



Early Years Strategic Alliance

starting early, starting strong, starting together for all children

Early Years Strategic Alliance Manifesto







INTRODUCTION

The Early Years Strategic Alliance (EYSA), jointly chaired by Children in Northern Ireland and the Women's Support Network, is a group of organisations from across the children's and women's sector that work with, and for, children in their early years and their families.

The Alliance has undertaken a review and update of its original Manifesto from 2007. It now presents this Manifesto as a road map for the development of early years, childcare and family support services over the lifetime of the new Executive and Assembly.



INTEGRATION AND COLLABORATION (EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES)

The theme of integration and collaboration is EYSA's over-arching objective providing the foundation upon which all of the Manifesto issues can be addressed by the Executive and Assembly.

EYSA is asking the Executive and Assembly, through the Programme for Government, to prioritise the provision of fully integrated Early Childhood Education and Care Services (ECEC) across Northern Ireland. High quality integrated ECEC services can produce positive outcomes for children and their families across an array of policy priorities such as growing the economy, tackling disadvantage, promoting employment and helping to reduce child poverty. It is imperative that Government works to improve the lives of our young children.

Issue

The ongoing parallel development of strategic responses to early years and childcare, and the failure to establish lead ministerial responsibility, does not serve the best interests of children and families. The potential for duplication of processes and procedures increases the likelihood of scarce resources being wasted. Children from birth to age 3 are particularly disadvantaged by the failure to effectively integrate early childhood care and education systems. The current childcare infrastructure has suffered neglect and needs specific attention as part of work to fully integrate Early Childhood Education and Care Services (See: Quality Affordable Childcare)

What is needed

- The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety should take lead ministerial responsibility for fully integrated Early Childhood Education and Care Services as defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This must be underpinned by a commitment from all Executive Ministers to co-operate and work in partnership on early years and childcare through the mechanism of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People. Critical to this partnership working is the pooling of resources.


The Executive must incentivise the pooling of resources for early years and childcare provision.

- The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership provides a model, operating at agency level, for integrated planning and commissioning of supports and services for all children and young people. This must effectively integrate/link to early years and childcare supports and services, while having regard for the delivery model in place at local level which can sustain the implementation of early years and child care services.
- A comprehensive legislative basis for Early Childhood Education and Care Services is required. It must be informed by a review of all existing legislation in the area, to ensure gaps in provision and anomalies in practice are identified and addressed so that children and their families can access early childhood services of the highest quality.

Context

According to the OECD Early Childhood Education and Care Services (ECEC) usually means all services providing education and care to children below compulsory school age or before starting school. It reflects a broad, holistic, integrated and coherent approach to early years. The term reflects new attitudes and understandings about ECEC such as:

- An acknowledgement that all types of services which provide education and care to children under school age belong to the same policy field
- A shared desire to identify, understand and overcome barriers that have obstructed integrated action i.e. philosophy, objectives, management, regulation
- A shift from selective and exclusive to universal and inclusive
- A right for all children and families



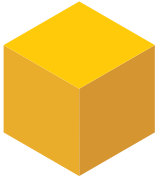
The OECD Starting Strong Reviews¹ recommends a systematic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation, it calls for a clear policy vision for children from birth to eight, and a co-ordinated policy framework at centralised and de-centralised levels. A lead ministry working in co-operation with other departments and sectors can foster coherent and participatory policy development to cater for the needs of diverse children and families. Strong links across ministries, services, professionals, and parents promote coherence in policies for children.



Positive Developments

The development of a comprehensive early years strategy that focuses on the development and wellbeing of each child, including affordable access to high quality early years provision for families living in areas of disadvantage and poverty in urban and rural areas was identified as a priority of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People in 2008.

1 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2006) Starting Strong II Early Childhood Education and Care



A RIGHTS BASED APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD

Issue

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international human rights Treaty that sets out a comprehensive set of basic human rights to which all children are entitled. The UK Government is a signatory to the Treaty, which means it has committed to implementing its provisions and principles.

In all actions relating to young children and their families the Alliance urges the Executive and Assembly to ensure that young children are recognised as rights holders as provided for by the UNCRC. Young children's rights must be promoted and upheld so that in all actions no child is discriminated against (article 2); the best interests of the child are the primary consideration (article 3); the right of the child to survival and maximum development is upheld in all circumstances (article 6); and, respect is shown for the views of the child as expressed by a variety of means (article 12). These are the guiding principles that underpin all of the Alliance's calls and their fulfilment for young children and their families is critical to full delivery on the Manifesto.


