

NICCY: Focus on Priorities for Action

**Findings from the consultation exercise with parent
focus groups**

**Submitted to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for
Children and Young people
by the Parenting Forum NI**

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Context and Rationale

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has launched a campaign called 'Shout - Tell us what you think now!' which contains fourteen priority areas of issues affecting the lives of children and young people. From the response to the pack requesting individual selection of the top five priority areas the Commissioner will evaluate the information to help shape his work over the next three years

A key aspect of the work of the 'Shout - Tell us what you think now!' pack is to gather the ideas of children, young people and parents across Northern Ireland on the fourteen priority areas. In this context the Parenting Forum NI was approached to carry out a consultation exercise with parents. Consultation with parents is an integral part of the work of the Parenting Forum NI and, as such, the organisation has developed effective methodology to carry out such consultations. To facilitate the consultation process a short programme was designed lasting approximately two hours for use with a number of parent focus groups throughout Northern Ireland.

The programme had three distinct exercises designed to introduce the fourteen priority areas to the consultation group, followed by small group discussions providing the opportunity to consider which areas should be prioritised and the final exercise provided the opportunity for individual parents to select their personal top five priority areas for the Commissioner's consideration.

The Consultation Process

In November 2004 the Parenting Forum NI commenced the task of carrying out a consultation exercise with parents on behalf of the Northern Ireland's Commissioner for Children and Young People. The Parenting Forum has considerable experience in carrying out such exercises: it has contact with a network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland on a daily basis and is well placed to carry out real and meaningful consultations with parents within a tight time framework. The consultation method chosen was focus groups.

The Parenting Forum NI used their own internal facilitators for the majority of the focus groups. External facilitators were members of the Parenting Forum NI and all were experienced in facilitating focus groups. Consultation with parents requires highly skilled and experienced facilitators who are capable of working sensitively with diverse groups and facilitators were chosen accordingly. The majority of focus groups were well attended and parents clearly valued the opportunity to be consulted on the fourteen priority areas and readily contributed their views and their experiences.

Consultation Methodology

A consultation pack was designed to ensure a uniform approach across all the focus groups in collecting and collating the views of parents.

The pack also included information for parents on the purpose of the 'Shout - Tell us what you think now!' consultation and how the information will help shape the overall work of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People over the next three years. User-friendly materials were designed in order to present to parents the fourteen areas on which their views were being sought. Focus groups were chosen as the data gathering method because they brought parents together in a way that allowed them to share their views and identify issues both of individual and common concern. They also made effective use of the resources available. Existing support groups/networks were approached with a view to becoming involved. The Parenting Forum NI was aware at the outset of the need to ensure that a diverse group of parents was consulted and therefore parents were consulted from differing socio- economic backgrounds and also from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Twenty focus groups were set up, and quantitative information was collected from the focus group parents. One hundred and seventy-seven parents were consulted and these parents cared for a total of three hundred and eighty-four children. Focus groups were held at times that would most suits the parents and transport and childcare costs were met to ensure accessibility.

The groups, which proceeded, were located as follows:

NICEM, Belfast

Men's Action Project, Derry

Barnardo's: Orana Family Centre, Newry

Barnardo's: Rathenraw Primary School, Antrim

Macca Resource Centre Parent and Toddler Group, Omagh

Belleck and Garrison Parent and Toddler Group

Derrylin Parenting Group,

Northern Board Parent Support Group, Newtownabbey

Maureen Sheehan Healthy Living Centre Parenting Group, Belfast

Arc Healthy Living Centre Parent Support Group, Irvinestown

Antrim Adolescent Parent Support Group

Mothers Union, Ballymena

Young Persons Project Parent Support Group, Craigavon

Moyle Gateway Parent Support Group (Affiliated to Mencap), Ballycastle

Derry Traveller's Group

Alessie Centre Parent and Toddler Group, Belfast

PAPA, Down Parent Support Group, Dundrum

Dungannon Meeting, Organizations represented, Mothers Union, Little Stars Toddler Group, Armagh and Dungannon Home Start and local support group for Autistic Children

PAPA, Lisburn Parent Support Group

New Building Parenting Group, Derry

Each facilitator compiled a report based on the 3 exercises carried out. The responses were analysed by the Parenting Forum NI and they are responsible for writing this report, which presents the views of parents both quantitatively and qualitatively. Key issues are identified in the recommendations.

Parent Focus Groups: The Findings

Exercise 1

This exercise introduced aspects of each statement priority issue affecting children and young people; all of the fourteen priorities have come from and have a basis from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The exercise was designed to help parents evaluate how they feel about each statement and to start the process of considering which areas they would select for the top five priorities for action

For many of the statements in exercise 1 parents chose to provide detailed responses, which resulted in an overlap with exercise 2 and exercise 3.

Statements

1. In areas of their lives such as school, politics, at home and at the doctors, children and young people want to have a say.

Strongly Agree

- Teenagers like to be involved in decision-making.
- Young people have opinions and it is in taking ownership of them that they can buy into them.
- Young people and older children are different now, prepared to speak out, families are different now.
- We tend not to take children seriously. As parents we think we always know best.
- Severe impairment in communication for children with some identified special needs can make this difficult.

