

include YOUTH

Response to Strategy for Looked After Children: Improving Children's Lives Department of Health

July 2018

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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 have 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, Omagh and Lifford.

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 respond to the consultation on the Strategy for Looked After Children.

We consulted with a number of young people from across Include Youth's Give and Take programme, including young people from our offices in Belfast, Newtownards, Derry, Armagh and Omagh as well as young people in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC). In total we spoke to 24 young people. We also consulted with our practitioners in each of our offices and their views along with those of the young people have informed our response.

We commend the Departments' commitment to engage as widely as possible with all sectors in the development of the Strategy and in particular their commitment to ensure that children and young people have a say. The consultation documents for children and young people were warmly received by the young people and the practitioners we spoke to.

We welcome the recognition that Improving Children's Lives must sit within the policy framework of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 (CSCA). We would welcome an amendment to the references to the need for authorities to co-operate to be changed from "may co-operate" to "must, in so far as it is consistent with the proper exercise of its children functions, co-operate with other children's authorities and with other children's service providers in the exercise of those functions". It would be beneficial if the Strategy referred to the reporting requirements of the CSCA, including the need for authorities to report on how they have co-operated, shared resources and pooled funds.

The recognition of the role and responsibilities of the wider Corporate family is to be welcomed but the Strategy and Implementation Plan could be more explicit in naming other members of the corporate family who clearly have a role in improving the well being of looked after children, including the Department of Justice, the PSNI and Departments of the Economy and Communities.

Many of the comments included in this response are reflected in Include Youth's previous responses at the pre-consultation stage.

Unless otherwise stated the quotes are from young people.

Specific Comments

Outcome 1 – Living in a Society which Respects their Rights

As we commented in our previous response, It is critical that the rights of looked after children are upheld and that any infringement of their rights is identified and rectified. The best interests of care experienced children and young people must be at the centre of all decision making. We welcome the reference to the UNCRC within this Outcome and would suggest that it would be appropriate to include a comment on the UNCRC General Comment No.5 on General Measures of Implementation.

We welcome the inclusion of various articles of the UNCRC within the Strategy (page 21) but would stress the need to ensure that all relevant articles are included. There are a number of key articles, rights and protections not currently listed in the strategy which are particularly significant for looked after children, for example, that detention should only be used as a last resort and for the shortest time possible.

We support the commitment to undertake a review of care/pathway planning and LAC review processes. While a number of young people have had a positive experience of LAC reviews, many of the young people we spoke to were not clear about the LAC review process and often did not feel that they had a say in proceedings.

“LAC reviews have been good for me – they have been sweet. I’ve a good relationship with my social worker.”

“I always wanted a say in my care plan. I have a 5 year plan and I did it with my youth worker.”

“I got barred from my LAC review. Every time I went into the LAC review I lost it, people were sitting talking about me and they knew nothing about me, I needed someone on my side, someone I trusted.”

“You are sitting in meetings and you know nothing about what is going on.”

“You don’t get a say in what happens when you’re placed.”

Young people highlighted the importance of having someone they could trust and could act as a go between with professionals who were involved in making decisions about their care. Who the best person is to act as a go between will differ from young person to young person. For one young man, his Personal Advisor proved to be the trusted individual.

“In secure care I had a middle man, I told him and then he told them and came back to me. He was my personal advisor. He was a youth worker and he had had addiction issues himself and he knew what I was going through.”

“You should have an impartial person, like a mentor.”

Another young person stressed the importance of giving young people a say in proceedings and making sure there were mechanisms in place to enable the young person to have their voices heard. One young person complained about the lack of opportunity she had to contact her social worker, independently of her foster carer.

“Give young people more power and make sure they can contact their social worker, so you can give them a ring and contact them separately from the social worker.”

A suggestion was made that young people should be offered incentives for attending LAC reviews and that this may improve the level of a young person’s engagement in the process.

Young people were totally supportive of the proposal to place advocacy services on a statutory basis.

“There should be a law that someone speaks up for you – yes.”

In view of the comments made by the young people it is clear that the placing of advocacy services on a statutory basis is an important element of the Strategy and Include Youth fully support this proposal. We also support the proposal to review the LAC review process. Young people and practitioners were also supportive of the proposal to consult young people every two years to seek their views on issues of importance.

