

Children's Law Centre

BRIEFING PAPER

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITY

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**



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This briefing document has been prepared by Rachel Hogan BL, SEND Specialist Legal Advisor and Fergal McFerran, Policy and Public Affairs Manager on behalf of the Children's Law Centre. It has been prepared for Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, in advance of a committee meeting scheduled to take place on Wednesday 6 March 2024, in relation to Special Educational Needs and Disability.

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Children's Rights
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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Children's Law Centre (CLC) is an independent charitable organisation which works towards a society where all children can participate, are valued, have their rights respected and guaranteed without discrimination and where every child can achieve their full potential.

We offer training and research on children's rights, we make submissions on law, policy and practice affecting children and young people and we provide a free legal advice, information and representation service. We have a dedicated free phone legal advice line for children and young people and their parents as well as a Live Chat service for young people.

Since its establishment in 1997, CLC has provided free legal advice and information as well as strategic legal representation on a growing and increasingly complex range of issues affecting children and young people under the age of 18.

CLC has developed considerable specialist expertise in Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) law across our advice and legal team and through employment of a dedicated SEND Specialist Legal Advisor. SEND casework has become a core part of CLC's work, due to an ever-increasing level of demand for support for children to unable to access their right to education.

Our advice service data shows that in 2011, 35% of the total advice queries we received related to education and 51% of those education queries (377) related to SEN. In 2023, over a decade later, 63% of total advice queries received related to education and 71% of those education queries (1,240) related to SEN.

Importantly, CLC was founded upon the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and leads for the NI NGO sector in co-ordinating the submission of evidence to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to inform their monitoring and reporting work on the UK's compliance with children's rights standards.

CLC CASEWORK: DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION

1. In all of the ongoing discussions around Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) provision, it is not clear to what extent the promotion and enabling of disability equality is driving the “investment” agenda. Whilst there are increasing numbers of children with complex needs entering mainstream schools, CLC’s legal advice and casework experience strongly indicates a lack of planning and proactivity.
2. Alana – CLC has recently secured High Court Declarations in two judicial review leave applications in relation to the denial of the human right to education for reasons connected to disability. One of these children, “Alana”, who had complex needs and was registered to a special school, was unable to access all but one day of nursery and did not enter full time education in a school until Primary 3 due to lack of suitable transport during the pandemic and whilst restrictions eased for her non-disabled peers. A case study about “Alana” is attached to this briefing paper¹.
3. Aurelia – CLC’s client, Aurelia, was unable to start Year 8 in a mainstream secondary school for the first four months of this school year for reasons related to her physical disability. She has asked CLC to speak about the extremely hurtful impacts of being treated less favourably than her friends and siblings who were welcomed into local schools whilst she was left behind and eventually had to go elsewhere. Aurelia said, “I want the government to know my name”.
4. **CLC recommends that the “D” in SEND receives much greater priority if our education system is to offer an effective and inclusive education to all children and young people.**

THE SEND FRAMEWORK

5. CLC provided a briefing paper to all MLAs in advance of the Northern Ireland Assembly motion debate on SEND which took place on 26 February 2024. We have attached that briefing document to this paper and ask that they are read together.
6. During the school year 2022/23, 19% of the school population was registered as having a special educational need (SEN) and 7% of children had a statement of special educational needs². The majority of children with SEN attend mainstream schools (around 90%). Special schools have insufficient capacity to meet the needs of all of the children who may require a place. The EA has been opening "Specialist Provisions within Mainstream" (SPiMs) as a crisis response to a lack of suitable specialist placements.
7. The legal rights of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are governed by a robust domestic legal framework which is designed to enable early identification, assessment and provision at school as well as protecting disability equality rights. Intervention may include school-based support and, if required, external support from the Education Authority (EA) and/or Health and Social Care Trusts and/or other children's services providers.
8. The key domestic legal rights protections regarding special educational needs and disability equality in education are found within:
 - The Education (NI) Order 1996, as amended.
 - The Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005 (SENDO).
 - The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016³.
 - The Children's Services Cooperation Act (NI) 2015.
 - The Autism Act (NI) 2011, as amended.
 - Section 75, Northern Ireland Act 1998.
 - The Human Rights Act 1998.
 - The Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations (NI) 2005.
 - The Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal Regulations (NI) 2005.
9. The above provisions are underpinned by statutory Codes of Practice and are augmented in their protective effect by international conventions, which the UK government has agreed to implement, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

