



## **Response to the Northern Ireland Office**

### **Together. Stronger. Safer; Community Safety in Northern Ireland; A Consultation Paper**

#### **Action for Children Northern Ireland**

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*as long as it takes*

## **Introductory Remarks**

1. Action for Children welcomes the publication of ‘Together. Stronger. Safer’ and the opportunity to respond to the draft Community Safety strategy. We support the overall aim ‘to make Northern Ireland a safe place to live, work and socialise’ and the Northern Ireland Office’s stated commitment to ‘local problem solving on community safety issues, and to working in partnership to respond to the issues that matter most to local people’.
2. Across the UK, Action for Children provides an extensive range of services which support families and children and young people most in need including those at risk of getting into trouble in their communities and with the law. In doing so, we aim to positively raise their potential and build their self-esteem, putting the child at centre and working in close partnership with families, children and young people and other agencies, service providers and the wider community.
3. While we welcome the three cross-cutting themes set out in the draft strategy, we are also concerned about the potentially punitive and stigmatising aspects of the draft strategy for families and children and young people, particularly for those who are most vulnerable and in need of support.
4. Our response starts with some information about Action for Children and our work in Northern Ireland, followed by some general remarks and then specific comments about the proposals under the key cross cutting themes in the draft strategy. Under the theme of a focus on families and young people, key proposals and consultation questions we highlight examples of Action for Children good practice and solution focused work. We make some brief comments under Equality Implications and conclude with some final remarks.

## **About Action for Children (formerly NCH)**

5. Action for Children is one of the UK's leading children's charities, helping children achieve their full potential. Through our services we support some of the UK's most vulnerable and excluded children and young people and facing difficulties such as poverty, disability and abuse. We believe all children and young people have unique potential and that they should have the support and opportunities they need to reach it.
6. Across the UK we run about 450 projects supporting over 170,000 of the most vulnerable and excluded children and young people, and their families. Through our work and through speaking out, we seek to break the cycle of deprivation, challenge injustice and empower children to overcome the obstacles in their lives that hold them back. We tailor our work to local circumstances, in partnership with children and young people, families, communities and local organisations. We work with children and young people:
  - whose families need support
  - who cannot live with their birth families
  - who are disabled
  - who experience severe difficulties in their lives
7. Action for Children supporting families services work aims to improve outcomes for children who are neglected or abused, whose parents are separating, children having difficulties at school, children returning to live at home, young people with caring responsibilities, families whose tenancy is at risk because of anti-social behaviour and/or at risk of breakdown.

## **Action for Children in Northern Ireland**

8. Action for Children plans to further invest in developing and providing services for vulnerable children, young people and families across Northern Ireland. Working closely with children’s services planning processes across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors, we

currently provide services to almost 3,900 children, young people and their families in Northern Ireland. We currently have 14 services with further developments underway in each of the current four Health and Social Services Board areas including:

- 4 Sure Start linked projects - in Downpatrick, Larne/Carrick, Waterside and Ballymena;
- Larne Parental Support Project, Locality Planning and Coordination of an Early Intervention Project for the prevention of youth offending and family support in the Northern Board area;
- Early Intervention Family Support (Local Action Planning Groups), Clooney Family Centre, Chance for Change Project and Mentoring Services 5-11 year olds and Floating Support services for care leavers and young homeless in the Western Board area;
- Regional Young Carers Provision with partners with Action for Children leading in Eastern and Southern Board areas and;
- A Regional Fostering Service in Northern Ireland.

9. By March 2009, we will employ about 120 staff in Northern Ireland with a range of professional backgrounds including Social Work, Education, Health, Nursing, Youth Work, Social Care and Early Years.

### **General Remarks**

10. Action for Children notes the new strategy intends to build on the developments, work and structures arising from the first community safety strategy and the key themes set out in *Creating a safer Northern Ireland through partnership*.
11. We support the 3 priority cross-cutting key themes which aim to comprehensively address community safety around *creating safer neighbourhoods, a focus on families and young people and building strong, confident communities*. We note the need under these themes to commit to tackle the underlying causes and effects, including the fear, of crime and anti-social behaviour to prevent their occurrence or reoccurrence and make communities safer and more sustainable.
12. We welcome the stated commitment to encourage the public to take a much greater personal involvement in making their communities safer and to work in partnership with all key stakeholders. However, we are concerned about the punitive, coercive and potentially stigmatising and criminalising effects which introducing some legislative proposals could have on disadvantaged and vulnerable children, young people and their families.
13. We are also concerned about the timing of the Northern Ireland Office publishing such a strategy given the developments around the devolution of policing and justice in Northern Ireland along with the impact of Review of Public Administration on community safety structures here. This development seems to run counter the Northern Ireland Office's stated commitment *to local problem solving on community safety issues, and to working in partnership to respond to the issues that matter most to local people* in disenfranchising the role of local politicians and the Northern Assembly in having the scope to determine local solutions to local problems.
14. Across the UK, Action for Children's experience shows that the best results and outcomes for families and vulnerable children and young people in need and at risk come from working in partnership *with* them, often in challenging circumstances, where they feel they are actively engaging in offers of support - rather than feeling coerced or required to do so as the result of court orders or other legal obligations placed on them.
15. It appears from the draft strategy that young people are being construed as the major focus of concern 'as perpetrators', rather than as 'victims', of crime and anti-social behaviour and community safety issues in Northern Ireland. We are concerned about the potential criminalising effects which introducing certain legislative proposals could have on vulnerable children and young people and their families.

