

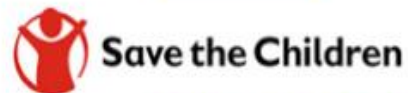
Reimagining Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland

Making the Case for a Single Regional Children and Families Organisation

By

The Reimagine Children's Collective

November 2024



Introduction

The Reimagine Children's Collective is a coalition of ten¹ of the largest regional charities in Northern Ireland, unified by a shared commitment to transforming children's social care. Our collective expertise spans antenatal care, early years, child and youth services, family support, fostering and adoption, advocacy and work with children affected by poverty, care and disabilities. We formed the Reimagine Children's Collective because:

- We recognised that the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services presents **an opportunity for transformational change**. Current children's social care services are not meeting families' needs, and innovative approaches are necessary to improve and transform the system.
- The Children's Sector was highly engaged throughout the Review process. Many organisations consulted children, young people, parents and carers, participated in workshops, conducted research, met with the Review panel and developed detailed consultation submissions. **We feel responsible for ensuring the voices of young people and families are heard and acted upon.**
- The scope of the Review is vast, and no single organisation or department has the expertise to tackle the scale and complexity of these challenges alone. **Collaboration is essential** to effectively address the challenges and bring about meaningful change.

A System Beyond Repair

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services, published 18 months ago, reported that families in Northern Ireland were in urgent need and unable to access the help they required. Evidence since then suggests that the situation has worsened for many children.

- **Child Poverty:** Child poverty is now impacting approximately 109,000 children or 24% of the child population in Northern Ireland²

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

² Public Accounts Committee (2024) Report on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland. Available [here](#)

- **Child Protection:** There are increasing numbers of children on the Child Protection Register³
- **Children in Care:** The number of children in care has reached record levels in Northern Ireland with the most recent statistics estimating that 4,137 children are now in care⁴

This situation is untenable. The existing system, which has been shown to be fragmented and inefficient, has repeatedly failed to meet the needs of children and families in Northern Ireland. In our view, the current system is beyond incremental repair and requires substantial and transformational change. The Review's most significant recommendation was the creation of a single regional Children and Families Arms-Length Body (ALB). This whole system approach was identified in the Review as the most effective solution to the systemic and endemic issues within the current system and the only viable pathway to achieve the scale of transformation required.

The Reimagine Children's Collective strongly supports the proposal for a single regional children and families organisation as the most effective way to address the challenges facing children's social care services. Currently, children's social care is split across five Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs), resulting in fragmented services that lack cohesion and consistency. This paper outlines the Reimagine Children's Collective's position on the ALB and highlights the benefits it could bring in terms of providing a sharp focus and clear vision for the future of children's social care.

Delivering for Children and Families

The children's social care system needs radical change and reform. Results from the consultation on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services showed majority support for the establishment of a Children and Families ALB in place of current arrangements with 60% agreeing, rising to 65% for responses from organisations⁵. The success of the ALB for children, young people and families relies on effective implementation and ongoing evaluation. The Reimagine Children's

³ Department of Health (2024) Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24. Available [here](#)

⁴ Department of Health (2024) Northern Ireland Children's Social Services Data (provisional). Available [here](#)

⁵ Department of Health (2024) Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services Consultation Report. Available [here](#)

Collective proposes a phased approach to create the ALB, starting with the immediate creation of a shadow board and chief executive to lead the development of the ALB. This will ensure leadership and focus as Trusts' functions, services and resources are combined into a single regional children's services organisation. A phased approach would also provide the opportunity to reflect on what is working well before adding other services working with children and families.

Making the Case for an ALB

The Reimagine Children's Collective believes that a comprehensive, whole system approach is essential to achieving transformational change in children's social care. Establishing a regional ALB for children and families could bring significant benefits including:

Dedicated Focus on Children and Families: A dedicated Children and Families ALB in Northern Ireland could prioritise the planning and delivery of children's social care services and ensure children's voices are included in service planning. A single ALB would establish clear lines of accountability, set high standards and provide strategic leadership that is currently lacking at a regional level.

Improved Regional Consistency: By implementing a single, standardised approach to children's social care, gaps in services could be better addressed ensuring every child across Northern Ireland receives equal access to quality care. This consistency across the region would particularly benefit key groups such as Looked After Children, young adults leaving care, foster carers and children with disabilities.

Fresh Approach to Funding: Establishing a single Children and Families ALB would promote more efficient use of resources, making funding allocation transparent, accountable and more consistent across Northern Ireland. This would help resolve the current budget mismanagement and bureaucratic inefficiencies identified in the Review and allow more funds to be redirected towards direct services for children. Moreover, a new regional structure would be beneficial in shifting the focus towards funding early intervention and prevention services which would improve outcomes for children and families while reducing long-term costs.

Supporting Staff: An ALB could streamline processes, support better collaboration amongst staff and significantly reduce administrative burdens on frontline workers, allowing them to dedicate more time and attention to direct care and support with children and families.

Utilising the Role of the Community and Voluntary Sector: A new structure for planning and delivering children's social care services offers the opportunity to reset and rebalance relationships between statutory services and the voluntary and community sector towards better collaboration and coordination. This approach could better utilise the role of the community and voluntary sector in service provision and lead to cost-effective and community-focused services.

Improved Data Collection and Outcome Monitoring: A single organisation could develop a comprehensive data system to track outcomes for children and families across Northern Ireland. By standardising data collection and analysis, it would become easier to monitor the impact of services and identify areas needing improvement.

Decisive Action Required from the Northern Ireland Executive

Every day that passes without a decision from the NI Executive on this reform is another day that children, young people and families wait for change. Frontline workers in both statutory and community and voluntary organisations are all waiting for the NI Executive to take decisive action. Inaction by the NI Executive has already deepened this crisis and left children and families without the support they need. Further delays will only exacerbate the existing challenges.

We urge the NI Executive to approve the creation of a single regional organisation dedicated to children and families and initiate the whole system transformation of children's social care across Northern Ireland.

Children cannot wait.

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.