

Early Years SEN Framework
Maydown House
1 Maydown Road
Derry/Londonderry, BT47 6UF

Dear Sir/Madam

23rd May 2018

RE: Proposed Framework of Future Provision for Children in the Early Years with Special Educational Needs (SEN) consultation response

Employers For Childcare aims to support parents to access work and to stay in work. The organisation encompasses a charity and the only Social Enterprise Childcare Voucher company in the UK. We help parents maximise their incomes, manage childcare costs and create a suitable work-life balance.

Through working with employers and policy-makers, we have sought to encourage and secure better support for families in the workplace and in public policy. We seek to represent the views of parents with dependent children on issues relating to childcare, employment and work-life balance. Our charitable activities include carrying out research on issues which impact on families, such as the annual Childcare Cost Survey series (2010 - present), which tracks the cost of childcare and the impact high costs have on families. We also capture the views of families whose children have special educational needs (SEN) in accessing appropriate childcare. In 2011, we published '[Childcare for All?](#)' which explored childcare and employment arrangements with families whose child(ren) has a disability and/or SEN. The report found that families who participated in the research were strongly reliant on informal childcare provision and some highlighted the lack of specialised childcare available for children with disabilities and/or SEN. We have used our research findings on childcare issues to inform several consultation responses.

We actively lobby for better support for families through our charity, which also includes the Family Benefits Advice Service (FBAS) providing support, information and advice on all aspects of childcare and work related issues including financial help towards the cost of childcare. The charity undertakes research, which provides an evidence base to lobby Government both locally in Northern Ireland, and at Westminster. Last year, the helpline fielded 10,400 calls, carried out 6,500 personalised calculations for parents and offered over 450 outreach sessions.

We would like to take this opportunity to respond to the Education Authority '*Proposed Framework of Future Provision for Children in the Early Years with Special Educational Needs*' consultation document. We welcome the publication of the framework, but consider that it misses the opportunity to effectively integrate consideration of childcare provision for families who have children with special educational needs aligned within the broader framework.

Principles underpinning the Proposed Framework

We welcome the ten key principles which have emerged from the Strategic Review. However, we believe the existing principles should include more explicit recognition of the role that childcare and childcare providers can have in provision for children with SEN. The framework

has the opportunity to explicitly link early education and childcare, particularly through these principles:

Developmental – Recognise the important role of childcare provision at an early age in supporting child development. 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 poverty or deprivation.

Partnership working – Ensure that childcare providers who have experience working in SEN are identified and included in the framework. This is important, as fragmentation in services can result in a lack of coherence for families.

Effective transition – Strengthen and build on the important transition between childcare settings and pre-school.

Proposal 1: Communication

The framework cites in Proposal 1 the following aim as part of the ‘programme of offer’: the SEN Inclusion Service would ‘provide parent and child sessions across a range of early years SEN settings from children aged 0 to 3 years’. Yet, from our own research we know that parents who have a child with a disability often find it difficult to access the childcare that they need. In our most recent [Childcare Cost Survey 2017](#), one in six parents who have a child with a disability felt there was not sufficient provision of childcare in their area. They also reported difficulties in accessing affordable childcare. This, in turn, may lead families to make compromises in relation to their childcare choice and employment patterns to accommodate their child’s needs.

The framework should consider linking to the forthcoming Childcare Strategy which recognises access to childcare as vital in providing opportunities for children with SEN, and supporting their parents. It should also recognise the accessibility of a single point of information for families, young people, children and practitioners to find local services to meet their needs. One useful source that is already available is the ‘Family Support NI’ Website. We believe that the proposed framework has the opportunity to utilise this service for all stakeholders.

We are concerned that the framework has missed the opportunity to acknowledge the value of wraparound childcare provision (breakfast clubs, 2 – 3pm clubs, afterschool clubs and holiday schemes) that are provided in, or in partnership with, pre-schools and primary schools. Our mission is to make it easier for parents with dependent children to get into work and to stay in work. It is recognised by researchers that wraparound care facilities support working parents. However, our latest Childcare Cost Survey highlighted that parents who have one or more children with special or additional needs find it difficult to access this type of provision. It is important that the framework considers wraparound care provision. This includes having a flexible package of support that can be tailored to the needs of children and parents.

