

27 February 2017

Children and Young People's Strategy Team
Room 6.14
Department of Education
Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Bangor
BT19 7PR

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: Children and Young People's Strategy 2017-27 Consultation Response

Employers For Childcare would like to take this opportunity to respond to the Children and Young People's Strategy 2017-2027 Consultation. We welcome the consultation and agree with the sentiments expressed by Minister Weir in his introductory remarks that the "well-being of children and young people is central to the development of a progressive, cohesive and prosperous society".

The consultation document sets out some major steps that have been achieved in the context of children's well-being over the course of the previous Children and Young People's Strategy. These are very welcome and, alongside the introduction of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, mark real achievement. However, significant issues remain. Too many children and young people still live with poor mental health, in poverty, or are experiencing homelessness or insecure and unsafe environments. The most recent Children and Young People's Strategic Indicators statistical bulletin highlights that, in 2014/15, the percentage of children in relative poverty (before housing costs) had increased by 2% from the previous year to 25%. Further, 15% of children were living in materially deprived and low income households in 2014/15, an increase of 3% from the comparable data baseline figure of 12% in 2010/11.¹

In responding to this consultation we provide general comments on the Strategy and make recommendations for the inclusion of additional indicators and actions informed by our work and expertise in key areas.

¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/children-and-young-peoples-strategic-indicators-2016-update>

General comments

Programme for Government

We welcome the many references in the Strategy linking it to the Programme for Government (PfG). This is essential given its critical role in achieving each PfG outcome. In particular, the Strategy is referred to as a key component in achieving PfG outcome 14, 'Give children and young people the best start in life.' We have a number of comments to make in this context:

- 1. Further recognition should be given within the Strategy to the role that it will play in achieving the full range of PfG outcomes.** While links are drawn in the illustration at figure 4.1 (page 19), in the rest of the Strategy the focus is on outcome 14. This limits the Strategy's ambition. The links made at figure 4.1 are to how the Strategy will impact on PfG outcomes in the **future** highlighting, for example, that today's children and young people are tomorrow's workforce and that supporting them now will have economic benefits in later years. This is true, but misses the impact that this Strategy should have **today** on the achievement of PfG outcomes. For example, in providing for accessible and affordable childcare, in addition to the developmental benefits for the child, there are benefits to the economy and the labour market through facilitating parents to access, stay in and progress in work, underpinning a strong, competitive and creative economy where we have more people working in better jobs.
- 2. Ongoing political instability is a concern for the delivery of this Strategy.** At the time of writing, the Northern Ireland Assembly has been dissolved, elections are pending, and neither a PfG nor a budget have been agreed. On page 17 the Strategy states that "It [the Strategy] will be supported by a forthcoming implementation plan which will draw from PfG delivery plans". Additionally, the final version of the Strategy will have to be formally adopted by the executive and laid in the Assembly. We would like further information on what the next steps will be for the finalisation of the Strategy and development of its implementation plan in the current political context.
- 3. The Children and Young People's Strategy should be featured more prominently within the final PfG.** The Strategy received only passing notice in the PfG consultation document, yet in this document is referred to as a key component in achieving PfG outcome 14. Given that the intention is for this Strategy to direct all Executive led programmes, policies and

services which impact on the lives of children, there should be a stronger link to this Strategy within the finalised PfG and within a number of delivery plans for the PfG, particularly those for indicators 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 32, 33 and 34.

Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA)

We agree with the OBA approach adopted within the Strategy which encourages a joined-up, flexible and proactive approach to achieving the desired outcomes. We welcome the Strategy's commitment to work across boundaries and traditional department lines, flowing out of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015; this is essential for the outcomes to be achieved as they, and the associated indicators, require actions which will span a range of government departments.