10. After extensive consultation and scrutiny over a prolonged period, a revised SEND framework was developed by the Department of Education (DE). The SEND Act (NI) 2016 was enacted but has not been commenced, with the exception of a small number of provisions. Revised Regulations and Codes of Practice which underpin this revised framework require Assembly scrutiny before they can be implemented. CLC raised significant concerns in March 2021 about the draft revised Regulations and the revised Code but have not yet had sight of any updated versions. It is now unclear what the status of this proposed revised framework is and whether or when the DE intends to implement it.
11. The urgent need to focus upon operational rather than legislative concerns has rightly become a priority. Early intervention at the school-based stages of the Code of Practice has not been funded, managed or developed properly, and this has resulted in the continuously spiraling costs of delayed intervention. The system is reaping what it has sowed, as we can clearly see in multiple reports on SEND.
12. A trend has developed that significant numbers of children with SEND have not even been able to access their most basic entitlement to a school place each September.
13. **CLC recommends that the focus remains upon improvement of the operation of the SEND framework until the point where early intervention and school provision (pre-statutory assessment/statement) is matched to the level of need.**

EARLY INTERVENTION

14. The SEND framework is designed so that needs are identified and met early, with the majority of the support being delivered at school based stages and with external support if needed but without the need for a statement. The operation of the framework needs to match its design.
15. CLC's view is that significant and sustained investment in early intervention pathways is the only possible way to stabilise the SEND system. Children need a series of potential pathways that they can follow depending upon their presenting needs, and these should not be confined to education support but should include health and social care support. Effective multi-disciplinary team working is key in complex cases.
16. Early intervention includes "early years" intervention to support positive educational outcomes. It also includes being responsive and providing timely intervention for children when needs arise at any age or stage. Schools and EA pupil support services need to have their capacity to respond early significantly built up.
17. **Capacity to identify and provide for SEND at the point of need is the foundation of a successful system. CLC calls for investment in early identification and assessment of special educational needs and for provision of early intervention services which match the needs of children and young people.**

REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF EDUCATION: INVESTING IN A BETTER FUTURE⁴

18. CLC has significant concerns that plans may be in train to dismantle the legislative protections contained within the current operative SEND framework in order to weaken the legal protection it affords to children with SEND. The CLC therefore vehemently disagrees with related proposals put forward by the Independent Review of Education in Chapter 3 of Volume 1 of its report "Investing in a Better Future".
19. The proposals around diluting statutory rights to avoid situations where the SENDIST may simply uphold them, whilst attractive to a public authority as a cost saving measure, are manifestly ill-founded and completely irrational from a children's rights perspective.
20. A dilution of legal rights in a bid to paper over the cracks and aid the appearance of legal compliance by public authorities would represent the ultimate betrayal of children with SEND and their families. This must never be allowed to happen.
21. **CLC believes that intensive scrutiny on the part of the Education Committee of any proposals for legislative change to the SEND framework is a critical safeguard against rights regression for children with SEND.**

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

22. CLC is seeing more children who face significant barriers to school attendance at key transition points, including Primary 1, Year 8 and Year 12. Children who were in Primary 7 or Year 8 at the beginning of the pandemic are now sitting their GCSEs. Some parents report that their children are unable to cope with school as it precipitates a response of intense anxiety, with severe impacts upon emotional health and well-being. There appears to be an array of different reasons for non-attendance across CLC's casework, but all of these can be captured as some form of "unmet need".
23. It appears to CLC that there has been a shocking deterioration in the situation of the most disadvantaged children.
24. DE statistics⁵ show that in the academic year to June 2023, 96,000 pupils had chronic or severe chronic attendance issues. An additional 100,041 children were in the "at risk" category. These figures are stated to be an improvement on the previous year. This is a truly shocking problem and the long-term consequences for children and young people, as well as for society as a whole, are entirely obvious.
25. It is likely that these statistics are an underestimate the scale of the problem as they may not capture all absent children who are missing parts of a school day or who are physically in school but are not able to access education.
- 26. Collection of comprehensive data, disaggregated by section 75 grouping, is urgently needed, including from affected children and young people and their parents and carers, to help identify the causes of and solutions to the loss of education associated with chronic absence.**

DE END TO END REVIEW AND EA SEND TRANSFORMATION

27. It is hoped that the DE's ongoing "End to End" review of the SEND processes, in parallel with EA Transformation processes, will enable the SEND framework to begin to deliver at pace at an operational level what it is designed to provide for children with SEND – **early identification and intervention at the point of need which produces positive educational outcomes and promotes equality of opportunity.**
28. CLC has appreciated being involved in DE workshops and in the EA's SEND Transformation Programme Reference Group. There appears to be broad agreement about what the issues are and about the direction of travel, with a focus upon early intervention. There have been opportunities for collaboration across disciplines which is very welcome. CLC reserves its position on the effectiveness of this work pending implementation and evaluation. We await evidence of meaningful progress for children with SEND.
29. We are aware that as a first step, "local integrated teams" are proposed to be rolled out in September 2024 which involve transforming single EA services into localised multi-service teams. The original EA business case plan to have multi-disciplinary teams including health input has been shelved after the transformation programme had its budget cut by 50% for 2023/24. Teams will be limited to EA services only and there will be no pilot and little (if any) opportunity for stakeholder co-design, which is concerning and represents a significant missed opportunity.
30. It is not clear how this approach of creating local integrated teams will significantly increase the availability of intervention that thousands of children with unmet needs may access, particularly in light of the budget cuts.
31. It is imperative that we know what the exact details of the service delivery changes are, how entry/exit criteria are affected, who can seek access, who decides upon granting of access (and when), what the balance is between "whole school" capacity building and individualised support and how outcomes will be measured, evaluated and reported upon.
32. CLC would be guarded about any intervention that is described as "advice and strategies to schools" as schools report to us that is no substitute for specialist intervention e.g. for literacy support. Placing a child on 12 weeks of "advice and strategies to school" may take them off waiting list statistics, but will it make any difference to their educational progress?