Agree

- My 15 year old can have a say, as a parent I don't have a say.
- Children have enough say in their lives.
- Children even at 3 or 4 need to know in hospital what is going on.
- Works better when kids of all ages are involved in what goes on at home, school, politics.
- Involving children helps their self-awareness, esteem and development.
- Agree about school and politics. With regard to the doctors, it depends on age.
- Children who are unable to communicate will require support.

Disagree

- Depends on age of children

Don't Know

- My young children are happy to go with the flow.
- Depends on circumstances, and age of child.

2. For a variety of reasons children are suffering from being bullied. Teachers can have difficulty in identifying and tackling bullying.

Strongly Agree

- Teachers do have difficulty in identifying/tackling bullying and may consider a child is demonstrating bad behaviour without taking into account a child's special educational need; they can only do so much.
- Children of ethnic minorities are encountering racism through bullying. One mother said, "I'm Chinese and I get chanted at when I go to the library, so now I've stopped going during the daytime with my young children when the youths are outside".
- There is a lack of resources for teachers.
- Teachers and their class-room assistants need on going training on how to recognise and deal with bullying
- Should be spotted - can be subtle, parents can back up own child, evidence base.
- School puts it down to "high spirits".
- "Conning wee gits behind teachers back".
- It causes so much physical and mental pain, is a scourge on society, can cause long-term difficulties to those bullied.

Agree

- Bullying can take many guises, many teachers are young themselves and May not have support.
- Teachers have busy workloads, assessing children often in large classes, it is difficult to manage everything to do with their job and bullying could be easily overlooked.
- A child needs to be safe in its own environment in family, school, street, at play, etc. Bullying reinforces perceived differences i.e. ethnic, disability, and sexuality within the child and within society.
- The bully is given help, the victim is told to get over it.
- There's a bully in my child's class getting a lot of attention.

Disagree

- Once identified there is no difficulty in tackling bullying.

Don't Know

- Difficult to protect children from everything.

3. Some children travel a distance to get to school. Many children and young people are concerned about their safety when travelling to and from school.

Strongly Agree

- When two schools are close together it is difficult for teenagers they get concerned.
- Buses are overcrowded and there are no seat belts.
- Even at 5.00pm my child is too afraid to walk home.
- Escorts on taxis are not always trained and some taxis have no escort
- Bus is bricked and not documented.
- Buses don't turn up or won't stop, kids crammed in.
- Community schools are closing, forcing our children to travel further to school.
- There are too many children on the school bus, so children near the end of the pick-up can't get on and so have to try to get public transport.
- Children's safety outside the home is paramount, busy roads and dark mornings are dangers to children. Care should be taken in vetting those who take children to school in taxi services used by social services. Who do you trust?
- Cameras and escorts are a must on all buses.
- Child abduction is a concern and you try to make your child aware

Agree

- No standing on buses, all buses to have seatbelts, children should all be seated with safety belt.
- Parental choice of school if it's in different Board area but shorter distance (cross funding from Boards). My son sits on bus every morning for 1¼ hour. A straight journey from his home would take 20 minutes. More buses are needed.
- Traffic around school is a concern for parents.
- Lack of supervision on crowded buses can lead to things like bullying, smoking, taking drugs without being seen/challenged.
- Parental concern as much as children and young people.

Disagree

- Because of my son's condition he doesn't understand what is happening when on the bus
- Parents are concerned.
- Children have no sense of danger.
- Children provided with transport - no problems.
- Helps children with socialising.

Don't Know

- Our children don't travel on bus.
- Do not notice a problem.

- I'm happy to organise my children's travel to school, as it is very close.

4. Children and young people identified to have either a general or specific special educational needs may face emotional and behavioural difficulties. A learning disability can range from moderate to severe and more should be done to help children with special needs.

Strongly Agree

- Provide independent assessors who are fully trained in different special needs to ensure that teachers receive the specific training, and will then be confident to know when to refer/seek help for a child with a special need
- Education should be tailored to the individual because special educational needs cover a very broad spectrum - learning in the correct way is important
- Education Special Needs need more money.
- This needs to reflect the many forms of disability and its severity.
- Ensure parental choice of intervention.
- Lack of understanding from schools.
- Teachers won't give medication.
- A child's confidence and self-esteem will be high, resulting in fewer problems.
- Parents have to fight to get their entitlements.
- Any identified special educational need for any child should be addressed by the powers that be. There needs to be more avenues were parents and their children can shape the best way for this to happen
- Disability can range from mild (not moderate) to severe.
- In mainstream school they cannot deal with the behavioural problems presented by children who require extra support. A more holistic approach providing allied health professionals and trained independent assessors is to be found in Special Educational Needs schools
- Pay attention to why behavioural difficulties occur - there will be a reason why some children strongly react e.g. there may be issues the child faces over sensory difficulties.

Agree

- My child has a speech impediment requiring speech therapy. I had to pay for private arrangement with an allocation teacher.
- When problem identified help to be carried out.
- Children who need help should get it.
- Did some work with children with learning difficulties and found not a lot outside help. Early years set the foundation upon which you build children's development.

