



Working together for a healthier Belfast

Response to consultation on a Child Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland

4 February 2011

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Child Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation working to improve health equity and wellbeing for people living and working in Belfast and beyond. Our focus is on improving physical and social living conditions and prosperity in a healthy way, through intersectoral collaboration and a health in all policies approach. Belfast is a designated World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy City, and the role of the partnership is to deliver on targets set by WHO for all European Healthy Cities. Equity in health has been a core issue of the Network since its inception more than 20 years ago.

Belfast Healthy Cities broadly agrees with the proposed approach to tackling child poverty in Northern Ireland. We are particularly pleased that greater emphasis is put on tackling the root causes of poverty and disadvantage, as this is vital for taking action that delivers lasting, sustainable change. It is also very positive that the framework includes the living environment. A child's environment has significant impact on their physical as well as mental wellbeing and development, and including this gives a clear rationale for involving agencies responsible for the built environment in tackling child poverty.

We would also note that the general approach is in line with the recommendations of the influential WHO Global Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, which outlined global evidence on how inequity and poor health can be tackled effectively, and the subsequent Marmot review of inequalities in England post 2010, which collated similar evidence but specific to England. Both emphasise early years, as well as addressing the balance of power, money and resources and creating good living conditions for all. We would suggest that it would be useful and strengthen the strategy to explicitly recognise the close linkages and synergies between tackling (child) poverty and improving health. Strong evidence indicates that health is an outcome of the wider living conditions; this is why action to tackle poverty and low income and improve living conditions also is the key way to improving health. It is important to note that prevention and early intervention should focus on all ages, not only early years.

We have some comments on the draft Strategy, which are based on the current evidence of effectively tackling inequalities, and our experience in the field.

Firstly, we suggest that focus should be on improving opportunities and living conditions for all children, not only the most disadvantaged. This is important to avoid stigmatising children, and also because poverty and disadvantage especially in rural areas is dispersed. Moreover, this helps reduce the social gradient, which means that not only the poorest are at disadvantage, but that outcomes for middle groups are poorer than for the most well off. In short, focusing on the entire child population (in a proportionate way) adds to more than the sum of its parts, and supports better outcomes overall.

In relation to supporting parents to access paid employment, it is worth noting that the quality of jobs matters. Low paid, routine jobs may not sufficiently improve disposable income, and may do little to improve family wellbeing where the work involves high demands, limited flexibility and/or significant travel to work. Lower skill jobs can also create stress where progression routes are limited. Emphasis in job creation should therefore be put on providing progression routes and opportunities, including training that enables people to move from basic to more advanced positions. This would, in addition, contribute to strengthening people's confidence, which in turn supports aspirations as well as wellbeing.

It would be important to include an explicit focus on enabling children to value themselves and giving them the skills to look confidently to the future, and as part of this an element around engagement and children's ability to influence plans, services and decisions that affect them. This appears currently missing in the framework, yet is vital to support new generations to develop into confident people. In particular children from more disadvantaged backgrounds may have less confidence and coping skills, which affects their mental wellbeing and also overall outlook on life. This is a vast area that requires action from all sectors, but engaging all children in decision making is one very important way of conveying the message that they matter and have a role to play in society, which in turn supports mental wellbeing and can help strengthen aspirations.

In relation to the monitoring framework, we believe that indicators highlighting the quality of children's living environments, as well as children's own experience of their lives, would be important to include, as this provides contextual information that helps target action appropriately. More generally, the monitoring framework should be developed with a focus on desired outcomes. In other words, outcomes – which can be longer term and go beyond the set targets - should be identified, and then used to identify indicators needed to monitor progress towards the outcome.

Finally, Belfast Healthy Cities would urge to exercise caution in relation to the last principle mentioned, ie. balancing the strategy against economic conditions. While difficult decisions will need to be made, we stress that children's wellbeing is an issue which cannot be postponed or subdivided, without significant negative impact on large numbers of people. Children today have only one opportunity to grow up into confident, flourishing adults. If this is not prioritised, there will be a major future cost not only to individuals, but also to society as a whole, for example through higher health and social care costs, continued and rising benefit dependence, and higher public order costs.

In relation to the above, as each of the priority areas is large in its own right, it may be necessary to further prioritise within each area. This exercise should be done in collaboration with children and young people, and other stakeholders to ensure key issues are targeted in the most promising way possible.

Working across sectors, within government as well as in wider society, and ensuring that better outcomes for children is a priority across sectors, is essential to deliver the aim. This should include joint and complementary actions at the practical level, as well as alignment of strategic objectives.