What is needed

The Executive must incorporate the principles and relevant provisions of the UNCRC into domestic legislation to promote the rights and best interests of young children and their families.

Context

The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment No.7 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood'² urges Government administrations to develop rights-based, co-ordinated, multi-sector strategies in order to ensure children's best interests are always the starting point for service planning and provision. These should be based around a systematic and integrated approach to law and policy development for the full age range up to eight years old. A comprehensive framework for early childhood

2 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) General Comment No. 7 Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, 2005, CRC, para 18

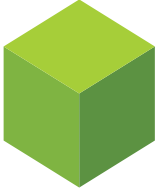


services, provisions and facilities is required, backed-up by information and monitoring systems.



Positive Developments

The Department of Education in its Draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy expressed its desire to ensure the strategy was developed with regard to the principles and provisions of the UNCRC.



EQUAL ACCESS TO EARLY YEARS, CHILDCARE AND FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES FOR ALL CHILDREN

Issue

Not all young children experience equal access to early years, childcare and family support provision.

Access to childcare provision for children with disabilities is problematic. Research conducted by Employers For Childcare Charitable Group³ points to a shortage of specialised appropriate childcare. Only 34% of survey respondents reported using formal childcare. Amongst parents of children with disabilities there is a strong reliance on informal childcare (66%), with grandparents being the most common choice (35%). Parents spoke of the lack of suitably trained staff to manage their child's needs within formal childcare, while 16% of respondents to the survey said that childcare providers would not accept their child because of their disability.

The location of the family home will also impact on a family's ability to access flexible childcare. Rural areas have a limited selection of childcare providers and transport issues may mean that it is not feasible for families to access what could be an appropriate form of care. Some of the more disadvantaged urban areas also have very limited access to registered childcare.

While early years services do reflect and celebrate the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of local communities, it is also important to recognise that meaningful engagement by early years services with black and minority ethnic communities demands targeted programmes of support around the specific linguistic, health and educational needs of the asylum seeker and refugee communities. Programmes and pathways which encourage integration into the local area should be identified and resourced.

What is needed

- The Executive and Assembly must ensure that all children have equal opportunity to benefit from early years, childcare and family support services.

³ Employers For Childcare Charitable Group (2011) Childcare for All? 2011, EFCCG


- The Executive and Assembly must work in partnership with the widest range of sectors and agencies (and in particular the community and voluntary sector) to progressively build on the effective delivery of universal services to provide the targeted, additional and specialist supports that some children, families and communities require if children's outcomes are to be improved.
- The Executive must monitor availability and access to quality early years, childcare and family support services, through systematic data collection which is appropriately disaggregated in terms of major variables relating to children's and families circumstances and needs. Based on this data targets must be set to address unmet needs through provision of appropriate services.

Context

The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment No.7 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood'⁴ encourages Government administrations to monitor availability and access to quality services that contribute to young children's survival and development, including through systematic data collection, disaggregated in terms of major variables related to children's and families' background and circumstances.

The Committee also calls on Government administrations to ensure that all young children (and those with primary responsibility for their wellbeing) are guaranteed access to appropriate and effective services, including programmes of health, care and education specifically designed to promote their wellbeing. Particular attention should be paid to the most vulnerable groups of young children and to those who risk discrimination (article 2). These include girls, children living in poverty, children with disabilities, children belonging to indigenous or minority groups, children from migrant families, children who are orphaned or lack parental care for other reasons, children living in institutions, children living with mothers in prison, refugee

4 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) General Comment No. 7 Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, 2005, CRC, para 9



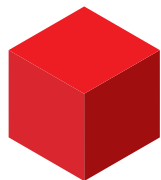
and asylum-seeking children, children infected with, or affected by HIV/AIDS, and children of alcohol or drug addicted parents.⁵



Positive Developments

The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership is establishing themed groups to ensure that in the planning and commissioning of services the rights and needs of specific vulnerable groups of children and young people are addressed. The themed groups include those focusing on disabled children and young people, black and minority ethnic children and young people and children and young people with specific emotional and behavioural difficulties.

5 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) General Comment No. 7 Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, 2005, CRC, para 20




EMBED EARLY INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION IN ALL EARLY YEARS SERVICES

Issue

The first years of a child's life are critical in developing relationships and laying the foundations for positive physical, cognitive and emotional development. Parents' interaction with their children is vital in these early years. Nurturing, responsive care and the formation of a strong attachment or bond with a primary caregiver (usually the mother) also enables healthy brain development. A positive home environment in these early years provides the foundation for all future human relationships and promotes resilience in children who are then more able to cope or recover from stresses or trauma as they move through life.

