

All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare

Key recommendations for
a new Childcare Strategy
for Northern Ireland



March 2022

Foreword

Reading the clear, evidence-based and comprehensive recommendations shared in this paper gave me pause to reflect on how I – along with others – have been calling for a new Childcare Strategy for as long as I have been an MLA – almost 12 years.

As my tenure as an MLA draws to a close, it is deeply frustrating that this remains a call that has not, as yet, been answered and the Childcare Strategy remains long overdue. This is an issue that has been raised with me time and time again. By parents, who struggle year on year to afford the childcare they need, who want the best for their children and for their family. By childcare providers, a sector that stepped up and delivered critical care during the Covid-19 pandemic, and who were promised a new Childcare Strategy within New Decade, New Approach. But also by employers, who now clearly recognise the critical role of childcare as economic infrastructure that enables their employees to work.



I am hopeful however that, with work now ongoing to develop the new Childcare Strategy, we will soon see much-needed progress, and that the Childcare Strategy will be recognised as a day one priority for the new mandate. As this paper clearly demonstrates, the evidence and the solutions are there to secure a world-class childcare infrastructure. What is required now is the courage to implement the changes we know are needed and political commitment to the ambitious funding that will help to make this a reality.

I am delighted that the All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare has played a key role in securing this progress. It has been a privilege to act as Chairperson, alongside my dedicated colleagues representing the full range of political parties on this active and engaged All Party Group.

Over the last two years we have heard from a range of experts, local and international, as well as from those whose expertise is drawn from lived and worked experience. We have generated a rich evidence base, and really got to the heart of the challenges facing the early education and childcare sector, as well as families in Northern Ireland.

I would like to thank all of those key stakeholders who have so generously shared their time and expertise with the group, reflecting both their passion and their commitment. I would also like to acknowledge the constructive engagement of Senior Departmental Officials. And that really highlights the strength of this particular All Party Group - the commitment of its members, the breadth of its stakeholders, and the level of engagement at meetings.

I am grateful to the individuals and organisations who have taken the time to share their key recommendations for a new Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland. In collating these together in this paper we have a record of the wealth of evidence shared at meetings, and an invaluable resource for Departmental Officials working on the new strategy, as well as for our elected representatives.

So looking ahead, I wish this critical All Party Group every success into the future, in its work to secure an ambitious Early Education and Childcare Strategy. If we are to aspire to a better society, a better economy, and to giving our children the best start in life, we must invest in childcare – and we must do it now.

Chris Lyttle MLA

Chairperson, All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare

March 2022

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About the All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare

The Stormont All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare was officially established in 2020, developing out of a cross-party working group that began to meet in 2019. It is a cross-political group of MLAs who come together to promote best practice policy and provision in the delivery of early education and childcare in Northern Ireland. At the end of the 2017-22 Mandate, the office bearers are:

Chairperson: Chris Lyttle, MLA (Alliance)

Vice-Chairperson: Sinead McLaughlin, MLA (SDLP)

Secretary: Nicola Brogan, MLA (Sinn Féin)

Treasurer: Claire Sugden, MLA (Independent)

A full list of members can be found on the Northern Ireland Assembly website [here](#).

The Group meets every second month and, as well as its MLA membership, benefits from the constructive engagement and support of a wide range of key stakeholders including:

- Departmental officials
- Membership bodies from the early education and childcare sectors
- Childcare providers
- Charities and civic society organisations
- Women's sector lobbyists
- Industry and employer representatives
- Academics
- Trade Unions
- Other elected representatives.

Meetings of the Group provide an opportunity to hear from expert speakers and practitioners, as well as to discuss key issues affecting children, parents, childcare providers and our economy and society as a whole. Meetings are regularly attended by more than 40 stakeholders from across the childcare and early education sectors. A record of meetings held to date can be found [here](#).

Employers For Childcare provides the secretariat for the All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare. To find out more, or to be added to the invitation list for meetings, email aoife.hamilton@employersforchildcare.org.

About this paper

Since its formation in 2020, the All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare has played a key role in pressing for progress on a long overdue and much needed new Childcare Strategy, and its stakeholders have identified a wide range of priorities and recommendations for inclusion.

This paper sets out the key recommendations from stakeholders, collating a clear record and strong evidence base. This will assist the Department of Education in its work to develop the new Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland, complementing the Department's ongoing engagement with stakeholders, as well as its more targeted consultation through the Strategic Insight Programme carried out in 2021.

And as we head into the pre-election phase for the Northern Ireland Assembly election scheduled for May 2022, the paper offers a wealth of expertise on how we can – and must – achieve the early education and childcare infrastructure we aspire to.

Stakeholders were asked to share short, solution focused recommendations. The response was extremely positive, generating specific and targeted proposals from a wide breadth of individuals, organisations and networks. This reflects the cross-cutting nature of childcare and its impact on every aspect of our society and economy.

Some common threads emerge from the submissions:

- The Strategy should have the needs of children at its core. Reference was made to enshrining the UN Sustainable Development Goals, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).
- The Strategy must have clearly defined actions, be outcomes focused, and set out specific, measurable targets.
- Effective governance and consultation structures should be in place to ensure the Strategy is co-designed with key stakeholders. It should also evidence learning from developments elsewhere in the UK and Ireland, as well as internationally.
- Early education and childcare should be recognised, and invested in, as a public good that benefits all of society.
- Early education and childcare should be affordable and accessible for all families, irrespective of their household circumstances.
- There needs to be significant, ongoing investment of ring-fenced funding directly into the sector to facilitate the provision of free or heavily subsidised childcare for families, which should be regarded as an investment rather than a cost. Several specific funding models and areas for funding are proposed.
- The Strategy should recognise the key role of early intervention, and include a focus on outcomes for children in terms of their early education and development through accessing high quality early education and childcare.
- A focus for the Strategy must be the role of childcare in enabling parents, particularly mothers and lone parents, to work, addressing economic inactivity levels and promoting gender equality. As well as work, it should also facilitate access to training, education and social inclusion opportunities, particularly for women.
- The important role of employers must be recognised both as key stakeholders, who will benefit from the Childcare Strategy, and for their role in supporting staff to access information, support and provision.
- The Strategy should also reflect the role of affordable, accessible childcare in helping to address high levels of poverty in Northern Ireland.

- There should be careful consideration given to the terminology used to describe the sector, and those working within it, reflecting its professionalism and value.
- The Strategy needs to encompass the varying needs of families with children of all ages; this includes for children aged 0-4 when childcare can be most expensive and when early intervention can have the greatest impact; also the needs of school-aged children and older children, including those over age 12, particularly those with a disability.
- Investment is needed in the early education and childcare workforce, enhancing pay and conditions within the sector and promoting opportunities for career progression.
- The Strategy must be inclusive to meet the needs of all children and families, and promote equality of opportunity. This includes for families who have a child with a disability, families living in a rural area, those accessing Irish Medium early education and childcare, and families who are from an ethnic minority background, who are subject to immigration control or who are new residents.
- Childcare providers need support to ensure they can be inclusive of children with additional needs, including through training and qualifications.
- Promote investment in, and strengthening of, the existing community infrastructure.
- Commit to long-term business rates relief for relevant registered childcare providers.
- The Strategy needs to address and challenge unregulated, unregistered childcare provision.
- Strong links should be made across other relevant Strategies that are in development including the Anti-Poverty Strategy, Economic and Skills Strategies and the Covid-19 recovery plans.
- A more cohesive approach to childcare is required across Government with improved cross-departmental working.
- Incorporate a review of regulations, standards and ratios in consultation with the sector.
- The Strategy should commit to the development of underpinning legislation, establishing a statutory basis for key commitments.

