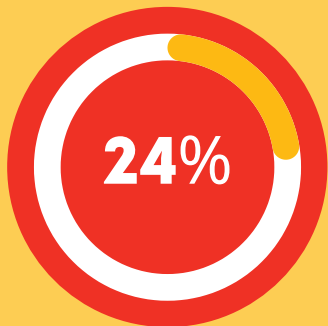


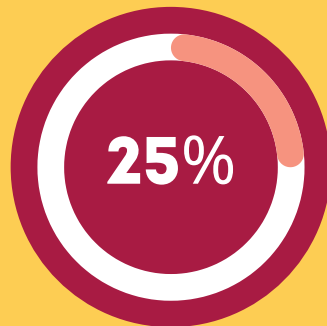
# Our Manifesto

2022 - 2027

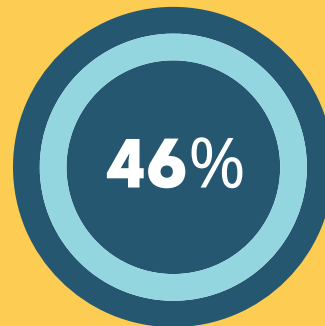
## A Star in Every Child



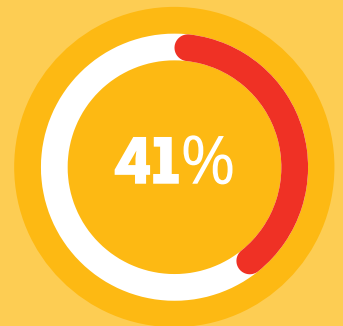
24% of children are living in poverty in Northern Ireland



Children and young people in Northern Ireland have 25% higher chance of experiencing mood disorders than other parts of the UK



Between Jan 2019 and August 2021, there has been a 46% increase of children in temporary accommodation



The number of looked after children in Northern Ireland has risen by 41% in the last ten years, with 79% in foster care

# Our Core Values



**Our services and policy action aim to ensure that:**

- A Every child should have the best start in life**
- A Every child should have access to Mental Health Support and the Chance to Thrive**
- A Every child should enjoy Safe, Stable and Loving Homes**

These three ambitions naturally overlap with one another and should be considered as interconnected. Whilst this document divides our key asks under different headings, it is important that we communicate the priorities raised in each area are often deeply connected to one another.

As service-providers, we are constantly reviewing how to offer holistic, inclusive and comprehensive responses to the needs as we find them. In the same way, we would urge members of the Executive to continue joining up efforts across different areas of departmental responsibility to facilitate better outcomes across all of our society.

To deliver for infants, children, young people and their families, we need to work together towards a continuum of service provision with holistic, accessible and inclusive principles in both statutory and non-statutory bodies.





# About Our Work in Northern Ireland



Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care, ensuring their voices are heard and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives. We have operated across the UK for more than 150 years and here in Northern Ireland for over twenty years. With over 20 services across the region, our frontline staff support more than 15,000 children, young people, and their families each year. We have a bold and ambitious vision that every child and young person in the country should have a safe and happy childhood and the foundations they need to thrive.

## Where we work



### Western Trust

#### Derry/Londonderry

- Clooney Family Centre
- Waterside Sure Start
- Waterside Family Support Hub
- Western Early Intervention Support Service (WEISS)

#### County Fermanagh

- Fermanagh Family Support Hub

#### Omagh

- Floating Support Service
- Omagh Family Support Hub
- Early Intervention Family Support Service

#### Enniskillen

- Early Intervention Family Support Service
- Rossorry Grove Supported Accommodation
- Floating Support Service

### Southern Trust

- NI Regional Young Carers

### Available in all Trusts

- NI Regional Fostering Service
- Young Adult Carers



### Northern Trust

- Choices Family Support
- Northern Family Support Hubs

#### Ballymena

- Ballymena and Little Steps Sure Start Centres
- Northern Early Intervention Support Service (NEISS)

#### Larne

- Northern Early Intervention Support Service (NEISS)

#### Antrim

- Ballymena and Little Steps Sure Start Centres

#### Carrickfergus

- Northern Early Intervention Support Service (NEISS)

### Belfast Trust

- NI Regional Young Carers

### South-Eastern Trust

- NI Regional Young Carers

#### Downpatrick

- Ballymote Family Project
- Ballymote Sure Start





***A Star in  
Every Child***





As we try to recover from an extremely difficult context in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is our view that infants, children and young people must be strategically and consistently prioritised in the coming mandate. As we look ahead, we are asking leaders to consider their role in children's potential to thrive in our region.

