

Creating a Vision for all our Children - Informal  
Consultation

Findings from Discussions with Parent Focus Groups

Submitted to Children and Young People's Unit,

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By

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## Executive Summary

An overarching strategy for children and young people in N Ireland will be the vision to enable all children and young people to have a better quality of life. The Children and Young People's Unit in the office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (prior to the suspension of the Assembly) was given the responsibility for developing the strategy and this work is still ongoing. In November 2002 the Children and Young People's Unit began an informal consultation (closing January 2003) with a view to drafting a formal consultation paper outlining draft proposals for the strategy by Spring 2003.

In order to ensure that the views of parents are reflected in the structure, assumptions and draft proposals of the consultation document, Home-Start Northern Ireland and Parents Advice Centre have developed a short programme for use with parents. In doing so, the organisations wanted to ensure that policy makers understand the lives of parents in Northern Ireland and that they value parents and parenting. Home-Start and Parents Advice Centre wanted to enable parents themselves to identify their support needs and sources of support. They wanted to give parents the opportunity to share their ideas for a better future for all children in Northern Ireland and to tell policy makers what they should do to make this a reality.

Focus groups were used as the main data gathering method because they brought parents together in a way that allowed them to share their knowledge and experiences and to identify and discuss issues of common concern. Focus groups were also an important source of peer support for parents enabling them to reinforce their opinions and experiences and validate their feelings collectively as parents. The focus groups lasted for two hours in order to build up to the final exercise.

### Consultation - Key Issues for the Children and Young People's Unit

Parents want to be consulted. Parents need to be listened to and responded to.

Consultation with parents needs to be resourced and facilitated.

Consultation with parents needs to be on-going throughout the life of the strategy.

Parents Advice Centre and Home-Start are established organisations with specialist skills and expertise and access to a range of supports. It is vital that they are adequately resourced to facilitate ongoing consultation with parents.

Findings from the Parent Focus Groups are described under the following headings:

Parents' Views on their own Childhood

Significant Sources of Support for Parents

Future Support Needs of Parents of children Aged 0-18 years

Parent's Vision for all Children in N Ireland

What Action Should Government take to Achieve the Vision of Parents for Children and Young People?

### Significant Sources of Support - Key Issues for Children and Young People's Unit

Parents have a range of significant people and organisations that they draw support from in the task of parenting.

The role of parents, family and extended family as sources of support is a significant one for parents. Parenting skills and supports are passed on from one generation to the next.

Parents acknowledged diminishing levels of family support and with changes in society the roles played by and the services offered by voluntary and community organisations has increased. If trends continue, then this will significantly increase. Schools, church, neighbours and friends are also significant sources of support for to-days parents.

The media and role models (positive and negative) are also sources of support for some parents.

Services offered through the statutory sector, other than Health Visitor and GP, are not identified by parents as significant sources of support for them.

Measures contained in the strategy to support families need to take cognisance of the importance of extended family, local communities and voluntary activity as sources of support for parents and target resources accordingly.

### Support Needs of Parents of Children aged 0-18 years - Key Issues for Children and Young People's Unit

Focus groups agreed that Family Support Services should be available to every family in Northern Ireland who do not have support systems through no fault of their own. This could be because they have moved to a new area or new country, have no supportive extended family, have suffered disability, bereavement, domestic violence, drug or alcohol misuse, are worried about their own parenting skills, need advice on parenting/childcare issues or simply need a friend or listening ear.

This service should not be dependent on a referral basis and should be readily available for parents (mothers and fathers) to access themselves. They should also be readily available to referral agents from any quarter as long as the parent is in agreement and should form an essential complimentary service to other statutory or community provision. Receipt of Home-Start, with parental consent, is based on a referral system from any referral agent and self- referrals are welcome. Groups felt that Home-Start and Parents Advice Centre were well placed to provide these services as they were both well established and had a proven track record in all aspects.

Parents need support in bringing up children and parents and children need a wide range of support, information, medical, physical, educational, leisure, sporting, arts, transport, shopping and spiritual facilities and activities available to them so that children can have

the best possible chance to develop to their full potential, becoming well balanced and settled adults forming balanced and peaceful communities.

