



Department of

**Health, Social Services
and Public Safety**

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agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí**

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Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland

Regional Family and Parenting Strategy

March 2009



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Foreword




This government is committed to ensuring all children get the best start in life and are helped to reach their full potential. This is reflected in *Our Children and Young People, Our Pledge*, a 10 year Strategy that puts the spotlight firmly on the needs of children and young people in Northern Ireland. It is the overarching document which every government department in Northern Ireland has to take into account when introducing any new policy development to ensure children and young people are given the opportunities to fulfil their potential. My Department's strategy, *Families Matter*, supports the aims and objectives of *Our Children and Young People, Our Pledge* and sets out the vision for improving support and services for families and children.

Parents are the people best placed to raise their children. Parents can give their children the emotional and physical care and support necessary for healthy development and well-being. A central theme of this strategy is how we can support parents and families in their role as primary care givers; first educators; and most significantly as role models to their sons and daughters as they grow and develop.

All families have access to universal services, such as, education, health care, parent toddler groups and leisure facilities. Some families, who experience personal or social problems such as relationship breakdown, unemployment, ill health or homelessness, may need access to other services to help them through a difficult time. Providing such assistance at an early stage can help avoid situations deteriorating and becoming major problems which are more difficult to deal with and can take longer to recover from.

It is well recognised that there must be a move towards preventative and early intervention services sooner rather than later. Therefore, this strategy gives priority to prevention and early intervention in supporting families to parent confidently and responsibly, especially when they are facing difficulties. Our aim is to ensure that all parents can access information and services in their local areas to support them in carrying out their parental responsibilities.

To achieve this, we need to work in partnership with children, young people and their families, as well as with other agencies such as education, policing, housing, voluntary and community organisations and social services. We intend to build on and strengthen existing mechanisms such as Children's Service Planning which has a central role in identifying, planning, developing and delivering family support through partnership working in local areas. We also need to ensure that this support is continually improved and built on to meet the real needs of families and children within the community.



My Department is committed to working in partnership, not only with other government departments and statutory bodies, but also with the voluntary and community sector to support families and communities in their roles in improving the quality of life and social well-being of our children and young people.

I believe this integrated approach and focus on early intervention and prevention will meet the needs of families in assisting them help all children and young people fulfil their potential, have better life chances and, in time, become responsible citizens and parents themselves.



Michael McGimpsey

Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Section One:

Introduction and Aim of the Strategy



Section One: Introduction and Aim of the Strategy

1. Introduction and Aim of the Strategy

- 1.1 Government is determined to improve the life chances for children and young people to ensure that every child, irrespective of race, gender, religious belief, age, sexual orientation, disability, background or circumstances, gets the best start in life and the support they need to fulfil their potential. This is the aim of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) strategy - “Our Children and Young People, Our Pledge” (the children and young people’s strategy). The effort to deliver this aim must include responding to the issues that parents will have to cope with as they bring up their children. *Families Matter* moves parents into a central position in policy terms and strives to provide, not only strategic direction for government on how best to assist parents in Northern Ireland, but to also provide detailed initiatives and actions to meet our strategic aims.
- 1.2 We know that support for families cannot be provided by government alone. Rather, government must work with the health and social care services and other statutory agencies, as well as, voluntary, charitable and community organisations and of course, most importantly of all, parents. We must challenge each other to do the best we can, to deliver the best possible future for our children.
- 1.3 The aim of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) is to empower and assist parents to be confident and responsible in helping their children to reach their potential. All parents have access to the universal services to which they and their children are entitled. However, there are occasions when extra help is needed. Life can throw unexpected events and experiences at us, such as unemployment, homelessness, marital/relationship breakdown or bereavement. Some people are better able to cope with change at different times in their lives; many of us find it difficult.
- 1.4 When parents do need help, they still want to be in control and indeed in the vast majority of families they should be. Article 8 of The European Convention on Human Rights, reflected in the 1998 Human Rights Act, upholds the right to family life, which is supported within this strategy. It is important that a balance between intervention and assistance is maintained. See Appendix 1.
- 1.5 There must be a clear understanding of the rights and responsibilities that fall to families and those that fall to government. Parents are the people best placed to raise their children and it is only in extreme circumstances when the welfare of the child is at risk – for example, domestic violence, physical, sexual and emotional abuse – when direct intervention should occur.



- 1.6 It is also important that professionals working with parents should work in partnership and ensure that the views of the parents are taken seriously and respected.
- 1.7 There have been major changes to family structures in Northern Ireland over the last few decades. Today when we talk about families, we do not just mean the traditional mother and father living in the same household as their children. The definition of family has evolved and covers single parent households, children living with step-parents, same-sex families, or children living with a relative.
- 1.8 This strategy recognises a variety of family forms including circumstances in which children and young people are not able, for whatever reason, to live with their birth families. For purposes of this strategy the definition of a family is:

“A family consists of any child or young person under the age of 18 (21 for young people leaving care and disabled young people) and their primary caretakers. A primary caretaker can be a parent, an expectant mother or other biological relative or any person involved in bringing up the child or young person.”

- 1.9 Some children do not live with their biological parents, but are brought up by grandparents or other family members and of course a small number of children have to be cared for by Social Services in foster care or in residential homes. For the purposes of this strategy when we mention parents it incorporates:

“A parent, a guardian, a person acting in the place of the parent, such as a grandparent or step parent with whom the child lives, a person who is legally responsible for the welfare of the child.”

- 1.10 There are many drivers behind developing a regional strategy. At the core is the need to enable parents to support their children and to build communities in which parents can access the support they require.
- 1.11 *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* programme was one of the government’s most ambitious policies and, in the previous political vacuum, it provided the impetus to initiate this strategy. This has now been replaced in Northern Ireland by the OFMDFM Strategy for Children and Young People – “*Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge – A 10 Year Strategy*” as the key driver.

Section One: Introduction and Aim of the Strategy

- 1.12 The children and young people's strategy sets out a common vision and high-level outcomes for children and young people. It sets out performance indicators and the actions, which need to be taken to fulfil the vision over a ten-year period. Most importantly it recognises that parents, carers and communities are key partners in improving the lives of the children and young people.
- 1.13 The overall pledge is to deliver on a shared vision for all our children and young people over the next ten years – **'that all children and young people living in Northern Ireland will thrive and look forward with confidence to the future'**. Our success will be judged by how well we achieve the improved outcomes set down in the key areas of children and young people's lives.
- 1.14 The aim of the children and young people's strategy is to assist organisations to work together at all levels, by facilitating better information sharing, putting in place common standards and ensuring that the focus remains on the child or young person. The strategy will ensure a coordinated approach to the development of policies which impact on the lives of children and young people across government departments and the wider public sector.
- 1.15 *Families Matter* will help to achieve the vision set out in the children and young people's strategy by supporting parents and compliments policy development in child poverty, child protection and safeguarding.
- 1.16 There are a number of other important policy drivers behind this strategy. These are:
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
 - The Programme for Government
 - Care Matters NI
 - Child Poverty
 - Safeguarding
- 1.17 The UNCRC recognises 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. It acknowledges that the family should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community.
- 1.18 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.



