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Comhairle Ceantair
Lár Uladh
Mid Ulster
District Council

Ref: Every Child: DE's Draft Corporate Plan (2023 – 2028)

To whom it may concern:

Mid Ulster District Council would like to take this opportunity to put forward its views in relation to the consultation on Every Child: DE's Draft Corporate Plan (2023 – 2028). Feedback from the Council on each of the strategic priorities is provided below:

CHAMPIONING all our children and young people and the positive impact of education on all aspects of life

In relation to championing children and young people, Mid Ulster District Council is of the view that providing access to high quality education for all children and young people is the primary way for DE to achieve this priority. It is well documented that disadvantage has a detrimental impact on a child's educational attainment. Statistics show that children in low income families can underperform at key stages in education by up to 10% from their peers not impacted by poverty.

Therefore, quality education must be free at the point of delivery. Research has highlighted that many children skip school on days where money is required, for example, to purchase text books, for home economics resources, art materials, school fees, school visits, charity days etc. There should be provision for low income families. This must not be a stigmatised system which highlights children from low income households. Good practice exists with uniforms based on transferable badges, educational school trips linked to public facilities (many of which are free), school resources books, art materials and so on included in budget etc.

Breakfast clubs can be an 'effective support' solution as many children, especially in disadvantaged areas, are going to school hungry and struggle to participate. After School Clubs can again provide effective support, particularly to children from disadvantaged backgrounds where they are less likely to be supported with school work at home. Research would show those children who are struggling with school work are also more likely not to attend, further impacting on their achievement outcomes.

As evidenced above, low attendance and poverty are inextricably linked. There is a key importance to monitoring attendance and the provision of support in addressing it to ensure the child or young person is fully supported to attend education. There needs to be a promotion of young carers' needs as they are an unidentifiable group and are at risk of low attendance/attainment.

HELPING all our children and young people where they need support for their learning and well-being

With regard to helping children and young people, Mid Ulster District Council believes that recognising and addressing the needs created by family environment is imperative if help is to be targeted and meaningful. Family environment has a major impact on a child's educational attainment and experience. Various issues within a family unit, such as physical and mental health problems, abuse, financial difficulties, can affect a child greatly and his/her ability to learn. A cross departmental whole family approach is required to address the health, economic and educational issues within the family, in order to achieve the best outcomes.

Family Learning Centres aim to provide parents with the support, knowledge and guidance that they need to support their child to achieve their full potential and overcome the barriers to learning that they are experiencing. Effective programmes delivered specifically to address educational attainment and poverty within Neighbourhood Renewal areas in Mid Ulster are the Family Learning Programme (FLP) and the Primary Attendance Matters Programme (PAM). The aim of the FLP is to ensure that parents are provided with the skills needed to help their children at home, ensuring a good link is forged and nurtured between home and school. The aim of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programme is to help parents to develop their written and spoken English skills, which will ultimately help them to assist their children at home.

INSPIRING all our children and young people to make a positive contribution to society.

Inspiring our children and young people should begin at the earliest possible juncture and as such Mid Ulster District Council believes that there should be a clear focus on early years development and this is fundamental to improving the outcomes of young people. Mid Ulster Community Planning supports the huge benefits of early years programmes and acknowledges the great work carried out by local organisations. However, too often these programmes are targeted by methods such as geographical areas of disadvantage. Whilst the Council acknowledges the need for area based intervention to address disadvantage and that this is recognised by Mid Ulster Community Planning, it can however, exclude pockets of severe deprivation that exists across the district. All early years intervention programmes must be made available to those identified by relevant services regardless of their post code. Mid Ulster District

Council would also advocate that all pre-school children are allocated 30 hours per week in a pre-school setting in line with other regions of the UK.

Meeting the LEARNING needs of our children and young people and developing their knowledge and skills, enabling them to fulfil their potential.

In relation to meeting the learning needs of our children and young people there are a number of ways that the Council feel that the DE could act in order to enable and fulfil potentials to be met. These areas include:

Pre-School Provision

Mid Ulster District Council's Members have previously highlighted their concerns regarding the complex pre-school education process delivered through a combination of nursery units, primary schools with nursery units, and the voluntary/private sector. It remains the Members' opinion that primary schools with attached nursery units have an advantage over primary schools without. Some parents are willing to travel beyond the catchment area of their nearest primary school without pre-school provision so that their child can attend another school's nursery unit and then progress to that primary school. Boards of Governors of schools with nursery units are able to set their own criteria and can facilitate this practice.