The duration of provision was also highlighted in the Education Authority’s Strategic Review of Nurse Provision in Special Schools and it was agreed that the model will depend on the needs of each child. Ensuring a suite of options including pre-school, nursery and wraparound childcare allows parents to tailor their choices to their and their child’s needs.

Proposal 2: Partnerships

We believe the proposed framework provides a unique opportunity for the Education Authority to align with other key strategies, particularly the [Draft Childcare Strategy 2015](#). The draft outlined a commitment to 'ensure that every child with a disability that requires a childcare place can access provision appropriate to his or her needs'. Collaborating on the issue of early education and childcare would help develop strategic planning which would enhance the childcare and education infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

This would also support co-operation between health and education agencies in identifying, assessing and providing services to children with SEN as required through the [Special Educational Needs and Disability Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#). A collaborative approach between agencies would positively contribute to the well-being of children and young people. In England, this alignment is evident in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework which sets standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years old. All schools and Ofsted-registered early years providers must follow the EYFS, including childminders, preschools, nurseries and school reception classes. The framework also supports an integrated approach to early learning and care. It gives all professionals a set of common principles and commitments to deliver quality early education and childcare experiences to all children.

As the Education Authority is already a key partner on the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) it can utilise and maximise links with other key partners to take forward integrated planning.

Proposal 2 also outlines plans to develop an 'Early Years SEN Forum, comprised of representatives from relevant statutory, voluntary and community organisations'. It is not clear if parents will have the opportunity to be involved. We believe that the remit should be clear to avoid confusion for stakeholders.

Proposal 3: Support which precedes the pre-school year

Early years strategies in other regions of the UK are inclusive of childcare services. There is a wealth of research that inextricably links childcare and early education, often described as 'educare'. This includes strong international evidence which supports the integration of education and care in order to secure the best outcomes for children, young people and their families. For example, in Finland, an integrated model of education, care and teaching has highlighted several long-term and developmental benefits for families and children. However, this integration is largely absent from education strategies and policies in Northern Ireland. We believe that Proposal 3 should recognise the integration of childcare and early education. Without quality childcare, where staff are trained, qualified and experienced in SEN, a key opportunity for early intervention and identification of needs is missed.

The importance of a child's early years experience is outlined in ['Learning to Learn: A framework for Early Years Education and Learning'](#) (Department of Education, 2013). It advocated for greater collaboration and integration for early years support. This was also included in the Draft Programme for Government Outcome 14: 'We give our children and young people the best start in life'. We welcome the inclusion of the provision of high quality pre-school education under this outcome to enable children to fulfil their potential.

Proposal 3 also outlines the aim to ‘enhance the skills of early years practitioners to identify, assess and meet the needs of children facing barriers to learning’. Research from our [Childcare Provider Report 2018](#) highlighted the challenges childcare providers face when accessing training and development opportunities. Where providers had not accessed training, reasons included the location, timing and cost of training. It was recommended that online training should be made available to reduce costs and accommodate working hours. The framework should include greater clarity on how it aims to enhance the skills of practitioners. This is important because having fully trained staff can assist in earlier identification and intervention which are key to helping children reach their potential. It should also outline how training will be implemented and resourced.

In the current financial context, it is important that the proposed framework includes a detailed implementation plan which comprises an allocated budget and realistic timeframe. We would also like further information on how the finalised framework will be costed and budget allocated.

Additional comment

The ‘effective communication’ principle in the framework does mention a ‘Local Offer’. In England, local authorities have a statutory duty to publish a ‘local offer’ setting out information across education, health and social care provision for children and young people who have SEN or are disabled, including childcare provision. The consultation document should provide greater clarity on what a ‘local offer’ would explicitly mean and look like in Northern Ireland.

Summary

We are pleased that the Education Authority is working on developing a framework on the future provision for children in the early years with special education needs. We believe that childcare and education should be inextricably linked and the proposed framework has the opportunity to integrate these much more clearly and to greater effect.

We hope that our response is useful in shaping the final framework and would like to be kept informed of its progress.

We would be glad to discuss the points that we have raised in more detail with you. Please feel free to contact me on 028 9267 8200 or alexandra.chapman@employersforchildcare.org

Yours Sincerely,



Alexandra Chapman
Research Officer