- 1.19 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), set out in Appendix 2 of this document, states that:

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

- 1.20 The Convention goes on to recognise –

“that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding”.

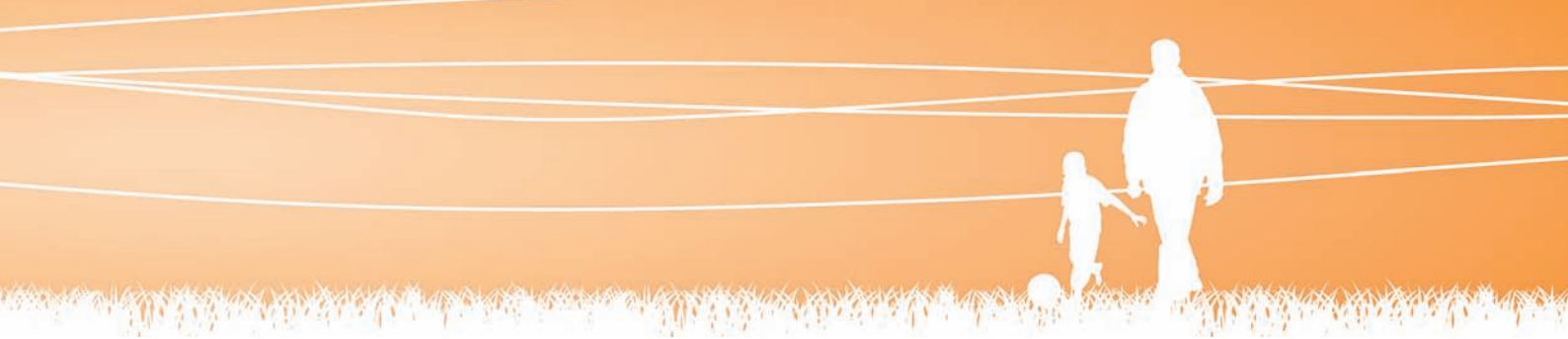
- 1.21 The Programme for Government which sets out government’s strategic priorities and key plans for 2008–2011 to ‘build a shared and better future for all through working together’, underpins the aims of this work. In particular, under the Public Service Agreement 6 (PSA6) Children and Family, we aim to ensure that children are cared for; live in safety; are protected from abuse; receive the support they need to achieve their full potential; become more independent; and grow into well adjusted adults, taking their place in the community.
- 1.22 *Families Matter* also compliments the aims of *Care Matters NI* which focuses on providing support for families in crisis. *Care Matters NI* builds on the Department for Education and Schools (DfES) green paper *Care Matters*, which sets out policies to ensure earlier interventions and support for families where children are on the edge of care. The provision of early intervention and prevention through *Families Matter* will impact positively on those who might otherwise require higher needs based intervention.
- 1.23 There is growing recognition of the need to help and support parents who experience poverty in order to have a positive impact on the lives of children and also recognition that child poverty will not be eradicated simply by tax or economic initiatives. The Child Poverty Review commissioned by the Chancellor, has shown that the quality of parenting is critical if we are to eliminate child poverty in a generation. The quality of parenting in the home is vital. We must therefore shift the balance of family support to those services that assist with early intervention and the prevention of crisis.

Section One: Introduction and Aim of the Strategy

- 1.24 The importance of protecting and safeguarding children and young people in our society is a further issue long recognised by government. *Safeguarding Children in Northern Ireland* will take forward and develop one component of the children and young people's strategy – *Living with Safety and Stability*. Safeguarding incorporates all preventable harm that impacts on the lives of children, with a clear focus on children's personal development and well-being and making children's lives better.
- 1.25 It is through these complementary policies that we will positively impact significantly on children and families.