While a large volume of evidence illustrates the positive outcomes for children when investment is targeted during the very early years, it also has to be recognised that some children and families will need additional supports and interventions at different points in a child's life; such as later childhood or adolescence. It is essential that parents and families are informed and supported to provide the best possible care for their children. This must go hand in hand with measures to redress inequalities and barriers to positive parenting such as poverty, violence, poor mental health and inadequate housing.

The Alliance has concerns that with budgetary constraints and a rising birth rate, the vital universal services which provide a solid base for prevention and/or early intervention such as midwifery, health visiting, speech therapy and educational psychology will continue to be under strain. Subsequently, they may not be able to provide the safety net of services in a consistent or timely manner across the region. While the Sure Start programme in Northern Ireland clearly has an important role in prevention, early intervention and providing additional supports for families in need, there continues to be significant geographical gaps and families that are in need who do not have access to this support. This is true of groups including families living in rural areas as well as older children in terms of family and parenting support that



would either prevent or intervene at an early stage before problems are established or families move into crisis.



What is needed

The Alliance urges the Executive and Assembly to support parents and carers in their role as the main caregivers during childhood. There must be a continuum of support and available services to enable and empower parents to ensure their children have the best start in life but also to intervene at the earliest possible stage when issues or problems begin to emerge in later childhood or adolescence. The Executive and Assembly must recognise and invest equitably in all sectors (statutory, community and voluntary) in order to provide a comprehensive range of universal and progressive services for children and families. While some prevention or early intervention measures will be short term, other children and families will need longer term support and sometimes on an intensive basis.

- The Alliance calls upon the Executive and Assembly to monitor and regularly report on the implementation of universal services (e.g. the DHSSPS Healthy Child/Healthy Future Strategy or the Pre-School Education Expansion funded pre-school year) and ensure that all families can access the core complement of services as opposed to a postcode lottery operating.
- Identify gaps in services for families that need additional support and work inter-departmentally, and in conjunction with, the community and voluntary sector to respond holistically to these needs.
- As part of this strategic approach to prevention and early intervention, identify and work to address the inequalities and barriers that impede parents in supporting best outcomes for their children.



Context

Article 18 of the UNCRC affirms that parents or legal guardians have the primary responsibility for promoting children's development and well-being,

with the child's best interests as their basic concern (articles 18.1; 27.2). States parties should respect the primacy of parents, mothers and fathers.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment No.7 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood'⁶ affirms that child rights in early childhood is ... an effective way to help prevent personal, social and educational difficulties during middle childhood and adolescence.


The Committee recognises early childhood as the period of most extensive (and intensive) parental responsibilities. These relate to a child's well-being; their survival; health; physical safety and emotional security; standards of living and care; opportunities for play and learning, and freedom of expression. Accordingly, realising children's rights is in largely dependent on the well-being and resources available to those with responsibility for their care.

The Committee recommends that States parties support early childhood development programmes, including home and community based pre-school programmes, in which parents' (and other caregivers') empowerment and education are main features.

A European Parliament Resolution on Early Years Learning in the EU⁷ stresses that parents, both mothers and fathers are equal partners in ECEC. Members recognise that services should be fully participative involving all staff, parents and where possible children themselves ...they encourage Member States to invest in parental education programmes and, where appropriate, to provide other forms of assistance, such as home visiting services for parents who need additional help.

6 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) General Comment No. 7 Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, 2005, CRC, para 26

7 European Parliament Resolution of 12 May 2011 on Early Years Learning in the European Union (2010/2159 (INI))

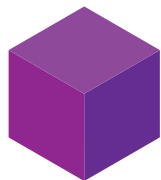


The Council of the European Union agrees that supporting parents in their role as the main educators of children during the early years is extremely important and encourages ECEC services to work in close partnership with parents, families and communities, in order to increase awareness of the opportunities offered by ECEC and of the importance of learning from an early age.



Positive Developments

- The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership is seeking, from the Executive, through its constituent Ministries, status for Northern Ireland as an early intervention region. This would, if agreed, communicate across agencies and departments that early intervention needs to be taken forward as a joint Government priority.
- A Northern Ireland Family Support website (FamilySupportNI.gov.uk) has been established to map family support services at local and regional levels enabling greater co-ordination of early intervention initiatives.