Outcome 2 – Living in a Society in which Equality of Opportunity and Good Relations are Promoted

We fully support the inclusion of the need for equality of opportunity for looked after children, and would like to see specific actions included under this outcome. Without specific and separate actions being allocated to this outcome we are concerned that serious inequalities of opportunity for looked after children will not be addressed.

As previously stated, this outcome should be guided by the UNCRC General measures of implementation.

Outcome 3 – Physical and Mental Health

As we commented in our previous response, the mental health of looked after children and care leavers remains a considerable cause for concern. We would welcome a recognition within the body of the strategy of the current challenges in the overall delivery of mental health services for young people.

This outcome provoked much discussion amongst young people and practitioners and was one of the topics that participants appeared to feel most strongly about and hoped that the Strategy would address as a matter of urgency. The young people we spoke to highlighted a range of issues in relation to mental health provision.

“The 16 plus team are good but it does depend on who you get.”

“There isn’t enough support.”

“They don’t do enough, it should be easier to access.”

“I’ve seen ones in the children’s homes who are feeling sad and they go down to the staff and they are just brushed under the carpet, it’s like we have seven children and we can’t look after all of them., they are in the office doing their notes, they’re too busy.”

There was a real sense of urgency from the young people we spoke to about the need and demand from young people in care, to access mental health support.

“cos people are committing suicide.”

“you need help and support.”

“I waited 8 months to get help and support.”

“Not enough support- some people just don’t care- need someone to always be there like an advocate.”

*“when you’re in care it f**** up your mental health.”*

Young people were able to identify sources of support for their mental health needs.

“the hospital helps.”

“the doctor helps.”

“some staff understand more than others in the care homes.”

“It’s really important.” (mental health)

“I go to CAMHS and they come in here (Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre). You need regular check ups.”

Practitioners share the sense of urgency that young people have around the immediate need to address the mental health needs of young people in care. Many of the practitioners have direct experience of working alongside young people with extensive mental health needs and they are frustrated and concerned that more is not done to help them. Sadly, they were able to recall incidences of young people self harming and taking their own lives.

“We facilitate meetings and give the young people information and guidance around mental health and they still cut themselves.” (Practitioner)

There was a general sense from practitioners that there was not enough support to address the mental health needs of young people in care. Practitioners were aware that some of the young people they worked with had not had good experiences of CAMHS. Others complained about the waiting lists and the long time that young people had to wait until they spoke to someone about their mental health. There was a general view that the issue of counselling in schools should be reviewed and that something needs to be done to address the current stigma that many young people feel when accessing school counselling services. There was also a call from practitioners for more availability of mental health services in children’s homes as well as a variety of provision to suit individual need.

“Mental health services come into care homes but they should come more often.” (Practitioner)

“There should be therapeutic care and one to ones and drop ins.” (Practitioner)

“There are not enough services, young people are on the waiting list for too long.” (Practitioner)

“Many of them have had bad experiences of CAMHS, I think it is more of a healthcare approach, when it should be more of a social work approach.” (Practitioner)

A number of practitioners would like to see more provision being made available before a young person reaches crisis point.

“There is a stage missing- there needs to be a crisis before CAHMS intervenes- it shouldn’t be that way.” (Practitioner)

“Schools have a role in this-non-stigmatising.” (Practitioner)

We welcome the proposal to ‘explore options for early interventions and support within the school environment to promote the well being of looked after children.’ We would suggest the indicator of ‘improved well being following engagement with education counselling services’ should be expanded to take into account those young people who do not receive counselling service in schools such as primary school children, young people not attending education or who are in an EOTAS project.

Practitioners and young people welcome the proposal to introduce an annual holistic health assessment which will consider the mental health as well as the physical health of young people.

“It’s important that it is optional.”

They are also supportive of the need to establish an effective CAMHS pathway for looked after children and would welcome additional organisations being named as partners alongside HSCB and the lead organisation. This should include partners in education, social services and youth justice.

