



## **Response**

# **Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration**

**November 2010**

## **Introduction**

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella body for the children's sector across Northern Ireland. CiNI provides information, policy, training, participation and advocacy services to support our 140 members in their direct work with and for children and young people. Our membership is drawn from across the voluntary, statutory and independent children's sector. We are increasingly working in partnership with the statutory children's sector, recognising that the best outcomes for children and young people are achieved through partnership working.

CiNI welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Executive's Consultation on its Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. Our analysis and consideration of the current proposals flows from our engagement and contribution to the debate and discussion on the Shared Future framework and it remains our overwhelming concern in responding to this consultation to ensure that children and young people are respected, valued, and enabled to engage and contribute positively to the ongoing debate and discussion on building a shared society in Northern Ireland.

## **General Comments**

CiNI has considered the analysis commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT) and carried out by the Institute for British Irish Studies (IBIS) comparing the CSI Programme with its predecessor A Shared Future. CiNI did have significant concerns regarding the Shared Future framework, particularly with regards its response to children and young people. Unfortunately the draft CSI Programme has done nothing to allay these concerns, and indeed the direction that is now being proposed appears to be a clear weakening of the political resolve to tackle the deep divisions in our society which continue to have the greatest adverse impact on our children and young people. It is of grave concern that the previous strategic goal of reconciliation appears to have been abandoned for the mantra of separate but equal. We concur with the view expressed by the IBIS that *"it is far from clear that this vision [the CSI vision] is sufficiently compelling to prevent a resegregation of society in Northern Ireland, especially among the young"*<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, CiNI does note the very evident focus throughout the consultation document on people with different political/religious opinion and different ethnicity to the exclusion of all other marginalised groups. We recognise that this may be explained in keeping with the good relations definition derived from section 75 (2) of the NI Act 1998 which applies to groups of different religious belief, political opinion and racial background. However, we are gravely concerned at the ongoing exclusion of some of our most vulnerable and marginalised groups from this critical work. It is CiNI's long held view that the 'good relations' duty should be extended to all nine equality groups covered by the section 75 duty to promote equality of opportunity<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the duty must apply to children and young people, alongside older people, as part of the 'age' group.

## **International Human Rights and Children's Rights Framework**

CiNI notes that throughout the consultation document there is reference to building a community in a context/climate of fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect.

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<sup>1</sup> IBIS (2010) *From A Shared Future to Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*. An Analysis of NI's Policy Framework Documents. JRCTF

<sup>2</sup> CCNI (2003) 'A Shared Future' Response to the consultation paper on improved relations in NI by Child Care NI on behalf of the voluntary childcare sector

It is our view that the consultation document is diminished in its credibility by the absence of discussion or narrative to explore the role and significance of a human rights approach, which we would highlight must provide *the* over-arching framework for the development of a shared society.

In respect of children and young people, we would highlight the absolute imperative for a priority focus on children and young people which must be underpinned by a commitment to ensuring the full realisation of children's rights as recognised by the internationally agreed United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). As a signatory to the UNCRC Government must deliver on the Convention's minimum standards for all children and young people. Therefore a shared society in which children and young people are an equal and valued partner must have at its core a commitment to the guiding principles of the UNCRC which recognise the paramountcy of the best interests of the child (article 3), the child's right not to be discriminated against (article 2), the child's right to life, survival and maximum development (article 6), and to respect for the views of the child (article 12).

### **Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 – Promotion of Equality of Opportunity**

The Programme must seek to ensure that all public authorities act in compliance with their statutory obligation to promote equality of opportunity in carrying out their functions and responsibilities. This necessitates full and rigorous application of the section 75 screening, consultation and equality impact assessment obligations. This statutory obligation is one element of the overarching legislative framework within which the draft Programme must be developed; therefore it cannot be downgraded to a key aim of the draft programme as is suggested at para 3.43.