Importantly, there are also issues that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency, in parallel with the development of the Strategy, but that cannot wait for it. These issues include rising costs both for childcare providers and for parents, and staff recruitment and retention challenges.

This is a critical time for the All Party Group, with work on the new Strategy underway, and it is anticipated that a draft Strategy will be published for consultation in the Autumn of 2022. The election in May will bring to a close the current Assembly mandate. This paper provides an opportunity to hand over a vital resource to the re-convened All Party Group as it establishes its priorities for a new mandate and maintains a clear focus on securing a new, ambitious and evidence-based Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland.



- 1) We believe Sure Starts must be included in a new Childcare Strategy and would benefit from diversified funding streams that fit with its varied deliverable outcomes (in health, education and social wellbeing):

Specifically, Action for Children are asking for further investment in Sure Start in existing areas to expand the level of targeted support to parents and children under the age of four. We would recommend taking account of updated census results and identifying funding to extend Sure Start provision by five percentage points to the 30% most deprived areas.

- 2) Workforce - investment and retention:

Capacity restrictions and workforce investment is a weighty concern amongst our dedicated teams. In many scenarios, we often know or have resources that are evidence-based and prove to have positive outcomes, but we simply don't have the resources to provide them at full capacity. We urge all strategies to prioritise long-term thinking regarding building a trauma-informed and well qualified workforce for Early Years Services. The Childcare Strategy should give due attention to filling the gaps in current services and incentivising work opportunities and training pathways across the region, particularly in more rural settings to reduce regional disparities. Funding mechanisms must be reviewed towards more long-term approaches to training, recruitment and retention of skilled early years providers and the holistic services they offer.

- 3) Links with other key strategies to facilitate inter-departmental partnership working:

We believe that the Childcare Strategy should be properly linked with other key strategies relating to the Early Years and Children's wellbeing. As a member of the Stronger from the Start Coalition, we would advocate in particular that all legislation relating to infants and children, must be well informed around the importance of the first 1001 days in early child development, infant mental health as well as the ongoing need to support the home learning environment and parents. By working to include infants in all policy, strategy and service delivery, we can deliver positive change to the life chances of our children and investing in the early years is a cost-effective way of transforming child and family outcomes. We would call for a multidisciplinary, cross departmental approach to prioritise and improve infant mental health, which would involve working closely with the Childcare Sector.



1. Responsibility for the Childcare Strategy should fall under one government department. This would ensure a cohesive approach, single point of contact for all childcare matters and minimise duplication of work. This approach has proven most effective in other countries.
2. There needs to be an appropriate funding strategy running alongside the Childcare Strategy to ensure its effective implementation. While a Childcare Strategy will be an expensive operation, research has proven that the long-term cost savings outweigh the initial investment for example; increased funding to parents for childcare provision will result in more adults (women especially) joining the workforce. This will increase household income and generate new spend in the economy, while also reducing dependency on state benefits.
3. The Childcare Strategy must be beneficial to all children, including those with special educational needs. This will ensure that we continue to meet the needs of **all** children and respect their rights to participate fully in all aspects of life. Children with SEN should not be marginalised or excluded, but rather celebrated. Provision should be made for early diagnosis and intervention, with funded training courses for practitioners so that all children's needs are met under the strategy.

<p>Given the internationally recognised positive outcomes for children within Irish immersion educational environments, it is essential that children accessing these services are doing so in a secure, well-resourced sector with clear progression routes and sustained investment. The Childcare Strategy should:</p>
<p>1. Improve outcomes for children - redirect focus to Early Years; embed the principles of child development; recognise IIEY services positively affect health/education/life outcomes, support families/create communities.</p> <p>IIEY Specific</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in development of specialised immersion specific resources to support second language acquisition- high quality immersion experiences-appoint lead organisation-fund IIEY Resources Development Officer • Review EITP- improve/make IM sector inclusive • Expand IIEY services -ensure breadth of 0-3 provision to support immersion journey from birth <p>General</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase Pathways funding -cover full cost of programme delivery for voluntary Providers. • Free community places for children in need/poverty-not just working parents
<p>2. Improve inclusivity: create universally inclusive provision, celebrate diversity-unique educational journey Irish immersion programmes offer; meet needs of ethnic minorities/disabilities/poverty; and remove barriers;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise unique language skills required for workforce (IM/Ethnic minorities) • Invest in diversity signage/publicity • Build workforce capacity for supporting children with additional needs • Offer support programmes for children/families facing challenges
<p>3. Empower parents/carers: in their role in their child’s language acquisition journey and early development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in/develop IM parental support programmes • Fund a specialist Irish immersion family support officer/develop parent support resources
<p>4. Invest in IIEY infrastructure: deliver accessible, quality, affordable EY services, with sustained investment, relative to GDP, across all facets of its infrastructure, factoring in growth in IIEY 0-4 sector</p> <p>IIEY Specific</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incremental investment responding to growth of IIEY sector-(70%+ increase in service use in past 5 years) • Invest in IIEY support services-for 0-3 practitioner/provision advice/support <p>General</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level up PSEP/voluntary funding with statutory provision; invest in existing community/vol infrastructure • Capital/Revenue Investment Grant Programme for Community/Voluntary Sector EY Providers-upgrade existing accommodation, facilities-environmentally sustainable utilities.
<p>5. Raise quality-develop/support Early Years workforce: develop/support EY workforce; develop training framework specific to unique skillset required for IIEY. Reflect the value/importance of Early Educators role</p> <p>IIEY Specific</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review current skills and qualifications framework-address gaps/needs of IIEY- develop IIEY specific training, skills/qualifications framework-building capacity within sector to support sustainability/ sectoral growth. • Invest in Irish immersion employment/recruitment publicity materials- unique career pathway <p>General</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure better pay conditions - NLW/NI increases; better maternity conditions/ family friendly policy. • Change the narrative- Early Education/Early Educators.
<p>6. Improve Cross Departmental Working: strengthen collaborative approaches across all sectors; integrate the needs of Irish language education and community across all policy/strategies.</p> <p>IIEY Specific</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factor in Irish language legislation- DE’s statutory duty to support Irish Medium education • Consider & integrate needs of IIEY education/IM community in policy making processes- not a ‘bolt-on’ <p>General</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed strategy in legislation linking into other relevant strategies • Review Education lead-input from other depts; community/voluntary sector.

Barnardo's NI believes it is crucial that childcare policy is child-centred. The ages of 0-3 years are a crucial time for cognitive, emotional and social development and warm, responsive caregivers are central to an infant's sense of safety. This relationship with caregivers helps children develop strong attachment, which in turn supports good infant mental health.

Barnardo's NI believes that good quality childcare should be accessible and affordable to all families and the lack of affordable childcare has been identified as a key factor in child poverty as it poses barriers to parents' employment options.

Childcare must be accessible and responsive to the needs of parents, both in terms of location and opening hours. Parents who live in rural locations often face difficulties accessing good quality childcare in a location accessible to them. Shift workers or those working in the night-time economy (for example: hospitality, emergency services, security staff), face similar challenges and need access to childcare outside the typical working hours.

Childcare professionals also play a key role in ensuring consistent messages for parents and in delivering a consistent approach for children. Good quality, well-informed and affordable childcare will shape the social, emotional and cognitive development of our children. We have a responsibility to get it right for all children in order to give all children the best start in life.

As a result of the pandemic, the issue and challenge of childcare provision was brought to the fore within the CBI Northern Ireland's (CBI NI) Future Leaders Network, made up of business leaders under the age of 35. It was apparent that the challenges of choice and affordability of childcare were impacting on young working families across Northern Ireland, with experiences varying across the regions. Having worked with Employers For Childcare throughout 2021, the CBI Future Leaders' Network identified the need to deliver a robust and ambitious strategy as an economic enabler.

