



**Children in Northern Ireland's Submission to call for evidence on
The Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill
June 2020**

Introduction

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella body for the children's sector in Northern Ireland.

CiNI represents the interests of its member organisations providing policy, information, training, participation support services and the Regional Parenting Helpline Parentine NI. CiNI membership also includes colleagues in the children's statutory sector, recognising that the best outcomes for children and young people are increasingly achieved working in partnership with all those who are committed to improving the lives of children and young people in NI.

Children in Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Justice Committee on the draft, Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.

Please note that we will be making comment on the issues that impact upon children and young people and we fully support the submission made by Women's Aid Federation.

Impact of Domestic Violence on Children & Young People

Children and young people can experience both short and long term cognitive, behavioural and emotional effects as a result of witnessing domestic abuse within the family. Responses to the trauma may vary according to a multitude of factors including, but not limited to, age, race, sex and stage of development.

Children are individuals and may respond to witnessing abuse in different ways such as:

- They may become anxious or depressed
- They may have difficulty sleeping
- They have nightmares or flashbacks
- They can be easily startled

- They may complain of physical symptoms such as tummy aches and may start to wet their bed
- They may have temper tantrums and problems with school
- They may behave as though they are much younger than they are
- They may become aggressive or they may internalise their distress and withdraw from other people
- They may have a lowered sense of self-worth
- Older children may begin to play truant, start to use alcohol or drugs, begin to self-harm by taking overdoses or cutting themselves or have an eating disorder

Children may also feel angry, guilty, insecure, alone, frightened, powerless or confused. Which is why we fail to understand why safeguarding children and young people has not been included in this bill by the introduction of Operation Encompass.

We feel that the introduction will safeguard children and young people as Operation Encompass directly connects the police with schools to ensure better outcomes for children who are subject or witness to police-attended incidents of domestic abuse. Rapid provision of support within the school environment means children are better safeguarded against the short, medium and long-term effects of domestic abuse.

Family Court Systems

We echo the call from Women's Aid that there should be a review of the Family Court Systems to ensure the protection of children in cases of domestic abuse to ensure the best interests of the child are being met. The fact is the family court is so often a difficult and prolonged battleground, with children at the very centre of bitter arguments. We recognise the need for balance in the judicial process, but we must recognise that children and young people are too often victims as well as witnesses to abuse.

Cross Departmental Approach

We would refer the Department to the Children's Services Co-operation Act which received Royal Assent in December 2015. The aim of the Act is to improve co-operation amongst Departments and Agencies and places a duty on Children's Authorities, as defined by the Act, to co-operate where appropriate as they deliver services aimed at improving the well-being of children and young people.

The Act requires the Executive to develop and adopt a strategy which sets the strategic direction with a view to achieving improvements in the well-being of children and young people in NI.

The Act is structured as follows;

- Well-being of children and young persons – a “purpose clause” used to define what is meant by well-being and what is intended by the Act.
- Co-operation to improve well-being – a duty on the NI Executive to make arrangements for co-operation to improve well-being.
- Children and young persons strategy – a duty on the NI Executive to bring forward a strategy to outline the priority outcomes for children's well being.
- Sharing of resources and pooling of funds – an enabling power to allow Departments and Agencies to pool resources (should they choose) to deliver children's services.
- Report on the operation of this Act – a duty on the NI Executive to report on the delivery of the strategy and how the lives of children and young people have improved.
- Programme for Government – a requirement that the Programme for Government (PfG) consider issues raised in the report on the operation of this Act.
- Guidance – a clause which details that the Executive Office may bring forward guidance on the implementation of this Act.

- Regulations relating to clause 4 – a clause which gives the Department of Finance the power to introduce regulations which would outline how Departments should act in the pooling of budgets.

We echo the call from Women's Aid for a cross-departmental approach to implementing this legislation and suggest by utilising the Children's Services Co-operation Act as a means of achieving this.

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