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**Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network**

**Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network (NIRWN's)
Response To**

Early Years (0-6)

Strategy

Department of Education (DE)

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) is a regional network established to articulate the voices of women in rural areas. It is jointly funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department for Social Development (DSD).

1.2 NIRWN has six key objectives:

- Increasing the voice of rural women through giving them a voice at Policy level
- Playing an advocacy and lobbying role on behalf of rural women
- Capacity Building and Group Development for rural women
- Encouraging women in decision-making and providing representation for rural women
- Information and networking opportunities for rural women
- Working within the Women's Centres Regional Partnership to give a voice to rural women's centres

1.3 To ensure there was no adverse impact on rural women that we hadn't considered; NIRWN held a focus group on the Early Years (0-6) Strategy with S.A.C.C. (South Armagh Childcare Consortium)¹ using the Executive Briefing Paper, Strategy and consultation questions as a framework for discussion.

1.4 NIRWN welcomes the opportunity to comment on: 'Early Years (0-6) Strategy'. Our comments in relation to specific issues are set out below.

¹South Armagh Childcare Consortium was established in March 2008 as a direct response to the lack of registered provision in South Armagh Area. SACC's membership consists of representatives from the community, voluntary and statutory sector. All the key stakeholders in this partnership have a vested interest in the rural childcare sector and recognise the impact lack of quality affordable childcare has on rural families.

2.0 Response to Consultation

2.1 EQIA & EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

NIRWN is gravely concerned that the draft Strategy document does not recognise the Department's statutory obligation to promote equality of opportunity under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and in compliance with its own Equality Scheme.

There is an urgent need for a full and rigorous Equality Impact Assessment of the draft Strategy proposals in consultation with Section 75 groups, including young children and their parents, to allow for the consideration of the evidence which exists relating to the discrimination and marginalisation faced by these groups.

2.2 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Evidence Paper repeatedly uses the term "Early Childhood Education and Care" and it observes the OECD definition of the concept:

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services usually mean all services providing education and care for children below compulsory school age or before starting school. It is the term used in the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's (OECD) Thematic Review and 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 providing 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; and*
- *A right for all children and families².*

However, there is no analysis in the Evidence Paper of the arrangements in Northern Ireland to determine whether our system meets the definition of ECEC.

Interestingly the draft Strategy itself does not use the term ECEC. Fundamentally the draft Strategy recognises that the Department needs to address the contribution of early years provision to the wider Executive consideration of childcare policy, however there is no commitment to action in this regard.³

2.3 QUALITY IN EARLY YEARS PROVISION

The Evidence Paper gives considerable attention to the concept of quality, noting the view that it is a subjective term dependent on many variables, and one which must be viewed in a holistic way⁴. The Evidence Paper also notes the view of stakeholders on the need for a Quality and Standards Framework based on child development and well-being, with quality indicators and standards for all service providers⁵. The Evidence Paper mentions the policy observations of the OECD Starting Strong II report in relation to quality and an agreed set of quality standards⁶.

The priority emphasis in the draft strategy appears to lean very much to language and number development/readiness for formal learning; while “whole child” development is recognised; the child’s: personal and social development, physical and cognitive development and emotional development, would appear to have a lower priority.

² Evidence Paper para 4.1.3

³ draft Strategy para 4.8.

⁴ Evidence Paper para 3.5

⁵ Evidence Paper para 5.3.2

⁶ Evidence Paper para 5.4.20

“DE will work through ESA to ensure that progression in language development, early literacy and early numeracy skills is fostered across early years provision”⁷.

While clearly language development and numeracy skills are critical and our focus Group felt speech and language provision should be improved; there is no appreciation of social, emotional skills as enablers of the effective development of these more formal skills.