33. CLC recommends that the pupil support services aspect of the transformation of EA services requires close and careful ongoing scrutiny as it is the foundation upon which “pre-statement” early intervention will be built. It would be beneficial to know the exact details of the service delivery changes and what the service providers (e.g. peripatetic teachers) and service users in each service area make of the direction of travel.

SUPPORTING SOLUTIONS: CHILDREN'S SERVICES COOPERATION

34. CLC has prepared a separate briefing paper on the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015 (CSCA) which is attached to this Committee briefing document.
35. Improving the well-being of children who require multi-disciplinary services is precisely what the Northern Ireland Assembly intended to do in 2015 with this innovative legislation. It is long before time that this intention and ambition is realised with urgent wide-scale action across all departments and children's services providers to fulfil the express purpose of the CSCA.
36. The DE and the EA will not be able to provide early intervention for children with SEND without support from other children's services providers. It is incumbent upon all interested parties to support and enable positive change and to maximise the use and benefit of all available resources, particularly across government departments.
37. The CSCA sets out how to measure well-being, it provides for a mandatory duty of co-operation across all children's services and an enabling power to pool all types of resources including staff, premises and equipment. It enables the creation of pooled funds from which contributing parties can draw. The Department of Finance has regulation-making powers to enable pooling of funds.
- 38. CLC recommends that solutions to the SEND crisis which are available through the CSCA are fully scoped, identified and maximised to enable the holistic needs of children to be fully met through early and effective intervention from the appropriate specialists working together with the child, the school and parents/carers to remove barriers to effective education and to enable full inclusion at school.**

REFERENCES

- 1 The case study has been anonymised and the child's name has been changed.
- 2 NI School Census 2022/23.
- 3 Only a small number of provisions have been commenced.
- 4 Independent Review of Education: Investing in a Better Future. December 2023. Accessed at <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/key-documents/investing-better-future>
- 5 DE Circular 2023/11 – Attendance Guidance and Absence Recording by Schools.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

- [Alana's Story](#)

Appendix 2

- [Children's Services Cooperation Act briefing paper](#)

Appendix 3

- [SEND briefing paper](#)

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**INVESTMENT AND
TRANSFORMATION**



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Special Educational Needs and Disability – Investment and Transformation

That this Assembly commits to prioritising the needs of our most vulnerable children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND); notes that the current system for supporting children with SEND has failed to deliver appropriate and timely support for parents, pupils and schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to prioritise and invest in SEND transformation, to ensure that the End to End Review of Special Educational Needs produces an action plan that will be implemented urgently, and to make a commitment that all children with SEND in key transition years are notified of a school placement which meets their needs no later than children without special educational needs.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

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Our advice service data shows that in 2011, 35% of the total advice queries we received related to education and 51% of those education queries (377) related to SEN. In 2023, over a decade later, 63% of total advice queries received related to education and 71% of those education queries (1,240) related to SEN.

Importantly, CLC was founded upon the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and leads for the NI NGO sector in co-ordinating the submission of evidence to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to inform their monitoring and reporting work on the UK's compliance with children's rights standards.

OUR ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM A SYSTEM BUILT ON FAILURE

CLC has continuously challenged the systemic failings of public authorities responsible for delivering SEND services to children – in particular the Education Authority (EA), and the 5 Education and Library Boards (ELBs) that came before it.

CLC has always taken the view that the SEND legal framework is a robust rights-based framework and that the issues experienced by children and their parents, carers and schools have been caused by unlawful operation of that framework and process failings which were essentially allowed to continue and to escalate unchecked, driven in part by chronic under-resourcing and poverty of service provision, relative to growing need.

Notably, the Department of Education's long-running SEN and Inclusion Review which produced the SEND Act (NI) 2016 and draft revised regulations and a draft code of practice which have not been implemented, did not draw out the systemic operational failings of the ELBs or the EA.

Rather, evidence about issues with the EA's operation of the SEND framework, which ultimately led to the current SEND improvement processes came into the public domain, not through the relevant public authorities, but through whistleblowing and external investigation and reporting in a series of highly critical reports including the NICCY "Too Little, Too Late" report (March 2020)¹, two reports on SEN from the NI Audit Office (June 2017² and September 2020³), a Public Accounts Committee report on SEN (February 2021)⁴, IPSOS (May 2023)⁵, and the Independent Review of Education: Investing in a Better Future report (December 2023)⁶.