### Parent's Vision for Children in 10 Years - Key Issues for Children and Young People's Unit

A society that values children

A society that accepts difference and supports equality and reconciliation

A peaceful society

A society that children value and respect

Access to a range of locally available and affordable services delivered in a child friendly way including:

- Health and Social care

- Education choices and supports

- Services for children with special needs and their families

- Youth, leisure, playschool and afterschool services

- Play spaces

- Housing

- Public transport

Accessible, affordable, supports for parents that enable them to provide a high quality family environment for children

Children are safe and secure in Northern Ireland

Children develop self worth, esteem and self-awareness

Children respect the environment

Children can influence decision making in a stable government that they trust

### What Actions do Parents want Government and Others to take?

Parents identified the actions they want to see government take or facilitate others to take over the next ten years to achieve their vision for children in N Ireland. Actions were identified under the themes of:

- Education

- Health

- Housing

- Personal Safety

- Family Support

- Leisure

- Transport

- Environment

Actions identified reflect the need for an integrated strategy that takes a co-ordinated approach to developing the quality of life of children in N Ireland. Actions will also

require the allocation of sufficient resources to the implementation of the strategy. Parents need to be consulted with on an on-going basis throughout the lifetime of the strategy

## Context and Rationale

Since January 2001 the Northern Ireland Executive has been committed to the development of an overarching strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland that is for children up to 18 years of age.

The strategy will be the vision to enable all children and young people to have a better quality of life. The Children and Young People's Unit in the office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (prior to the suspension of the Assembly) was given the responsibility for developing the strategy and this work is still ongoing. In November 2002 the Children and Young People's Unit began on informal consultation (closing January 2003) with a view to drafting a formal consultation paper outlining draft proposals for the strategy by Spring 2003.

This consultation with parents aimed to hear what they have to say about their vision for our children's future. Specifically, it responded to a call from the Children and Young People's Unit for information, views and opinions on:

- The suggested structure for the strategy document
- The assumptions being made in preparation of a strategy document
- Specific questions posed

In order to ensure that the views of parents are reflected in the structure, assumptions and draft proposals of the consultation document, Home-Start Northern Ireland and Parents Advice Centre developed a short programme for use with parents. In doing so, the organisations wanted to ensure that policy makers understand the lives of parents in Northern Ireland and that parents and parenting are valued. They wanted to enable parents themselves to identify their support needs and sources of support. They wanted to give parents the opportunity to share their ideas for a better future for all children in Northern Ireland and to tell policy makers what they should do to make this a reality.

## The Consultation Process

The Children and Young People's Unit issued guidelines for the consultation. "Creating a Vision for all our Children - A Framework for Discussion", November 2002. (See Appendix 1)

### A Partnership Approach to Consultation with Parents

Parents Advice Centre and Home-Start are well established voluntary organisations and are members of the NGO Forum. Together, the organisations are the main voluntary family support organisations in Northern Ireland. They are both regional organisations who are in contact with and networking with parents on a daily basis. Both organisations are able to draw on experiences and expertise nationally. Home-Start is a national organisation with a regional base in N Ireland and Parents Advice Centre has links with the National Family and Parenting Institute and the Parenting Education Forum in England. They are therefore well placed to conduct real and meaningful consultation with parents that is based on established relationships.

Parents Advice Centre and Home-Start worked together on this consultation because they felt that a joint approach would underline the importance of the consultation to parents. The organisations have a shared value base and the experience of working together before. Parenting Forum NI, a project within Parents Advice Centre, lead on this piece of work on behalf of Parents Advice Centre.

Parenting Forum NI and Home-Start used their own internal facilitators for 14 out of 16 focus groups. External facilitators, who are also members of Parenting Forum NI were used to facilitate the remaining two groups. Consultation with parents requires highly skilled and experienced facilitators who are capable of dealing with a lot of demands within focus groups. Issues raised in groups are often very sensitive, particularly when participants are exploring their childhood feelings. Comments from parents included:

*"Brought vivid memories of my childhood"*  
*"Bad childhood memories"*  
*"Guilt"*

Painful feelings did emerge and facilitators needed to provide follow-up support to help parents. Parenting Forum NI and Home-Start were able to refer parents through to the Parent Advice Centre Helpline and provide support through the local Home-Start scheme.

Parents came to the consultations because of the reputation of Parents Advice Centre, Parenting Forum NI and Home-Start.

### Consultation Methodology

Representatives from Home-Start and Parenting Forum Northern Ireland met for one day to prepare materials that would enable the two organisations gather information from parents. The professional input from both organisations based on their collective experiences and knowledge of work with parents was crucial at this stage. It ensured

materials that enabled parents to share their experiences, feelings, and ideas in a way that enabled answers to the questions posed by the discussion framework were developed. (Appendix 2 - Children's Strategy Parent Focus Groups).

Focus groups were used as the main data gathering method because they brought parents together in a way which allowed them to share their knowledge and experiences, identify and discuss issues of common concern. Focus groups were also an important source of peer support for parents enabling them to reinforce their opinions and experiences and validate their feelings collectively as parents. The focus groups lasted for two hours in order to build up to the final exercise.