2.4 PLAY

It is NIRWN's view that in the 'Early Years (0-6) Strategy'; there is no recognition of the central importance of play to children's holistic development in the early years. There is no sense of play being embedded in a future early years framework. Play is only loosely addressed in the draft Strategy – *“those involved in pre-school provision and in delivering the Foundation Stage of the primary curriculum should focus more clearly on a continuum of play based learning and development, leading into more formal learning at an appropriate stage”⁸.*

The only substantive commitment to action within the 'Early Years (0-6) Strategy' in respect of Play; relates to support for parents in areas of disadvantage:

“DE will work with OFMDFM in the development of the Play and Leisure Policy. ESA will provide families with information on their role in encouraging the value of play, including outdoor play, in the development of early learning”⁹

The commitment that is made is to the production of *information* and this is to be targeted at parents in areas of disadvantage, so it is implicit therefore that parents of vulnerable groups of children, for example; children with

⁷ Draft Strategy para 3.6

⁸ Draft Strategy para 2.23

⁹ draft Strategy para 4.5

disabilities, ethnic minority children, will miss out on this provision under an area-based approach to disadvantage.

Our Focus Group were very clear that the definition of disadvantage utilised thought the Strategy is; very narrow and vague. Disadvantage they argued is greater than MDM statistics. The Strategy refers to *areas* of disadvantage when it should refer to children's experience of disadvantage; irrespective of geography.

2.5 EARLY YEARS WORKFORCE

It is the view of NIRWN that the 'Early Years (0-6) Strategy' needs redrafted to take account of the research evidence and The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommendations to address issues in NI relating to the Early Years workforce.

Issues relating to an Early Years workforce receive much attention in the Evidence Paper. The draft strategy acknowledges that to meet its objective to improve equity and access to early years provision the Department needs to address *qualification levels, professional development and access to specialist support for the early years workforce in the interest of greater equity between the statutory and non-statutory providers and of raising standards*¹⁰.

The draft strategy states that DE will take steps to address issues of access to early years provision by considering changes to the funding mechanisms to address the equality issues in pre-school education taking account of resource constraints¹¹. In other words DE will not be making changes to the funding mechanisms in the near future. NIRWN ask; is DE truly committed to delivering equity and access? Will resource constraints be a 'get-out' clause for DE?

The Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasises that "*work with young children should be socially valued and properly paid, in order to attract a*

¹⁰ draft Strategy para 4.6

¹¹ draft Strategy para 4.7

highly qualified workforce including men as well as women". NIRWN would like a redrafted Strategy to reflect this.

2.6 INVESTING IN THE EARLY YEARS

The Evidence Paper notes and the draft Strategy appear to accept the evidence and the rationale for investment in the early years. There is, however, no acknowledgement or, consideration of the research evidence which exists to show the historic under funding of education in Northern Ireland, which is particularly stark in relation to early years and primary education. Recent research undertaken by Save the Children¹² highlighted that in Northern Ireland the expenditure per child in the early years (£630 pa) was less than a third of that for children in GB (around £2,000). Not only is there lower expenditure on pre-school education, but also on Sure Start, with spend of £80 per child of that age in Northern Ireland, compared with £600 in England. This difference may reflect the more limited roll out of Sure Start in NI compared to England. NIRWN would like the 'Early Years (0-6) Strategy' propose a means of redressing the historic underinvestment in Early Years in NI.

2.7 CONTRIBUTION TO COHESION SHARING AND INTEGRATION

NIRWN would question whether the DE fully comprehends the role of early years in laying the foundations for a shared society. The Evidence Paper does refer to research which indicates children as young as three are beginning to hold prejudiced beliefs¹³. A theme which it indicates came through clearly in early engagement with stakeholders. However again this theme is not picked up in the draft strategy in terms of just how crucial the early years are in laying the foundations for building a shared society after a period of deep conflict.

The Executive's *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* recently out for public consultation contained no reference to the significance of early years education in building shared communities. DE itself is also consulting

¹² Save the Children (2009) *A Child's Portion: An Analysis of Public Expenditure on Children in the UK*. NI Briefing, Belfast: Save the Children.

¹³ Evidence Paper para 5.3.14

on its Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education Policy (CRED). Links are not made to the 'Early Years (0-6) Strategy'. While it is stated that the revised CRED policy will apply to early years there is no acknowledgment of the crucial importance of embedding the principles of equality and diversity across the early years sector.

