

The Reimagine Children's Collective

Response to the draft Programme for Government 2024



Introduction

The Reimagine Children's Collective is a group of ten¹ leading regional charities in Northern Ireland, united in a shared mission to transform children's social care. Our work covers a wide range of services, including antenatal care, early years support, youth services, family care, fostering, adoption and advocacy for children affected by poverty, care and disabilities. We formed this coalition because:

- The Independent Review of Children's Social Care offers a unique opportunity for transformative change. The current system does not meet the needs of children, young people and families and fresh approaches are necessary.
- Our sector played an active role in the Review, consulting with children, young people, parents and carers. We feel responsible for ensuring their voices are acted upon.
- Collaboration is key to driving meaningful change and the challenges are too complex for any one organisation to tackle alone.

We are also working with the Department of Health on the Reset and Rebalance Workstream (Recommendation 47) to improve collaboration between voluntary organisations and statutory bodies. Though in its early stages, this effort is already fostering valuable partnerships and exploring new ways to improve outcomes for children and families.

Responding to the Draft Programme for Government

The Reimagine Children's Collective believe that Northern Ireland has the potential to develop and provide world class services to support children, young people and families. However, this draft of the Programme of Government (PfG) does not adequately reflect the crisis facing many of our children, young people and families or provide any clear solutions about how these can be strategically addressed. Below, we have outlined key areas relevant to the work of the Reimagine Children's Collective for inclusion in the Programme for Government:

¹ Action for Children, Barnardo's NI, Bytes, Fostering Network, Include Youth, NCB, Mencap NI, Parenting Focus, Save the Children and VOYPIC

Addressing Poverty: Poverty has been recognised as a key driver of demand for public services. We are deeply concerned about the lack of progress on an Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland. In particular, we are disappointed to see no reference to an Anti-Poverty Strategy in this draft Programme for Government despite there being a legal obligation for the Executive to implement this. The percentage of children living in relative poverty in 2022/23 was 24% compared to 18% in 2021/22². This is a statistically significant increase. Children living in absolute poverty rose from 15% to 19% over the same period. We know this impacts on children’s physical and mental health, educational achievement and life outcomes. The recent report on child poverty in Northern Ireland from the Northern Ireland Audit Office³ highlighted how ineffective previous action has been at addressing the levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland. In our view, tackling poverty is essential for laying the foundations for a safer community and reorienting the system towards early intervention and prevention. Addressing poverty in Northern Ireland must be included as a priority in this Programme for Government and the development and delivery of an Anti-Poverty Strategy must be specifically included.

Early Learning and Childcare Strategy: It is positive that after many years of campaigning, the Executive has prioritised an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. We agree that families urgently need more access to affordable childcare and support the standardised provision of 22.5 funded pre-school hours a week. However, we need to be much more ambitious in providing positive interventions in the early years. Both the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland⁴ and the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services identified Sure Start for the significant and effective contribution it has made to early intervention and prevention at a regional level and recommended that the existing Sure Start framework is expanded to support more families. Our organisations also recognise and value the multi-agency support families receive from Sure Start and view this as a central way to reorientate our health and social care system away from crisis intervention to early support and help available within local communities. We strongly endorse the recommendation from

² Department for Communities (2024) The Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality report (2022/23). Available [here](#)

³ Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024) Child Poverty in Northern Ireland. Available [here](#)

⁴ Investing in a Better Future: An Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland (2023) Available [here](#)

the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services that access to Sure Start services is extended to all communities in Northern Ireland and urge its inclusion as a priority action in the Programme for Government.

Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs:

It is welcome that the Executive have prioritised Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and recognised that the current system needs substantial reform to support learners to fulfil their potential both during and post school. We agreed that children and young people with SEN and disabilities and their families need to be placed at the heart of this significant programme of reform and that there is much work to do to rebuild trust and confidence in and within the system. Unfortunately, the current narrow focus on educational outcomes for children with disabilities reflects a silo mentality which is unhelpful in supporting children and families. Children and young people with disabilities also need opportunities to play, socialise and have their additional health needs met. The Reimagine Children's Collective calls for the Programme for Government to take a much more holistic approach to supporting children and young people with special education needs and disabilities. Better support for children and young people with SEN needs a multi-agency response to effectively improve their life outcomes. More work is needed to support children and young people as they transition from children's services to adults' services and consideration on how to increase capacity for respite care, short breaks and opportunities to be cared for away from their families is urgently required and should be included in the Programme for Government.

Reform and Transformation of Public Services: As noted above, the Reimagine Children's Collective was formed to advocate for the effective implementation of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services. We are surprised that this significant opportunity for transformational change for many of the children, young people and families that use children's social care services has been covered so briefly in the Programme for Government. This is a missed opportunity for the Executive to collectively put forward their vision for children's social care and accept the central recommendation of the Review to create a single, regional organisation dedicated to Children Social Care Services. We need to stop making small changes to isolated parts of a broader system and instead aim for comprehensive system transformation

across all services to prevent negative impacts elsewhere. We believe this whole system approach can bring multiple benefits in the case of Children's Social Care Services such as prioritising children and families, providing authoritative leadership, improving coordination and delivering more efficient services. This approach would also reduce service disparities and improve accountability. The Programme for Government must specifically name the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and commit to implementing the recommendations from this Review.

The Role of the Community and Voluntary Sector: Improvement in multi-agency collaboration is required to transform public services. We agree that the role of the community and voluntary sector needs to be valued and better utilised to support the reform and transformation of public services. This includes representation in decision making to share expertise and potentially alternative perspectives from statutory colleagues. It also means sustainable investment in the community and voluntary sector including:

- Multi-year contracts for community and voluntary organisations;
- Ability to respond to emerging challenges;
- Investment in early intervention and prevention;
- Proportionate scrutiny of the community and voluntary sector;
- Full cost recovery to promote financial sustainability.

Accountability: Strong accountability and effective progress monitoring are crucial to preventing public services from deteriorating to this level again. While significant work was done under the previous Programme for Government to develop an outcomes framework and accountability model, we are disappointed this seems to have been set aside. We urge the Executive to revisit these practices rather than starting from scratch, given limited resources. To be effective, the Programme for Government needs relevant indicators and better use of data to inform service provision. The Programme for Government references the *Wellbeing Framework: Doing What Matters Most* as a key process for understanding the impact of PfG actions. However, these current indicators are not fit for purpose and do not align with existing strategies. For example, the 'Happier Children' domain cannot be effectively measured by birth weight or care leavers' employment at 19 years old. Instead, indicators should be drawn from the Department of Health's Children's Social Care statistics, which already

monitor increases in Children in Need, children in care, and those on the Child Protection Register.⁵ Priority should be given to developing a region-wide data system to track performance in service provision and we would particularly like to see a focus on addressing the lack of disaggregated data on children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Listening to Service Users: Listening and acting upon the views and lived experiences of service users will be central to the successful reform and transformation of public services. The people who have lived through services are the ones who can shape a better future. They are the experts in how services both are delivered and received. Those with lived experience can identify the gaps in provision, the failings, the successes and the impact services make in reality. We must put service users' views and voices at the heart of our public services and improve how we communicate with them about the type of services and quality of provision they can expect to receive, how their views will be considered and what the complaints process is when they believe those standards are not met.

Contact Details

The Reimagine Children's Collective is currently chaired by Michele Janes, Director of Barnardo's NI with the secretariat provided by the National Children's Bureau. Please contact Dr Donna Kernaghan, Reimagine Co-ordinator at donna@statsandstories.co.uk for further information.

⁵ Department of Health (2024) Children's Social Care Statistics 2023/24. Available [here](#)