



Children **in** Northern Ireland

## **RESPONSE**

# **DHSSPS FAMILIES MATTER: SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

## **A REGIONAL FAMILY AND PARENTING STRATEGY**

**March 2007**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella body for the children's sector in Northern Ireland.

CiNI represents the interests of its 100 member organisations, providing policy, information, training and participation support services to members in their direct work with and for children and young people. CiNI has recently opened up its membership to colleagues in the children's statutory sector recognising that the best outcomes for children are increasingly achieved working in partnership with all those who are committed to improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

CiNI welcomes the publication for consultation of the DHSSPS Regional Family and Parenting Strategy Families Matter. It is positive to note that the outcome from the initial pre-consultation with the voluntary and community sector (September 2005) has been used to inform the development of the current draft proposals and we very much welcome the fact that the development of this strategy is a work in progress. We trust that through current and future engagement with the DHSSPS that we can continue to inform and influence the development of a robust strategy to support parents and families in their role of enabling and empowering children and young people to reach their full potential.

CiNI held a Families Matter consultation workshop to discuss, consider and comment on the strategy's draft proposals. The workshop was attended by 12 member organisations and their analysis and commentary on the proposals have been integrated within this submission (see Appendix for List of Workshop Attendees).

## **GENERAL COMMENTS**

### **Working Together in Partnership**

CiNI notes that a clear, consistent and core theme running through all elements of the strategy is that of integrated, partnership working to deliver on Families Matter. It is a mark of its significance that it has been elevated to a 'seventh' outcome, additional to the six outcomes set in the Children and Young People's Strategy. It is also followed through as a priority theme in terms of the focus on integration and multi-agency working which is to be actioned through the creation of children's centres across Northern Ireland.

However while we recognise and welcome the potential of children's centres to promote integration and multi-agency working at a local level, we would advocate that action to promote such an approach must begin with and be led and resourced by Government. It must cascade from regional to local, through all levels and layers of statutory provision for children and families, if government is seriously committed to achieving its aim of developing and delivering appropriate seamless services for children and families that can create confident, responsible and empowered parents who can support their children to reach their full potential and become active citizens within their community and society.

Just as all of the Government departments including the NIO have signed up to the vision of the Children's Strategy, all of the Government departments, particularly DE and

the NIO with its responsibility for youth justice, must sign up to the vision and aims of Families Matter and take action to work together to create confident, responsible and empowered parents who can help their children reach their full potential.

**We would highlight the current proposals of the Four HSSB Children and Young People's Committees on the Post RPA Planning and Commissioning of Children's Services. It is our strong recommendation that the delivery of the Children and Young People's Strategy, and its supporting pillar the Families Matter Strategy, should be underpinned and enabled by the statutory duty to co-operate proposed by the Four Children and Young People's Committees. We would agree with their proposal that there should be a duty on all public bodies to co-operate within the framework of a regional Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and Plan to deliver on the Children and Young People's Strategy and Families Matter, with a general duty on these public bodies to safeguard and promote both the rights and best interests of all children and young people. We would recommend that Government give serious consideration to the proposals of the Four Committees with a view to integrating these proposals within a finalised Families Matter Strategy.**

### **Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector**

We note and welcome that throughout the draft consultation document reference is made to taking the strategy forward through partnership and collaborative working, and we welcome the pragmatism of the document in recognising that partnership is not easy. We in the voluntary and community sector also recognise and understand that partnership working must be worked at. It is welcome that the voluntary and community sector are viewed as 'primary agents' in the delivery of Families Matter. Both family support and parenting provision are areas where the sector has much expertise and consistently delivers high quality, creative and innovative responses to the needs of families and parents. However in looking to the sector as a primary agent for delivery of the strategy it is important to acknowledge the extreme financial pressures under which the sector has operated over the last number of years. It has been the experience of the sector that when government pursues its efficiency drives, crucial preventative and early intervention services delivered by the sector are the first in line to be cut and indeed axed. Member organisations across the sector have had difficult experiences of partnership with the statutory sector which have resulted in significant erosion of trust and a sense that in some instances there is a real lack of recognition and/or valuing of and respect for the role and contribution of the sector to families in need. There is a real need for government to recognise that to create the type of equitable partnership required to deliver on Families Matter that some investment will be needed to build trust between the statutory and voluntary sector so that they can work together to take forward joint family support and parenting initiatives.

