A Manifesto on Children’s Issues in Northern Ireland
This short paper has been written with a view to influencing policy and manifesto developments in light of the forthcoming elections.

It has been jointly written to reflect issues of relevance to policy and practice in Northern Ireland identified by either or both Barnardo’s and NSPCC. Both organisations also have UK wide General Election campaigns. The NSPCC General Election campaign ‘I Stand for Children’ calls on candidates in the UK to address the following issues:

1. Continue to fund helpline services for children and for adults concerned about the safety or welfare of a child;
2. Tackle domestic violence from a child’s point of view; and

Barnardo’s General Election campaign is “Believe in Children” which focuses on child poverty and youth unemployment.

Such are the interconnections between the UK government and the NI Assembly that policy recommendations in this paper are highlighted under each issue, which may be the preserve of one organisation or both.

Child Poverty
Poverty and disadvantage blight children’s chances and lessen their opportunities to fulfil their potential.

A number of factors contribute to Northern Ireland’s levels of poverty: high levels of worklessness and economic inactivity; the nature of jobs available and their pay levels; high numbers of families with only one adult working; and a lack of affordable childcare. There are often inter-related issues of poor educational attainment, mental ill-health, disability and parenting difficulties.

The lack of high quality, affordable childcare remains a barrier for many parents seeking employment. Reliance on market forces alone will not address this issue, particularly for the poorest families and those dependent on welfare benefits.

In addressing poverty it is not enough to simply measure the level of child poverty. Rather we need to address the underlying causes.

- Develop a programme of focused support for parents to develop the additional skills required to re-enter the job market.
- Develop a programme of actions to extend the provision of affordable childcare in NI including subsidised childcare payments for parents returning to employment.
- Develop an area-based response to those deeply rooted pockets of poverty where many children live in families with fourth generation unemployment.
- Provide practical levels of support for families currently living in poverty: for example, provide a transition year additional school uniform grant to take account of the extra costs associated with the move to second level education.
- Create a fund which charges lower rates of interest for credit to poor families to address the additional and often extortionate costs of credit they face.

Family Support
Parenting is very rewarding but can also be difficult and demanding. At some point many families will need support to deal with some of the challenges parenting brings. For some families the support may be long-term and intensive. Recent evidence suggests that parenting and the capabilities it builds in children is essential to improving life chances. However, in Northern Ireland we have had fewer resources for proven models to support parenting such as Sure Start. Only £80 per child has been spent on Sure Start services here compared to £600 for children in England.¹

¹ Save the Children, “A Child’s Portion; An Analysis of Public Expenditure on Children in the UK”, October 2009
• Commit to piloting programmes of intensive, family support services for the most vulnerable children and their families.

• Commit to an increase in the number and level of Sure Start Programmes across NI.

• Advice on positive parenting should be made available to all parents as part of the development of the Family Support Strategy.

The first three years of a child’s life are crucial in determining how well s/he will do in terms of health, education and future employment. Early intervention offering support to those families most in need is the most effective way of ensuring all children reach their potential.

• Commit to prioritising early intervention strategies by allocating 3 per cent of the budgets from health, education and youth justice to early intervention initiatives.

Education
One-fifth of children in Northern Ireland leave primary school unable to read and write to the required standard while two-fifths leave with poor numeracy skills. Addressing low aspirations and educational disadvantage is essential to improve children’s future chances in life.

• Commit to an expansion of the Extended Schools’ Programme.

• Implement pilot programmes of proven practice models to address the numeracy and literacy deficit in our schools.

• Extend the provision of a free nursery place for all three and four year olds.

Child Protection
The consequences of child abuse are increasingly recognised. Sexual abuse, for example, is associated with anxiety, depression, anger and guilt, poor self-image, difficulties in functioning at school and later at work, difficulties with personal relationships and parenting, sexual problems and physical problems. Abused children can also suffer post-traumatic stress disorder.

An average of three sex offences against children was recorded every day between 2008 and 2009 by the PSNI. The statistics, show under 18s were victims of sex crimes, including rape, indecent assault and indecent exposure, on 1,084 occasions during 2008-09. This accounts for almost 56 per cent of the total number of sexual offences recorded by the police during that period. Almost 10 per cent (89) of the children were aged four and younger – therefore not old enough to go to school. Almost two thirds of offences were committed against those aged 11-17 (658). The figures also show that girls were five times more likely to be the victims of a reported sex crime than boys.

In Northern Ireland, the highest levels of child protection registrations continue to be for reasons of neglect.

• Ensure the sexual violence strategy as it develops recognises that children are the majority of victims of sexual crime and that this is reflected in service development.

• Address the issue of neglect by undertaking a scoping exercise of evidence and best practice.

Approximately 160,000 young people aged between 8 and 18 years belong to a sports club or team outside of school.

• To safeguard these young people the Abuse of Trust legislation should be extended to include Sports Coaches in its scope.

