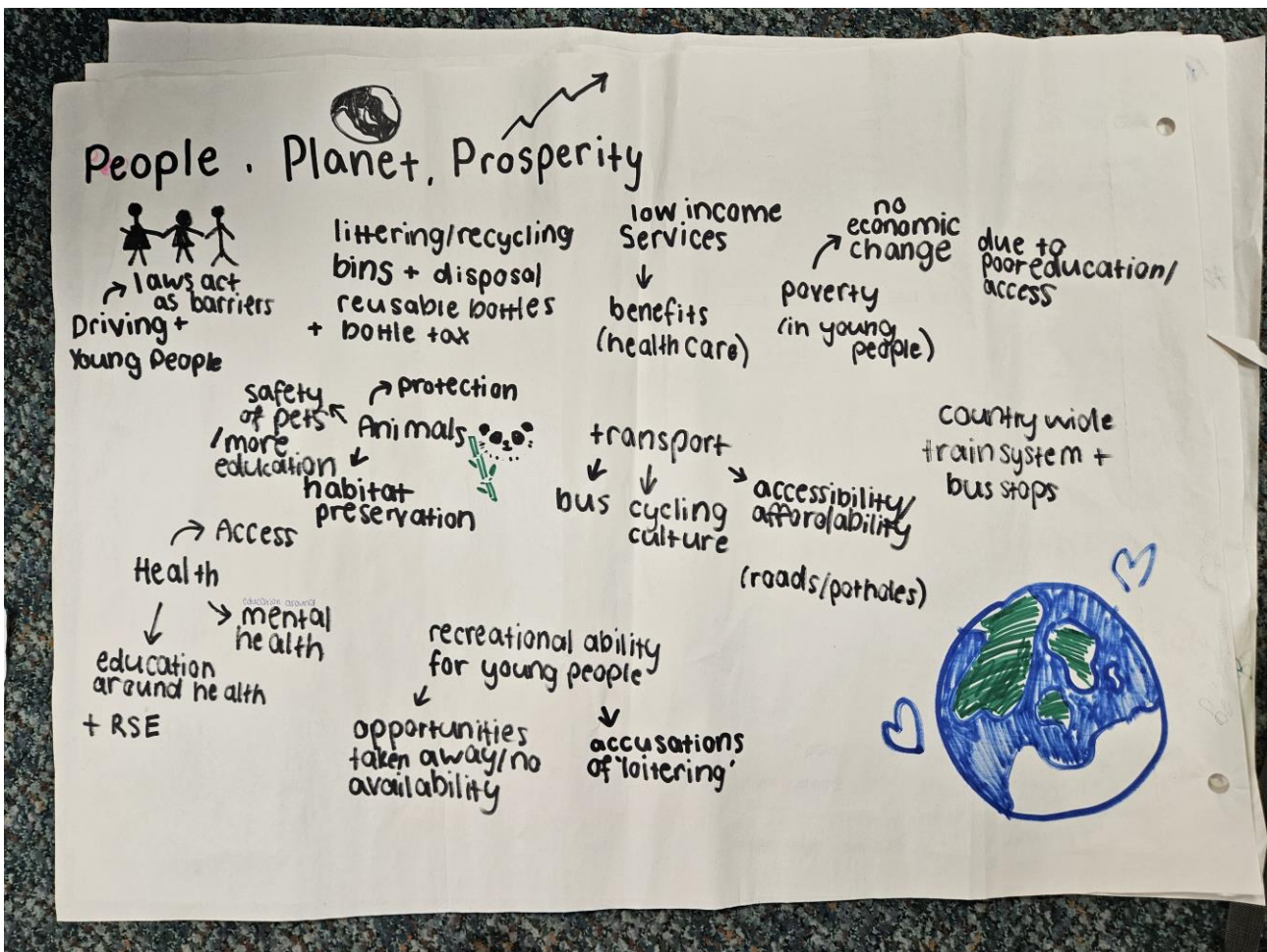
The NICCY Youth Panel were asked to think about what they think should be included in a Programme for Government, and the following flipchart pages reflect their views:



<b>Rights</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bill of Rights</li> <li>- Votes at 16</li> <li>- UNCPRD</li> <li>- UNCRD</li> </ul>	<b>Transport</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Free for under 25s</li> <li>- Rural isolation</li> <li>- Prices</li> <li>- New drivers</li> </ul>	<b>Economy</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Welfare</li> <li>- Minimum wage ↑</li> <li>- Poverty</li> <li>- Housing and homelessness</li> <li>- Graduated minimum wage abolished</li> </ul>
<b>Healthcare</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mental health CAMHS</li> </ul>	<b>Environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Green energy</li> </ul>	<b>Education</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- LLW</li> </ul>