We believe there must be a solid framework upon which to build partnership arrangements and we believe this can be achieved through adherence to the principles of the Compact between the Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector (DHSS, 1998) so that the voluntary and community sector are recognised and respected as an equal partner, resourced and appropriately supported to fulfil its roll in the in the provision of public services. In rolling out implementation and delivery of Families Matter we believe there is a real opportunity for Government and the sector to take forward the implementation of Positive Steps the Government's Response to Investing Together: The Report of the Task Force on Resourcing the Voluntary and Community Sector

(DSD, March 2005). In Positive Steps Government recognised the voluntary and community sector as a “key social partner working with the Government ... well placed to develop and deliver improved frontline services, particularly to the most disadvantaged people in society” and stated its desire to “harness this experience, expertise and capacity for innovation through targeted and strategic investment in the sector and its work”. **Therefore we wish to see initiatives delivered through Families Matter evidencing Government’s commitment to actively promoting a longer-term outcome focused approach to programmes that significantly involve the voluntary and community sector (para 3.2); voluntary and community organisations must be able to include full overhead costs related to delivering a contracted service (para 6.1); and Government must support the need for voluntary and community organisations to retain appropriate reserves (para 3.1.2). The voluntary and community sector in turn can assure Government of our commitment to the maintenance and where necessary further development of robust governance systems across the sector, and will ensure and demonstrate that the services which we deliver are of the highest possible standards while consistently striving to improve performance.**

### **Measurable Time-Bound Targets for Action**

In relation to the proposed actions contained in the strategy it was highlighted that it would be useful to reference the evidence sources which have been used to inform the development of proposals for action. It was also commented more generally that the actions were extremely broad and that more precise detail would be required in relation to how action would be practically delivered on the ground. It was also advocated that actions be accompanied by time bound targets and that these should be measurable by accompanying child-rights centred performance indicators.

### **Children’s Rights within the Family**

CiNI welcomes the role of Families Matter as a ‘supporting pillar’ of the Children and Young People’s Strategy (para 3.5). As a supporting pillar the Families Matter Strategy will also be required to give due regard to the ‘pledges’ made in the over-arching Children’s Strategy. Fundamentally this will mean that the delivery of Families Matter must be guided and informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The UNCRC in its preamble recognised the family as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, and acknowledged that the family should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community.

This protection is provided by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, incorporated into domestic legislation via the Human Rights Act 1998, which provides families with a right to protection of their private and family life.

Article 18 (1) of the UNCRC further confirms that parents, or as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child and requires that the best interests of the child will be the basic concern of parents.

**In the context of the ongoing development of Families Matter we would urge the DHSSPS in developing actions to deliver on outcomes to give due regard to the**

## **provisions relating to the assistance which Government is required to provide to the family.**

Article 18 (2) states that for the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the Convention, States parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.

Article 18 (3) provides that States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.

## **AIMS, VISION, PRINCIPLES AND OUTCOMES**

CiNI would advocate that the aims of the strategy should be anchored more closely to the vision of the strategy i.e. the aims must flow from the vision.

In relation to the vision some suggestions were made by way of ensuring the visibility of particularly vulnerable children. The strategy must identify and take additional targeted action to ensure that their families can overcome the obstacles which stand in the way of these children having the same opportunity as their peers to achieve their full potential (suggestions for amendment included in bold):

**All** children and young people are valued during childhood. **All** children and young people reach their **full** potential and have **equal** opportunity to lead full, healthy and satisfying lives by **being** active contributors **within their home, school and wider community** through **child-centred and child led participation** in the life of the community.