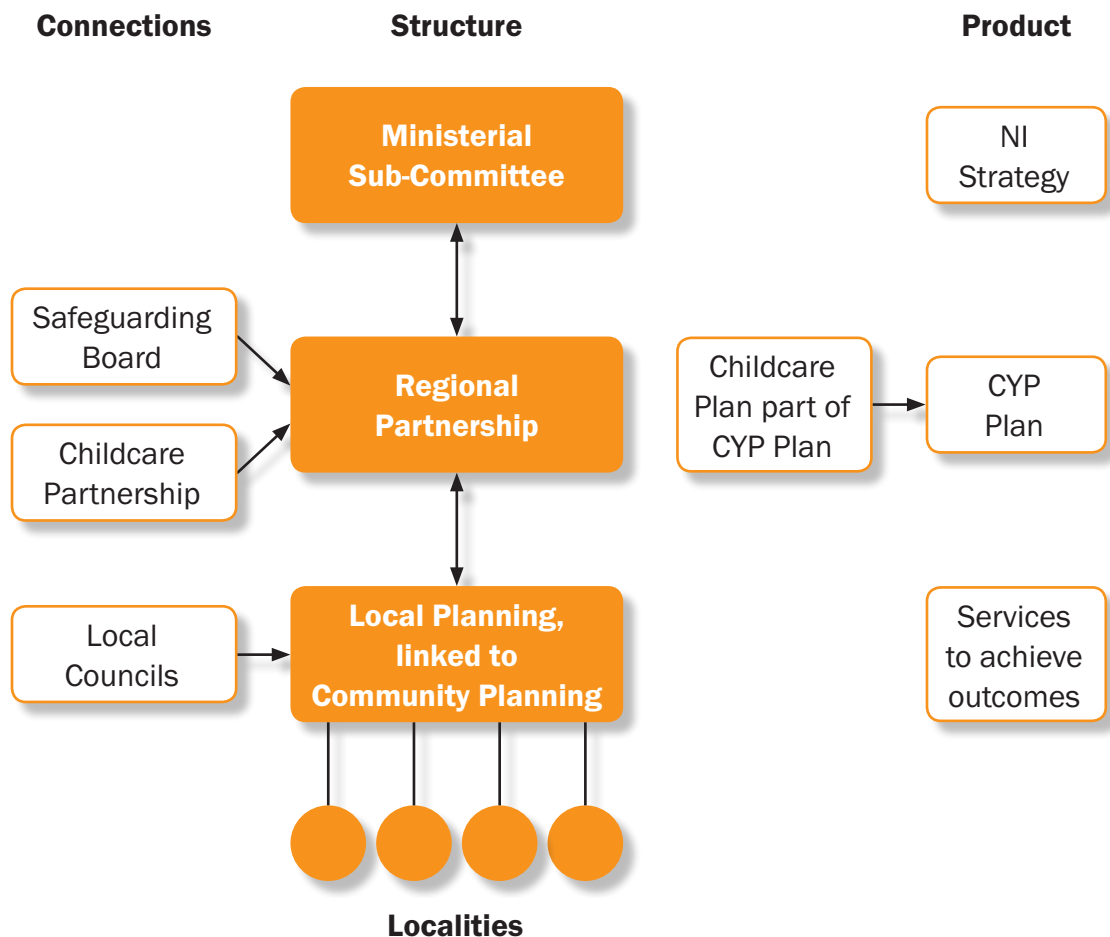
Integrated Planning

- 1.26 We will also promote integrated partnership working to develop and deliver appropriate seamless services for families and children and, in order to implement this strategy effectively, it must be underpinned by effective integrated planning arrangements.
- 1.27 These arrangements should build on existing accountability arrangements of individual Departments and Agencies.
- 1.28 It is recognised that integrated planning and commissioning of services must happen at three levels.
- At Government Level: where all departments of government work together for the improvement and well-being of families and best outcomes for children.
 - At Regional Level: where strategic partnerships are responsible for planning how appropriate agencies will work together.
 - At Local Level: where planning for children's services must be a multi-agency process, which delivers strategic objectives to meet locally assessed need.
- 1.29 Significant progress through partnership working is already evident at government level through the establishment of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People and the Children and Young People's Inter-Departmental Group. These groups ensure the implementation of the action plan and measure each department's contribution to the delivery of jointly agreed outcomes.



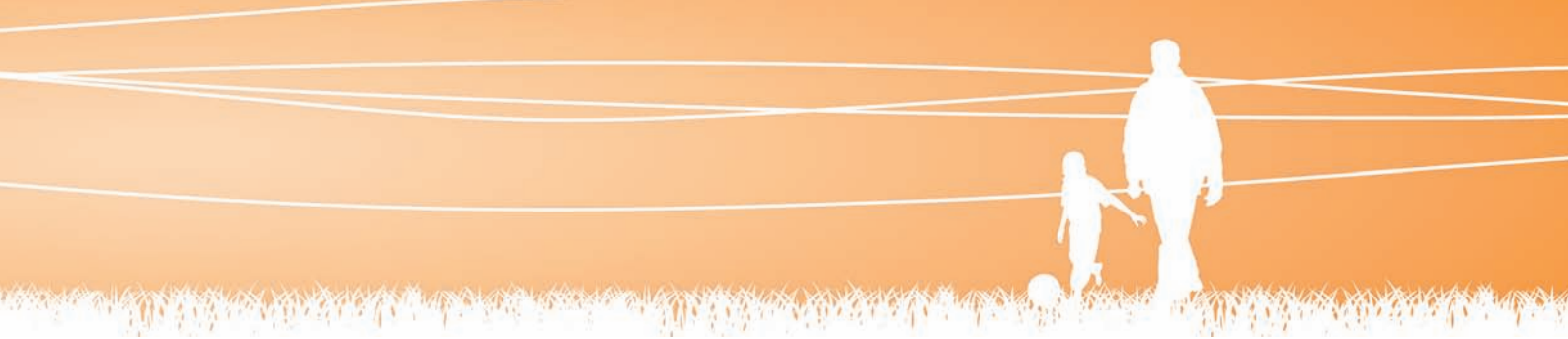
- 1.30 Other Inter-Departmental groups have also been established to enhance this partnership working and this strategy will build on those joint partnerships.
- 1.31 The Area Children and Young People's Committees, led by the four Health and Social Services Boards, are examples of successful regional partnership working. At local level, each Children's Services Plan is rights and needs based, it identifies gaps in service provision and addresses these through inter-agency planning groups. Extensive work has also been undertaken in respect of a Northern Ireland Regional Children's Services Plan 2008 - 2011, which builds on the previous planning process, is now based on the six OFMDFM outcomes and sets out a comprehensive practical vision for integrated planning arrangements for the future. This vision is set out in the diagram below, which sees regional and local integrated planning directly contributing to improvements in the outcomes for children and young people as set out in the OFMDFM strategy.

Proposed Integrated Planning and Commissioning of Children's Services



Section One: Introduction and Aim of the Strategy

- 1.32 OFMDFM announced the setting up of one of the implementation structures for the children and young people's strategy– the 'Strategy Planning and Review Group'. It is envisaged that a temporary structure for integrated planning will be set up, with a linkage to the Group from the four Children and Young People's Committees, with regional and local integrated planning processes, all contributing to improvement in outcomes for children and young people.
- 1.33 The involvement and active participation of children, young people and parents at local level is currently facilitated through the Children's Services Planning processes. This participation must mirror the mechanisms in place across government, regional and local levels, with children, young people and families participating at all levels, recognising that already existing mechanisms for the participation of children should not be duplicated.
- 1.34 We believe that the joint planning undertaken by Children's Services Planning will be crucial to the delivery of effective family support services.
- 1.35 Changes under the Review of Public Administration (RPA) will also provide the opportunity for structures to allow services for children, young people and families to be planned and commissioned to achieve the outcomes set out in this strategy.
- 1.36 An example of successful regional integrated working is the CAWT (Co-operation and Working Together) Children's Services Planning and Information Project. Under the CAWT initiative, Children's Services Planners and Information Officers from two Health and Social Services (HSS) Boards in Northern Ireland and two regions of the Health Service Executive in Republic of Ireland have produced a framework for integrated planning for outcomes for children and young people. This is an easy to use tool to support integrated planning at any level, involving children and young people, their families and communities.
- 1.37 An example of a best practice model of local services working in partnership is the South Belfast Sure Start, which offers a range of childcare services and services to parents across six locations. These are The Markets, Sandy Row, Ballynafeigh, Taughmonagh, The Village, Donegal Pass. Working in partnership with the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB), the Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT), voluntary sector services and the local community, these services include a school starter programme for children in transition to nursery school; health visiting and health promotion services; midwifery support;



speech and language support, with a bespoke programme for children from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities for whom English is a second language. Parental support is also provided through family support services including debt management; job clubs; alternative therapies; women's groups and preparation for employment courses.

1.38 Other examples of best practice models of local services are:

- The Dry Arch Integrated Children's Centre, which operates over a number of locations in Dungiven and Limavady providing an integrated Family Support and Child Care Service to local children, young people and their families. It works in partnership with the Western HSCT, Western Education and Library Board, Limavady Borough Council and local schools and nurseries.
- The Northern Locality Groups Partnerships representing the statutory, voluntary and community sectors, are formed for each district council area with input from parents, children and young people. An audit of need provides the basis for greater integration of existing services and cross agency plans for new services to meet the identified gaps. For example, the Larne group has introduced a range of services to complement existing provision, such as, family support for 0-4 year olds provided in community settings; peer education around drug and alcohol misuse; inter-generational mentoring mums; Pyramid Plus improving the mental and emotional well being of 8-9 year olds; transition from primary to post primary and the Choices programme aimed at adolescents at risk of offending.