5 per cent of all sexual offences committed against children involve females.

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2 The Education and Training Inspectorate Chief Inspector’s Report 2006-2008
3 YPBA analysis, DCAL/Sport NI form a forthcoming bulletin
• The issue of female sex offenders should be recognised in the public protection arrangements and be reflected in the revision of DHSSPS child protection guidance.

Early intervention and prevention play an important role in protecting children and babies.

• Health Visitors, as part of the refocusing of their strategic direction, should take a regional approach to advising parents on positive parenting and to raising awareness of the dangers of shaking and hitting babies.

Looked After Children require the highest standards of care the State can provide.

• In addition to the full implementation of Care Matters commit to the development of an Action Plan for Missing and Runaway Children and Young People with a particular focus on those at risk of sexual exploitation.

There is increased immigration into Northern Ireland and we are starting to see more evidence of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and human trafficking.

• Establish the extent of unaccompanied asylum seeking children; assess the adequacy of service provision for this group and the risks to them of exploitation including child trafficking.

• Commit to developing improved information exchange processes in relation to cross-border child protection and in particular the sharing of vetting and barring information.

Internet Safety
Governments throughout the UK and industry, NGOs, police, professionals working with children parents and children themselves need to work together to keep children safe on line. Sex offenders are increasingly sharing indecent images of children by setting up private spaces online using ‘peer to peer’ file sharing software and grooming children in the virtual world. Internet and mobile phone use has seen the development and growth of ‘virtual’ bullying for children.

• All departments should contribute to DHSSPS led NI internet safety action plan to complement that developed UK Council on Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS).

• The UK Government and the computer industry should work together to research and devise an action plan to stop the viewing and distribution of child abuse images through the use of peer to peer software.

• Social Networking sites should be required to regularly review the content on their sites and ensure cyber bullying is addressed within Personal Development Programmes in schools.

• Training should be provided for professionals, social workers, probation officers who work with, or come into contact with online offenders to help manage the risks they pose.

Helpline Development
Children must have access to safe, confidential spaces in order to be able to speak out about abuse and to get help. The most difficult thing for a child to do is find the courage to speak out against their abuser in the first place.

• There needs to be continued funding for helpline services for children and for adults concerned about the safety of welfare of a child.

Protecting the Public
Since 1997 measures to protect the public from dangerous adults have been developed. Last year (2008) saw the launch of Public Protection Arrangements NI (PPANI) made possible by the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 1998.
• Bring NI into line with GB by introducing legislation to establish Violent Offender Orders.
• Develop arrangements for the assessment and risk management of sex offenders and individuals who pose a risk both north and south.

Development of Therapeutic Services
Specialist service provision for sexually abused children across Northern Ireland is not universally available. Service providers have reported being unable to meet the demand for therapeutic services for abused children and young people in their catchment areas. Resources are needed to develop this capacity.  

• All children who have been abused should have access to therapeutic support to help them deal with the effects of abuse on their health and emotional wellbeing.

Domestic Abuse
Every year in Northern Ireland domestic abuse results in over 6,000 assaults, around 700 families having to be re-housed and tragically each year several deaths occur. Domestic abuse accounts for one-fifth of all recorded crime in NI and it is estimated that in excess of 11,000 children here are living with domestic violence. To complement progress in the development of the regional strategy there are three key areas for further policy development.

• All professionals dealing with the issue of domestic abuse should be aware of its effect on children. They should have training to enable them to recognise the importance of listening to children and to ensure their voices are heard.
• Improve provision of services to unadjudicated males, such services play a role in early intervention and treatment and should be universally available across Northern Ireland.

• Children should be enabled through Personal Development programmes in schools to keep safe and know how to seek help when dealing with an abusive situation in the home.

Preventing a Lost Generation
In Northern Ireland there are 52,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in education, employment or training. We are in danger of losing an entire generation of young people to reduced aspirations, low educational attainment, economic inactivity and poor health.

• Commit to resourcing a strategy and a specific programme of actions for NEET young people to provide additional support, training and access to employment.
• Commit to reducing the number of NEET young people aged 16-24 in NI to 10%.
• Implement a “Pre-VENT NEET” programme that works with 9 – 14 year olds who are identified as being particularly at risk of becoming NEET.
• A “Future Jobs Fund” for NI should be developed.

Children with Disabilities
Children with disabilities and their families face many additional barriers. They are at a much increased risk of poverty and are much less likely to avail of training and employment opportunities. They often encounter difficulties in accessing the services they need or in simply having their voice heard. Every political party should include a commitment to addressing the needs of children with disabilities and young people within their Manifestos.

• Commit to the introduction of the Aiming High Programme for disabled young people.
• Commit to the introduction of a specific programme to address the needs of disabled young people in relation to access to training and employment opportunities.

6 Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), August, 2009), Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey: 2nd quarter 2009, Labour Market Statistical Bulletins, NISRA
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