### **Empowering the next Generation**

CiNI would strongly advocate that children and young people must be a priority focus for Government in any serious attempt at building a shared future. The imperative for such a focus has been consistently recognised at the highest level. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement itself recognised that young people from areas most affected by the Troubles face particular difficulties (1998:18). The report of the NI Victims Commission called for a focus on children and young people as a vital part of *"looking forward to a better future as well as backward to a divisive past"* (1998:42). This has also been advocated at an international level. In 2000 Olara Otunnu, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, following a visit to Northern Ireland observed *"Northern Ireland will have a far better chance of a durable peace if young people are a priority in that process"*. He urged political leaders and policy makers to *"take advantage of the present phase of the peace process to address the pressing basic issues affecting children"*. Otunnu was clear that *"children's voices must remain priority concerns throughout the building of peace and that the voices of young people should be heard throughout the process"*.

We note that the focus of the draft consultation centres on 'disaffected young people' and while we strongly agree on the need for a specific and targeted focus on those children and young people who have acute experiences of the conflict and ongoing sectarianism, we firmly believe this must be placed within the context of a recognition of the role and contribution that all our children and young people can make to building a shared and equal society.

However, CiNI is concerned that the focus on disaffected children and young people is not evidenced in the draft consultation as being based on a thorough analysis and understanding of the lives and experiences of this group of young people which is fundamental to understanding and responding to their engagement in behaviour which puts themselves and others at significant risk.

Significantly research evidence is coming to the fore which captures the reality of lives shattered by the conflict. In 2004 research carried out by QUB and commissioned by NICCY confirmed that the impact of violent conflict and sectarianism was clearly pronounced and a priority for those living in high conflict or interface areas<sup>3</sup>. The research reported that *“the view from interface areas is bleak, indicating a resignation among children that differences have solidified”*. The QUB research quoted research by Leonard which notes *“while the situation was better [now] in some ways as there were less bombings and shootings”, some children “felt there was more hatred than in the past”*. There was a pervasive *“sense of inevitability and permanence about the conflict”* and all were *“pessimistic about the possibility for conflict resolution in Northern Ireland”*<sup>4</sup>.

Six years later and the view from interface areas remains bleak and, if anything, children and young people are being further isolated and marginalised. Recent research by McAlister et al<sup>5</sup> carried out over a 3 year period with 196 children and young people from six communities significantly affected by the conflict found that *“violence has remained a part of everyday life for children and young people living in communities defined by uncertainty, unease and the continued presence of paramilitaries and dissidents”*.

The research observes that the discourse of ‘post-conflict’ is premature. *Claims of ‘peace’ and ‘transition’ are not evident within the experiences of those living in marginalised, disadvantaged and under-resourced communities ... the much publicised benefits of ‘peace’ were not evident to children, young people or community representatives ... frustration, anger and resentment were directed towards the rhetoric of ‘peace’ and ‘change’ as communities attempted to address the legacy of the conflict without necessary resources.*

Fundamentally, this research highlighted that these young people’s views, experiences and behaviours have not been sought, understood or contextualised within political or popular debates, and the young people themselves believed the police and politicians were out of touch with the views and experiences of their families and communities.

CiNI is deeply concerned by the manner in which young people are being characterised which is increasingly resulting in their further isolation, marginalisation and disillusionment. We believe there is a considerable challenge for the Executive in creating a shared future to tackle the misrepresentation of children and young people and effectively and robustly champion children and young people as *the* key stakeholders in building a better and shared future. This is an issue which has been addressed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its most recent Concluding

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<sup>3</sup> Kilkelly, U., Kilpatrick, R., Lundy, L., Moore, L., Scraton, P., Davey, C., Dwyer, C., McAlister, S., (2004) *Children’s Rights in Northern Ireland 2004*. NICCY p. xvi

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p.199

<sup>5</sup> Haydon, D., McAlister, S., Scraton, P. (2009) *Childhood in Transition* Experiencing Marginalisation and Conflict in Northern Ireland. QUB, Save the Children, The Prince’s Trust

