



Briefing: OFMDFM Committee on Childcare Consultation

Introduction

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella body for the children's sector across Northern Ireland. CiNI provides information, policy, training, participation and advocacy services to support our 154 members in their direct work with and for children and young people. Our membership is drawn from across the voluntary, community, statutory and independent children's sector. We are increasingly working in partnership with the statutory children's sector, recognising that the best outcomes for children and young people are achieved through partnership working.

CiNI welcomes this opportunity to provide this briefing to the OFMDFM Committee.

Background

CiNI together with the Women's Support Network (WSN) jointly chair the Early Years Strategic Alliance (EYSA) which brings together organisations from the child care and women's sector. EYSA seeks to inform and influence early years, child care and family support policy. It seeks to ensure equal access to high quality, child-centred support and services that meet the holistic needs of younger children and their families. In 2012 EYSA updated its Early Years Manifesto outlining some of the key elements for an early years strategy. The Manifesto is a road map for the development of early years, childcare and family support services. A copy of the Manifesto can be downloaded from here: <http://www.ci-ni.org.uk/docs/EYSAManifestoFINAL.pdf>.

The Manifesto outlines eight key themes that need to be addressed. The theme of integration and collaboration in early childhood education and care services is EYSA's over-arching objective and provides the foundation upon which all of the Manifesto issues can be addressed.

Other themes include a rights based approach to early childhood; equal access to early years, childcare and family support services for all children; early intervention and prevention in all early years services; quality affordable childcare; promoting young children's right to play; ending child poverty; and early years funding.

Integration and Collaboration

There continues to be separate strategic initiatives on Childcare and Early Years. April 2006, seen policy responsibility for early years (0-4) transferred from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to the Department of Education, (DE) with the intention of promoting a more integrated approach to policy and service delivery for children. It wasn't until June 2010 that a draft 0-6 Early Years Strategy was ready for public consultation, with over 90% of respondents

disagreeing with the Early Years Strategy, DE revised the strategy, publishing an Early Learning Framework in December 2012, concentrating solely on education. This is a worrying development, especially due to the lack of actions for children 0-3 outside Sure Start areas. DE's own Early Years Strategy Evidence Based Paper¹ states that 'Early Years in this context includes services for all young children to play, care and learning experiences for children in either voluntary, community, statutory or home based settings before compulsory schooling.' The contradiction between the Evidence Based Paper and the Early Learning Framework is striking and somewhat alarming.

A perfect example of the indivisible nature of having separate strategic initiatives and not working collaboratively is clearly illustrated by childcare not being held with one particular department. Instead it is spread across many, responsibility for the Early Years Strategy (0-6) and Sure Start is held with DE, DHSSPS has responsibility for inspection of childcare settings, OFMDFM responsibility for children and young people and the Department for Social Development (DSD) has responsibility for the Women's Centres Childcare Fund. It should also be noted that a number of other departments provide funding for childcare settings through various programmes and initiatives.

Due to a lack of integration, collaboration and coherence in Early Years Policy, we believe there are many losers with this scenario. The Government lose out in that when there are parallel systems for early education and childcare, there is a duplication of administration and a waste of very scarce resources, service providers across the sectors lose out because there is a confusing variety of operational procedures, regulatory frameworks, staff training and qualifications, and importantly children and families lose out because they are between two different systems.

Early Childhood Education and Care is the terminology used at European level to describe services that broadly combine education and care in one seamless experience for children and young people. It is the subject of a European Commission Communication published in February 2011, which offers an important policy framework for all EU countries. Some countries make such integrated provision universally available. Others, including the UK, divide early years provision by making unhelpful distinctions between 'education' and 'childcare'. This divide is manifest in myriad ways: through different mechanisms for policy, funding and guidance.

The needs of children and young people do not neatly begin and end along the lines of departmental portfolios. There is an urgent need for better collaboration and coordination to improve the manner in which interaction takes place in the lives of children and young people.

¹ http://www.deni.gov.uk/early_years_evidence_based_paper.pdf

The Programme for Government Priority 2: Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Wellbeing clearing sets out within commitment 33 the need for a Childcare Strategy which will ‘promote better support for children and parents through a joined-up approach to early years provision; and will seek to provide greater coherence between education and afterschool provision.’

We call upon the OFMDFM Committee to use its influence to ensure the full integration of early childhood education and care, as has been recognised throughout Europe.

Lead Responsibility

The challenges faced by Northern Ireland’s children and young people, and particularly our most vulnerable children and young people, are complex. Their needs straddle the areas of responsibility of multiple government agencies and therefore require a holistic and combined approach. There is currently a lack of agreement among departments as to who should have overall responsibility for childcare. We strongly believe lead ministerial responsibility for Childcare should be established without further delay. Our recommendation is that it should rest with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). However, it is very important this is underpinned and matched by a commitment from all other Departments.