2.8 UNOCINI (Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland)

The draft Strategy recognises the need to strengthen links between early years providers at points of transition and the importance of exchange of relevant information. It is our understanding that this work is already happening, with UNOCINI being rolled out comprehensively across health, social care and education, with some good practice initiatives of multi-disciplinary joint training. However, while education is engaged in the process; NIRWN believe the uptake from early years providers could be improved. It would be welcome if both DE and DHSSPS could ensure comprehensive roll-out of UNOCINI across all early years providers

2.9 THE ROLE OF PARENTS

One of the objectives of the draft Strategy is *to recognise and respect the role of parents and carers of young children and to raise the level of engagement by DE (and its partners) with families and communities*¹⁴.

It is the view of NIRWN that the Department, in responding to this objective and identifying what it needs to address and what it needs to do, focuses narrowly on parents of children in funded provision and parents of children in the Sure Start programme.

“The Department through ESA intend to put in place a family programme in funded pre-school provision to increase awareness amongst parents of the child development milestones and to assist them with the early identification of additional or SEN. In this way it is intended that parents will themselves

¹⁴ draft Strategy para 4.4

*become involved in the removal of barriers to learning. This programme will take full account of existing good practice.*¹⁵

While this intention may be worthy, we ask; 'is the reality here that too much onus is being placed on parents, when in fact it is the professionals that must take the lead in identification and removal of barriers given their role, skills and expertise?'

We would like clarity on the commitment to, the effective provision of information and advice to parents on the availability of early years services - will this be through the Family Support Database being developed by DHSSPS?

NIRWN feel that the within the draft Strategy the Department's commitment to providing assistance to parents is minimal. When asked: 'What else might help build support for parents in areas of disadvantage?' our Focus group listed the following:

- What about disadvantaged families outside areas of disadvantage (pockets)?
- Flexible, affordable, accessible, high quality childcare provision for all families
- O-2 Year old Programme accessible for all
- Support for all parents at the ante natal i.e. SureStart holistic approach
- Parenting Skills Development
- Mainstream funding of existing supports i.e. Homestart
- Accessibility for all to nurture parents in the development of their parenting role
- Support for young parents who may find it difficult to access support
- Separate support for single identity groups to support integration into mainstream services
- Investment

¹⁵ draft Strategy para 4.5

NIRWN believe the Department through this draft Strategy in its current form are missing a real opportunity to enhance ‘*the role of parents and carers of young children*’.

2.10 HOME-BASED CARE

NIRWN is disappointed that there is minimal recognition of home-based parenting support. The Evidence Paper makes passing reference - “*accessible home-based parenting support is sometimes required for parents*”¹⁶. This fails to recognise and acknowledge the invaluable contribution of home-based support services, such as *Homestart* and *Lifestart*, to the well-being of children and their families. Nor is there any recognition of the significant value for money offered by such initiatives. *Homestart* can support 40 children living at home for the cost of taking one child into care. There is no recognition of or provision for home-based support in the actual draft strategy.

2.11 CONSULTING

Within the draft Strategy there is a commitment to consulting with parents on policy formulation and on the development of early childhood services – this is a section 75 of the NI Act 1998 requirement and is therefore something the Department and its agencies should already be doing. However, this is not paralleled by a commitment to consulting with children and young people; which is also required by section 75, article 12 of the UNCRC and article 7 of the UNCRPD. NIRWN would expect that this is amended in a redrafted Strategy.

2.12 HEALTHY PREGNANCY

The draft Strategy does not reflect the findings of the Evidence Paper which, acknowledges that “*learning starts before the child is born*”¹⁷ and refers also to “*good pre-natal care*”¹⁸. The draft Strategy, while referring to learning beginning at the earliest stages, does not specifically address pre-birth

¹⁶ para 5.3.8

¹⁷ para 3.3.1

¹⁸ para 5.4.11

considerations relating to the physical health and well-being of mums which is so critical for child development pre-birth.

Domestic violence often starts or escalates during pregnancy. It is known that 1 in six pregnant women have suffered domestic violence. NIRWN believe that this is a key area where the Department of Education has a joint responsibility with and needs to work with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

2.13 PROGRAMME FOR 2 YEAR OLDS

The consultation document states *“the Department is currently of the view that, over time, provision for two year olds should be a targeted service aimed at children from areas of most **significant** disadvantage”*¹⁹.