Early intervention has taken a back seat to bureaucracy whilst public authorities, in a futile effort to control spending, have constructed ever higher barriers to access for those children who need support to access learning and development.

The SEND system has been allowed to degenerate into critical failure, with even basic legal entitlements, such as a school place, being unavailable to children most in need of a rich and nurturing educational environment. Crisis management has taken the place of proper operation of statutory functions.

The EA has a "Plan of Arrangements" set out on its website to describe all the pupil support services available to children with SEND. Despite CLC's active participation in the EA SEND transformation Reference Group and ongoing DE End to End Review, there is a complete lack of clarity about what transformation processes are taking place "on the ground" within EA

pupil support services. The DE End-to-End Review of SEND must produce positive outcomes urgently and in the long term, underpinned by sustainable funding. The outcomes framework by which success is to be measured, should be ambitious and not limited to a “tick box” statistics exercise based on “easy wins”.

We are aware that local integrated teams are proposed to be rolled out in September 2024 which involve transforming single EA services into localised multi-service teams. The original plan to have multi-disciplinary teams including health input has been shelved after the transformation programme funding had its budget cut. It is imperative that we know what the service delivery changes are, how entry/exit criteria are affected and how outcomes will be measured and evaluated against the single service model that is being dismantled.

Recommendation

CLC recommends that this aspect of the transformation of EA services requires close and careful scrutiny as it is the foundation upon which early intervention will be built.

THE IMPACT OF FAILURE REFLECTIONS FROM CLC CASEWORK

CLC's legal team report that over the past number of years cases regarding SEND have become more complex, more entrenched and more difficult to resolve. Despite very positive working relationships, communication with the EA has become more difficult as staff appear to be extremely overstretched. Parents and young people report that they feel they are being ignored.

CLC has recently secured High Court Declarations in two judicial review leave applications in relation to the denial of the human right to education for reasons connected to disability. One of these children, who had complex needs and was registered to a special school, was unable to access all but one day of nursery and did not enter full time education in a school until Primary 3 due to lack of suitable transport during the covid pandemic and whilst restrictions eased for non-disabled peers.

Ongoing legal work within our team has exposed an extremely concerning trend regarding vulnerable children who are unable to attend school due to unmet needs. The majority of these clients have SEND and there are a high proportion with anxiety and mental health difficulties which are not being addressed, as well as children with no suitable school placement, children inappropriately placed and children with complex family support and respite needs. Schools are ill equipped to make reasonable adjustments both in terms of "knowhow" and due to overcrowding and lack of time and money. Unacceptable attitudes towards children with disabilities which inhibit true inclusion are also a concern alongside poor planning, which hinders access to educational facilities.

We have recently assisted a Year 8 pupil who was unable to start Year 8 for the first four months of term as the necessary equipment and toilet facilities were unavailable and were only sourced after the start of term.

We are witnessing family breakdown and entry of children into care when education placements fail and there is little or no short break provision available from Health and Social Care Trusts.

CLC are having to step in to drive and coordinate multi-disciplinary responses in cases where children have SEND but have been left at home, with professionals believing the problem is for another agency to resolve. The system is simply not responding and these vulnerable children are becoming invisible.

INSTITUTIONALISED DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION

It is important to make the connection between the operation of the SEND framework for special educational provision and access to disability equality protections. In many cases that CLC deals with, disability discrimination is flowing from unmet need which has caused barriers to educational access and inclusion within school.

In a proportion of cases the EA will be aware of or complicit in the informal exclusion or other unfavourable treatment experienced by a child. CLC has previously obtained a declaration of disability discrimination from the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST) on the basis of failure to carry out a statutory assessment which left a young child unsupported and suffering significant school exclusion, both formal and informal. In other cases, schools are failing to recognise their legal duties and the need to proactively plan to educate pupils with disabilities and to make reasonable adjustments to enable full participation in education.

Delays in access to early intervention and in access to appropriately specialist placements, caused by lack of investment and shortcomings in EA planning and operations (and formerly by ELB operations) are responsible in some cases for blocking access to education for disabled children and young people.

In CLC's view, which we have formed through our legal advice and casework, disability discrimination against children has become institutionalised within our education system due to shortcomings in the implementation of the policy of inclusion which became legally regulated through the Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005 (SENDO).

We see this discrimination when children with SEND are sent home early from school or placed on part-time timetables for prolonged periods; when they are isolated or segregated from peers; when their school-work or physical environment is not adapted appropriately; and when they are subject to unregulated restraint. It manifests in a myriad of ways; when children with SEND are not allowed to be in the school playground or go on the school trip and when they are excluded from the class photo; when they are so anxious and unwell that they cannot tolerate the thought of putting on a uniform or getting into or out of the car to go into school; when they are formally suspended or expelled for behaviour arising from disability in the absence of special educational provision.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN A SYSTEM BUILT ON SUCCESS

All are broadly agreed on what the problems are. This in itself is a form of progress and presents an opportunity for positive change. The pervasive process flaws which have become deep rooted and entangled throughout all stages of the SEND operational system will not be weeded out overnight. It will be important to identify for all stages of the SEND framework how progress is to be actioned and measured from the child's standpoint and how the DE and the EA will be able to demonstrate both legal compliance and an ability to measure and report upon the timeliness, quality, efficiency, effectiveness and ultimately the outcomes of SEND operations and SEND service provision. It will not be possible to measure success in the absence of significant ongoing input from affected children, young people and their parents and carers.