We welcome the reference on page 31 of the Strategy to the importance of maintaining continuity of care when a child enters the juvenile justice centre to ensure that any mental health issues are addressed. We would welcome the implementation plan making specific reference to the need to address the mental health needs of looked after children within the justice system and to ensure that looked after children with mental health needs are not placed inappropriately in the JJC due to a lack of alternative accommodation or more effective and suitable services not being available. We would like to see actions to reflect the point made in Section 6.22 of the Strategy. We note the reference to the findings of the Review of Specialist Children’s Services in the implementation plan. Without being provided with further detail on what the recommendations of this review are we cannot comment further on the detail of this aspect of the Strategy. We would welcome details on the findings, recommendations and proposals of the Review of Specialist Children’s Services.

The young people we spoke to raised the issue of the damaging impact of drugs and alcohol on the lives of some young people in care and were very supportive of any attempt to address this.

“A lot of problems come from drugs and alcohol and so they should solve this as a separate issue, before you end up getting a criminal record and then that holds you back from other things.”

We would also welcome more detail on the Department of Health and Department of Justice proposal to trial a Family, Drug and Alcohol Court.

Outcome 4 – Living in Safety and with Stability

The provision of a stable and safe environment for looked after children are central to children and young people's sense of well being and confidence. The young people we spoke had had varying experiences of living in residential care, some of which were positive and others more negative.

"The home I'm in now does loads of substance abuse stuff and its good, and they help us with school stuff and all, it's really good. I've been in there a couple of months."

There was agreement amongst the young people that multiple moves are not good.

"Some children's homes are long term and some are short term, I think that long term is better, to be able to build relationships."

"It's good to be able to stay somewhere long term."

Young people appreciate any efforts made to help them move from residential care to supported and independent living.

"They have a flat inside the home to help you learn about how to look after yourself before you go to supported accommodation. You need most help after you turn 16. I'm going to supported living soon and they will let me be in the flat for a while."

One young person talked about the need for more support to be given to families of looked after children and in particular those families who may have a child within the juvenile justice system.

"My Mum doesn't get much support, she needs support too. Like she has young kids too, a two year old ad a three year old. The social worker only gives her milk tokens and stuff but it would be good if someone could call with her, she is new to the area and it would be good for her meet new people."

This is especially significant for the point raised in 6.27.1 of the Strategy which states that an effective system will support families as well as the point raised in 6.27.8 of the Strategy which notes that any system must be 'responsive to the support needs of birth parents'.

Young people agreed that there needs to be a concerted effort to keep children and young people in care safe and protected from harm. This included protection from the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol, sexual exploitation and paramilitary threat. Some of the young people were able to give examples when they clearly did not feel safe and protected from harm.

*“I was in a home at 13 until 16 – and the social workers just wiped their hands of me, they didn’t want me, they didn’t rehome me, they just let me go. I left (the home) ‘cos they stopped giving a s***, I got a phone call after I had been missing from the home for 8 days. I told the social worker that I had been sleeping in a car and she just said it was my choice to walk out of the home. “*

“There should be more support for the young ones in the homes, I had a girl with me in a home who was only 12 and she was running around with the older ones getting into trouble.”

“Yes some of them (young people) get into trouble with paramilitaries around drugs and all, it would be good be able to talk to people about it, it could be family, social worker or someone from the children’s homes.”

“There should be more experienced youth workers coming in to homes.”

Some young people felt that more support should be given to young people when they enter the care system while others thought that at the point of leaving care was when support was most required.

“You need help straight away when you go into care.”

“When you leave, that’s when you need it.”

We support the proposal to extend the support available to children leaving care, including living arrangements.

Include Youth are aware of the number of young people leaving care who are presenting as homeless due to a lack of secure and appropriate accommodation and it is disappointing that this is not addressed in the implementation plan. One young person talked about the need to address housing for young people in and leaving care.

“More housing options should be available, there should be more schemes to help you buy a house.”

Furthermore, young people were keen to point out that the level of support in finding suitable housing options and the type of support provided when moving into semi independent and independent living should be tailored to suit the individual young person, and should not take a one size fits all approach.

“Not everyone wants to go into supported accommodation. Some people suit it as a stepping stone and need it, but then they can become too dependent on it and when you move out you are lonely and can’t cope.”