Members call for intervention by the Department of Education with more stringent regulation of schools admissions criteria and close alignment between EA Area Planning and the Early Years Directorate in the delivery of Pre School and Primary School Provision.

Special Educational Needs

The Council is aware of the significant pressures in the SEN sector and welcomes the investment that has been made to date to meet immediate need to date. However, Mid Ulster are keen to ensure that appropriate funding provisions are put in place as soon as possible so that our children can be educated in the closest school that meets a wide range of complex needs and ensures access to the best educational pathway possible.

DELIVERING an effective, child-focused, collaborative, high-quality education system.

Regarding delivery, there is an apparent lack of clarity around special education provisions set out by the DE and the provision made by Health Trusts. Mid Ulster District Council's Members are aware of young people under the age of 18 attending facilities such as Parkanaur College, Dungannon and the Buddy Bear Trust. The lack of co-terminosity between the two Health Trusts serving Mid Ulster brings its own challenges in navigating the different health and social care services provided by both Trusts in the district. The lack of clarity around the role of Health Trusts and DE in planning for and providing special education further compounds this issue. Addressing

this issue would certainly contribute to the delivery of an effective, child-focused, collaborative, high-quality education system.

Mid Ulster District Council would also like to take this opportunity to put forward the following views on the strategic priorities detailed in this consultation. Each strategic priority is examined below:

COLLABORATING – Partnering with our stakeholders to support co-production and achievement of shared outcomes.

Mid Ulster District Council would point out, that to strengthen the delivery of this corporate plan and see greater benefit a whole joined up working system approach be taken. This delivery style should also take cognisance of what is happening through the 11 Council areas at local district levels, many of whom are delivering Community Planning actions for vulnerable children and young people.

OPTIMISING – Prioritising, modernising and making most efficient use of our resources to achieve the greatest impact, including stopping or changing activities that don't make the difference we want.

In terms of making the greatest impact, Mid Ulster District Council would consider that the review of change to the use of Free School Meals (FSM) numbers as criteria to assess schools' access to programmes ie after schools.

While the Council acknowledges that there must be some assessment criteria, FSM are not always an accurate assessment of need – particularly for families known as the working poor, who do not qualify. Schools have indicated that they have been unable to access DE/EA programmes because they do not have sufficient numbers of pupils on FSM but there are many children who would benefit greatly. A review of the use of this criteria would certainly make a great positive change for many schools that can pass this onto their pupils and their families.

RESPONDING – Addressing the long term impacts of the pandemic and other emerging challenges and needs faced by our children and young people and the education workforce.

There are a number of ways in which Mid Ulster District Council feel that DE could respond to addressing the impacts of the recent pandemic, including:

- It is now clear that IT equipment are essential items for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to work towards improving their educational attainment. The recent pandemic has highlighted this as a major issue for children and it should be responded to robustly

- The pandemic has also shed light on the requirement for the delivery of equitable access to services and curriculum choices across Northern Ireland, this includes rural and disadvantaged communities.
- A funding and investment response is also required in relation to schools who have been able to clearly demonstrate that their school buildings/sites are not fit for purpose, and in some cases substandard.
- School transport is also a continuing challenge for DE and EA which requires urgent attention in order to find long term solutions. Issues such as overcrowding on school transport, a lack of structure and continuity in relation to transport for SEN pupils and provision in rural areas can have lasting and detrimental impacts for children and young people travelling to their education provision setting. Logistical issues should be addressed in a coherent way that produce effective outcomes.

ENGAGING – Communicating and consulting with our stakeholders to help shape our future services

Mid Ulster District Council welcomes DE's proposal for additional engagement with stakeholders. The Council has responsibility for the facilitation and delivery of Community Planning within the district of which the Education Authority is a statutory partner. The Mid Ulster Community Plan shares similar aims of DE's Draft strategic priorities and will continue to work directly with EA and other partners from across the statutory and voluntary sectors to improve the wellbeing of our children and young people, delivering positive and long lasting educational outcomes. Additional stakeholder contribution opportunities from the Council via the Community Planning function would be encouraged if it can be demonstrated that it will help to positively shape our future DE services in the District.

Finally Mid Ulster District Council would like to offer any assistance necessary to the DE, either through Council or Community Planning, to achieve the best outcomes for the children of Mid Ulster.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Cora Corry

Chair of Mid Ulster District Council