

NI EXECUTIVE CHALLENGED TO INTRODUCE THE CHILDREN'S BILL – A MECHANISM TO ACHIEVE BETTER OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children and young people with disabilities are largely invisible in many strategic policy initiatives. They tend to fall between disability services and children's services and therefore their unique and specific circumstances and needs as children with disabilities are often overlooked. This can result in children with disabilities and their families becoming invisible when key decisions are made about establishing the need for, planning and delivering services, including public services.

It is these children and young people who are on the margins who have been effectively relegated by a failure to implement policies through a cross-departmental working approach. Specifically, children with disabilities and their families are at greater risk of social exclusion. Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) have for many years been calling on the Northern Ireland Executive to place a statutory duty to co-operate on all Government Departments to improve outcomes for all children. Across Government there is a need for co-operation and joint working on strategic policy initiatives, planning, commissioning and delivery arrangements to ensure positive outcomes for all children, giving explicit consideration to the particular needs of children with disabilities and their families.

It is for this reason that we support the Children's Bill being brought forward by the Green Party's MLA Steven Agnew. The Children's Bill would compel all government departments to co-operate in achieving better outcomes for children and young people; compel relevant government departments and agencies, public bodies and local councils to work together in planning, commissioning and delivering services for children and young people; and help government departments pool budgets, share staff and other resources, as well as jointly commission services for children and young people.

Children in Northern Ireland believe that a revised approach to the manner in which policy, budgeting and spending are constructed is urgently needed to ensure the essential needs of children and young people with disabilities are protected in a time of diminishing public resources. Experience has shown us that Government Departments approach their work with specific mandates, separate budgets and defined areas of responsibility, because of this there are limitations to how Departments are working in collaboration.

The needs of children and young people do not simply begin and end along the lines of departmental portfolios. It is only through genuine, collaborative, co-operative and joined up working that the true opportunity to maximise scarce resources in the best interests of children and young people can be achieved.

For further information <http://www.ci-ni.org.uk/>

Ellen Finlay, Policy Officer at Children in Northern Ireland