Significant investment in specialist multi-disciplinary early intervention at the point of need is urgently required. This is a cross-departmental issue. Current plans for "Local Integrated Teams" included EA services only, following cuts to the EA Transformation budget. Children with SEND must have their needs identified early, access appropriate assessments quickly and receive suitable and timely intervention/reasonable adjustments, whether at school level or with support from the EA and/or HSCTs and other children's services providers.

Implementation of cooperation across all children's services involved with a child, including pooling of expertise, human and financial resources, buildings and equipment – as envisioned under the Children's Services Cooperation Act (NI) 2015 should be a priority. It is unclear what steps have been taken to maximise the opportunities such pooling of resources may present. The Department of Finance does not appear to have exercised any of its regulation-making powers under section 8 of the Act. The DE Children and young People's Strategy has not been implemented.

Active promotion of equality of opportunity and compliance with equality duties in the allocation of resources as per section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, including through appropriate screening, data gathering and consultation with affected parties is a legal requirement.

Schools and education providers require adequate resourcing, training and professional development to enable them to meet the needs of children with SEND in the classroom, particularly as the direction of travel is increased "inclusion" in mainstream in the absence of specialist places.

Non-attendance at school is becoming normalised, particularly post-covid. For the substantial number of children who are regularly not at school and

are not receiving suitable education or social protection, which we believe is substantially due to unidentified or unmet needs, it is absolutely critical that the DE and the EA with support from schools and HSCTs collect data from the affected children and families about the reasons for disrupted school attendance and identify the factors that would assist return to education. Children who are not at school are much less likely to access early intervention from the education system. Data should be capable of disaggregation by section 75 characteristics.

Children with SEND who are not in education, are legally entitled to alternative arrangements by the EA. This is not happening and it is unclear why the EA is failing to provide article 86 education “otherwise” than at school for children who, for any reason, are not receiving suitable education (Education (NI) Order 1998).

All children have strengths, abilities and aptitudes which should be promoted and celebrated in line with article 29 of the UNCRC. Success and outcomes should not be measured by academic achievement alone. All children should be valued, celebrated and enabled to have a sense of belonging within their school community. Outcome measures should capture a wide range of attainments including social, emotional and developmental progress for all children as well as measures for inclusion in all aspects of an effective education.

Recommendation

It is clear that any meaningful improvement in outcomes for children with SEND will require effective co-operation and ongoing cross-departmental and multi-agency planning, funding and implementation (as reflected in the findings of both the Independent Review of Education and 'A Fair Start'⁷). CLC therefore recommends that MLAs examine the current ability, both in structural and resource terms to enable this to effectively take place, including through regulation-making powers, to ensure that sufficient resource is invested to deliver meaningful joined-up working to enhance the delivery of children's services.

Recommendation

CLC further recommends that relevant Ministers are asked to outline the extent to which the Children's Services Cooperation Act (NI) 2015 has been implemented and utilised since its introduction in this context.

COMPLIANCE WITH CHILDREN'S RIGHTS STANDARDS

Ratified by the UK in 1991, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international human rights treaty; celebrated as the most complete statement on children's rights ever produced, containing civil, political, socio-economic and cultural rights and is the most widely-ratified international human rights treaty in history. The UNCRC should be seen as minimum standards rather than the ceiling of our ambitions for children's rights.

While the UNCRC has not yet been incorporated into domestic law it provides a blueprint for the treatment of children which the UK government has already ratified. There are also a number of other policy and legislative vehicles through which it is envisioned children's rights will be realised in NI including the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015, and the Children and Young People's strategy 2020-2030.

The Department of Education is the lead, co-ordinating department for monitoring the implementation of the UNCRC in Northern Ireland but all departments and public authorities have a responsibility to fulfil the rights of children and young people.

While the rights of children as set out in the Convention are interrelated and interdependent, it is particularly relevant to reflect a number of key standards set out in the Convention. These include, that children should be protected from discrimination; that the primary consideration in all decisions impacting upon children should be their best interests; that they have the right to express their own views freely in all matters affecting them and that those views should be given due weight; that children with disabilities have the right to experience conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate active participation in the community. So too, the Convention sets out the right of children of all abilities to access education which realises their potential in an entirely holistic sense, seeking to develop a child's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities.⁸

If it wasn't already clear that we aren't meeting the needs of children with SEND it is demonstrably clear that we too are failing to fulfil their human rights. These standards, as set out in the UNCRC should be read and interpreted alongside the rights contained within the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)⁹, most notably article 24 of the UNCRPD which relates specifically to inclusive education.