Observations on implementation of the Convention when it expressed its concern “*at the general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children, especially adolescents, which appears to exist in the State party, including in the media, and may often be the cause of further infringement of their rights. The Committee recommended that Government take urgent measures to address the intolerance and inappropriate characterisation of children, especially adolescents, within society, including the media*”<sup>6</sup>

More recently the grave implications for children and young people of the PSNI's Operation Exposure have again called into question attitudes to young people. Commenting in the aftermath of the publication of pictures of 21 young people wanted for questioning in relation to sectarian disorder, Scraton highlighted that “*minimal consideration is given to the emotional impact on children and young people living through the out-workings of conflict and the daily reality of political and economic marginalization ... where inadequate, essential services fail to meet the complex needs of children's lives.*”

On the pursuit of community stability Scraton commented “*Central to a progressive strategy is the inclusion of the voices, experiences and frustrations of children and young people. Only by listening to and accommodating their hopes and aspirations and by including them in all decisions that affect their lives, can a real opportunity be created for community stability.*”<sup>7</sup>

CiNI would lend its support to this analysis and advocate strongly that the voices of those children from our most marginalised communities must be actively and meaningful engaged in the ongoing discussion and debate on building a shared society.

### **Child Poverty**

CiNI notes that the draft Programme in identifying themes for action makes a commitment in the long term to “*tackling the multiple social issues effecting and entrenching community separation, exclusion and hate*”<sup>8</sup>; with the focus in the short term on crisis intervention, rapid responses and early intervention to tackle sectarianism, violence, and anti-social behaviour. This focus on managing crises in interface areas must not deflect resources away from work on reducing the likelihood of interface problems by addressing poverty, fear and the marginalisation of communities.

CiNI would strongly advocate that immediate and urgent action is taken to tackle these issues; it is not acceptable to push responses to these multiple social issues into the long term future. We would highlight there is now a legislative imperative on the Executive to act expediently to address the issue of child poverty through the development of a Child Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland by March 2011. While we note that the draft Programme does acknowledge that “*poverty and disadvantage is a constant factor in most interface areas*”, we are deeply concerned that the legislative obligations placed on the Executive by the UK wide Child Poverty Act 2010 are not recognised; nor is there any attempt to explore the widely recognised interrelationship between conflict and poverty as it impacts on children and young people.

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<sup>6</sup> CRC (2008) Concluding Observations of GB and NI CRC/C/GBR/CO/4 paras 24-25

<sup>7</sup> Scraton, P., *Young people need to be listened to not talked at*. Belfast Telegraph 14<sup>th</sup> October 2010

<sup>8</sup> Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation Document p.9

Research evidence has indicated the strong and complex relationship between poverty and conflict in Northern Ireland (Hillyard et al 2005). It is recognised that the Conflict severely undermined economic investment and development, exacerbated child poverty, and contributed to high levels of mental ill-health resulting in impaired employment opportunities (Horgan, 2005). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has noted that *“poverty is a very serious problem affecting all parts of the UK ... it is a particular concern in Northern Ireland, where over 20 per cent of children reportedly live in persistent poverty”*.

The Committee recommended in accordance with UNCRC article 27 that Government:

- (a) Adopt and adequately implement the legislation aimed at achieving the target of ending child poverty by 2020, including achieving measurable indicators for their achievement;*
- (b) Giving priority in this legislation and in the follow-on actions to those children and their families in most need of support;*
- (c) When necessary, beside giving full support to parents or others responsible for the child, intensify its efforts to provide material assistance and support programmes for children, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing;*
- (d) Reduce a statutory duty on local authorities to provide safe and adequate sites for Travellers.<sup>9</sup>*

### **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Young People**

CiNI is deeply concerned that by the draft Programme’s narrow interpretation of the concept of good relations, which operates to the exclusion of consideration of issues relating to sexual orientation as well as disability.

While the commitment to publishing a sexual orientation strategy is welcome and important; we are concerned with the delay in bringing the strategy forward and would urge the Executive to publish the strategy as a matter of urgency.

