



The Belfast Child

A seamless journey of development
for Belfast children aged 0-8



'Belfast is a Child Friendly City'



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Foreword

In the heart of Belfast, a place, a city built on resilience, community and hope, our children represent the brightest part of our shared future. They are the centre of everything we do.

As Chairperson of the Belfast Area Outcomes Group and Director of Children's Community Services, I am delighted to introduce 'The Belfast Child' seamless pathway plan for children from birth to eight years. This plan reflects a collective commitment across statutory, community, and voluntary partners in Belfast to give every child the strongest start in life and to make sure that the support they receive is connected, accessible and responsive to their needs.

The early years of a child's life shape their future health, learning, and wellbeing. Families should experience joined-up support — from pregnancy, through early childhood, and into the first years of school — without confusion or duplication. This pathway sets out how our organisations will work together to make that vision a reality.

It builds on the strengths that already exist in our communities: skilled practitioners, trusted relationships with families, and a shared belief that early intervention changes lives. Together, we have agreed clear priorities and actions to improve coordination, reduce gaps between services, and make it easier for parents to get the help they need when they need it.

Our success will depend on continued collaboration, transparency, and a focus on outcomes for children. I want to thank all partners — across health, education, early years, community and voluntary sectors — for their commitment to this joint endeavour.

By working together in this way, we can create a Belfast where every child's journey from birth to age eight is supported, connected, and full of opportunity.

On behalf of all the members of this partnership, statutory agencies and community and voluntary sector alike, I am delighted to commend this document to you all.

Kerrylee Weatherall

Director of Children's Community Services,
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

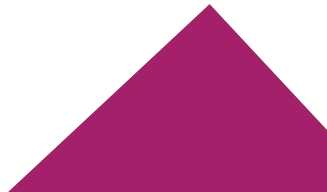
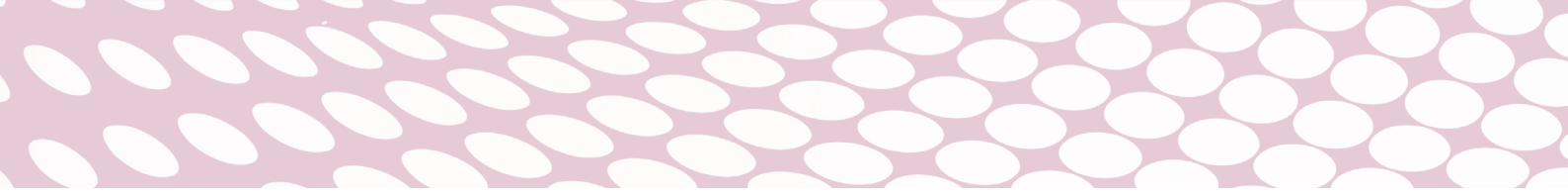
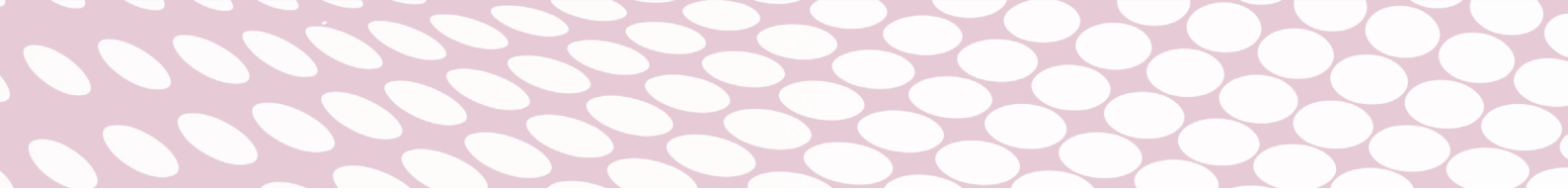


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I. Introduction

This document, 'The Belfast Child' is a blueprint for a new approach from the Belfast Area Outcomes Group, to help every child aged 0 to 8 years, to have a successful developmental journey. It's built on a shared commitment to a whole-child, whole-family, and whole-community model, which creates support networks where families, communities, and services all play a crucial role. This document shares the story of how we collaboratively designed this vision, drawing on the wisdom of experts and the vast experience of Belfast's community and government partners. Ultimately, this document provides a clear roadmap for how we will work together to create an environment where every child in Belfast can truly thrive.

Core beliefs

'The Belfast Child' is a child-centred initiative focused on a seamless developmental journey for all children aged 0-8. By prioritising children and their interests, in every decision that impacts their lives, we acknowledge their diverse experiences and learning styles. Our goal is to create safe, happy, and loving environments where children can grow up healthy, confident, and resilient. Since strong family relationships are vital for a child's emotional, social and cognitive development, we will support families to improve their overall well-being.

- Our vision is to build an integrated, citywide support system that provides appropriate, timely intervention for all Belfast children and their families, starting at the point of pre-conception and continuing throughout their childhood.
- Our approach includes equipping parents and families with resources and support to understand key developmental stages, which is essential for advancing equality of opportunity for our children.
- We believe it is essential to offer proactive support as soon as developmental milestones are identified as delayed and thus preventing minor issues from becoming major obstacles.
- Every Belfast child deserves a fair start. This is the foundation for more equitable outcomes for our children, families, and communities.
- The dividends of effective early support are evident in improved indicators of physical and mental health, increased educational attainment, and enhanced socio-economic mobility.

The core elements of the Belfast Child seamless pathway vision are:

- **INTEGRATED PARTNERSHIP DELIVERY:** By bringing together local partners to support families in our most vulnerable communities, we will test the recommendations from the Jones and McAllister reviews. This focused approach will help us develop better, more effective family support services.
- **BELFAST CHILD RELATIONAL PRACTICE MODEL:** By providing a unified approach for all our partners, ensuring every organisation's efforts are focused on the child and family relationship.
- **CHILD FRIENDLY BELFAST:** Represents a collective promise from each of the city partnerships to invest in the well-being of our children and young people. We will draw on successful models of support from Northern Ireland, Ireland, the UK and beyond to inform our work.
- **BELFAST CHILD DASHBOARD:** An accessible tool for tracking performance and accountability, measuring the impact on children, families and the wider community.
- **BELFAST CHILD PARTNERSHIP DELIVERY:** Dedicated to building a unified network of support for Belfast's children and families. By collaborating across different services and sectors, we will smooth the developmental journey for every child and increase their chances of a happy, healthy and successful life.
- **BELFAST CHILD LOCAL NETWORKS:** By strengthening our existing partnerships, we will improve cross-sector collaboration at the local level through our Belfast Child networks. This expansion ensures organisations work more cohesively to support children and families in every neighbourhood.