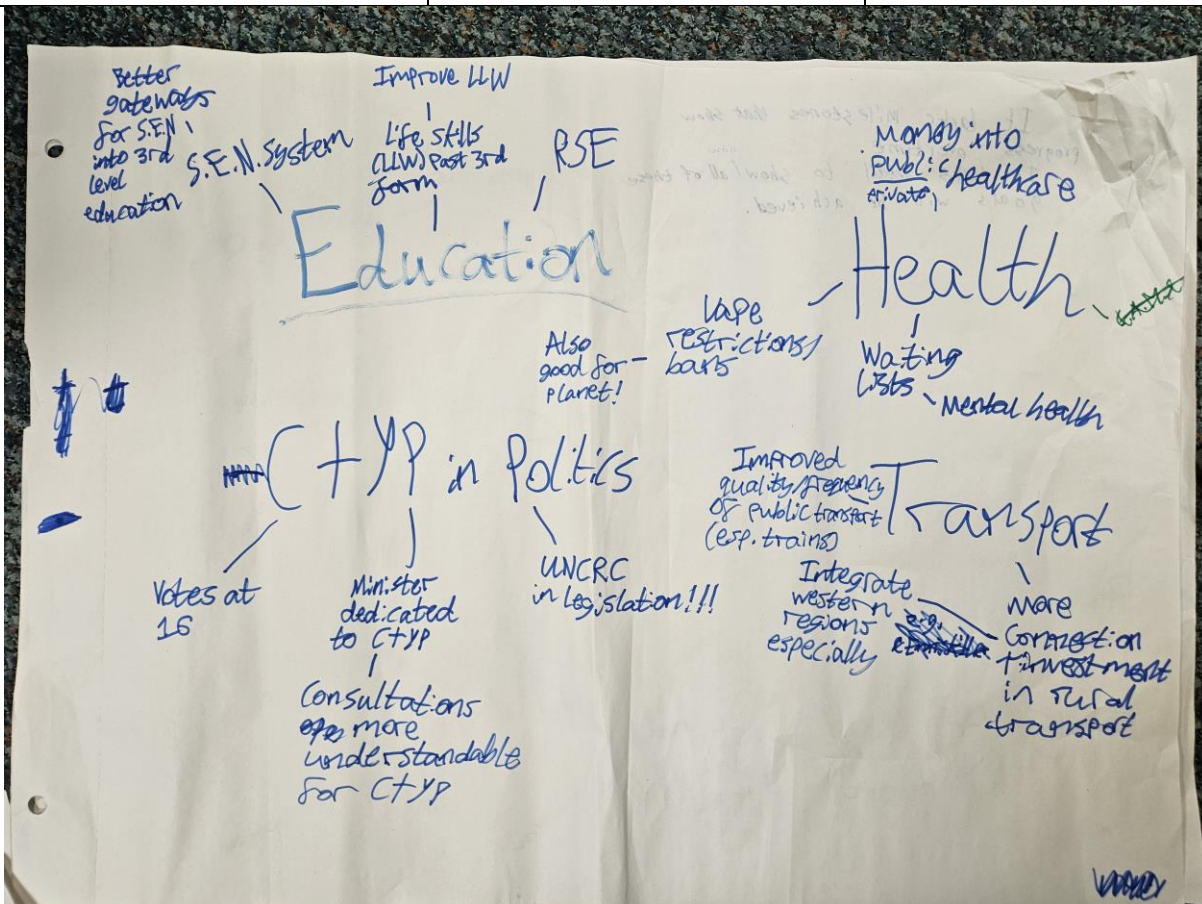
- Access to services	- Lough Neagh	- Political - RSE - Financial
<b>Justice</b> - Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility - Policing		



**People, Planet, Prosperity**

Driving and young people - Laws act as barriers	Littering/recycling bins and disposal Recyclable bottles	Low income services Benefits (healthcare)
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	Bottle tax	
Poverty (in young people) No economic change Due to poor education access	Transport <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bus</li> <li>- Cycling culture</li> <li>- Accessibility / affordability</li> <li>- (Roads / potholes)</li> <li>- Countrywide train system and bus stops</li> </ul>	Recreational ability for young people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Opportunities taken away / no availability</li> <li>- Accusations of 'loitering'</li> </ul>
Health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Access mental health</li> <li>- Education around health and RSE</li> </ul>	Animals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Protection</li> <li>- Habitat preservation</li> <li>- Safety of pets / more education</li> </ul>	



Education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SEN system – better</li> </ul>	Health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Money into public vs</li> </ul>	Transport <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improved quality /</li> </ul>
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<p>gateways for SEN into third level education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improve LLW – Life skills (LLW) past third form</li> <li>- RSE</li> </ul>	<p>private healthcare</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Vape restrictions / bans – also good for planet!</li> <li>- Waiting lists – mental health</li> </ul>	<p>frequency of public transport</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Integrate western regions especially</li> <li>- More connection and investment in rural transport</li> </ul>
<p>Children and young people in politics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Votes at 16</li> <li>- Minister dedicated to C&amp;YP</li> <li>- More consultations understandable for C&amp;YP</li> <li>- UNCRC in legislation!</li> </ul>		

After they had completed this exercise, the NICCY Youth Panel members then reviewed the Programme for Government priorities and actions. While there was recognition that many of the areas they had identified were included, they felt that there needed to be more detail on what would be delivered, and when.

*“overall pleased”*

*“too vague”*

*“all of the priorities are very vague, there is nor enough detail. It does not tell us when they will have it done, by and how they are doing it.”*

*“Goals dates and milestones are missing, not enough detail”*

*“would love to see an action plan”*

They also had suggested in relation to the Priorities identified.

*“I think they should prioritise issues with education such as RSE, academic selection, single education system and mental health”*

*“violence against women and girls – education starts at school! The chain of violence should be nipped in the bud”*

*“we need to address internet culture, the treatment of mental health issues and women’s rights”*

*“needs more support for homelessness and those that support them”*

*“free universal childcare until age of enrolment in primary school”*

*“we need comprehensive in and harsher sentencing crimes”*

*“for young people with SEN there should be a school placement guaranteed”*

*“I agree that there should be better support for C&YP with SEN but I would want to know how they are going to do it as there are so many issues with SEN”*

*“there’s an intelligence loss – people don’t stay after education”*

*“there’s no support system for young men in and out of school”*

*“there’s so much stigma around seeking help (for MH issues)”*

*“Sorting health waiting times and ensuring availability of support is vital”*

*“agree with prioritising funding for NHS”*

*“reform of public services point is too broad”*