The materials were piloted with one focus group. The materials were cascaded down to internal facilitators in Home-Start and Parenting Forum and to the two external facilitators. This ensured a uniformity of approach in conducting the focus groups.

Sixteen focus groups were conducted with parents in existing and newly formed groups. Statistical information was gathered from the focus group participants. Home-Start and Parenting Forum Northern Ireland accessed 215 parents, with 645 children from across Northern Ireland.

The groups interviewed including numbers of parents present and numbers of children they parented were as follows:

- Home-Start Causeway - 10 parents, 20 children
- Home-Start Lakeland - 18 parents, 36 children
- Home-Start Antrim - 13 parents, 57 children
- Home-Start Down District - 15 parents, 53 children
- Home-Start North Belfast - 8 parents, 36 children
- Mencap - 12 parents, 38 children
- Parent's Advice Centre, Derry - 8 parents, 25 children
- Foyleview School, Family Information Group and Derry Children's Commission - 10 parents, 36 children
- Parent's Advice Centre, Belfast - 22 parents, 59 children
- Men's Action Network - 11 parents, 37 children
- Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities - 13 parents, 40 children
- Home-Start, Close to Home in Dungannon - 10 parents, 25 children
- Women's Aid, Lisburn - 6 parents, 18 children
- Home-Start, Clogher Valley Surestart (2 groups) - 14 parents, 46 children
- Home-Start, Newry and Mourne - 28 parents, 91 children
- Home-Start, Armagh & Dungannon - 17 parents, 28 children

Home-Start and Parenting Forum Northern Ireland were conscious from the outset of the need to ensure wide representation from parents in selecting the groups. Given the tight timescales for the consultation, representation is as diverse as it could be. Representation across Northern Ireland, geographically, and across the four Health & Social Services Boards has been achieved. The inclusion of the Mencap, Women's Aid, Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities and Men's Action Network groups has increased the diversity of parents consulted with. Home-Start and Parenting Forum Northern Ireland are however, under no illusions,

that the groups consulted with represent all parents. They have identified the following gaps:

- Greater exploration of cross - cultural differences needed
- Parents with special needs and mental health difficulties require more in depth focus work
- Carers
- Parents with specific stresses or difficulties (an analysis of Home-Start families needed)
- Muslim parents (consultations were held during Ramadan and they could not attend)
- Teenage parents

Focus groups were held in either the morning or afternoon to suit parents locally. Transport, crèche facilities and lunch were provided. It was important that groups were accessible to parents in their local areas.

Evaluation feedback from parents indicated that they found the consultation a valuable and worthwhile exercise. They liked the methods used and felt able to participate fully. Parents were appreciative of being asked to make a contribution to the document. Comments included:

*"Hopefully there is a better future for our children"*

*"Feeling Good about having a say in the future"*

*"Made me think about the real value of children"*

*"Thinking and working to-gether with fellow mums for a better future for our children"*

*"Enjoyed feeling part of my children's/grandchildren's future and having a voice"*

Parents wanted to see their views taken on board and want to have a response either through personal representation or written communication from the Children and Young People's Unit indicating how their submission will be incorporated within the draft consultation strategy and on the on-going consultation process itself.

*"Previous consultations have been held and nothing seems to happen to address the needs identified. There should be feedback to the group. There needs to be constructive outcome to consultation to show good faith to communities and dispel the overwhelming sense of disillusionment"*

Each facilitator compiled a report based on the five exercises. The reports were analysed independently by an external facilitator. Findings were drawn from the material gathered in the focus groups. This report summarises the findings from the focus groups and draws on them to identify the key issues for the Children and Young People's Unit in drafting a consultation document.

#### Key Issues for the Children and Young People's Unit

Parents want to be consulted. Parents need to be listened to and responded to.

Consultation with parents needs to be adequately resourced and facilitated.

Consultation with parents needs to be on-going throughout the life of the strategy.

Parenting Forum and Home-Start are established organisations with specialist skills and expertise and access to a range of support. It is vital that they are adequately resourced to facilitate ongoing consultation with parents.

## Parent Focus Groups - The Findings

Findings from the Parent Focus Groups are described under the following headings:

Parents' Views on their own Childhood

Significant Sources of Support for Parents

Future Support Needs of Parents of children Aged 0-18 years

Parent's Vision for all Children in N Ireland

What Action Should Government take to Achieve the Vision of Parents for Children and Young People?