NIRWN would like clarification from the Department on this point; does the addition of ‘significant’ mean in effect that the Programme would be narrowly focused within Sure Start areas i.e. less access to the Programme than at present?

2.14 CHILD POVERTY

The draft Strategy makes no mention of child poverty and the poorest children. Its focus and emphasis is on “areas of disadvantage”, with particular associations to Sure Start. This is despite the Evidence Paper noting the research which makes the link between high quality universal early childhood services and low levels of child poverty²⁰. Similarly, the overwhelming relevance of UNCRC Article 27²¹ is not recognised and therefore there is no consideration of whether the draft Strategy recognises the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. There is no recognition of the statutory

¹⁹ DE Strategy para 2.12

²⁰ Evidence Paper para 3.4.2

²¹ <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

obligation on the Department to contribute to the Executive effort to reduce and eradicate child poverty in line with the Child Poverty Act²².

Most recently in reviewing implementation of the UNCRC in the UK and NI the Committee on the Rights of the Child while welcoming increases in expenditure on children, noted its concern that the increases were not sufficient to eradicate poverty and tackle inequalities. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has emphasised that budgetary decisions must be made with the best interests of the child²³ as a primary consideration

It is NIRWN's view that the draft Strategy does not recognise the vulnerability of young children to poverty and the extent to which it can undermine opportunities for development and learning. This needs immediate attention when redrafting this Strategy if the Department and indeed if the NI Executive are to fulfil their statutory obligations.

In the same way the draft Strategy contains no acknowledgement of Lifetime Opportunities Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for NI²⁴, which in adopting a lifecycle approach to tackling poverty contains a focus on the early years (0-4). In relation to Early Years; the goal of Lifetime Opportunities is *"to ensure that every child has the chance to develop to their full potential in infancy, within a nurturing environment"*.

The draft Strategy in its current format NIRWN believes does not address the needs of *'every child... regardless of social background'* it is completely focussed on a narrow, unclear definition of 'disadvantage'

2.15 TRAVELLER CHILDREN

Traveller children receive no mention in the draft Strategy. This is despite the concern and focus on the enrolment of Traveller children in pre-school; the

²² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/9/section/12>

²³ UNCRC Article 3

²⁴ OFMDFM Lifetime Opportunities Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for NI

success of the Toybox initiative in encouraging enrolment, and recent investment made in this area. The Evidence Paper makes only one reference to Traveller children observing the view of stakeholders that ethnic minority and Traveller families often need support to develop their confidence in their parenting role. NIRWN would expect this omission to be addressed in any final Strategy.

2.16 CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Disability receives minimal recognition within the draft Strategy and there is no consideration of the distinct needs of children with disabilities; the main focus takes an area-based approach to disadvantage.

The consultation document does not consider how children identified from birth or in their early years are to access the early intervention support they need or; how an assessment which takes place before a child attends an educational setting will be taken into account by early years services and providers. Access to early years provision for young children with disabilities is limited.

There is some concern regarding the capacity of some pre-school programmes to make provision for children with special education needs. Choosing appropriate pre-school provision is made increasingly difficult due to delays in diagnosis and assessment. Children with disabilities should have equal access to appropriate and quality early years provision. It is vital that families are provided with good quality information and support during this time especially on promoting communication, play and social relationships.

The Evidence Paper makes some reference to children with disabilities. It notes the Policy Observations from OECD Starting Strong II *“early childhood services are particularly important for children with diverse learning needs, whether these stem from physical, mental or sensory disabilities or socio-economic disadvantage”*²⁵.

²⁵ Evidence Paper para 5.4.23

Our Focus Group were particularly alarmed that any draft Strategy for Early Years could omit a consideration of children with disabilities. It was their view that children with disabilities require **more** early years specialist intervention and that the Department of Education should be leading the way with a 'joined up' approach, linking all agencies and Departments to ensure children with disabilities are not further disadvantaged through the lack of integrated support services.

NIRWN agree that the Strategy should complement the Minister's other policies including in relation to SEN and Inclusion²⁶. However, the SEN and Inclusion Strategy has not been finalised and the draft proposals which were viewed as eroding the rights and entitlement of children with SEN, were strongly opposed by parents and stakeholders.