Section Two: Vision, Principles and Outcomes



Section Two: Vision, Principles and Outcomes

2. Vision, Principles and Outcomes

- 2.1 DHSSPS has a duty to improve the health and social well-being of the people of Northern Ireland (Article 4, Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972). It discharges these duties by ensuring the provision of appropriate health and social care services, both in clinical settings, such as hospitals and GPs' surgeries, and in the community, through nursing, social work and other professional services. It supports programmes of health promotion and education to support the community to adopt activities, behaviours and attitudes, which will contribute to the better health and well being of the population.
- 2.2 DHSSPS is committed to the improvement of children's health and emotional well-being, by delivering services that will assist parents in the discharge of their responsibilities and improve the outcomes for their children. This commitment is expressed in terms of a vision supported by statements of values and principles.

The Vision

'All children and young people are valued during childhood. Children and young people reach their potential and have the opportunity to lead full, healthy and satisfying lives by becoming active contributors to their community through participating socially, educationally and economically in the life of the community'.

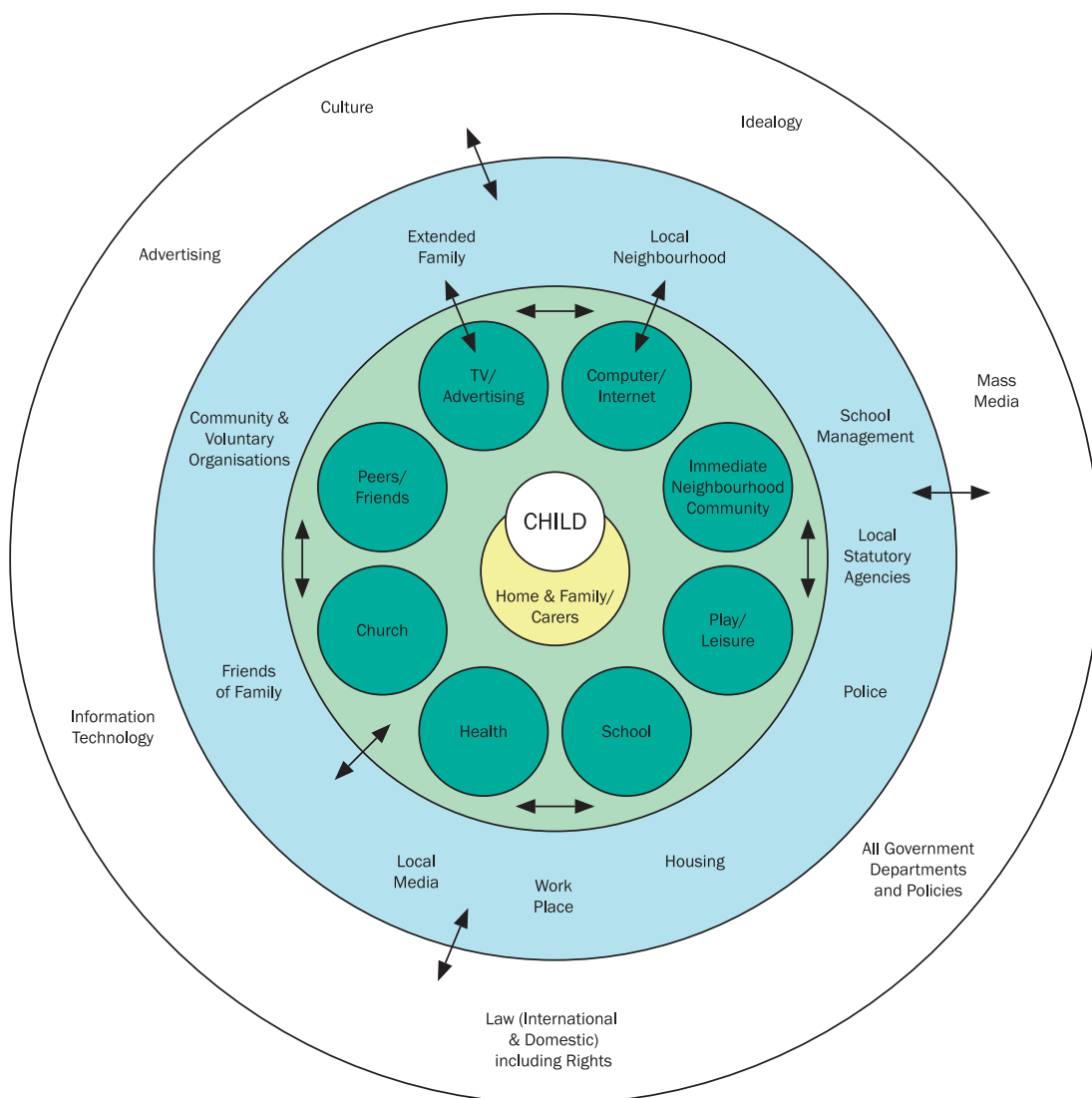
- 2.3 DHSSPS wants to involve children, young people, their families and communities in the development of preventative services. We want children, young people and their families to be empowered with the skills and knowledge to protect themselves from abuse, harassment, discrimination, prejudice, exploitation and neglect. To develop the confidence and capability to love, protect and care for their community and family members. We want families to know how and where to get assistance when they need it and have timely access to those services when they need help in resolving difficulties.



- 2.4 To achieve this, this strategy endorses the ‘whole child’ approach that draws on the work of the Northern Ireland Children’s Services Planning process, which proposes that a whole child model should be regarded as a core map for integrated planning.

Diagram 1: Whole Child Model.