Over the past 15 years, Northern Ireland has enjoyed relatively high levels of employment, however, this is undermined by some of the highest levels of economic inactivity in the UK (NI – 20.7%, UK – 16.3% (% of 16-66 year olds economically inactive exl students (ONS Labour Force Survey, Q3 2021). Around 46,800 people in NI are economically inactive due to looking after the family/home. Against the background of acute skills and labour shortages, the Executive has within its gift, policy levers to tackle the issue of economic inactivity. When it comes to caring responsibilities, an ambitious childcare strategy has an important role to play. This is particularly the case when it comes to woman. The PwC 2021 Women in Work Index shows that NI has the lowest rate of female workforce participation relative to the rest of the UK. Taking all of this into account, it is our belief that there are significant amounts of hidden talent unable to access the workforce due to caring responsibilities for childcare, particularly women.

As a result, CBI NI key asks for a fully funded Childcare Strategy are that within its stated objectives:

1. **Inclusivity and the Workforce:** there are specific targets for enabling economically inactive into the workplace, and increasing female participation in the workforce
2. **Choice and Affordability:** that existing regionally disparities on choice and affordability are tackled to drive regionally inclusive growth
3. **Level Playing Field with GB and Ireland:** that at a minimum the childcare policies create a level playing field with childcare provision throughout the rest of the UK and Ireland.

Robyn Scott, Communications and Equality Coalition Coordinator

The lack of affordable childcare provision remains a huge issue for parents in Northern Ireland, but particularly so for women, who have consistently been shown by statistics to shoulder a disproportionate amount of childcare and caring responsibilities. This situation has only worsened as a result of the pandemic due to extended school and childcare closures during the multiple lockdowns (see this [BBC article](#) for example).

Northern Ireland is lagging behind the rest of the UK and Ireland on the issue of affordable childcare - and has been for years. A childcare strategy is long overdue, especially since it was committed to in the 2020 New Decade, New Approach agreement. Now that we are (tentatively) entering the recovery phase of the pandemic, it is time to fully commit to developing a childcare strategy and launching it within an agreed timeframe. This strategy, unlike previous ones, must have clearly defined actions that are measurable and will have a direct, positive impact on the provision of childcare in NI and the lives of parents and their children.

We wish to see a strategy produced that reduces the huge financial burden paying for childcare places on parents in NI. The support provided should be based on **objective need** – with more offered to those who need it the most. However, some level of support should be available for everyone who would benefit from it.

Any childcare strategy must be subjected to the proper **equality** processes to ensure it promotes equality of opportunity under Section 75, including equality screening and equality impact assessment. A rural needs impact assessment must also be undertaken. Parents – and women in particular – must be consulted upon at every stage during the development of the childcare strategy, as well as childcare providers. The needs of children must also be adequately considered, including their educational, emotional, and social needs. We would urge the department(s) responsible for the strategy to use a **co-design** approach.

CAJ is a member of the Childcare for All campaign and also endorses its recommendations for a childcare strategy.



Childcare is an essential building block of a healthy, inclusive & vibrant society contributing to social, health & economic outcomes & requiring long term investment. Children in disadvantage/poverty benefit the most from high quality childcare rooted in their community – this is the basis for our proposals.	
Recommendation	Solution
<p>Remove barriers to quality early education/care for children in poverty and facing additional obstacles-additional needs/ ethnic/ cultural/ linguistic.</p> <p>Focus on child development – social, emotional, physical & cognitive – prioritise children in poverty.</p> <p>Embed community/family approach in strategy – high quality/holistic/nurturing, early care/ education / family support services rooted in the community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocate/progress to 1% GDP early years investment by 2025 • Establish NI community early years education / care fund (additional monies) to mitigate under-investment • Free community places for children/families in poverty/need, not just working parents • Capital & revenue investment in existing community childcare infrastructure
<p>Early investment - greater return. Re-direct focus to 0-3/ child poverty & community-based services</p> <p>Early experiences have profound/lasting impact on future learning/development</p> <p>Resource community- based daycare delivering effective early intervention for vulnerable children/families, demonstrating positive outcomes for children impacted by poverty/trauma,</p> <p>Address risk of post-Covid rise in child poverty</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target investment in community- based 0-3 early intervention services/programmes for disadvantaged/at risk children/families through community early years education/care fund • Free childcare for families in poverty/crisis (mental health support/pre-employment/vocational training) • No displacement/duplication of existing community services by statutory provision – build effective local partnerships.
<p>Early years workforce valued/resourced</p> <p>Review-</p> <p>Low wages/ imbalance in pay/conditions between community/voluntary & education settings</p> <p>Staffing crisis/impact of pandemic, retention of experienced highly skilled staff</p> <p>Qualifications/skills framework, resource training/development/create viable career paths</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial support for community settings to address low wages/NLW requirements • Develop workforce skills strategy/qualifications framework that is needs led/addresses age-appropriate qualification & skill requirements & creates pathways to higher quals. Resource training/development, innovation & accreditation • Review DE graduate workforce proposal to ensure no displacement of experienced/skilled staff. • Community/voluntary involvement in review
<p>Culturally appropriate/inclusive provision for all children addressing disability, disadvantage & poverty, the needs of ethnic minority and Irish medium communities.</p>	<p>Proactive inclusion strategies at community level that recognise/resource:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • additional skills/language required for IM/ethnic minority staff & staff working with children with additional needs • holistic/inclusive support programmes, employment/ training opportunities/ childcare for families/children with additional needs/IM/ethnic minorities
<p>Childcare is an economic driver creating employment/supporting women to uptake training/education/ employment, enabling families to lift themselves out of poverty.</p> <p>Investment in childcare is an investment in the community & economic driver - offers significant employment opportunities in local communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of social economy/not for profit provision to create employment/training/education opportunities • Accessible/affordable/holistic/inclusive community-based childcare, family/child-centred services/support for those impacted by poverty/ pandemic/trauma • Access to childcare for parents not economically active
<p>Improve leadership/ interdepartmental working</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review early years/education leadership in DE/ appoint advisory panel with community/voluntary experience • Strategic link to anti-poverty strategy • Childcare Strategy with specific targets & annual review



Issues arising in regard to WORKFORCE	Solutions
Terminology used to describe the 'childcare sector'	It needs to be recognised that childcare providers deliver early education and care. Also, that school-age childcare is a profession in its own entity, with many staff in that sector being qualified playworkers. Our combined workforce is made up of professional educators and playworkers in our own right, and we also provide a crucial role in the well-being and care of children and young people. On top of our role with children, we offer emotional, social, and practical support for working parents and families, allowing them to work and contribute to the local economy. Therefore, we need to ensure that the new strategy reflects these comprehensive roles and responsibilities. The word childcare needs to be replaced with early education and care (or early education, playwork, and care)
Boost the status of the childcare workforce	The upcoming strategy needs to be long-term and ambitious in terms of the workforce, allowing sufficient funding to ensure childcare providers of all types can continue to deliver services of high quality. In addition, the strategy needs to align how the sector is funded in line with education and youth sectors. This will ensure both a fair and equitable salary structure as well as terms for our workforce, which reflects their expertise and the responsibilities of the role.
Strategy Measures (SMART)	<p>Specific – Actions of the strategy need to be clearly stated. They need to encompass children from age 0-12 (or in line with the Minimum Standards) and not just specific to funding only one age range. Working parents need a strategy for all children, not just for particular childhood years, and the workforce cares and educates all ages, not just 2-5-year-olds.</p> <p>Measurable – There needs to be a wider society involvement in how the strategy is to be measured in terms of workforce, well-being and attainment of children, the impact on the local economy by enabling parents to return and remain in work. This cannot be measured by one department alone and requires cross departmental support.</p> <p>Achievable – A strategy can only be viable if it is correctly funded with actions that will ensure that the workforce is at its heart. Training and funding will be required to deliver a successful strategy</p> <p>Relevant and realistic – The strategy will need to address the years of underfunding and be realistic of what can be achieved with the budget allocated. We need to learn from the mistakes of other jurisdictions in terms of underfunding or narrowing funding to one age range of children.</p> <p>Time-bound – there needs to be urgency and an agreed timeframe to implement the strategy. There needs to be an agreement to review the Minimum Standards in line with the strategy and a commitment from one department to take the lead role in overseeing the childcare sector.</p>
Unregulated and unregistered childcare	The strategy needs to make a solid commitment to eradicate unregistered and unregulated childcare. This is not only a safeguarding issue but also undermines the profession as a whole.

