



northern ireland commissioner
for children and young people

**Response to the consultation on:
Draft Priorities and Budget
2005 - 2008**

9th December 2004

1. Statutory Responsibility

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for children and young people (NICCY) was established in October 2003. Under the terms of its enabling legislation, the Commissioner for children and young people (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, Article 7 requires the office of the Commissioner to review the “adequacy and effectiveness of services relating to children and young people” and to advise Ministers and/or the Secretary of State accordingly.

As the pre-cursor and foundation to service provision the draft Priorities and Budget 2005 – 2008 clearly falls within the duties outlined at Article 7 (2) (3) & (4) of the Commissioner for children and young people (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

2. Background

NICCY have corresponded with and met officials from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to discuss the draft Priorities and Budget 2005-2008 in more detail and to check understanding and interpretation of the relevant aspects of the consultation document.

We have also sought to meet with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for the draft Priorities and Budget 2005 – 2008. With his current responsibilities and schedule we have not been able to meet with Mr Pearson. We have however arranged to meet with the Second Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance and Personnel to outline our views and concerns in order that we might meet our duties under Article 7 (4) of the Commissioner for children and young people (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

In recognition that the draft Priorities and Budget 2005 -2008 contain issues with regard to the provision of services to children and young people of both a global nature and those more directly related to the allocation within government departments, we will also be making representations directly to Ministers and departments.

This document will therefore serve two functions; as the basis for our response to the consultation on the draft budget and priorities 2005 -2008 and as the basis for further representations to the Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State and senior officials with responsibility for both the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department for Education.

Our legislation also requires us to have due regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In late 2003 we commissioned Queen’s University to undertake a large scale research project comparing Northern Ireland to the standards of the

convention¹. In general terms, the research demonstrates a significant disparity between the minimum standards outlined in the convention and the manner in which the rights of children and young people are currently being met in Northern Ireland. The research also highlights specific areas with regard to those rights, for example concerning education (Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC) where there are significant gaps in service provision directly impacting on children and young people in Northern Ireland.

3. Overview and Principles

We welcome the thrust of the draft priorities and budget 2005-2008 and, in particular, the emphasis on the three key interlinked themes of:

- Economic Competitiveness
- Building Equality and Community Cohesion
- Better Public Services

We also welcome the indicative increase in spending on front line staff and services signalled in the plans and in follow-up correspondence with officials from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

4. The Executive Programme Children's Fund

We welcome the re-investment of efficiency gains in the provision of services directly to children and young people outlined in the draft Priorities and Budget 2005 - 2008. However we have serious concerns about the availability of a number of funding streams which have proved very effective since 2003 ~ in particular the Children's fund. We welcome confirmation that existing projects and services currently supported by the Children's Fund will continue to receive funding beyond 2005 but we note with grave concern that the cross-cutting thematic **Children's Fund** will not be available beyond existing commitments made to 2006/7.

NICCY considers the fund to be an excellent and innovative means of providing creative solutions to a number of longstanding and seemingly intractable problems. We are worried therefore that those faced with emerging, and existing issues and difficulties, will not be in a position to access this ring-fenced funding stream and **we would urge Government to re-consider removal of the Children's Fund from its plans and priorities beyond 2006/7.**

Where existing projects and services funded by the Children's Fund are considered effective and are meeting clearly defined needs in an efficient manner we strongly recommend that funding should be mainstreamed to allow these projects to continue.

¹ Children's Rights in Northern Ireland, An Audit of the Areas in Which Children's Rights Are Ignored or Underplayed in Northern Ireland in 2004, Queens University see www.niccy.org

We will seek to lobby those departments with specific responsibility for children and young people, such as DHSSPS and DE, to ensure that the worthwhile approaches funded by the Children's Fund are not lost and those children and young people continue to be able to access services provided by them.

NICCY has a clear role in supporting best practice initiatives and we are very concerned that a number of projects providing effective solutions will be lost to those children and young people who need them most, if funding is not provided beyond 2006/7. The impact of funding not being mainstreamed in this way will be twofold. On the one hand skills and solutions will be lost to the Public Service generally and on the other removal of these solutions will place an added burden on already overstretched services to children and young people.

Our concern is heightened by the fact that many of the effective projects supported by the Children's Fund are directed to those children and young people in greatest need, either by the nature of the need each project is set up to address or because many of the services are targeted at those in poverty, a significant and widespread issue for many children and young people in Northern Ireland.²

5. Mainstream funding in the DHSSPS

We welcome the increases in the allocation to DHSSPS. However we are also very concerned to hear from colleagues in Boards and Trusts that a significant proportion of new funding is being consumed by "Agenda for Change". They report that the impact on funding of "Agenda for Change" will be very significant and commitments made to increase much needed front – line staff will not be reflected in the position on the ground. We will therefore seek to ensure that the re-investment will be reflected in real and concrete improvements to services to children and young people.

