

Children and Young People's Strategy 2017-2027
[Department of Education]
Draft Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

Brief Background to the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council Area

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people, approximately 52,500 jobs and 7,175 businesses. The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km² (or 20% of NI) - and is the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km² is the sparsest in Northern Ireland. This is a key feature of the district but presents challenges in terms of accessibility and service delivery.

Consultation Response

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department's consultation on the Children and Young People's Strategy 2017-2027.

The Council believes that a proactive Children and Young People's Strategy can play a vital role in assisting the focussing of resources and services, allowing children and young people to have the best possible start in life. This has been referenced in a number of documents publicly consulted upon recently including the draft Programme for Government and the Western Health and Social Care Trust's Draft Corporate Plan.

This corresponds with the Ministerial statement at the beginning of this consultation document that achieving improvements in the well-being of children and young people can be achieved through improved co-operation as well as an improved delivery and implementation of services.

Statistical Breakdown of Children and Young People within the Council District

Within the Fermanagh and Omagh District, the statistical breakdown of children and young people can be seen in the table below:

Age (years)	Total	Percentage of Total
0-3 years	6,094	20.5%
4-10 years	11,179	37.5%
11-15 years	7,636	25.7%
16-18 years	4,854	16.3%
Total	29,763	100%

The percentage breakdown of the gender of the local children and young people within the Fermanagh and Omagh District, is quite similar to the Northern Ireland average:

Boys: 51.4%

Girls: 48.6%

Strategy Aim

The aim proposed in the strategy is: 'To work together to improve the well-being of all children and young people in Northern Ireland - delivering positive long-lasting outcomes.'

The Council, in principle, agrees with this Strategic Aim. Improving the well-being for children and young people in Northern Ireland is an essential component in delivering a prosperous Northern Ireland and for future success.

It is essential that a joined-up, collaborative and co-ordinated approach is undertaken including Government Departments, local Councils and other relevant agencies/organisations.

Collaboration / Joined-Up Working

As stated, the Council believes this is vital as to the success of the Strategy. The Council's Community Plan (Fermanagh and Omagh 2030) document, contains wording quite similar to the recent draft Programme for Government, as well as that which is contained within this Consultation Document:

'Our people have the best start in life with lifelong opportunities to fulfil their potential'

Within the Fermanagh and Omagh 2030 Community Plan, there are a number of considerations which should be included within the Children and Young People's Strategy, and these will be explored further within this consultation response.

Childcare in Rural Communities

Childcare provision is referenced in a number of places within the Consultation Document; however, more emphasis needs to be placed on reducing existing barriers to childcare in order to support better access to learning. In some areas of Northern Ireland, and in particular rural areas of the Fermanagh and Omagh District, a good quality, accessible and affordable childcare infrastructure is not available. For many families within Northern Ireland, finding the right care for their children presents difficulties. These difficulties could take the form of availability, price, suitability, location, amongst many others. It is clear that a choice of high quality childcare is vital for all families, regardless of demographic location or economic standing.

The most recent Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey (2016), demonstrated that over half of the 6,000 respondents (55%) said that the cost of childcare put them under increased financial pressure, with a further 27% of parents stating that it 'sometimes put them under financial pressure'.

The same survey also showed that the average cost of childcare for families in Counties Tyrone and Fermanagh is £154 and £139 respectively. These figures demonstrate an increase of £6 (Tyrone) and £8 (Fermanagh) on the average cost of childcare in the previous 12 months. Furthermore, parents living in Fermanagh and Tyrone were more likely to comment on their being 'insufficient childcare provision within their area' – 80% of Fermanagh respondents 67% of Tyrone respondents stated that there was 'insufficient childcare provision within their area'.

Therefore, the major issues in relation to childcare provision within the Fermanagh and Omagh District revolves around: 'Affordability', 'Accessibility' and 'Availability' and Departments must work collaboratively to ensure that these issues are addressed for rural areas.

Educational Inequalities

The Council supports the inclusion of 'Education Inequality' within the consultation document as well as in the 'Proposed Indicators'.