We are concerned that the draft Programme in considering the increase in sectarian and racist incidents did not also recognise, acknowledge and seek to address the statistics in relation to hate incidents/crime motivated by sexual orientation. The PSNI Annual Statistical Report for 2009/10 shows that transphobic incidents rose by 40% and homophobic incidents only reduced by 2.2%.

CiNI would highlight the circumstances and situation of young LGBT communities in Northern Ireland. It is widely recognised that LGBT young people experience significant discrimination and exclusion.

In its most recent Concluding Observations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed its concern that LGBT children *“continue to experience discrimination and social stigmatisation”*<sup>10</sup>. The Committee recommended that Government ensure full protection against discrimination on any grounds including by:

*“strengthening its awareness raising and other preventative activities against*

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<sup>9</sup> CRC (2008) Concluding Observations of GB and NI CRC/C/GBR/CO/4 para 64-65

<sup>10</sup> CRC (2008) Concluding Observations of GB and NI CRC/C/GBR/CO/4 para 24

*discrimination, and if necessary, take affirmative actions for the benefit of vulnerable groups of children, such as Roma and Irish Travellers children; migrant, asylum seeking and refugee children; lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender children (LGBT); children belonging to minority groups”*

*“taking all necessary measures to ensure that cases of discrimination against children in all sectors of society are addressed effectively, including with disciplinary, administrative, or – if necessary – penal sanctions”*

While it is welcome that the draft consultation document acknowledges both the fear and the reality of physical and verbal abuse of young people on grounds of religion and race it must also recognise the very real vulnerability of young people to physical and verbal attack due to their sexual orientation. Harassment and bullying due to sexual orientation is becoming much more prevalent and requires focused and urgent attention in order to protect and promote the rights and best interests of these young people. Recent research by NICCY indicated that LGBT youth and ethnic minority young people felt especially at risk of targeted attacks fuelled by racism and homophobia<sup>11</sup>.

Local research evidence has shown that 63% of same sex affected individuals experienced harassment in school and 44.7% experienced bullying due to their sexual orientation<sup>12</sup>. There are very grave consequences associated with such harassment and bullying, with 29% of LGBT youth having attempted suicide or being five times more likely to be medicated for depression<sup>13</sup>.

The Executive must act now to listen to young LGBT communities and engage with them positively and proactively in work to build a shared society where they are respected and their rights upheld.

### **Children with Disabilities**

While the draft Programme purports to the aim of building a strong community inclusive of people with a disability it fails to include any consideration of the extent and depth of discrimination and exclusion experienced by people with disabilities, including children and young people with disabilities. This is particularly worrying given the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) by the UK Government in March 2009. We would highlight in particular UNCRPD article 5 Equality and Non-Discrimination; article 7 Children with Disabilities; and article 19 Living independently and being included in the community.

Again we are concerned that the draft Programme in considering the increase in sectarian and racist incidents did not also recognise, acknowledge and seek to address the alarming statistics in relation to hate incidents/crime motivated by disability. The PSNI Statistical Report on Hate Incidents and Crimes for 2009/10 shows that alongside an increase in sectarian and racist incidents, disability motivated incidents increased by

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<sup>11</sup> NICCY (2009) *Children's Rights Rhetoric or Reality* A Review of Children's Rights in NI 07-08 p.108

<sup>12</sup> Out on our own, An examination of the mental health needs of same-sex attracted men, The Rainbow Project, 2006

<sup>13</sup> Shout; The needs of young people in Northern Ireland who identify as LGBT, Youth Net and DE, 2003

14 (31.8%) and disability motivated recorded crimes increased by 13 (46.4%)<sup>14</sup> over the period 2009/10.