Pauline Walmsley, Chief Executive Officer

The following are some of the key recommendations relating to early childhood education and care in Northern Ireland and a new childcare strategy.

- Recognition of early childhood development and childcare as a public good that benefits ALL children, parents, families, the economy and society through the availability of high quality, affordable and sustainable services.
- Ringfencing of NI Executive Budget funds for the development and ongoing implementation of an early childhood development and childcare strategy to end the trend of under-investment in early education, care and development in this region and sporadic, short-term and short-notice nature of previous budgetary developments regarding vital early childhood services.
- The development of funding which adequately provides for and sustains high quality early childhood services in areas of greatest need as a consistent, long-term budgetary priority.
- Continued investment in a range of early interventions through Pathway Fund and Sure Start targeted at the top 25%, with extension to top 40% most disadvantaged.
- Non-domestic rates exemption for relevant childcare providers for the period 22-25, in alignment with wider NI Executive plans to develop childcare in the region, as has been recognised particularly in Scotland and Wales.
- A capital development plan to support the expansion of existing and new services in the voluntary and community based pre-school sector in line with the commitments within Learning to Learn.
- An early childhood education and care workforce growth and sustainability strategy and associated fund to bring NI better into line with other areas of the UK and the Republic of Ireland to support the creation and retention of high quality jobs in the sector in addition to realigning some of the current job creation and training schemes to focus specifically on the early years sector.
- An Early Education and Care Act for Northern Ireland that recognises the rich multisectoral provision in NI and establishes a statutory basis for the financing, supervision and coordination of the delivery of all early education and care services by the voluntary, community, private and statutory sectors.
- Reflecting the enormous opportunity presented by the remit of policy responsibilities regarding early childhood already held by the Department of Education - to represent a seamless policy journey in relation to a child's education and development, starting from pre-birth - a common, streamlined, cross-departmental and agency approach to inspection, ratios, registration, regulation and access to support services (presently involving such bodies as HSC Trusts, the Department of Health, Department of Education, EA and the ETI) to end unacceptable disparities and inconsistencies between voluntary, community and independent providers and their statutory counterparts.
- Better subvention and support to service providers reflecting the costs (staffing, salaries, training and CPD, qualifications, premises, adherence to inspection and regulatory requirements, rates and overheads) associated with the provision of high-quality services for young children, their families and communities.

Francis Loye, Chair of the Daycare Forum

The following are some of the key recommendations relating to early childhood education and care in Northern Ireland and a new childcare strategy.

- There must be a shift away from the ‘childcare’ terminology so frequently used to ‘early childhood education’, in order to position the sector as a phase within the education journey rather than only a means of enabling parents to work.
- An awareness campaign should focus on the critical importance of early childhood education on a child’s development and life chances and portray the crucial role early years professionals play in supporting this.
- To recognise the sector as an essential element of economic infrastructure both enabling parents to take an active role in work and providing employment.
- One department to take a strategic role for the early childhood education sector within increased opportunities for active collaboration between providers and regulators to facilitate the sharing of good practice and raising of standards in the sector, as well as building the capacity of providers through a model similar to the Associate Assessor model currently used by ETI.
- Ensure an allocation of funding to enable the implementation of the childcare strategy.
- To provide financial support to providers recognising the investment in existing infrastructure, with a continuation of the rates exemption in line with other jurisdictions. In tandem opportunities for capital funding to develop provision in areas of need as well as funded professional development opportunities for staff to enhance practice.
- To provide opportunities to raise the value of the workforce in early childhood education which will enable the sector to overcome current recruitment and retention challenges. The importance of recognising high-quality childcare, delivered by skilled and caring staff, which can have a significant positive impact on children’s learning during the early years, particularly for the children in areas of disadvantage.
- Regulations and standards to be developed in consultation with the sector and implemented in a collaborative approach with the sector to build capacity and continue to raise standards through a self-evaluation approach. These standards should be child centred. There should be an alignment of the standards / regulations and expectations between the statutory and voluntary community sector.
- To support parents to access high quality childcare through accessible support schemes with reduced barriers to access and be universal in nature.

A new Childcare Strategy must ensure all parents can access and afford the high-quality childcare they need, while supporting providers to deliver this sustainably. This will offer developmental benefits to all children, help reduce the gender pay gap, decrease poverty and support economic growth and rebuilding. An ambitious Childcare Strategy must:

- Be developed in close consultation with key stakeholders - children, parents, childcare providers and employers.
- Contain firm commitments, actions and measurable targets.
- Be fully costed, with funding ring-fenced in the Executive's Budget.
- Have a dual focus recognising childcare's role as economic infrastructure and in the early education and development of children.
- Fund childcare providers directly to offer an allocation of fully funded or heavily subsidised early education and childcare when it is of most cost to parents and greatest benefit to children, from age 1 to age 4. Delivery options could include:
 - Fully funding an allocation of hours for all families
 - Setting a progressive cap on fees based on household income, applying a simple fee structure and using subsidies to make up the difference between fee revenue and the full cost of delivery, such as proposed in the Canadian Early Learning and Childcare Plan.
- Ensure funding is sufficient for providers to recover the full cost of delivery and offer improved pay, terms and conditions for the workforce. Rates should be established following independent evaluation of hourly delivery costs, in consultation with providers, and regularly reviewed.
- Be 'provider neutral' offering parents choice and flexibility, but also linked to criteria ensuring overall provision is high quality and enhancing workforce conditions.
- Ensure appropriate school age childcare is available to facilitate parental working patterns during term time and holidays.
- Commence an information campaign to ensure all parents are aware of financial support they are entitled to.
- Include a workforce, training and development plan recognising the value of the professional staff in the sector and promoting relevant career pathways.
- Consider the additional needs of families who have a child with a disability, and support providers to offer accessible, inclusive and appropriate early education and care.
- Consider the additional needs of families and providers in rural areas.
- Consider the additional needs of migrant and ethnic minority families, including families with no recourse to public funds who may be unable to access financial support.
- Work closely with employers, encouraging and incentivising them to engage with the strategy and support their staff who have childcare needs.
- Promote the use of registered childcare.
- Include provision for the introduction of a statutory underpinning, establishing a legal framework for accessible, affordable and flexible childcare.

This must be a day one priority for the new Executive. Parents, children, childcare providers and our economy cannot afford to wait any longer.

Kathryn McNickle / Deborah Howe, Senior Policy Officers

Provide, and monitor uptake of, appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare and early-years provision more generally to meet the diverse needs of all children, including children with disabilities, those from BME communities and new residents.

