

Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Children's Services Co-operation Bill: Oral Evidence, 15th April, 2015.

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1. Outcomes to support co-operation.

- Extensive international evidence of the need for agreed outcomes to improve children's lives.
- The six NI outcomes developed through extensive consultation.
- The outcomes, taken together, cover the whole of children's lives and provide a coherent framework for work across all sectors towards improvement.
- They greatly help to put the child's life at the centre of joint work, rather than the focus being on the current responsibilities of individual agencies. The Child Poverty outcomes can be used together with the 6, as indicators of success can be linked.
- The duty is essential as it makes co-operation core business.

2. Suggested Amendments

2.1 The Bill requires co-operation at two levels;

- Government department level
- Agency level.

Greater clarity would be achieved if this were noted at the start and in the titles of sections, as suggested below.

- 'Require Northern Ireland departments to discharge their functions and co-operate with one another in order to contribute to the achievement of certain specified outcomes relating to the well-being of children and young people, and to require agencies to discharge their functions and co-operate with each other in order to contribute to the achievement of the same outcomes, through an amendment to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.'
- General Duty at Department Level
- Corresponding Duty at Agency Level: Amendment of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995

2.2 The other amendment I suggest is to the wording of the amendment to Schedule 2 of the Children Order, in order to allow the Bill to include cooperation on early intervention at agency level.

In Schedule 2 to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (provision of services for families: specific powers and duties) for paragraph 2A substitute—

‘Children and Young People’s Plans’

2A.—(1) The Board shall, within one year of this paragraph coming into effect—

- a) make arrangements to promote co-operation between the Board and specified statutory bodies as well as any other appropriate persons or bodies, with a view to improving specified outcomes in relation to the well-being of children and young people.
- b) review services provided within its area which are relevant to improvement in relation to the specified outcomes
- c) having regard to that review and the most recent reviews under Article 20, prepare and publish a plan, to be known as the Children and Young People’s Plan, for the planning and commissioning of services to secure improvement in the specified outcomes in relation to the well-being of children and young people.

3. Children’s Services Planning.

The HSCB, alongside all statutory agencies, operates under statutes, and discharges responsibilities accordingly. This cuts across neither the lead roles of Government Departments nor MLAs. There is already a statutory requirement on the HSCB, contained within the Children (NI) Order 1995, to carry out Children’s Services Planning. This Bill is suggesting an amendment to an existing statutory requirement, which would make such joint planning core business for each agency, and such core business status, for statutory agencies, is only achieved if the business is made statutory.

4. Sharing Resources and Pooling Funds.

This is essential. The lack of the ability to pool budgets has severely limited current attempts to provide an integrated approach to improving children’s lives. Sharing resources in this way will allow changes to flow from decisions in various Departments’ areas of responsibilities, and will greatly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the totality of resources across Departments to improve children’s lives.