

# Children's Law Centre

BRIEFING

## CHILDREN'S SERVICES CO- OPERATION ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2015

PREPARED FOR THE NORTHERN IRELAND  
ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

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## Introduction and Background

The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015<sup>1</sup> (the "CSCA") came into effect in December 2015. It was a much-anticipated piece of legislation and for many years prior to its enactment by the Northern Ireland Assembly featured amongst the consistent calls and recommendations of many within the children's community and voluntary sector.

Those working with and advocating for children and young people argued (and continue to argue) that such legislation was necessary in order to drive positive change in culture and practice to end the damaging impact of "silo" working across departments, agencies and bodies who have responsibilities to our children and young people.

On 24<sup>th</sup> November 2025, the Children's Law Centre (CLC), in partnership with the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast hosted *From Promise to Practice: Realising the Vision of the Children's Services Co-operation Act*<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of the event was to mark the tenth anniversary of the introduction of the CSCA, alongside three further aims:

- To bring renewed attention to the Children's Services Co-operation Act, its content and duties;
- To explore the extent to which the Children's Service Co-operation Act has been effectively implemented, and its purpose and intention is being fulfilled; and
- To discuss how implementation of and compliance with the Children's Services Co-operation Act can be improved.

The event brought together approximately 100 attendees which included senior officials from various government departments and agencies, children's service providers, academics and representatives from the voluntary and community sector. Representatives from Youth@CLC<sup>3</sup> were also in attendance at the event.

In this briefing paper we will provide a summary of the contents and duties of the CSCA before exploring key themes from the event held in November 2025.

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<sup>1</sup> The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, accessible at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2015/10/contents/enacted>.

<sup>2</sup> Children's Law Centre and Queen's University Mark 10 Years of the Children's Services Co-operation Act. 24 November 2025. Accessible at: <https://childrenslawcentre.org.uk/clc-and-queens-mark-10-years-of-csca/>.

<sup>3</sup> Youth@CLC is the young people's advisory panel at the Children's Law Centre.

## The Children's Services Co-operation Act: An Overview

The CSCA is a relatively straightforward piece of legislation, the main provisions of which can be summarised as follows:

**Section 1** makes clear that the express purpose of the Act relates to improving the well-being of children and young people. It also sets out a non-exhaustive list of specific aspects of the life of a child or young person which contribute to their well-being;

- a. Physical and mental health;
- b. The enjoyment of play and leisure;
- c. Learning and achievement;
- d. Living in safety and with stability;
- e. Economic and environmental well-being;
- f. The making by them of a positive contribution to society;
- g. Living in a society which respects their rights;
- h. Living in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted between persons who share a relevant characteristic and persons who do not share that characteristic (i.e. Section 75 characteristics)

The Act here also sets out that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) informs the interpretation of well-being: *"In determining the meaning of well-being for the purposes of this Act, regard is to be had to any relevant provision of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child...<sup>4</sup>"*

**Section 2** of the Act places a statutory duty on every children's authority to co-operate with other children's authorities and with other children's service providers in the exercise of their children functions in order to improve children and young people's well-being. Section 2 also places a duty on the Executive to make arrangements to promote such co-operation, as well placing a duty on all children's authorities and the Executive to co-operate in developing those arrangements.

**Section 3** requires the Executive to adopt a strategy which sets out how it will improve the well-being of children and young people with named outcomes, actions to achieve those outcomes and how it will be determined whether, and to what extent, those outcomes have been achieved.

**Section 4** contains an enabling power for children's authorities to pool resources (including staff, goods, services, accommodation or other resources) and to make contributions to a fund from which relevant payments may be made to contributing service providers to enable them to carry out their functions.

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<sup>4</sup> The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, accessible at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2015/10/contents/enacted>.

**Section 5** sets out the duty upon the Executive to report on the operation of the CSCA. This requires reports to be published which outline action taken to achieve the outcomes set out in the children and young people's strategy as well as progress made in achieving those outcomes. Reports on the operation of the Act must also set out how children's authorities and children's service providers have co-operated, how they have exercised the enabling power to pool resources and ultimately, how children and young people's well-being has improved. The reports are also required to identify further opportunities for co-operation as well as other ways in which children and young people's well-being can be improved.