16. Many of the families we work with in Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK live in socially and economically disadvantaged and poorly resourced areas and are in, or at risk of, living in poverty. We are concerned, therefore, about introducing legislative measures which would lead to fining parents who are already struggling to make ends meet.
17. We would also seek clarification as to what extent children, young people and parents have been engaged in the development of the draft Community Safety strategy. As a new policy initiative, we would query why an Equality Impact Assessment has not been carried out as it would clearly impact on a number of s75 groupings including children and young people.
18. We would also question to what extent the draft strategy has been considered alongside various other strategies and policies being developed or implemented which relate to families which will impact on aspects of community safety. The most obvious examples include 'Our Children, Our Pledge' – the 10 year children and young people's strategy (2006/2016), the Play and Recreation Policies, the Safeguarding Policy, Family Matters, Care Matters and Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy.
19. The impact of these key policies and strategies are not referenced in any detail within the current Community Safety strategy. It would seem prudent to wait for such initiatives to take effect before decisions are made about introducing other community safety measures or ensure such developments are taken into consideration. For example, in keeping with the rest of the UK, the NI Assembly has made a commitment to tackle child poverty and disadvantage and to support those socially excluded or at the margins of society. Yet the introduction of Parental Compensation Orders could lead to placing fines on families least able to pay and lead to further impoverishing them and restricting opportunities for children and young people.
20. In light of the current review of the operation Anti-Social Behaviour legislation in Scotland and learning anticipated from ASB pathfinder pilots, we would suggest that the NIO consider taking evidence from Scottish Ministers/Parliament and indeed evidence from other jurisdictions in the UK such as the Respect Unit.

## **Specific Comments**

### **A. Creating Safer Neighbourhoods**

21. The draft strategy rightly acknowledges the drop in recorded crime in Northern Ireland but then highlights a series of concerns and proposals focused on issues which could feed perceptions of a growing 'fear of crime' in the community. While 'fear of crime' is clearly an important issue especially when related to young people, in our view the strategy should also seek to balance this perception through:
  - recognising that that young people are more likely to be 'victims' rather 'perpetrators' of crime';
  - emphasising the positive contribution which many young people make to the community and wider society and;
  - more accurately reflect the issues facing young people, and especially those living in deprived and disadvantaged areas, of having very limited opportunities or means to engage in age appropriate activities and safe places to go in local communities across Northern Ireland.

### Dispersal Zones / Dispersal Orders

22. Action for Children is concerned about the proposed introduction of Dispersal Zones and Dispersal Orders, given the introduction of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders and apparent lack of clear definition of anti-social behaviour (harassment, alarm or distress) in Northern Ireland. The application of such Zones and Orders has the potential to discriminate against children and young people given the apparent lack of regard to due process in terms of effective challenge and human rights.