Meaningful reporting and accountability is critical within this context to ensure the ongoing relevance of outcomes and indicators. To date, the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership website² has worked well as a format to display and track progress against indicators. The annual snapshot produced through the statistical bulletin is also an important tool. It is important that these continue to be produced and, we hope, may be part of the overall development of a reporting format, along with reporting on indicators linked to the PfG, similar to the Scotland Performs website.³

Early Intervention and the importance of childcare

We are pleased that the Strategy places a specific emphasis on early intervention. Research shows that investing early saves the public purse in later years. Early investment in childcare in particular has significant long-term benefits for society. Heckman's cost-benefit analysis of state provided childcare concluded that there was a 7% to 10% per year return on investment in early years, based on children's increased school and career achievement, and reduced costs in the health and criminal justice systems.⁴ Much of this investment is required before school, and even before pre-school. Childcare is key to this investment yet is often omitted as a tool in giving children and young people the best start in life.

² <http://www.cypsp.org/outcome-based-planning/>

³ <http://www.gov.scot/About/Performance/scotPerforms>

⁴ <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/>

The most crucial years for learning and development are from birth to the age of six. The benefits of providing good quality childcare during these years are substantial and include improvements in cognitive skills such as language development, reasoning and concentration. The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) Project, involving a longitudinal study of 3,000 children in the UK, showed that the cognitive outcomes in reading and mathematics nurtured during pre-school provision persist through primary school.⁵

Early intervention is also key in supporting young people to develop socially and emotionally. This may be particularly the case where children are living in deprivation. Melhuish's overview of international research in this area concludes that the benefits of intellectual, social and behavioural development through good quality pre-school education and childcare are more substantial for disadvantaged children.⁶ Long term benefits include improved educational attainment, less risk of juvenile arrests, lower rates of substance misuse, better adult employment and enhanced earning prospects. Good pre-school care is also proven to develop a child's sociability, peer-relationships and independence.⁷

We recommend that this Strategy is strengthened through the addition of further links to the developing Childcare Strategy.

Structures

The establishment of new structures to support the implementation of the Strategy is set out in chapter 5. While this is helpful, we would welcome more information on these structures, how membership will be established, what are the key lines of accountability, and how effective monitoring and reporting will be undertaken. We have a number of specific comments:

1. **Include additional stakeholders within the research pillar.** We agree it is essential that quality research underpins how we measure progress against indicators. However, only academia is recognised as a stakeholder within the research pillar. Quality, meaningful research comes from a range of sources including the voluntary / community sector and the

⁵ <http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk/eppe/eppepdfs/TP10%20Research%20Brief.pdf>

⁶ EC Melhuish, A Literature Review of the impact of early years provision on young children with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, prepared for the National Audit Office, Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues, Birkbeck College, 2004

⁷ M Hill and E Knights, Quality Costs – Working Paper 1, What is high quality early childhood education and care? London: Daycare Trust, 2009

private sector. The voluntary and community sector has a particular role to play in gathering evidence given that organisations are often working on the ground, directly with those whom the Strategy seeks to benefit. It is essential that this pillar is extended to recognise the role of those providers in delivering research and in the data development agenda. For example, Employers For Childcare has carried out a range of research including:

- a. Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey – carried out annually (most recently, in 2016, we received responses from 987 childcare providers and over 6,000 parents)
- b. Sizing Up: a comparative study of childcare policy and legislation across the UK (2010)
- c. Childcare for All? Consulting families of children with disabilities and/or special needs about childcare and employment (2011)
- d. Wraparound childcare in primary schools: consulting primary schools on the provision of wraparound services (2012)
- e. Managing Expectations: A Survey of New Mums and Dads (2013)
- f. Striking the Balance: The impact becoming a parent has on employment, working life and career (2015)
- g. Choosing Childcare in Northern Ireland (2016): Explores local parents’ experiences of looking for childcare for the first time.

2. **Ensure childcare providers are recognised as stakeholders.** We welcome the establishment of a stakeholder forum to ensure that the views and experiences of all stakeholders are known and shared. We would welcome a role within this forum. We would also want to ensure that childcare providers are involved. At present, childcare providers receive very little recognition throughout the Strategy. Childcare settings are heavily involved in the early years of children and their families, they are front-line practitioners. Childcare professionals should be included in the range of bodies and services which are necessary to the development and implementation of the strategy.

General comments on outcomes and indicators

We fully support the eight key outcomes as drawn from the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015 and agree with the holistic approach taken that recognises them as interconnected. For example, a child who is living in poverty may be more likely to experience physical or mental ill-health, or barriers to play. We note that the Strategy recognises children and young people are

more than statistics and that, in achieving against population outcomes, on a personal level some individuals will not experience the 'turn of the curve'.