Underpinning our entire approach is a consistent focus on strengthening and nurturing relationships by ensuring consistent messaging. This is critical for fostering positive engagement with children, families, and communities, and for aligning the efforts of all organisations and government departments involved in supporting the children of Belfast.

This blueprint will evolve through broad stakeholder engagement and partner contributions, shaping its detailed design, implementation and delivery over time.

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2. Our strategic context

2.1. Strategic alignment with a practical focus

Our work aligns with regional and local strategic goals for Belfast. We are committed to developing a cohesive journey for children and families in Belfast, ensuring that various policy aims are practically implemented using a joined up approach to improve their lives, ultimately improving outcomes for our children and families.

The key elements of strategic context are:

2.2. Programme for Government - Children and Young People's Strategy (CYPS) 2020-30

The commitment that all of Northern Ireland's children will have the best start in life and flourish personally within a supportive society, illustrated by the below extract from the CYPS 2020-30:



The work we take forward on the seamless pathway will also align with the new Northern Ireland Programme for Government focus on early years.

2.3. Educational Inequalities

The 'A Fair Start' report and its action plan is committed to improving educational outcomes and tackling inequality, through a sharper focus on early childhood development. It advocates for a seamless journey from pregnancy onward, ensuring children receive timely and appropriate support. Research cited in this report, shows that investing early provides a more equitable foundation and yields long-term financial benefits for society. For example, earlier intervention reduces the need for costly future interventions in areas like special education, social services and criminal justice.

This report suggests reviewing current early year's programmes – Getting Ready for Baby (GRfB), Getting Ready for Toddler (GRfT) and Getting Ready to Learn (GRtL) – and boosting overall investment in the sector.

A key focus of our work is to address the underlying causes of underachievement, a goal shared with 'A Fair Start's' advocacy for a community-wide, place-based approach centred on equal opportunity.

Initiatives like the Raise Programme will support local partnerships in creating tailored strategic plans, fostering collaboration to identify and overcome learning barriers.

Aligning with other government initiatives is crucial to implementing the vision of prioritising early childhood care and education, while also maximising its impact on a child's future success.





2.4. Review of Children's Social Care in Northern Ireland

Our work is guided by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in Northern Ireland, commissioned by Health Minister, Robin Swann and conducted by Professor Ray Jones.

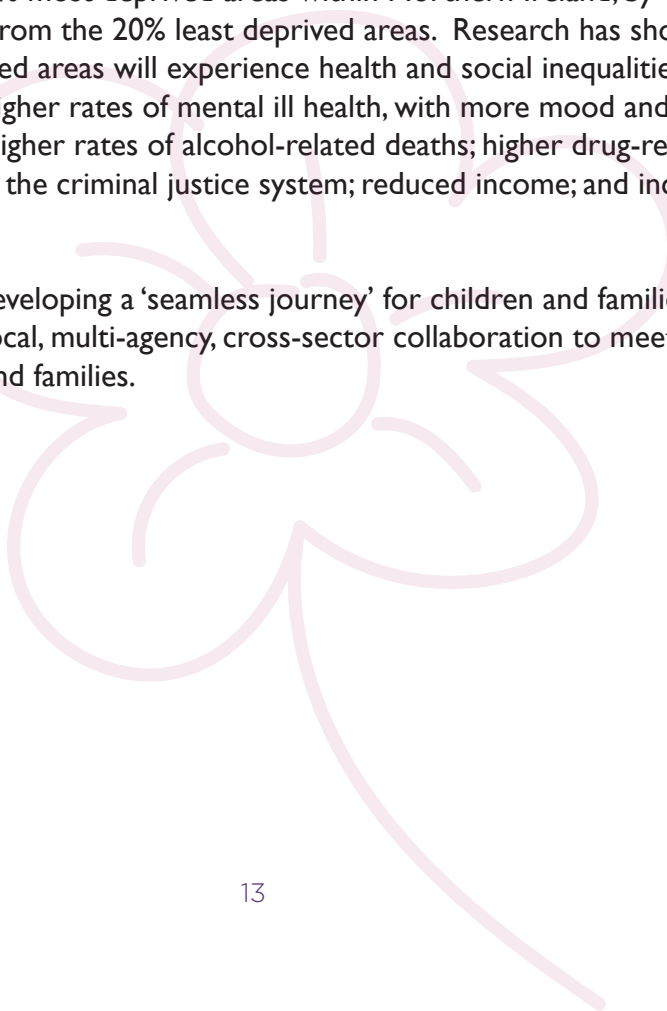
This aligns with the overarching Health and Wellbeing strategy, 'Delivering Together', which aims to provide early and intensive family support, fostering nurturing home environments to reduce the number children entering care, and ensure the public care system achieves optimal outcomes.

The Jones review specifically scrutinised the quality, equity, resilience and sustainability of Children's Services in HSC Trusts, assessing their ability to meet current and future demand, engage vulnerable families, and support staff. It also evaluated the efficiency of the Trust-based model for regional services.

Despite its social care focus, the review highlighted the vital need to re-orient the system towards family support through aligned locality working and integrated support – an approach essential for improving outcomes for children and families.

This is particularly pertinent given the disproportionate number of children entering care from Northern Ireland's most deprived areas (over 40%, with 50% of the top 100 most deprived SOA's (MDM's NISRA 2017) being in Belfast), where health and social inequalities are prevalent. In 2017/18, 43% of children taken into care were from the 20% most deprived areas within Northern Ireland; by way of comparison around 5% of children originated from the 20% least deprived areas. Research has shown it is more likely that children in those most deprived areas will experience health and social inequalities, such as lower life expectancy; higher suicide rates; higher rates of mental ill health, with more mood and anxiety disorders and more instances of self-harm; higher rates of alcohol-related deaths; higher drug-related deaths; greater likelihood of becoming involved in the criminal justice system; reduced income; and increased homelessness and unemployment.

The review's suggested path for developing a 'seamless journey' for children and families in Belfast is central to our proposals, advocating for local, multi-agency, cross-sector collaboration to meet the needs of the most vulnerable babies, children and families.




2.5. The Belfast Agenda 2024-28: Leadership priorities

The Belfast Community Planning Partnership requested the Belfast Area Outcomes Group to design a seamless pathway for children and families as proposed in the updated 2024 'Belfast Agenda'. In response, the 'Belfast Child' initiative was developed. 'The Belfast Agenda', Belfast's Community Plan prioritises critical, multi-agency collaborations that drive significant short, medium and long-term impact. These are issues which are identified as meeting the following criteria:

- ✓ **Urgent/of critical importance** for the City.
- ✓ Can only be delivered through **multi agency collaboration**.
- ✓ A **partnership delivery approach** can improve scale and pace of outcomes.
- ✓ **Can produce tangible and multiple impacts** in the short, medium and long-term.