A number of young people also talked the rules and regulations of where they are living can be different, depending on the location. One young person talked about how he had felt lonely in his flat and would have liked to be able to meet with other young people in the common living room area, but this area was closed at certain times. He found this particularly difficult when he was going through a stage of poor mental health and felt that it would have helped him if he had been able to talk to others.

“But there is no consistency in places, in some they let you be in the common area at all times while others they don’t and then you are stuck in the flat. Some places are too rigid.”

A number of the young people talked about the need to stay in touch with family and friends and that this is critical to the level of stability that they feel in their lives.

“It’s important to me that I see friends and family. If someone wanted to travel places to see friends and family, they should give you bus passes to be able to do that.”

“You need positive relationships with people in life.”

As previously stated we would welcome more detail on the joint work taking place with the Department of Justice on the review of secure care arrangements.

We support the development of a system which ensures there is ‘effective engagement across agencies to identify early factors which will minimise to risk of offending behaviour and entering the juvenile justice system’ (6.27.17) but would like to have seen more specific actions linked to this within the implementation plan.

Given the depth of the issues discussed within the main body of the consultation on this outcome we would have expected to see more accompanying actions in the implementation plan.

We support the three actions listed under this outcome but would have liked to see more actions included under this outcome. Furthermore actions should emphasize the need for multi agency working, as required under the Children’s Services Co-operation Act.

Outcome 5 – Learning and Achieving

We welcome the commitment to closing the educational attainment gap and that the Strategy should set the bar high for looked after children and foster aspirations in looked after children and be aspirational for them. Providing tailored support is critical to success. Include Youth has extensive experience of providing tailored

educational support for looked after children and we are keen to emphasize the importance of ensuring education is available in different settings, including outside the mainstream education system. Practitioners were vocal about the positive attributes of the Give and Take scheme and believe that this flexible, holistic and tailored model works for the young people they engage with.

“the girls have gone back to tech numerous times and they don’t like it, they don’t do well there, they do better here with us (Include Youth Give and Take).” (Practitioner)

Young people were also very positive about the need to provide tailored models of learning for young people.

“I think young people should be given opportunities, all different types of opportunities. The only way I got into Include Youth was through MACS, social services never told me about Include Youth Give and Take.”

“I had to ask my social worker to come here.”

“I couldn’t cope in school but now I have level 2 in essential skills English and Maths.”

“Include Youth understand me better.”

“Everyone learns differently.”

One young person talked about the importance of being able to continue with learning even if you are not in mainstream education. A number of the young people had had very bad experiences in mainstream education but it was clear that they still saw the value in getting an education and securing qualifications. This highlights the importance of providing an education system which is flexible to be able to meet individual needs and is able to operate outside the formal education setting.

“I was kicked out of school when I was 14, I missed out on a year at school. So someone from school came out to me and we did work in the library and stuff and then I went in and did my exams in school.”

We would welcome recognition within the Strategy and the Implementation Plan of the role and need to provide sustained support to alternative education providers and voluntary organisations that provide vital education services for looked after children, outside the mainstream school setting.

Young people were supportive of the action to support looked after children to take part in after school programmes and out of school activities.

“Yes support in school is important.”

“It would be good to have after school clubs to go to. I would like the teachers to know more about you. Teachers just think you go home and do your homework, but it’s not like that, so some help at school with homework would be good. “

“Boredom and isolation is a big issue for young people in care- it drives you to drink because there is nothing else to do. It might open up a career path or get you into doing some hobbies and it can promote positive mental health.”

“I would like an after school club with other young people in care and to not be judged.”

“Yes it would be good for the children’s home to contact the social worker to get you to take part in activities, so that when you get out you will be able to do stuff that you’re into.”

Young people were supportive of the proposal to make teachers more aware of the needs of looked after children. Many of the young people recounted experiences where teachers had not demonstrated any understanding or sensitivity and indeed had made derogatory comments.

“Some teachers don’t understand at all- don’t take the time to find out why you might be behaving in some way- they are too quick to judge.”

“My Principle actually said to me ‘now I know why your mum and dad got rid of you’.”