We are concerned in light of our recommendations with regard to the Executive Programme Children's Fund that adequate resources are made available to properly fund the innovative projects supported which would fall within the remit of DHSSPS. On the basis of what we have been told we are concerned that adequate resources are not available to achieve this.

6. Education

² Children's Rights in Northern Ireland, An Audit of the Areas in Which Children's Rights Are Ignored or Underplayed in Northern Ireland in 2004, Queens University see WWW.NICCY.ORG and Severe Poverty in Northern Ireland SCF 2004

The emphasis on increases in expenditure on services to children with special educational needs signalled in our correspondence with officials from OFMDFM is particularly welcome.

In our role as Ombudsman for children and young people we have an established caseload of over 220 cases involving individuals seeking redress on a wide variety of issues. Of these, over 27% (60) concern children and young people's education and 12% (26) are particularly with regard to special educational needs, both assessment and/or the provision of services e.g. speech and language therapy.

We welcome the commitment given in correspondence that children and young people with special educational needs will benefit from an additional £22m for staff providing services directly to them such as classroom assistants and educational psychologists. We trust that the Department for Education will now be in a position to ensure that the standards set in its own guidance on special educational needs assessment, will be met. It is our experience from our role as Ombudsman for children that this is often not the case for this most vulnerable group of children and young people and their parents.

We have already commented on the current controversy surrounding the funding of services provided by the Education and Library Boards in the South East and Belfast areas. Whilst we await the outcome of the current inquiry into the issue we are very concerned to ensure that resources are allocated in a manner which does not directly affect the standards of educational services to children and young people and their families. We are concerned that all of the Education and Library Boards are currently predicting shortfalls in their budgets over the next three years. NICCY is not in apposition to judge whether or not this is structural under-funding but we do urge both Boards and the Department for Education to ensure that the quality of children's education is not adversely affected.

7. Comparison to the rest of the UK

NICCY welcomes the commitments to Sure Start and early years development totalling £10.4m. These projects provide a worthwhile and targeted level of support of children and families.

NICCY has concerns at the level of committed expenditure to the children and young people of Northern Ireland as compared to dedicated funding in England. Services to children and young people are going through a significant change with the passage into legislation of the Children Act and we welcome the focus on the targeted provision of services this will bring. We also note that there has been a fundamental commitment to funding the provision of ring fenced resources in the Chancellor's Children's Fund.

We believe that plans and priorities must reflect the needs of children and young people on the ground in Northern Ireland and whilst we applaud Government's increases in expenditure in this area **we recommend the approach adopted in England of increased expenditure committed over a longer time frame as representing a more focussed**

and effective means of meeting those needs specific to Northern Ireland, particularly with regard to the legacy of conflict.

8. R wrld 2 and the Youth Work Strategy

The Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for children and young people has keenly awaited the publication of the draft 10 year Children's strategy from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. We wholeheartedly support the aims and objectives of this cross-cutting statement of intent particularly as it fulfils an important aspect of the Belfast Agreement.

The aims of the strategy have our full support:

- To give children and young people a higher priority
- To address the gaps in information about children and young people
- To enable organisations to work together for children and young people
- To help realise the rights contained in the UNCRC

We note with some concern, however, that there does not appear to be a matching commitment to fund the strategic outcomes contained within the strategy.

We recommend that Government allocates specific resources and a concomitant commitment over the lifetime of the strategy to help achieve these aims.

The recently published draft Youth Work strategy represents a significant investment in time and energy on behalf of the Youth Service Liaison Forum (YSLF) and it sets out a number of very clear and achievable objectives for a more effective and targeted service to Young People. Colleagues from the YSLF have contacted our office to register their concerns about the potential shortfall in funding for this strategy.

We recommend that specific resource commitments are made to adequately fund this important strategy.

9. Conclusion

We welcome the overall thrust and impetus of the draft plans and priorities and, where this has been signalled, improvements in services for children and young people.

However we have outlined above a number of significant concerns which we believe will have the potential to have a fundamental impact on the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

It would appear, on the information we have to hand that, overall, **services to children and young people will be less adequate if the draft Priorities and Budget 2005 – 2008 is implemented in its current form.**

We also wish to point out that **there appears to have been insufficient priority allocated to services to children and young people.** In this context we advise Government to re-consider the removal of the Executive Programme Children's fund and to re-emphasise the need for Government to reconsider a number of the proposals in this draft budget to more closely align Northern Ireland with the positive developments currently underway elsewhere in the UK.