In comparison with the other regions of the UK, Northern Ireland is the only region within the UK that does not have a legislative remit to ensure that parents have access to childcare services. The Childcare Act 2006 operates within England and Wales and Scotland’s powers lie within community planning. We are the only region in which there are no clear lines of accountability. That is why we are fully supportive of the Green Party’s MLA Steven Agnew, who has set out proposals for a Private Member’s Bill that would introduce a statutory duty on all relevant government departments to collaborate in the planning, commission and delivery of services to children in Northern Ireland. We believe this is a welcome development that would have clear mechanisms in place to ensure policies are implemented in a co-ordinated way for the benefit of children and young people.

Encouragingly, at a more local agency level, there is a mechanism — the Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership — that already facilitates integration, collaboration and a cohesive approach to early years. The Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) set up by the Health and Social Care Board to improve the wellbeing and the realisation of rights of children

and young people across Northern Ireland continues to work well. This is the first time that integrated planning and commissioning of supports and services for children and young people have operated at a regional level through a cross-sectoral and multi-agency approach.

We call upon the OFMDFM Committee to support a statutory duty for government departments to cooperate on the planning of services for children and young people and the pooling of departmental budgets.

Where is the Childcare Strategy?

The first childcare strategy for Northern Ireland was published in 1999, entitled Children First. The Strategy highlighted a number of challenges that needed to be addressed. One was the high cost of childcare; others were the number of parents who did not have access to childcare services, childcare services not being appropriate, and insufficient information services for parents. Those issues were identified in 1999, and they are still very relevant today.

We are disappointed with the 'Towards a childcare strategy' document. This is merely a discussion document, and we feel that the wrong questions are being asked, they are also rudimentary and have already been answered through numerous pieces of research that have already been carried out.

Despite many Assembly Questions (AQs) being asked by MLAs as to the status of a Childcare Strategy, it still remains elusive. In fact an AQ on 25th October 2010² states:

“The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People identified childcare as a priority issue and agreed that a policy and economic appraisal should be carried out on a range of strategic options. A paper on the appraisal report has now been prepared for the Executive. It outlines the key findings and when the Executive has had an opportunity to consider the paper, the next phase of the work on the development of a Childcare Strategy will begin. This work will include a public consultation. The appraisal report contains a timetable of actions and estimates of the financial implications of these actions. It is expected that the report will form part of the evidence base underpinning the public consultation.”

The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People clearly stated childcare was a priority, over 2 years later we continue to remain in a significant policy vacuum around the area of childcare provision. Childcare should be considered within two contexts: firstly, as contributing to a child's

² AQW 1678/11

education and development and secondly as an economic issue, to facilitate parents to get in to and stay in work and an opportunity for job creation.

Government have long argued that the best route out of poverty is through paid work. However, in Northern Ireland, there is an absence of a childcare infrastructure to support parents to be able to get into work, education or training. In the context of welfare reform, the success of universal credit depends upon childcare infrastructure being in place to support parents to find work. Unfortunately Northern Ireland lacks such an infrastructure.

Research conducted by Save the Children shows that many low income mothers are considering leaving work because they can no longer afford childcare.³ According to research by Employers for Childcare Charitable Group, families in Northern Ireland are paying 44% of their income for childcare for one child, which is the highest amount in Europe.⁴ Recent changes to the tax credit systems mean the childcare element of working tax credit has reduced from 80% to 70%.

We call upon the OFMDFM committee to ensure a Childcare Strategy is developed without further delay.

Children with Disabilities and Childcare

Children and young people with disabilities are largely invisible in many strategic policy initiatives. They tend to fall between disability services and children's services and therefore their unique and specific circumstances and needs as children with disabilities are often overlooked. This can result in children with disabilities and their families becoming invisible when key decisions are made about establishing the need for, planning and delivering services, including public services.

There are increasing numbers of children with complex health needs now being cared for at home by their families. These children are more likely to experience exclusion from mainstream support services due to the perceived risks and lack of appropriate training for staff in this area. Child care services (early intervention) and support services for families (respite care, personal assistance) are necessary tools to ensure consistent service provision for children with disabilities.

³ Whitham, G. (2012) 'Ending Child Poverty: Ensuring Universal Credit supports working mums', Save the Children

⁴ Dennison, R. and Smith, N. (2012) *Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey 2012*, Employers for Childcare

When it comes to development of policy in respect of children with disabilities and childcare there is no real consideration given to their particular needs and circumstances. As an example, emphasis on area-based approaches to disadvantage and targeted areas of disadvantage has an adverse impact on children with disabilities who are geographically dispersed and will often experience difficulty accessing specialist provision in their local area.

In 2004, the Promoting Social Inclusion (PSI) Working Group on Disability identified barriers to employment, education, transport, housing, access to information and lifelong learning for children and adults with disabilities and made a series of recommendations.⁵ One of the recommendations was:

- Early Years and Family Support: More childcare provision is needed for families with children with disabilities.