2.17 GENDER

The evidence paper²⁷ clearly states that "Early childhood policies should be concerned not only with education and care services but also linked to issues of women's employment, child development, child poverty, health and social welfare."²⁸ The role of women and mothers is ignored in the draft Strategy. NIRWN hold the view that any effective Strategy for early years cannot be gender neutral.

2.18 THE ECONOMIC CASE

NIRWN recognise that care provision for very young children (aged 0-3 years) has changed in recent years. Historically, its main function was to support families unable, for whatever reason, to provide care for their own children. However, the demand for childcare for very young children has grown. Several factors account for this growth, including:

- the number of working mothers with young children has doubled since 1984

²⁶ (draft Strategy para 3.5).

²⁷ Evidence Paper 6.2.6

²⁸ DE(2010) Early Years (0-6) Strategy Evidence Based Paper, pg 63

- one in every five dependent children in the UK lives in a lone-parent family
- 80% of jobless mothers say they would work if childcare were available.

Provision for very young children now serves two purposes: it still provides support for families and children who need additional help, but it also it provides care for young children whose parents or carers need, or choose, to seek training or work.²⁹

NIRWN hold the view that the Department of Education need to acknowledge in this Strategy; the importance of linking to other government Departments and Strategies. There is simply no point in the Executive supporting DEL; DETI and DHSSPS initiatives to encourage; economic growth, business and skills development if parents simply cannot access flexible, affordable childcare to participate.

2.19 WOMEN'S CENTRES

The recent WCRP *Childcare Mapping & Research Report 2010* provides excellent evidence of the importance of community early years provision such as the Women's Centres, and the positive impact it has on women; families and most importantly children.

Key findings from the report include:

- Last year the women's centres provided over 9,800 hours of childcare and nearly 5,000 childcare places per week. They provide services to around 1,500 individual children.
 - All the centres have children on waiting lists; at the time of our research 162 children were waiting for a childcare place.
 - The research findings indicate that access to local, high-quality childcare was very important to parents.

²⁹ **Good practice in the care of very young children** Tony Munton (Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education University of London); Janet Powney, Valerie Wilson (Scottish Council for Research in Education) and Maureen Buist- for the Scottish Executive

- There was strong feedback from mothers that this intervention makes a significant difference to their child's development and confidence³⁰.

Speaking at the Launch of the Report Joy Poots, Project Coordinator of South Belfast Sure Start and a key advocate on childcare policy, stressed the crucial importance of childcare, stating:

“One of the key barriers for community development in disadvantaged areas is accessible, affordable, local childcare. This makes it possible for women in particular from disadvantaged communities to avail of quality children’s services that positively impact on their child, and enables parents to access respite, and to take up training, education and employment opportunities.”

It was very clearly the view of our Focus Group that community early years settings are firstly, often the only local provision available; particularly in rural areas and secondly their value to children and parents needs to be reflected in any future Strategy and appropriately resourced.

3.0 CONCLUSION

There is a real sense emerging that with all the focus on DE funded provision, with the exception of those children involved in the Sure Start programme, this is in fact a strategy for children aged 3-6 years. A fundamental concern relating to the draft Strategy is the continuing split between early years education and child care – the absence of integration and cohesion. NIRWN would like to highlight the findings from the *Working for Inclusion*³¹ programme which demonstrate that education and care systems that are not fully integrated and led by one government department can exacerbate inequality making the pursuit of common frameworks for quality, access, funding, regulation and the workforce much more difficult to achieve

Our focus group were very clear that; urgent efforts are required to establish lead Ministerial responsibility for fully integrated early years and childcare

³⁰ WCRP *Childcare Mapping & Research Report 2010*

³¹ *Working for Inclusion: An overview of European Union Early Years Services and their Workforce.* The Working for Inclusion Programme is funded by the European Commission under the EU Progress (Employment and Social Inclusion) Programme with the support of the Scottish Government.

services underpinned by a strong duty of co-operation on all relevant government departments. It is imperative in a time of scarce resources that the Executive demonstrates leadership in collaboration and integration of strategic frameworks for children and young people with children at the centre.