It is extremely welcome that the Department wants to involve children, young people, their families and communities in the development of preventative services (para 3.3). We would highlight that this is in line with the Department's obligations to consult with those directly affected by their policies under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and in compliance with Article 12 of the UNCRC which provides for the voice of the child to be heard and acted upon in decisions that affect their lives.

## **The Principles**

We would advocate that the Department ensure that the principles of the Families Matter strategy are closely aligned with the underpinning values of the over-arching Children and Young People's Strategy, which recognise that all children and young people are unique individuals with their own individual rights, including that of being active participants with a valuable and diverse contribution to make to society. These underpinning values also consider the role of adults and parents/carers in helping to deliver the vision for all children and young people. We believe that a number of these underpinning values are worth reiterating within the context of Families Matter. These recognise that children and young people need loving and supportive families/carers; are entitled to both adult protection and opportunities to exercise their independence; need support to explore and achieve their individual potential; and need support and encouragement through the transition from childhood to adulthood enabling them to express respect for others and take increasing responsibility for their actions and decisions.

During consultation suggestions were made in relation to the further development of the principles underpinning Families Matter (suggestions for amendment included in bold):

- The **rights**, needs and perspectives of the children and families are used to inform planning and service delivery decisions
- Policy development and planning decisions should be based on evidence of **what we know about the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland and on evidence of what we know works best for children and young people in Northern Ireland**
- The evaluation of outcomes should be open and transparent to all **and based on a standardised robust child rights centred evaluation framework in line with that used to evaluate the 10 year strategy.**

### **The Outcomes**

As a 'supporting pillar' of the Children and Young People's Strategy (para 3.5) it is wholly appropriate that the proposed outcomes of Families Matter are clearly related to those set by the overarching document and that these outcomes are tailored specifically to families and parents. We agree that if the outcomes are achieved at this level, they contribute to the achievement of the outcomes for children and young people.

During consultation feedback was provided with a view to ensuring that the outcomes are sufficiently and appropriately parent and family centred:

**Making a positive contribution** – It was advocated that the reference to “not engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour” should be removed, as this could be interpreted almost as a presumption that families do engage in such behaviour, rather than taking a more holistic family centred view which identifies and addresses the risk factors for families at risk of coming into contact with the justice system.

**Enjoy your rights** – It was advocated that within Families Matter specific action should be included to support the creation of a society where parents and families are aware of and understand their rights vis-à-vis protecting and promoting their children's rights; and are enabled to support their children, in a positive and constructive way, to realise their rights. In research commissioned by NICCY on Children's Rights in Northern Ireland 2004 it was commented that “there is an extremely large gap in knowledge regarding the extent of parents/carers and children's knowledge of their rights” (NICCY, 2004, p.46). We would advocate that Families Matter provide for an assessment of parents awareness, knowledge and understanding of their children's rights as a baseline from which to develop an information strategy on the UNCRC for parents and families in line with the recommendation made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2002 (CRC/C/15/Add.188 para 21).

An example which evidences the need for information, awareness raising, understanding and skills for parents in relation to supporting their children realise their rights is evident from the NICCY research. It flagged up that when asked about unfairness in the home just under a third (29%) of the children and young people interviewed as part of the research stated that they were concerned at not having a say in family matters and felt that because of their young age their views were either not sought, or simply ignored or over-ruled in decisions taken by their parents (NICCY, 2004 p43-44). Article 12 of the UNCRC requires that children who are capable of expressing their views have the right

to do and have those views given due weight in accordance to their age and maturity, both within as well as outside of the family. Article 5 provides for the right of parents to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of their rights under the Convention.