### Parents Views on their own Childhood

Parents were asked to identify words that related to their own childhood. This is an important exercise because it identifies parents' views of their own childhood. In doing so, it established common ground for participants and builds up to the final exercises. It highlights the importance and clarity of childhood memories. It also highlights the diversity of childhood experiences. The words identified by parents reflected their views and feelings during childhood, the relationships they had with other people and being involved with them. They also reflect their sense of place and the activities they were involved in.

Happy	No Worries	Challenging	Friendly
Euphoric	Caring	Belonging	Wonder
Excited	Content	Secure	Concern
Small	Confident	Loved	Good
Choices	Warmth	Happiness	Enjoyable
Joy	Magic	Fun	Freedom
Carefree	Outgoing	Imagination	

### ***Feelings During Childhood***

Uncertainty	Longing	Emptiness	Pressure
Melancholy	Spoilt	Under-privileged	Dark
Frightened	Failure(11+)	Nervous	Vulnerable
Worried	Different	Shame	Embarrassed
Panic	Separated	Used	Sheltered
Bad	Fear	Boredom	Anxious
Misunderstood	Tears	Unsettled	Apprehension
Undervalued	Lack of food	Tearful	Unsure
Strict	Lonely	Anxious	Obedient
Insecure	Poor	Confusion	Shy
Sad	Led	Tested	Reared
Quiet			

Lack of communication with Parents	Competitive	Large Families		
Togetherness	Loss	Looking After Younger Brothers and Sisters		
Mum always being there	Controlled by Parents	Cared for		
Showing Off	Close Bond	Fun & Laughter	Sympathy	
Sisters & Sharing	No Responsibility	Loved	Illness	Death
Wanted	Falling Out	Divorce	Included	
Sabbath	Bible	Morals	Lasting Friendships	
Babysitting	Hate	Rage	Mistrust	Terrors

### ***Relationships***

*(Parents, Grandparents, Brothers, Sisters, Aunties, Extended Family, Teachers, Friends, Priests, Church, Uncles, Boyfriends, Guardians, New Friends, Visitors, Cousins)*

Approval	Verbal Abuse	Lonely Only Child	Rivalry
Punishment at School	Loss of Innocence	Responsibility	Punishment
Hard Work at Home	Jealousy	Had to be Independent	Disciplined
Isolated	Bullied	Hit with Slipper	Taunted
Had to be resourceful	Shouting	Poverty	Sexual Abuse
Lack of Money	Sectarianism	Seen and Not Heard	Pressure

Family Chats Around the Fire		Sunny Summers		Country Life
Honeybees	Snow	Fresh Air		House and Children
Soldiers Shooting		Child Among Trees		Gas lamps
Picnic in the Country		Grease - Olivia Newtown John		Primroses
Bird's Nests	Neighbours & Neighbourliness			Leaving Ireland
Safe	Outside toilet	Tin Bath		No Traffic
Back Doors Unlocked		Fear of Bombs	Fields	Glens

### *Place*

Rivers	Barefoot	Bottles and Stones		Seaside
Troubles	Trains	Dr Barnardos		Locality
Tractors	Smoking	Sun	Motors	Air raids
Gas Masks	Fresh Air	Freezing	Heat	Coal Fires

Bicycle	Christmas	Singing	Leaving School		
Routine	Radio	Street Games	Homework		
Going to School	Skipping Rope	Hopscotch	Going to the Beach		
Cutting Turf	Bringing in the Hay	Milking	Football		
Getting water from the well	Playing	Swing Boats	Books		
Cinema	Stilts	Exams	Tech	Hockey	Computer
Exciting	Fishing	Discovering	Camping	Feis	
Parties	Comics	Dances	Discos	Roller-skating	

### ***Activities***

Apple-picking	Energy	Pets	Reading	No TV	
Circus	Imagination	Birthdays	No Sweets		
Conkers	Housekeeping	Top of the Pops	Bands		
Knitting	Zoo	New Job	Bike	Shopping	
Story-time	Sweets	Chocolate	Brownies		
Caravan	Girl Guides	Going for a Walk	Swimming		
Holidays	TV	Visiting	Home Baking		

## Significant Sources of Support for Parents

Participants in focus groups were asked to identify the most significant people or organisations involved in parenting for:

- (a) me as a child
- (b) me as a parent
- (c) my parents

Considering the support identified by participants across all focus groups as a parent i.e. for them as parents the immediate family network, local support network provided by neighbours, church, school, voluntary organisations and work were identified. Support through statutory services was not identified across all focus groups. Support provided by, health visitors and GPs, was identified by parents in most focus groups. The Women's Aid focus group identified a range of statutory supports as significant. The significant sources of supports identified by the parents in all focus groups for them as parents are:

FAMILY	Partner/Husband/Wife
CIRCLE	Parents
	Grandparents
	Brothers/Sisters
	Aunts/Uncles
	Older Children
	In-Laws

The focus group at the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic minorities identified female members of the family circle (grandmother, mother, aunts, sisters) as significant. The focus group at the Men's Action Project identified both male and female members, but did identify grandfather, father, uncles, and father-in-law separately. This was not the case in other focus groups.

