



**NIACRO Response to the Department of Health and
Department of Education Strategy for Looked After Children:
Improving Children's Lives Consultation**

4th July 2018

1. NIACRO is a voluntary organisation that has been working for almost 50 years to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. Specifically, its contributions have been to:
 - Support the resettlement of adults leaving prison and those on community supervision
 - Build skills, confidence and employability of people both in prison and in the community
 - Build the resilience of children, young people, families and adults who are displaying behaviour that would put them at risk of engaging with the criminal justice system, supporting positive lifestyle choices
 - Influence service providers in the statutory, voluntary and community sector and building their capacity to provide appropriate support and bespoke training
 - Contribute to public debate and influencing others with regard to criminal justice matters, at the highest level.

2. Preliminary Comments

2.1. At the heart of NIACRO's work is a drive to reduce (re)offending within the understanding that integrated and flexible approaches towards desistance are most effective. We provide services for, and work with, children and young people, adults in the community, and people in prison and their families.

2.2. We believe that:

- children and young people can be diverted from the criminal justice system through support which meets their needs and the needs of their families;
- people in prison, and their families, have the right to maintain and sustain relationships both in prison and in the community; and
- helping people, who have offended, to make positive choices contributes to reducing offending.

2.3. Our comments are based on our direct experience of delivering services to children and young people, who are at risk of offending or reoffending, people in prison and adults in the community, as well the feedback we receive from our service users.

2.4. We work with looked after children and care experienced young people across two projects:



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- **The Independent Visitor (IV) Scheme** offers a volunteer-led independent befriending and support service to young people aged 11 -18 who are 'looked after' by the Belfast and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts and have infrequent or poor quality contact with a parent or person with parental responsibility for them. A young person is matched with their volunteer for a minimum of one year, though this can be extended with the agreement of the young person and their volunteer.
- **The Independent Representation (IR) Scheme** aims to ensure that the views, opinions and concerns of young people in Lakewood Secure Care Centre are heard, receive serious consideration and are responded to in a considered way. The IR team, which consists of the IR Project Worker and a volunteer Independent Representative, visit each unit within Lakewood on alternate weeks to meet with young people, listen to their concerns, and support young people who wish to raise issues in the Centre. The IR Scheme complements and enhances the ethos of The Sanctuary Model that is adopted at the Centre. The Scheme is a reflection of the Centre's confidence and commitment to ensuring that the views, opinions and concerns of young people are heard and taken seriously.

2.5. NIACRO has achieved the Investing in Children Membership Award™. Investing in Children (IiC) is a UK initiative that promotes the human rights of children and young people. The Investing in Children Membership Award™ Scheme recognises and celebrates examples of imaginative and inclusive practice with children and young people. The award demonstrates dialogue with young people, which leads to change in service provision and advocacy. The accolade is unique in that children and young people using the services have provided evidence for the organisation and endorsed the membership report.

3. General Comments

3.1. NIACRO welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department of Health and Department of Education Strategy for Looked After Children: Improving Children's Lives Consultation, in particular:

3.2. The Strategy for Looked After Children extends to children and young people in care to improve their outcomes and help them achieve their full potential in line with their peers. It also describes the pledge to support children and young people in care, i.e. those children in foster care, residential care or placed with parents.

3.3. It also applies to those who are on the 'edge' of care, that is:



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- a) Living in families with intense needs and requiring intensive supports [on the edge of coming into care];
- b) Returning home from a period in care [on the edge of a [short] period in care];
- c) Leaving care to make the journey into adult life [on the edge of aging out of care]; and

3.4. It also applies to those leaving care namely, young people who have left care and are still in need of support, including those who have been adopted, those who are living in a family under a Private Law Order and those who are supported in independent living in early adulthood.

3.5. NIACRO believes that in order to include all groups mentioned above, particularly those who are pre-care and leaving care / care experienced, this strategy could be renamed to reflect the diverse groups that the strategy seeks to support. This would also go some way to ensuring that those groups mentioned, who do not self-define as looked after, would feel included in the aims of the strategy. NIACRO believes that a more reflective title relating to the continuum of care would better include all groups mentioned.

3.6. NIACRO welcomes the strategy in context of the draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2017-2021 which commits the Executive to improving the outcomes for the citizens of Northern Ireland over the course of the existing Assembly mandate. The introduction of an Outcomes Based Accountability model (OBA) represents an opportunity for creating new forms of social contract between the Executive and the people of Northern Ireland. The commitment to openness and transparency with the ability for the public to be in a position to judge performance and progress is significant.