23. As civil orders, as with ASBOs, Dispersal Orders will be subject to a lower burden of proof with hearsay and professional evidence being admissible in hearings leading to the potential blurring of the distinction between civil and criminal law. Young people could find themselves unwittingly committing a criminal offence through breaching the terms of a civil order.
24. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child raised concerns about the introduction of ASBOs in restricting children's freedom of movement and right to peaceful assembly, the use of 'mosquito devices' and introduction of the concept of 'dispersal zones' .. and called for a review with a view to the abolition of ASBOs (UNRCR, Concluding Observations 2008; paras 34, 35, 79 and 80).
25. The Northern Ireland Office seem to have disregarded this advice and appear intent on extending the application of ASBOs and the powers of agencies which may be in breach of the Human Rights Act 1998 (Article 6 right to a fair trial, Article 8 right to freedom of expression and Article 11 right to assembly under the European Convention on Human Rights).
26. Of particular concern is the proposal to establish a curfew and dispersal zones from which under 16 year olds can be removed irrespective of committal, or suspicion, of 'bad behaviour' which has been subject to a legal challenge in England. This further supports the view that the proposal to introduce ASBOs and Dispersal Zones seem to be directed toward young people. Given the tendency of the media to demonise and negatively stereotype young people, these measures may reinforce public perceptions that groups of young people gathered on the street are a threat to community safety.
27. Yet, children and young people themselves report having nowhere safe or affordable to go, especially those living in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland. The relationship between lack of appropriate play opportunities for children and young people, and problems emerging in relation to anti-social behaviour has been well documented. Research commissioned by NICCY (2004) found that 'many children and young people suggested that a lack of things for young people to do in their free time led to them either becoming involved in anti-social behaviour, or being viewed in this, even if it was not the case' (Kilkelly et al, 2004: 203). Reflecting on the lack of sufficient play and leisure facilities, children and young people across Northern Ireland recently identified having 'things to do and safe places to go' as one of the biggest issues facing them. NICCY has now identified this as a key priority.
28. Action for Children shares concern expressed across the sector about proposals which will give the PSNI and NIHE powers to ask people to leave an area and not return within 24 hours and also to take a child under sixteen home or to another safe place between the hours of 9pm and 6am. The consequences for children refusing to comply with such measures could result in them deemed as committing a criminal offence. Moreover, such proposals do not appear to recognise safeguarding issues involved for some young people who, if brought home, may result in a risk of placing them in danger of being harmed – as for some young people, home may not be a safe place.
29. The PSNI currently has sufficient powers to take a child home or to a place of safety under existing child protection and safeguarding regulations which are more likely to result in the 'best interests' and safety of the child being the central concern, rather than risk the young person being criminalised or labelled anti-social.

Emotional well-being and positive, structured activities for children and young people<sup>1</sup>

30. Action for Children Growing Strong campaign highlights the importance of promoting children and young people emotional well-being - or 'inner strength'. Emotional well-being helps us to empathise with others and to care for them, to be self-aware and self-confident and take pride in ourselves and our achievements and to manage our feelings. It also helps us accept and cope with stress, adversity, tragedy and trauma and helps us to control our reactions and

<sup>1</sup> Young People Growing Strong; the role of positive structured activities, NCH (2007) see <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content.aspx?CategoryID=179>

behaviour and makes us motivated. These are the qualities which grow out of what is also called resilience.

31. Evidence shows that those who are resilient will also be socially mobile and that they will experience good mental health<sup>2</sup>. However, negatively, there is a link between the lack of resilience in children and young people and the fact that one in 10 of them suffer from mental health problems. Even when people have had a disadvantaged start in life, those with emotional and personal qualities like application and self-esteem, and who believe that they have control over their own lives and behaviour, are more likely to succeed both at work and in their social lives.
32. Policies that tackle social exclusion, deprivation or lack of social mobility are undermined by children and young people's lack of emotional wellbeing. Our research<sup>3</sup> demonstrates how emotional health is important in determining the relative life chances and an important factor in explaining social mobility.
33. The effects of the lack of emotional wellbeing can also be seen in the increase in anti-social behaviour, rising drug and alcohol misuse and the decline in personal interactions by young people. Strong, supportive family relationships are key to children growing up emotionally healthy. These positive relationships, often starting with parents, are built on consistency in rules and the way the parent behaves, warmth and interest, stability and security and authority without hostility.
34. *Structured activities* are very important in developing emotional wellbeing. This is because, apart from the enjoyment of engaging with others and gaining a sense of achievement, they help young people to be constructive, relate to authority figures, acquire skills, and understand the need for hierarchy when it is appropriate.
35. Action for Children would suggest the proposed Community Safety Strategy should be integrated with a broader play and leisure strategy which is : universal in application; serves the needs of younger children and teenagers; works with parents in the community; is based on structured activities; targets vulnerable groups of children and young people and disadvantaged areas; offers services which overlap in terms of age groups; creates opportunities for young people to have their say and ; ensures all young people have someone to talk to about their problems in activities as a matter of course. A volunteer programme should be established to enable young people support others, such as disabled young people, to use existing and new activities.

## **B. Focus on families and young people**

36. We are pleased to see the focus on families and young people as a key cross-cutting theme in the draft strategy and, in particular, the intention to *support these families to break the cycle of poor parenting and lack of opportunity, in order to improve the lives of all citizens and promote social inclusion and reduce offending and re-offending*.
37. We note also the reference that central to this is creating opportunities which offer people alternatives to becoming involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, challenging unacceptable behaviour, and providing support to keep people out of the criminal justice system and that the reducing offending strategy will have a relevance to this work and helping address the desired outcomes being sought.
38. While we register below some concerns about plans to introduce new powers under this section of the draft strategy, we particularly welcome *the focus on early intervention and supporting families* under this theme as Action for Children has considerable experience and developed models of good practice around these areas across the UK.