“Teachers turn into dickheads when they know you are in care, but they can also be very patronising when they find out you are in care, they give you too much sympathy. There is more training needed for teachers.”

“Teachers should be made aware of problems and issues.”

“They should train teachers about what it is like to be in care.”

“When you have someone in your class who is in care and they may blow up and get cross, so the teacher needs to know that is why that might happen.”

“But it should be more than just teachers getting the training, what about foster carers.”

“Teachers saying that ‘you’re a failure’- that repeats on them.” (Practitioner)

A number of the young people talked about their Personal Education Plans and agreed that it would be a good idea to review the process to ensure that the plans are working effectively and fitting in with their care plan.

“That’s a good idea. That’s what I did, where do you see yourself in 5 years. It’s good to have a PEP plan, it keeps track of where you are at.”

Practitioners talked about the damaging impact of school moves on young people.
“Children in care change schools too frequently for them to be able to settle into one.” (Practitioner)

It is imperative that the LAC Strategy takes into account the negative impact multiple moves can have on a young person’s education.

Practitioners were also concerned about the impact of increasing pressures on schools and how that translates to children in the classroom, and in particular those children with particular needs, such as looked after children.

“With teacher cuts and the structure of the school now – they can’t deal with the individual needs of all children and so if someone is struggling, they are either isolated or put into a class that they can’t cope in.” (Practitioner)

“Training is important but it is not enough if they don’t have the resources.” (Practitioner)

We welcome the commitment to provide tailored support to looked after children to ensure they reach their full potential. We are supportive of schemes such as the Tick the Box campaign and Going the Extra Mile Scheme. We would be supportive of the GEM scheme being placed on a statutory basis but would also like to see similar initiatives being developed for those care leavers who are not in education, training or employment.

We would also support apprenticeships for looked after children and the use of Social Clauses in public sector contracts targeted at looked after children.

Outcome 6 – Play and Leisure

Access to extra curricular activities, leisure, sport, artistic and cultural activities can greatly enhance children and young people’s development. We welcome the inclusion of this outcome but are concerned about the lack of detail within the Strategy on how these opportunities will be progressed.

There was broad support from young people and practitioners for the proposal to ensure there is access to internet in children’s home where possible.

“Internet – that needs to be included for supported accommodation as well.”

“Children’s homes should definitely have Wi-Fi, I’m 17 and I should be trusted with WiFi.”

“That internet (recommendation) – that’s a good one, because that can help you stay in touch with your family and friends.”

On the whole young people were supportive of the proposal to increase the opportunity to access play and leisure facilities for young people in care and saw the value in engaging in these types of activities, for both their physical and mental health.

“There should be more opportunities for day trips and activities.”

“Play and leisure is important yes, if you are into sport. You don’t want to be stuck at home all day, and it makes you forget about a lot of things.”

“Helping us use parks and nature reserves – that’s a good one.”

We would welcome more actions being added to this outcome as the current indicators and actions are limited and somewhat vague.

Outcome 7 – Economic and Environmental Well-Being

Transition from care can be a difficult experience and providing the necessary support to be able to make that transition successfully and in way which enables young people to reach their full potential is critical. This is particularly true for those care leavers seeking to access education, employment and training.

We believe that care leavers should be provided with support until they reach at least 25 years of age.

While we support the points raised in the body of the consultation document under this outcome we are disappointed that a range of necessary, focused and specific actions to coincide with the narrative are not included in the implementation plan. The actions appear to be unambitious and lacking detail. While a review of current arrangements for providing young people with advice, guidance and representation is to be welcomed we believe the action should go further to include a more focussed and detailed action.

For example section 6.59 says ‘we will consider what additional measures can be put in place to secure the economic and environmental well-being of looked after children and care-experienced young people. The challenge will be to maintain and potentially enhance some of the measures already in place’. We would have hoped

that the Strategy and implementation plan would have proposed new actions rather than reviewing or maintaining existing provision. We would like to see further detail of specific actions regarding this commitment. We believe the wording within the Strategy is vague and could be strengthened by identifying specific measures.