QUALITY AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE

Issue

Parents need access to high quality, accessible, affordable and appropriate childcare services in order to be able to reconcile their caring and work/ education demands.⁸ High quality childcare services have important benefits for children, nurturing their social and emotional development.

It is well documented that there is a lack of childcare provision in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the childcare settings which do exist are unevenly distributed across the region. Rural areas have the lowest level of childcare provision. 71% of all childcare settings in Northern Ireland exist in the east of the region (within the Northern, South Eastern and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Areas). The remaining percentage of childcare settings are found within the, mostly rural, Southern and Western Health and Social Care Trust Areas.

Without adequate and affordable childcare provision, parents struggle to access and remain in employment. The second Childcare Costs Survey (2011) carried out for the region revealed that for 46% of respondents the cost of childcare influenced the hours they work. In addition, many families struggled with their childcare costs, with 45% of the average net salary is allocated to childcare for one child.⁹ Two forms of financial assistance help to reduce the cost of childcare, these are the childcare elements of Working Tax Credit and the Childcare Voucher Scheme. However, a large percentage of parents are unaware that potential support is available. Historically there has been a much greater uptake of working parents availing of these forms of tax relief in the other regions of the UK. The region with the lowest numbers of tax credits recipients is Northern Ireland.¹⁰ Currently there are 16,600 families claiming the childcare element of Working Tax Credits and there are approximately 10,000 families availing of the Childcare Voucher Scheme. The tax exemptions can greatly reduce the cost of formal childcare for

8 For the purposes of this section childcare denotes the care of children that is provided through registered formal daycare services.

9 Employers For Childcare Charitable Group (2011) Northern Ireland Childcare Costs Survey 2011, EFCG

10 HMRC (2011) Child and Working Tax Credits statistics April 2011, HMRC, p37

families. This support comes from the Treasury as opposed to the Northern Ireland block grant. In addition, the tax savings generated also stay in the Northern Ireland economy.

A reduction in support for families through changes to the tax and benefits system has greatly impacted on families. In particular, the reduction in the amount of support available through the childcare element of working tax credits has been reduced by 10% from April 2011. Therefore raising awareness on what support is available to parents is vital.

In 2004, the Northern Ireland Taskforce on Employability and Long-term Unemployment reported that the lack of access to affordable and decent quality childcare provision was one of the main barriers to entering the labour market for parents, particularly so for women.¹¹ The 2005 review of the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy (1999) also recognised this point, stating that the “availability of affordable childcare has been identified as a barrier to parents hoping to return to work”.¹² More recently the First and Deputy First Minister outlined the need to empower parents back into employment through access to childcare in the Northern Ireland Child Poverty Strategy.¹³

Childcare policy in Northern Ireland has suffered neglect. This is evident given that the themes of the first Childcare Strategy for the region, Children First (1999) still remain relevant. Furthermore, childcare policy and development in the region lags behind the rest of the UK where childcare services have been elevated onto a statutory footing.

A professionally recognised, appropriately paid, suitably trained workforce plays an integral role in ensuring the delivery of high quality early childhood education and care services.

11 Report of the Taskforce on Employability and Long-Term Unemployment, December 2002, p93

12 DHSSPS (2005) Review of Children First Final Report, August 2005, p46, DHSSPS

13 NIE (2010) Improving Children's Life Chances, The Child Poverty Strategy , p1, NIE

What is needed

- A fully integrated approach to early childhood education and care must ensure provision of high quality, accessible, affordable and appropriate childcare services.
- A comprehensive legislative basis for early childhood education and care services that guarantees access to appropriate childcare services.
- Development of a clear workforce strategy to ensure entry, progression and professional development within the early years workforce to include: accessible entry points for all ages of unemployed/economically inactive people; continuation and broadening of apprenticeships for those already in employment and a bursary scheme to provide financial support to assist with the costs of undertaking third level or post degree early years studies.
- A high level awareness campaign to maximise potential support available to families to help with their childcare costs.
- The Assembly must lobby Westminster on the need to support and protect families through welfare reform changes, in particular to restore the 10% reduction in childcare support through Working Tax Credits.

Context

UNCRC article 18 requires Government to render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children. This includes taking all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from childcare services and facilities for which they are eligible.

Did you know?