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<sup>2</sup> Emotional Well-Being and Social Mobility; a new urgency to the debate, Action for Children (2008) see <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content.aspx?CategoryID=179>

## **Proposed New Powers ; Individual Support Orders, Parenting Support Contracts/Orders and Parent Compensation Orders**

39. Action for Children is concerned that Individual Support Orders (ISOs) could be disproportionately used against young people and that they could be used to place further requirements on children, which may lead to increasing the likelihood of breaches of Orders and therefore criminalisation of children and young people.
40. Similarly, we are also concerned about the introduction and application of Parenting Support Contracts (PSCs) in situations where, if a parent refuses to engage in a PSC, this can be documented and used in evidence when an application is made for a Parenting Support Order. There appears to be no provision for a third party or advocate to be present when a parent engages in a Parenting Support Contract which is worrying given the potentially criminal implications of engagement or non-engagement.
41. We oppose introducing Parent Compensation Orders (PCOs) for two main reasons. Firstly, this measure could lead to imposing fines and criminal sanctions on parents for acts that are carried out by children (aged under 10) and legally presumed incapable of 'offending behaviour' thereby making any evidence impossible to obtain. This could, in effect, lead to further lowering the age of criminal responsibility. Secondly, as noted already, imposing fines on parents who are already struggling financially and exacerbate the extent of child poverty in Northern Ireland, already a growing problem and highlighted as a key issue by the Executive and Assembly.
42. Our services in other parts of the UK (see examples below) have experience and developed good practice in working with families who have been subject of ISOs and PSC/Orders. Often this work takes place in challenging circumstances. We believe what 'works best' is to intervene early to prevent the need for such Orders through *providing support* to families and children and young people. The focus of this work is to bring about positive changes and outcomes, preferably on the basis of voluntary agreements which best motivate potential recipients of such Orders to address relevant issues with regards to their behaviour.

### **Early Intervention**

43. Action for Children welcomes the acknowledgment in the draft strategy that a range of factors can lead young people to becoming involved in offending or anti-social behaviour which can in turn ruin their life chances and create distress for those living around them and therefore the need to intervene early.
44. We note too reference to the work and good practice of the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) in developing the Youth Conference Service and benefits of restorative approaches and diversionary work in preventing young people from engaging in further criminal or anti-social behaviour.
45. Action for Children welcomes the options set out in the draft strategy to build on existing successes and developments for further timely intervention in relation to:
  - Investing in diversionary activities for young people, particularly those at risk of offending or anti-social behaviour [CSU through CSPs]
  - Developing mentoring schemes - eg through sports clubs or peer mentoring or through community based volunteer development schemes [DCAL, voluntary organisations]
  - Developing sustainable intergenerational projects that address older person's perceptions of the fear of crime and encourage the younger generation to view old age positively [CSU through CSPs, YJA, voluntary organisations].

46. A number of good practice examples are set below illustrate how our early intervention, prevention and intensive support services help divert children and young people and their families from becoming involved in (further) crime and anti-social behaviour.

**Action for Children (Northern Ireland) - Northern Area Early Intervention/Choices Project**

*The Northern Area Early Intervention Project and Choices Project are examples of how we are working in partnership with the Youth Justice Agency and other statutory and voluntary partners in the Northern Children and Young People's Committee in helping to prevent offending.*

*While only recently developed, the services are modelled on research and best practice around 'what works' and an approach which emphasises the significance of working with education, using health, employment opportunities, inclusion or family support in promoting positive outcomes for children and families. The work includes taking a whole-child/family approach which promotes children and young people's well-being, raises their potential and self-esteem while addressing issues around reducing their anti-social and/or offending behaviour.*

*Working through the local Community Safety Partnership(s) and Youth Diversionary Forum(s) and taking referrals from a range of agencies, the Early Intervention and Choices services engage children in young in a combination of intensive (1-2-1), group-based support and constructive diversionary activities while also supporting their parents and families. The services help children (aged 8-12) and young people (aged 13-16 years) to develop positive relationships with others, strategies to promote their own personal safety, become aware of their rights and responsibilities, develop as active members of a community, understand that choices bring consequences including the importance of rules and laws and the implications of breaching these, including the effects or impact of anti-social behaviour.*

*These services are part of a wider continuum of integrated, non-stigmatising early years, parenting and family support services provided by Action for Children in partnership with others which will soon stretch across the Northern Health and Social Services / Health Social Care Trust area.*

**Action for Children (Northern Ireland) - Chance for Change and UK Mentoring Projects**

*Action for Children's **Chance for Change** (CfC) service is targeted at 7–11 year olds who are experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties. It is delivered through a strategic partnership between the Western Health and Social Care Trust and Action for Children. Developed within the broad context of family support services and child and adolescent mental health services (Tiers 1–2) as an early intervention prevention initiative, the service aims to improve outcomes for children, particularly their emotional health and wellbeing. CfC programmes involve 8–10 children and 12–16 carers/parents, although all programmes are tailored to meet the specific support needs of participating children and their families.*