Disagree

- Too much funding being directed to special needs at the cost of the other children.
- Parents keen to see their children diagnosed so that they are entitled to special treatment.

Don't Know

- No experience in this area.

5. Play and leisure issues which children and young people are not happy with include limited sports time at school and a lack of play areas and youth clubs should be addressed.

Strongly Agree

- Give children the right to have a choice to what sports they participate in.
- There is nothing to do in Youth Clubs and children don't go then go to the park instead where they see bigger children drink/glue sniffing
- In our area we have community vigilantes who walk around with baseball bats.
- Insurance/Child Protection issues mean shortage of youth leaders.
- One parent stated, "my child has a special education need and because his classroom assistant goes home at 3.00 he can't attend the After School Club because he requires supervision on a one-to-one bases. This isn't fair on him or me as I need to work
- Free play for children who benefit from structured play with conditions such as autism
- Areas not well lit.
- No play area in Derrylin, not enough sports in school.
- An active mind is a healthy mind, proper play facilities keep children safe and off the streets.
- Mainstream school sports not good for children with special needs e.g. football - if child can't take part in some sports no alternative provided

Agree

- Youth Club/After School Club should be supervised and not cost a fortune.
- Local Youth Clubs can be manned by young people only 2 years older than the teenagers. There is not control as to who comes in.
- The schools have limits to their possibilities. More play areas are needed and target activities that young people state that they want.

- There is a lack of good play space, child development facilitation; local communities need to take more care/responsibility in protecting the facilities they already have.
- Agree about play areas and youth clubs, unsure about sports.

Disagree

- Our school has plenty of facilities including a Youth Club.
- Adequate provision for most age groups in this area.

6. Many children with a disability lack the support from professionals, and their families live in poverty.

Strongly Agree

- Parents are let down and out of pocket. We can't afford equipment and we have no services - professional services.
- People need to be better informed provide guidance into waiting lists with time scales and signpost parents to appropriate help
- Parents loose half their income becoming carers. Professionals close book at 5.00 and go home. Parents need more compassion from professionals.
- Early help is essential for later life, support needs to be given as soon as possible and should be talked about more in the media and press to highlight the problems and connect with those who are suffering/coping in silence or in isolation with similar problems.
- It costs 3 times as much to raise a child with a disability.
- There is a higher rate of divorce in families with a disabled child.
- There is no interagency working.
- If parents have their own money they are fine, lower income families are worse off.
- No support given when son diagnosed with ASD it was PAPA who provided the much need information

Agree

- Lack of support for children with disabilities.
- Not enough support for parents, there is a lack of professional help often only.
- My son had a serious back injury. There was a 3-month waiting list for physio so we paid privately.
- Access to professionals only available Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.
- Lack of faith with medical profession.
- Children with disabilities and those who care for them need as much help as they can.
- Get to cope with the additional burdens this cause to family life on a daily basis.

Disagree

- Today children are not living in poverty. "As a girl I knew what poverty was. I slept with my coat as a blanket and cried myself to sleep each night because I was cold"
- "We used to cut out cornflake boxes to make a liner for shoe when it had a hole in it".
- Health Services are very good and DLA is very generous.
- Depends on degree of disability.

Don't Know

- Provision is often where you live, what postcode is it is a lottery.
- Families will pay for specialist help rather than wait for funding support and professionals.
- We have no experience so don't know.
- The inference that having a disability, which may lack professional support, equates to living in poverty is certainly not always the case. Need to see definition of what is meant by poverty and how the research data supports the statement.
- Group felt the question was unclear - one comment was that some people have DLA and more money than people who are working. Saw poverty and disability as two different things.

7. When children and young people suffer with their mental health often other problems are being faced, such as poverty, bullying and substance abuse.

Strongly Agree

- No one suffers for no apparent reason.
- Generally an underlining cause - poverty, bullying, and lifestyle.
- Children who self-harm on substance abuse, help comes too little, too late.
- Through lack of training, knowledge and expertise in Northern Ireland lots of young teenagers who present a particular special need end up in mental health systems
- Not enough support given to parents.
- Not enough awareness or acceptance of children's mental health issues.
- High cases of young people who have depression, which can result in suicide. It is not helping our children who watch and listen and know about suicide

Agree

- Teenagers don't have to live like this; it does however become a pattern, which is hard to get out of.
- There are some support systems trying to access kids in need of help.
- Family life is an important issue behind these factors.

- A child's living environment accounts for a lot of the stress, depression and mental health issues in children and young people.
- Bullying and substance abuse is a sad but growing experience of many of our children causing many mental problems and we need to do more to put sufficient, structured responses in place. Good mental health is also reliant on good emotional health.
- Paramilitaries can be a cause for mental health.

Disagree

- Not true in all cases.

Don't Know

- Why all this talk about poverty?
- Depends mainly on individuals but they can see that this may be possible.

8. When children live in poverty their health and self-esteem can be affected. Additionally, ethnic minorities report being excluded from society.