Our focus on a seamless journey for babies, children and families, aimed at preventing young people from entering the care system, is one such priority. This work will receive strong leadership support as it is developed, tested and scaled. The initiative directly links to the Belfast Agenda's goals concerning educational inequality and creating skills and employment pathways for disadvantaged individuals and communities. Locally, these three areas of work will be joined up to support families and communities more effectively.





3. Why does a whole child, family, community and system approach matter?

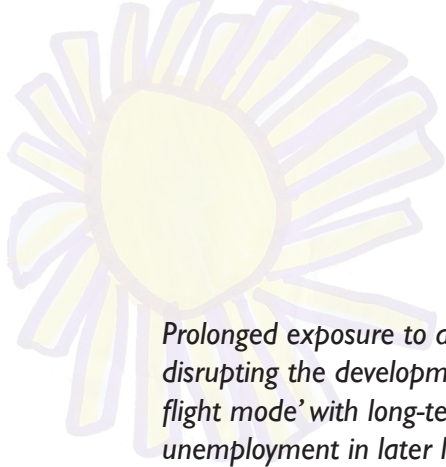
Extensive research confirms that providing early support and high-quality early years experiences creates the essential foundation for positive outcomes across individual, societal, and economic levels. This has informed our focus on adopting whole-child, whole-family, whole-community, and whole-system approaches in policy and practice, both locally and internationally. Specifically, the Northern Ireland ‘A Fair Start’ report recommends implementing targeted, community and place-based strategies to intensify support for young people in areas with high levels of disadvantage and educational under-achievement. The extract below from ‘A Fair Start’ illustrates this policy intent:

A ‘whole community approach to education’ has a ‘place-based’ focus that coheres the greatest concentration of effort in those localities with the greatest concentration of educational underachievement. At a minimum such approaches promise more integrated working practices at local level, but they also have the potential to shift the focus to how sources of support for children and young people can be configured strategically, creating greater collective impact.

Our explorations further afield have amplified the crucial nature of a whole system approach, summed up well in this extract from a Boston (USA) College for Thriving Children Publication ‘strengthening whole family supports in early childhood’:

The early years of life are a time of unparalleled growth that is deeply influenced by children’s environments and experiences. For healthy development and learning, all children need safe, affirming, and positive early experiences within their families and outside of their homes. These experiences include safe, stable, nurturing environments within the home where the wellbeing of mothers, fathers, and other caregivers are supported. A caregiver’s mental health and levels of stress influence children’s behaviors, language development, and brain development, thus the focus needs to be on whole child and whole family support. Experiences in the community are also important to ensure that children have opportunities to learn, play, and grow in spaces that are free from violence and harmful chemicals, and in environments that are culturally-affirming, promote positive relationships and access to resources that can reduce stress on both caregivers and children.

Toxic stress, defined by the Harvard Centre on the Developing Child as ‘prolonged activation of the stress response system,’ can be experienced when a child goes through frequent and significant adversity, such as deprivation, neglect, abuse, or exposure to violence without adequate adult support. Families experiencing poverty, and families that face systemic barriers that limit access to protective resources are especially at risk.



Prolonged exposure to adversity can potentially cause physical changes to the structure of children's brains, disrupting the development of strong brain architecture and heightening their propensity to be in 'fight or flight mode' with long-term implications for health and learning. Early childhood adversity is associated with unemployment in later life.

Fortunately, children thrive when their families thrive, and there are proven strategies for mitigating the effects of the adverse experiences of children and families while building on their strengths. Research demonstrates that: caring relationships, access to basic resources, access to opportunities, and safe and predictable early environments can buffer children and their families against the adverse consequences of toxic stress and boost healthy development and learning.

While this example originates from the US, its focus on stress, adversity, disadvantage, and trauma holds significant relevance in Belfast, given the city's troubled past and the context of our future work. A core element of our deliberations has been the pivotal role of connection: with parents, families, the wider community, and various support services. Our seamless journey framework was informed by a chronological understanding of a child's attachment, needs, drawing upon the Gordon Neufeld model of attachment, outlined below.

Children's attachment needs in the first 6 years

Years 0-1 - SENSES

Babies are sensory beings – they have an instinct to pursue closeness. Baby's needs are met by touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight by the parents / caregivers enabling opportunities for this. Each activity that you do with a new-born is an opportunity to connect – feeding, rocking, singing, changing the nappy – are all times when mum / dad / caregiver can connect to the child. Even in these earliest days the baby will be able to mimic their caregiver – and that is how the foundation of early language is developed.

Years 1-2 - CONSISTENCY, RELIABILITY AND REPITITION

Toddlers begin to talk and walk and their personality starts to develop from learned behaviours and mimicking those around them. What starts to emerge as their character is a collection of ways the child has learned to copy behaviour and the actions of people they are close to (nurture having a key influence on the development of the toddler). At this stage brain development is still key and the need for a consistent caregiver who can be attuned and attentive to the child, leads to a secure attachment.



Years 2-3 - BELONGING

At this stage the child has a strong sense of needing to belong – so those people who have been key in the early years of a child’s life continue to be really important. The early attachment relationships support the development of the foundational constructs of social communication. Social communication greatly impacts mental health across the lifespan and is also highly vulnerable to neurodevelopmental threats and adversities.

Years 3-4 - SIGNIFICANCE

At this stage the child wants to be special and loved by their parents or caregivers, they trust that you will respond consistently to their needs. They long for approval, hunger to be heard and want to matter to people that they are connected to. They need you to spend quality time with them and engage in activities that they enjoy. They need you to demonstrate positive relationships and emotional regulation in your own interactions.

Years 4-5 - LOVE

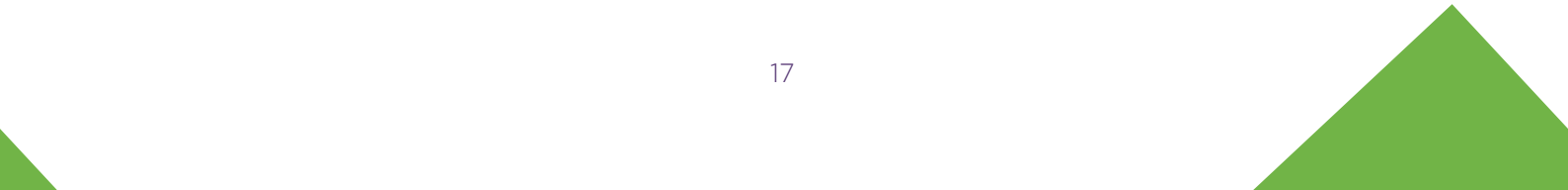
The child can express love to their special people – they can start to show empathy and become more aware of others and their needs. They need us to be available to them and to delight in them. They are learning to understand and regulate their emotions and need us to notice how they are feeling and help them to name those emotions and guide them in managing the full range of emotions.