*An independent evaluation of the project (CENI, 2008) recently found that CfC has established an effective partnership approach, enabling both partners and local community and voluntary organisations to meet more effectively the needs of a particularly marginalised, vulnerable section of the population. The project has achieved a number of health and wellbeing outcomes of participating children in relation to :*

- *behavioural improvements, including reduced levels of hyperactivity/ attention difficulties at school and disruptive behaviour in general*
- *reduced levels of emotional distress and anxiety*
- *reduction in feelings of anger*
- *increased confidence and self-esteem*
- *improved communication with parents, teachers and other children*
- *more constructive relationships with others and*
- *more constructive attitudes to school*

## **Action for Children's Mentoring Project**

*Action for Children and Chance UK have developed a partnership to offer a **pilot mentoring programme** across the UK – Inverness, Liverpool, Crawley and L'Derry, Northern Ireland. The programmes are delivered to children who are in need of additional support to help them with the emotional and behavioural problems they are facing. The aim is to intervene early in the lives of children to help them and their families build a brighter future through working towards achieving the same outcomes for all the children in terms of improving their emotional wellbeing, ability to contribute in a learning environment, engage safely in a leisure activity of their choice, maintain a supportive relationship with a significant other and improve their social skills.*

*Action for Children's mentoring project targets children aged 5-11 years old in both Citywide and Waterside of L/Derry referred by Family Intervention/Support Services within Social Services, Primary Schools and Health Visitors, Educational Welfare Officers and other Action for Children services. The project aims to introduce more stability into the children's lives, reduce the isolation the children and the families may experience, support the children as they find the motivation and life skills they need to move forward, channel the children's disruptive energy into projects that encourage a sense of personal achievement and produce a sense of self-discovery and self-worth in the children.*

*Like Chance for Change, the mentoring project is based in Action for Children's Clooney Family Centre which provides a range of family support services for children aged 0-12. Together the services all add value through offering a continuum of support in order to help children who are experiencing transitions, whether emotionally or physically to achieve better outcomes for their future.*

## **Family Support**

47. Action for Children notes that Youth Justice Agency parent support groups have proved to be a valuable tool in building confidence, restoring relationships and providing support for individual parents and we have been closely involved in a number of these initiatives. We therefore welcome proposals to:
- Introduce family support panels – multi-agency expertise on practical action to deal with the most troublesome families for the benefit of the community and the family concerned. This may require intensive family intervention projects for the most challenging cases. [CSU with other agencies eg PSNI, NIHE, social services]
  - Developing models of good practice for youth diversionary initiatives aimed at reducing the impact of anti-social behaviour [CSU, YJA]
  - Working with Drug and Alcohol Co-ordinating Teams to address substance abuse issues in families.
48. However, in relation to the first point, we would suggest that rather create numerous new family support panels that priority and focus should be given to integrating existing structures and family support panels linked to Children Services Planning and, where possible, further support locality planning approaches.

### How best to make support available to parents

49. In addition to the examples cited above, we would also point to other areas of good practice below of how Action for Children's solutions focused work currently provides more intensive interventions and crisis support to parents and families.

## **Action for Children (UK wide) – Intensive Family Support / Crisis Intervention Work**

### **Intensive support for families**

Action for Children 's family work includes aiming to improve outcomes for families whose tenancy is at risk because of anti-social behaviour and at risk of breakdown. Greater support is needed for intensive family support services because, where appropriate, they are an effective means of keeping families together and avoiding children going into care unnecessarily. Action for Children believes that significant investment is needed in preventative services for children, young people and families with multiple problems to prevent re-occurring cycles that reinforce these problems. Intensive family support is a successful and costs effective way of, where appropriate, keeping families together.

Complex needs and problems need a multi-disciplinary and multi-agency approach and the government must facilitate this by promoting the role of the third sector. Our intensive family support services bring together many agencies and professionals. We work with the whole family, co-ordinating local partnerships to ensure services have a clear focus on improving outcomes for families who often have diverse and complex needs.

The focus of the **Renfrewshire Family Support Project (Scotland)** is on intensive family support, and on early intervention. The project provides support to parents and primary aged children at risk of becoming significant offenders. It offers a wide range of services aimed at enhancing parental support and at promoting greater parental responsibility. The overall aims of the projects include reducing the number of young people being placed on supervision, reducing the number of school exclusions and enabling more parents to address their own needs, including illness or addiction.

### **Family Intervention Projects**

There is now significant evidence of how crisis intervention services and intensive family support projects help families with multiple and persistent problems, including anti-social behaviour. Action for Children runs a number of rehabilitation projects for families at risk of losing their homes as a result of anti-social behaviour (often referred to as Family Intervention projects).