- In 2009, there were a total of 1,145 childcare places in community day nurseries (DHSSPS, 2010). 2010 figures show that this number has decreased to 782, which amounts to a 32% decrease.
- The Childcare Act 2006 was pioneering legislation introduced to England and Wales. It imposes a statutory duty on Local Authorities (LAs) to

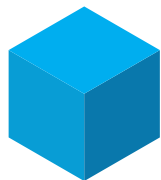
ensure there is ample childcare provision in their area to meet the needs of local working parents. LAs also have to provide information to parents to ensure that every parent has the information to make informed choices about their childcare related issues.

Positive Developments

- There are a total of 4,274 childminders, day nurseries and out of school clubs in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS, 2011¹⁴). This figure has increased by 4% since 2009 (see DHSSPS, 2010 for figures).
- £12 million ring fenced specifically for childcare services by the current Executive.
- The Rural Childcare Programme developed by the Department of Agricultural and Rural Development (DARD) provided the opportunity for demonstration projects to improve rural childcare provision within the region.
- In the most recent Childcare Cost Survey (2011) for Northern Ireland, 97% of respondents were happy with the quality of service offered by their childcare provider.¹⁵

14 The figures used in this report are those as cited in the Children Order Statistical Bulletin 2010, published in March 2011. These are the only published figures on the number of childcare settings and places in Northern Ireland.

15 Employers For Childcare Charitable Group (2011) Childcare Costs Survey 2011, EFCCG



PROMOTE AND SAFEGUARD YOUNG CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO PLAY

Issue

Throughout childhood play is at the heart of children's everyday lives and experiences. It is the cornerstone of learning for children and therefore needs recognition and promotion. This will ensure that children's earliest years provide the opportunity for them to play, learn and develop the confidence and skills that will help them thrive and develop.

Research indicates that play can help to combat childhood obesity by increasing activity levels; aid children's mental and emotional responsiveness; improve social skills and promote resilience.¹⁶ There is also evidence that play helps children to develop learning and problem-solving skills, which is key to their ability to achieve in school and in later life. Within early years and education we suggest there should be a greater emphasis on the value of play for play's sake.

The value and importance of play to children's holistic development must be recognised by policy makers and practitioners alike. The intense pressures of testing and target setting can lead to demands being made for practitioners to cut back on the amount of play that they provide for the children in their care. This pressure to reduce play opportunities should be strongly resisted. It completely overrides the basic truth that young children learn best through play.

Play should be part of the common core of knowledge that every adult needs when working with children. Getting the balance right by intervening in play at the right moments is vital. Early years settings must offer a rich environment that stimulates and encourages spontaneous play. It is important that practitioners provide a broad balance of different types of play for the children in their settings.

16 Lester S & Russell W (2008) Play for a change. Play, policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives. National Children's Bureau & Play England.

What is needed


- Promotion of the Play and Leisure Policy and Implementation Plan to highlight the benefits of play from birth onwards. Ensuring that play is coordinated within the overall vision of the Children and Young People's Strategy in order to create joined up children's services and child-friendly environments that genuinely place children at the heart of early years settings and their communities.
- Create spaces and places for play that do justice to children's endless capacity for adventure and imagination.
- Paying attention to early years environments and making them more 'playable' could produce significant rewards in terms of children's health and well-being.
- Play theory should, as a minimum, be part of the common core of knowledge that every adult needs when working with children.
- Ensure that parents are given advice to inform them that giving children opportunities to play is one of the best things that they can do for their children's health and wellbeing.

Context

UNCRC Article 31 addresses the right to engage in play and recreational activities.

1. State Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. State Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

The UNCRC Concluding Observations for Northern Ireland (2008) found that the right to play and leisure is not fully enjoyed by all children; especially due to poor play infrastructures, and notably for those children with disabilities.



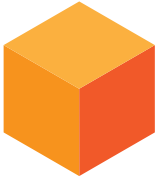
Play and leisure facilities must therefore be accessible to children of different ages, needs and interests. One of the key strengths of the UNCRC is that all of the articles of the convention are interrelated and indivisible, thus creating the important connection between play and other aspects of a child's life including, by way of example health, education and the right to have a voice on decisions that impact upon them.



Positive Developments

The Executive has produced its Play and Leisure Implementation Plan through which it intends to help deliver on the aims of the Ten Year Children and Young People's Strategy and contribute to the delivery of a broad range of strategic aims, including those which relate to improved health and achievement outcomes.

The Play and Leisure Implementation Plan is for the period 2011-2015 and includes a number of key actions for OFMDFM as well as other departments. Within the budget there is funding allocated to the delivery of the play and leisure implementation plan over the four year budget period.