Years 5-6 - BEING KNOWN

If the child feels secure then they will share their inner world with you – they are their own individual and want to be recognised as such. They will feel good, competent, worthwhile, wanted and lovable. They will regard their caregivers as responsive and trustworthy and see the world as a safe place to explore.

For children aged 6-8 years, attachment needs evolve as they navigate increased independence and social relationships beyond the family. Their need for a caregiver remains crucial, but the focus shifts from constant physical proximity to a secure “safe base” of emotional support. This secure base, consistency and emotional validation, fosters self-regulation, trust and healthy relationships.

Our design work, detailed in the next section, confirms our work must address the whole-life experience of children, extending beyond education. To achieve our desired outcomes, we must combine the efforts of schools and other public services with immediate and extended families, as well as communities and local organisations. This collaborative approach will create a seamless journey that delivers tangible results.



4. Our design approach – Building on our strengths

4.1. Appreciative inquiry

To create a seamless journey, our design process employed an asset-based appreciative inquiry methodology, deliberately building on current strengths. The work systematically advanced through discovery and design stages during collaborative workshops, ultimately leading to the production of this blueprint.

A short summary of three key workshops in the design process is provided here:

4.2. Workshop One: Shared Understanding and Objectives

4.2.1. 'All on the same page' – shared understandings

The primary goal of our initial whole-group workshop was to develop a common understanding of and gain consensus on the 'seamless development pathway'.

Using the metaphor of a 'seam' helped us discuss the critical transition points in a child's journey from 0-8. This exploration included examining the inevitable 'seams', or handovers, between services and stages of development in our complex, multi-sector system. The consensus was that our goal should be to make the system feel smooth and seamless for children and families. The key is not to eliminate these seams but to strengthen them, ensuring they are points of connection, not weakness.

The workshop discussions also centred on several key themes as principles to guide our approach. These are outlined as follows.

4.2.2. 'What's Strong?' – assets-based approach

A key element of our strategy is to adopt an asset-based approach from the outset. This means we will proactively support and build upon the existing strengths, interests, and skills of babies, children and families across Belfast. This focus on assets, rather than deficits, will enable a more preventative approach to our work.





4.2.3. Belfast Values Babies and Children

Our conversation centred on the macro-environment for Belfast's children and babies, considering how the city's policies and societal values affect their development. We specifically explored how strategic design and communication within city-wide policies could encourage Belfast to be recognised and function as a 'child friendly' city.

4.2.4. Belfast Values Families

We agreed on the vital need to acknowledge and support Belfast's parents and caregivers, particularly in challenging economic and social circumstances. Acknowledging that some policies and services can feel judgemental and unattainable to struggling families, we agreed that the system's role is to be a source of support, not judgement.

We recognised that factors like employment and income complicate the task of providing children with what they need.

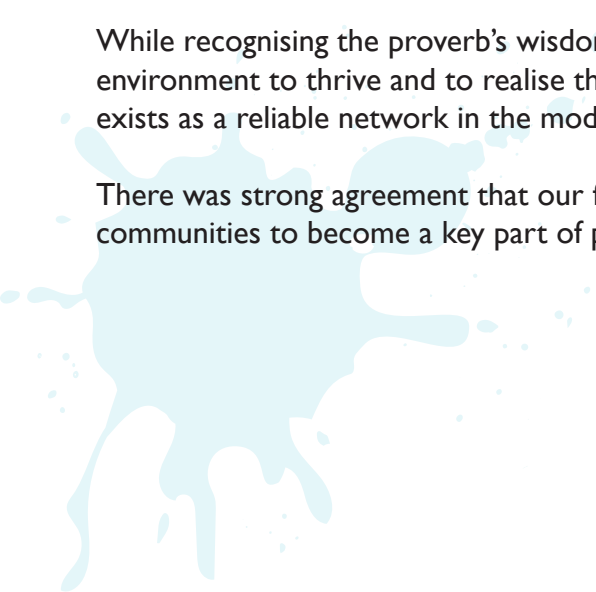
Parents and caregivers are crucial to a child's success, and so our future work will focus on supporting the entire family's journey, which ultimately benefits the child, family and wider community.

4.2.5. The role of 'The Village'

Our small group discussions examined the role of local communities in supporting child development, prompted by the proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child'.

While recognising the proverb's wisdom – that children need a broad, safe, healthy and supportive environment to thrive and to realise their hopes and dreams – participants discussed if 'the village' still exists as a reliable network in the modern world.

There was strong agreement that our future work must focus on supporting and empowering local communities to become a key part of providing a safe and nurturing environment for children.



4.2.6. The voice of Belfast Children and Families

There is strong support for actively involving Belfast's children and families, by ensuring their voices and lived experiences inform our work. This engagement will use a combination of existing methods and targeted, new initiatives as the work develops.

4.2.7. 'I Statements' - examples

We were encouraged to develop 'I statements' to articulate a child's perspective on what a future development journey might look like and feel like. Below are a number of examples of these statements:

- I am in a calm atmosphere in the womb
- I want a full-term birth with my caregiver able to give me stable care when I am born
- I need to be held, fed when hungry and kept dry and clean
- I can safely explore my environment and build relationships (first 1001 days)
- I enjoy being responded to
- I need opportunities to practice lifting my head and body to develop strength
- I have a relaxed caregiver, a calm home, with enough support, nutrition and resource to support me
- I have a house free of toxins such as smoke, drugs and alcohol
- I have caregivers, who are able to focus on our family and are free from substance dependency (alcohol / drugs / smoking)
- I need to be talked to and communicated with as I grow
- I love baby massage
- I am nurtured to look, see, sing and play
- I need to learn to feed myself, go to the toilet, wait a little for what I want
- I need a stable, consistent environment
- I live in a community that is supportive and accessible
- I have a home that is appropriate to meet my needs and allows me to feel safe and independent as I grow
- I have a family who are calm, safe and supportive
- I have all my basic needs met
- I have people around me who focus on my potential not my problems
- I am in a community that values children
- I am safe and secure
- I am supported to reach my potential
- I am in a supportive, nurturing family and community environment
- I have services around my family that are accessible and able to provide reliable support

The focus of this work, on engaging with children and families, will encourage us to gather these perspectives routinely as part of this approach to partnership delivery.