Our services, based on our learning from Action for Children's **Dundee Families Project**, provide floating outreach support to help families keep their existing accommodation and dispersed tenancy support where we (or another housing provider) hold the tenancy agreement on behalf of the family. In some projects, we also run residential units for a small number of families. Families referred to these projects tend to be large, with a fifth having more than four children; they also have low employment rates and are often in debt.

The work of these services has been evaluated by Sheffield Hallam University, with the evaluation showing that they can save the taxpayer over £200,000 per family per year. The results of these projects are impressive – the levels of complaints about anti-social behaviour had substantially reduced, 95 per cent of families had maintained their tenancies, 80 per cent had managed to reduce the threat of possession action and in 84 per cent of families school attendance had improved by the end of the intervention (Anti-social behaviour intensive family support projects – Communities and Local Government, 2006). A follow-up study published in 2008 showed that the early outcomes reported by Family Intervention Project staff for 90 families who completed the intervention displayed considerable improvements in all key areas of the project's work. Anti-social behaviour and criminal activities had declined considerably at the point families exited from the projects, as had the risk of families engaging in anti-social behaviour. The risk of families being evicted had also considerably reduced.

## Supporting the rehabilitation of offenders

50. Action for Children notes the intention in the draft community safety strategy also to reduce re-offending by helping those already involved in crime to break out of the offending cycle and that families have a critical role to play in providing the essential support and links which can cement the rehabilitation process and our proposals above will reinforce the importance of positive parenting.
51. We support the proposals around offering support and alternatives to offending including:
- building on the success of drug arrest referral schemes which provide the support necessary for offenders to “kick their habit” and consequently reduce their offending, and implement new schemes in areas where a need is identified and justified by the scale of the problem [CSU, PSNI, Youth Justice Agency, PBNI, DHSSPS, community and voluntary organisations] ;
  - continuing to strategically invest in voluntary sector organisations to enable them to deliver services that support the objectives of the criminal justice system [CSU] and;
  - Improving the services and programmes available to rehabilitate offenders and reduce re-offending [PBNI, NI Prison Service, NIACRO]

### Other ways to support, and provide services to, those who have been involved in crime and anti-social behaviour to tackle the causes of crime and prevent them re-offending

51. The good practice examples from Action for Children’s Youthbuilds and fostering solutions for young offenders below show other ways to support those who have been involved in crime and anti-social behaviour to tackle the causes of crime and prevent them re-offending.

#### **Action for Children (Scotland) Youthbuilds - Securing real jobs for difficult to reach young people**

*Action for Children Scotland’s innovative Youthbuild model offers training and employment opportunities in the construction industry for disadvantaged young people. We believe this model offers a better future for these young people, while helping to address labour shortages in the construction industry. The young people involved in Youthbuild come from difficult backgrounds, and face multiple challenges in finding work. This can include poor family support, issues around leaving care, homelessness, specific learning difficulties, alcohol/substance misuse, offending and poor social/personal skills. Action for Children believes that getting young people into work is vitally important in helping them to move forward in their lives.*

*The young people we work with require extra support to take the crucial first steps on the employment ladder. A key aspect of the Youthbuild model is the one-to-one support provided by staff to the Youthbuild trainees to help them make the move into work. Key elements of the project focus on induction and preparation, work experience, relevant training, personal support, and core skills and development. The Youthbuild projects are proving successful in securing training and employment opportunities in the construction industry for young people. This shows what can be achieved when different agencies work together to help young people take advantage of the opportunities that are out there.*

*The projects in Scotland work on local regeneration developments and, along with local housing associations such as the Oak Tree, Cloch, Milnbank, Shettleston and Govanhill housing associations, aim to give the young people work experience on local sites where they are building homes. Other partners include the Scottish Government’s Youth Crime Prevention Fund, Glasgow City Council, Glasgow Community and Safety Services, the European Social Fund, Inverclyde Council, Scottish Enterprise and Communities Scotland. We are also actively working with 20 large construction companies.*

*Building on the success of Youthbuild projects in Scotland (Glasgow Great Eastern, Inverclyde and Govanhill) Action for Children is looking at the potential to expand the model to engage other employment/ skills sectors, partners and groups of young people across the UK.*

### **Action for Children – Fostering Solutions for young offenders**

*The rise in the use of custody for children and young people is a UK-wide concern. Action for children does not believe that custody adequately addresses the needs and behaviours of young offenders; it has not succeeded in reducing re-offending rates as very high proportions of young people released from custody re-offend within 12 months.*

*In our view, custody for young people should be used as a last resort, and only then for the small number who are at risk to themselves or to others. Real alternatives to custody need to be considered and made available to all those children and young people who could benefit. Remand and intensive fostering have a proven track record in reducing re-offending rates and have been fundamental in turning around the lives of vulnerable and challenging children and young people. However, currently these initiatives are only available to small numbers of children and young people. Action for Children has long-standing experience of delivering fostering solution to young offenders.*