**We believe there is a Star in Every Child – including their boundless energy, their curiosity, personality and imagination and the decisions made at the Executive and all other levels of public service have a role in creating the right conditions for every child to shine.**

That's why we are asking your party to consider some of the following recommendations for inclusion in your manifesto commitments for the upcoming election and subsequent mandate;







# Secure the Best Start in Life

## Tackling Poverty & Inequality

We know that children cannot get the best start in life or feel safe and secure if their parents or carers are struggling to make ends meet. The implications of experiencing poverty are far-reaching; it undermines all other hoped-for outcomes in terms of physical, social, educational and emotional development. It places unnecessary and long-term pressure on social and healthcare services in ways that can be prevented by a fit-for-purpose social security system.

Addressing Child Poverty is always our first policy priority as an organisation because it is the root cause of so many children and young people's challenges in terms of achieving optimal life chances. For that reason, we believe it should be your priority too. We have less chance of improving overall health and wellbeing outcomes as a society without addressing the social determinants that cause ill-health.

Imagining what a post-covid world could look like necessitates an enquiry into the





**“key structural determinants that have contributed to the disproportionate effects of the covid-19 pandemic on marginalised and other groups” (BMJ 2021;372:n129, 2021).**

Infants, children, young people and their families need leadership committed to dismantling systemically reproduced conditions of vulnerability and practically moving towards building a fairer, more sustainable future.

In the coming mandate, we can do this by supporting parents, helping families with the cost of living, and by making lasting improvements to our social security and early years support systems. Creating more financial stability for families must be a priority as part of building firm foundations for healthy emotional and physical wellbeing outcomes.



# Our Policy Recommendations:

-  Ensuring the delivery of the Anti-Poverty Strategy with specific and measurable Child Poverty reduction targets. This should include adequate resourcing for monitoring and review processes.
-  Introducing a non-taxable Child Payment. This will ensure that the families most impacted by the high costs of living are better protected.
-  Guarantee long-term and permanent changes to the Universal Credit system to address the clearly identified loopholes and adequately cater to the challenging socio-economic context post-pandemic. Permanently mitigating the harms caused to families by removing the two-child limit and benefit cap would allow more children and their families to thrive and optimise their potential.
-  There should be further investment in Sure Start in existing areas to expand the level of targeted support to parents and children under the age of four. Taking account of updated census results plans should be developed and the funding identified to extend Sure Start provision by five percentage points to the 30% most deprived areas.





# Implementation of the Mental Health Strategy

Ensuring a Continuum of Care across the Lifespan

We were delighted to see the Mental Health Strategy launched this year with support from all parties. We welcome its emphasis on a whole-life, person-centred approach and improving accessibility to Mental Health Support through the “no wrong door” concept. It also laid out a vision to fully integrate the voluntary and community sector in mental health services delivery and create local pathways at community level to an overall regional structure.

It is crucial that clear protocols for this vision are developed via co-production with the sector to ensure all stakeholders are represented in the transformations proposed. The inclusion and participation of young people is another area where encouraging progress has been made, and this practice must continue to be valued going forward in the development of policy and services for children and young people.

As we now pivot to implementation stage, there are still significant challenges and opportunities to ensure children and young people have appropriate Mental Health Support and the Chance to Thrive.

The Mental Health Strategy rightly emphasises the need for early support and preventative approaches- at all stages and all areas of life. To provide a continuum of care across the lifespan requires an inclusive approach and a meaningful commitment to collaborative working.

