



Committee for the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister  
Room 346  
Parliament Buildings,  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont,  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

26 February 2015

Dear sir/madam

**Re: Children's Services Co-operation Bill**

VOYPIC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Call for Evidence from the Committee for the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister on the Children's Services Co-operation Bill. VOYPIC fully supports the Children's Bill and its aim to put the Government's six high level outcomes from the children's strategy into legislation. This will require departments to discharge their functions and co-operate to further the achievement of these outcomes. We endorse the submission made by Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) and will make reference to this throughout our response.

VOYPIC is a charity working across Northern Ireland promoting the rights and improving the lives of children and young people cared for away from home. They may be living at home in care; with foster or kinship carers; in children's homes; in secure settings; or in supported accommodation. They may be preparing to leave care or be care leavers. We support children and young people through a wraparound model of practice.

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## General duty

VOYPIC supports the Ten Year Children's Strategy and its six high level outcomes. We believe that the strategy and the six high level outcomes are robust and are based on improving the lives of all children and young people.

In 2011 VOYPIC introduced Our Life in Care (OLC) survey as a three year pilot project to collect the views and experiences of children in care aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland. Our three surveys were completed in 2011, 2012 and in 2013. We used the six high level outcomes as the basis for three age appropriate questionnaires.

In recent years in Northern Ireland, critical chances for better outcomes for children and young people have been missed as key strategies have been insufficiently developed, implemented or integrated across government, or have failed to adhere to obligations outlined in fundamental statutes and regulations.

We welcome the clause in the Bill that would place a duty on Northern Ireland departments to co-operate with each other to further the achievement of the objectives stated in the ten year strategy. In the case of children in care, Our Life in Care shows that that whilst we may have the system, the structures and the policy in place, it's the everyday practice and fine detail that impact on daily life. A statutory duty to co-operate would ensure the best outcomes for children and young people are achieved.

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### **Co-operation Report**

We endorse the view of CiNI that there appears to be some confusion regarding the reporting process recommended within the draft Children's Bill in relation to the co-operation report. There are reporting mechanisms already in place which, if amended slightly, would ensure streamline reporting and avoid duplication when reporting on co-operation to achieve the specified outcomes detailed within the Children's Strategy.

### **Sharing resources and pooling funds**

VOYPIC fully supports legislation to create an enabling power to permit government departments and agencies to pool budgets and jointly commission services. Creating a mechanism for pooling budgets would make it easier for departments to share staff, skills and resources, to jointly commissioned services and work collectively towards shared outcomes. This joint working and cooperation could be used to develop the concept and understanding of corporate parenting for children in care and care leavers. We are promoting a greater level of corporate parenting responsibility across government and the statutory sector to improve outcomes for children in care.

### **Children's Services Planning**

We endorse the views reflected by CiNI and welcome the proposals contained under Clause 4. It is important that those bodies are specified to ensure the coordination of the delivery of services to achieve the six high level outcomes. We support the duties placed on the Health and Social Care Board particularly with regard to monitoring and reporting.

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Whilst the requirements contained in the bill are not new, it will amend the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 substituting the existing paragraph 2A of Schedule 2 with a more detailed provision. We believe that placing a duty on the relevant public bodies to co-operate to prepare, review, implement and report on the children and young people's plan will lead to more effective monitoring and better outcomes for children and young people.

Yours faithfully,

Ruth Barry  
Senior Policy Officer

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