#### *The Intensive Fostering Model*

*Intensive fostering provides troubled young people with intensive supervision and support for up to 12 months, providing a structured regime within a foster carer's home. The scheme works with young people aged 10-17 whose home circumstances may have contributed significantly to their offending behaviour. Placements are offered as an alternative to custodial sentences and where the only other alternative for young people is custody.*

*Action for Children's services, such as **Wessex Community – Intensive Fostering**, have been successful in using the Oregon Social Learning Centre treatment foster care programme to work with young people in the criminal justice system. The model requires commitment of a multi-agency team working to support the needs of the young person. The model requires : professional foster carers are provided with training and support services ; young people have access to community resources (including health professionals); young people have close supervision; fair and consistent boundaries are maintained; young people are provided with a mentoring adult; negative influences on young people are reduced (ie anti-social peers); appropriate positive behaviour is reinforced; academic skills and work habits are encouraged and; conflict between family members is addressed and reduced.*

*Evidence from the Wessex Community – Intensive Fostering service showed that all the young people involved in the service fully graduated from the programme and where engaged in education, training or employment with most of the young people moving to suitable accommodation at this point. Moreover, none of the young people were found guilty of any offence while on the programme, with the majority not committing offences after graduating – and those who did, the offences were of a much less serious nature than prior to joining the programme.*

#### **Remand Fostering**

*Action for Children's remand fostering offers a safe environment for an alleged young offender while they await trial or sentencing. During his time, the alleged offender must not be involved in offending, anti-social behaviour or absconding, and should attend court at the requisite times. Remand fostering helps the young person to do these things. It provides an alternative to secure or custodial accommodation for young people awaiting trial or sentencing who would otherwise have been incarcerated.*

*As with intensive fostering, remand fostering works with the key principles of the Oregon Social Learning Centre treatment foster care programme. However, the work is undertaken over a much shorter timeframe, with the average period on a remand being just six weeks. Our*

services provide and maintain specialist foster placements, offering a high level of support and help for young people with bail requirements.

*An independent evaluation of Action for Children's Wessex Community remand fostering scheme (Lipscombe, Jo 2006) found that over eight years the project had been working with young people, it had consistently demonstrated impressive outcomes in relation to young people reducing their re-offending while in placement, engaging in school, training or employments on leaving, valuing the attention they received while on placement and as alternative to being remanded in local authority accommodation, secure children's homes or custody.*

*The evaluation also identified difficulties with finding appropriate move-on accommodation and a lack of support post placement and that magistrates were less aware of remand fostering than they were of bail support and supervision, but were generally positive about remand foster care.*

### **C. Building strong, confident communities**

52. Action for Children welcomes the cross-cutting theme of building strong, confident communities and reference within it that communities should have confidence in themselves' and with the agencies which serve them and that fear of crime can undermine communities.
53. We support the desired outcomes associated with increasing confidence in the individual agencies responsible for community safety and the criminal justice system as a whole, as well as encouraging reporting of incidents and ensuring that effective action is taken - especially for the more vulnerable members of our society. We also welcome many of the proposals around better supporting victims and witnesses and empowering communities to engage in community safety initiatives.

#### Engaging Children and Young People as partners

54. Action for Children believes it is essential to engage children and young people as partners in identifying and tackling the causes of crime. It is important to reach a clear understanding through consulting and actively listening to children and young people as to why they become involved in offending behaviour which can often have distressing consequences on victims of crime which may include other children and young people, families, wider communities, not to mention the individual child or young person involved.

#### Encouraging more people to report crime and anti-social behaviour

55. Action for Children is concerned about the amount of under-reporting of crime against children and young people and other vulnerable members of society. Unfortunately, many young people speak of their lack of trust in the police and feel that there is no point in reporting crime as nothing will happen as a result. It is essential, therefore, that this is recognised in the community safety strategy and to include key measures to address this issue.

#### Supporting the particularly vulnerable and other actions

56. We are concerned that the section on supporting the particularly vulnerable does not seem to acknowledge the level of fear many children and young people themselves feel on a daily basis. Young people frequently report about having to be careful when they are out and about and that they are in constant fear of attack and assault.
57. As part of Action for Children's Growing Strong campaign, over 800 children and young people across the UK participated in an online survey which explored the impact of gun and knife crime on local communities.

