

include YOUTH

Response to Programme for Government

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Include Youth

Include Youth is an independent non-governmental organisation that actively promotes the rights, best interests of and best practice with disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people.

The young people we work with and for include those from socially disadvantaged areas, those who have had poor educational experiences, those from a care background, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs and/or alcohol, engaging in unsafe or harmful sexual behaviour, or at risk of being harmed themselves. We provide a range of tailored employability programmes for these young people, including programmes in partnership with community based organisations.

Our Give & Take Scheme adopts a youth work approach to improving the employability and increasing the self-esteem and confidence of young people aged 16 to 24 who are not yet ready to participate in mainstream training.

Many of these young people have experienced social exclusion, poverty or have other complex challenges in their lives and therefore need additional support to overcome these barriers and positively progress their education, training or employment needs. Seventy-five per cent of young people on the Scheme are care experienced, while over a third has a background in offending. We offer a range of tailored programmes including

- Core - for young people referred to us through the Health Trusts
- Start Programme – a collaborative partnership programme with community based organisations, targeted at young people in the North Down, Ards and Belfast areas
- Outreach - for groups or organisations throughout Northern Ireland
- One to One - for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation
- Transitional support - for those moving on from our Scheme and into mainstream education, training or employment

Our main offices are in Belfast, Armagh, Ballymena, Derry, Enniskillen, Newtownards and Omagh.

Include Youth also delivers an Employability Service on behalf of two of the five Health Trusts for young people aged 16 + who have had experience of the care system. This service is designed to offer tangible and concrete opportunities to assist young people leaving care to prepare for, and engage in work. We also deliver a joint employability mentoring project with Business in the Community.

Include Youth also engages in policy advocacy work in the areas of employability, youth justice and policing. This work is informed by relevant international human rights and children's rights standards, is evidence based, including that provided by young people and practitioners and is based on high quality, critical analysis.

General Comments

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the Programme for Government.

We are fully supportive of the move towards outcomes based accountability and the commitment to work in partnership in the achievement of these outcomes.

While we welcome the inclusion of Outcome 14 to give our children and young people the best start in life, we are disappointed that the range of issues identified within the outcome are narrow in comparison to the overall needs of our most vulnerable children and young people.

We welcome the reference to the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015 under Outcome 14. We would welcome further detail on how the Children's Services Co-operation Act will be implemented within the Programme for Government.

The Act places statutory obligations on Government Departments and all statutory agencies to co-operate with each other in order to contribute to the improvement of well-being for children and young people. It is critical that the Executive takes a lead role in ensuring that the Act is developed in both policy and practice across government. Furthermore, the Children and Young People's Strategy should be the delivery mechanism for Outcome 14.

Eight areas are set out in the Act which define the well-being of children and young people. These 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.

We would recommend that there should be more outcomes added throughout the programme which would refer specifically to improving the lives of children and young people, and in particular those children and young people who are most likely to experience poverty, disadvantage and inequality. The outcomes as they stand at present fall far short of what we would expect a comprehensive programme for government to deliver.

Furthermore, the data which is contained within the programme does not give a complete picture of the reality of many children and young people's lives. Include Youth have long called for more efficient data collection in relation to all aspects of children and young people's lives. Without such data we cannot correctly assess how our children and young people are progressing and most importantly identify why too many children and young people are struggling to achieve in education, secure training and employment opportunities or ending up in the youth justice system. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly called for the development of a mechanism to collect and analyse data on the areas covered by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We would like to see reference made to the UNCRC and in particular to the UNCRC Committee's recent Concluding Observations, as well as the Executive's Children and Young People's Strategy (CYPS). The CYPS will provide a mechanism through which the delivery of Outcome 14 can be achieved and will also be beneficial to the attainment of other outcomes.

We note that the children's version of the consultation was not made available at the same time as the general consultation was released. This is disappointing given the fact that children require an adequate amount of time to consider the document and to participate fully in the process. We are keen to hear how children were consulted, in compliance with Section 75 and Article 12 of the UNCRC.

Specific Comments

Outcome 3

We would like to see more specific reference to the need to tackle child poverty within this outcome. Statistics on the rates of child poverty should be included. There are a number of key factors which impact on child poverty and as such their impact should be registered within the PfG. This includes the increase in the use of zero hours contracts and the high numbers of people who are engaged in poorly paid employment.

We would welcome specific reference to the obligations arising from the compliance with the UNCRC within the section 'On Why this Outcome Matters'.

We welcome the commitment to reduce educational inequalities and would urge that there is a particular focus on at risk groups of children and young people, such as looked after children and children in the justice system.

It is essential if equality of opportunity for children is to be attained that legal protections are in place. This should result in protection against discrimination for children in the provision of good, facilities and services.

We welcome the commitment to reduce health inequalities and would draw particular attention to the mental health needs of children and young people and the limited budget which is allocated to CAMHS, which falls far short of what is required.

Outcome 4

We welcome the commitment to improve service provision in support of better health outcomes and work towards 'parity of esteem' for mental health services. This commitment must include addressing the paucity of budget which is allocated to CAMHS. Include Youth are increasingly concerned about the mental health needs of the young people we work with and the limitation in services to meet the demands.

We support the introduction of problem solving justice which will address the roots causes of offending behaviour and will respond to children's offending in a more welfare based approach rather than a justice based response.