4.3. Workshop two: What's Strong?

In line with our appreciative inquiry approach, we have explored existing practices in Belfast. We discovered a strong and diverse range of practice, collaboration and experience across the city, providing a highly valuable platform for future work. The expertise of organisations in the community, voluntary and statutory sectors provides a rich and valuable platform to build upon. This rich network of support includes:

- Family Support Hubs – collaboratively bringing together organisations that offer timely, early intervention and support to children, young people and their carers.
- Midwives and Health Visitors including specialist midwives and health visiting teams for perinatal mental health and for postnatal mental health (Swans and Signets).
- Sure Start, covering the top 30% of SOA's as defined by deprivation. Sure Starts provide antenatal, postnatal and early years (0-3) services. Sure Start provides both universal and targeted services which can include more specialist additional needs programmes.
- Pre-schools, Nursery Schools, Primary Schools and Special Schools.
- Specialist services for children with additional needs e.g. SOLAS in South Belfast, Kids Together in West Belfast, Butterfly Club and MENCAP.
- Community and private daycare facilities.
- Womens Centres.
- Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team in Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.
- Early Intervention Support Services.
- Numerous community organisations delivering early years and family support services.
- Family support and children's support projects supported by Children's community services in BHSCT.
- Larger voluntary organisations including Action for Children, Save the Children, Barnardos, and NCB.
- Anti-poverty and advice activity co-ordinated by Belfast City Council.



Delivery and commissioning structure

- Locality Planning Groups – identifying needs and supporting localities, wherever possible, to come up with their own answers to delivering seamless pathways locally.
- Belfast Area Outcomes Group – implements outcomes based planning for the Belfast Trust area.

Our exploration of this picture of delivery, included area-based presentations from group members focusing on several parts of Belfast and different elements of support and collaboration. These were:

- Greater Shankill Partnership and the Greater Shankill Children and Young People Zone presented by Nicola Verner and Jackie Redpath.
- West Belfast Community Education Improvement Programme presented by Angie Mervyn.
- East Belfast Early Learning Community presented by Tracey Ripley-McElvogue.

Our in-depth reviews confirmed the strong foundation of community organisations and local partnerships in Belfast. These networks provide crucial reach, insights and connections within neighbourhoods and communities.

Presentations and discussions reinforced that a community-based approach, which tailors support to local needs, is central to creating a seamless journey and delivering impact for children and families. While there are rich resources and skills to build upon for the ‘Belfast Child’ initiative, we must address the destabilisation effects of funding uncertainty.

There was also a consensus on the need for more systematic city-wide and local co-ordination of support systems. By focusing on scaling up exemplary practices, we can more efficiently and effectively serve Belfast’s children and families.

4.4. Workshop three: Expert inspiration, learning and advice

We gained valuable insights from academics and expert practitioners on the evidence base for effective children’s pathways.

Dr Sarah Meekin, BHSCT, Psychological Services.

Dr Meekin’s session focused on **‘Good Enough Parenting’ – Developing a Belfast Message Together**, exploring modern research on ‘Best Care’ in bringing up baby and how to effectively communicate this to the parents of Belfast.

Dr Glenda Walsh and Dr Suzanne McCartney, Stranmillis University College, Queens University.

Dr Walsh and Dr McCartney’s session highlighted the critical role of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Shaping Northern Ireland’s Future. This provided:





- An overview of the evidence base on the importance of Early Years Education and Care and how it impacts later educational, societal and economic outcomes
- A closer examination of the current situation for 0-3 year-olds in NI and what still needs to happen.
- A focus on the 4-8 year-olds in Northern Ireland and getting it right for them – this illustrated very strongly the importance of play as learning practice.

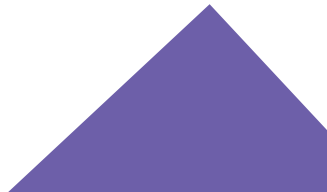
Dr Siobhan Fitzpatrick CBE, Early Childhood Peace Consortium.

Dr Fitzpatrick delivered a session focused on integrated, place-based approaches and the key challenges she saw in NI for:

- The need for strategic alignment between the Fair Start report and a new Early Years Care, Education and Development Strategy.
- Increasing funding by learning from countries like New Zealand, Finland and Ireland.
- Advocating for a later school starting age (raised to 6) – we have the youngest school starting age in the world.
- Developing a seamless, holistic curriculum that focuses on socio-emotional wellbeing, executive functioning and self-regulation in addition to language and motor skills - for babies, toddlers, preschool children and first stage of primary school.

These sessions were highly informative, and we intend to remain engaged with this expert group as our seamless journey blueprint develops.

The insights gained, from the experts, will be used to create practical pathways that deliver better outcomes for all children and families in Belfast, taking into consideration their specialised perspectives and the worldwide examples they focused on.



5. Objectives: what are we trying to achieve in Belfast?

Put simply, we want all children and young people in Belfast to have the best start in life.

The Belfast Child approach is designed to transform potential into positive outcomes by focusing on three key goals:

1. **Seamless Pathway:** We will align cross-sectoral skills and resources to design and deliver a cohesive early years pathway (aged 8 and under), helping children realise their full potential.
2. **Targeted Wrap-around Support:** We will strengthen our collective capacity to provide focused, wrap-around support, ensuring a positive developmental journey for all.
3. **Family Voice:** We will develop better methods for listening to and empowering children, young people and families to participate in decisions affecting their lives, in accordance with United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC), Article 12.

We have identified specific aims for each stage of a child's development journey which are set out later in this blueprint. These stages are:

- Pre-conception (education and awareness about parenthood and care giving relationships)
- Belfast parents to be – the antenatal stage
- Belfast babies
- Belfast toddlers
- Belfast children





6. Our commitments to Belfast children and their families

Following the discovery phase, we established a set of ten commitments. These commitments define the substance, focus and culture for creating a seamless developmental journey for children in Belfast. These are shown in the table below:

We want the best outcomes for Belfast Children and Families	We value and support parents and families of all kinds	We are united as a single support community for all families and children	We see the strengths of all children first – asset-based approach	We act early to address barriers to children achieving their potential
We are flexible and responsive to community contexts	We are trauma informed	We provide quality, evidence-based support for all Belfast children	We are strong at the seams, both between services and at moments of transition	We are accountable, open to scrutiny and learning

These commitments will serve as a framework for evaluating potential delivery models. We will test how a proposed seamless pathway can meet these commitments, support children and parents daily, and enhance children and families potential to develop and thrive.

Commitment 1: We want the best outcomes for all Belfast children and families.

Supporting the best outcomes for all the children of Belfast and their families is our central focus. To ensure that every child in Belfast is supported in a way that respects the UNCRC, we will embed its principles into all support services. By making the child’s best interests a primary consideration in every decision, we will ensure that the lives and lived experiences of Belfast children remain central to their journey.



Commitment 2: We value and support parents and families of all kinds.