**Partnership working** – It was advocated that parents and families, including children and young people, must be central to the partnership working approach. They must be recognised and respected as equal partners and empowered and enabled to speak out. Fundamentally parents and families must be able to trust that their partners in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors will work with them to promote and protect the best interests of their children.

It was emphasised that in the final strategy the priority themes and their associated actions must be mapped against the Families Matter outcomes so that it is explicitly demonstrated where actions are contributing to the delivery of outcomes, therefore enabling the identification of areas where further action is required to enable full and comprehensive delivery of the Families Matter outcomes. Again we would highlight that there is a real need for specific and targeted action to deliver on the rights outcome.

**Therefore CiNI would strongly advocate that the outcomes of Families Matter, appropriately parent and family centred, should be directed toward creating confident, responsible and empowered parents who can support their children to realise their rights and achieve the outcomes set in the over-arching Children’s strategy.**

#### **THE SCOPE OF THE STRATEGY**

CiNI welcomes the definition of family provided in the strategy and agrees that the scope of the strategy must, as a minimum cover children and young people aged 0-18 and up to 21 where a child/young person is in care or has a disability. Indeed it was recommended that consideration should be given to raising the age range for access to family support services to 25 in line with the youth strategy and international best practice. We would also highlight that the scope of the strategy must go beyond ‘times of need’ and ‘stages of development’, it must explicitly apply equally across all age groups of children and young people throughout their lives.

Overall there was real concern at the limited focus and action orientated to support for families and parents of adolescent young people, including those young people in substitute families such as foster families. Parents need specific support to help these young people realise their rights in a positive way. Young people are particularly vulnerable at this time of transition into adulthood and have significant experiences of discrimination, where at times they can fall into the gap between children’s services and adult services. Parents need specific information and support services to help them to deal with the frustrations and anxieties experienced by adolescent young people so that they are able to help them overcome the barriers they encounter, so that they, in the same way as their peers, have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

#### **PRIORITY THEME ONE - PARENTAL SUPPORT**

##### **Health Visitors**

During consultation it was highlighted that Families Matter should consider the role that social services could and should have in terms of family support; beyond intervening on child protection concerns, social services should also promote early intervention and preventative approaches which would be more timely and effective.

It was also advocated that the focus should be on the capacity of *all* universal service providers to take a 'whole child' view toward assessment, identification of need and provision of services to meet need, which must include assessing, identifying and providing for the support needs of parents and families. This was regarded as one of the potential opportunities provided by the UNOCINI approach.

### **Sure Start**

CiNI recognises that Sure Start is one of the main departmental initiatives introduced to help strengthen family life and would advocate that it is expanded beyond its current focus on the 20% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, recognising in particular that there are groups of extremely deprived families living in areas that would in overall terms be regarded as affluent.

However we are concerned that Families Matter has limited its focus to Sure Start, thereby failing to consider the support needs of those families and children who do not and cannot currently access Sure Start provision. Beyond Sure Start there are a wide range of high quality support services provided by organisations in the voluntary sector (Home Start, Lifestart, NCH NI, NICMA) to families and children both in group-based settings and in children's own homes. These services must be recognised, equally valued, resourced and supported by the Families Matter strategy. We would advocate that to inform the development of the proposed regional information database that a full and comprehensive audit of current family support services should be undertaken.

**There was real concern conveyed during the consultation that in current Sure Start provision, and indeed all forms of universal provision, children with additional needs including children with disabilities were often invisible.** The experience has been that these services are not consistently accessible to and inclusive of children and families with disabilities. Overall there was a sense that all universal service providers should be skilled up so that provision offered can be inclusive of additional needs, recognising that the type of early intervention which can be provided by universal services would prevent these children and families being forced at a later stage to rely on intensive support services.

### **Positive Parenting**

CiNI notes that the law on physical punishment has recently been changed. It is with grave concern that we note under the new legislation the defence of reasonable chastisement has not been removed entirely, as has been recommended by a raft of domestic and international children's rights bodies, rather its application has been limited and it remains available on a summary charge of common assault.

