

## Foundations for the Future Conference

The Foundations for the Future conference, held in Belfast on 27th November 2024, was an important event for discussing the progress and future direction of children's social care services in Northern Ireland.

### Why did we do it?

The conference was organised by a cross-sector Task and Finish Group, as part of the Reset and Rebalance Workstream, to track progress on the recommendations set out in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland.

### Who are we?

The Reset and Rebalance Workstream is a collaborative initiative between the Reimagine Children's Collective and the Department of Health, designed to reshape relationships between statutory departments and voluntary and community organisations. Its goal is to foster greater collaboration and mutual support to enhance outcomes for children, young people, and families.

### Who was there?

A total of 125 people, including young people, parents, carers and professionals from the statutory, community and voluntary sectors, came together to talk about the progress made so far and what more needs to be done. Among the high-profile attendees were the Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt, MLA, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Chris Quinn and Professor Ray Jones.



*"We are busy trying to live our lives as normal as possible, but nothing in our lives is normal."*  
Young Person



### Immersed Tales of Fostering Drama Performance

The voices of 12 young people from the Fostering Network set a powerful tone for the event with their performance of "Immersed Tales of Fostering". This drama was developed from the young people's own experiences and explored the realities of growing up in foster care in Northern Ireland. Key themes raised in the drama included:

- Young people feeling unheard
- Instability in living arrangements
- Uncertainty about the future

The group created this drama to highlight the challenges they face, calling for change to improve their lives and those of others in similar situations. This performance was an important reminder of the support that children and young people urgently need today.



## Progress Update

Part 1 of the conference focused on outlining the early progress. The Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt MLA, addressed the conference and reiterated his commitment to addressing the recommendations from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services led by Professor Jones.

The Minister voiced his strong support for the central recommendation of the Independent Review, which was a single regional organisation for children and families (an Arm's Length Body or ALB). Minister Nesbitt recognised that this has the potential to deliver more and better for children, families and staff. The Minister also recognised the need to shift the children's social care system towards early support, as outlined in the Review. However, he also noted the significant barriers to delivering change which included:

- **financial constraints**, including need for additional funding to scale up and roll out services on a regional basis;
- **lack of political consensus** for structural reform of children's social care by parties in the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Minister also reported that there was no consensus for creating the role of a Minister for Children and Families within the Executive.



***"We are on a journey. More than ever before, I need the support of you all on that journey and I appreciate the significant effort all of you have made so far - I know that it hasn't been easy. But – all of us owe it to the children and parents in this room and across Northern Ireland to deliver much needed change - to make children's social care in Northern Ireland as good as it can be."***

***Mike Nesbitt, The Health Minister***

### Key Achievements

- £13 million has been allocated to improve services for children with disabilities, including short breaks and family support.
- Recruitment of over 400 newly qualified social workers in the past two years with increased social work training places approved.
- Significant progress has been made on workforce stabilisation, safer staffing guidance and career pathways for social workers.
- Steps have been taken towards implementing a multi-agency front-door system and introducing new roles like the Children and Families Support Officer.
- Partnerships with the community and voluntary sector have been enhanced through the Reset and Rebalance Workstream.

## Practice Examples

Practical examples of early progress were presented by Trust colleagues, showcasing advancements made across various areas, including:

### Heat-Mapping Work (Belfast HSCT)

1

Gerry Largey showcased how visual mapping can help to better understand family journeys and activity levels in specific areas. This approach highlights community needs and promotes collaboration by aligning support networks effectively.

### Early Intervention Domestic Abuse Support Service (Southern HSCT)

2

Donna Murphy presented a new service launched in July 2023 to support families experiencing or at risk of domestic abuse. The service provides tailored interventions, educational work with victims and children and engages perpetrators to promote change, enhancing safety and well-being.

### Edge of Care Project (South Eastern HSCT)

3

David Hamilton and Joanne Garrett highlighted an edge of care project designed to prevent residential care admissions. This initiative showcased a successful model of family support that helps children stay safely at home.

### Regional Investment in Children's Disability Services (South Eastern HSCT)

4

Sarah Johnston outlined progress in improving disability services and shared plans for using new funding to enhance respite care, family support and to deliver on recommendations from the Review.