One such measure should consider how we can support care leavers to make the transition from supported to mainstream programmes. As referred to in our previous response, Include Youth has learnt through our direct work and our delivery of employability programmes that it is essential that care leavers are enabled to make successful transitions from supported employability programmes into mainstream education, training and employment. This was explored in detail in Include Youth's research entitled 'Removing the Cliff Edge', which was previously forwarded to the Departments.

Include Youth believe that this research can provide useful pointers with regard to how the Department can implement and further develop some of the proposed actions under outcome 7 of the Strategy.

We would also remind the Departments of the proposals developed by the Access All Areas NI group, led by Barnardos and of which Include Youth is a member:

- Expand provision of educational support to age 25.
- Provide transitional support to care leavers within relevant employability and training programmes, and in mainstream education.
- Extend training credits for care experienced young people to 3 years.
- Retain Essential Skills Level Two training within Pathways and supportive employability programmes.
- Ensure that all young people have access to comprehensive and holistic careers advice that reflects their care and pathway plan and includes up to date accurate advice on essential skills equivalency, where relevant.
- All Government departments to offer opportunities to care leavers for employment, training and apprenticeships.
- In Guidance on apprenticeships - ensure care leavers are included in groups requiring additional support and discretion, and fully fund care leavers for the duration of the apprenticeship.

Access All Areas NI also made recommendations to reduce financial barriers and obstacles to engaging in and sustaining pathways into employment, which would be helpful for the Departments in the development of actions for this outcome.

Actions:

- With the informed consent of care leavers, promote and implement the identification of care leaver status in Job Centres, Social Security Agency,

Careers and Further and Higher educational facilities in order to maximize support & financial entitlements.

- Target financial support or top up benefits to support young people to maintain financial and housing stability whilst engaging in apprenticeships and training programmes or commencing employment.
- Extend the provisions of income support and housing benefit (Universal Credit) for any care leaver seeking to complete education to second (A) level up to age 25.
- Ensure sanctions are not applied or benefits reduced if a care leaver changes direction in pathways towards employment (such as enrolling in Training for Success or Further Education).
- Provision of a dedicated governmental funding stream for organisations delivering alternative ETE programmes to care leavers, particularly those not yet ready to engage with mainstream providers, to draw down discretionary financial help for care experienced young people in need and hardship to enable their continued engagement in training and employment.

We would recommend that the associated reporting indicators could be expanded to include measures around income and housing.

All of the young people we spoke to would welcome more advice and support being given to young people in care and leaving care. The young people were very supportive of any schemes that would help them secure employment and one young person had a suggestion for how staff in the children's homes could help young people find a job or even to set up their own business.

"You see the staff in the home, if they have friends who own businesses and know some employer, it would be good to help them get set up with jobs. They could then fund themselves to buy their own clothes and stuff, and it could keep them out of trouble with the police."

We very much welcome and support Action EE3 to promote the use of social clauses in public sector contracts targeted at looked after children.

We welcome the reference to Project 100 and the Give and Take Scheme in section 6.59. As we mentioned in our previous response we believe the findings from the associated Project 100 research report and the adoption of the three policy options, would represent 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.

Project 100 represents an innovative, outcomes- focused approach to successfully addressing the serious employment inequalities experienced by young care leavers as a group. We believe that Project 100 initiative fits well with the Improving Children's Lives Strategy and could deliver on Outcome 7.

At the very least we would like the Strategy and implementation plan to identify how Trusts, as corporate parents, can lead the way in demonstrating how other departments and organisations can practically support and provide employment opportunities for care leavers. As previously stated we suggest a number of vehicles for doing this and are pleased to see that one of those, the promotion of the use of social clauses in public sector contracts, has been included in Action EE3. However, rather than 'promotion' we would welcome clear guidance being issued to all corporate parents. We would welcome an additional action that all Trusts could follow the lead of the Belfast and Western Trust by providing ring fenced employment initiatives for care leavers. and providing dedicated training opportunities to support care leavers, such as traineeships and apprenticeships.

Practitioners talked about the obstacles that young people faced because some employers may have a preconceived notion about young people in care and judge them to be unsuitable for a job even before they have met them.

"They need to reduce the stigma." (Practitioner)

"In employment forms, they can be judged even before they have an interview." (Practitioner)

It was suggested that employers could access training for their staff which would ideally be delivered by young people with care experience.