There are key equality issues around access to childcare that must be addressed. There is a lack of suitable facilities for disabled children, and provision is variable outside of urban areas. For Traveller and minority ethnic families, there may be a lack of local family support network limiting access to informal care and language and cultural barriers limiting access to wider childcare services. For some, it is more an issue of affordability, for example for single parent families, who may struggle to pay high childcare costs on a single income. Some families will face multiple barriers to accessing childcare.

We recommend the monitoring of uptake by those equality groups experiencing educational underachievement, with action taken to address any shortfalls.

Mitigate the negative impacts on children caused by COVID-19, including those with disabilities, from minority ethnic communities and new residents.

Steps must be taken to identify and mitigate any particular equality impacts in Northern Ireland so that responses to COVID-19 do not unfairly impact upon the educational progression and trajectory of children from specific equality groups.

Seek to promote equality of opportunity for parents

There is a need to examine and challenge cultural attitudes towards working mothers and for acceptance and recognition of a greater emphasis on both women and men taking childcare responsibility. This should include the promotion of flexible working practices and encouraging employers to develop parent/ carer friendly policies. Shortfalls in provision of childcare for the under 2's and for before and after school activities should be addressed.

Ensure sustainability of childcare services

We recommend actions to ensure the sustainability of childcare services, particularly of childcare services in disadvantaged and rural areas; whilst also ensuring that the work of those employed in the area of childcare, predominantly women, are properly valued and remunerated.

Government should review the revenue streams and costs of childcare provision, and explore innovative ways of developing and supporting childcare to maximise the quality and sustainability of provision, including during times of fluctuating or lower demand.

The Strategy should set out the specific mechanisms by which it will ensure that it takes account of, and gives full effect to, relevant elements of equality strategies and other initiatives; such as the social inclusion strategies; the Reducing Educational Disadvantage programme; and any future recommendations from the Independent Review of Education.

For further details, see www.equalityni.org/education/policy.

FSB Northern Ireland: FSB has around 165,000 members in total, including around 6,000 in Northern Ireland across all sectors of industry and business. Established in 1974, we are a non-profit making and non-party political organisation that's led by our members, for our members. Our mission is to help smaller businesses achieve their ambitions. Northern Ireland is a small business economy, with the highest concentration of SMEs in all the regions in the UK - 99.9% of businesses are SMEs. 98% of all firms employ fewer than 20 people, while 95% employ fewer than 10. Northern Ireland SMEs provide 75% of all private sector jobs, and over two-thirds of private sector turnover compared with around 50% in the UK as a whole. To this end, FSB seeks to create the conditions for more people to start a business and for those businesses operating to maximise their chances of success. Effective childcare investment and system design is an enabler in this respect, and so FSB recommends the following:

Structures

Along with the All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare, it is essential that effective governance and consultation structures are in place throughout the development and implementation of the strategy. These structures should include effective engagement with relevant groups, Terms of Reference, transparent decision-making processes and a microsite updating citizens on a continued basis.

System design

Rather than rule options out and constrict new ways of thinking, officials should present a range of options including the one considered 'most expensive' - even if deemed unachievable. This will allow stakeholders to co-design the 'ideal' system for children, parents, employees and providers – after which politicians can determine what investment can be made. If we are to set a 'budget' prior to the design process we will lose the potential for transformational change.

Sustainability

FSB members who operate childcare services continue to highlight the rising costs of providing childcare, and the upward effect this has on fees. Sustainability funding has been successful in maintaining childcare provision through Covid-19, and funding should continue until strategy investment comes to fruition. NI Social Care providers and staff have recently benefited in this way. Support could also include ongoing Business Rates relief for providers as is the case in Scotland and Wales.

Women

The evidence base outlines a disproportionate impact of ineffective childcare investment on women. FSB believes women should have an equal choice when deciding to enter or stay in employment, train or to start a business. The strategy needs to ensure childcare is seen as an economic issue, meaning policy is designed to enable all women to become employed, train or to start a business if they choose. In order for this to happen, officials from across Government departments need to examine what is preventing women from having this choice i.e. the reasons for economic inactivity, and create the conditions to enable this to happen. Some of the reasons will lie beyond the remit of Dept of Education, and this should not act as a barrier.

Data

Covid-19 has created newfound conditions that mean policymakers are in a position to reconsider longstanding issues in new ways. The use of Data is and has been crucial in allowing us to unearth information about our childcare system. Data and use of information has a key function during strategy development, and in real-time when the strategy is implemented. However, this is often overlooked due to lack of awareness. Data experts should be consulted to verify potential and Investment factored in accordingly.

The NIC ICTU policy paper [Childcare in Northern Ireland](#), care, cost and gender equality focused on three overarching themes.

Public investment in childcare as social infrastructure

More households in Northern Ireland are paying for childcare and are having to use more of it. At the same time, public expenditure is disproportionately aimed at funding childcare through individual social transfers, in particular Tax Credits. We need to rebalance public support for childcare for greater provision and less reliance on reimbursement.

- A properly resourced commitment to free, flexible childcare (full time equivalent) needs to be extended to Northern Ireland.
- State spending on childcare should be redirected from individual subsidisation of childcare to supply and investment in childcare services.

Gender Equality

For too long the responsibility of caring for children has fallen disproportionately on women. This has not only constrained women's participation in the labour market, but it has also stunted the progress of women who do participate. Importantly, the gender gap in labour market participation rates between men and women increases drastically with the presence of dependent children, therefore policy interventions need to be directed at both women and men, improving women's labour market participation and men's participation in the care of their children.

- Review of employment rights to support families and work life balance including entitlements to properly remunerated maternity and paternity leave, parental leave, carers leave and flexible working.
- Paid parental leave entitlement reserved for each parent, use it or lose it
- Strengthened rights to access flexible work. Jobs should be advertised as flexible as the default position
- All workers should be able to access these employment rights without eligibility barriers; remove 26 week eligibility criteria.

Childcare workforce

Removing barriers to participation in the labour market is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for gender equality. The quality of employment that workers enjoy when in the labour market matters just as much. If we are to be successful in closing the labour force participation gender gap there will be a need for more workers in the care sector. We must ensure that a policy which seeks to increase women's employment is not one that leads to the continued creation of poor-quality employment in the care sector. Unionisation and collective bargaining or a system of sectoral agreements provide a mechanism to introduce a skills and wage infrastructure that could improve job quality. Devolved bargaining structures such as works councils in Germany, which implement sectoral agreements at the ground level, have also been shown to give the greatest premium to low paid workers.

- We propose that the Northern Ireland Executive (or Ministers exercising that authority) should provide for a sectoral agreement between trade unions and employers to agree fair and decent terms and conditions for workers in the childcare sector. This should also inform government decisions about the funding of childcare provision and dispel the notion that these types of services can be provided with a low paid workforce.

Ellen Farren, Children and Early Years Programme Manager

Early Years Training Programme

MencapNI has been working in partnership with the BHSCT for 52 years, delivering an early intervention service for children aged 2-3 with a learning disability. We have a wealth of understanding and expertise which supports not only the children we care for but also their families.

We know:

- approximately 4,000 children aged 0-5 living in Northern Ireland have a learning disability
- high quality Early Years intervention can make a positive difference to the outcomes of children with a learning disability
- there is a direct link between Early Years practitioner training and the learning outcomes of children.

The desire and willingness of Early Years settings and practitioners to be inclusive of all children, including those with a learning disability, is without question. However, the staff in these settings also often feel unable to support* these children within their busy settings. They often feel that these children require 1-1 support, misinterpret difficult behavior, do not feel confident in their ability to communicate with the family and generally feel overwhelmed.

At MencapNI, we hear from many families who have been asked to keep their child on a reduced day and even asked to remove their child from a setting.