Our work is built on a foundation of respect for the challenges and responsibilities of parenting and caring for children and we are committed to supporting families without judgement. We understand that grandparents, uncles, aunts, siblings and other extended family members can play a central role in the lives of Belfast's children. Our approach will acknowledge and support all these caring roles, and we will work to support their unique needs.

Commitment 3: We are united as a single support community for all families and children.

We are united in our mission to support all children in Belfast and recognise that only through a united effort, combining our collective insights, resources and influence, can we provide the necessary support for Belfast's children and families to reach their potential.

No single organisation can achieve this alone. We are therefore committed to working as a single, integrated system, ambitiously aligning our services and teams. We will actively remove any barriers to cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration that prevent children from realising their potential.

Our work is built on the strength of relationships, and we recognise that our communities are one of our greatest assets. We will embed community-level support into the seamless journey, creating a city-wide approach that embodies the principal that 'it takes a village to raise a child'.

Commitment 4: We see the strengths of all children first – assets-based approach.

Our work is rooted in the belief that all children and families have inherent gifts and talents. Our commitment is to establish shared practice models that first recognise these strengths then empower children in Belfast to use and develop them. This asset-based strategy focuses on 'What is strong?' rather than 'What is wrong?' empowering children to express and develop their unique abilities on their journey.

Commitment 5: We act early to address barriers to children achieving their potential.

To help every child in Belfast reach their full potential, our seamless pathway will actively support their growth, development and transitions. We will focus particularly on critical transition points, such as developmental shifts or handovers between services, which represent vital opportunities for intervention. We are committed to collectively identifying and understanding these moments for every child and family. At these pivotal junctures, our collective efforts will be at their strongest, focusing on offering opportunities, providing support and collaborating to address any barriers to a child's success.



Commitment 6: We are flexible and responsive to community contexts.

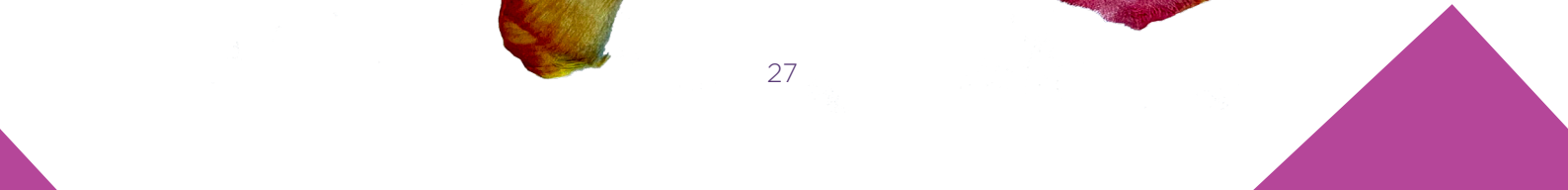
We acknowledge the strengths and needs of Belfast’s diverse communities and the varied landscape of services available. The seamless pathway we are developing will be flexible, adapting to local community dynamics and existing strengths. This neighbourhood-level approach, integrated within a broader family support system is focused on helping children to realise their full potential. This involves directly confronting the negative effects of poverty and the cost of living that impacts upon the ability for children and families to thrive.

Commitment 7: We are trauma informed.

We acknowledge that many of the children, families and communities we support have experienced significant trauma, including trauma linked to Belfast’s history. Our work, from frontline staff to leadership, is trauma-informed and based on an understanding of Adverse Childhood Experiences. We are also committed to addressing the impact of structural inequalities on the life chances of children, families and communities.

Commitment 8: We provide quality, evidence-based support for all Belfast children.

Moving forward, we will develop and provide a consistent ‘base offer’ of support and service for all children and families in Belfast. This will be informed by both global evidence on early childhood development, as well as proven approaches from our local work. We will then build on this foundation to create flexible, community-based services to address local needs.



Commitment 9: We are strong at the seams, both between services and at the moments of transition.

We will support all children in Belfast to realise their potential and we will act early and together to support children and families where there are barriers to making this happen. Recognising that some children face greater challenges than others in reaching their potential, our approach prioritises prevention and early intervention. Using data and insight we will strategically identify when and where children, communities and neighbourhoods need extra support. We understand that this requires seamless collaboration, particularly in complex and difficult situations.

Commitment 10: We are accountable, open to scrutiny and learning.

We understand the significance of our work and are committed to being accountable for its impact on the children, the families and the communities of Belfast. As partner organisations we are all on a developmental and learning journey. We will remain open to external advice and guidance, ready to adapt and change our approach as we evaluate its performance and learn from both our own efforts and best practices elsewhere.





7. The Belfast Child Seamless Journey – what will it look like in practice?

7.1. Stages of the Journey


Our work focuses on a child's journey up to age 8 years, a scope determined by our brief rather than the full developmental timeline extending into adulthood (18 years).

We have identified and agreed upon five key stages within this journey. Each stage requires effective, joined-up support delivered through a whole-child, whole-family, whole-community and whole-system approach.

The stages are:

- Pre-conception: parenting education and awareness.
- Belfast parents to be: the antenatal stage.
- Belfast babies: infancy (0-1).
- Belfast toddlers: ages 1-3.
- Belfast children: ages 3 and up.

The principles and approaches in this document will help all stakeholders – regardless of their specific role or organisation – to see how their efforts in supporting children and families fit into and contribute to the larger city-wide landscape.



7.2. Belfast child partnership delivery ‘at the seams’

Our first priority is to launch a set of partner actions to strengthen collaborative approaches for the developmental journey of Belfast children aged 0-8. We will work to ensure the city provides seamless support to children and families as they navigate developmental transitions, such as the child’s first step beyond home.

These partnership actions will connect the power of local knowledge and community connections to ensure all Belfast children and families can thrive.

A key focus is strengthening collective efforts to support parents and caregivers. While much information exists, we recognise that many families need clearer, more connected guidance on healthy child development. By uniting networks, local initiatives, communities and professionals, we can enhance universal understanding and support. This collaborative ‘village’ approach will ensure that every new parent feels confident and all Belfast babies receive the nurturing environment they need to reach their full potential.

7.2.1. Pre - conception stage

Key opportunities to support transitions

In preparation for parenthood we have identified the need, for a clearer, collective focus to improve universal education on baby and child development throughout life. While acknowledging the availability of information, it is not always effectively connected to families in need. The key challenge is to improve universal preparation for parenthood and create more effective connections between families and support systems, thereby ensuring that all babies in Belfast receive the nurturing required to fulfil their potential.