"It would be good if they involved young people in the training of staff." (Practitioner)

Action EE2 on enhancing measures currently available to children and young people leaving care, in relation to housing, further and higher education, employment, apprenticeships and training opportunities and access to financial, careers and benefits advice is too broad and we recommend it being separated out into actions

for each of the areas listed. Young people and practitioners suggested a number of actions that they would like to see included in the Implementation Plan.

“After 21 your support finishes, they only keep it on if you are in higher education.”

“I need help with budgeting and cooking, life skills.”

“There is a bit (support) but I would like more.”

“Personal advisors and social workers are not a great help.”

“They need hygiene, cooking and life skills and this needs to be at an age appropriate level.” (Practitioner)

“They need to facilitate the transition, they lose the support of the trust at a certain age, and this links back to the numerical versus the emotional age.” (Practitioner)

We are disappointed that there is no specific reference or associated action within Outcome 7 to the need to address the obstacles to employment for care leavers who have been in contact with criminal justice. As we stated in our previous response, we believe the Strategy could include a reference to the potential obstacles that are in the way of care leavers gaining employment and could suggest possible solutions. We know that the system of informing potential employers of an offender’s criminal history acts as a barrier to accessing employment. We would recommend that the Strategy should call for the Youth Justice Review recommendations in relation to reforming criminal records disclosures for young people to be implemented.

- a. diversionary disposals should not attract a criminal record or be subject to employer disclosure;
- b. young offenders should be allowed to apply for a clean slate at age 18;
- c. for those very few young people about whom there are real concerns and where information should be made available for pre-employment checks in the future, a transparent process for disclosure of information, based on a risk assessment and open to challenge should be established.

Furthermore, the rehabilitation and re-integration of young offenders in custody should be prioritised. Young people should be prepared for release from the outset through, for example, day release for the purpose of education, training or employment and should have continuing access to support on a multi-agency basis. Evidence based services providing support within and on release from custody should be prioritised and resourced. There is a need for specialist training and pre-employability programmes for young people pre and post release from custody. Such schemes have already had a proven track record in ensuring young people do

not reoffend and in securing places for them in mainstream education and training and employment.

Outcome 8 – Positive Contribution to Society

Young people were supportive of the proposal to address the negative images of looked after children and the need to promote positive images.

“Yes – there is a stigma with people in care.”

“There is an issue with stigmatising young people in care.”

“How do they expect you to feel good about yourself?”

“I was badly judged, oh she’s in care, she’s not fit for life, all she wants to do is party.”

“The children’s home was front page of the newspaper (about drugs), so now it’s like, oh you live in that druggie children’s home.”

“If one does something wrong then we are all tarred with the same brush!”

“I’ve seen the same thing being done by to different people, one in care and one not in care and the paper does the front page on the care kid and not a word about the other.”

“People think we are a bad influence.”

“We are looked down on by the community, we get blamed for everything.”

The young people agreed that it is important for the public to hear positive stories about young people in care.

“Yes that’s a good one, and if anyone in public has kids who are just going into care, that would help them to hear that. My mum likes to hear positive stories about me.”

“yes because people think that because you are in care that it’s your fault, but that’s not fair, that’s not the case.”

They are adamant that every young person should be given a chance to make something of their lives and to not be judged. There was also the suggestion that because of their own personal experiences young people in care are ideally placed to give something back to their community and because of their experiences they could help improve the lives of those children coming up behind them.

“It would be good to be able to work in the community and to make sure young people in care get to help the community. You could give community workers loads of ideas to make the community better.”

“If someone mucks about ends up in care, they are seen as a wee dick, but when you are an adult they would just see that you are someone who has made mistakes.”

Young people believe that they were treated differently before and after they entered the care system.

“I did cadets, guides, 9 GCSEs – loads of stuff – and then I ended up in care and bang – everything stopped, people looked at me differently.”

There were a number of suggestions as to how negative stereotyping could be addressed.

“The media stories are too negative and stereotyping, and this spills out into the public, the public associate all young people in care with these bad stories.”

“You could use soaps and dramas, and use young people in care to promote good news stories, positive role models.”

