

INTERNATIONAL HEALTHY CITIES CONFERENCE – ACE SEMINAR 01.10.18

“UNDERSTANDING THE BIGGER PICTURE – A STRATEGIC POLICY CONTEXT IN NORTHERN IRELAND”

Dreena Evans gave a broad overview of the strategic context within which children’s services in Northern Ireland are developed and delivered.

The Draft Programme for Government

The draft Programme for Government framework sets out twelve high level strategic outcomes around which government can frame the delivery of public services. These outcomes reflect key areas of economic and societal well-being that people said mattered most to them.

All twelve outcomes are connected but two outcomes in particular provide a solid foundation from which government can move forward in relation to the rights and needs of our children and young people:

- Outcome 12 *“We give our children and young people the best start in life”*; and
- Outcome 8 *“We care for others and we help those in need”*.

The Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

In addition to the Programme for Government, new legislation came into effect in Northern Ireland in December 2015: the Children’s Services Co-operation Act. This places a duty on named children’s authorities to co-operate with each other, and with other children’s service providers, with the important aim of improving the well-being of our children and young people.

The well-being of children and young people is at the heart of the Children’s Services Co-operation Act. “Well-being” is defined within the Act as covering eight areas:

- Physical and mental health;
- The enjoyment of play and leisure;
- Learning and achievement;
- Living in safety and with stability;
- Economic and environmental well-being;
- The making by children and young people of a positive contribution to society;
- Living in a society which respects children and young people’s rights;
- Living in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted.

The Act specifies that in determining the meaning of well-being for the purposes of the Act, regard should be had to any relevant provision of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The named Children’s Authorities include government departments, local councils and key public service organisations such as the Public Health Agency, HSC Trusts, the Education Authority and the PSNI.

Co-operation has many benefits. It can lead to the creation of better connected policies that are more able to meet the needs of our children in a holistic way; reduce or even prevent duplication of services; allow for pooling of resources; and make it easier for children and their parents to navigate public services. Most importantly, it can help prevent children and young people falling into the gaps between traditional services or between organisational, geographic or professional boundaries.

The Children and Young People's Strategy

The Act includes a requirement for the Executive to adopt a Children and Young People's Strategy setting out how it proposes to improve the well-being of children and young people. The Act specifies that the Strategy must set out what outcomes the Executive intends to achieve, the actions government Departments will take to achieve those outcomes, and how these will be measured. It will therefore provide the strategic direction, outcomes and priorities for children and young people's services.

The Act also ensures that the Children and Young People's Strategy will influence future Programmes for Government (PfGs) by requiring the Executive to take account of reports produced under the Act when developing future PfGs.

The Department of Education is leading on the development of the new Children and Young People's Strategy on behalf of the Executive, but it is a cross-departmental strategy and therefore has input from all government departments.

The draft Strategy has been developed in conjunction with stakeholders and informed by discussions with groups of children and young people, and with their parents, guardians and carers. It will be the key instrument for addressing children's issues over the next ten years. It takes an outcomes-based approach, and will be overseen by cross-departmental monitoring and reporting structures.

Consultation on the draft Strategy - what people told us

Formal public consultation on the draft Strategy took place from December 2016 to March 2017. An analysis report on the consultation responses is available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/node/32976>.

Stakeholders and young people identified a number of themes which resonate closely with the themes of the seminar, including the need to address issues such as emotional, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and the impact of living with difficult family circumstances such as domestic violence. They also identified the need to promote good mental health, resilience and self-efficacy in a variety of settings including the home, early years services and schools.

The voices of children and young people in the consultation responses were particularly striking. They may not have the professional vocabulary to describe stressful experiences, but they are very aware of the things that are impacting on their young lives in a harmful way.

The views of those who responded to the consultation will feed into the draft final Strategy which is being prepared for Executive consideration and adoption. Their views are also being shared with other government Departments, to help them identify and address the issues raised in more detail.

Next steps

The next steps in the development of the Children and Young People's Strategy are:

- Development of the Strategy monitoring and reporting structures including ongoing engagement with children and young people, parents/guardians, stakeholders, academia and practice-based researchers.
- Drafting the final Strategy for NI Executive agreement and laying in the NI Assembly when convened.
- Development of, and consultation on, an Implementation Plan.
- Development of monitoring and reporting mechanisms.
- Further work on the Data Development Agenda.