Current figures show 4,097 childcare providers advertising on FamilySupportNI, yet only (1.8%) list experience with disability and only (0.5%) with learning disability. Childminders account for 2,243 of providers (54.7%), with (0.7%) advertising experience in disability and (3%) in learning disability.

MencapNI Early Years Inclusion Service was approached in 2019 by the Childcare Partnership requesting training materials to support its members to provide more effective programmes for children with a learning disability. Since January 2020, we have developed and delivered training to 290 attendees from 275 settings. The need for high quality, relevant training for practitioners who work within the Early Years Sector is evident in order to improve outcomes for children with a learning disability.

- [Global Developmental Delay Webinar: Over 90% of learners, when asked stated delivery and facilitation of the course was excellent.](#)
- [The Importance of wellbeing webinar and workshop: 100% of participants felt that the training would positively impact their work with children with a learning disability and their families.](#)

We would ask the APG to consider highlighting the benefits of having at least one member of staff with a relevant or recognized qualification in learning disability in every Early Years setting within the Childcare Strategy, and ideally to make a recommendation of making a qualification in learning disability a requirement for employment in Early Years settings.

*Participant quote from Introduction to Learning Disability short course:

[“When on the ground there is little support as we are not classed as education. Truthfully, we just classed as childcare, so we get less support than others.”](#)

NICMA strongly propose that the Childcare Strategy should have children's needs firmly at its core and strengthened by incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) throughout. Good quality childcare can support child development and learning and allow every child in Northern Ireland the opportunity to get the best start in life.

Childcare is a crosscutting issue and NICMA believe that there is a need for greater co-operation across all Government Departments. We believe that childcare should feature as part of the objectives of all relevant Departments, feeding into the Department of Education overall accountability. We also believe that an interdepartmental group on childcare should be set up.

Families with children who have additional needs face added difficulties in accessing suitable childcare. The Childcare Strategy must address the training needs and capital costs involved for registered childminders (RCMs) offering childcare services for these families. RCMs are an obvious choice for these parents as they can offer 1-1 support for children in a home environment. However, depending on the nature of a child's particular needs a RCM may not be able to offer their service and Approved Home Childcarers (AHC) should be promoted in this instance. The Childcare Strategy should consider appropriate funding to assist RCMs offering this service.

The Childcare Strategy must take cognisance of the gaps in childcare across Northern Ireland. Families living in rural areas face additional difficulties in accessing suitable childcare options and rural providers struggle to achieve sustainability. NICMA believe that the Childcare Strategy should reflect the lessons learned from the Rural Childcare programme. Rural areas face additional challenges around transport and hours of operation that meet the needs of rural parents travelling between the workplace and RCMs.

Lastly, NICMA believe that the issue of unregistered childminding should be addressed within the Childcare Strategy. The organisation works tirelessly to ensure that registered childminding is recognised as a quality option for parents. NICMA would like to see the Childcare Strategy address the issue through stronger sanctions in legislation, especially if the unregistered provider does not come forward for registration. We would recommend a taskforce is set up to tackle the issue of unregistered childminders.



NIDCO is a member-led volunteer group, made up of independent childcare providers from across NI. We work with other childcare sector stakeholders and decision makers to ensure we co-design solutions that help ensure the Childcare system in NI is the best it can be. We endorse the evidence-based approach of organisations such as *Employers For Childcare* and *The Early Years Organisation*. The evidence from these organisations has been created and honed over more than a decade, with invaluable expertise applied during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This evidence has been supplemented through the 2021 Childcare Insight Lab. When put together with the NIDCO expertise of delivery on the ground, it leaves NIDCO members with three primary issues that currently lead to difficulty for children, parents, employees and providers on a day-to-day basis:

- 1) Ever-rising operating costs
- 2) Sector staff shortages
- 3) Inconsistent regulations

A new Childcare Strategy promises to bring about new opportunities to address each of these three issues, but NIDCO judges that we do not have the luxury of time. Our key recommendations are therefore as follows:

1. The Pandemic has brought about new ways of working e.g. The Childcare Reference Group and other valuable stakeholder groups. These should continue indefinitely.
2. The Childcare Insight Lab and related report(s) should be published as soon as possible. Stakeholders should have a chance to feedback on their findings. A timeline and list of steps on how the Childcare Strategy will be developed, must then be clearly communicated with the public.
3. Politicians and officials must then consider whether any of the core problems can start to be addressed in parallel with the development of the Childcare strategy and investment. For example,
 - How can we prevent costs from rising further?
 - How can we work to recruit more staff into the sector?
 - Can we review regulations before a new childcare strategy?

NIDCO recognises that the Childcare Strategy is very important for children, parents, employees and providers. However, NIDCO requests that we seek to address key issues outlined so that this actually becomes part of the strategy development itself, increases the chances of providers remaining viable and keeps costs as static as possible.

Childcare responsibilities often isolate women, particularly those in rural areas who may become excluded from fully participating in social, economic and community-based activities. Flexible, affordable, accessible quality childcare is very difficult to find in rural areas. Distance from work means rural women's childcare needs to start earlier and end later, up to two hours a day more than their urban counterparts. This can make childcare unaffordable and work/life balance unrealistic.

Without affordable and accessible childcare, many women from disadvantaged and rural areas are unable to consider education or work at all. During the pandemic, relying on elderly parents or grandparents to shoulder this responsibility was not an option either because of social isolation and shielding restrictions. We might be coming out of the pandemic now but we can't be certain that this situation won't arise again in the future and we need to be prepared for that.

With childcare costs continuing to rise NIRWN believes that if we are to give our children the best start in life, then the cost of childcare should be linked more closely to the child and their needs not to their parents' income and benefits. Calculating benefit entitlement can make it very difficult for families to assess whether a return to work or education and training is a financially viable option for them in their particular circumstances.

Any proposed Childcare Strategy must be rural proofed. It is not enough to identify rural areas as having inadequate provision, a NI Executive must take mitigating actions to address these inequalities if rural families and children are to experience equality.

Delivery of a Childcare Strategy for N.I. would require cross Departmental responsibilities and a partnership approach between government, statutory, public, private and community/voluntary sectors. NIRWN recommends that there is one lead Department to ensure: effective roll out of Strategy actions; to coordinate Stakeholders, monitor and evaluate the Strategy and ensure equity of provision across the region.

Consultation with our members consistently identifies childcare as one of the top two issues, together with transport, for rural women. The feedback we have received is that cost and affordability is an issue for rural families but also access to quality, flexible provision in many areas.

Recommendations

- We need a Childcare Strategy for NI to identify gaps in provision and ensure that rural families have a choice of flexible, affordable provision.
- Investment in community infrastructure to help build the capacity of community-based childcare
- Increase the number of registered childminders in rural areas with a community development approach based on identified needs and local knowledge
- We need energetic, time bound progress to developing actions to go alongside a Childcare Strategy for NI which takes account of particular rural needs.

Alexandra Brennan, Coordinator

The NIWBG believes that the only way to recover from the current economic crisis, is to address gender inequality in the labour market, promote a sustainable and inclusive economy and to implement a caring, green economy as outlined in the Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy's report, [Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action](#).

