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MEMORANDUM E (20) 186 (C)

FROM: ROBIN SWANN
MINISTER OF HEALTH

DATE: 6 AUGUST 2020

TO: EXECUTIVE

FINAL EXECUTIVE PAPER: Cross-Departmental Covid-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan

Background

1. Public health restrictions have created new, or intensified existing, challenges and risks for many children, young people and their families.
2. Lockdown restrictions have created a range of pressures on families - financial pressures, as well as pressures from isolation and loss of wider family support and social networks. Many families, are not able to access the same level of support from services as pre-lockdown and school closures have created particular challenges for families as they try to balance home life and online learning.
3. Some children and young people are at a greater risk of harm in the home. This can be due to factors including parental conflict and domestic abuse. With more time spent online, children and young people are also at greater risk of online harm.
4. With the majority of schools closed, health services restricted and children's social care services unable to provide the full range of support and many not seeing children face-to-face, children are less visible than before.

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Covid-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan

5. My Department has lead on the development of a Covid-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan, which has been produced on a cross-departmental basis with DfC, DE and DOJ (Annex A).
6. The Plan has been developed in response to the challenges and risks facing children, young people and their families due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is intended to reflect a series of activities that will be, or have been, undertaken across the Executive to meet the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families during this time and in the recovery period after. In developing the plan 'vulnerable child or young person' has been considered in its widest sense, as outlined in the Plan and includes young adults who are care leavers.

Objectives of the Plan

7. The objectives of the plan are to:
 - promote the safety and well-being of children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic period;
 - to strengthen system capacity to respond to current challenges and risks; and
 - to make preparations for future rebuilding of services.
8. The plan reflects the activities that are being undertaken to support children and vulnerable families during the Covid-19. It reflects how services have adapted and enhanced provision to continue to support children and families during Covid-19 as well as new actions that have been undertaken specifically to address some of lockdown risks and challenges.
9. The plan will help support the next steps in rebuilding services to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people. It is anticipated, and

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evidence is beginning to emerge, that that the prolonged period of lockdown will result in increased demand for support. The objectives in the short-term will be to respond to the immediate needs of children and families, in particular those in need of protection, at risk of family breakdown. In the medium term, the objective will be to ensure that there is sufficient capacity within services to deal with increased demand and prepare for a second potential COVID-19 wave. Building resilience into services and embedding innovative practice that has emerged from the pandemic will be a longer-term objective. The plan will seek to respond to service rebuild challenges, including providing services that meet the needs of children and families while continuing to manage public health restrictions and will also take account of the limitations that those restrictions impose in effectively identifying risks and in delivering relationship based services that are critical to supporting vulnerable children and their families.

Review of the Plan

10. The issues faced by children and families continue to evolve as more information is known and as the situation changes. My department will use available data and intelligence to identify emerging issues and keep the Plan under review.
11. The expectation is that both an Equality Impact Assessments and a Rural Needs Assessments will have been carried out at individual policy level for the actions within the plan.

Targeted Consultation

12. It is proposed to publish the plan and to undertake a short, targeted consultation on the actions within it, with the aim of identifying any gaps or emerging issues where further actions need to be identified and included.

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13. It is envisaged that Departments would continue to engage with delivery partners, including those in the voluntary and community sector, in relation to issues facing children and young people and their families throughout the pandemic period and beyond.

Responses from Executive Colleagues

14. Responses have been received from the Ministers of Justice; Communities; Economy; Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs; Infrastructure, Education and Finance. The First and deputy First Ministers have not yet responded.
15. The Education; Infrastructure and the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Ministers indicated they were supportive of the draft plan.
16. Substantive comments were received from the Ministers of Justice; Economy; and Communities.
17. The Justice Minister welcomed the plan and the range of interventions and asked for two changes to the plan – one was removing the work “support” from the reference to “Community Support Hubs” to avoid any confusion with the separate Multi-Agency Support Hubs and the second was including a reference to the Tackling Paramilitarism, Organised Crime and Criminality Programme. Both of these suggested amendments have been incorporated.
18. The Economy Minister asked for the plan to include reference to the Peace4Youth Programme. This has now been incorporated into the plan.
19. The Communities Minister asked for a number of changes to be made to the plan including:
 - for the plan to reflect the vulnerabilities and barriers faced by children and young people who attend - or would need to be able to access -

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Knowing Our Identity (KOI) services regarding children's gender identity;

- the addition of a glossary of terms;
- inclusion of children whose parents have no recourse to public funds in the definition of vulnerable child;
- adding "of services" after "...make preparations for future rebuild.";
- replacing "data and intelligence" under Monitoring and Reporting of Plan with "facts, statistics and anecdotal evidence";
- clarification of an existing action to reflect that an agreement is in place that social housing tenants facing rent difficulties due to COVID-19 will not be evicted;
- updated action on action relating to access to food;
- an additional action in relation to access to Libraries for children to provide them with the space and facilities to do school work;
- clarification of which key programmes of grant funding are being prioritised by DfC (Neighbourhood Renewal, Areas at Risk and Small Pockets of Deprivation); and
- inclusion of link to new NI Maternity website.

20. In relation to the Knowing Our Identity (KOI) service, the Belfast Trust (which has responsibility for providing the service) advised that the KOI service was not suspended. Essential contact was delivered remotely and some endocrine clinics were postponed in the very early days of Covid-19 due to Beechhall becoming a Covid-19 assessment centre. These clinics were then also moved to remote delivery. The plan has not been amended as a result of the comments provided in relation to KOI as it is considered to be adequately covered by Action 1.6(i) "Children and young people services continuing to be provided, where possible, including by alternative means or with additional measures in place to facilitate public health restrictions."

21. The Finance Minister welcomed the plan and has recommended that NICCY, the Children's Law Centre and Barnardo's are included in the

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targeted consultation. He has also advised that while many of the actions have already started, going forward each department will be responsible for ensuring that the actions are appropriately costed and funding made available to ensure they can be actioned, with those actions which deliver greatest benefit prioritised.

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22. The remainder of the changes are reflected in the revised plan.

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Recommendations

14.23. The Executive is asked to:

- i. Agree the revised draft of the Cross-Departmental Covid-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan (Annex A); and
- ii. Agree to a targeted consultation on the plan.

ROBIN SWANN MLA
MINISTER OF HEALTH

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