Again while it is welcome that the draft consultation document acknowledges both the fear and the reality of physical and verbal abuse of young people on grounds of religion and race, we are deeply concerned that the issue of disabilist bullying is not given equal consideration given its high prevalence and the impact it has on a child's health and well-being and educational experience. Mencap's 'Don't Stick it, Stop it!' research in 2007 found that amongst children and young people from Northern Ireland, England and Wales eight out of ten children with a learning disability are bullied. Eight out of ten children with a learning disability are scared to go out because they are frightened they might be bullied and six out of ten children with a learning disability had been physically hurt by bullies. These statistics paint an alarming picture of the extent and impact of disabilist bullying. It is an issue which must be acknowledged and addressed by Government in its work to build a shared society and action must be taken by the Department of Education to ensure that children and young people with disabilities can fully enjoy their right to education.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its recent Concluding Observations on UNCRC implementation called for "*the development of a comprehensive national strategy for the inclusion of children with disabilities and recommended that Government undertake awareness raising campaigns on the rights and special needs of children with disabilities, encourage their inclusion in society and prevent discrimination and institutionalisation*"<sup>15</sup>. The Committee also expressed its concern that "*insufficient action*" has been taken to ensure respect for the views of children with disabilities and recommended. We would ask the Department how it has consulted with children and young people with disabilities in line with Section 75 of the NI Act 1998, UNCRC article 12 and UNCRPD article 7.

### **Shared Education**

CiNI notes and shares the view expressed by the IBIS which observes "... *this document [CSI Programme] does not appear to have advanced the practical agenda already set out in Shared Future, particularly in the field of education and for young people more generally*"<sup>1</sup>.

CiNI is concerned that despite recognising that 62% of people are indicating that they would prefer to send their children to mixed religion schools there is little focus on the issue of supporting and promoting shared education.

The consistent and ongoing low level of integration has been the subject of adverse comment by both the Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN 2002:12) and UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education (UN, 2003).

We share the view expressed by NICCY in its Rights Report<sup>16</sup> "*it is imperative that the promotion of integrated education be explicitly prioritised within the changing landscape*

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<sup>14</sup> PSNI Annual Statistical Report No. 3 Hate Incidents and Crimes 1st April 2009-31st March 2010

<sup>15</sup> CRC (2008) Concluding Observations of GB and NI CRC/C/GBR/CO/4 para 53

<sup>16</sup> NICCY (2009) *Children's Rights: Rhetoric or Reality* A Review of Children's Rights in Northern Ireland 2008-09 p.273-274

*of education if the government is to adequately fulfil its UNCRC obligations to conduct educational programmes “in ways that promote understanding, peace and tolerance, and that help to prevent violence and conflict”.* The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has consistently put on record its concern regarding *“the problem of segregated education”* and in its most recent Concluding Observations has called on Government to take measures to address segregation of education in Northern Ireland<sup>17</sup>. (paras 66 and 67)

CiNI is particularly concerned that there is no recognition or acknowledgement within the consultation of just how critical it is to start laying the foundation for sharing, inclusion and equality in a child's early years. It is disappointing that no connection is made to the ongoing development of the DE Early Years Strategy. CiNI would strongly advocate that the Department of Education's Community Relations Equality and Diversity Strategy must apply right across the early years sector, that is, it must encompass statutory and non-statutory early years settings so that principles of equality and respect for diversity are core to a child's earliest experiences of education and care regardless of setting. QUB research commissioned by NICCY has identified that *“beginning in the early years, there needs to be a further appreciation for, and respect of, cultural diversity and of reducing negative attitudes towards those who are different from themselves (in religion but also ‘race’, disability, sexual orientation and gender).”*<sup>18</sup>

CiNI is also concerned that the draft CSI Programme demonstrates no appetite for dealing with the past and would appear to have abandoned any hopes of reconciliation. However challenging and difficult the past is it cannot be ignored and avoided in the process of building for the future. In fact children and young people have said they want to know about the past. Recent research from the Community Relations Council<sup>19</sup> has demonstrated that young people report that they want to know about 'The Troubles' but they are (largely) not being taught about it in school, and find it difficult to get adults to talk about this dark period of our history, in spite of the fact that it still largely shapes our present. This research has concluded that the draft CSI should include a strategy on how we should address teaching history and the past with young people, a lack of such a vision will mean that the hotch-potch of approaches currently adopted will continue and programmes of good practice such as the work carried out by organisations such as YouthLink, The Base and the Nerve Centre will have minimal effect because they are operating in isolation.

