

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Opening Statement by Tom Jeffery, Head of United Kingdom Delegation to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

Madam Chair, members of the Committee, we are very pleased to have the opportunity to be with you today.

Introductions

I am Tom Jeffery and I am the Director General for Children and Families in the United Kingdom Government's Department for Children, Schools and Families.

I am delighted to be able to bring with me a large and senior delegation of officials. The delegation reflects both the importance we attach to our responsibilities under the Convention; and also the extent to which the United Kingdom Government has devolved responsibilities for children's issues to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I will touch on this in a moment.

Let me introduce my colleagues from the Devolved Administrations:

From Scotland:

- Colin Maclean, Director of Schools; and
- Kit Wyeth, Head of Children's Rights.

From Wales:

- Suzanne Chisholm, Head of Children and Young People's Rights and Entitlements,
- Keith Ingham, Director of Children's Health and Social Services;
- Ian Butler, Specialist Policy Adviser to the Cabinet Committee for Children and Young People; and

From Northern Ireland:

- Eddie Rooney, Director of Equality from the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister;
- Paul Martin, Chief Social Services Officer from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; and
- Tony Kavanagh, Head of the Youth Justice Policy Unit in the Northern Ireland Office, who is responsible for justice and security matters that are not devolved to the Northern Irish administration.

My colleagues from the Department for Children Schools and Families are:

- Anne Jackson, Director of Child Wellbeing, who shares responsibility with others across Government for child health and child poverty;
- Andrew McCully, Director of Young People Group;
- Jeanette Pugh, Director of Safeguarding Group;
- Sheila Scales, Director of Early Years, Extended Schools and Special Needs Group;
- Shirley Trundle, Director of Families Group;
- Helen Williams, Director of Curriculum and Pupil Wellbeing Group; and

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- Sandra Walker, Deputy Director in our legal advisor's office.

From other Government Departments we are pleased to have with us:

- Christine Stewart, Director of Law and Sentencing Policy from the Ministry of Justice;
- Jeremy Oppenheim, the Children's Champion and Director of Organisational Design and Development at the United Kingdom Borders Agency of the Home Office; and
- Susan Dickson, Legal Counsellor from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Tomorrow, the delegation will change as I shall be joined by colleagues from the Ministry of Defence to have our first opportunity to discuss with you the Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict.

Four nations approach

I said I would return to the issue of devolution.

Our reports to the Committee reflect our four nations approach to implementation of the UNCRC in the United Kingdom, set within the context of devolution.

When we were last in Geneva, the implications of the greater devolution of power to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were only just becoming apparent. Now, 6 years later, devolution has developed significantly.

The precise nature of the arrangements varies – reflecting long-standing settlements. But, broadly, the United Kingdom Government in Westminster is responsible for defence, macroeconomic policy and foreign affairs. The devolved administrations are responsible for education, health and social policy, with Scotland also having responsibility for justice. The UK Government raises taxes and distributes the revenue to the administrations who, according to their powers, decide how they are to be used.

It follows that the UK Government is the state party so far as the UNCRC is concerned but the devolved administrations make their own contribution to the realisation of children's rights in their respective territories, according to their jurisdictions. Inevitably, this will entail different emphases, not least as the democratically elected administrations comprise different political parties. But all four administrations are wholly committed to the UNCRC. All of us work closely together on the Convention, with my team coordinating our efforts; and there are regular meetings between the administrations on general and particular matters including, for example, child safety.

As you will also be aware, the British Overseas Territories have their own constitutions and laws. Implementation of human rights in the Territories is devolved to Territory Governments. Unfortunately, no representatives from the Overseas Territories have been able to attend this dialogue. However, my

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colleagues from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, will endeavor to deal with any questions you may have concerning the Territories. Where we cannot answer any territory-specific questions we will, of course, revert to the Committee in writing.

Scale of United Kingdom's ambition

Children are at the heart of the agenda in each of the United Kingdom's four administrations.

We are committed to:

- securing the health and wellbeing of every child and young person;
- attaining world class educational standards so that all children and young people can participate and achieve; and
- driving forward the reform of children's services to provide an integrated and responsive service that meet the needs of children and young people, in particular those who are vulnerable.

We have taken significant steps towards these ends since our last dialogue with the Committee, but we are clear that we have further to go to realise our ambitions for the United Kingdom's children and young people. All four nations in the United Kingdom have developed – and are now implementing – far-reaching, long-term strategies to deliver improved outcomes.

The Government's Children's Plan for England published at the end of last year, builds on the extensive reforms undertaken to improve children's outcomes through the Every Child Matters programme. The Children's Plan is underpinned by the principles of and explicitly aligned with the articles of the UNCRC. Similar plans have been developed in the devolved administrations.

In Scotland Ministers are closely engaged in implementation of the Convention and Northern Ireland Ministers oversee their rights-based strategy for children and young people. In Wales, all government policies and programmes for children and young people are based on the UNCRC, which was formally adopted by the National Assembly in 2001

Structures and strategies to deliver

We now also have the structures in place to deliver our vision for children and young people across the United Kingdom.

In England, the creation of the Department for Children, Schools and Families in June 2007, brought a strong unifying focus to all policy affecting young people from birth to 19 years old. Where policies link with those of other Departments we have shared responsibility, for instance on child poverty, youth justice, children's health, play and sport. The creation of a Secretary of

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State for Children, Schools and Families is the first such Cabinet level appointment.

Similar arrangements have been put in place in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to reflect commitments we each have to better outcomes for children and to the UNCRC in particular.

Significant developments to highlight

Along with these structural developments, we now have four Children's Commissioners who work closely together on issues of common concern. I am particularly pleased to see them here today. [need to check all four attending].

I am also delighted to see such strong representation from the United Kingdom's NGOs and also to see many children and young people. Children and young people across the United Kingdom have made a tremendous contribution to this reporting process. We will continue to rely on their input and are looking forward to working with them, and the Commissioners, on the Committee's Concluding Observations.

Madam Chairman I can confirm today that, with the support of the devolved administrations, we will be writing the UN Secretary General and to the Committee formally to withdraw our reservations against article 22 and article 37c in respect of the United Kingdom. I would like to thank the Committee for their very helpful guidance about the scope and content of these articles which has facilitated the withdrawal of the reservations.

In addition, in last year's written report to the Committee, we explained that we were assessing the extent to which the United Kingdom is compliant with the provisions of the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. I am pleased to say that this has now been completed and we intend to ratify the Protocol before the end of the year, subject to the will of Parliament.

Ongoing Challenges

I and my colleagues are proud of the progress we have made in the last six years. But we know that, across the United Kingdom, there is more work to be done. We look forward to discussing with the Committee in a frank and constructive manner our progress so far and the challenges that remain. And we also look forward to receiving in due course your Concluding Observations which will help us in our future work. Thank you Madam Chair.