Strongly Agree

- Primary schools are getting better at including children not born here.
- There is a stigma - social services have cost, funding issues.
- As a parent "I would go in to debt to ensure my child has designer trainers - I won't have my child bullied because he's in the wrong trainers".
- Language difficulties from some groups who require interpreters.
- Schools are trying, parents can't keep up, and peer pressure is a problem, overall a domino effect.
- Some ethnic minorities, whether in poverty or not, decide to stay excluded from society.
- Parents support and the help of others who support families is needed to ensure children are properly fed, clothed and nurtured to support their development and self esteem. Respect for their selves and their bodies are crucial in preventing things like STDs or unplanned pregnancies, more should be done to highlight these problems.
- Having autism is a minority causing social exclusion.

Agree

- Poverty and lack of esteem are a big issue.
- It takes a big step for people to mix today.
- Ethnic minorities don't want to mix.
- Vietnamese/Chinese here had a rough life. The community put them out, because ignorance takes over
- When kids don't wear the correct "brand" they are picked on.
- There is a lot of pressure on children to have material things, which can lead to bullying

- Social Services should provide support.
- Language could be issue for first generation ethnic minorities.
- As a member of the travelling community I feel my children are not treated equally or often even fairly.

Disagree

- Children from all classes are affected when more outsiders are included.
- Not many ethnic minorities in this area, mainly Lithuanians - men without their families.
- It is up to parents how to bring up their children, ethnic minorities exclude themselves.
- Poverty or no poverty, your self-esteem can be affected by your family and the way they treat you.
- Self-esteem has nothing to do with money.

Don't Know

- Bosnian, Chinese, Lithuanian Communities fall out within themselves.
- Cultural diversity will need to be addressed.
- Hard to link statement, first part was obvious, but the second part is not always the case.

9. 'The Troubles' still affect children when the society they grow up in is still largely divided.

Strongly Agree

- In this area 2 schools are next to each other. This has meant parents are scared to send child to school.
- The religious divide is still very prevalent particularly at teenage level (male).
- Still single identity schools and areas. We all agree to integrated schools.
- We are still largely divided with the wall, peace line, separated geographically, sectarian influences with areas of social deprivation.
- Problems are not being dealt with.
- Adult's views are often reflected by their children.
- Can't move freely outside area.
- Integration is a class thing - Protestant housing estate kids stick together/middle class more mixing.
- From the politicians down, through the media, in our own communities and even our home many still practice and preach the old tribalism's, as role models to how our children should act we are failing miserably. For some children they do need outside help to give them a view of the bigger picture.
- It is still largely divided because the schools are still one or the other.

- You're not going to understand another culture if you're not going to be mixing with them.
- It's amazing how many children have parents who are bigots.

Agree

- Education system doesn't help, society-making split. Co-education schools enable children to grow together. The next generation will move away from divisions.
- Pushed back into own enclaves. Housing department does not have enough homes to integrate two communities.
- Poverty and ghettos impact on this as do schools and their environment (flags and murals).
- Not enough integrated schools.
- It is what the children learn from the home.
- The Troubles are still affecting parents and this is having an affect children.
Hard to change old habits.

Disagree

- Depends on the way they are brought up.
- Not in this area.
- Parents want a trouble free life for their children.

Don't Know

- Perhaps partially sectarian attitudes can be found in cities but not here.

10. When children require protection from abuse the child protection is provided from Social Services.

Strongly Agree

- We agree that Social Services should provide protection but you can't get a social worker, they don't share information, there is a lack of communication.
- Vetting to provide protection from peers, family, parents.
- Put more supports in place.
- Social Services not willing to work with community.
- Children have a right to grow up in safety and abuse robs them of this. We need to ensure any children who suffer abuse get all the help they need to be able to disclose their abuse and get adequate treatment /therapy/support when they do.

Agree

- Social Services were fantastic when I had an abusive partner.
- Help should not just be the agency - community as well.
- There should be more involvement from family, other relations, GP, schools, etc before removal.

- Social Services step in as governing agency.
- Child protection should be our number one priority and all who are tasked to help/support children should be well trained and safe for children to confide in.

Disagree

- All have a responsibility. Provide parents with information to know what to do.
- Social Services don't always get it right. This priority is for teachers, neighbours, everyone.
- Social Services can't always keep them safe. Other agencies can help e.g. Battered Wives Association.
- While it is of the utmost importance that we have systems to deal with child abuse it should not be left solely to social services to provide this support. It is all our jobs to be aware and protect children from abuse. Social services need to adopt a more humanistic approach and realise that children/people are involved, not numbers or objects of proceedings.
- Voluntary organisations are the first to pick up the pieces.
- It mustn't be, otherwise there wouldn't be so much of it.
- Social Services fail a lot of children; they need a network of support.

Don't Know

- Social Services can't do it all.
- Don't know what happens when children are abused.

11. A lack of recreation facilities can lead young people to become involved in criminal activities.

Strongly Agree

- Where can our children go for a coffee/drink?
- Young people - they knock on doors and steal.
- There is too much crime.
- Day in day out there is nothing to do in street or recreation area.
- Need well-led sports teams, etc. for children to get involved in.
- More role modelling required.
- You can get in with crowd; it's who you know. Nobody to work with the children.
- Nothing else to do, meet with each other.
- A lack of facilities equals crime.
- Geographical isolation.
- Peer pressure.