ENDING CHILD POVERTY

Issue

Despite the Executive's obligations to eradicate child poverty as required by the Child Poverty Act 2010, official statistics show that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK where the level of child poverty has increased by 2% to 26% in 2009/10.¹⁷ Moreover, 21% of children live in persistent poverty¹⁸ and there are 40,000 children in severe child poverty (almost 10%).¹⁹

Child poverty numbers are expected to regress to 1999 levels due to the impact of budget and welfare cuts, the rise in the cost of living and unemployment.²⁰

Widening Education Gap

Despite all of the accepted evidence highlighting education as one of the best routes out of poverty Northern Ireland's education attainment gap is shocking.

- Over 20% of children do not attain the expected standards in literacy and maths when they leave primary school.
- In 2009 only 29.7% of children entitled to free school meals (FSME) achieved 5 GCSEs A* to C, including English and Maths, compared to 63.6% non FSME students.²¹
- Statistics from some of the most disadvantaged wards in West Belfast show that more than 80% of young people are leaving school with no or low qualifications – at a time when the EU has a 2020 target of 40% entering higher education.²²

17 Households Below Average Income (HBAI) <http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai>

18 Marina Monteith, Katrina Lloyd and Patricia McKee, Persistent Child Poverty in Northern Ireland, Feb 2008, Save the Children, ARK and ESCR

19 Severe Child Poverty in Northern Ireland – Save the Children briefing paper Feb 2011

20 Child and Working Age Poverty from 2010 to 2020, M Brewer, J Browne, R Joyce, IFS 2011

21 DE STATISTICAL PRESS RELEASE Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers 2008/09, quoted in Save the Children briefing, Better Odds at School, 2010

22 Save the Children Briefing (2010) Better Odds at School, 2010 SC NI p2

Northern Ireland's poorest children do worse and make less progress than their better-off classmates. They are failed by the very system that is meant to help lift them out of poverty.

In addition the Northern Ireland rate of youth unemployment is a major concern, currently sitting at 18% compared to an overall unemployment rate of 7.6%, meaning that almost one in five young people are out of work.

Save the Children Northern Ireland's 2007 Child Poverty Report²³ noted that educational disadvantage begins at an early age in Northern Ireland even before children enter the formal schooling environment.

Pre-school children from higher socio-economic backgrounds in Northern Ireland already show signs of higher cognitive and behavioural abilities than children from poorer backgrounds. Young children living in areas of high deprivation score less well on verbal skills, early number concepts and general cognitive skills. They also show less progress on sociability and cooperation. So before poor children even start their formal education, they are already playing catch up with those from more affluent backgrounds.

The evidence on how socio-economic background affects early learning and development is clear. There is evidence to show that differences in children's cognitive development linked to parental background can be seen as early as 22 months and that the highest early achievers from deprived backgrounds are overtaken by lower achieving children from advantaged backgrounds by age five.²⁴

What is needed

- The Executive is required by the Child Poverty Act 2010 to prioritise the fight against child poverty. The Executive must deliver and implement a

23 Save the Children (2007) Child Poverty Report, 2007, SC NI

24 Save the Children, Bringing Families and Schools Together: Giving poor Children the best start, Save the Children briefing September 2011

concrete child poverty action plan incorporating specific targets relating to the early years.

- The Executive must recognise and invest in Early Childhood Education and Care Services as a fundamental foundation for promoting equity in educational outcomes and stemming the flow of young people who are not in education, employment or training.
- The Executive must break the link between poverty, educational underachievement and disengagement leading to early school leaving, starting in a child's early years:-
 1. Additional resources for early intervention including early childhood education and care.
 2. Set FSME targets to close the performance gap from Early Years as well as GCSE level.
 3. Extend parent programmes to help parents support their children's disposition to learn.
 4. Focus on children's best outcomes, not institutions, which will encourage more sharing across sectors and release funding to tackle education inequality.
 5. The economy lags behind on a number of key productivity drivers including skills, education, innovation and research and development. Links needs to be made between early childhood education and care, ending child poverty and economic development.

Context

The UNCRC requires Government to ensure every child has the right to an adequate standard of living for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child²⁵ in its General Comment No.7 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood' observes:

25 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) General Comment No. 7 Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, 2005, CRC

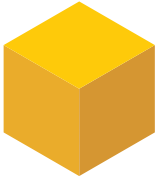
States parties are urged to implement systematic strategies to reduce poverty in early childhood as well as combat its negative effects on children's well-being. All possible means should be employed, including '...material assistance and support programmes...' to children and families (article 27.3), in order to assure young children a basic standard of living consistent with rights. Implementing children's right to benefit from social security, including social insurance is an important element of any strategy (article 26).