## Campervan Of Dreams

Check out participants' views about progress collected through the Campervan of Dreams on X  
@camperofdreams #FoundationsForTheFuture





Part 2 of the conference focused on reflecting on the progress made to date. This section began with the Northern Ireland Children and Young People's Commissioner, Chris Quinn. The Commissioner welcomed the early progress and emphasised the importance of including children and young people in decisions, policies and practices that affect their lives. He also queried how much of a priority children and young people are to the Northern Ireland Executive.

Conference participants were asked to respond via Menti-Meter to the question: *"How would you describe what you have heard today?"* As shown in the image, there was a mixed response. While some of the most prominent words were *"hopeful"* and *"encouraging"*, there were also recurring mentions of disappointment and frustration, particularly around the lack of decision making and slow pace of change.

As part of the Reflection Session, conference participants were invited to discuss what they heard in groups and to develop questions for the panel. The panel was made up of members of the Strategic Reform Programme Board drawn from Health, Education, Youth Justice and the Community and Voluntary sector. The panel was chaired by Nuala McAllister, MLA and a Member of the Health Committee. Questions for the panel covered a number of recurring themes:



**“How would you describe what you have heard today?”**

How can reforms, such as establishing a single regional organisation for children and families, move forward given the current lack of political will and leadership?

How can young people be actively included in discussions and decisions, related to the reform process with opportunities to ask questions, challenge progress and receive clear updates?

How can levers such as the Children's Services Cooperation Act be fully utilised to unlock resources and scale successful early intervention initiatives regionally?

How can the role of the community and voluntary sector be strengthened, and funding and procurement challenges be addressed to ensure effective collaboration with statutory bodies?



***“How do you scale up the good practice demonstrated today to ensure equality of access and improved outcomes across NI?”***

***“Collaboration is vital between statutory, voluntary and families—trust, communication, respect—how do we do this more effectively?”***

***“How do we improve systems and mechanisms to make changes in a more timely fashion?”***

***“We worked really hard on this to help Ray see what needs to be done. We did our work. Ray did his work. We begged you not to let us down. Have you done that?”***



# Foundations for the Future Conference



Children's Social Care Services Reform Programme



Professor Ray Jones, author of the Independent Review, closed the conference. He expressed frustration at the lack of progress regarding the central recommendation of the Review to form a single regional organisation for children and families.

He reiterated the urgent need for transformational change, as the current system no longer meets the needs of children and families. Highlighting the low number of MLA's in attendance, he urged participants to hold political leaders to account to ensure that this was not just another review left on the shelf.