- An active mind is a focused mind, if we can't provide them with adequate facilities their natural curiosity will prevail and this can ultimately lead them into crime.
- More than likely.
- When kids are bored they go and look for fun. The fun they look for isn't always the right type.

Agree

- It doesn't help if they mix with older ones who get into trouble.
- Different kids will react differently according to their environment and depending upon their background and peers.
- More parental involvement required.
- Boredom and family troubles can often lead to children committing crime but is no excuse for doing so. Those tasked with dealing with children who commit crimes, as well as policy makers, need to balance these conflicting facts in their provision for, and treatment of, children.
- Other factors also involved.

Disagree

- "As a parent whatever is there I get my kids into them, it is up to parents to sort their kids out".
- Need spare time filled with structured activities.
- Depends on home/family (not class issue)

Don't Know

- Cheaper alternatives are needed - coffee/milkshake bar/American diners

12. Instead of the use of force such as smacking a child, government help should be provided to help parents find alternative ways to discipline children.

Strongly Agree

- We know enough about not smacking, do we need government help?
- Provide parent support groups, government to fund this initiative. Alternatives to smacking should be given.
- More support for families, provide more social services, North Belfast are withdrawing funding even though the need is there.
- Provide behaviour management.
- If not smacking what is the alternative?
- Other methods work e.g. consequences. Government should help parents to break cycle of how they were parented being repeated - where it is negative.
- Smacking is usually done out of our frustration or anger and only teaches a child it is ok to do the same to others. For most of us

however we are never taught alternative ways of relating to our children.

Agree

- Agree with alternatives but not with Government help.
- Don't do one thing (smacking) but (Government) don't show them anything else.
- Parenting skills courses should be made available to support parents.
- We struggle as parents to get it right with no book but our own experience of how we were parented. Now we are becoming more aware of the consequences of smacking but it is unfair to expect us to know how to do it differently when we either don't know or like some aren't interested. Often the threat of force is used as a discipline.
- If the law is changed, parents need training and support.
- All new parents should be targeted and helped to adapt to it, not everyone has extended family.

Disagree

- Mild physical punishment is not hazardous, and often useful to the child.
- The Government are in no position to teach us, but they could create a group of parents from a diverse community to teach young parents, single parents, etc and fund it for Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland.
- As a parent I think a parent has the right to smack.
- A good smack never did me any harm.
- Government no right to tell parents how to parent (no one size fits all solution)

Don't Know

- Parenting Programme.
- Parents should know how to discipline themselves, but parents should be banned from hitting kids.

13. At present there is not enough information available for children and young people to find out about their rights and the rights of others.

Strongly Agree

- Parents should implement their children's rights not enough information is provided.
- A lack of access to information.
- Some young people e.g. in care/difficulties tend to know rights.
- Children need to know what their rights are and where they can get help if they feel they are not getting their rights. There needs to be a central, easily accessible, point or service where children can get this information instead of levels of bureaucracy.

- Child friendly format aimed at all levels.

Agree

- Schools are powerful and young people/parents don't know their rights.
- Parents who have learning disability are powerless.
- Childline should be congratulated, the Children's Law Centre is recognise too in helping children, parents - all children should have the phone number of Childline.
- Information is there but no money to implement availability. Provide more money up front to ensure access to information.
- Children don't know how to access the information that is there.
- Very closed doors when it comes to talking about entitlement from DHSS.
- It is undermining to parents when child quotes "Childline wants to ring them", automatically uses this against parent, it is threatening and undermines parents.
- Some of it is there but not getting through to the children .It needs to be part of the school curriculum as early as possible - from the age of 8 upwards.

Disagree

- Availability is the issue. The rights of others should be factual, in child friendly language - school could ensure information available?
- Information is available but young people need to be more responsible.
- Children are a lot more clued in today.

Don't Know

- Sometimes I think my two children know more that me.
- With rights come responsibilities.
- This priority is more for older age group.
- Language too hi-faluting for kids.

14. Give children the right to be heard by implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Strongly Agree

- Children from disadvantaged areas will be heard.
- My child has aspergers, it is no man's land between the ages of 16 to 18.
- Some children with special needs tend to be immature and need more time to learn.
- Disabled children should be represented by parents/carers in the Convention.
- Need to inform every one of this and what it means - regular copies in newspaper or on TV.

- Why shouldn't children have the same rights as adult's .All children have the right to be heard on all issues that involve them.

Agree

- Age related.
- Self determination and the state should provide these in the first instance to everyone however the more consultation and involvement you have with children the more their rights can be guaranteed by law, policy and in practise.
- Sometimes people don't want to tell children about their rights because it doesn't suit them. Educate them in how to use their rights wisely.

Disagree

- Parents have to be heard on the rights of their child.

Don't Know

- We adults need to see it first to make a judgement on this.
- What is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child?
- Nobody knew what the "UN Convention on the Right of the Child" actually was.
- It could open a can of worms that could have children and parents in conflict with each other.
- Parents need to know what the convention says and its implications.