The Council of the European Union 'Council conclusions on Early Childhood Education and Care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow'²⁶ asserts that early childhood education and care lays the essential foundations for language acquisitions, successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and employability. If solid foundations are laid during a child's formative years, later learning becomes more effective and more likely to continue throughout life, increasing the equity of educational outcomes and lowering the costs for society in terms of lost talent and public spending on welfare, health and even justice ... 'by helping to close the achievement gap and supporting cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development it can help break the cycle of disadvantage and disengagement that often lead to early school leaving and the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next'.

Positive Developments

The Executive is required by statute to prioritise the fight against child poverty. The Child Poverty Act 2010 commits the Executive to eradicate child poverty by 2020. The legislation highlights education, childcare, health, family support, financial assistance, employment, skills and housing as crucial elements in the battle to end child poverty.

26 Council of the European Union Council Conclusions on ECEC (2011) Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, 2011, Official Journal of the European Union (2011/C 175/03)



EARLY YEARS FUNDING

Issue

The evidence demonstrating the high return on investment in the early years is increasingly accepted and acknowledged. However, research evidence highlights the ongoing chronic under investment in early years provision in Northern Ireland. Even before the welfare and budget cuts, Northern Ireland suffered from historic under-investment in children. Research into public spending on key children's services in 2009 confirmed the stark under-investment - overall spending in 2007/08 on Early Years amounted to £630 per child in Northern Ireland compared with around £2000 per child in Great Britain. Spending on Sure Start was much lower in Northern Ireland - expenditure per child was £80, compared to nearly £600 per child in England.²⁷ A report issued by Dawn Purvis and the Working Group on Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant working class,²⁸ has suggested that funding priorities are '*back to front*'. It highlights that '*accumulated evidence suggests that the more we invest in young people early, the better the outcome. Proportionately too little is invested in the early years during key stages of a child's development*'.

Furthermore, there has been an historic absence of sufficient capital investment to develop childcare facilities across Northern Ireland.

What is needed

- Resources, including the £12 million earmarked for childcare in Budget 2011-14, should support the development of all types of registered provision (childminders, home-based childcare, daycare, Women's Centres childcare and school aged childcare) so that availability, accessibility and parental preference is widened.
- The Executive must deliver a re-balancing of resources towards a child's early years and early intervention. The development and implementation

27 Save the Children (2009) A Child's Portion, An analysis of public spending on children in the UK, NI Briefing, 2009, SC NI

28 Dawn Purvis and the Working Group on Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class (2011) Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class *A Call to Action*

- of a robust mechanism for tracking spend on children to ensure maximum return on investment in support of outcomes must be a priority.
- Sufficient sustained capital investment must be provided in areas of social need where there is an identified gap in registered childcare provision.

Context

A European Parliament Resolution on Early Years Learning in the EU²⁹ stresses that in an unstable economic climate we must not neglect to invest substantially in ECEC services ... it has been observed that investment in ECEC has been proven to have subsequent economic and social benefits, such as increased tax contributions through a strengthened workforce, along with reduced future health costs, lower crime rates and fewer instances of anti-social behaviour. It recognises that quality early years education can reduce early school leaving.

The Council of the European Union³⁰ draws the following conclusions on ECEC invites Member States to invest efficiently in early childhood education and care as a long-term growth enhancing measure.

Returns on investment in early childhood education are the highest, and particularly for those from a disadvantaged background, while educational investment in later stages tends to disproportionately benefit children from higher socio-economic backgrounds ... higher investment in early childhood can save money later ... public spending on early childhood per child is lower than in any other phase.

29 European Parliament Resolution of 12 May 2011 on Early Years Learning in the European Union (2010/2159 (INI))

30 Council of the European Union Council Conclusions on ECEC (2011) – providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, 2011, Official Journal of the European Union (2011/C 175/03)



Positive Developments

In 2009 there were 1,364 individual children registered for childcare within Women's Centres.³¹ This equates to 9,828 hours of childcare provided weekly mainly for children age 0-4 years funded by the Department of Social Development through the Women's Centres Childcare Fund.

