Children in Scotland is the national network organisation for the children’s sector in Scotland. We have over 400 member bodies in the public, voluntary, community and independent sectors. We are aware that several of our member organisations have responded at length and in detail to the call for evidence and we would not propose to reiterate many of the points made. In particular, the evidence submitted by Barnardo’s Scotland is both extensive and comprehensive and we generally endorse its content. There are a few additional points, however, we would like to contribute.

1. To what extent do you consider the Bill will empower communities?

While we very much welcome the commitment to community empowerment embodied in the Bill, we do believe that its provisions could be made more robust. We are concerned that the level of formality and organisation required of groups before they can apply to participate may deter or disqualify less formal and ad hoc groupings, or single-issue topical campaigns. Specifically we are concerned that those in less advantaged communities and groups may find these requirements a barrier to access. We also believe it is important to provide opportunities for empowerment in settings outwith designated community planning partnership arrangements. Many people may be concerned, for example, about litter in their street, about standards in their local school, about local transport provision, about the quality of their social housing or about the accessibility of local healthcare. They may not wish to be engaged in the wider issues with which CPPs concern themselves. Community empowerment is more likely to be effective, both in terms of reach and impact, if it allows individuals and groups, formally constituted or not, to be involved in issues that affect them directly.

Similar issues apply to the matter of appropriately empowering children and young people. Communities will in the longer-term be much more effectively empowered and have meaningful influence over issues of importance to them if co-production of services becomes perceived as the norm for all citizens, whatever their age. Ensuring that systems and methods are in place to involve children and young people in contributing to the development of the services they use will build active citizenship that is likely to be sustained into adulthood.

2. What will be the benefits and disadvantages for public sector organisations as a consequence of the provisions in the Bill?
The bill will certainly have an impact on how public bodies discharge their functions. Whether these are seen as benefits or disadvantages depends on the values that underpin the organisations’ work. There is certainly potential for an increase in bureaucracy without any measurable impact on community wellbeing. Processes may be more time-consuming, particularly if dialogue with community groups is detailed, thorough and inclusive. Public services are, however, likely to be more responsive to community need, thus more likely to result in positive outcomes and potentially, to generate cost savings.

3. Do you consider that communities across Scotland have the capabilities to take advantage of the provisions in the Bill? If not, what requires to be done to the Bill, or to assist communities, to ensure that this happens?

We strongly believe that growing empowerment ‘from the ground up’ is the most effective approach to ensuring that capacity exists within communities to take advantage of the Bill’s provisions. We therefore urge that building capacity, through relevant knowledge and experience, among children and young people is given high priority. We are concerned that many individuals and groups already involved in community planning processes are not adequately representative, in terms of diversity, of the communities they seek to represent. We also believe that there are groups and individuals who are detached and disengaged from effective engagement with community structures and that they are likely also to be those who experience marginalisation in other aspects of their lives. It is should not be a case of ‘training’ such people to fit in with structures largely devised and driven by large bureaucratic bodies, but ensuring that systems are accessible, enabling and, critically, can show that community participation is not a tokenistic compliance with a statutory duty but can bring about positive change. It is, however, important that community capacity is developed and supported through an adequate level of relevant service such as Community Learning and Development, much of which provision has been eroded in recent years.

4. Are you content with the specific provisions in the Bill, if not what changes would you like to see, to which part of the Bill and why?

We would like to see changes that address the issues we have raised above. We would also wish to see a requirement to demonstrate the impact of community empowerment by the gathering and analysis of appropriate data. We believe that increasing the level of information and evidence available to communities on relevant issues should be increased; for example most school and hospital closures are resisted even though improved outcomes may result from a review of provision. This is vitally important when developing meaningful participatory budgeting as assumptions may be inaccurate and unreliable. It is important that participation in budgetary processes is not a ‘popularity contest’ among services but increasingly becomes an informed and informative contribution to achieving better public services.

5. What are your views on the assessment of equal rights, impacts on island communities and sustainable development as set out in the Policy memorandum?

We believe that a Child Rights Impact Assessment should be part of this process. We would also like reassurance that the degree of impact on socio-economically disadvantaged groups will be fully considered.