Table 1 below presents how parents chose to select a grading for each priority area

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
1	56	85	6	16
2	118	36	3	6
3	60	46	28	29
4	129	25	1	8
5	97	48	11	7
6	64	39	14	46
7	70	48	3	42
8	48	63	16	36
9	82	49	9	23
10	36	36	54	37
11	86	54	14	9
12	70	57	27	9
13	29	63	44	27
14	69	33	9	52

Exercise 2

Exercise 2 is designed in two parts. The first part of the exercise was devised to provide parents with the opportunity to further develop their understanding of the fourteen priority areas and to begin to rate the fourteen priorities for the Commissioner's work in some more detail.

Parents provided a priority score on how high a priority area in their view each priority should be, 5 was the highest award on a sliding scale with 1 receiving the lowest priority award.

The second part of exercise 2 required the facilitator to rank each priority statement which received a number 5 or 4 ranking which when shared with the group enabled parents to be provided with an overview and see what as a group they had started to select as their priority action areas selected for the highest priority for the Commissioner.

Table 2 identifies how groups chose to vote on their top chosen priority areas for the Commissioner's work over the next three years. Please note that not all groups participated in this exercise because when exercise 1 was conducted with in-depth discussion and written notes there was then an overlap into exercise 2 resulting in parents moving directly to exercise 3

Priority Area	Group Scores														Total
1	5	5				5		5	5	4				5	34
2	5	5	5		5	4	5	5	5	5		5	5	5	59
3	5		5			4	5		5	5		5		5	88
4			5	4	5	5	5	5	4	5			5	5	48
5	5				5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	52
6	5	4		4	5	5	5		4	5	4			5	46
7	5	5	5			5		5	5	5	4	4	5	5	53
8	5	4	5			5	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	57
9	5	5	5			4		5	5					5	34
10	5	5	5		5	5	5	5	4	5		5	5	5	59
11	5	4		4		5	4	5	5					5	42
12	4	5		4		5	5	4	4			4	4	5	44
13	5	4				4		4			5			5	27
14	5					4			5					5	19

Below is the feedback parents provided during their discussions:

Priority 1 - Having Your Say

Feedback for making this a top priority

Children have the right to be consulted on areas that affect their lives, it is important that children's voices and opinions are heard and acted upon on all issues that affect them. If we listen more to what children say we can make it better for the generations of children to come. How it is done needs to be age appropriate. Children and Young people need to have ownership of change for it to be effective.

Priority 2 - Bullying

Feedback for making this a top priority

Children need to feel safe in any environment they find themselves in. Much has been talked about bullying but what real support is offered to those who are bullied?
Bullying disguises other issues, which a child may be facing. Being bullied is often how ethnic minority children experience 'racism'. Children with disabilities or from ethnic communities appear to be particularly vulnerable. Sometimes those tasked with the job aren't willing or able to do much about it. Parents and teachers need to work in partnership to deal with this issue. When a child is being bullied their confidence and self-esteem is affected as can their learning, development and how they relate to others.

Priority 3 - Play and Leisure

Feedback for making this a top priority

School is often one of the few safe places where children can play or take part in sport and more school time should be given to it. More supervised play areas for children to be safe and have fun for children of different ages. Local communities should be encouraged and supported to take responsibility for their local play areas.

Priority 4 - Road Safety and School Transport

Feedback for making this a top priority

Children are not being valued when we pack them on to buses and provide no safety belts. We all wear seat belts in our cars and we are all aware of the dangers of not wearing a belt, so why is a bus any different?
When using the school bus a child should feel safe and know that there will be room

for them when they get on to the bus. If providing After School facilities please ensure that there is transport available home
Money is an issue but children's safety should be paramount whether in buses or on the road to or from pick up or drop of on way to school. More private transporters and taxis are being used - please ensure that we can safely entrust our children to these drivers. It is important that drivers are aware of any bullying to ensure children's safety while travelling. Adult supervision is required

Priority 5 - Special Educational Needs and Autism

Feedback for making this a top priority

A child with a special educational need should have this need met in an environment that is best suited to them and their parents/carers need to be involved in this process and the development of any service to meet this need. There is a need for continuous funding with localised provision.

Parents say that they have to fight for what should be a right for services and support for their child with special needs.

Provide children with access to play and address special needs resources.

Provision of more special education needs teachers at a local level with more training for teachers is a requirement. In addition, train and provide assistants for the special educational needs co-coordinators in the school setting.

Provide specialist input with a one-stop shop for education/social services information

Priority 6 - Children with Disability and Allied Health Therapies

Feedback for making this a top priority

Any child with a disability requires the right support that is possible. The additional cost of supporting a child with a disability is putting additional financial costs on to a family unit however not all children or parents of children with a disability lack adequate support, or perceive themselves to be, in poverty.

There is a concern that support is dictated by funding available rather than by need.

Early assessment is essential, followed by early provision to build confidence and avoid withdrawal. Social inclusion and equality are important.

Provision should be locally available particularly in rural areas where parents have to travel to meet with the allied health professionals

A lack of understanding on part of teaching professionals can add to difficulties faced by children at mainstream schools

A holistic approach is required

Address special needs resources to ensure children have access to play and provide appropriate socialising facilities for all children regardless of their ability/disability

Provide a crèche placement for children in their own area. When required any therapies for children with special needs/disability could take place at crèche ensuring equality for all.

Priority 7 - Children with Mental Health Issues

Feedback for making this a priority

Parents/children are confused about services and how to access them.