31 Women's Centres Regional Partnership (2010) Childcare Mapping and Research Report, 2010, WCRP



EARLY YEARS STRATEGIC ALLIANCE CALLS TO THE EXECUTIVE AND ASSEMBLY

- Through the Programme for Government prioritise the provision of fully integrated Early Childhood Education and Care Services (ECEC).
- The Minister for Health Social Services and Public Safety should take lead ministerial responsibility for fully integrated Early Childhood Education and Care Services. This must be underpinned by a commitment from all Executive Ministers to co-operate and work in partnership on early years and childcare through the mechanism of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People.
- The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership must effectively integrate/link to early years and childcare supports and services, having regard for the delivery model in place at local level which can sustain the implementation of early years and child care services.
- A comprehensive legislative basis for early childhood education and care services is required. It must be informed by a review of all existing legislation in the area to ensure gaps in provision and anomalies in practice are identified and addressed so that children and their families can access early childhood services of the highest quality.
- Incorporate into domestic legislation the principles and relevant provisions of the UNCRC to promote the rights and best interests of all young children and their families.
- The Executive and Assembly must work in partnership with the widest range of sectors and agencies (and in particular the community and voluntary sector) to progressively build on the effective delivery of universal services to provide the targeted, additional and specialist supports that some children, families and communities require if children's outcomes are to be improved.
- Monitor availability and access to quality early years, childcare and family support services, through systematic data collection appropriately disaggregated in terms of major variables relating to children's and families' circumstances and needs.

- Monitor and regularly report on the implementation of universal services (e.g. the DHSSPS Healthy Child/Healthy Future Strategy or the pre-school year) and ensure that all families are accessing the core complement of services as opposed to a postcode lottery operating.
- Identify gaps in services for families that need additional supports. This will require an integrated approach, working cross departmentally and in conjunction with the community and voluntary sector to respond holistically to these needs.
- As part of this strategic approach to prevention and early intervention, identify and work to address the inequalities and barriers that impede parents in supporting best outcomes for their children
- A comprehensive legislative basis for Early Childhood Education and Care Services that guarantees access to appropriate childcare services. The current childcare infrastructure has suffered neglect and needs specific attention as part of work to fully integrate Early Childhood Education and Care Services.
- Development of a clear workforce strategy to ensure entry, progression and professional development within the early years workforce to include: accessible entry points for all ages of unemployed/economically inactive people; continuation and broadening of apprenticeships for those already in employment and a bursary scheme to provide financial support to assist with the costs of undertaking third level or post degree early years studies.
- A high level awareness campaign to maximise potential support available to families to help with their childcare costs.
- The Assembly must lobby Westminster on the need to support and protect families through welfare reform changes, in particular to restore the 10% reduction in childcare support through Working Tax Credits.

- Promotion of the Play and Leisure Policy and Implementation Plan to highlight the benefits of play from birth onwards. Ensuring that play is coordinated within the overall vision of the Ten Year Children and Young People's Strategy in order to create joined up children's services and child-friendly environments that genuinely place children at the heart of early years settings and their communities.
- Deliver and implement a concrete child poverty action plan incorporating specific targets relating to the early years.
- Recognise and invest in Early Childhood Education and Care Services as a fundamental foundation for promoting equity in educational outcomes and stemming the flow of young people who are not in education, employment or training.
- Break the link between poverty, educational underachievement and disengagement leading to early school leaving, starting in a child's early years.
- Resources, including the £12 million earmarked for childcare in Budget 2011-14, should support the development of all types of registered provision (childminders, home-based childcare, daycare, Women's Centres childcare and school aged childcare) so that availability, accessibility and parental preference is widened.
- Deliver a re-balancing of resources towards a child's early years and early intervention.
- Develop and implement a robust mechanism for tracking spend on children to ensure maximum return on investment in support of outcomes.
- Sufficient sustained capital investment must be provided in areas of social need where there is an identified gap in registered childcare provision.



EARLY YEARS STRATEGIC ALLIANCE ORGANISATIONS

Action for Children

Altram

Belfast Childcare Partnership

Blackie River Community Groups Association

Children in Northern Ireland

Eastern Childcare Partnership

Employers for Childcare

Footprints Women's Centre

Gingerbread NI

Inner City South Belfast Sure Start

Ionad Uibh Eachach

LifeStart Foundation Ltd

Mencap

NI Rural Women's Network

Northern Ireland Childminding Association

PlayBoard NI

Royal National Institute of Blind People Northern Ireland

Save the Children

South Eastern Trust District Childcare Partnership

Windsor Women's Centre

Women's Centres Regional Partnership

Women's Resource Development Agency

Women's Support Network



Children in Northern Ireland

Unit 9
40 Montgomery Road
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Women's Support Network

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