



Children England submission to the Joint Committee on Human Rights: Children's Rights

Introduction

1. Children England welcomes the decision of the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) to undertake a short inquiry on children's rights, following up the recent concluding observations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children on the UK as well as several JCHR reports.
2. As the leading membership organisation for the children, young people and families voluntary sector, Children England is in a unique position to represent charities that work with children, young people and families. Our members include the largest children's charities in the country through to small local groups. Our mission is to create a fairer world for children, young people and families by championing the voluntary organisations which work on their behalf.
3. This short submission does not attempt to cover each aspect of Children England's concern in relation to children's rights. Rather it sets out some of the key themes that we believe must be addressed, and we would urge the Committee to consider embarking on a more detailed inquiry into children's rights in the UK.

Building a culture of children's rights

4. Almost twenty years on since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a great deal of progress has been made in children's rights. The Every Child Matters agenda has ensured that children's policy has been at the forefront of government thinking, whilst more recently the ambitions and proposals set out in the Children's Plan are commendable and have real potential.
5. However, there is still a real need not only to ensure that the principles of children's rights are thoroughly embedded throughout policymaking and practice, but also that there is a clear and common understanding of what children's human rights mean.
6. Much more needs to be done by Government and bodies such as the Equalities and Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Children's Commissioner to ensure that the public has a good understanding of children's human rights. We share the previously voiced concerns of the Children's Rights Alliance for England, who have observed that 79 per cent of its members do not think that the public has a good understanding of children's rights and that only 20 per cent of its members agreed that Government Ministers have a good understanding of children's rights.

7. We are especially concerned that children are too often negatively portrayed in the media and in political debate and that this weakens the concept of children's rights. If we are serious about building a culture of children's human rights then there needs to be a more sophisticated approach within a human rights framework to how to support children who pose challenges, such as those who break the law or who have behavioural problems.
8. The Committee should give serious consideration to how it can promote the greater participation of children in decision-making. As Children England's own work on issues such as Placeshaping (as part of the Speaking Out Project in partnership with the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services) has shown, when children are involved in making decisions it is not only empowering for those involved but can also lead to better-informed policymaking which can promote the rights of other children.
9. We would welcome the JCHR giving sustained consideration to how a greater shared understanding of children's human rights can be built and how a human rights culture can be better developed.

Protecting the rights of the most vulnerable

10. We welcome the Committee's announcement that issues of particular interest include children in detention, asylum seeking children and child trafficking victims. We would also urge the Committee to focus on other particularly vulnerable groups, especially children in care and care leavers, children with disabilities, homeless children and children in contact with the youth justice system.
11. We are especially concerned that many of the most vulnerable children are drawn into a youth justice system which too often is unable to meet their needs. Whilst there is an undoubted need to address problematic and criminal behaviour, drawing children into a stigmatising criminal justice system isn't always the answer. There needs to be greater investment in diversionary schemes and solutions including adolescent mental health services, family support, restorative justice and mediation. There also needs to be greater investment in prevention if future generations of vulnerable children are not to be drawn into the youth justice system.
12. Vulnerable children could benefit greatly from access to an improved and standardised complaints system along with appropriate support and advocacy.
13. In light of the particular vulnerabilities of many children in care, the Committee may want to particularly explore the case for unrestricted access to independent advocacy being available to children in care on a statutory basis.

Social and economic rights

14. We welcome the Committee's focus on how best to enshrine in law the Government's goal of eradicating child poverty by 2020, in view of the right of every child to an adequate standard of living under Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is vital, however, that the focus on 2020 should not detract

from the pressing need for Government to invest the necessary resources to reach the interim target of halving child poverty by 2010. Child poverty legislation must also define child poverty – and ensure that housing costs are taken account of in any measurement.

15. We urge the Committee to engage with the children, young people and families voluntary sector to ensure that its knowledge, skills and experience of working with children in and on the edges of poverty is taken fully account of in taking forward work on children's economic rights. Tackling inequalities and social exclusion, as well as child poverty, must be at the heart of work to uphold children's rights.

Supporting those who work with children

16. It is essential that those who work with children are equipped to protect and promote the rights of the children they work with. This requires appropriate training and ongoing professional development, as well as a policies and procedures in place to ensure appropriate support and monitoring.
17. Children England is currently working with the Children's Workforce Development Council to explore ways of ensuring the children, young people and families voluntary sector workforce continues to receive adequate support. We urge the Committee to acknowledge the importance of ensuring training and support for all those who work with children and families, and the need for sustained government funding to take this forward.
18. We are concerned that a great deal of expertise within the children, young people and families voluntary sector risks being lost because of uncertainty around funding, not least because of short-term contracts and late decisions about contract renewals. Protecting children's human rights requires first class, experienced staff and we can ill afford to risk losing highly qualified staff from the sector because of uncertainty about statutory sector funding for vital services.

Next steps

19. Children England would like the Committee to build on its current call for evidence and launch a more detailed systematic inquiry into children's human rights. Twenty years on from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child such an inquiry could not be timelier. We note the impact that many of the Committee's previous inquiries have had and believe that a detailed focus on an issue such as building a culture of children's rights or protecting the rights of children in the care of the state could make a real difference.
20. Children England would be keen to work with the JCHR in any way that would be useful, including through facilitating discussions through our membership or arranging for a selection of voluntary organisations that work with children, young people and families - including smaller charities whose voices are often not heard – to give evidence to the committee.

For further information please contact Joe Levenson, Children England's Director of Policy and Communication, on 020 7833 3319 or joe@childrenengland.org.uk