We would add our support to this recommendation and would also highlight that QUB research commissioned by NICCY has highlighted that *“educational initiatives aimed at increasing children's awareness and understanding of key historical and political events associated with NI should begin in primary schools, from the ages of about 7 or 8”*.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, in line with article 29 of the UNCRC on the right to education we would advocate for human rights, including children's rights, equality and an exploration of

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<sup>17</sup> CRC (2008) Concluding Observations of GB and NI CRC/C/GBR/CO/4 Paras 66-67

<sup>18</sup> Kilkelly, U., Kilpatrick, R., Lundy, L., Moore, L., Scraton, P., Davey, C., Dwyer, C., McAlister, S., (2004) *Children's Rights in Northern Ireland 2004*, NICCY p. 154

<sup>19</sup> Bell, J., Hanson, U., McCaffery, N. (2010) *The Troubles Aint History Yet* Young People's Understanding of the Past, Community Relations Council

<sup>20</sup> Kilkelly, U., Kilpatrick, R., Lundy, L., Moore, L., Scraton, P., Davey, C., Dwyer, C., McAlister, S., (2004) *Children's Rights in Northern Ireland 2004*, NICCY p.155

identity to be included as core elements of the curriculum. We are dismayed to note that McAlister et al's research with children and young people from communities most affected by the conflict, found that the children and young people lacked understanding about the meaning of rights, and had received limited formal information about children's rights<sup>21</sup>. This is an issue which must be urgently addressed by Government if it is truly committed to empowering the next generation in a way that ensures they are central to a shared society.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its most recent Concluding Recommendations on implementation of the UNCRC has highlighted its concern on this matter noting that *"that there is no systematic awareness raising of the Convention, ... the level of awareness of the Convention among children, parents and professionals working with children is low."* The Committee recommended that Government *"further strengthen its efforts to ensure that all of the provisions of the Convention are widely known and understood by parents and children alike, inter alia by including the Convention in statutory national curriculum and ensure that its principles and values are integrated into the structure and practice of all schools"*<sup>22</sup>.

### **Shared Space**

CiNI notes the consultation documents focus on the creation of shared space. We would highlight that space is an issue of critical importance for children and young people and they consistently raise the lack of appropriate places to go and things to do as a concern<sup>23</sup>. Therefore we are disappointed that the consultation document gives no active consideration to identifying and addressing the issue of shared space as it pertains specifically to children and young people.

In relation to the spaces and places that are available to children, research shows that play and leisure space is often religiously segregated (Leonard 2004). In research commissioned by NICCY and carried out by QUB concerns were raised that even play areas which are in supposedly neutral space can become aligned with one section of the community or fall into disuse because of parents reluctance to let their children play there. Related to this was a concern raised by some young people that a lack of appropriate play and leisure facilities can lead to youth getting into trouble with local paramilitary organisations. These young people complained they were regularly being moved off street corners yet had no alternative place to go because of the lack of facilities available for teenagers in their area.<sup>24</sup>

Five years on, further NICCY research pointed to ongoing religious and political segregation in public spaces which impacted on children and young people's safety and infringed their right to access play and leisure spaces and facilities. Children also reported their concerns about not being able to use public spaces without being labelled as trouble makers or considered a risk to the community even though the reality is that there are no/few appropriate alternatives for young people in many communities

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<sup>21</sup> Haydon, D., McAlister, S., and Scraton, P. (2009) *Childhood in Transition* Experiencing Marginalisation and Conflict in Northern Ireland. QUB, Prince's Trust NI, Save the Children.

<sup>22</sup> CRC (2008) Concluding Observations of GB and NI CRC/C/GBR/CO/4 paras 20 and 21

<sup>23</sup> NICCY (2009) *Children's Rights: Rhetoric or Reality* A Review of Children's Rights in Northern Ireland 2008-09 p.325

<sup>24</sup> QUB p163

In McAlister et al's research children and young people expressing their feelings that poor play/youth provision was an indication of their low status in communities.

