

Fostering Network NI

Response

Building a Better Future

***Draft Programme for Government
2008-2011***

Draft Budget 2008-2011

December 2007

The Fostering Network endorses the responses made by CINI and NIVCA to the consultation documents- building a better future, Draft programme for Government 2008-2011 and Draft budget 2008-2011. Our response will limit itself to those specific areas in relation to foster care and the children and young peoples funding package.

Education

The Fostering Network welcomes the government's focus on education and skills in the PFG and Budget and the proposed inflation increases in the education budget. We share the Executive's commitment to raise educational standards and close the attainment gap and look forward to a continued focus on enhancing basic skills of children and young people, with particular emphasis on a new literacy and numeracy strategy. Children in care suffer greater disadvantage than their counterparts in the community in relation to education, health and life chances. Educational analysis for "Care Matters in Northern Ireland" indicates that:

- 22% of the 1263 school aged children looked after by HSS Trusts as at 30 September 2003 had a statement of SEN compare with 27% of the same group in England and 4% of the total school population in Northern Ireland
- 51% of care leavers left school without gaining any qualifications compared with 5% of general school leavers.
- 11% of young people left care with 5 or more GCSE's (grades A*-C) compared with 59% of all school leavers.

Therefore, the commitment to "provision tailored to the needs of disadvantaged children and young people" and the objective to "reduce the gaps in educational outcomes by addressing the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people" is very welcome. A significant element of the Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package was targeted at "reducing underachievement and improving the life chances of children and young people by enhancing their educational development"

Fostering Network, in conjunction with its partner Include Youth, have successfully delivered the 'Foster Carers as First Educators' project, under Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package. The Fostering Achievement scheme supports foster carers as the first educators and in its first year, exceeded the targets set by government by helped 638 foster families and 979 children through the provision of goods and services such as school tutoring, driving lessons, computers, musical instruments and bikes. Through this provision of equipment and skills, Fostering Achievement strives to ensure that all fostered children have the same opportunities to advance in academically and personally. It will take time to assess if the scheme will have a long term impact in achieving the aim of improving the educational attainment of fostered children. To date, the scheme has been enthusiastically welcomed by fostered children, their foster carers and other professionals.

It is therefore of concern to us that, apart from action related to improving access to the youth service for young people most at risk of exclusion, there is no reference to maintaining nor further developing those other elements of the package which would contribute to reducing gaps in educational outcomes by addressing the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people, that is, there is no reference to:

- **Extended Schools provision** (front line activity in schools; schools based counselling support; creative learning centres and centralised services)
- **Extended Early Years provision** (expansion of Sure Start; planned development programme for 2 year olds; daycare; seamless provision of Pre-school expansion programme and Sure Start; increased the enrolment of Traveller children in pre-school)
- **Improving education support and provision for children and vulnerable adults** (supporting and equipping foster carers to discharge their role effectively as 'first educators' of the child in their care; supporting staff in residential care setting to promote improved educational outcomes for the children in their care)
- **Child Protection** (support the voluntary and youth sectors to improve their child protection arrangements; improve inter-agency co-operation and collaboration between schools staff and social services)
- **Children with special needs and disabilities** (English as an additional language – translation of core documents into 35 common languages and call off list of interpreters; transition into adulthood – 100 extra age specific day care places, additional child and youth respite places; social and life skills (independence) training as part of transition planning for young people aged over 14 with statements of special educational needs)

We join with CiNI in requesting *that the DE urgently clarify its position in relation to the future status of these initiatives funded via the Children and Young People's Package.*

PSA 6 Children and family

Fostering Network welcomes this PSA as there seems to be little focus on children elsewhere in the suite of documents. We welcome implementation and resourcing of the children and young people's strategy and the promise of an Early Years Strategy which will place a vital emphasis on the most important stage of a child's development when life chances can best be equalised, regardless of socio-economic background. We further welcome the proposals that:

“Obviating the need for children to be taken into care or, where that cannot be avoided, providing stability once in care, will increase the chances of better outcomes for children. By 2011, the extra investment in family support, foster care etc will help reduce by 10% the number of children in care, reduce by 5% the number of care leavers aged 18-20 living on their own, and increase by 50% the proportion of care leavers in education, training or employment.”

This echoes some of the thinking in the “Care Matters” agenda but the lack of detail on how this will be achieved including funding limits the ability to comment in any detail on the proposals as outlined above. The Fostering Network broadly welcomed the proposals in Care Matters in Northern Ireland and particularly the recognition it gives to the role that foster carers play in the lives of looked after children and young people. Throughout our consultations on “Care Matters” there was growing awareness that these proposals and the overarching OFMDFM strategy will require:

- a true commitment to multi agency working
- Investment in early multi disciplinary assessment of the needs of children on the edge of care and on entry into care, and
- A recognition that we can no longer rely on a mainly volunteer workforce to provide essential alternative care to children and young people. The general consensus of opinion is that a “one size fits all” approach will not work. To meet the diverse needs of children and young people we need an equally diverse pool of foster carers who are recruited regionally, trained on an on going basis and recognised financially for the skills they bring to the job.

For some time we have advocated the need for significant investment in foster care. In 2005, BAAF and Fostering Network calculated that an additional £17.9m was required to pay fees to foster carers in Northern Ireland in order to increase the number of foster families available to looked after children. There is no reason to believe that this figure has changed substantially since then.

It is clear that there is a need for at least an additional 200 foster families in Northern Ireland to provide the range of families required to look after the children waiting on long term placements. We believe that it is only by paying and providing better support to foster carers to provide “at home” care that these additional families will be recruited and retained. In a recent survey of foster carers conducted by the Fostering Network, over 90% of respondents agreed that career grade foster carers should be paid a fee for their full time commitment to fostering and their commitment to training, with 63% stating that they would apply if such a scheme was available to them.

Given the needs for additional investment in the fostering service, there is concern about the efficiency targets and the impact that these could have on the work of the DHSSPSNI. The work of the new Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit set up to monitor these savings will be crucial. We urge that the Executive ensure that monies are made available so that all of the DHSSPS service development proposals are taken forward in full. Resources are required to develop services that meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable sections of our population.

Kate Lewis
Director