

Westminster Hall Debate

'Developing a cross-Government strategy for improving outcomes for children and families'

- David Simmonds MP

About us

The Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) works with over 100 members to promote children's rights and monitor government implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. CRAE fights for children's rights by listening to what children say, carrying out research to understand what children are going through and challenging those who violate children's rights. CRAE merged into Just for Kids Law in 2015. For more info visit: www.crae.org.uk

CRAE fully supports the need for a cross Government strategy for improving outcomes for children and families. As the UK emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic and on the road to recovery, a strategy is needed now more than ever, to ensure children are at the heart of our recovery. The impact of the pandemic on children has been significant. While certain actions were necessary to protect public health like national lockdowns and school closures, they have had an unprecedented effect on children's education, wellbeing, and the delivery of vital services. Any strategy should put children's rights, and the voices of children and young people, at its heart.

Why is a cross-government strategy needed?

A cross -government strategy would ensure that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the key framework for implementing children's rights and their needs, from conception to adulthood, would be fully implemented across every aspect of the Convention.

Article 4 of the CRC obliges countries to 'undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognised in the present Convention.'

In its General Comment number 5 (on the implementation of the CRC)¹, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee) has made clear that *'government as a whole and at all levels is to promote and respect the rights of the child, it needs to work on the basis of a unifying, comprehensive and rights-based national strategy, rooted in the Convention'*. Such a strategy must go beyond statements of policy and principle, to set real and achievable targets in relation to the rights of children.

Following its last examination of the UK in 2016, the UN Committee called for the revision of the UK-wide child rights strategy (published in 2009) and the adoption of comprehensive child rights action plans to deliver the strategy in England (and the devolved nations). It also recommended the UK *'allocate sufficient human, technical and financial resources, set up clear timelines as well as a monitoring and evaluation framework for the implementation of the strategy'* and pay particular attention to the most vulnerable groups.²

¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003) General Comment No. 5 on the General Measures of Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6)

² UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016) *Concluding Observations on the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*

The UK Government will be next examined by the UN Committee in 2022 and it has requested in its recent List of Issues to the Government (the answers to which will form the basis of the UK State Party report) the following information on a strategy:³

6. Please provide information on:

(a) Ensuring comprehensive implementation of the Convention across all areas of government, in the absence of an updated State-wide strategy and corresponding action plans in England, Wales and Northern Ireland;

(b) Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation and impact of policies and programmes for children's rights, including the 2009 Working Together, Achieving More strategy;

(c) Establishing statutory bodies at inter-ministerial levels in devolved administrations, overseas territories and Crown dependencies to effectively coordinate the implementation of the Convention.

Reinstating the Minister for Children to attend Cabinet

We believe a key mechanism to implement a cross-government strategy to facilitate cross-Whitehall working and ensure children's needs and rights are at the heart of Government action and policy making in the country's recovery, would be to re-instate the Minister for Children to attend Cabinet. This role would ensure there was policy coordination and delivery across all Government departments that have an impact on children e.g. the Ministry of Justice, Home Office, Department for Health, Department for Work and Pensions and that policy responses to children are not focused only around education or vulnerable children because they only come under the remit of the Department for Education, but consider the varying needs of all children as mandated by the CRC.

Again, this is a key proposal by the UN Committee. In its 2016 examination of the UK, it reiterated its previous recommendation from 2008 which said that effective mechanisms should be put in place 'at a high inter-ministerial level with a clear mandate and sufficient authority to coordinate all activities across the relevant sectors' with responsibility for implementing the CRC.

In 2018, the Children and Families Minister was demoted from a Minister of State to a Parliamentary Under Secretary of State. We would like to see the role of Minister for Children reinstated to attend Cabinet, as they did pre 2010, to ensure children are placed at the heart of the country's recovery and that 'levelling up' includes children. This is a vitally important role that will coordinate and lead our country's response to the pandemic on behalf of children, babies and families to ensure all children have a good childhood and a bright future.

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³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2021) *List of issues prior to submission of the combined sixth and seventh reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*
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