

UNCRC

NORTHERN IRELAND'S PRIORITIES AND PLANS

Government here is committed to supporting and realising the rights of all our children and young people as an integral part of our work to improve children's outcomes and help them to achieve their potential. To underline this commitment the Executive has included 'ensuring the central role of the rights of the child' in its Programme for Government 2008-11.

In 2008 the Junior Ministers with responsibility for co-ordinating children's issues established a Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People for all Executive Ministers and also invited representation from the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Court Service. The aim was to ensure that making progress towards the outcomes of the rights based 10 year children and young people's strategy was placed at the heart of government's agenda. Champions for Children and Young People were also appointed in all government departments to ensure that children and young people's rights and interests were fostered and their views sought on relevant policy and strategy issues.

Our ten year strategy for children and young people 2006-2016 '*Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge*' sets out a shared vision that all children and young people living in Northern Ireland will thrive and look forward with confidence to the future. Progress is measured against six high level outcomes, one of which is that children and young people are living in a society which respects their rights. If children are living in a society which respects their rights then they are more likely to achieve in the other five outcome areas which are: healthy; enjoying learning and achieving; safety and stability; economic and environmental well being; and contributing positively.

Like the UNCRC, the ten year strategy applies to everyone under 18, but it extends to 21 years for young people who have been in care or have a disability in recognition of the fact that they may need extra support to protect their rights.

The mechanism for achieving these outcomes for all children is through triennial strategy action plans. The current 2008-11 action plan ([Children and Young People's Strategy Action Plan 2008 - 2011](#)) already addresses a number of the Concluding Observations but we recognise that there is considerable work still to be done. We

have agreed with our NGO partners and the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Northern Ireland that the children and young people's strategy action plan will be a 'living document' which will be built upon and strengthened by including further actions in response to the Concluding Observations. We consider that this will more effectively integrate respect for children's rights into policy and practice than developing a separate UNCRC action plan. We will also make a clearer link between the appropriate actions and the relevant Concluding Observation in both the current and future action plans.

Although the 2008 Concluding Observations on how the UK can better implement the UNCRC are for the State party as a whole, the majority of them are relevant to us. There is already considerable work in progress that addresses the issues raised by the Committee but we are committed to responding positively to the Concluding Observations and will give careful consideration to all those which apply here. However, we recognise that we cannot address all the Committee's recommendations immediately. As issues and progress are not consistent across the administrations, it has been important to establish the most important issues for priority action here in the short to medium term. We would emphasise however that this is the starting point not the end point.

Establishing key priorities areas for action – the process

Identifying a draft list of priorities

In 2008, the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People recognised that there was a number of cross-cutting issues which would benefit from being driven forward at a Ministerial level and, after extensive consideration, the Sub-Committee agreed on six key priorities to improve the lives of the most marginalised young people to progress the implementation of the Convention. These priorities were developed and agreed by all Ministers and reflected the issues being raised with them, both in their capacity as Ministers and Members of the Legislative Assembly, by constituents and NGOs

Three key relevant pieces of work have also been carried out independently since 2007 to establish priority action areas for progressing rights. These are:

- 1) A Review of Child Rights in Northern Ireland carried out by the Commissioner for Children and Young People who has a statutory role in monitoring and advising on child rights in Northern Ireland (published November 2008). Eight-seven statutory, voluntary and community sector professionals, 101 parents

and carers and 2,114 children and young people aged from 3 to 25 years engaged in the process.;

- 2) The Commissioner's key priorities for 2008 to 2011 which were established after a process of consultation with 1,453 children and 420 parents, carers and NGOS; and
- 3) A consultation with 132 children and young people carried out in February 2007 in preparation for the UNCRC examination.

The priority action areas identified in each of these pieces of work and the Ministerial Sub-Committee's six priorities were compared and mapped against the 2008 Concluding Observations to establish a set of 15 draft high level priorities, most of which cover more than one of the Observations.

Finalising our priority areas for action

Young people's versions of the Children and Young People's Strategy Action Plan and the UNCRC Concluding Observations were produced for consultation. A series of age appropriate workshops was facilitated by Participation Network groups across Northern Ireland and included many of the most marginalised and difficult to reach children and young people.

Young people were also given the opportunity to give their views on what further actions were needed to address the Concluding Observations via an online questionnaire and media advertising.

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, NGOs, the Children and Young People's Parents' Advisory Group, the Assembly Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the All Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People were also asked for their comments on the draft list of priorities to address the Concluding Observations. Their responses, alongside the feedback from children and young people, was analysed to inform our final list of 14 priority areas for action which are set out in the table below.

Priority area for action (not ranked)	UNCRC Article	Relevant Paragraphs of Concluding Observations
Improved co-ordination in implementing children's rights	4	13, 15
Dissemination, training and awareness raising of the UNCRC	42, 44	21
Counteracting negative portrayal and perceptions of young people	2	25
Improving participation and respect for the views of children and young people	12	33, 67
Safeguarding, including support for families and carers	6,17e, 18,19,33-36, 39	29, 39, 42, 43, 45, 51, 74, 76
Children and young people in alternative care and leaving care	20, 21	45,47
Children and young people with physical and sensory disabilities	23	53,
Mental health and wellbeing	24, 25	57, 63
Young people involved in risky behaviour	24, 33	61, 63,
Tackling child poverty and social disadvantage	27(paras1-3)	19, 55, 65, 67
Equity, support and access for all to high quality education	28, 29	67
Play and Leisure	31	69
Youth Justice	37, 40	78
Newcomer/minority ethnic children and Travellers	2, 27,30	25, 65, 67

The draft priority areas for action also included:

(1) Bullying

This is now included in the education priority which has been added as a result of the responses to the consultation.

(2) Early years and early intervention.

This was not specifically referred to in the Concluding Observations but was initially included because of the significant body of work emerging which highlights the importance of early intervention and quality early support across a wide range of issues affecting the most vulnerable, marginalised and discriminated against young people. However, as early intervention is key to so many of the above priority areas for action, it is more appropriate to consider it as a supporting theme across the priorities.

Awareness raising since the publication of the Concluding Observations

While this document outlines our priority areas for further action, we have already taken steps to disseminate the Concluding Observations and to promote the rights of children and young people.

The Concluding Observations have been drawn to the attention of all Members of the Legislative Assembly and have been discussed at meetings of both the Ministerial Sub-Committee and the Champions for Children and Young People. Age appropriate versions of the Convention have been sent to all schools and Further Education colleges for distribution to pupils and a young people's version of the Concluding Observations has been distributed through NGOs and consultation workshops. We have also distributed the Articles of the Convention and awareness raising material to almost 4,000 personnel at middle management level across government departments.

Next Steps

As highlighted, our Children and Young People's Strategy Action Plan 2008-11 already addresses a number of the Concluding Observations and work is underway in strengthening it. This will focus on our priority action areas but we will give careful consideration to our response to all those which apply here.

Partnership working is key to progressing children's rights and we will continue to work with NGOs, the Commissioner for Children and Young People and children and young people themselves. We have established a Strategy Planning and Review Group which is made up of both statutory sector members and voluntary sector representatives of a range of organisations working with children of all ages, with a variety of needs. This Group plays an important role in providing advice on and monitoring the implementation of the strategy action plans and progress against the Concluding Observations. We will also work closely with colleagues in the other jurisdictions so that we can all learn from, and contribute to, the progress each is making in meeting our commitments under the Convention.