

These notes refer to the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 (c.10) which received Royal Assent on 09 December 2015

Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

EXPLANATORY NOTES

BACKGROUND AND POLICY OBJECTIVES

3. In 2002, the Westminster Government commissioned Lord Laming to undertake a major inquiry following the tragic death of Victoria Climbié. The inquiry identified a lack of co-operation as a factor which contributed to the failure of the Government in their duties. The Westminster Government's response was the Children Act 2004, which overhauled children's services in England and Wales. Sections 10 and 25 of that Act introduced a statutory duty on local authorities to promote co-operation with their relevant partners.
4. In Northern Ireland, a duty to co-operate to safeguard at-risk children was introduced in the Safeguarding Board Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Nevertheless, Lord Laming's recommendations made clear that child protection could not be separated from policies to improve children's lives as a whole.
5. Northern Ireland has some of the highest levels of child poverty in the UK and 21% of children live in persistent child poverty, which is double the rate for GB. Poor outcomes for children in NI, in spite of the higher level of government spending per person when compared to GB, suggests that an opportunity exists to improve the current governance model of children's services. This view is shared by those organisations working within the children's sector.
6. Evidence shows that integrated working does bring about changes that can be expected to increase effectiveness in practice, which are likely to lead to better outcomes.¹ There is presently no requirement for departments or public bodies to co-operate with each other on the issue of children's services. The objective of a statutory duty to co-operate, is to ensure that departments work together to devise and implement cross-cutting strategies. The intention is to improve outcomes for children by supporting, enhancing and encouraging co-operation, to ensure that children's services are most integrated from the point of view of the recipient.

¹ Page 9 *Integrated Working: a Review of the Evidence* Children's Workforce Development Council 2010 <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/3674/>

7. Inadequate integration of children's services in Northern Ireland has been repeatedly identified by a wide range of organisations, many of which have made recommendations for stronger legislation to require those responsible for children's services in Northern Ireland to co-operate. These include the four Area Children and Young People's Committees (ACYPCs) in 2008 (now superseded by the Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership); the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in 2011 in their report into 'Barriers to Effective Government Delivery for Children in Northern Ireland'; the umbrella group Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI); and the Assembly's Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in its 2008 inquiry into child poverty.
8. It is widely acknowledged that the lives of children and families cannot be compartmentalised in a way that coincides with the responsibilities of individual departments and public bodies. Greater levels of co-operation will make the delivery of children's services more effective and efficient by:
 - ensuring that statutory bodies take responsibility for those children who have difficulty accessing services as a result of perceived gaps in service provision;
 - supporting government departments and statutory bodies to tackle shared problems in a more coherent fashion;
 - motivating departments and statutory bodies to identify services which are duplicated or where over-provision exists and to reallocate resources more efficiently;
 - encouraging departments and statutory bodies to devise and implement more co-ordinated, and therefore more effective, strategies and plans for children;
 - mainstreaming collaboration through the use of reciprocal requirements for departments and statutory bodies to co-operate with one another and with children's service providers; and
 - requiring departments and statutory bodies to self-assess and report on the efficiency and effectiveness of co-operation and what opportunities exist to improve collaboration and outcomes.
9. The Member has raised the problems associated with integration in children's services and the need for a duty to co-operate, through public statements, media interviews, by tabling Assembly Questions, by supporting events at Parliament Buildings and through participation at the All Party Group for Children and Young People. The relevant Assembly Questions can be viewed on the Northern Ireland Assembly website via the AIMS portal, at <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/mlas/search.aspx>