FRIENDS	Friends
	Other Parents
	Peers

### NEIGHBOURS

VOLUNTARY	Scouts/GB Youth Class
SERVICES	Breastfeeding Groups
	Community Groups
	Parent Support Groups
	Parent and Toddler Group
	After School Activities
	Sport's Club/Swimming Cruise
	Men's Group
	Cedar Foundation
	Women's Aid
	PAC
	Home-Start

Lifestart  
Surestart  
Youth Leader  
Women's Aid Staff  
Playgroup

SCHOOL Teachers  
Classroom Assistants  
Further Education  
Careers Advice  
Nursery School  
Lollipop Man  
Parent Teacher Association

Support provided by the church, was identified by 8 groups.

CHURCH Priests/Ministers  
Nuns  
Church Organisations  
Prayer Group  
Friends in Church

The Health Visitor and GP were identified in 10 groups as significant sources of support. The other statutory services listed were identified in one group only.

STATUTORY SERVICES Health Visitor  
Community Midwife  
Doctor/GP  
Speech Therapist\*  
Social Worker\*  
Police\*  
State Benefits\*

(\*Identified in one group only)

Three groups identified work colleagues, media, childcare and myself as significant sources of support.

WORK COLLEAGUES

MEDIA Television  
Literature Sources/Books  
Information Technology

CHILDCARE/  
HOMEHELP Babysitters  
Homehelp  
Housekeeper  
Childminder

MYSELF

ROLE	Positive - film Stars, musicians
MODELS	Negative- observance/interaction/experiential learning of the negative actions of politicians, paramilitaries, the system, statutory bodies, priests, teachers, society

Parents identified the main sources of support for their parents as extended family, church, school, doctor and midwife/health visitor.

Parents identified the main sources of support for them as children as their own parents, extended family, grandparents, sisters, playmates at home and school, Church and related organisations, School including school nurse and teacher and family doctor.

#### Key Issues for Children and Young People's Unit

Parents have a range of significant people and organisations that they draw support from in the task of parenting.

The role of parents, family and extended family as sources of support is a significant one for parents. Parenting skills and supports are passed on from one generation to the next.

Local networks - voluntary organisations, schools, church, neighbours and friends are also significant sources of support for to-days parents.

The media and role models (positive and negative) are also sources of support for some parents.

Services offered through the statutory sector other than Health Visitor and GP are not identified by parents as significant sources of support for them.

Measures contained in the strategy to support families need to take cognisance of the importance of extended family, local communities and voluntary activity as sources of support for parents and target resources accordingly.

## Future Support Needs of Parents of Children Aged 0-18 years

The support needs identified by parents are listed below.

### SOCIETY

Awareness-raising on all children's rights

- Inclusive community - everyone treated with respect and dignity - allowed to be different
- Advertising places too much pressure on parents/kids

### ACCESS TO QUALITY SERVICES

More information for children (teens) about youth clubs and safe places to meet.

- Children needed to know there is help available outside the home - newsletters for kids.
- Information for parents - parenting, legal issues, child development
- Free-phone Parent Help line
- Not just crisis intervention
- Child development clinics after school to suit children
- Hospitals more child friendly and schools
- Parents and schools aware of support agencies/services (parenting Newsletter) (Information pack for new parents)
- Parenting, parent groups, playgroups, nursery, parent and toddler groups locally available
- Health care for all parents and children
- Respite facilities/circles for all parents, drop-in centres
- Affordable childcare for working parents
- Parenting programmes targeted at younger parents, parents of children with special needs, single fathers, parents of teenagers, lone parents needs help
- Parenting skills taught in second level education
- Interactive clinics (not just weighing babies)
- Counsellors allocated to schools to help children
- Support for grandparents to help the family
- More support in schools for parents
- Support/supervision on school buses
- More family friendly places/play facilities
- Increase the accessibility to third level education of members of ethnic minorities
- Shorter housing lists

### RESOURCES

Training for teachers/other professionals on the needs of parents/how to engage and communicate in the best interests of the child

- Financial assistance for mothers who want to stay at home

- Free transport to school
- More funding for voluntary organisations who target the less well off
- Voluntary groups resourced to cover more areas
- Job Share, family friendly working policies for fathers and mothers
- Better financial support for parents of children in third level education