We call upon the OFMDFM Committee to ensure they highlight the need for innovative and appropriate childcare services to ensure that children and young people with disabilities get access to high quality childcare they require in the setting of their choosing. A regional training strategy is also required to ensure that staff are confident and competent when delivering childcare and support to children and young people with complex needs.

Investment in Childcare

Children and young people represent the highest leverage point for investments to build human capital and the principal means by which to break the cycles of poverty and deprivation. The opportunity costs of investing in children are lower and the benefits are maximal because they have the longest possible period to accrue.⁶

An amount of £12 million was set aside for the Childcare Fund, the first tranche of funding spent was £322,000 allocated to 3 bids, a second tranche amounted to £4.5 million over 5 bids. We are concerned that the current method of funding distribution via Departments is not proving the best

⁵ Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability (2009), Report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability, Belfast, OFMDFM

⁶ The World Bank, "Why Invest in Children and Youth," <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTCY/0,,contentMDK:20243901~menuPK:565261~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:396445,00.html>

approach to allocating resources where they are most needed. (Please see Appendix A for the full breakdown of the Childcare Fund)

To ensure the best outcomes overall, investment must be long-term, focused on results and reflect the government's legal obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Creating better outcomes for children and young people is inextricably linked to the government's vision for a more vibrant society and economy, as well as to its rights-based legal obligations.

Spending focused on children and young people represents a critical value statement, as both a commitment to what we value as a society, and as a mechanism to deliver value for money.

The £12 million ring fenced specifically for childcare services by the Executive was welcomed, however we have concerns this money is not reaching those in need and would question whether the current method of funding distribution (via Departments) is proving the best approach to allocating resources as it would appear money is being spent on projects that do not necessarily help develop a childcare infrastructure.

We call upon the OFMDFM committee to ensure the Childcare Fund is more transparent and is opened up beyond Departments. We also ask that the OFMDFM committee assist with the introduction and application of children's budgets as well as creating opportunities for more intensive, meaningful, and regular consultation with the children and young people's sector on spending and investment.

Consultation and engagement with children and young people

Obligations have been placed upon Government Departments to engage directly with children and young people, as the group who will be most impacted by the draft childcare consultation.

Furthermore, we would highlight the obligations placed upon Departments by

Section 75 of the NI Act 1998, UNCRC article 12 and UNCRPD article 7. Obligations associated with article 12 also mean that it is important to consider whether early years services promote the voice of the child; is the voice of the child integral to service design, planning, delivery, evaluation. In relation to article 12 the Committee on the Rights of the Child is clear –

“As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views, which should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child ... they make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to

communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language ... the right to express views and feelings should be anchored in the child's daily life at home and in his or her community; within the full range of early childhood health, care and education facilities, as well as in legal proceedings; and in the development of policies and services, including through research and consultations."

Children in Europe⁷ has highlighted the participation of children as an essential value, stating that services should embody participation as an expression of democracy and as a means to combat social exclusion and should mean the active inclusion of the entire community. We would also emphasise that engagement with children and young people must include young children as well as young adults, noting the research evidence which demonstrates that from an early age children do exhibit small but significant cultural and political awareness.⁸

It is extremely important that the OFMDFM Committee ensure the Department of the First and Deputy First Minister produce a child friendly version of 'Towards A Childcare Strategy' and that the planned consultation events include engagement with children and young people.

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⁷ Children in Europe (2007) Ten principles for a European approach to services

⁸ Connolly, P., Smith, A. & Kelly, B. (2002) *Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

Appendix A**1st tranche a total of £322,000 allocated to 3 bids**

DHSSPS £250,000: to expedite work undertaken by the Health and Social Care Board to reduce the backlog in the registration and inspections of childminding and daycare settings and to implement revised procedures to mitigate future delays.

OFMDFM £20,000: to enable PlayBoard to provide additional grant funding to the South Armagh Childcare Consortium. This was funding to enable the Consortium to continue its development towards financial sustainability.

DCAL £52,000: allocated to NI Screen to extend the after schools Film Club in extended service schools.

2nd tranche a total of £4.5 million allocated to five bids.

DHSSPS: up to £250,000 for a focused review of the childcare needs of vulnerable families;

DHSSPS: up to £500,000 to enhance childcare provision for children with a disability;

DE/DHSSPS: up to £370,000 for enhanced development opportunities for pre-school children;

DCAL: After school film clubs, up to £362,000; and

DEL: up to £3 million to expand Steps to Work Childcare provision.

Research in to Childcare commissioned by OFMDFM

RSM McClure Watters to conduct research to provide a detailed up-to-date review of current childcare provision and the current demand for childcare places. The projected cost of this research is approximately £90,000 and is being funded from OFMDFM's Research Budget.

OFMDFM is also funding a research project on childminding. This research, which is being conducted by the National Children's Bureau, aims to (a) explore issues of practice and quality within childminding and (b) to assess the impact of the grouping of children of different ages within childcare. The projected cost of this research is approximately £100,000 and it is also being funded from OFMDFM's Research Budget.