This missed opportunity to ensure the protection of our children is all the more concerning given that the Government is due to report again to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in July 2007 and has failed to take the opportunity presented to positively address the Committee's serious concerns regarding physical punishment of children. Five years ago the Committee expressed its 'deep regret' that the Government persists in retaining the defence of "reasonable chastisement" and has taken no

significant action towards prohibiting all corporal punishment of children in the family. The Committee stated that it was of the opinion that governmental proposals to limit rather than to remove the “reasonable chastisement” defence did not comply with the principles and provisions of the Convention ... particularly since they constitute a serious violation of the dignity of the child. Moreover, they suggest that some forms of corporal punishment are acceptable and therefore undermine educational measures to promote positive and non-violent discipline. The Committee recommended that Government with urgency adopt legislation to remove the “reasonable chastisement” defence and prohibit all corporal punishment in the family and in any other contexts not covered by existing legislation; promote positive, participatory and non-violent forms of discipline and respect for children’s equal right to human dignity and physical integrity, engaging with children and parents and all those who work with and for them, and carry out public education programmes on the negative consequences of corporal punishment (CRC/C/15/Add. 188 para 35-36)

We believe that in the interest of ensuring clarity on the current status of the law the full provisions of Article 2 of the Law Reform Miscellaneous Provisions should be included in the strategy.

While the actions focused on promoting alternatives to physical punishment contained within the strategy are welcome, it is concerning that these efforts made be undermined by the recent change in the law, which is likely to create even more confusion for parents. On the one hand the DHSSPS is promoting alternatives to physical punishment, while on the other hand it is required to uphold law which states that in some cases physical punishment will be permitted.

During the consultation there was also a clear message that Government must take action to work with the voluntary and community sector to develop and promote awareness of the emotional/psychological abuse of children within families, provide for its identification and develop and deliver appropriate responses that will protect the dignity and best interests of children.

There was strong support for the accreditation of positive parenting courses. In addition to promoting positive parenting through parenting classes it was also highlighted that support should be provided to parents on a one-to-one basis in their own homes if this is their chose.

### **Parenting Education**

CiNI agrees that all parents can benefit from the opportunity to share experiences, improve knowledge, find new approaches and work on their own parenting skills (para 5.15). The value of parent to parent support has been recognised, mostly recently in the Equal Lives report which pointed to its value for parents of children with a learning disability. We would advocate that Families Matter provide for and promote this approach to parental support.

However not all parents and carers have the same life experiences or life circumstances and many have additional needs. For example families where a child/parent has a disability, minority ethnic families, new immigrant families, and substitute families, all have different experiences and stress factors in their daily lives which exert pressure on the family unit. While these parents must have access to universal parenting classes, Families Matter must also develop and implement additional specific parenting education

provision for these families that look at resilience within the family and promote coping strategies.

For families for whom English is not the first language programmes should be delivered through bi-lingual workers and programme materials should be made available in a variety of languages and formats to meet the needs of individual families. Programmes should be adaptable enough to be delivered through a range of methods and styles bearing in mind levels of adult literacy.

Clearly parenting styles and the skills required will vary depending on the age range of children and young people. It is essential that Families Matter both recognises and provides appropriate support for families throughout their children's lives including as they approach, enter and move through adolescence and make the transition to adulthood.

CiNI notes that funding provision has been made available for a Youth and Parent Support Programme which is to develop a network of multi-agency teams that offer early intervention and prevention work with vulnerable young people aged 8-13 and their parents based on assessed needs and agreed frameworks. These are young people at risk of coming into conflict with the law. We would like to see this programme referenced and included within the context of Families Matter. We would also strongly advocate that this programme is further extended and developed to include young people aged 13+ who are at risk of coming into conflict with the law.