## SPECIAL NEEDS

More Support for families with children with special needs

More funding for leisure facilities for children with special needs

- More youth club workers trained for working with children with special needs
- More education about the needs of children with special needs
- More respite care for families with children with special needs
- Befriending scheme for teenagers with special needs
- More work placements for teenagers with special needs
- More play areas for children with special needs
- Someone/project worker to keep up to date with child's progress and to look at what the child and family need (children with special needs)
- Support for changing family units
- Mediation services for couples at difficult points in a relationship
- Support for families living in poverty
- Interpretation facilities for parents from ethnic minorities
- Support for parents with alcohol or drug abuse problems
- Speech and Language Therapy more widely available
- Impartial listening and counselling service for parents and children
- A proactive strategy involving schools and communities to value diversity, promote tolerance and learn about different cultures in N Ireland would facilitate the acceptance of young people from ethnic minorities of their own rich cultural identities

### Key Issues for Children and Young People's Unit

Focus groups agreed that Family Support Services should be available to every family in Northern Ireland who do not have support systems through no fault of their own. This could be because they have moved to a new area or new country, have no supportive extended family, have suffered disability, bereavement, domestic violence, drug or alcohol misuse, are worried about their own parenting skills, need advice on parenting/childcare issues or simply need a friend or listening ear.

This service should not be dependent on a referral basis and should be readily available for parents (mothers and fathers) to access themselves. They should also be readily available to referral agents from any quarter as long as the parent is in agreement and should form an essential complimentary service to other statutory or community provision. Receipt of Home-Start, with parental consent, is based on a referral system from any referral agent and self-referrals are welcome. Groups felt that Home-Start and Parents Advice Centre were well placed to provide these services as they were both well established and had a proven track record in all aspects.

Parents need support in bringing up children and parents and children need a wide range of support, information, medical, physical, educational, leisure, sporting, arts, transport, shopping and spiritual facilities and activities available to them so that children can have the best possible chance to develop to their full potential, becoming well balanced and settled adults forming balanced and peaceful communities.

## Parent's Vision for all Children in Northern Ireland

- A good quality of life
- Peace
- Reconciliation
- Better understanding of each other
- Acceptance of difference and equality
- Children's rights acknowledged
- Caring loving community
- Children and others assured of our support, love, respect, trust and continuity
- A nation (society) they want to look forward to
- Health and social care available locally to meet their needs
- Separate mental health facilities for children and young adults
- Safety
- Security
- Parents and professionals working together
- Parents who are supported to provide a high quality family environment
- Age and developmentally appropriated choices in education freely available to all children
- Job opportunities available locally
- Free from drugs or alcohol abuse
- Support/counselling available in schools
- Youth, leisure, playgroup, after-school services available accessible and affordable to all children
- Pride in themselves/family/country
- Self worth/esteem/awareness
- Young people with special needs supported and included
- Trust in government
- Stability in government
- An opportunity to influence decision making
- Play spaces
- Respect and awareness of the environment
- Greater awareness of child abuse and resolutions to deal with
- Affordable housing
- Improved public transport

## Key Issues for Children and Young People's Unit

Parents' vision for their children over the next 10 years:

A society that values children

A society that accepts difference and supports equality and reconciliation

A peaceful society

A society that children value and respect

Access to a range of locally available and affordable services delivered in a child friendly way including:

- Health and Social care

- Education choices and supports

- Services for children with special needs and their families

- Youth, leisure, playschool and afterschool services

- Play spaces

- Housing

- Public transport

Accessible, affordable, supports for parents that enable them to provide a high quality family environment for children

Children are safe and secure in Northern Ireland

Children develop self worth, esteem and self-awareness

Children respect the environment

Children can influence decision making in a stable government that they trust

## What Actions do Parents want Government and others to take to achieve the Vision for Children and Young People?

Parents identified the actions they want to see government take or facilitate others to take over the next ten years to achieve their vision for children in N Ireland. Actions were identified under the themes of:

Education  
Health  
Housing  
Personal Safety  
Family Support  
Leisure  
Transport  
Environment

Actions identified reflect the need for an integrated strategy that takes a co-ordinated approach to developing the quality of life of children in N Ireland. Actions will also require the allocation of sufficient resources to the implementation of the strategy.