We need more awareness on mental health issues to help us understand the pressures children are under and how it affects them mentally.

We label children when we say that they have a mental health problem and this in itself can be very stigmatising.

The issue of young people taking their lives need to be addressed with some urgency, ensure funding is set aside to tackle this issue

Priority 8 - Children and Poverty

Feedback for making this a priority

We need more programmes aimed at parents and children to encourage and support children to respect themselves and their bodies nutritionally, physically and sexually.

Children from poorer backgrounds may need and require greater support to do this.

Not all ethnic minorities live in poverty but when they do they can face the additional crisis of being excluded from society/local community

Priority 9 - Children and The Troubles

Feedback for making this a priority

The climate we all have lived in has caused many difficulties for our children and we need more support to deal with it. In many communities children are presently still witnessing or are victims of traumatic experiences at the hands of paramilitaries and various gangs. We need to learn more about each other from playschool onwards to give the next generation informed choices. Sectarian attitudes aren't born into children but are bred into them by significant adults! Adult attitudes need to be changed in order to change the children's. Parents would like to see as a top priority more integrated schools. From the consultation with ethnic minority parents the group felt that it would have been better if the issue of ethnic minority children being excluded from society had not been subsumed under Issue 8 (effects of poverty) as the problems experienced by their children do not arise from poverty but from 'racism' they thought it would have been better to either include this with Issue 9 - Sectarianism, or to have named 'racism' as a separate issue.

'Racism' is similar to sectarianism. Racism is experienced by almost all ethnic minority children at some stage and is something parents worry about. In addition more education about other cultures and more multicultural resources in school, libraries etc. is required. This would benefit all our children.

Priority 10 - Child Protection

Feedback for making this a priority

Children have a fundamental right to grow up in a safe environment free from any type of abuse. Everyone entrusted to support children should be vetted to the highest level to ensure children's safety. The consequences on the individual child when this fails are too high a price for any child to suffer. Protecting children from abuse is something we all should be aware of, look out for and do our best to stop. There should be one overall adequately funded body to spearhead awareness and support this issue to ensure all children are less at risk and receive all the help they need to give them a chance of a better future. Presently Social Services are stretched and the level of provision is inadequate, more funding is required. Increasing mobility among workers means that local knowledge of individuals may no longer apply, so stringent vetting is more important than ever. Provide parents with more awareness of vetting procedures and ensure better communication between professionals with a central source/bank of information. Ensure information is available to and gathered by accountable people.

Priority 11 - Children and Crime

Feedback for making this a priority

Not having recreational facilities on its own is not a reason to commit crime, however we need to look at the other factors and see what can be done. Parents find it increasingly difficult to fund children's recreation/social life.

Priority 12 - Physical Punishment

Feedback for making this a priority

Parents are often not fully aware of alternative forms of discipline. Parenting classes receiving full financial backing from the government would be welcomed. We outlawed physical punishment in school but still allow it in the home. Someone will have to lead the way, although not all parents are in agreement with the government backing a law, which will tell parents how to parent

Priority 13 - Knowing Your Rights and Responsibilities

Feedback for making this a priority

For children to protect themselves, grow, develop and know that they are listened to and that their opinions matter they need to have something or somewhere where they can find out what rights they have. Children and young people need to show others what responsibilities they have and also be able to find out what is expected from them. Any issues, which affect children and young people, should involve their participation as to how they are resolved. Those helping or consulting with children and young people must do it in a way that is understandable to them and that is not condescending or patronising

Priority 14 - Implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

Feedback for making this a priority

We need bills to be enforced in law which will allow children and young people the rights which the Northern Ireland Commissioner is recommending and it should be a duty for service providers and all those who care or work with children. More publicity should be made to enable more parents to know and understand what the UN Convention on the rights of the Child represent.

Exercise 3

Exercise 3 is based on individual choice and parents had the opportunity to each complete Handout 3.

The handout contains all fourteen priorities and parents were requested, on an individual basis, to select the five priorities which are most important to them for the Commissioner to pursue in order of preference (1 being the highest, 2, the next highest through to 5 as the final and lowest)

Table 3

<u>Priority</u>		<u>Ranking</u>					<u>Total</u>
		<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	
1	Having your say	4	8	5	11	14	42
2	Bullying	28	23	19	18	14	102
3	Play and leisure	5	11	7	10	8	41
4	Road safety and school transport	4	6	7	9	9	35
5	Special educational needs and autism	36	19	12	11	8	86
6	Children with disabilities and allied health therapies	11	14	20	7	8	60
7	Children with mental health issues	4	6	18	6	10	44
8	Children and poverty	5	5	9	11	11	41
9	Children and the troubles	2	11	4	5	8	30
10	Child protection	21	11	13	14	7	66
11	Children and crime	1	9	2	10	15	37
12	Physical punishment	3	4	7	8	6	28
13	Knowing your rights and responsibilities	1	1	3	5	6	16
14	Implementing the UN Convention on The Rights of the Child (UNCRC)	2	6	2	3	6	19

Statement 15 on Exercise 3 asked parents if we have left anything out?

Below are a few statements representing areas of provision not visibly included in the fourteen priority areas.