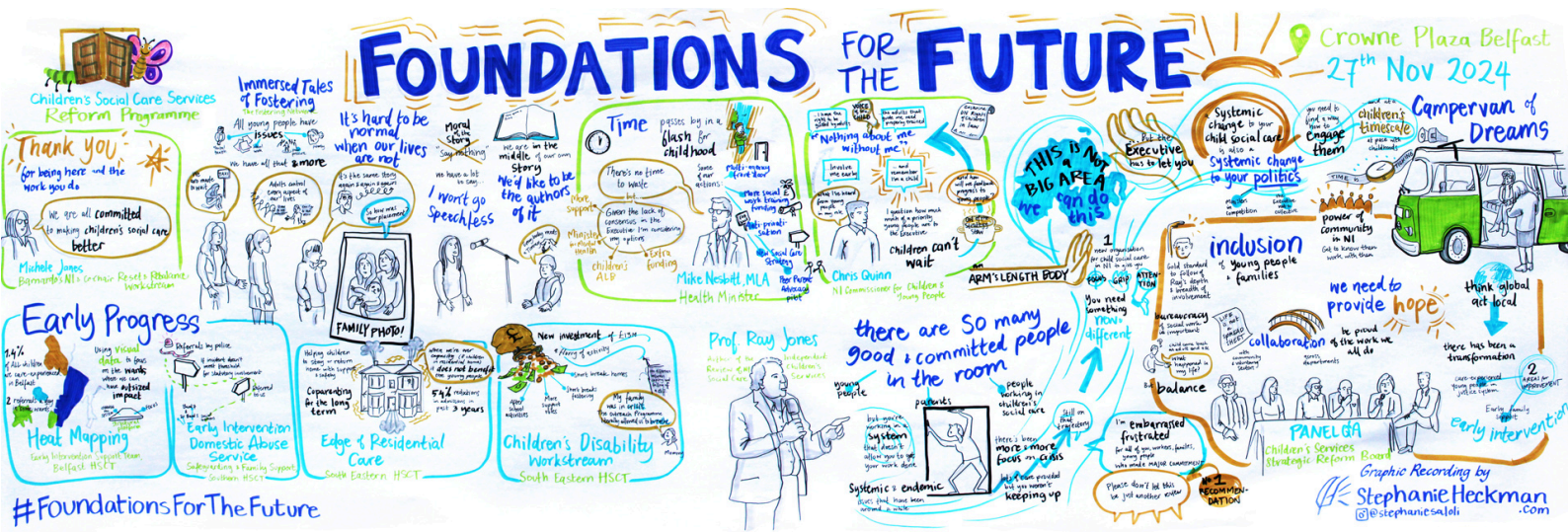
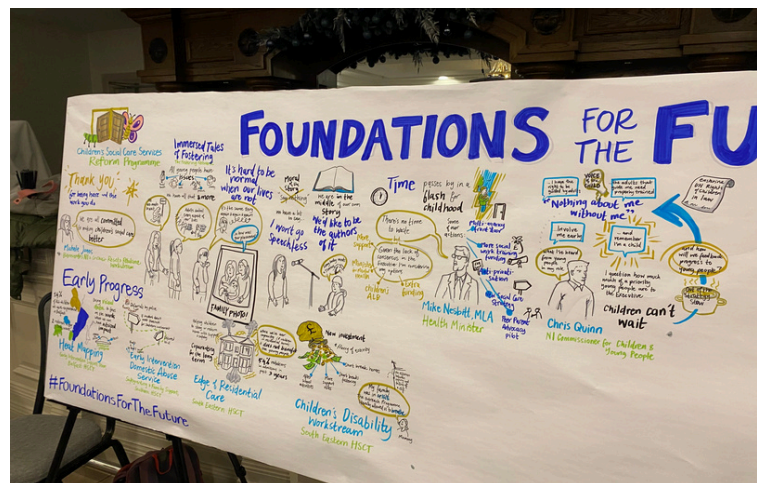
Despite the challenges, Professor Jones encouraged participants to stay motivated and keep working towards meaningful change so that every child and family in Northern Ireland receives the support they deserve.

*"There are so many good and committed people in the room..."*

*We can do this!"*  
Professor Ray Jones

We used a graphic recorder at the Foundation for the Future event to visually capture key ideas, discussions and insights in real-time. This helped attendees see the main points and themes in a creative and engaging way, making complex information easier to understand and remember.

Click on the graphic recording to see the full PDF!





## Key Messages

### Recognition of Early Progress

The positive examples of early progress were welcomed. Participants reported feeling hopeful about what could be achieved with the right focus and resources. While it was acknowledged that early progress has been made, attendees expressed frustration with the slow pace of progress and unmet expectations.

### Participation of Children, Young People and Families

A strong call was made to actively involve children and young people in decisions, policies and practices that impact their lives. More work is needed to include the voices of children and families in the implementation of the recommendations of the Review including opportunities to ask questions, challenge delays and receive clear updates.

### Lack of Political Leadership

The absence of decisive political leadership to advance critical structural reforms, such as the creation of a single regional organisation for children and families was a key area of frustration. Participants emphasised the importance of holding political leaders accountable for driving transformational change.

### Regional Change

The potential for a single regional organisation dedicated to children and families to deliver more effective outcomes was a key focus. The need to fully utilise existing levers such as the Children's Services Cooperation Act was highlighted as important for successfully scaling early intervention initiatives on a regional basis.

### Collaboration

Strengthening collaboration between statutory bodies, the community and voluntary sector and families was identified as essential. Participants stressed the importance of trust, communication and respect while addressing funding and procurement challenges to enhance partnership effectiveness.

The Reset and Rebalance Workstream is a partnership between the Reimagine Children's Collective and the Department of Health. It aims to strengthen collaboration between government and community organisations to better support children, young people, and families.



We hope to build on this early progress and continue seeking opportunities for collaboration in the coming year. For more information about the Reset and Rebalance Workstream, please contact Dr Donna Kernaghan, Reset and Rebalance Coordinator, at [donna@statsandstories.co.uk](mailto:donna@statsandstories.co.uk)