Belfast Child local partnership ‘seamless delivery across boundaries’

Effective local partnerships, delivering consistent core messages, reinforced within family homes and across community, voluntary and statutory settings, are key to improving life chances for children. It is a shared responsibility for all local partners to work alongside families and caregivers to drive this forward. The Belfast child approach will therefore develop an appropriate and accessible programme of universal messaging and education on:

- Brain development in infancy
- The child’s needs for security, love and boundaries to thrive

This approach will improve delivery of messaging/education in local contexts including schools and communities settings.

7.2.2. Belfast parents to be - the ante-natal stage

Key opportunities to support transitions

We've identified pregnancy and birth preparation as a crucial period where effective collaboration can significantly impact future parents. Evidence shows that current delivery approaches can struggle to reach individuals in more challenging or complex life situations. Some families can be reluctant to engage with messages from statutory bodies for various reasons. This can disconnect parents from vital support networks, which can result in some Belfast babies not receiving the care, attention and nurturing they need to thrive, both during the antenatal and postnatal stages.

Belfast child local partnership 'seamless delivery across boundaries'

We see the focus of added value of local partnership delivery to ensure that:

- Parents feel supported through their antenatal journey, including doctor's appointments, first hospital visit and ongoing scans.
- Antenatal classes are available for each first time parent involving the Togetherness approach and covering the importance of nurturing babies.
- Continuous support from a midwife through the journey from preparing for birth to postnatal.
- Promoting the connection of every new parent to local supports, in particular Sure Start if living in a Sure Start area.
- All families receive consistent information about the importance of connection and attuned parenting on brain development from early stages, delivered in a variety of settings and contexts.

7.2.3. The Belfast Baby

Key opportunities to support transitions

The seamless pathway's success hinges on a baby's experience during infancy. By providing seamless support during these formative months, we can best foster secure parent-baby attachment, which is fundamental to long-term positive outcomes.

Belfast Child local partnership ‘seamless delivery across boundaries’

For the birth of baby


- Mothers should have every opportunity to make informed birthing choices. Any medical interventions or birthing arrangements must be mindful of the crucial importance of the first few days postpartum for parent-infant bonding. Addressing this is vital, as many mothers report that interventions can negatively impact a mother’s focus on attunement during this critical period.
- To better support mothers, hospital stays should be long enough to ensure they are supported in attuning, resting and bonding with their babies.
- We acknowledge the critical importance of fathers and the positive influence their active involvement has on child development. Our approach will ensure fathers receive the support they need to fully embrace their vital role.

On return home with Baby

- Wrap around support for all new parents during the first few weeks, will focus on strengthening parent-baby connection.
- Our collective goal is to ensure all professionals emphasise responsive parenting and feeding. This approach is to support healthy infant-caregiver relationships and positive long-term developmental outcomes.
- We work together to ensure a supportive first midwife visit. The midwife will take time to discuss the mother’s emotional health and support systems, and to effectively coordinate with the health visitor by sharing this important information.

Through infancy

- In addition to their core role, this pathway promotes Health Visitors as key community links to parents. This involves giving parents information on local support networks and groups, providing the name of a contact person, or asking for permission for that person to get in touch.
- To ensure families receive the appropriate level of support, we will collaborate to offer tiered services that include a flexible number of visits based on need. Early intervention will be prioritised by focusing on connecting new parents with external networks, like Sure Start and local community groups, within the first six weeks. This proactive approach will ensure families access support before a crisis point is reached and helps build stronger community connections.
- By making baby groups more accessible across the city, the aim will be to empower parents through peer-led and experiential learning. These groups offer a safe space for discussion on topics like sleep, weaning and self-care. We will proactively expand effective programmes such as Baby Massage, Baby Yoga and Sing and Rhyme beyond Sure Start areas to build stronger parent-baby connections and provide greater support to all new parents in Belfast.
- Supporting and developing local Parent and Toddler groups, which play a vital role in early family life is crucial. By investing in these groups, we can better embed the Togetherness Approach and focus on early language development. To ensure families get timely support we will strengthen links between Parent and Toddler groups and other services. This includes aligning Sure Start with local groups to build capacity and ensuring health visitors connect with groups in all areas, thereby providing robust support for all families.

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- Childminders and Daycare providers will be supported in enhancing their ability to apply the principles of the Togetherness Approach and a deeper understanding of baby brain development. This is critical for supporting the children in their care, many of whom begin soon after birth.
 - We are committed to actively supporting fathers throughout this critical period, recognising their positive influence on a child's development. Our approach will specifically address the unique challenges they face, including financial pressures, mental health issues, and feelings of isolation. We will provide targeted support and information that facilitates positive father-child bonding and encourages a more inclusive and supportive environment for fathers in early years services.

7.2.4. The Belfast Toddler

Key opportunities to support transitions

For the Belfast Child Approach we will develop a city-wide focus on collaboration and consistent messaging. Parents, particularly when facing challenges, can feel disconnected from support. This can be compounded by the influence of informal networks and social media, which may offer inconsistent or negative messaging. We will work as a city to ensure consistency in guidance, support and messaging for families. This proactive, coordinated effort aims to ensure every family receives reliable, consistent information throughout their child's developmental journey.

Belfast Child Local Partnership 'seamless delivery across boundaries'

- The seamless pathway demands an early childhood development system that is trauma-informed, strengths-based and actively involves families. This system must also be attuned to the growing emotional needs of every child in Belfast, ensuring safety and responsive care.
- A strong emphasis on family engagement and consistent messaging for children aged 0-3 is critical to ensuring they receive the necessary healthcare, advice and guidance. This proactive approach supports families by providing clear, coordinated information and resources, particularly during the early, formative years.
- Encourage seamless transitions from family and pre-school settings with relevant and child-centred information.
- We will place a greater emphasis on the opportunities that high-quality preschool settings, (of all types), offer for the development of toddlers in Belfast. This emphasis acknowledges that investing in high-quality early learning is a highly effective and equitable means of assuring the well-being and skills of the next generation.
- Create a smooth, connected, and low-stress transition for children moving from an early years setting to a formal primary school. This process involves coordinating efforts between the child, their family, the pre-school, and the primary school to ensure continuity of learning, care, and relationships.

7.2.5. The Belfast Child

Key opportunities to support transitions

We will support every child in Belfast across Key Stage One, of their formal education, to develop the crucial social, language and play skills needed to realise their potential and achieve educational excellence. This requires cross-sector partnerships to maximise family and child engagement, ensuring that a love of learning is also a love for learning through play opportunities, choice and curiosity. Every child is unique and starting school is a significant step for the entire family. Instead of focusing solely on children being 'school ready', we will encourage schools to be 'child ready' by recognising each child's strengths, interests and needs and creating a safe and welcoming environment where they can thrive. Through collaboration with families, schools and communities we can make the start of school a positive and exciting experience for all Belfast children.