We have a number of recommendations for additional indicators that will make for a more robust Strategy that can deliver real and meaningful progress against outcomes.

Overall, we advocate a stronger emphasis on **early intervention** across each outcome and for this to be reflected in the indicators. At present, many indicators leave the possibility of intervention too late, for example, by focusing on educational attainment levels at school leaving age.

We believe that evidence points to childcare having a key role in underpinning the achievement of the eight outcomes both through supporting the educational, social and emotional development of children and through lifting children out of poverty by reducing economic inactivity through tackling barriers to employment and underemployment. Childcare can empower and support families and communities to give all of our children and young people the best start in life.

Comments on specific indicators

Outcome 1: Children and young people are physically and mentally healthy

This outcome reflects the importance of tackling poverty in order to address health inequalities for children and young people. The Strategy highlights the link between poverty and preventable child deaths, mood and anxiety complaints, suicide levels and self-harm. Access to childcare has a critical role to play in lifting children and young people out of poverty, leading to more children and young people experiencing good physical and mental health. Enabling parents to access, stay in and progress in work is key to addressing child poverty levels. Additionally, childcare settings can be positive arenas for the promotion of healthy eating, physical exercise and mental well-being.

The Strategy also notes that health care services and programmes for children and young people with a disability must be of the same quality and standards as those provided to others. Our research has highlighted that childcare for children with a disability may not be readily available or fit for purpose and, where it is, may be more expensive. This could lead to parents of children with greater support needs not being able to work, having a financially detrimental impact on the family and preventing children from accessing the developmental benefits of quality childcare.

We agree, therefore, with targeting greatest effort around early intervention, children and young people with disabilities, and children and young people living in areas of deprivation.

We propose adding the following indicators to those currently listed:

The following indicators are required to properly quantify achievement against this outcome:

- Experiences of children and young people with a disability in accessing services (positive)
- Children and young people committing death by suicide or admitted to hospital for self-harm (reduction)
- Levels of alcohol and drug misuse (reduction).

We propose adding the following to what needs to be done:

- Explicitly link to the implementation of the childcare strategy and economic inactivity strategy to ensure that parents can access, stay in and progress in work, enhancing family well-being, and to ensure that children can access the benefits of quality childcare where healthy eating, physical and mental well-being, play and education are promoted.
- Ensure that parents have access to information and advice on financial supports available to them and to assist them in their role.

Outcome 2: Children and young people enjoy play and leisure

This outcome highlights the importance of play and leisure in a child's development as well as their mental, emotional, social and physical well-being. All children and young people must be able to access these benefits, including those with a disability, and those who are living in poverty. The Strategy reflects that children and young people in poverty may have less opportunity to engage in out of school activities if parents cannot afford the fees or if they cannot provide transport to and / or from the activities.

Many children access leisure activities in the form of childcare, for example, through out of school clubs or activities. Childcare settings are valuable spaces for play, leisure and interaction for children and young people. If parents feel they are unable to provide access due to the costs associated then it is essential that they are made aware of how to access the financial supports that may be available to them.

We would propose adding to the areas where effort is particularly needed. While we agree with those listed, there is also a need to support children and young people who have a caring responsibility to access play and leisure activities. For example, in a household where a parent or

another sibling has a disability then a child may find that their time outside of school is dedicated to caring for their family member.

We propose adding the following indicator to those currently listed:

- The number of children and young people accessing leisure activities (eg music, sports, drama) including disaggregation by:
 - a. Number of children and young people with a disability
 - b. Number of children and young people entitled to free school meals
 - c. Number of children and young people with a caring responsibility.

We propose adding the following to what needs to be done:

- Explicitly link to the implementation of the childcare strategy with an emphasis on supporting access to quality childcare where providers have been trained on the importance of play and leisure for children.
- Implement a campaign to raise awareness of the financial supports available to parents with the cost of childcare which may include out of school activities, summer schemes and other leisure activities.
- Raise awareness of the support available for families where an individual has a disability, both financially and in terms of social care and respite.