58. Key findings from the 'Step Inside Our Shoes' report (2008)<sup>4</sup> indicated that 29% of young people told us they had been affected by gun and knife crime, 36% were worried about gangs in their area and 41% know someone who has been personally affected. 63% of respondents stated a main reason they felt young people get involved in gun and knife crime was to protect themselves.
59. Children and young people feel demonised by negative public perceptions and believe their fears are not taken seriously. They also report their lives are being restricted by how unsafe they feel. Only 28% of survey respondents feel safe in their community, while 45% could not claim to feel safe at any time while 1 in 5 said they sometimes – or often – feel in danger.
60. Young people want an active voice in their communities so that they can play a part in addressing society's problems. 4 in 5 of the young people surveyed welcomed the idea of a Youth Forum where they could meet local decision makers to discuss the issue of gun and knife crime.
61. In Northern Ireland, much of the fear is concerned with sectarian violence and street violence is most common in interface areas. In looking at the experiences of children and young people in Loyalist and Nationalist areas of North Belfast, Leonard (2007) found that there was a constant fear of verbal and physical intimidation and this impacted on the movement of young people outside their immediate area. Young people continue to fear the paramilitaries.
62. It is imperative that children and young people are included as a vulnerable group in the community safety strategy, especially since they are more likely to be victims of crime rather than perpetrators.

### **Equality Implications**

63. As noted already, Action for Children does not feel there was adequate consultation with children and young people or families in developing this strategy. Such consultation is essential not only to ensure compliance with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, but is also in keeping with good practice and Article 12 of the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
64. As the strategy is a new policy initiative, we would seek clarification from the NIO regarding when they will carry out the required screening process or an Equality Impact Assessment on the potential adverse impacts which introducing the strategy may on Section 75 groupings including the grounds of age, gender, religion, race and those with dependents.

### **Concluding Remarks**

65. Action for Children welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NIO draft five year Community Safety Strategy. While we have raised a number of concerns and questions in our response in relation to the timing and likely negative impact on vulnerable children, young people and families of introducing certain new powers, we have tried to respond positively and offer solutions based on our experience as a service provider and what we know 'works best'.
66. We recognise that anti-social behaviour is a complex problem with no quick fix solution, nor any single measure to solve it overnight. Action for Children sees a balanced approach of prevention and enforcement as essential to reduce the incidence of anti-social behaviour.
67. In other parts of the UK, the evidence suggests there has been an overemphasis on enforcement to the neglect of preventative measures. For example, when first introduced in England, a high proportion of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) were issued to 10–17 year

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<sup>4</sup> 'Step Inside Our Shoes'; young peoples views on gun and knife crime, Action for Children (2008) See <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content.aspx?CategoryID=179>

olds, compared with only a small number individual support orders (ISOs) – a measure aimed more at addressing the underlying causes of anti-social behaviour<sup>5</sup>.

68. A major review is underway about the operation of ASB and related legislation in Scotland and we may have much to learn from their experience, pathfinder pilot initiatives and the likely direction of travel which may be taken in that jurisdiction.

69. Action for Children strongly believes that to address anti-social behaviour effectively it is vital that its root causes are tackled. This means there needs to be a greater emphasis on prevention and rehabilitation than we have seen to date. We believe that expanding such provision would have a significant impact and reduce anti-social behaviour.

70. From our experience of developing and running a range of early intervention and preventative services through to more intensive family support and crisis intervention services including specialist services for children and families at risk of being evicted from their tenancies, we know first hand that it is possible to address and change their antisocial behaviour by providing a combination of support and challenge. Research also shows that these approaches are effective.

71. Building on the Growing Strong campaign (launched in 2007) which aims to improve the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people in the UK, Action for Children launched its *As Long As It Takes* campaign in 2008. This work is based on UK on a programme of work looking at what it means to be there for vulnerable children and young people, taking time to listen to their views and investigate the validity of the issues raised by them.

72. In January 2009, we launched the *Stuck in the Middle* report<sup>6</sup> which highlights the need to support to six to 13 year olds struggling with major problems which, if left unchecked, can lead to lifelong struggles with issues such as crime, drug dependency or mental health concerns. The report concluded with a number of suggestions, which we believe have relevance to the development of the community safety strategy here, in relation to calling for:

- a. A long term cross-party vision for children and young people in each nation of the UK, describing how both public services and public bodies will work together to ensure children receive the support they need at all key stages and transitions in their lives;
- b. All children need at least one trusted adult who is there for them for as long as it takes, especially at times of transition. Agencies and professionals working with children and families must do more to recognise and safeguard the vital role of continuity, commitment and relationships built on trust in children's lives; and
- c. Governments and media across the UK must begin a responsible debate on the way our young people are perceived and highlight young people's contribution to communities

73. Finally, we wish the Northern Ireland Office well in their deliberations around finalising the five year Community Safety Strategy. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require any clarification or further information about the issues we have raised in this response or about our work.

Ross McCrea

Policy and Public Affairs Manager  
Action for Children (Northern Ireland)

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<sup>5</sup> Tackling Anti-social behaviour; have we got it right. NCH (2005) <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content.aspx?CategoryID=179>

<sup>6</sup> *Stuck in the Middle* - the importance of supporting six to 13 year olds, Action for Children (2009) see <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/36/4442.pdf>