Criminalisation

Issues related to youth justice would be better placed under Outcome 4 rather than Outcome 8.

Our concerns with regard to the narrow focus the Strategy demonstrates in relation to the criminalisation of young people in care, remain. While we welcome the acknowledgement in sections 6.65 and 6.66 that more needs to be done to avoid the unnecessary criminalisation of looked after children, we believe this section could still be expanded considerably to include more detail on the extent of the problem and outline specific actions to address it. The statement (6.66) notes that ‘we will build on the work already undertaken to recognise the additional needs of LAC and work innovatively and collaboratively to develop alternative pathways and avoid them being unnecessarily criminalised.’ We would welcome more detail on ‘the work already undertaken’ and the evidence that this work is reducing the numbers of looked after children being criminalised or being detained inappropriately. Furthermore, there are no corresponding actions dealing with criminalization of looked after children included in the implementation plan section on Outcome 8.

We would also recommend that the PSNI are named as partners in the implementation of any actions arising in relation to unnecessary criminalisation and would welcome details on any input the PSNI had to the LAC Strategy and Implementation Plan

We acknowledge action A5 which is to ‘in partnership with the DoJ implement the findings of the Review of Specialist Services’ but without more detail being provided

on what those findings are we cannot comment further. The Review has not been published and no public consultation has taken place on it. We would welcome detail on the specific actions emerging from the Review of Specialist Services and in particular we are keen to consult children and young people on the review findings and proposals.

In 2011 the Youth Justice Review recommended that ‘looked after children should no longer be placed in custody, either through PACE, on remand or sentenced, where this would not have been an outcome for children in the general population.’

It is clear, given the inappropriate detention of extremely vulnerable young people and the continued over-representation of looked after children in the youth justice system, that detention is not being used as a measure of last resort and that the recommendations of the Youth Justice Review in this regard are not being implemented.

This Strategy must as a matter of urgency address the unmet recommendations from the Youth Justice Review and provide in detail how and when they will be actioned.

Include Youth would like to see the following actions progressed and included in the Strategy Implementation plans:

1. Corporate parents need to prioritise early interventions on reducing the number of LAC being detained.
2. Staff in residential children’s homes should be supported to use restorative approaches.
3. All relevant staff across various agencies interacting with looked after children to adopt a problem solving approach, including restorative practice.
4. Early intervention and prevention services are as accessible to LAC as they are to other children and young people.
5. DoH should reinstate the role of Criminal Justice Officer to ensure there is an interface between DoJ and DoH with regard to the contact of looked after children with the criminal justice system and in particular with those detained in custody either through PACE, remand or sentence.
6. Data collection should improve between Departments with regard to looked after children’s and young people leaving care’s contact with the criminal justice system. As the Youth Justice Review recommended (recommendation 22) the DoH should lead in developing better assessment, inter-agency information exchange and cross referral mechanisms alongside more specialized interventions for those groups over-represented in the youth justice system and in custody.
7. Recommendations 8, 9 and 19 of the Youth Justice Review and recommendations from should be implemented as a matter of urgency:

- *an appropriate range of accommodation be developed for children currently being detained under PACE*
- *the use of PACE be reduced to an absolute minimum*
- *looked after children should no longer be placed in custody where this would not have been the outcome for children in the general population.*

8. The 2012 Northern Ireland Law Commission (NILC) recommendation that Article 39 (1)(b) of PACE be replaced and that new bail legislation include a requirement that bail must not be refused on the sole ground that the child does not have any, or any adequate, accommodation should be implemented.

Overall Implementation

We would welcome the inclusion of time bound targets and resource implications with regard to the implementation of actions.

We are concerned that many of the actions in the implementation plan are related to existing reviews rather than the introduction of specific and concrete actions. In some instances we believe that the research and evidence exists to be able to make specific and detailed actions, such as addressing the unnecessary criminalisation of looked after children.

Concluding Comments

We welcome the opportunity to comment on Improving Children's Lives and trust that the views of young people and practitioners will prove helpful to the Departments as they move forward to the next stages of the Strategy. We are happy to be contacted should any clarification be required on the points raised within our response.