- Better support for parents including parenting programmes and more schemes such as SureStart to help us support our children.
- Could do with a helpline and access to a confidential service to help parents.
- Children and young people with a disability - there should be provision made for independent living and training for access to work when 16+.

Conclusions

The Parenting Forum NI has developed and successfully implemented a methodology for consulting with parents on their views in relation to the fourteen priority areas identified as issues affecting children and young people which the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has compiled in a pack called 'Shout - Tell us what you think now!'

The organisation is in a unique position to carry out such consultations because of its links with a huge network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland. From the twenty focus groups spread across Northern Ireland who participated, one hundred and seventy-seven parents were consulted and these parents cared for a total of three hundred and eighty-four children. The required mix of parents was met by selecting groups situated in areas of high deprivation e.g. Surestart groups, ethnic minority groups, groups parenting children with special needs and groups both in rural and urban locations.

The consultation has provided a range of useful information. The views of parents in areas of deprivation did not seem to differ from those in less deprived areas.

The top five priority areas, for the Commissioner's attention, which emerged from the parents individual selection are set out below - 1 being the most important.

Bullying	1
Special Educational Needs	2
Child Protection	3
Children with Disabilities and Allied Health Therapies	4
Children with Mental Health Issues	5

(Please note that these ranking are as a result of our cross tabulation results from Table 3. We understand that these may not be the specified calculations for the final overall top five priority areas identified by the Commissioner)

Recommendations for each priority area

Having Your Say

Communication will be the key to ensuring children and young people are able to voice their concerns and be involved in decision-making. Provide a wide variety of methods, resources, and independent advisors to represent all children

Bullying

Bullying is identified as being a big issue, which is of great concern to parents. Provide a responsible adult on school buses. When appropriate ensure school entrance/exit have an adult present for the busy periods of children arriving/leaving school.

Ongoing training is required for teachers/classroom assistants to help them recognise and provide appropriate assistance to children, and to work in partnership with parents.

Empower children themselves by providing suitable training programmes

Play and Leisure

Youth clubs and afterschool clubs require funding to keep costs down and staff must be trained, with additional staff providing one to one for children with Special Education Needs, disabilities. Maintain/improve time on curriculum for P.E./sports time with wider choices of physical education to ensure all children have opportunity to participate

Road Safety and School Transport

Major concerns were raised over how children travel to and from school.

Provide fitted safety belts on buses with a seat available for every child. Ensure more buses are available on busy routes or in isolated rural areas where children require collection.

Provide and train school escort with priority for the children with special educational needs who require transport

Special Educational Needs and Autism

Provide ongoing funding to ensure children's needs are being met: this need's to reflect the many forms of disability and its severity.

Support staff to enable them to understand, identify and know how to seek help for children who have or may be diagnosed with a special educational need.

Fund alternative methods of education to ensure learning is maximised to the individual child.

Children with Disabilities and Allied Health Therapies

Many parents who have a child diagnosed with a disability are out of pocket. Supplement a parent/carer who gives up work or works part time in order to meet the needs of their child. Ensure more flexibility in work place to ensure child's needs are being met, such as appointments with allied health professionals

Children with Mental Health Issues

Ensure support for children, who suffer with their mental health, no one suffers for no apparent reason. Generally there is an underlining cause.

Many parents don't know how to access help when their child is most vulnerable.

Long waiting lists need to be addressed, signpost families to various available organisations when they need the support

Children and Poverty

Do some ethnic minorities, whether in poverty or not, decide to stay excluded from society? More research is required to address why there is a suggested exclusion from local communities.

Peer pressure is a problem, families will buy items of fashionable footwear/clothing to avoid their child feeling different, excluded, bullied

Provide programmes aimed at parents and children to encourage and support children to respect themselves and their bodies nutritionally, physically and sexually.

Children and The Troubles

Help the next generation to move away from divisions and grow together. Co-education schools are what parents frequently requested during their consultation.

Please note that 'Racism' is similar to sectarianism. Our group brought together from NICEM state that 'Racism is experienced by almost all ethnic minority children at some stage and is something parents worry about'.

Child Protection

Parents find it difficult to access social services and would like to be provided with information on child protection in order to know what to do. Society, other agencies, teachers, neighbours, everyone have a responsibility. Social Services is the recognised governing agency but they can't do it all and don't always get it right.

Improve the vetting procedures for adults to further protect children.

Children and Crime

Not having recreational facilities on its own is not a reason to commit crime, however we need to look at the other factors and see what can be done. Parents find it increasingly difficult to fund children's recreation/social life.

Physical Punishment

Physical punishment is a priority, which causes parents a dilemma; many use and prefer alternative methods other than the use of force such as smacking. Some parents question government involvement in this issue yet parenting classes receiving full financial backing from the government would be welcomed.

Knowing your Rights and Responsibilities

Information may be available for children and young people to find out about their rights and the rights of others, but how to access this information is the question raised by parents. Funding and a signpost agency are required to ensure access to information that is there. The rights of others should be factual, in child-friendly language

Implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

More awareness of UNCRC is required; there is a requirement to inform every one of this and what it means. Parents need to understand how to use the UNCRC when issues arise affecting their child.