It is the Council's belief, as stated in response to other consultations (for example the Programme for Government), that there is an 'over-reliance' or 'over-emphasis' on overall data – data collated at a Northern Ireland level. The Council is concerned that this could result in certain pockets, or gaps, going unnoticed or ignored. In relation to the Council District, children and young people classed within the 'Free School Meal Entitled' (FSME) grouping is a key group that needs to be targeted. 'FSME' children and young people (particularly boys) sometimes become disengaged from education/training and initiatives need to target this. The development of Initiatives or services targeting this group need to consider local/regional issues in order to be flexible and individual-centred.

All children and young people, regardless of their belonging to any Section 75 Grouping, have the right to access education and/or training opportunities that will assist them in achieving their potential.

Educational Attainment

Currently within the Fermanagh and Omagh the education breakdown of the Fermanagh and Omagh District population is as follows:

- 26.7% qualified to NVQ Level 4 or above.
- 14.9% have no qualifications.

Any initiatives which can reduce the percentage of people with 'no qualifications' would be an extremely positive step. There are a number of good and excellent schools within the District, however it is vital for the area that these schools are properly resourced. Council would also stress the need for a mechanism to reflect local circumstances such as the impact of rurality and TSN impacts.

This would also correspond to one of the recommendations from the 'Fermanagh and Omagh 2030' Community Plan to 'develop and enhance programmes to raise educational attainment levels in children and young people in the most deprived households'. Within the District there is a particular issue with disengagement, especially amongst boys - 21% of whom do not achieve 5 GCSEs (A-C Grade).

Statistics also show that whilst 65% of individuals in the District obtain 2 A Levels (or equivalent), 32% of FSME students do not achieve 5 GCSEs (A-C Grade).

Therefore, every attempt needs to be made to improve the educational attainment of those within the District.

Shared v Integrated Education

In relation to Integrated and Shared Education models, the Council believes that there is no single model that will best suit all areas of the District, let alone Northern Ireland. The Department for Education should work in partnership with the Council and other relevant Community Planning Partners to assess the needs of individual areas and what would best meet their needs.

Future Employment

The Council believes that the Department should also place an emphasis on assisting children and young people to transition from education, to either employment, training or further education. This is particularly important in relation to Young people leaving the Care system. Young people who have been in the care system are significantly less likely to go to university than their peers. According to the Office for Fair Access (Ofa) just 6% of care-leavers in England progressed to higher education in 2012, compared with 43% of the general population (aged 17-30).

Within the Fermanagh and Omagh 2030 Community Plan, a 'Young People in Schools for Employment – Local Action Plan' is referenced. This would assist the Children and Young People's Strategy, through increasing the employability skills of young people within each District. This should be something that the Department, the Council as well as other relevant organisations (e.g. the Education Authority) should work in partnership to achieve and delivery.

Play and Leisure

Through the Council's Community Planning process, it was identified that there should be improved opportunities for play, recreation and creativity for all children and young people.

Within the outcome entitled: 'Children and young people enjoy play and leisure', there should be a mention of creativity – for example 'Children and young people have increased opportunities to enjoy play, leisure and creativity'.

Research has shown that increasing opportunities for children and young people to be creative can be very beneficial; it may result in them: increasing their cognitive skills, increasing their sense of purpose, increasing their confidence, increasing their communication skills, increasing their concentration, increasing their problem-solving skills, amongst many beneficial attributes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to this public consultation. We want all children and young people in our district to be healthy, safe and to enjoy and achieve at school, so that they have the skills, abilities, self-esteem and positive outlook to achieve their potential, secure good and sustainable employment, make a positive contribution and be successful in adult life. It is essential that new ways of working with new models for investment, integrated commissioning and delivery of services create conditions for economic growth and enabling all children, young people and families to reach their potential to access jobs and economic wellbeing. At the same time, we must provide sufficient support for our most vulnerable children and young people, ensuring they are safeguarded and narrowing the gap in outcomes compared to their peers.

The Council looks forward to working in partnership with the Departments through the Community Planning process to support the delivery of the Strategy going forward.