### **Family Mediation and Relationship Support**

CiNI warmly welcomes the commitment to action to develop and expand family mediation and relationship support. However again we would highlight that the associated actions are very broad in scope and would benefit from further detail. These must be accompanied by specific targets for action and set alongside performance indicators to measure progress toward delivery of the actions. We would highlight that Family Mediation services have been in existence in Northern Ireland since 1997 and have suffered from a real lack of recognition and valuing of the service they provide to an increasing number of families. Action must be focused on developing, expanding and appropriately supporting and resourcing existing best practice in family mediation. It is also important to note that family mediation services in Northern Ireland remain significantly under developed and under-resourced in comparison to their counterpart services in GB. Government action through and beyond Families Matter must focus on ensuring that Northern Ireland has a proportionate level of family mediation provision to meet the particular needs and circumstances of families in Northern Ireland.

Again while the commitment to action to work collaboratively with voluntary and community organisations in supporting families through the provision of relationship advice and counselling is welcome, we would request more information in the final strategy on how this action will be practically delivered. It was highlighted during consultation that some of the relationship counselling which is currently offered in Northern Ireland is prohibitively expensive and beyond the reach of low-income families and those families who may be in most need of the service. It was advocated that action should be directed toward normalising and de-stigmatising counselling through the provision of holistic and comprehensive child and family advice services, with efforts focused on creating a network of provision which families and children can access and move through easily, perhaps located within local communities in new children's centres.

### **Child Contact Centres**

CiNI welcomes the commitment to action to develop and expand Child Contact Centres in Northern Ireland. However we would emphasise that fundamental to action in this area is the need to ensure the sustainability of existing child contact services. A priority must be to ensure outreach/satellite services are developed through existing services. There was strong support for outreach/satellite provision to be located within communities which would serve to de-stigmatise provision. However it would be essential to ensure that proper risk management is undertaken and that priority remains with providing a safe, neutral environment for children.

In terms of planning new child contact provision the local knowledge that is already available through existing contact centres should be used to help inform decision making on the geographical location of new contact centres and operation of outreach/satellite services.

CiNI believes that in the context of new and further developed child contact provision that the role of the Child Contact Centre Network will become even more crucial and should be further enhanced. Its role must include quality assurance and accreditation of provision, as well as training and development support for staff and volunteers. We would strongly advocate that training should include a specific children's rights module which promotes child-centred practice and the central importance of listening to and acting on the views of the child when making and implementing decisions in relation to contact, whilst giving paramount consideration to promoting the best interests of the child in these circumstances.

Clearly with a central, co-ordinating role the Network should develop and implement robust, standardised evaluation tools and facilitate the collation of appropriately disaggregated data to support evaluation and inform research on the outcomes of contact for children and families.

### **PRIORITY THEME TWO – ACCESS TO SERVICES AND INFORMATION**

CiNi would advocate that this priority theme must flow from the intended scope of the strategy i.e. it must focus on access to preventative and early intervention services as support for families with children in need rather than veering into safeguarding and crisis intervention services, as Families Matter should be aiming to decrease the need for families to revert to these high intervention services.

Action in this area should be directed toward strengthening and further developing the existing high quality provision of information and helpline provision that is currently delivered by Northern Ireland's regional voluntary parenting organisation the Parents Advice Centre.

Again it was emphasised during consultation that an information database and helpline must be accessible to and responsive to the additional needs of our most vulnerable parents and families. Indeed it was also suggested that innovative approaches must be developed to make information accessible as there are families who due to their particular circumstances would prefer face to face contact in terms of providing information, advice and signposting.

### **PRIORITY THEME THREE – ASSESSMENT**

CiNI believes that there is much merit in a standardised and integrated approach to the holistic assessment of a child and their families needs, which we agree should assist with a more effective, earlier identification of additional needs.

During consultation some the perceived positives and negatives of the UNOCINI approach were identified. On the positive side it was felt that it would encourage professionals to take a holistic view of the child and family, rather than viewing the child and family from the perspective of a particular service area. It was also felt that a standard approach to assessment would promote the development of a common language of assessment across all sectors.