3.6. NIACRO has followed closely the Independent Care Review currently taking place in Scotland. This review aims to look at legislation, practices, culture and ethos of the care system across Scotland. The Care Review will listen to young people with experience of care and their families, as well as providers of care and particularly, children and young people in care now, to inform its recommendations to improve both the quality of life and outcomes of young people in care. Each stage of the review is built on the stage that precedes it. The Care Review is evolving and learning through four key stages of work, each being guided and informed by the recommendations and actions identified during the stage before. This dynamic, innovative and flexible approach means the Care Review can gather information and evidence, make recommendations for change, and then take action to implement change throughout the process. NIACRO would suggest that departments look closely at the 'stages' elements of the Care Review and how it deals with a root and branch review of the care system in Scotland. Further information can be found on the Independent Care Review website:

<https://www.carereview.scot/>



3.7. NIACRO welcomes the joined up approach of the Health and Education departments in taking forward this strategy, taking into account the specific needs of looked after children, their unique in-care experiences and their post-care challenges. It is an acknowledgment that an extra push is required to address earlier, often very difficult, pre-care lives. A commitment to partnership working is an important recognition that the delivery of outcomes will often be undertaken at the front line, at a distance from government departments, by all sectors. To ensure the appropriateness of delivery arrangements, NIACRO believes there is a requirement for a Social Value Act - to undertake our role as innovators, advocates and critical friends, voluntary sector organisations require support. We would ask that public procurement becomes an equal playing field, supported by the introduction of legislation similar to a Social Value Act in Northern Ireland, which recognises the worth of voluntary, and community organisations. We ask that public buyers consider quality as well as cost to ensure that service delivery has the impact intended and makes a difference.

3.8. NIACRO is keen to be included, along with other voluntary organisations, in the implementation infrastructure to monitor progress of the strategy against the commitments made and the corresponding delivery plans.

3.9. NIACRO welcomes the pledges given for pre-care, in-care and after-care provision. We believe that children should be supported at the earliest possible stage in an appropriate way in the best interest of the child. We welcome in particular, the pledge for those young people with care experience who require emotional, practical, holistic support in order to successfully transition into independent living.

Outcome 1 – Living in a society which respects their rights

- i. NIACRO welcomes this outcome and believes that the voice of looked after children and care-experienced young people is critical in developing appropriate strategies and policies which directly affect them. Whilst it is important to celebrate the positive experiences of looked after children and care experienced young people, there needs to be supported and appropriate mechanisms in place to hear the views of those children and young people who have less positive experiences. Often these children and young people are harder to reach and thus, it is critical that their views and experiences are taken into account in order to provide meaningful learning in the future.

Outcome 2 – Living in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted between persons who share a relevant characteristic and persons who do not share that characteristic.



- i. NIACRO broadly supports this outcome but would welcome further information on figures with respect to gender, sexual orientation and barriers around language for example, for looked after children and young people.

Outcome 3 – Physical and mental health

- i. NIACRO supports this outcome and its associated action points. We understand that looked after children and young people are much more likely to have experienced adverse childhood experiences particularly in relation to parental drug and alcohol misuse. We note that behavioural and mental/emotional health problems were found to be the most common health issues suffered by looked after children. We understand that these experiences can sometimes lead to children and young people suffering from or developing ill health into adulthood particularly in relation to mental health and addiction.
- ii. NIACRO believes that the importance of friendships is critical in minimising feelings of isolation and can help to strengthen the child or young person's emotional wellbeing. NIACRO's Independent Visitor (IV) Scheme is a volunteer-led independent befriending and support service to young people aged 11-18 who are 'looked after' by the Belfast and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts and have infrequent or poor quality contact with a parent or person with parental responsibility for them. A young person is matched with their volunteer for a minimum of one year, though this can be extended with the agreement of the young person and their volunteer. We know that at 18, the young people who use this service, and similar services would like this support to be extended as they transition into independent living, with many volunteer befrienders and service users remaining in contact long after their work on the project. We welcome the recognition for a more holistic approach particularly with regard to medical examinations. We note the importance of mechanisms to support positive mental and emotional wellbeing and we believe that medical examinations must extend to the assessment of a child's mental health and emotional wellbeing.
- iii. NIACRO supports the continuity of care model and we think that it is an important step to extend this to looked after children who may enter the juvenile justice centre, ensuring that appropriate treatment is continued in order to support the young person when they leave care.

Outcome 4 – Living in safety and with stability

- i. NIACRO supports this outcome in principle but we feel that much more needs to be done to tackle the stigma across the board for looked after children and young people and care experienced young people to enjoy the full possibilities of stability from care into independent living in adulthood. NIACRO would welcome the extension of support for children leaving care particularly those in the 18-25



age group with regard to: living arrangements; education, training and employment; and emotional and mental wellbeing.

Outcome 5 – Learning and achieving

- i. NIACRO recognises that the needs for looked after children and care experienced young people are more complex and thus appropriate support needs to be in place, which deals with the additional difficulties that they may face. Whilst we welcome support to encourage care leavers to enter further education and training through campaigns such as 'tick the box' which ensures that care leavers have priority consideration from further education colleges and universities, we feel that this does not go far enough. Practical, emotional and financial support should also be provided. Young people leaving care require greater support than assistance with securing a place on an education or training course - they also require support to ensure that they maintain their place and complete the course.