The investment in free, universal childcare would not only remove a significant barrier to women's participation in the labour market in Northern Ireland, but it can help raise revenue as well. In a UK Women's Budget Group (UKWBG) report to HM Treasury, their research found that free, universal childcare would create more jobs and as a result, generate additional tax revenue¹. Furthermore, it would alleviate the responsibility of childcare on mothers and would allow those who left the labour market for childcare reasons to return to the paid economy. This strategy needs to provide **heavily subsidised state childcare, to promote labour participation of second earners and lone parents.**

Northern Ireland must also play its part in achieving the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. In order to meet the targets, such as Good Health and Well-being (SDG3) and Gender Equality (SDG5), increasing investment in employment in low-carbon sectors like care is necessary. De Henau and Himmelweit outlined how an investment in care is three times less polluting per job than the same investment in construction². As well, greater investment and valuation of care would help improve the precarious nature of the sector, making it a more attractive and secure career that would draw both women/girls and men/boys. The strategy needs to outline **provisions for year-round, full-time childcare, focusing on increasing the qualifications and pay of employees working in childcare, making it a desirable career option. This could be funded by government borrowing, similar to investment in physical infrastructure.** Jerome DeHenau expands on it more here: [DeHenau_costingchildcareUK.pdf \(open.ac.uk\)](#). Furthermore, the strategy must ensure that **career pathways and pay progression are put in place for low-paid, precarious work like care, and that funding is increased for apprenticeships that are considered highly skilled yet require low-level qualifications, such as care apprenticeships.**

¹ Women's Budget Group (WBG) (2020). *Budget representation to HM Treasury: invest in social infrastructure*. ([WBG-Budget-2020-FINAL.pdf](#))

² Himmelweit, S. and J. De Henau. (2020). *A Care-led recovery from coronavirus*. ([Care-led-recovery-final.pdf \(wbg.org.uk\)](#)).



1. The title of the strategy should include the words 'Early Education' as opposed to 'Childcare' alone. This would better reflect the children's rights framework being adopted by NI Executive Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030.
2. As regards babies and children with additional needs/disabilities Parent Action recommends that throughout the strategy, actions should be identified to closer align CHILDREN'S COMMUNITY HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE services, with all elements of the Early Education sector in Northern Ireland. This is because i) Access to early education for babies and children with additional needs, WILL ALWAYS require partnership working with their parent carers, AND their community health and social care teams. ii) Babies and children with additional needs/disabilities are not currently registered with HSC Trusts on diagnosis, which leads to difficulties in accessing vital community health early intervention services, and their right to early education and childcare provision.
3. This 'closer alignment' with children's COMMUNITY HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE SERVICES by the Early Education sector through this strategy, would contribute to early intervention and prevention goals by all departments, including disability and inclusion goals.
4. All early education providers, including home based providers such as childminders and Approved Home Childcarers, should be enabled to develop links with other community based early education providers, such as Direct Payments workers for babies and children with additional needs, health visiting and community children's nursing services, as well as GP's and community AHP staff for children. Extensive investment in support for all early education providers to develop their own resources and risk assessments for babies and children with additional needs, including children with additional needs over the age of 12 years, should be directly actioned through this strategy.

Conal Baxter, Senior Policy and Research Officer

Parenting NI have been delighted to contribute to the development of the Childcare Strategy through the Strategic Insight Programme. We are grateful to have been able to attend the APG on Early Education and Childcare and believe the APG has been doing great work in ensuring the development of the Childcare Strategy is given the importance it deserves.

Parenting NI believes that it has to be clear in the Childcare Strategy that childcare can be for children beyond the early years e.g. right up to teens, as there is a common perception that it is all about early years development in settings and the afterschool and wrap-around settings get forgotten.

Parenting NI would also like to see how the Childcare Strategy links to other strategies. In particular, the development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy, COVID Recovery Plan and particularly strategies that consider enabling parents to return to the workplace which will inevitably link to a need for more high quality, affordable childcare settings.

Another consideration we would like to see in the Childcare Strategy is how the key childcare staff are recruited, trained and retained to ensure high quality provision. There should be clear reference of the need to recruit more males to the childcare sector as it is hugely beneficial for children to see males in these caring roles.

We would also like to see a commitment around staff receiving regular training on parental engagement and working with the family to ensure better outcomes for the child rather than only child focussed training that is currently required.

F. Walsh, Regional Co-ordinator for School Age Childcare

If we are to develop an effective childcare strategy it is essential that the needs of children are at the heart of its development. Childcare plays a critical role in the lives of our children and young people, as well as their parents and wider society. Effective, quality childcare can, and should provide children with opportunities for individual and social development; the enhancement of physical and mental health and well-being through active and stimulating play experiences; all within a safe and nurturing environment.

It is critical that the Childcare Strategy is strongly underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). By ensuring that the strategy is underpinned by both the UNCRC and UNCRPD there is a very real opportunity to deliver positive change for children and young people across Northern Ireland.

If the Childcare Strategy is to have the level of impact required, it is vital that it is outcome focused with a clear articulation of the changes required and the actions which will drive such change. The final strategy should include a clear action plan identifying key actions, highlighting which government department will take a lead role in delivering the action and outlining a monitoring framework to ensure that tangible impacts are achieved during the lifetime of the strategy.

Childcare subsidies for families on low incomes have been an integral part of the benefits systems for a number of years. However, many parents continue to find childcare an expense they can't meet. In seeking to ensure that childcare services remain affordable to those who need them, the Childcare Strategy must give recognition to the economic pressures facing providers across all sectors.

Whilst self-sustainability should be the goal for community and voluntary service providers, government must recognise that within certain geographical locations underlying socio-economic factors severely limit the capacity to achieve self-sufficiency. It is therefore likely that ensuring accessible childcare within some areas will require a level of ongoing government subsidy for the foreseeable future.



In order to give early years education the necessary space and importance as a fully funded public good it deserves, we must reframe the debate away from a rhetoric of childcare services vs. early years education, opening up the discussion and increasing the likelihood of implementing real change. Key to this is challenging why we consider education from the age of 4 a public good and an essential aspect of our children's development, but we disregard education up until the primary school age and dismiss it as 'childcare' only. The childcare services in NI is a privately owned, market based, business plan system, which does not prioritise the education aspects of early years' development the same way as primary age and up. It is typically based on adult to child ratios rather than an educational curriculum that supports child development. Education is at the base of our social development.

The **cost** of implementing early years education for all children in NI aged 0 to preschool age is often presented as prohibitive. It is my belief, based on my previous microeconomics research, that this cost could be easily estimated and met. Northern Ireland already has the infrastructure and knows the cost per child for the nurseries/pre-school settings that are run by the Department of Education. Early years education for all children in NI aged 0 to preschool age should be implemented based on this existing infrastructure, or, ideally expand the existing infrastructure to incorporate and provide for all children aged 0 to preschool age, for at least 30 hours a week. We must also recognise the lack of facilities in the rural areas, and ensure that this is addressed in any solutions developed moving forward.

Loss of jobs/lack of jobs and staff qualification: Loss of jobs in the childcare services and lack of qualified personnel for early years education can happily become a non-issue if the recommendation above is implemented. If one creates the demand for jobs in a publicly-funded early years education system, the supply will follow. Historically, publicly-funded early years education systems offer better pay and attract a better-qualified workforce. Adequate education for staff providing early years education in NI can be achieved by basing the existing minimum educational requirements for nurseries/pre-school settings.

Embedded in the NI economy: It is essential to recognise the intrinsic connection between early year education, maternal employment, economic growth and equality in NI. Early years education is a vital part of the social infrastructure in a social democracy. Not adding (an often prohibitive) cost to parents, not forcing one parent (usually the lower-paid one) out of employment due to childcare costs, reduces both economic and social inequality. Reducing inequality, especially through giving mothers a choice between employment and full-time motherhood increases gender equality and reduces the gender pay gap.

Registered Childminders (RCM) Branch of Unite the Union

Sharon Collins, Branch Secretary



Our branch completed a survey on issues that are affecting their work, their livelihoods, and areas of concern. Some of the key issues that would help inform the NI Childcare Strategy are identified below:

Minimum Standards/Implementations – there is a need for a standardised approach between and within Trusts. Often one Registered Childminder (RCM) may be instructed to follow one set of interpretation of the implementations and a fellow RCM within the same Trust a different set, sometimes under the same inspector. This has created inconsistencies in settings within Trusts and between Trusts and has left RCMs in an unfair, unequal, and vulnerable position.