There were some concerns expressed that the assessment should not be built on a deficit model, rather equal consideration should be given to the strengths and abilities of the child and family. It was also emphasised that UNOCINI would only operate effectively if information on a child and family was kept up to date and constantly reviewed.

However CiNI has some fundamental concerns regarding the UNOCINI approach. We would request more information on how it will support the delivery of the central outcome of the Children's Strategy which looks toward the creation of a society which respects children's rights. We believe UNOCINI must be able to provide an assessment of the extent to which children and families are able to exercise their rights, and therefore it should highlight where service providers need to take action to support families to be able to help their children realise their rights. We would also highlight that in line with article 12 of the UNCRC and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 UNOCINI must ensure that the child is an active participant in the assessment process and that his/her views are listened to and acted upon during the assessment. Fundamental to the approach must be the objective of assessing the child's needs with a view to a response to assessment which will promote the best interests (article 3) of the child in a non-discriminatory manner (article 2). We would strongly advocate that in advance of the model being rolled out across the sectors that action should be taken to child rights impact assess UNOCINI.

### **PRIORITY FOUR – INFORMATION SHARING**

CiNI recognises the crucial role of information sharing in terms of ensuring timely, appropriate and effective support and where necessary intervention for families and children. As discussed above we believe that the four CYPCs proposed duty on public bodies to co-operate to plan and commission services for children could underpin and facilitate the effective sharing of information between professionals, particularly those at the frontline, within and across professional and sectoral boundaries.

### **PRIORITY FIVE – INTEGRATION AND MULTI-AGENCY WORKING**

While we warmly welcome the long awaited creation of Children's Centres in Northern Ireland we would highlight that at present there is much confusion regarding the development and creation of these centres. We understand that these are primarily a DE lead initiative and rather than focusing on physical centres, these will look at co-ordinating and integrating services in the community. This is extremely welcome as it will enable the identification of gaps in support for families and children. However we would advocate that the DE and DHSSPS should jointly take lead responsibility for these new centres. It will be essential that the new centres ensure that health and social services are co-ordinated and integrated within this new approach. We would request more detailed information on the timeframe and associated resources for the development of children's centres and would strongly advocate that parents and children, as well as their representatives in the voluntary and community sector are consulted and involved from the outset in the planning and development of these new centres.

## **EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

### **Consultation**

Although not referenced in the draft strategy document CiNI is aware that the DHSSPS have commissioned the production of a child-friendly version of the consultation document and have also commissioned a number of organisations to consult directly with children and young people on the draft strategy proposals. This is a positive step toward more inclusive approaches to policy development. **We would strongly advocate that in fulfilment of their section 75 obligations and to enable its own direct engagement with children and young people that the DHSSPS take cognizance of guidelines being developed by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on consultation with children and young people. Further we would encourage officials to liaise with the Participation Network (c/o Children in Northern Ireland) with regard to developing adequate and appropriate consultation expertise to ensure that children and young people are involved in a real and meaningful way in the ongoing development of the Families Matter Strategy.**

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion we trust that DHSSPS will give active consideration to this submission and that it will positively influence the ongoing development of Families Matter. We look forward to viewing an analysis of responses to the consultation and would be keen to engage further in the process to represent the views of those working at the frontline with children and families on a daily basis.

## **APPENDIX CONSULTATION WORKSHOP ATTENDEES**

BAAF NI  
Dry Arch Family Centre  
Family Mediation NI  
Include Youth  
Lifestart Foundation  
Lifestart Mid-Ards  
Mencap NI  
New Life Counselling Service  
Positive Futures  
Prison Fellowship NI  
Sure Start South Belfast  
VOYPIC  
Women's Support Network

### **Input also received from:**

Child Brain Injury Trust  
Mencap NI