Adapted from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of the environment. Text and Model adapted from C. Kopp/Krakov, *Child Development in the Social Context* (Figure 12.1) © 1982 by Addison-Weslwy Publishing Co., Inc



Section Two: Vision, Principles and Outcomes

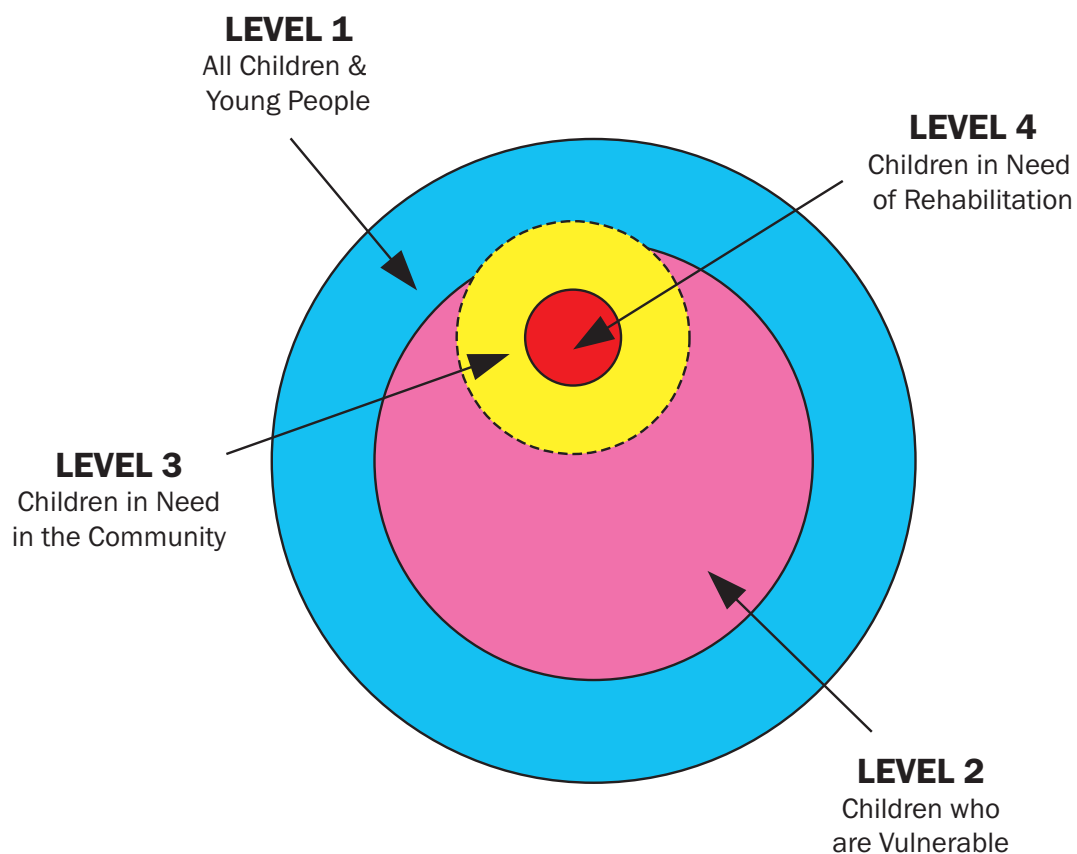
Northern Ireland Family Support Model

- 2.5 Family support is defined as the provision of a range of supports and services to ensure that all children and young people are given the opportunity to develop to their full potential. It aims to promote their development primarily by supporting and empowering families and strengthening communities. Its focus is on early intervention, ensuring that appropriate assistance is available to families at the earliest opportunity at all levels of need.
- 2.6 The wider vision of family support has been articulated in the Northern Ireland Family Support Model, which has been adopted by the four Children and Young People's Committees in Northern Ireland. This wider vision of the totality of family support sets out how all organisations, with a responsibility for delivering services to children and families, should support families to become empowered, confident, responsible and able to help their children to reach their full potential. This strategy will be informed by this wider vision of family support, which sets a blueprint for all organisations across sectors and partnerships to enable children to achieve the outcomes set out in the children's strategy, through ensuring that a range of support services are developed for families and carers.
- 2.7 The Family Support Model, initially developed by Pauline Hardiker, is used to map and understand the range of family support services. It enables a 'whole-system' approach to service planning to be conceptualised and emphasises the important links between the different levels of provision. Further, it is important that adequate service provision exists at all levels of the family support continuum. The most vulnerable children and families need to be supported in making the best use of the universal services that exist for all families. Many children and young people can be vulnerable at particular points of their development and will need the support of preventative services to ensure that more enduring problems are not allowed to occur.



- 2.8 The Hardiker model has been adapted to show need and services as in the diagram below.

Northern Ireland Family Support Model



- 2.9 In terms of need, the diagram above represents how, (whichever definition of need we use), it is important to see that populations of children with different needs are not mutually exclusive. This diagram starts with the total population of children and young people and smaller sub-populations with additional needs. This model details four levels of need, which can be responded to by four levels of services.

Section Two: Vision, Principles and Outcomes

2.10 The levels of services are described as follows:

- Level 1: this represents services for the whole population, such as mainstream health care, education, leisure facilities, etc.
- Level 2: this represents support for children who are vulnerable, through an assessment of need and are targeted through specific services.
- Level 3: this represents support to families, or individual children and young people, where there are chronic or serious problems, provided through a complex mix of services across both the statutory and voluntary/community sector.
- Level 4: this represents support to families, or individual children and young people, where the family has broken down temporarily or permanently, levels 1-3 services having not met their needs.

2.11 It is widely acknowledged that early intervention produces positive dividends in terms of children and families not needing more specialist services at a later date. The aim of the higher levels of support (3 and 4) is to affect the situation in the family positively, so that the child and/or family can be supported through level 1 and 2 services, (and therefore no longer need specialist services) alongside the mainstream population. This strategy, in conjunction with *Care Matters NI*, provides an integrated approach to ensure that needs based support is provided to all children and families, and that through investment in early intervention and prevention there will be a positive impact on families and a reduction in need for higher levels of support. Those responsible for planning and commissioning services are aware of the current inequity in resourcing early intervention services compared to those of higher needs and this must be addressed.

2.12 Utilising the Family Support Model will ensure good outcomes for children, young people and their families, service provision and service planning, with the provision of adequate services across all the Hardiker levels. The task for all multi-agency partnerships will be to map the provision of services and gaps, and for individual organisations to understand where they can provide services to address gaps.



Principles

- 2.13 The principles supporting this vision and which underpin this strategy are:
- That children and young people are safe and secure.
 - Approaches to developing policies and services for children and young people should be holistic and integrated.
 - The 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.
 - The evaluation of outcomes should be open and transparent to all.
 - Innovation and creativity in developing policy should be valued further.
 - Encourage all stakeholders – statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to work together in partnership, especially in participation and collaboration with children, young people and their families.
 - Encourage communities to have a say in the design and delivery of services.
 - Promote social inclusion through developing strong families and communities and services to prevent children being adversely affected by discrimination and/or economic and social disadvantage.
 - Provide services that will empower and promote the independence of children, young people and their families enabling communities to help themselves.
- 2.14 In addition, services should be planned using a set of operating principles to identify and respond to need and improve the outcomes for children. This could be individual services, partners working together or making better usage of existing resources. The planning of services should reflect the principles identified in this strategy. Included at Appendix 3 is a set of principles, devised through the Northern Ireland Children's Services Planning process, which will be used in the allocation of funding for family support preventative services.

