

Cross Departmental Actions for Vulnerable Children and Young People during the Covid-19 Pandemic Period

Mid Ulster District Council welcomes the development of a Cross Departmental Action Plan for Vulnerable Children and Young People and wish to offer its support to the promotion of the safety and wellbeing of children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic period **and beyond**.

Mid Ulster District Council have responsibility for the facilitation and delivery of Community Planning within the district of which they are a partner along with other agencies. The Mid Ulster Community Plan shares the aims of the Cross Departmental Action Plan, which also seeks to work with its partners from across the statutory and voluntary sector, to improve the wellbeing of our children and young people to deliver positive and long lasting outcomes.

Within the Cross Departmental Plan, there are a number of actions that Mid Ulster District Council is responsible for or are leading on in partnership and would like to specifically address, in relation to what is being developed and delivered within the district.

Increased Harm in the Home: Increased temporary accommodation places for victims of domestic violence

Mid Ulster District Council are currently working with Causeway and Mid Ulster Women's Aid regarding the lack of appropriate accommodation across the district for victims of domestic violence and their families. Whilst Mid Ulster District Council can appreciate the need for emergency accommodation for victims of domestic violence, placing these families in accommodation far away from their support networks forces many to return to their perpetrator. Failing to also provide them with appropriate, longer term accommodation often leads to the same consequences. These issues must be addressed in order to ensure the safety of domestic violence victims and their families.

Council officers and Women's Aid staff recently met with the Minister for Communities to discuss a proposal to build a number of supported housing units in Cookstown to alleviate this need. Although this is a longer term action, Mid Ulster District Council would welcome the support of the cross departmental partners in ensuring its successful delivery in its efforts to meet the housing needs of vulnerable children and families.

Families facing financial hardship and/or in food poverty

Mid Ulster District Council welcomes the number of programmes listed in the plan to alleviate financial hardship and food poverty. Mid Ulster District Council are currently developing an anti-poverty strategy for Mid Ulster and have commenced engagement with DfC regarding the development of a regional anti-poverty strategy. Mid Ulster District Council would welcome support from all the partners involved in this plan, to assist in the delivery of a Mid Ulster anti-poverty strategy, to address chronic issues of poverty experienced by our vulnerable children and families.

Mid Ulster District Council currently partners with DfC in the provision of support for emergency food poverty and some support for fuel poverty. Within this section, at item

1.4 it appears to read that DfC and Local Gov are partners in the delivery of the 'Discretionary Support COVID-19 short term living expenses grant'. This is not accurate. Local gov would only be partners on items vi and x. We ask this is amended.

Specifically regarding Free School Meals (FSM), Mid Ulster District Council would urge the Department for Education to consider reviewing the criteria for FSM to allow them to be extended to more families in financial hardship. Through our work in the COVID-19 response hubs, Mid Ulster District Council are aware of the significant number of families in food poverty, where one or both parents were in employment. This reality needs to be better reflected in the provision of FSM.

Children facing educational disadvantage due to school closures

Mid Ulster District Council supports all actions aimed at reducing educational disadvantages of vulnerable children. Within the draft Mid Ulster anti-poverty plan are a number of actions aimed to address these issues also and would be happy to work with partners in this plan, to develop them further.

Mid Ulster District Council notes a lack of educational actions of children with special needs or complex special needs. Mid Ulster District Council received considerable feedback from local residents and communities that these children and families were 'abandoned' during lockdown. Whilst some of the actions noted in the plan may cover support to these children, given that children with special needs are more likely to be educationally disadvantaged, Mid Ulster District Council feel that more specific actions needs to be included or developed in this plan.

Children/families unable to access services due to reduced service provision and/or social distancing requirement

With specific reference to CAMHS, through its work in Community Planning and anti-poverty, Mid Ulster District Council are acutely aware of the growing number of children & young people's suffering with poor mental health. Mid Ulster District Council are also aware of the growing demand on CAMHS, with long referral waiting times for young people in accessing the professional help they desperately require. As a result of the pandemic and lockdown, this demand will undoubtedly grow. Mid Ulster District Council welcomes a COVID-19 Mental Health Response Plan but is not entirely confident this plan clearly sets out how it will meet growing demand for a service that was oversubscribed before the pandemic. While capacity is built within the CAMHS system, actions are required to fill this gap.