Outcome 3: Children and young people learn and achieve

We welcome the recognition that the education system needs to be child-centred and child-friendly and would suggest that this be extended to the pre-school education and learning system that incorporates early years and childcare settings. The Strategy commits to strengthening efforts to reduce the effects of social disadvantage on children and young people's achievement in school. It is important also to work to reduce the effects of economic disadvantage which, it is recognised, links to educational underachievement.

We are pleased the Strategy recognises that quality childcare and early education services contribute significantly to a child's cognitive and linguistic development and to the development of social skills which can result in improved performance at school and into adult life. Additionally, it enables parents to access and stay in work, helping to reduce the potential for economic and social disadvantage on children which, in turn, can lead to educational underachievement.

As with other outcomes, it is important that children and young people with a disability are able to access the same quality and standards of education to assist them to learn and achieve, whilst recognising that achievement is not the same for every child.

We propose adding the following indicators to those currently listed:

- Educational attainment and educational inequality indicators are currently focused on school leavers. This is too late to enable focused intervention when it is needed. This outcome should include indicators for earlier years, for example, the transition from primary to post-primary and from pre-school to primary school.
- An indicator to measure social and emotional development at various stages.
- Indicators broken down to identify children with disabilities, those who are in custody, and those who are in care as the strategy identifies these as children and young people for whom most effort needs to be targeted.

We propose adding the following to what needs to be done:

- There is support for high quality childcare and early childhood education however this should be strengthened with firm commitment to implementation of the childcare strategy.

Outcome 4: Children and young people live in safety and stability

This outcome reflects the importance of providing support to families and lifting children out of poverty. Homelessness and economic deprivation are key causes of insecurity and instability.

We propose adding the following indicators to those currently listed:

- While there is an indicator for the number of 16/17 year olds presenting as homeless we think there should be an additional indicator measuring the number of younger children who are living in a hostel or experiencing homelessness.

We propose adding the following to what needs to be done:

- There should also be links to various strategies including the childcare strategy, refocused economic strategy, social strategy and economic inactivity strategy, and their role in lifting children out of poverty.
- Ensure that parents have access to information on the range of financial supports available to them and know where to go for help.

Outcome 5: Children and young people experience a. economic and b. environmental well-being

It is vital that families who cannot provide the economic well-being that all children and young people are entitled to should be supported by the government to achieve this. Poverty should never determine the opportunities a child has to reach their fullest potential. The strategy notes that 23% of all children in Northern Ireland are living in poverty and, as a result, are likely to experience poorer health outcomes, lower levels of educational attainment, isolation, and fewer opportunities to play.

We welcome and endorse the connection the Strategy draws between improving the economic well-being of children and childcare. An inability to access affordable, flexible, appropriate childcare can directly impact on poverty levels, acting as a barrier to parents gaining employment. Where parents are working, the costs of childcare can place significant pressures on family budgets. The childcare sector both creates jobs and supports them by enabling parents to access, stay in, and progress at work, as well as supporting parents to train. A weak childcare infrastructure, characterised by high costs, inflexibility and lack of suitable places, acts as a barrier to work and training. Each year we carry out a Childcare Cost Survey for Northern Ireland. Last year over 6,000 parents and almost 1,000 childcare providers responded to the survey. We found that:

- The cost of an average full-time childcare place is £168 per week.
- 50% of parents reduced their working hours or left work altogether due to the cost of childcare.
- 63% of parents struggled with their childcare bill either throughout the year or at some point during it.
- 53% of parents said their childcare bill placed them under financial pressure.
- 25% of parents regularly used credit cards, loans from family or friends, overdrafts or payday loans to pay their childcare bill.

It is important that this outcome, associated indicators and relevant actions reflect the fundamental impact that the cost of childcare can have on families. Additionally, it should be reflected that the cost of, or accessing, childcare may be more challenging where a child has a disability, and this should be reflected in the priority areas.

We propose adding the following indicators to those currently listed:

- Families are able to access affordable, flexible childcare that is appropriate to their needs (increase) – identification of statistics could be part of the data development agenda, Employers For Childcare would be keen to work with the Department to develop this information.
- There is currently no indicator related to environmental well-being and we would recommend that one is developed.