Every country which has ratified the UNCRC has accepted a duty to report to the treaty body responsible for overseeing its implementation, that is, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. This reporting process

is a lengthy, deliberative exercise which involves the submission of evidence both from government(s) and a wide range of other stakeholders, including young people themselves. The process results in the Committee producing what is referred to as their Concluding Observations and Recommendations (CObs).

The most recent reporting process for the UK, including devolved jurisdictions concluded in June 2023 when the Committee published their CObs¹⁰. These were wide-ranging and, in our view, pointed to an alarming scale of non-compliance and an ever-increasing gap in children's rights.

The Committee made particular recommendations to the UK and devolved administrations in respect of children with special educational needs and disabilities, including but not limited to the recommendations to:

"40. (b) Reduce waiting times and strengthen the system for early detection and intervention, including for children with autism and developmental disorders, in order to facilitate access for children with all types of disabilities to education, health care, social protection and support services;

40. (c) Strengthen support for the social integration and individual development of children with disabilities, including by providing capacity-building to professionals working with and for children on the rights and specific needs of children with disabilities and ensuring the access of such children to personal assistance, rehabilitation and assistive devices;

40. (d) Ensure the right of children with disabilities to be heard in all decisions that affect them.

47. (a) Strengthen measures to address inequalities in educational attainment and improve educational outcomes for children in disadvantaged situations, including ... children with disabilities..., by, inter alia: (i) providing financial and other support for such children to finish school; (ii) developing guidelines for responding to cases of school absenteeism; and (iii) collecting and analysing data disaggregated ... relevant indicators on completion rates and exclusions to inform policies and programmes;

47. (b) Ensure inclusive education in mainstream schools for all children with disabilities, including by adapting curricula and training and assigning specialized teachers and professionals in integrated classes, so that children with disabilities and learning difficulties receive individual support and due attention;..."¹¹

Recommendation

CLC recommends that renewed focus is given to the meaningful implementation of the UNCRC across government, that the current mechanism for its implementation is scrutinised effectively and that serious consideration is given to placing the standards set out in the Convention on a legislative footing.

CONCLUSION

CLC welcomes the motion debate which we hope provides a meaningful opportunity for the Assembly to speak with a collective voice on the urgent need for investment and reform; close and continued scrutiny; and ultimately maintaining momentum to create a system which finally meets the needs and fulfils the human rights of some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

CLC acknowledge that MLAs will be well aware of the current challenges in SEND provision through their constituency casework, perhaps most acutely in how the outworkings of those challenges impact upon individual children and their families. In this briefing we have sought to highlight, informed by our years of practice in this area, some of the key areas of focus that we would encourage MLAs to bring renewed attention and scrutiny to. We welcome the opportunity to engage further with MLAs on this and other children's rights issues during this Assembly mandate.

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8 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child can be [accessed here](#). In the context of this briefing the Convention should be read with particular attention given to Article 29 and in conjunction with the following General Comments of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child:

- [General Comment No 1, 2003: On the aims of education](#)
- [General Comment No 9, 2006: On the rights of children with disabilities](#)

9 The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities can be accessible at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>

10 The Concluding Observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the UK (CRC/C/GBR/CO/6-7) published June 2023, can be accessed at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2F-C%2FGBR%2FCO%2F6-7&Lang=en

11 The recommendations included above are not exhaustive; the entire report of recommendations made by the Committee can be found in their totality at the previous footnote.

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Children's Law Centre

BRIEFING PAPER

THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES COOPERATION ACT (NI) 2015



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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Children's Law Centre (CLC) is an independent charitable organisation which works towards a society where all children can participate, are valued, have their rights respected and guaranteed without discrimination and where every child can achieve their full potential.

We offer training and research on children's rights, we make submissions on law, policy and practice affecting children and young people and we provide a free legal advice, information and representation service. We have a dedicated free phone legal advice line for children and young people and their parents as well as a Live Chat service for young people.

Since its establishment in 1997, CLC has provided free legal advice and information as well as strategic legal representation on a growing and increasingly complex range of issues affecting children and young people under the age of 18.

CLC has developed considerable specialist expertise in Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) law across our advice and legal team and through employment of a dedicated SEND Specialist Legal Advisor. SEND casework has become a core part of CLC's work, due to an ever-increasing level of demand for support for children to unable to access their right to education.

Our advice service data shows that in 2011, 35% of the total advice queries we received related to education and 51% of those education queries (377) related to SEN. In 2023, over a decade later, 63% of total advice queries received related to education and 71% of those education queries (1,240) related to SEN.

Importantly, CLC was founded upon the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and leads for the NI NGO sector in co-ordinating the submission of evidence to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to inform their monitoring and reporting work on the UK's compliance with children's rights standards.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN MELTDOWN

Through its legal advice and casework CLC sees that the disjointed nature of children's services planning and delivery in Northern Ireland. This, coupled with extreme budgetary pressures, is resulting in missed opportunities for preventative work which lead to failures of early intervention regarding special educational needs and disability (SEND) and health and social care support.