It is our view that this would be best served by diversifying funding streams to allow for holistic services that cater to varied and sometimes complex needs. Careful consideration and reflection is also necessary regarding the impact of virtual and digital offerings that were developed during the pandemic.







# Key Recommendations

**For mental health and a change to thrive, we recommend...**



Avoid a “hollowing out of the middle-the services that help identify and support families and young children who are under pressure and struggling”- Preventative work at community-level is chronically underfunded and limited by undiversified funding streams. Without it, more children and families face avoidable crises.



Mental Health support in educational contexts should remain a priority. The VCSE have evidence-based preventative and early intervention services that can add value to school offerings and ease the burden on school leadership teams and their staff. For many children and young people, this is the best avenue for them to access emotional wellbeing support. However, careful consideration of how to better support more marginalised groups is also necessary; for example, care-experienced young people, young carers, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth and those living in temporary accommodation.



As members of the Stronger from the Start Alliance we continue to advocate for the need to include infants and ensure the needs of our youngest children and their parents are fully integrated into policy and action. This should translate into specific policy, funding and investment in universal support programmes for the Early Years and Parents as well as provide specialist mental health services specifically for 0-3s within CAMHS.



Early Years investment is the most evidenced and cost-effective way of transforming child and family outcomes. Our research "Parenting through a Pandemic" indicated that 4 in 5 Parents say they struggled with at least one symptom of potential parental burnout and nearly a third (30%) of parents say they have struggled with more than three symptoms. For a true recovery, we need to support parents and families practically and emotionally. Early Intervention Services, Family Support Hubs and Sure Starts have provided accessible and holistic Mental Health support and other vital services at community-level. These vital services should be clearly incorporated into the Mental health Regional System and enabled to deliver joined-up support for infants, children, young people and their families.



# **Safe, stable and loving homes**

For a child or young person, not having a safe or stable home is a traumatising experience, and often means long term impacts on their physical and mental health and overall life chances. A safe, stable and affordable home provides families a space to nurture the emotional and physical needs of their children which optimises their development and wellbeing outcomes across the lifespan.

A UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing has challenged governments to "make the elimination of homelessness a top human rights priority with particular attention on youth" because they "face record high unemployment, insurmountable education costs, harsh austerity measures and increasing economic inequality-conditions that propel homelessness among young people".

Increasing evidence is emerging that "People...who have suffered significant adversity in childhood are 16 times more likely than the general population to experience homelessness". This suggests the importance of early work to reduce and prevent homelessness should also be directly related to preventing and mitigating Adverse Childhood Experiences. It also relates to our other key concerns - addressing child poverty and prioritising mental health supports for infants, children and young people. Tackling homelessness generally is likely to positively impact on rates of youth homelessness and children entering the care system.







## **Working Towards Trauma-Informed Policymaking**

For those who do experience the trauma of circumstances of instability and homelessness—policymakers must be conscious of the need for developing practical solutions combined with social and health care.

We are hopeful that all parties can commit to becoming trauma-informed policymakers and work towards understanding that homelessness or entering the care system has implications for an individual in terms of:

- **How it shapes how they see themselves and their core beliefs**
- **How it impacts how their nervous system functions and how they relate to others or form attachments**
- **How they regulate their emotions and what coping mechanisms they might adopt to handle the stress of dislocation**

Therefore, it is crucial to recognise that the range of childhood experiences within this group demands a range of support options to meet different needs; including but not limited to: high quality Fostering Services, Floating Support, Supported Accommodation and Residential options that cater for physical, social and emotional needs simultaneously.



# Key Recommendations

**For safe, stable and loving homes, we recommend...**



Early preventative work must be included in the Homelessness Strategy and become a shared responsibility across the Programme for Government with clear links to other key pieces of Departmental Strategies. It is our view that early work to reduce and prevent homelessness through preventing and mitigating Adverse Childhood Experiences in children will have long-term gains.