Belfast Child Local Partnership 'seamless delivery across boundaries'

The seamless pathway's ambition is to create city-wide environments of safety, love and clear boundaries where every child in Belfast can learn, explore, be curious, ask questions and feel seen and heard as an individual. We recognise the need to invest in and value the workforces that we entrust with these tasks. This means ensuring that in teacher training, daycare and other workforce learning settings the messaging of the Belfast Child approach is embedded in the approaches of the work force of tomorrow.

7.3. Belfast child whole system partnership development

The core purpose of our key building blocks is to enhance collaboration among local partners, ultimately benefiting the Belfast child and creating positive change for our families. By strengthening local partnership arrangements, we will enhance our collective ability to provide a well-integrated early help support system. This system will be better equipped to support all families, especially those facing barriers to fulfilling their potential.





The partnership development measures are:

7.3.1. Belfast Child Local Networks

We will enhance partnership working across Belfast at area level, involving multiple organisations and sectors. This will include providing communications and engagement opportunities to ensure that managers and frontline staff have the necessary support, resources and physical conditions to collaborate effectively. By systematically bringing these elements together we can better identify how to support existing services and address any gaps in delivery.

7.3.2. Integrated partnership delivery for children and families and for neighbourhoods where poorer outcomes are a current reality.

Our goal is to improve outcomes for children and families by advancing our collaborative efforts in targeted areas. This will involve implementing multi-agency and multi-disciplinary methods including ‘Team around the Family’ approaches, which draw from all sectors. Consistent with recommendations from the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, the Independent Review of Education and the Fair Start report, we envisage local integrated teams that bring practitioners from all sectors and communities closer together. These teams will serve as prototypes for the city-wide level of coordinated activity needed to achieve positive outcomes for every child in Belfast.

Our focus will include providing proactive support to children in Belfast and their families to prevent the need for care placements. By intervening early and addressing underlying issues such as neglect, family breakdown and poverty, we can provide families with the necessary resources and supports that can prevent the circumstances from escalating to a crisis point.

In response to the disadvantages and challenges experienced by many children and families, we will make it a priority to implement the Belfast Child approach to provide integrated support, ultimately mitigating the disadvantages and improving long-term outcomes for our city’s most vulnerable families.



7.3.3. A shared relational practice model

We will develop shared ways of working at practice, at managerial and at leadership levels, centred on the principles and frameworks outlined in the seamless pathway that are child friendly, asset based and trauma informed. This will foster more collaborative delivery, tailored to local communities to help realise our vision of networks, able to assist every child in Belfast to realise their full potential.

This will be supported by programmes to build support, skills, knowledge and confidence across partners so that teams and services can grow and learn together to best meet the needs of all families.

7.3.4. A Belfast Child Dashboard

We will establish an accessible, clear outcomes based performance framework that is designed to support a local multi-agency working model on which the pathway will deliver.

7.3.5. 'Child Friendly Belfast'

To achieve these goals, all community planning partners will collaborate to make Belfast a child friendly city. Clearly this will need wider ownership as well as executive and political leadership, but we believe this can signal a step change and add value to what we are trying to achieve for the children, young people and families of Belfast.

This will mean looking at the whole of the 'Belfast Agenda,' through the lens of children and young people, to realise the principles of seamlessness outlined in this document, in the lived experiences of families. This will help us to 'future proof' the development of our child focused city. It will also involve empowering children and young people to have a say in decisions that affect their lives and will be critical if we are to achieve a sustainable, inclusive and child friendly place to be.

This is a bold, but an essential ambition, requiring all communities, organisations and sectors to prioritise child and family development, and to take learning from other places in Northern Ireland, Ireland, and the rest of the UK alongside other examples across the world.





8. Mobilising the Belfast Child approach

In the next phase of our work, we will ‘socialise the approach’, seek feedback and test key aspects in order to generate learning. This will be followed by the formal launch of ‘The Belfast Child’ to raise awareness, confirm our commitment and set out our intentions.

Our next steps will involve prototyping a partnership delivery model for children at high risk of or already in the care system, focusing on areas with the highest need. The delivery plan will outline this integrated approach.

We will then prioritise implementing the remaining actions, aligning resources and committing to continuous learning and adaptation to ensure all children thrive.

9. Conclusion

This blueprint document presents the Belfast Area Outcomes Group’s work on creating a seamless pathway of support for children aged 0-8. The proposals for improving outcomes through local partnership delivery are based on evidence, expert input from workshops and extensive collective experience.

We believe this approach will significantly enhance existing arrangements, capitalising on the strengths of our organisations and communities.

Our ambitious plans reflect the aspirations we hold for the children and families in Belfast. Realising them will require regional, city-wide and community leadership and support from a wide range of agencies. We are confident of this support and will work to confirm specific commitments as we move forward.

***THE PRIZE WE SEEK IS THE MOST PRECIOUS OF ALL –
THAT ALL CHILDREN IN BELFAST WILL THRIVE AND ENJOY AND ACHIEVE
THEIR POTENTIAL IN LIFE.***

Acknowledgements

The Belfast Child is an ambitious proposal of creating a seamless pathway, for children in Belfast, across all of our organisations and services so we can achieve positive, long-lasting outcomes for them.

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Terms

BHSCT – Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

CAMHS – Child and Adult Mental Health Services

EISS – Early Intervention Support Services

Getting Ready for Baby (GRfB) – focused on transforming maternal care, both hospital and community based, from the initial GP appointment to delivery (co-ordinated by the Public Health Agency).

Getting Ready for Toddler (GRfT) – focused on embedding early intervention in core health visiting, with a focus on improving the social and emotional development of children attending pre-school (co-ordinated by the Public Health Agency)

Getting Ready to Learn (GRtL) – focused on improving outcomes for children in pre-school by engaging and empowering parents to help them create and sustain positive home learning environments (co-ordinated by the Education Authority on behalf of the Department of Education)

HSC – Health and Social Care

MDM's – Multiple Deprivation Measures

NISRA – Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

SIGNETS – Parent-Infant Relationship Team. A specialist early intervention service within BHSCT supporting antenatal parents from 28 weeks of pregnancy and parents and primary care givers from birth to 4 years old with a range of social complexities.

SOA's – Super Output Areas

SWANS – Social Wellbeing and Antenatal Complexities team, BHSCT

Togetherness – rebranding and refreshing of the Solihull Approach to expand it's reach across the world for real change and raising emotional wellbeing for everyone. This approach is about emotional health and wellbeing for all children, their parents, carers and grandparents with a focus on relationships. It is a theoretical model emerged from practice that can be applied to working with families, individuals, groups and communities and has a significant evidence base.

UNCRC – The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

US – United States

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The Belfast Child

A seamless journey of development for Belfast children aged 0-8