

Misc/7

21 March 2007

Ms Sonya McAnulla
sonya.mcanulla@omagh.gov.uk

Mrs Marna Bell
Family Policy Unit
Dept of Health, Social Resources and Public Safety
C4 22 Castle Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3SF

Dear Mrs Bell

Re: Response on the Consultation on “Families Matter: Supporting families in Northern Ireland”

I am writing on behalf of Omagh District Council in response to the above consultation. The following comments and recommendations form the formal response of the Council to this consultation.

- The Council notes the vision of this strategy ‘Our Children and Young People, Our Pledge’ which sets out to improve the life chances for children and young people so that they get the best start in life.
- The Council agrees that the realisation of this vision must have parents at the centre of policy development, working alongside central government, the health & social services and voluntary and community organisations.
- The Council notes the underpinning principles of the strategy and supports their inclusion particularly the reference to policy development and planning being based on evidence and encouraging communities to have a say in the design and delivery of services.
- The Council notes the proposed outcomes of the strategy and supports the provision of timely and appropriate support to families to achieve the outcomes.
- The Council is in agreement with the seven identified outcomes. The Council is particularly concerned about bullying of young people which has resulted in a high incidence of suicides throughout Northern Ireland. The Council also supports the need to address issues of anti-social behaviour and to promote positive inclusion and integration of young people who have such a positive contribution to make to society.

21 March 2007

Consultation on 'Families Matter: Supporting families in Northern Ireland'.

- The Council recognises and supports initiatives and services which focus on prevention and early intervention.
- The Council agrees that this strategy should be closely aligned to other strategies such as the Suicide Prevention Strategy, the Bamford Review on Mental Health & Learning Disability (NI), as it is only through collaborative thinking and partnership working that a full and positive impact on children, young people and their families can be achieved.
- The Council agrees with the priority themes as set out but is concerned that the time span of 10 years to implement the plan is too long. The Council would recommend that adequate resources are sought to implement the plan over 5 years, particularly in relation to the need for early intervention and prevention.
- The Council is very supportive of the role of health visitors particularly through initiatives such as Sure Start. The Council would recommend further additional resources being made available to expand the Sure Start Programme so that it is more widely available. In the Omagh area the Sure Start Programme is a valued resource offering high quality support services but is limited to the numbers it can cater for due to funding shortfalls. Nine new Sure Start Projects across the Province by April 2008 is not sufficient to meet the overall need and the Council request that this is reviewed and that additional funding is sought now to allow more projects to be established or existing projects to expand further into more disadvantaged wards within their catchment and neighbouring areas.
- The Council supports the 'Positive Parenting' initiative but again feels that this is only available in selective areas and it is not as targeted as it should be. Additional resources to expand this should be made available.
- The Council supports the expansion of 'Parenting Education' but again would seek assurance that appropriate resources are made available to make it available in more areas of the Province. The Council supports the establishment of parenting networks and outreach support.
- The Council also supports the availability of 'Family Mediation and Relationship Support' in assisting families to prevent separations or if separation is inevitable to ensure it is less acrimonious so that there is the least disruption possible to the affected children and young people.
- The expansion by April 2008 of Child Contact Centres is to be commended.

(Cont...)

- The need for readily available and easily accessible information is critical to supporting parents and the Council welcomes the efforts being made to expand on the various mediums and venue for parents to obtain such information. The Council is particularly pleased by the recognition of the difficulties experienced in rural isolated areas and the steps being taken to address this.

However, the Council is again concerned at the timescale for the setting up of the Regional Information Data base which is not due to be available until April 2010 although they do welcome the availability of a fully responsive regional helpline by June of this year.

- The Council is conscious that access to services and information in a timely manner is a very important resource for parents. Therefore, the recognition of the needs of the wide and varied family structures is critical to ensuring appropriate and easily accessible information and advice is available to all. The Council supports therefore the design and implementation of a Regional Information Database but is again concerned that the target date is April 2010 and would encourage a quicker implementation date. However, the availability this year, of a fully responsive regional helpline is to be commended but its availability must be widely advertised.
- The Council supports the introduction in April 2007 of a 'common assessment process' which will undoubtedly make the service more customer friendly and focussed hence, more encouraging for families to seek early intervention.
- The Council welcomes the introduction of 'Information Sharing' and the adoption of the holistic approach to working with families and children where the child is at the centre of the assessment and service delivery process. This should narrow the margin of error in relation to Child Protection issues. Equally the benefits of multi-agency working are to be encouraged particularly since evidence shows it assists in earlier identification and intervention.
- The Council would only support the transfer of Surestart and other early year's activities, from the DHSSPS to the Department of Education if the services are resourced appropriately. The Council would not endorse such a transfer if such services had to consequently compete for funding with other school provision. The establishment of 6 new children's centres by April 2008, whilst welcome is not sufficient to meet the requirements of the whole of Northern Ireland.
- With regard to equality implications, the Council does not foresee any adverse impact of any of the 9 categories, however, the Council would seek assurance that the strategy is adequately 'rural proofed'.

-4-

21 March 2007

Consultation on 'Families Matter: Supporting families in Northern Ireland'.

The Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation and hope that the comments made will be taken into consideration in the development of the final strategy.

Yours sincerely

D McSORLEY
Chief Executive