We propose adding the following to what needs to be done:

- Implement the childcare strategy to lift families out of poverty.
- Run a campaign to raise awareness of the financial support available to working parents and to promote access to information and guidance.
- Monitor the impact of welfare reform on children, young people and families. During its roll out many existing benefit claimants will be moved into work. There is a need to promote the in-work benefits which are available to help employees maximise their income and increase financial stability, for example, help with the cost of childcare.
- Promote the implementation of family friendly and flexible working policies by employers.

Outcome 6: Children and young people make a positive contribution to society

Early intervention is key in supporting young people to develop socially and emotionally and, therefore, to make a positive contribution to society.

We propose adding the following indicators to those currently listed:

- Children and young people are meaningfully engaged and consulted with in the development of all strategies, policies and plans that will impact on them (also an indicator for outcome 7).

Outcome 7: Children and young people live in a society which respects their rights

The fundamental rights of children and young people are set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It is important that this outcome takes a broader approach to respecting the rights of children including a range of rights that are not referred to, for example, the right to play, the right to education, and the right to a good enough standard of living.

We propose adding the following indicators to those currently listed:

- Children and young people are meaningfully engaged and consulted with in the development of all strategies, policies and plans that will impact on them (also an indicator for outcome 6).

Outcome 8: Children and young people live in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted

The Shared Education Act (NI) supports children and young people from different community and socio-economic backgrounds coming together to learn. Additionally, the Department of Education's Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education policy (CRED) aims to improve relations and underpins and supports various curriculum requirements at primary and post-primary levels.

We believe that it is essential to intervene earlier to help cultivate good relations and shared learning in pre-school settings, for example, through integrated childcare settings and cross-community playgrounds.

The outcome focuses on good relations between some children and young people, for example those from a Catholic or Protestant religious background, and this is reflected in the indicators. However, this does not go far enough and we recommend including actions to cultivate positive attitudes towards equality of opportunity and good relations across the full range of section 75 categories. We would suggest adding an indicator that gauges attitudes towards people from a range of backgrounds.

We propose adding the following indicator to those currently listed:

- Attitudes towards others: percentage who are favourable towards those of differing sexual orientations, gender, those with or without a disability, those with or without caring responsibilities, those with different political opinions, those from a religious background other than Christian (for example, Muslim, Jewish), and those of different ages.

About Employers For Childcare: context of our response

At Employers For Childcare we support local families by campaigning to address the barriers that prevent parents from entering into, and staying in, the workforce. We see childcare as a social, economic and labour force issue. The provision of high quality, affordable and accessible childcare

carries extensive benefits for children and young people, parents and families, employers and society as a whole.

Each year we undertake research which provides us with the evidence to campaign on these and a range of issues relating to childcare, family and work. Most notably we track the cost of childcare and the impact that this has on local families, both financially and in terms of their well-being, through our annual Childcare Cost Surveys. We publish a wealth of information to assist parents, employers and childcare providers to better understand issues such as the benefits of family friendly working policies, how to access financial supports that are available, and the importance of effective early intervention in a child's development.

We also operate a Family Benefits Advice Service offering free, confidential and impartial advice and guidance. Our Family Benefits Advisers carry out personalised benefits checks and calculations to ensure that every parent is claiming all the financial help they are entitled to, particularly with the cost of childcare. We also deal with queries on childcare and work related issues.

It is through our work with local families, employers and childcare providers that we have gathered the experience and knowledge which informs our response to this consultation.

Conclusion

We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department on an ongoing basis as a partner in delivering on the Children and Young People's Strategy 2017-27, improving the well-being of children and young people living in Northern Ireland, delivering positive, long-lasting outcomes. We look forward to viewing the Strategy's implementation plan and would be keen to engage with the Department in its development.

We hope that our response is useful in shaping the final Strategy. We would be keen to discuss the points that we have raised in more detail and would be happy to meet with you in order to do so. My contact details are aoife.hamilton@employersforchildcare.org or telephone 028 9267 8200.

Yours faithfully

Aoife Hamilton
Policy and Information Manager