**Section 6** of the Act requires the Executive to take account of the most recent report on the operation of the CSCA in preparing a programme for government.

**Section 7** provides that the First and deputy First Minister may issue guidance to children's authorities on the exercise of functions conferred by the Act.

**Section 8** of the CSCA empowers the Department of Finance to make provision through regulations for procedures to be followed when pooling resources.

# **From Promise to Practice: Realising the Vision of the Children's Services Co-operation Act**

## **i. Event Outline**

As referenced above, *From Promise to Practice: Realising the Vision of the Children's Services Co-operation Act* took place in November 2025 to mark the tenth anniversary of the introduction of the CSCA.

The event was structured around three key sections<sup>5</sup>:

1. Session one focused on exploring the origins of the CSCA, the context within which it was being argued for, the impetus for change and the intention of the legislation.
2. Session two was dedicated to reflecting on the ten years since the introduction of the Act to assess progress made in its implementation. This was achieved through two panels, one comprised of senior officials from the Departments of Health, Education, Finance and Justice and another comprised of senior leaders from leading community and voluntary sector organisations.
3. The third and final session of the event was less formally structured and invited attendees to participate in roundtable discussions from which notes were taken. These discussions were intended to be future-focused with discussion prompts provided encouraging attendees to consider the second decade of the CSCA.

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<sup>5</sup> The event programme can be accessed at this link: <https://childrenslawcentre.org.uk/?mdocs-file=8648>

## **ii. Session One: Origins, context, impetus and intention**

During this session of the event some of the key themes raised by contributors can be summarised as follows:

- The case for some form of statutory duty to co-operate had been building for many years as there was a growing depth of concern in relation to the impacts being felt by children and young people, particularly the most vulnerable children and young by the seeming inability of different parts of “the system” to work together meaningfully.
- The evidence has always supported the now established consensus that children’s lives cannot be neatly separated or divided up and that children and young people’s needs must be considered holistically, reflecting the fact that their rights are indivisible.
- For many who had argued for the CSCA, its passage through the Assembly was an acknowledgement of a simple truth - that children only have one childhood and cannot afford the missed opportunities created by fragmented systems and disconnected approaches.
- Political support grew during the passage of the Bill and ultimately the Assembly reached a clear consensus in favour of its provisions, mandating a clear direction about the need to change structures and mechanisms to drive change in culture and practice.
- Part of the Act’s value was seen by some stakeholders as being an attempt to address the power imbalance felt by many children and those who advocate for them in trying to fulfil their rights within a complex system of government and governance that didn’t have a central focus on the child.
- This also raised questions about the visibility of children and young people within government in Northern Ireland; how they are prioritised (or not) and whether their experiences and views are taken seriously in decision making.
- There was also an acknowledgement that while Northern Ireland has a unique structure of government which may create additional barriers to timely and effectively co-operation, the frustrations felt by many in arguing for the Act are not necessarily all unique to this jurisdiction.

### iii. Session Two: Looking back and assessing progress

This session featured two panels, one comprised of senior officials from the Departments of Education, Finance, Health and Justice and another comprised of senior leaders from leading community and voluntary sector organisations.

Key reflections from the panel of senior officials from government departments can be summarised as follows:

- That, despite challenges, there has been progress in the implementation of the Act. This can be observed by the production of the Children and Young People's Strategy and related delivery plan as well as new governance structures that exist around these. It was also acknowledged that two reports on the operation of the CSCA have now been published.
- Contributors also reflected on practical examples of meaningful co-operation across government departments and children's authorities more broadly which have demonstrably achieved the purpose of improving the well-being of specific groups of children and young people. However, there also appeared to be a general consensus that activity like this wasn't necessarily driven by the Act itself or by the need to comply with the Act.
- Similarly, in reflecting on the two reports on the operation of the Act which have now been published, it was acknowledged that it is difficult if not impossible to draw a clear line from the Act to the examples of co-operation that are being reported or evidenced.
- There was a suggestion that while finance can at times be a meaningful enabler for co-operation, it is also potentially used as an excuse not to progress with potential forms of deeper collaboration. There was also an acknowledgment that there may still be cultural uncertainties about what is and is not allowed in terms of the pooling of resources in order to facilitate co-operation. It was highlighted that whilst it has not exercised its regulation-making powers under Section 8 of the Act, the Department of Finance has produced practical Guidance on pooling of budgets<sup>6</sup>.
- In considering potential areas for improvement in relation to the implementation of the CSCA, contributors were united on the need for a consistent and co-ordinated approach which focuses on considering the whole child, to meet their holistic needs. It was also suggested that those in frontline delivery tend to be better at co-operation instinctively.
- A significant theme of the discussion also related to being able to effectively demonstrate the difference that is being made to the lives of children and young people. There was an acknowledgement that this is not currently

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<sup>6 6</sup> Department of Finance: Guidance on Pooling of Budgets. Updated 6 March 2025. Accessible at: <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-pooling-budgets>.

happening in the way it should be and that being clear about what is measured and what needs to be measured in order to understand how outcomes for children and young people are improving requires greater focus going forward.

Key reflections from the panel of senior leaders from the community and voluntary sector can be summarised as follows:

- The children's sector had long argued for duties such as those that were realised in the CSCA, in fact many had hoped for a stronger piece of legislation with greater accountability mechanisms, clearer requirements in terms of monitoring and reporting as well as a mandatory duty to pool resources (rather than a power). The CSCA was what was politically possible and any piece of legislation that recognises individual children and rights holders is to be welcomed, even if the CSCA has not seen its full potential realised yet.
- An acknowledgment that there are pockets of good practice in terms of relevant authorities working together in the best interests of children and young people but that this is often the result of good people in the right place at the right time, rather than a cultural or systemic approach driven to comply with the duties of the Act. There was also a suggestion that where there are examples of good practice there is also scepticism about the ability to scale such good practice up and develop integrated systems, given that public authority children's functions continue to operate in siloes at various levels.
- There was also a clear consensus across the panel that for many children and young people, and for specific demographics of children and young people with particular characteristics – that their well-being will actually have regressed in the decade since the introduction of the CSCA and that the urgency of the Act's intention, to improve well-being of children, has only grown in nature.
- A substantial theme related to the collection and sharing of data by duty bearers to better understand, pre-empt and address the needs of children and young people. This was also raised in the context of a demand to work collectively to establish a clear understanding of what should be measured to determine children and young people's well-being in Northern Ireland. There was a strong emphasis placed on determining a baseline of children and young people's well-being in order to assess the performance of government against this as a way to improve compliance with the Act, celebrate and share best practice but most importantly, to understand whether the well-being of children and young people is actually being improved.
- Concerns were also raised about whether there was currently a tangible way to seek accountability for non-compliance with the Act.

## **IV. Session Three: The second decade of the Children's Services Co-operation Act**

The structure of this third and final session was less formal in nature, providing attendees with an opportunity to reflect their own considerations, expertise and experience.

Attendees were assigned places on arrival to ensure a balance of representation for each table discussion. A facilitator and notetaker was present at each table with discussion prompts provided to enable the discussions.

Below we have summarised key themes from the record of the table discussions.