NICCY has called for concerted effort, from across the political spectrum, to address religious segregation in play and leisure and the consequent restrictions this places on children and young people's ability to enjoy the right to play<sup>25</sup>. In support of this call, CiNI would advocate for creation of safe, age appropriate shared spaces for children and young people. This is a critical element to securing a shared society, and while it must be properly considered within the draft CSI strategy, it must be actioned by the Executive within the context of the forthcoming Play Policy for Northern Ireland.

### **Consultation with Children and Young People**

Given our desire to see children and young people given a high priority focus as equal partners in building a shared society, CiNI would highlight the critical importance of real and meaningful engagement and consultation with children and young people.

CiNI does welcome the Department's engagement with the Participation Network. The Network, an initiative supported by the Department (OFMDFM), has been set up to provide training, signposting and consultancy support to public bodies to help in fulfilling section 75 obligations to consult with children and young people.

However we are concerned and disappointed that the Department has only engaged in a one-off event with children and young people as part of the consultation process. While we are keen to hear of the outcome of this event, we would highlight the urgent need for much wider and more representative engagement and consultation with children and young people on their views and experiences in compliance with the Department's obligations under section 75 of the NI Act 1998, UNCRC article 12 and UNCRPD article 7. Such engagement and consultation must also be in keeping with the Participation Network's 'Ask First' standards. In particular we would ask the Department how it plans to engage directly with those children living in interface areas who are likely to be most affected by this policy. Given our concerns regarding the exclusion of any consideration of the circumstances and needs of LGBT and disabled children and young people we would ask how they have been engaged in this consultation?

We would also emphasise that engagement with children and young people must include young children as well as young adults, noting the research evidence which demonstrates that from an early age children do exhibit small but significant cultural and political awareness<sup>ii</sup>. We would ask the Department how it plans to engage with young children?

CiNI would urge the Department to ensure it avails fully of the practical support on offer from the Network which can ensure meaningful engagement with children and young people.

### **Mechanisms for implementation**

CiNI notes the JRCF commissioned analysis carried out by IBIS which, having considered the four options for overseeing the implementation of the CSI, concludes that

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<sup>25</sup> NICCY (2009) *Children's Rights Rhetoric or Reality* A Review of Children's Rights in NI 07-08 p.331

all four options are weaker than the current mandate of the Community Relations Council to push forward community relations duties and look critically at the role of existing political and local organisations.

It has been CiNI's long held view that there needs to be a strong independent body responsible for driving forward the shared society agenda<sup>26</sup>. We would continue to highlight that any such body must have the necessary authority to effectively and robustly monitor and challenge Government on its work to create a shared society. We would echo the view expressed by the IBIS "*maintaining an independent critical voice is a vital means of ensuring that government lives up to its responsibilities to bring about a peaceful and just society ... while economic efficiencies are clearly a relevant consideration, the savings accruing as a result of any of these proposals would be dwarfed by the economic and social costs of failing to complete the transition away from sectarian violence*".

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion we would reiterate children and young people are key stakeholders in building a shared society and must form a central part of a future strategy, its development, implementation, and ongoing monitoring.

CiNI would echo the sentiments expressed by Paul Smyth "*building a shared future, a more democratic, inclusive and pluralist society will not be achieved unless we harness one of our greatest assets – the energy, hope and passion of our young people from all our communities*"<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> IBIS (2010) *From 'A Shared Future' to 'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration' An Analysis of Northern Ireland's Policy Framework Documents*. JRCF.

<sup>ii</sup> Connolly, P., Smith, A. & Kelly, B. (2002) *Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

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<sup>26</sup> CCNI (2003) *'A Shared Future'* Response to the consultation paper on improved relations in NI by Child Care NI on behalf of the voluntary childcare sector

<sup>27</sup> Smyth, P. *Harnessing the passion of youth is key to the future*. Belfast Telegraph 7<sup>th</sup> October 2010