To ensure effective use of scarce resources and to secure earlier, lower cost interventions, which have better outcomes for children, it is an absolute necessity that creative approaches to co-operation across departments, public authorities and children's services providers across all sectors are designed according to evidence of need.

Notably, it has come to light in a wide series of reports that current structures for the delivery of children's services are not working for children and young people and their families. These include the NICCY "Too Little, Too Late" report (March 2020)¹, two reports on SEN from the NI Audit Office (June 2017² and September 2020³), a Public Accounts Committee report on SEN (February 2021)⁴, A Fair Start – Final Report and Action Plan (endorsed by the Executive, May 2021)⁵, NICCY – Neither Seen Nor Heard (December 2021)⁶, Baker Tilly Mooney Moore Landscape Review of the Education Authority (June 2022)⁷, IPSOS Review of SEN Service and Processes (May 2023)⁸, Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland (June 2023)⁹, and the Independent Review of Education: Investing in a Better Future report (December 2023)¹⁰.

The sheer volume of reviewing and reporting which is either focussed upon or crosses into the domain of SEND indicates that children with SEND are disproportionately affected by the failure of systems which have been set up to provide for their needs. In CLC's legal casework, we see that children with the most complex needs, alongside their siblings and families, are suffering the highest degree of hardship due to unrelenting failures of provision and failures of co-operation and resource/skills pooling across public authorities that are responsible for children's services provision.

It is noteworthy that all of the above reports post-date the enactment of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015.

The intentions of the Northern Ireland Assembly have not been realised which should, for all elected representatives, be a cause for concern. Children's services are in meltdown. CLC meets with children and families who feel they have been cast adrift by providers whose function is to identify

and meet their needs and to promote equality of opportunity. These families report that they have been left to fend for themselves in the absence of properly functioning health, social care and education services, with devastating consequences.

THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES COOPERATION ACT (NI) 2015

The Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015¹¹ was enacted by the Northern Ireland Assembly in recognition of the damaging impacts and inefficiencies inherent in “silo” working and to enable implementation of joined-up, collaborative working across all children’s services which contribute to the well-being of children and young people.

Guidance on the Children's Services Co-operation Act¹² was issued in 2018 and revised by the Department of Education in March 2022.

IMPROVING WELL-BEING

The express purpose of the Act, stated in section 1, is improving the well-being of children and young people.

Eight elements which contribute to well-being are:

- a. Physical and mental health.
- b. The enjoyment of play and leisure.
- c. Learning and achievement.
- d. Living in safety and with stability.
- e. Economic and environmental well-being.
- f. The making by them of a positive contribution to society.
- g. Living in a society which respects their rights.
- h. Living in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted between persons who share a relevant characteristic and persons who do not share that characteristic (i.e. Section 75 characteristics, in The Northern Ireland Act 1998).

The United Nations Convention in the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) informs the interpretation of “well-being”. The Act provides that regard is to be had to any relevant provision of the UNCRC when determining the meaning of “well-being”. For example, “learning and achievement” would be interpreted in line with article 29 of the UNCRC, which provides that children should be enabled to develop their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; education should enable development of respect for human rights as well as respect for the child’s parents, and development of respect for the child’s own cultural identity, language and values.

Rather than an improvement in the well-being of children and young people, CLC has been witness to a significant and severe deterioration in the well-being of our client base from 2015 to the current time, with children and families experiencing a bewildering array of barriers and challenges as they attempt to go about their day to day lives.

MANDATORY LEGAL DUTY TO COOPERATE: A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Section 2 of the Act imposes a mandatory legal duty upon every children's authority to co-operate with each other and with other children's services providers when exercising children's functions, which would include designing, implementing and providing children's services. The Executive must make arrangements to promote such co-operation.

Under section 3, the Executive must adopt a children and young person's strategy setting out how it proposes to improve the well-being of children and young people.

The Children and Young People's Strategy 2020 - 2030¹³ was approved by the Executive on 10th December 2020. The Department of Education takes a co-ordinating role but all departments carry collective responsibility for the arrangements. The strategy commits to creation of a Data Development Plan to collect relevant data, including baseline data, to inform the strategy. Monitoring is based upon a selection of strategic population-level indicators. Reporting structures are to be aligned with the Programme for Government (PfG) (which under section 6 should be informed by reports on the operation of the Act) and will, like the PfG, use an Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) approach.

The Delivery Plan for the Strategy is stated to focus on actions that will address the issues and groups of children and young people that have been identified as requiring the greatest focus. In CLC's view, all data should be relevant to and disaggregated by the eight elements of well-being and by section 75 characteristics to enable compliance with the requirements of section 1 regarding improving well-being.

Fundamental to success, in CLC's view, is provision targeted towards the needs of the most vulnerable groups children and young people, including those with legally protected equality characteristics, those living in socio-economic deprivation and children looked after by public authorities. The public need to be able to clearly see what measurable difference the implementation of the duty to co-operate is making to the well-being of children and young people.