### EDUCATION

Abolish transfer test  
Introduce all ability schools  
Facilities at school equal  
Good school buildings  
Good teachers being rewarded and recognized  
More teachers - more motivated qualified teachers  
More teaching assistants  
Equal opportunities for all children, especially non-academics  
More integrated schools that teach acceptance of each other and honour diversity  
Change grammar school system  
School counsellors for children with difficulties  
More funding for schools and nursery schools  
Smaller classes  
Teacher training every three years  
Funding for parenting courses  
Life long learning to be free  
Programmes on safety in schools e.g. Kidscape  
After school activities, Home work classes  
On going training for teachers to bring them up to speed with alternative approaches for dealing with needs and behaviour of today's children  
More support for children with dyslexia  
More support for children with special needs including classroom assistants trained to meet individual needs  
Special needs children should be mixed with other children  
Health education at school  
Parents support worker in every school  
Teachers to acknowledge and work more closely with Parents Advice Centre

Education for good citizenship  
Young Children - What is an appropriate age to start school?  
More play based curriculum for young children  
More focus on personal and social development to address children's self esteem, relationships and addictions  
Re-introduction of student grants

## HEALTH

More funding for health service  
Money not spent on ADMINISTRATION - more organised health board, one health board  
Childrens health professional to centralize their location  
Professionals trained in people skills as well as medical knowledge  
Services available province wide not always in Belfast and local hospitals retained  
Reduced waiting lists  
School nurses  
More doctors  
More nurses / community nurses  
Funding for self help groups  
GPs who have time and skills to listen to parents  
Pay more nurses  
More home visits - out of hours  
Health Visitors visit a lot more often  
Information on children illness - signs and symptoms  
Medical advice line 24 hour - staffed by nurses  
Better liasing between GP and support services  
More fluidity between services  
Support for addictions  
Better access/availability for young people to seek help on medical/health matters and to professionals  
Develop more awareness about young people's health (effects of STDs, alcohol, drugs, emotional well-being, relationship problems) with youth clinics to address these problems  
Better health information and education for boys  
More full time therapists  
Care allowance for parents of disabled children  
Social workers knowing about the disability/syndrome they are working in  
Information/support services for the Parents Advice Centre  
Better awareness of sexuality and sexual health issues  
More education re: healthy lifestyle and healthy eating  
Keep Fit programmes for children that are fun  
More services for mental health including Child Psychology  
Tackle domestic violence - specialised counselling  
Increased training, input and ethnic responsiveness of Health Visitors is essential as is the requirement for increased availability of interpreters, particularly to access in emergency situations

## HOUSING

More low cost housing for first time buyers  
Gardens for all houses  
Good housing helps make good families (not grant housing)  
Safer environment for play around house/parks/play areas  
Stricter control of (rogue) landlords  
Central heating in all homes  
More funding for poor housing  
All housing to reach basic standard  
Safe houses - free smoke alarms - alarms in every house  
More reasonable houses prices  
Legislation to put a ceiling on private rental costs  
More housing executive houses - better maintenance  
Better planning - 10 yr plans  
More housing schemes funded by government  
Address young homelessness  
Child Accident Prevention Programmes and grants for safety equipment  
Compulsory respite  
Better access in housing for disabled  
Access to advice, advocacy, information and support  
Reasonable planning permission for landowners  
No charge for water supply  
Address the needs of separated fathers to adequate housing to ensure no housing barrier keeps them from having a home for their children to stay with them

## PERSONAL SAFETY

More CCTV  
Footpaths on country roads  
More bumps on the roads to reduce speed in built up areas  
Neighbourhood co-operation in safety and crime  
More lollipop people  
Prosecute more drivers who drive fast in built up areas  
Community police officers, more police on the beat, Reformed police service  
More policing in rural areas  
Family involvement  
More supervision at discos/youth clubs etc  
Safe play areas  
School busses for all  
'Walking Busses' to school  
More bicycle lanes  
Better public transport  
Increased awareness of the troubles/difficulties children experience and education on dangerous situations  
More traffic lights - working properly  
Safety railings on footpaths at dangerous crossings  
Free smoke alarms  
Child protection training  
Educating children on Internet dangers

More severe punishment for those who break the law  
Regional standardised anti-bullying policies for all organisations  
Public access to sex offenders register  
More help for children attacked, bullied, raped and abused  
Parents take responsibility for attacks by their children on other children and adults

## FAMILY SUPPORT

Family and parent support is the norm and not crisis intervention  
Doctors who have time  
Teachers who have time  
More help from extended family/grandparents  
More support for lone parents  
Support in the homes to keep families together  
Breaks for parents  
Financial support to enable mums to stay at home if they wish  
Listen to children  
Volunteers - train more to work with children and young people  
More funding for family support voluntary organisations  
Drop in centres  
Parenting classes universally available  
Support for parents with literacy problems - home tutors  
Support for new parents  
Information on post natal depression and support  
24 hour free help line for parents  
Better pay for carers  
Independent pack given to every home with contact numbers on a wide range of issues  
Access to a social worker when and where needed - regardless of ability or disability - if the child or parent need support  
More support for over 5s  
More available and affordable childcare for working parents  
Recognise that family structures are changing in society and the law must change to reflect this e.g. access to children after family break-up  
Family therapy to help in times of crisis