Section Two: Vision, Principles and Outcomes

The Outcomes

2.15 As *Families Matter* is a supporting pillar of the children and young people's strategy, the proposed outcomes of this strategy are clearly related to those listed in the overarching document, which are;

- **Being healthy** – enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle free of alcohol and drug abuse, with access to the services to maintain such a lifestyle. Families should be able to develop the confidence and capabilities to love and protect their family members.
- **Keeping safe** – being protected from harm and neglect; living without fear. Children and their families should be able to live in safe, secure communities, provided with the skills and knowledge to protect themselves from abuse, harassment, discrimination, prejudice, exploitation and neglect.
- **Enjoying, learning and achieving** – getting the most out of life and obtaining the skills and confidence to realise their potential. Children and young people should be supported to achieve their educational potential by supporting their families and affording them access to both universal and specialist services in times of need.
- **Making a positive contribution** – add value to the community and society by not engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour. Supported by multi-disciplinary and cross-organisational working within the community.
- **Economic well being** – having the ability to do the things that you want to, to give you fulfilment and enjoyment, with enough money and the prospects to do well in life. Financial support to help families in times of crisis.
- **Enjoy your rights** – everyone has the right to be free from the things that harm them. Everyone should expect those with a duty of care towards them to uphold the laws that are there to protect the public. Violation of the rights of children and their families should not be tolerated and any failure to do so should be dealt with appropriately.

Section Three:

The Scope of the Strategy



Section Three: The Scope of the Strategy

3. The Scope of the Strategy

- 3.1 There have been significant developments in health and social care services for children and families over the last few years. Support services for children and families now cover a wide range, such as, advice for childhood obesity; teenage pregnancy; childhood immunisation programmes; support for children in care; adoption; fostering; child and adolescent mental health support; children with disabilities; health visiting; community nursing, etc.
- 3.2 This strategy focuses on universal support and preventative and early intervention services to support parents, children and young people, not only at particular times of need or stages in the development of their child, but continuously throughout children's lives. Through this strategy and the initiatives addressing higher level needs within Care Matters NI, the full range of effective family support will be provided and it is therefore imperative that in order to achieve better outcomes for families and reduce pressure on acute services, equal priority is given to both strategies when commissioning services and that this is reflected in the allocation of resources.
- 3.3 There has been ongoing work at looking at how parents should be supported. The Area Children and Young People's Committees have all produced family support strategies. These focus on the high level outcomes which drive services for children and young people using the "whole child model", together with a focus on the requirements of the UNCRC.
- 3.4 Other strategies being developed within DHSSPS and across government will also contribute to the children and young people's strategy and will demonstrate the continuing cross-departmental approach to government, which is designed to ensure there is an integrated approach to policy development.



3.5 The following policies demonstrate the ongoing work being undertaken by government:

- Suicide Prevention Strategy
- The Bamford Review on Mental Health and Learning Disability (NI)
- Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Fit Futures
- Re-design of Community Nursing
- Drugs and Alcohol
- Fostering
- Adopting – The Future
- Domestic Violence
- Sexual Violence Strategy

This list is illustrative and not exhaustive.

Section Four:

Key Themes



Section Four: Key Themes

4. Key Themes

- 4.1 During the development of this strategy, we consulted with key stakeholders in the statutory, voluntary and community sector and parents about improving the provision of family support services currently and over the next 10 years. They were asked to identify key priorities; suggest how timely, effective, appropriate and integrated services could be achieved; and to identify services, which if combined and delivered regionally, could be rendered more efficient and effective. Parents were also asked to highlight what services worked for them, where they felt the gaps were, and what they felt needed to be improved, including how access to services could be enhanced.
- 4.2 Valuable information was obtained from the consultation process to enable DHSSPS to identify four key themes to be taken forward over the life span of this strategy.
- 4.3 The key themes on which DHSSPS will act upon are:
1. Information for Parents and Service Planners
 2. Access
 3. Supporting Families and Parents
 4. Working Together for Families and Communities

It is important to note that while the above areas will appear in numbered themes, the Department considers them all to be of equal importance.

Key Theme One – Information for Parents and Service Planners

- 4.4 The provision of information is an important part of supporting parents. It should be relevant, clear, accessible and current, both for parents and those commissioning services. Up-to-date information ensures there will be no duplication of services and provides valuable assistance in the identification of gaps in services which are needs based.
- 4.5 There is a wide variety of types of family in Northern Ireland today, who will need to access informal and formal advice and information services differently.



- 4.6 We need to ensure that information is readily available to both parents and professionals on the full range of services available to them. This can be achieved by the development of a regional information service. This service will be a resource for parents and professionals to readily access information on services available; assist with timely referrals; and be a resource to service planners helping identify areas of unmet need and avoid service duplication.
- 4.7 We also need to provide information on how well children and young people are doing, in relation to indicators linked to the children and young people's strategy outcomes. It will be important to bring these two types of information together, to identify the need and location of additional services. This information can then be used to inform the effective allocation of resources regionally, sub-regionally and locally with appropriate monitoring procedures in place.
- 4.8 These two types of information have been brought together by CAWT - a mapping system which currently provides information in the cross-border region. A regional information system will be developed through Children's Services Planning, building on the CAWT system and databases of services already available.

Key Theme Two – Access

- 4.9 Not every family needing help readily accesses the services available. This can be due to a number of factors. There are families who are already experiencing exclusion in other areas of life, for example, minority ethnic parents, those who do not speak English or parents who have mental health or substance misuse problems. Fathers are another group of parents who are not perceived as requiring conventional services and often face barriers to accessing support.
- 4.10 One of the biggest barriers to parents seeking help is the stigma that is perceived to be associated with using social services or specialist services. The use of other venues for consultations with families, such as, schools, community centres, GPs' surgeries, etc., where it is normal to see a parent going in and out of such premises, may provide one possible solution to this problem. In addition, accessibility to information should be available through a variety of formats, such as, written information packs/leaflets, face to face consultation, media and appropriate methods of signposting.