Under 25s now represent 18% of those presenting as Homeless, and around 18% of all those placed in temporary accommodation settings. The Homelessness Strategy must include a clear vision and resourcing for youth homelessness prevention specifically for young people leaving care and targeting those transitioning from child to adult service provisions. It should also recognise and respond to the evidence that homelessness disproportionately impacts children and young people who are economically disadvantaged or have been exposed to multiple ACEs.



Shaping services through co-commissioning partnerships will better support children, young people and adults who find ACEs to be both a cause of homelessness and a barrier to accessing support.



Investing in a trauma-informed workforce and commissioning process should be a non-negotiable to enable the appropriate response to complex needs. For example, Health Strategies and commissioning structures linking to Mental Health/Substance Misuse must be clearly connected to Housing and Homelessness Prevention strategies.



The Executive should develop clear links and begin working together with Councils and Community Planning to share responsibility for monitoring homelessness in each jurisdiction. This should include setting targets and monitoring specific measurable outcomes relating to youth homelessness according to the different contexts that have variant dynamics and drivers causing instability.



The Housing Supply Strategy should include an updated selection scheme to ensure young people are not automatically excluded from housing options and invest in supply that caters specifically for the 16+ group. We suggest that the criteria used to assess "Priority Need" should be extended to include a clause that caters for vulnerable young people in need of independent housing.





# Key Recommendations

## For our Adoption and Fostering services, we recommend...



That the Adoption and Children's Bill is fully resourced for implementation.



Ensure there is a robust, fit for purpose family support model in place for kinship care, adoption and fostering processes and better support for transition procedures in the Care System. This includes supplying adequate housing options for children or young people who need temporary or residential accommodation.



Steps are taken in the next mandate to include CYPSP (Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership) on statutory footing. This would then enable the recommendations regarding the reshaping of the Safeguarding Board for NI into a Child Protection Partnership with CYPSP to be implemented.



The voluntary and community sector has once again demonstrated its value during the response to the pandemic. The last 18 months have demonstrated how precarious the funding arrangements are for the sector. There must be a commitment to reviewing funding models which includes a move away from the narrow procurement model of recent years to a partnership model which delivers partnership, responsiveness, sustainability and accountability.



# Closing Statements

**All our key areas of focus are inter-connected, and we cannot operate as isolated entities in order to achieve our desired impact. One of our core values is collaboration and we try to practice that internally and externally at every opportunity.**

**This document is the result of an internal collaborative process which identified other intersectional concerns that are key across our priorities for both policy and service provision. These are:**

## **Ensuring Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) are a cross-party political priority**

The experience of the pandemic raises significant questions around whether reforms around SEND have had the desired impact or are fit to respond to the current levels of need. There has rightly been considerable scrutiny of the current system's ability to support children and young people with SEND and it is our view, this emphasis should be maintained and prioritised in the next mandate. Across all of our services, we support a large number of infants, children, young people and their families with disabilities, neurodiversity and special educational needs. Waiting lists after referrals for support are unacceptable and cause considerable distress to far too many lives and livelihoods. We call on all parties to commit to prioritising reforms in this area, with proper investment, workforce development and accountability structures to ensure positive outcomes.

## **Workforce, Short-termism, Capacity and Regional Disparity**

Capacity restrictions and workforce investment is a weighty concern amongst our dedicated teams. In many scenarios, we often know or have resources that are evidence-based and prove to have positive outcomes, but we simply don't have the resources to provide them at full capacity. We urge all parties to prioritise long-term thinking regarding building a trauma-informed workforce, filling the gaps in current services and incentivising work opportunities and training pathways across the region and particularly in more rural settings to reduce regional disparities. Funding mechanisms must be reviewed towards more long-term approaches to training, recruitment and retention of health and social care workers and the services they offer with multi-year provisions with proper accountability and review processes in place.



# Next Steps

We look forward to engaging with all political parties on the issues outlined here and welcome further discussion how the Northern Ireland Executive can play a positive role in unleashing the full potential of every infant, child and young person in our society. Please get in touch if you would like to discuss any of the points made in this document.



## Contact

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## Stay in touch...



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