## LEISURE

Encourage children to be more aware of how important leisure is w.r.t. health  
More leisure facilities - accessible, affordable to all people and friendly to families  
Better coaching services and facilities  
More youth clubs and young people deciding how they should be run  
Integrated leisure facilities with varied and interesting range of activities  
More indoor emphasis including funding for arts and creative projects  
More facilities for disabled persons  
Safe parks  
Enclosed parks - locked at night  
More exciting playgrounds - some have so many things removed for risks that they are no fun  
Provide programmes that are fun for father and son to take part in  
More male only sessions in leisure centres

## TRANSPORT

More efficient transport system that is affordable and reliable  
Public transport subsidized by government for rural areas  
Increase rural services  
Extend rail services  
Keep more cars off the road  
Tax single car use  
Bus lanes in the cities with parking on the outskirts  
More regulation of school transport e.g. seat belts on old buses  
Better roads  
Better parking facilities  
Cheaper public transport, free for under 12s  
A1 Belfast to Newry is a death trap - why lack of finance?  
More child friendly transport - parents with pushchairs etc  
More lollipop people  
Transport paid for children with disabilities getting to college  
Conditions of buses need to improve - outside agencies need to service them  
Grants for disadvantaged parents to take driving lessons

## ENVIRONMENT

Education on the need to improve our environment  
Penalties enforced  
Waste management  
Pollution control  
Introduce viable recycling schemes and more facilities for recycling  
We as families can and have to recycle  
More green areas  
Every household to have 3 bins for recycling/collection  
More rubbish bins in public areas  
Keep rivers clean.  
More speed restrictions  
Smoke free zones  
Better access for people with disabilities  
Public spaces  
Play areas and green spaces  
More tree planting  
Better planning of the built environment

## Conclusions

Parents Advice Centre (Parenting Forum NI, a project within Parents Advice Centre undertook to lead on this piece of work) and Home-Start led by Home-Start NI have developed and successfully implemented a methodology for consulting with parents on issues of policy. Together they have consulted with 215 parents of 645 children across Northern Ireland. Parents Advice Centre and Home-Start NI are well placed, given adequate resources, to further develop this tool to enable a full and diverse consultation with parents on the draft strategy document and other family and policy matters.

To-day's parents have vivid memories of their thoughts, feelings, relationships, environment and activities as children - what childhood meant for them. These reflect the diverse situations, needs and interests of families in Northern Ireland. These memories and experiences influence how they parent today. Enhancing the quality of life of all children today is important because it will help shape the memories and experiences to-day's children will use as future parents.

Parents across all focus groups identified family, friends, voluntary activity and schools as significant sources of support for them as parents. Focus groups agreed that Family Support Services should be available to every family in Northern Ireland who do not have support systems through no fault of their own. This could be because they have moved to a new area or new country, have no supportive extended family, have suffered disability, bereavement, domestic violence, drug or alcohol misuse, are worried about their own parenting skills, need advice on parenting/childcare issues or simply need a friend or listening ear.

Parents' vision for their children over the next 10 years:

*A society that values children*

*A society that accepts difference and supports equality and reconciliation*

*A peaceful society*

*A society that children value and respect*

*Access to a range of locally available and affordable services delivered in a child friendly way including:*

*Health and Social care*

*Education choices and supports*

*Services for children with special needs and their families*

*Youth, leisure, playschool and afterschool services*

*Play spaces*

*Housing*

*Public transport*

*Accessible, affordable, supports for parents that enable them to provide a high quality family environment for children*

*Children are safe and secure in Northern Ireland*

*Children develop self worth, esteem and self-awareness*

*Children respect the environment*

*Children can influence decision making in a stable government that they trust*

The 215 parents consulted with identified a range of actions by government to achieve this vision. These reflect the need for an integrated strategy that co-ordinates action across government departments and targets adequate resources towards supports that families need and will want to use. The involvement of voluntary and community organisations that parents identified as significant sources of support in delivering these actions is also essential.

Parents want to be consulted. Parents need to be listened to and responded to.

Consultation with parents needs to be resourced and facilitated.

Consultation with parents needs to be ongoing throughout the life of the strategy.

There is a need to develop mechanisms that provide for on-going consultation with parents e.g. a platform or cross-section of parents who can be called on at all stages of policy development. This is best placed with Parenting Forum NI of which Parents Advice Centre and Home-Start NI are members.