Section Four: Key Themes

- 4.11 All people irrespective of diversity, rurality, poverty and language should have access to and information on services that are needs based. A step forward in terms of accessibility has been the establishment of a Regional Interpreting Service. The primary aim of the service is to ensure that key information produced by health and social care services organisations is accessible to service users with various needs. It will provide basic information on health and social care services in Northern Ireland for people who are not proficient in the English language.
- 4.12 A further best practice example of promoting access to services is the Bi-Lingual Workers South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP). The STEP programme uses bilingual workers in a range of organisational activities resulting in:
- The provision of initial information in the language of the client which is both cost effective and efficient.
 - The use of bilingual qualified tutors to facilitate learning English for those adults with little or no English.
 - The provision of bilingual staff to Sure Start, enabling maximum benefit of the service to families who could not access the programme without this link (Lithuanian, Tetum, Portuguese, Polish).
 - The use of bilingual professionals it has trained to provide access to consultation, research and policy for non-English speaking stakeholders.
- 4.13 As a result, STEP is able to provide a stream of skilled qualified bilingual workers to agencies within the statutory sector, for example, local government, community health and social care, schools and further education colleges.
- 4.14 Access to and uptake of services must be appropriately monitored by service providers to ensure quality and effectiveness of the services provided and that there is no duplication. One way that commissioners, planners and service providers can ensure quality of services would be through the development of a quality standards framework.
- 4.15 To improve access to information even more, we need to ensure that parents can get support whenever they need it. By providing a fully responsive regional helpline, parents will be able to get timely advice and the right support when they seek it.



Key Theme Three – Supporting Families and Parents

- 4.16 Parents and how they fulfil their role, as parents, are the most important factor in influencing how well most children do. By nurturing our children, protecting them, teaching them and acting as a role model for them, we help our children become happy, healthy and responsible citizens. In this sense, good parenting can be described as one of the best ways to prevent our children experiencing difficulties as children or indeed in adult life. Government recognises this and that it has a role to play in helping parents gain the skills that they need to help their children reach their full potential.
- 4.17 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.
- 4.18 Uptake of universal services should be maximised. For example, the ongoing continued development of Health Visiting services should link the Child Health Development Programme, as set out in Health for all Children (Hall 4), to support the health and well-being of children within an integrated interagency context, with a clear view that current provision needs to be strengthened.
- 4.19 Service provision should be available for families that want or need additional services and support. These include those services selected by families, for example, parenting education, anger management, debt management and positive parenting.
- 4.20 **Parenting Education:** Throughout the different stages of a child’s life there will be times when parents may need additional support. There are a number of sources of support to assist parents at these times. Parenting Education Programmes are one such source to help parents develop confidence and parenting skills.
- 4.21 Parenting classes have in the past been seen as being a response to a problem, for parents who are already viewed in some way as failing. This is a major misconception – *all* parents can benefit from the opportunity to share experiences, improve knowledge, find new approaches and work on their own parenting skills. We acknowledge that providing parental support through the provision of a wide range of professional, high quality parenting education programmes can also provide better outcomes for children and families.

Section Four: Key Themes

- 4.22 **Positive Parenting:** It is important that parents have the skills and information that will allow them to deal with their children's behaviour in a positive way. Progress on promoting positive parenting has been made through a number of initiatives. For example, the Department, in conjunction with the Area Child Protection Committees, has published and distributed the 'Safe Parenting Handbook'. This provides information and signposting to parents on a range of issues, including positive parenting.
- 4.23 The law on physical punishment in the home has just been changed. Under the new legislation the defence of reasonable chastisement will only be available on a summary charge of common assault. It is vital that we play our part in promoting awareness with parents about this change in legislation and in providing them with the knowledge and the skills to support them in considering alternatives to physical punishment.
- 4.24 The Inter-Disciplinary Group on Positive Parenting (IDGPP) has initiated a comprehensive information campaign and published two 'Top Tips' positive parenting booklets, which support parents in considering alternatives. The Department will continue to support this campaign.
- 4.25 Support must also be provided through **locality based services**, such as, statutory services like the Sure Start programme and voluntary/community services, for example, the Dry Arch Integrated Children's Centre. It is important that consideration is given to funding streams which may come from different routes, being used together to provide the appropriate support for parents in any particular area.
- 4.26 **Children Centres:** The idea behind the Children's Centre programme in England is based on the concept that providing integrated education, care, family support and health services, are the means to determining good outcomes for children and their parents. Children's Centres provide a wide range of services for children and families, such as, health services; parental outreach services; family support, including support for parents of children with special needs; and a base for childminders. They can provide a service hub within the community for parents and providers of childcare services.
- 4.27 **Sure Start:** The Sure Start Programme, administered by the Department of Education (DE), aims to provide vital support to parents and children when it can have the greatest effect, that is, when children are very young. Sure Start aims to strengthen families by encouraging early bonding between parents and their children. It recognises the importance of children and families and one of the



core services to be provided under any Sure Start project is support for families and parents. The Government's commitment to the Sure Start programme has been demonstrated by the extra funding that had been secured through the Children and Young People's package to enable its expansion. This expansion includes new projects, satellite services and existing services extending their boundaries to incorporate additional wards.

- 4.28 **Extended School Model:** A further initiative assisting in supporting families, undertaken by DE, is the extended school model. An Extended School provides a range of services and activities beyond the school day to help meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community. It engages in collaboration and partnership working with neighbouring schools and statutory and voluntary and community sector organisations operating in the community. An Extended School may provide support for families including opportunities for training in parenting skills, supporting their children's learning, leisure activities, ICT skills, healthy living skills, etc.
- 4.29 **Relationship Support and Family Mediation:** We recognise that emphasis must be placed on intervention at the early stages of difficulty in a family, before potential breakdown. Marriage and relationship support, such as family counselling, enables adults and children to have access to information, advice and effective support at key life stages and at particular times of challenge or crisis, which may be associated with the start (or an increase in) relationship difficulties. We recognise the effect relationship counselling has on helping families stay together.
- 4.30 Parental separation affects many children. Over the last 10 years approximately 2500 parental couples separated. In 2007, figures show that there were 2913 divorces and 2438 children in Northern Ireland experienced the separation of their parents. The process of separation is almost always a difficult one, but where it is handled well, the likelihood of it having an adverse impact on the child can be greatly reduced. Where separation is handled badly and in particular, where children are drawn into parental conflict, then the effects can be profoundly damaging for children. Children in this situation are likely to do less well in life – they are more likely to do less well at school, to truant or to run away from home. However, these risks can be reduced if parents can resolve parenting issues in an amicable fashion. Evidence has shown that those parents who underwent some kind of mediation experienced less acrimonious divorce proceedings and improved post-divorce relationships between parents and their children.

Section Four: Key Themes

- 4.31 **Child Contact Centres:** The importance of maintaining contact with both parents and the positive effect this has on a child's outcome is well documented. However, not all separations and divorces can be resolved amicably and those children whose parents are in conflict need a safe, neutral place in which they can maintain or establish a relationship with both parents. Child Contact Centres provide these neutral venues to promote and support contact between parents, guardians or other family members and children who do not live together. We recognise the importance of providing a safe, neutral environment for children, so they can build or maintain loving relationships with both parents and are keen to extend the provision of these services and those of the Court Welfare Service across Northern Ireland.
- 4.32 All services need to be planned and delivered on a locality basis, on assessment of need and mainstreamed, with all service providers working together. This should be an investment priority for government departments, authorities and organisations with responsibility for families and children, if we are to make good on our intentions, regarding early intervention and prevention.