Outcome 6

Include Youth has extensive experience of supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged young people to access training and employment. Young people with complex unmet needs were already finding it a struggle to access training and employment, but those barriers have multiplied even more in the recent years, due to lack of employment opportunities and increased competition in the job market. The young people we work with are increasingly feeling that they have no future or prospects and they have slipped even further down the employment ladder. We would like to have seen an explicit reference to address the needs of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

It is essential that the PfG helps our most marginalised young people develop their skills set and employability and that this should be done in such a way that takes into account the individual and often complex needs of the young people. We note the intention to improve the number of inactive claimants taking up formal programmes of support to help them into work, such as Steps 2 Success and other community-led programmes.

Over the past year or more a number of situations have arisen across our programmes in relation to Steps 2 Success that have caused us concern and that would suggest that young people are currently being mandated on to Steps 2 Success and may not be receiving the quality of support they require. Some of the young people who have been participants on Include Youth employability programmes have had to leave a programme they are progressing well on to join Steps to Success. If they do not move to Steps to Success they risk having their benefits reduced. The young people we work with want to have a choice on what programme they attend. Young people feel that they must comply with certain demands even when they are uncomfortable with them as they are fearful of losing their benefits. It is imperative that the PfG takes account of the particular needs of at risk young people and enables them to develop their skills and employability in programmes which are best suited to their needs.

Employers must be named as having a role to play in tackling the issues effecting young people who are NEET. A significant level of intervention is required in this area. It is essential that employers working within the public and private sectors improve employment and work based training opportunities for young people.

Outcome 7

We welcome the intention to intervene early with young people on the cusp of the criminal justice system but would emphasize the need for this intervention to be delivered from a welfare based approach rather than a justice model. Early intervention work is best delivered by health and social services, education and communities. Where possible young people and their families should not be labelled or brought into the justice system unnecessarily.

We welcome the intention to monitor confidence levels in the criminal justice system. This should include assessing the levels of confidence that young people have in the criminal justice system.

Include Youth support restorative justice initiatives and would welcome the expansion of this model of working across sectors and communities.

While the programme notes that proposals from the scoping study on children in the justice system will be taken forward and that there will be a 'refocus of the approach to working with juvenile offenders in custody', there is not sufficient detail on what the specific actions of these proposals will be. We would also like to see reference to the need to fully implement the recommendations of the Youth Justice Review.

As we already stated in our response to the draft programme, the measurement of the average time taken to complete criminal cases under Indicator 38 to Increase the

effectiveness of the justice system, is narrow in its approach. While speeding up the system is undoubtedly critical, there are other aspects that must be considered when assessing the effectiveness of the system, such as how due process is protected, how children and young people have their needs met within the youth justice system, how we reduce the numbers of children coming into contact with the system and address the over representation of certain groups, such as looked after children and those with mental health issues.

We remain concerned that the indicators listed under the Outcomes will not adequately demonstrate the Executive's commitments. This is especially true of the indicators relating to Reducing Offending, Reduce Crime and Increase the effectiveness of the justice system.

Outcome 14

We welcome the focus on the needs of Looked After Children within Outcome 14.

While we support all efforts to increase the % of care leavers who aged 19, are in education, training and employment we would welcome more detail than that provided in the 'What we Will Do' section and the associated Delivery Plan as to how this will be achieved.

We support the extension of the Going the Extra Mile provision.

We would also like to propose the inclusion of the Project 100 initiative within the PfG. This proposal, developed jointly by Include Youth and Business in the Community, is aimed at ensuring that all care leavers who need it are given a sustainable job opportunity. Inclusion in the PfG would ensure that the Executive Office spearheads and coordinates the implementation of the Project 100 initiative. In 2015 Include Youth and Business in the Community commissioned the '*100% Employment Opportunities for NI Care Leavers*' research report from Professors Robin Simmons and Ron Thompson of Huddersfield University. The research concluded that while much good will exists among employers, the statutory sector and others, there is an urgent need to develop a coherent course of action to improve the position of care leavers in the labour market.

The research report developed the following 3 policy options, each of which represents a game changer in terms of employment prospects and outcomes for care leavers:

1. New Jobs, New Prospects: the creation of jobs specifically for NEET care leavers
2. Ring Fencing Opportunities: reserving a small proportion of existing job vacancies for NEET care leavers

3. A Care Leavers' Pledge: a commitment from employers, HST Trusts and other organisations to support care leavers seeking work, including a guaranteed interview for appropriate job vacancies; workplace mentoring, advice and guidance; support with travel costs and other work-related expenses.

Getting a job is one of the clearly defined routes out of poverty and social exclusion. As such Project 100 could also act as a vehicle for delivering on Outcomes 3, 6 and 8 of the PfG. The Project provides benefits on a range of levels. It allows employers to fulfil their Corporate Social Responsibility and to reap the benefits of a diverse workforce. In terms of Government and public bodies – this initiative aligns to a number of key government strategies and initiatives, including Delivering Social Change, the Children's Strategy, the Strategic Statement on Looked After Children and the Pathways to Success Strategy. Each job provided for a care leaver saves the Exchequer in terms of welfare payments, lost taxation, health and social service costs, costs of imprisonment etc. These costs can range from between £180,000 to £1million over a period of 40 years, depending on individual circumstances.

Project 100 represents an innovative, outcomes- focused approach to successfully addressing the serious employment inequalities experienced by young care leavers as a group. The accompanying research presents a very strong case for the creation of 100% Employment Opportunities for care leavers – both economically and in terms of social justice. It also sets out very clearly how 100% employment opportunities can be created.

We believe that this initiative fits well with the Executive Office's strategic priorities in terms of tackling poverty and social exclusion and would wish to see it playing a leading role in the development and delivery of Project 100.

Concluding Comments

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the Programme for Government and are happy to expand on any of the points raised in this response. We look forward to working in collaboration with the Executive in the delivery of the Programme for Government