Outcome 6 – Play and leisure

- i. NIACRO believes that there continues to be an unmet need with regard to areas of play for all children, not least for looked after children and young people. The HSCTs in Northern Ireland must promote the wellbeing of children and young people in their care to include promoting play and ensuring access to appropriate and safe recreational opportunities. We feel that the departments should work in partnership with the HSCTs to ensure that this outcome is met. NIACRO strongly supports the provision of appropriate and sufficient opportunities for play and leisure for children and young people who are in care or are in the youth justice system. Play has the potential to improve many aspects of emotional well-being, such as reducing anxiety, depression, aggression, and sleep problems' (Play in Children's Development Health and Well-being, Jeffrey Goldstein, February 2012) and NIACRO believes that this must be taken into account for those children who are experiencing difficulties, or are in care or are in the youth justice system.

Outcome 7 – Economic and environmental well-being

- i. NIACRO believes that support needs to happen earlier for looked after children to prepare for the transition from in-care to after-care. At present, young people in the care system have to wait until they are aged 18 until formal processes are started e.g. securing accommodation, transitioning from CAMHS to adult mental health services for example.
- ii. NIACRO welcomes additional support for care experienced young people aged 18-25 who require extended support for the transition into adulthood and



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- independent living. Peers not in care still receive practical, emotional and often financial support from family at this age. Care leavers should also have the same support to ensure that their experience into independent living is positive and that each care leaver has a stable transition.
- iii. NIACRO believes that the importance of friendships is critical in minimising feelings of isolation and can help to strengthen the child or young person's emotional wellbeing. NIACRO's Independent Visitor (IV) Scheme is a volunteer-led independent befriending and support service to young people aged 11-18 who are 'looked after' by the Belfast and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts and have infrequent or poor quality contact with a parent or person with parental responsibility for them. A young person is matched with their volunteer for a minimum of one year, though this can be extended with the agreement of the young person and their volunteer. We know that at 18, the young people who use this service, and similar services would like this support to be extended as they transition into independent living, with many volunteer befrienders and service users remaining in contact long after their work on the project. We believe that a mentoring service provides meaningful support for looked after children and could be beneficial for care experienced young people.
 - iv. NIACRO feels that there is a requirement for an accommodation solution for looked after children in residential care. We can see the benefits of the GEM Scheme for children in foster care and would welcome stepping stone accommodation for young people leaving residential care with access to support as required.

Outcome 8 – Contributing positively to community and society

- i. NIACRO believes that key to addressing all of the outcomes in this strategy, in particular Outcome 8, that coordinated steps must be taken to address the stigma, which is still prevalent in the public narrative around, looked after children and young people with care experience. We welcome the focus on positive contributions of looked after children and children with care experience.
- ii. We note the issues arising with regard to residential care and offending particularly the statement by in the strategy by one young person who states: "I never got convictions 'til I went into care...I got 66 convictions in 2 years...wouldn't have been in here only I was in care. Even when we go into the staff office (in care home) to wind up, they would threaten to phone the police."
- iii. The Review of the Youth Justice System in Northern Ireland (2011) found that "contact with the criminal justice system, even for relatively minor matters, can have serious implications for young people's future life chances." The Police Service of Northern Ireland's (PSNI) use of stop and search powers have remained as a consistent and growing power over the past decade. Analysis of most recent data shows the powers are used 68% more than ten years ago and



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at

a greater rate than any other police service in the United Kingdom. In this regard, stop and search is the most common form of adversarial contact with the public. The PSNI state the powers are "an operational tool used to prevent, detect and investigate crime as well as to bring offenders to justice". Yet evidence demonstrates stop and search has a minimal, and in some cases negligible, effect on the prevention or detection of crime. It is also notable that children (17 and under) remain a significant focus of these powers.

- iv. Between 2010/11 - 2016/17, over 25,000 children have been subject to stop and search, with 15-17-year-old males five times more likely to be stopped proportional to numbers in the population.¹ NIACRO would like to see solutions to holding children in residential care when bail is not granted, or no place of safety can be secured.
- v. Whether or not a young person enters custody, formal involvement with the criminal justice system can affect their educational outcomes and increase their likelihood of further offending, leading to increased crime, victims and policing costs. It is therefore in everyone's interest that we stop criminalising children and seek to prevent young people from ever entering the criminal justice system.
- vi. We note that a disproportionate number of looked after children, particularly those in residential care come into contact with the criminal justice system which contributes to the negative image of these children and young people within their community. NIACRO welcomes the opportunity to work with the departments and other criminal justice agencies, to build on the work already undertaken to recognise the additional needs of looked after children and work innovatively and collaboratively to develop pathways to avoid the unnecessary criminalisation of children.

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¹ The Detail (2017), 'PSNI Urged to Reconsider Use of Stop and Search on Children:
<https://www.thedetail.tv/articles/psni-urged-to-reconsider-use-of-stop-and-search-on-children>