SOLUTION: a clear, standardised one document approach throughout all Trusts in NI.

Ratios – the current ratios in a RCMs setting do not lend themselves to the coveted flexibility, affordability, and ease of access that both parents and providers seek. In comparison to other parts of the UK and R.O.I RCMs in NI are limited in number and flexibility of care thus limiting their ability to provide accessible and affordable childcare. RCMs, mostly a female sector are somewhat reliant on the benefit system due to restrictions of ratios and having children of their own under 12 years of age. With the changes including Universal Credit (UC) many are not earning enough to sustain their business and are at risk of leaving the sector. Indeed, since June 2021 we have noticed a net reduction in RCMs of an average of 10 per month to Jan 2022.

SOLUTION: bring ratios in line with the rest of the UK, and R.O.I this would enable RCMs to earn at least the minimum wage, ensuring less reliability on the benefit system. This would enable parents to access more flexible and affordable childcare in their local area having a greater impact in more rural areas. It would also enable RCMs to have control over their own finances and more autonomy over their childcare business. Children over 12 years of age should not be included in ratios.

SEND – SEND children do not typically cease childcare at the age of 12 due to their vulnerability. Due to further restrictions on ratios in the latest update in implementation guidance (Sep 2020) RCMs faced with restricted numbers and the need to sustain their business face an impossible decision when these children turn 12.

SOLUTION: flexibility and common-sense approach to enable RCMs to continue to care for SEND children past the age of 12, without impacting their daily ratios.

Funded places – currently unlike our counterparts in the UK we do not have funded childcare places in RCM settings in NI for eligible age groups. The introduction of funded places would help parents and childcare providers alike.

SOLUTION: introduce a funded places scheme in NI that all childcare providers are eligible for.



Strengthening the Community Childcare Sector Infrastructure

Sustained investment is required in the physical and social infrastructure of the Community Childcare Sector (CCS) to ensure all Community Childcare Providers have the capacity, skills, and facilities to actively support inclusion of (at least some) children with disabilities in their settings.

Levelling Up Infrastructure for Community Disability Childcare Providers

Over the last 10 years, Community Disability Childcare Providers (CDCP) have emerged as a growing subset within the CCS. They specifically support the childcare needs of children with complex Disabilities. Additional '**levelling up investment**' MUST BE PUT IN PLACE for CDCP that have emerged to meet these needs. It is required **to build and sustain their:**

- **physical infrastructure** (appropriate community childcare facilities, play spaces, sensory rooms),
- **social infrastructure** (people skills, specialist training, medical training);
- **networking infrastructure** (building a network of CDCP across NI).

Solution: Capital Investment Grant Programme accessible to **all** Community Childcare Providers helping finance refurbishments of existing facilities, upgrades, extensions, installations of Sensory Rooms etc. Invest in CDCP through a '**levelling up funding programme**' providing revenue funding to community disability organisations who provide childcare that meets the needs of children with complex disabilities.

Childcare Funding for Parents via Tax Free Childcare and Universal Credit

The Childcare Strategy should enable delivery of high quality affordable childcare, in a registered childcare setting, to all children aged 3 to 12 years, **and to disabled children aged 12 to 18 years.**

Solution: Tax Free Childcare needs further incentivised. For every £8 a parent pays into the Tax free Childcare Account, it should be matched by an additional £4 from Government (rather than £2) AND an additional £6 for children with disabilities. For parents on Universal Credit with a disabled child, 85% of their childcare costs should be met and the Advisor Discretionary Fund should automatically apply to cover upfront monthly fees.

Early years Investment – Vital Role Played by the CCS in children's Early development

CDCP are well placed to deliver specialist child development programmes for children aged 2-4 years with additional needs. The current 2-3 year old programme delivered by many community childcare organisations is part funded by the DE Pathways Fund. This sends a message to community providers that their role in improving long term health & educational outcomes for children is only partly valued.

Solution: DE Pathways funding per child to be increased to cover the full cost of programme delivery for Community Childcare Providers. The premium for supporting children with additional needs should be increased to reflect the significant additional staff input required to support the needs of these children.

Appropriate 3-4 Year Old programmes for Children with Additional Needs

Many children with additional needs aged 3-4 years cannot access statutory pre-school. Many are given a space in a statutory pre-school within a class of 26 children, with no additional support, resulting in them dropping out or being placed on a significantly reduced timetable.

Solution: CDCP to be part of the delivery solution - building on existing 2-3 year old specialist programmes for children with additional needs, by providing a follow on 3-4 year old programme (equivalent to pre-school) specifically for children with additional needs.

Major investment is required make childcare affordable and to support and bring excellence to the sector.

1. Heavily subsidised /free childcare delivered via a collaboration of central government and employers is essential. Money for childcare should not be a barrier to women joining the workforce, returning to the workforce, setting up a business or re- training. The financial gain to the economy and society of women's participation in the labour market has been documented on many occasions.
2. Quality provision: Sector investment is required in terms of wages and skills. Female specific higher-level apprenticeships in childcare should be funded and wages should reflect the level of training. ROI are looking at Childcare currently, we could look at Childcare on an All Island basis and could gain funding through Peace monies.
3. Accessibility: Employers have a lot of empty office space; they should be given reduced rates incentives where they provide childcare onsite. This will not only increase the provision but support the back to the office/city initiatives.

Gender Equality as a key aim of the strategy:

Incorporation of gender budgeting and gender proofing to ensure the executive childcare strategy actively targets issues around childcare leading to gender inequality:

- Recognising the unequal distribution of childcare responsibilities on women and incorporating measures to rebalance childcare caring responsibilities between men and women,
- Targeting “economic inactivity” of women – whereby the main reason for women not being in the formal paid labour market is due to childcare and other caring responsibilities, through providing adequate free and universal childcare for women,
- Recognition of the “motherhood gap” whereby more women are earning less after having children, and women account for the overwhelming majority of part-time workers in NI due to inflexibility of full-time work and childcare needs,
- Address the gender segregation of the childcare sector labour market – actively work to recruit more men into the sector and work to address the poor working conditions of those within the sector with measures to implement a real living wage for all childcare workers (currently, approx. 48% of childcare workers earn below a RLW),
- Ensure universal and free childcare access for women accessing education *and* training, and not just employment, as the former are necessary to support many women in re-entering the formal paid labour market,
- Recognition of the childcare sector as core to our economy, as well as a green sector that should be adequately funded and incorporated into any Climate Change legislation,
- Ensure community childcare providers such as women's centres and RCMs are central to this strategy, as these childcare workers often target women from disadvantaged areas,
- Recognition that 91% of lone parents in NI are women, and ensure greater measures are implemented to support the childcare needs of these families,
- Ensure other marginalised groups have full access to childcare provisions, including disabled parents or disabled children, rural families, ethnic minority families, rural families etc.
- Provide adequate investment into the sector to ensure providers are able to cover core costs with more than just parent fees,
- Ensure childcare investment is central to any PfG, as WBG studies show that a 2% GDP investment into childcare provides a full return on investment and creates twice as many jobs for women, and almost as many jobs for men, as the same level of investment into construction,
- Ensure [women are at the heart of any public consultations](#) relating to this strategy,
- Ensure that the women's sector, particularly women's centres, are treated as partners throughout the development of this strategy and that proper measures for co-design are in place,
- Implement recommendations from the [WPG Feminist Recovery Plan](#) relating to childcare,
- Recognition of childcare as a public good, with adequate investment as a result.