Effective short, medium and long-term implementation through sustainable resourcing is essential, alongside close monitoring across departments of cumulative impacts and outcomes for children and young people regarding the eight elements of well-being identified within the Act.

POOLING OF RESOURCES: STAFF, GOODS, SERVICES, ACCOMMODATION, FUNDING ETC.

Section 4 contains an enabling power for children's authorities to pool resources (including staff, goods, services, accommodation or other resources) and to make contributions to a fund from which relevant payments may be made to contributing service providers to enable them to carry out their functions.

Despite a duty upon the Executive, under section 5, to report on the operation of the Act and to establish how further opportunities for co-operation can be developed, there has been no such report, and it is entirely unclear to what degree any such sharing of resources or pooling of funds is actually taking place or what the impact has been, if any, on the eight elements of well-being for children and young people.

CLC are aware that budget cuts to the EA SEND Transformation projects appear to have resulted in a change of plan which moves away from integration of health and education services for children with SEND. The "Local Integrated Teams" which EA is developing as an alternative to free standing pupil support services, is a pale imitation of the previous plan for integrated multi-disciplinary teams which were to have included HSCT staff in an effort to provide holistic early intervention for children with SEND.

If these local teams are to be the bedrock of early intervention regarding SEND, then funding should be available to enable maximum children's services co-operation as part of the implementation of the Act. How, for example, will an EA only pupil support team, provide effective intervention, including allied health therapies, for a pupil with cerebral palsy who is attending a mainstream school?

Further, CLC is dealing with multiple severe and urgent cases where children with complex disabilities have been unable to access respite or accommodation, at times simultaneously with school placement breakdown. Children with complex needs require a consistent and holistic approach with a high level of multi-disciplinary expertise and access to properly planned services. Pooled resources, financial and otherwise, including pooled data about the child and family's needs, are tools which do not appear to have been deployed to enable staff to provide wraparound support at the time it is needed and in the place where it needed.

INTERACTION WITH PROSPECTIVE SEND LEGISLATION

Section 4 of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Act 2016¹⁴ (the “SEND Act”), provides, in the exercise of their respective functions under the CSCA, for co-operation between the EA and HSCTs to identify, assess and provide services to children with special educational needs and to co-operate relation to transition planning. This SEN co-operation clause (which resulted from an amendment proposed by a previous Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education) is intended to be inserted as an amendment to the Education (NI) Order 1996 which governs SEN, and the clause goes into some detail about how health/education co-operation should work, to include information sharing and the establishment of joint inspection teams across ETI and RQIA.

The majority of the SEND Act, including this section, has yet to be commenced.

It is unclear what level of background work has been undertaken by the relevant children's services authorities to work towards implementation of this important provision.

“SEND Transformation” through the creation of “EA-only” integrated teams as currently formulated due to budget cuts, lacks vision and ambition for children with SEND and as such is highly unlikely to be transformative.

It is clear to CLC that appropriate planning, design, funding and financial structures are required to enable realisation of this important provision of the SEND Act and that if these were agreed and put in place, section 4 of the SEND Act could be commenced with a view to enabling the establishment of properly constituted, jointly funded, multi-disciplinary teams to identify assess and provide for the needs of children with SEND from their earliest years and throughout the lifespan of the educational journey.

The commencement of the provisions within section 4 of the SEND Act should be considered as a priority by the Department of Education, together with the Department of Health.

FINANCIAL STRUCTURES FOR POOLING FUNDS

Section 8 of the CSCA empowers the Department of Finance to make provision through regulations for procedures to be followed when pooling resources.

It is CLC's understanding that without appropriate financial structures in place, with the aim of making it easy to co-operate and clear information on how to facilitate this, it is not possible to make significant progress towards the use of pooled funds on a scale that can make a significant contribution to the well-being of children and young people. Indeed, from what CLC can observe, progress appears minimal, piecemeal and coincidental to existing work.

As well as scrutinizing structural barriers to efficient delivery of children's services within public authorities, such as the EA or HSCTs, CLC urges decision-makers to scrutinize financial barriers to the use of pooled budgets by children's services providers.

The power to share and pool all types of resources and to integrate service-provision for the well-being of children and young people requires to be rapidly progressed into widescale action, including through regulation by the Department of Finance in co-operation with all other government departments to put appropriate financial structures, mechanisms and controls in place, alongside information about how a pooled budget can be set up for a particular children's services co-operation workstream.

CONCLUSION

It is well known from the multiple available reports what the problems are with the delivery of children's services. Hard-pressed children and families cannot afford to wait any longer.

It is now essential for children's authorities together with children's services providers to explore all possibilities for the creation of effective solutions, in consultation with service users and service-based staff.

The full potential of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015 should be maximised as intended by the Northern Ireland Assembly when it stepped up to enact this innovative piece of legislation to improve the well-being of all children and young people.

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