Key Theme Four – Working Together for Families and Communities

- 4.33 The relationship between service provider and service receiver is closely interlinked with the process of support, where the processes need to be able to adapt to the changes in the circumstances of children and families.
- 4.34 There are different ways in which families and parents receive support, which can broadly be described as formal and informal.
- 4.35 Formal support is usually provided by larger organisations in response to the needs of the service user, such as social services, health services, religious organisations and regional voluntary and community family organisations. The users of formal support networks will usually have been referred or will have self-referred. Informal support is normally provided by relatives, friends or neighbours and is normally accessed through people's own networks within the community. Informal support can play a vital role in helping parents cope, but are often not available to some of the most vulnerable families, who for a variety of reasons, may be isolated from social and family networks.
- 4.36 We know that parents want more support and that they want this support to continue beyond their child's early years. Integrated working using a holistic approach is required and should reflect the Whole Child Model – (Section 2, diagram page 17, refers).



- 4.37 **The Whole Child Model**, which is supported by international best practice, suggests that improving outcomes for children and young people can only be achieved effectively through integration at the following three levels:
- Integrated planning of services for children, young people and families.
 - Integrated services for children, young people and families – across agencies and sectors.
 - Integrated direct work with children, young people and their families – through wraparound approaches with multi-agency teams and services based together, so as to address the range of the child and family needs in a holistic way.
- 4.38 Planning for such services should be integrated as detailed earlier in this document. (Section1 – Integrated Planning refers).
- 4.39 **Integration/Multi Agency Working:** This is necessary to ensure:
- earlier identification of need and intervention;
 - easier or quicker access to services and expertise;
 - better support for parents;
 - children's needs are addressed more appropriately; and
 - the provision of a more holistic approach to the needs of children, young people and families.
4. 40 Good examples of multi-agency and integrated working are Full Services School Model, the Wraparound services for disabled children and young people in the Southern Area, Sure Start and Children's Centres.
- 4.41 Frontline universal services need to be able to identify and respond to families needs at critical 'turn to' times, when families are more likely to welcome help and crisis can be avoided. These services also need to be able to effectively assess and refer parents and children to appropriate and readily accessible services, taking into account the expertise of parents.

Section Four: Key Themes

- 4.42 **UNOCINI:** One barrier that prevents different organisations working effectively is the different approaches being taken to address the same issues. To overcome this, a common assessment initiative, called Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI), is being developed and consulted upon. With appropriate training, it will be used by a wide range of people working with children and families, including key workers, such as, health visitors, social workers, the community nursing sector and also the voluntary and community sector.
- 4.43 The UNOCINI will be a significant factor in helping to deliver frontline services that are integrated and focused around the needs of children and young people. The UNOCINI will introduce a consistent approach to carrying out an assessment of a child's and their family's additional needs and deciding how those needs should be met. It will be used by professionals across children's services in Northern Ireland.
- 4.44 The UNOCINI will assist with a more effective, earlier identification of additional needs, particularly in universal services. It is intended to provide a simple process for a holistic assessment of a child's needs and strengths, taking account of the role of parents, carers and the impact of environmental factors on their development. Practitioners will then be better placed to agree, with the child and family, about what support is appropriate. The UNOCINI will also help to improve integrated working by promoting coordinated service provision.
- 4.45 However, whilst introducing a common assessment process will ensure children needs are looked at in a consistent way by professionals across agencies and organisations, these professionals need to be able to easily access the additional supports the child and family need to meet these needs. The development of local service partnerships or service networks through the locality planning approach outlined above are crucial in supporting the effective functioning of the UNOCINI common assessment and referral tool.
- 4.46 Failure to share information appropriately among those who work with children and parents can result in missed opportunities to intervene at an earlier stage before problems have become acute. DHSSPS has produced guidance on information sharing policy standards and criteria for agencies working with children in NI.



- 4.47 **Robust Protocols:** Priority must be given to the importance of sharing information through robust protocols to meet needs through accurate assessments for appropriate services.
- 4.48 At an organisational level, the work of the four Children and Young People's Committees and in particular the efforts of the Child Care Partnerships and Children's Services Planning Working Groups, have made excellent progress in helping organisations, statutory and voluntary, to work more closely. Nonetheless, this work has to be supported by the appropriate sharing of information by staff on the ground if we are to develop a truly holistic approach to meeting children's needs.
- 4.49 With relevant information, practitioners can form sound judgments, assess needs and decide on the appropriate services to meet those needs.
- 4.50 It is important that service providers, both statutory and voluntary, who come into contact with children and families in making decisions, have in place robust guidance and protocols for information sharing and work together for the best interest of the family and child.

Section Five:

End Note - The Way Forward



Section Five: End Note - The Way Forward

5. End Note - The Way Forward

- 5.1 This strategy has set out the vision for the future support of families and children. To enable the effective implementation of this vision DHSSPS secured funding through the Children and Young People's package. This document has set out a number of key areas DHSSPS envisages as necessary for future investment, development and enhancement of services.
- 5.2 The initial work must be built on. In order to ensure the effectiveness of these and future initiatives, an action plan, along with robust monitoring and evaluation procedures will be needed. These will be developed in conjunction with other departments, the Children Services Planning process and our voluntary and community partners.

Appendices



APPENDIX 1

The European Convention on Human Rights

ARTICLE 8

1. Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.
2. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.



APPENDIX 2

UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The principle of supporting parents and family life is set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Article 3 states-

“State Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures”.

Article 18 states-

“For the purposes of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present convention, State 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 20 states-

“A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the state”.

APPENDIX 3

Northern Ireland Children's Services Planning Principles

1. Service design and development is based on promotion of children's rights.
2. Services develop a whole child perspective that is aware of the interacting relationships between child, family and community.
3. Working in partnership is an integral part of supporting families. Partnership includes children and young people, families, professionals and communities.
4. Family Support interventions are needs led and strives for the minimum intervention required.
5. A clear focus on the wishes, feelings, safety and well-being of children is maintained.
6. Services are based on a strengths based perspective which is mindful of resilience as a characteristic of many children and families' lives.
7. Family support services strengthen informal support networks.
8. They should be accessible and flexible in respect of location, timing, setting and changing needs.
9. Families are encouraged to self-refer and multi-access referral paths will be facilitated.
10. The participation of service users and providers in the planning, delivery and evaluation of family support services is promoted on an ongoing basis.
11. Services aim to promote social inclusion and equality, addressing issues around ethnicity, disability and rural/urban communities.
12. Measures of success are routinely built into provision so as to facilitate evaluation based on attention to the outcomes for service users and thereby facilitate ongoing support for quality services based on best practice.

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