- Attendees appeared unconvinced of any meaningful levels of awareness of the CSCA either within, “the system” or within the public.
- A consensus was reflected in discussions that a clear understanding of what well-being means should be prioritised by determining a set of specific measures that can be monitored to track improvements in children and young people's well-being.
- Concerns were noted across a number of discussions in relation to a growing lack of faith and trust in government to deliver meaningful change. Collective political leadership was identified consistently as a foundational enabler for more effective and meaningful co-operation.
- Attendees appeared to agree that children and young people, their families and advocates (including the voluntary and community sector) should be directly involved in supporting duty bearers to understand how to co-operate more effectively and how to understand and measure well-being.
- Meaningful participation of children and young people was a feature of multiple table discussions with attendees questioning how authentic existing attempts at engaging children really are. Attendees appeared to feel that where children and young people's views are sought, it is often ad hoc, poorly planned and often isn't reflected in the decisions that are then taken.
- A number of attendees suggested that children and young people do not appear to be a political priority and that we should revisit structures which previously existed where there was a central children's policy unit which sat within the Executive's co-ordinating department (OFMdFM, now The Executive Office).
- Attendees were also clear that further spaces and opportunities like this event - to allow for an honest and frank exchange of views – would be beneficial to build relationships, share experiences and also to fulfil the intention of the Act by creating opportunities for co-operation.

## V. Reflections from Youth@CLC

As referenced at the beginning of this briefing document, a number of members of the Children's Law Centre's young people's advisory panel, Youth@CLC, attended the event.

Youth@CLC members participated in the same discussion as other attendees and at the end of the third session were invited to share their feedback and reflections.

Below summarises the key themes of what they told us:

- Children and young people should know about the CSCA and other measures that exist to protect and defend their rights. They deserve better education to understand that these protections exist and how to enforce them.
- Does everyone have the same understanding of well-being and what it is, does it mean different things to different young people and how is that being taken into account in how well-being is measured and monitored? Children and young people should be involved in defining well-being and deciding how to measure it.
- So much of the 'youth voice' and 'youth participation' that government does it tokenistic. Young people have a right to be heard and for their views to be meaningfully taken into account, not to be used for photo opportunities or to "tick a box".
- Politics doesn't seem to care about young people. If plans and strategies are being developed about children and young people then children and young people should recognise themselves and their lives in those plans and strategies through proper engagement and consultation.
- Monitoring of the CSCA and its impact should be more thorough and children and young people should have a role in influencing how that is done to ensure it is reliable and authentic.

## Monitoring, reporting and relevant developments

The first report on the operation of the CSCA, covering the period June 2020 – June 2022 was published in July 2024<sup>7</sup>, having been delayed due to the collapse of devolution. The second report, covering the period June 2022 – June 2025 was then published in July 2025<sup>8</sup>.

CLC responded at the time of the publication of the second report on the operation of the Act with the following statement:

*The publication of this report provides an important opportunity to reflect seriously on how well government, public bodies and children's services providers more generally are working together to improve the lives of our children and young people.*

*Regrettably, the second report on the operation of the Children's Services Co-operation Act reinforces why the Act was, and remains, necessary. While there are some indications of the very early beginnings of progress in limited areas, systemic, strategic change at a cross-departmental level is largely absent and has to date mainly occurred in reaction to widescale systemic crises. In places, this report reflects just how low the bar is when it comes to planning and executing meaningful, proactive, strategic co-operation. It is yet further evidence of how children and young people are being seriously failed and reflects an inconsistent and often piecemeal approach to how the Act is understood and complied with.*

*As we approach a decade since the introduction of the Children's Services Co-operation Act, it is also deeply concerning that a report on the operation of the Act provides such little data and analysis on how the wellbeing of children has actually, tangibly improved. Perhaps that isn't surprising given the marked decline in the lives of so many of our children, particularly the most vulnerable, over the last decade. We witness the reality of this decline through the experiences of those who contact our advice service on a daily basis.*

*Importantly, this report does acknowledge key areas for improvement to enable compliance with the Act. The issues identified are not new, they have been raised and repeated many, many times, not least by those organisations who work most closely with and for children and young people. The wide-ranging nature of those areas for improvement speaks to the scale of unfulfilled potential when it comes to co-operation between all those with a responsibility for delivering services with potential to improve the wellbeing of children.*

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Education: First Report on the Operation of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. 24 July 2024. Accessible at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/first-report-operation-childrens-services-co-operation-act-northern-ireland-2015>.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Education: Second Report on the Operation of the Children's Service Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. 30 July 2025. Accessible at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/second-report-operation-childrens-services-co-operation-act-northern-ireland-2015>.

The areas for improvements identified by both reports can be summarised as follows:

	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Report (December 2020 – June 2022)</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Report (June 2022 – June 2025)</b>
<b>Areas for Improvement Identified</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longer term planning and funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stable funding and longer-term planning</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritisation of actions and specific groups of children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritising actions and specific groups of children</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement with children and young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement with children and young people</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data availability and sharing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data availability</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pooling of resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pooling of resources</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing good practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing information and good practice</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrating co-operation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deeper and earlier cooperation</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government partnership with voluntary and community organisations</li> <li>• Joint training and development</li> </ul>

In addition to the reports on the operation of the Act, it is also important to note that guidance on the Children's Services Co-operation Act was issued in 2018 and revised by the Department of Education in March 2022<sup>9</sup>.

The Department of Finance similarly issued new guidance on the pooling of budgets in April 2025 which has been revised in March 2026<sup>10</sup>. In addition, the Department of Finance has also published a report and action plan<sup>11</sup> in response to the Public Accounts Committee Report on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland which identified barriers to fulfilling the CSCA's potential.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Education: Guidance on the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. 14 November 2018. Accessible at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-childrens-services-co-operation-act-northern-ireland-2015>.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Finance: Guidance on Pooling of Budgets. Updated 6 March 2025. Accessible at: <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-pooling-budgets>.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Finance: Removing barriers to the Children's Services Co-operation Act – Action Plan. 15 December 2025. Accessible at: <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/removing-barriers-childrens-services-co-operation-act>.

## Conclusion

By bringing a broad range of stakeholders together, *From Promise to Practice* provided an opportunity for an honest stocktake of the CSCA's first decade and to provide a clear steer for the future.

Contributors reaffirmed the original impetus for the Act - the need to end siloed practices and to centre children's rights and well-being - and confirmed that the core rationale remains compelling: children only have one childhood, and fragmented systems still too often miss the chance to meet holistic needs.

There is evidence of progress - an Executive Strategy, delivery structures, and practical examples of joint working that have made a tangible difference for some children and young people. Yet the causal line from statutory duty to everyday practice is not consistently visible; and the system remains better at describing activity than evidencing planned improvements in well-being.

In CLC's view, the Act's second decade must be defined by disciplined planning, action, measurement and visible positive outcomes. The collection, analysis and reporting of data will be key to this. All data should be relevant to, and disaggregated by, the Act's eight elements of well-being and by Section 75 equality characteristics so that performance can be tracked transparently. The public must be able to clearly see what measurable difference the compliance with the mandatory statutory duty to co-operate is making to children's lives. That requires a shared measurement set, common definitions, and routine publication of outcomes that matter to children and families.

CLC is clear that provision must be targeted towards the needs of the most vulnerable - including children and young people with legally protected equality characteristics. These are the groups for whom fragmented systems do the greatest harm, and for whom meaningful co-operation and pooled resources can yield the greatest gains, particularly in economically challenging times. Effective implementation must be planned and resourced in the short, medium and long term, with sustainable funding and close, cross-departmental monitoring of cumulative impacts and outcomes across all eight elements of well-being.

It is now essential for children's authorities, together with children's services providers, to explore all possibilities for effective solutions, co-designing with service users and service-based staff who understand where processes fail and where collaboration can make the greatest difference to efficiency and effectiveness. That means normalising deep, outcomes-focused co-operation, using the Act's enabling powers to unlock pooled resources where they add value, and evidencing impact with the same discipline we bring to describing process. This work must include children and young people directly.

The Northern Ireland Assembly enacted the CSCA as an innovative, system-wide lever to improve the well-being of all children and young people. The task for the second decade of the Act is to maximise its full potential as intended - so that its duties become part of the design of public authority service delivery, ensuring good practice in improving well-being becomes common practice for every child. The next

decade must translate legislative intent into measurable, visible improvements in the lives of all children and young people.

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