

# Children in Northern Ireland



## **Response to the Consultation on the NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy**

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## Who we are

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella organisation for the Children's Sector in Northern Ireland. With over 130 members, CiNI is accountable for representing and giving voice to the experiences, views and aspirations of its members across NI to inform and influence those who make policy or plan and deliver services for children and young people. Our vision is to make Northern Ireland a society where all children are valued, treated fairly and are able to flourish. To deliver on this vision, CiNI has three strategic priorities:

- **Influencing:** through campaigning and engagement to ensure that children are at the centre of policymaking;
- **Learning:** capacity building across the sector and innovating best practice;
- **Collaboration:** working with others to increase impact.

We are the secretariat to the All Party Group on Children and Young People at the Northern Ireland Assembly and we are represented on the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) - a multiagency partnership that includes the leadership of key statutory agencies and community and voluntary organisations, with responsibility for improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. CiNI is also a member of Safeguarding Board NI, a statutory body constituted to safeguard and protect children.

CiNI offers a wide range of training to both individuals and organisations working within the community and voluntary sector to develop their skills and knowledge through our high-quality and positively evaluated Children's Services Training Programme. We also offer bespoke training, tailored specially to the needs of organisations, both within the sector and beyond.

CiNI manages the regional parenting support helpline: Parentline NI. Funded by the Department of Health, this service offers free, confidential advice and guidance to Parents and Carers across Northern Ireland. Parentline also provides one-to-one support, practical workshops, online resources (including an award-winning podcast), and referrals to counselling services. CiNI also runs the Parent Participation Service and the Parents' Disability Forum, which are key platforms for parents/carers to have their voices heard and ensure that policymaking is informed by their lived experience.

At a community level, CiNI delivers the 'Gets Active Project', a range of healthy food and physical activity programmes aimed at addressing child food insecurity. Our Youth Advisory Group helps shape these programmes and gives young people a platform to influence policy making. We also work with a range of partners on specific youth participation projects, such as amplifying youth voice on online safety in collaboration with the NSPCC.

More information is available on our website: <https://www.ci-ni.org.uk/>

## Executive Summary

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. The ambition to transform early learning and childcare provision is strongly supported, particularly the focus on affordability, accessibility and the development of a more integrated early years system.

While the direction of travel is widely welcomed, the evidence from both Members and parents is clear: the Strategy is not yet sufficiently developed in terms of delivery, resourcing and equality. Families continue to face significant challenges in accessing affordable and suitable childcare, while providers are operating under increasing pressure.

CiNI's position is grounded in a child-centred, rights-based approach, recognising that in all actions concerning children, their best interests must be a primary consideration. This requires that the Strategy is designed and implemented in a way that prioritises children's outcomes, safety and development, while also addressing the structural barriers currently faced by families. While we recognise the significant pressures across the childcare sector, these must be addressed through sustained investment and system reform, ensuring that improvements in access and affordability are matched by high-quality, inclusive provision.

A consistent message emerging from both Member engagement and parental evidence is that the current system is under strain and, in some cases, failing to meet the needs of children and families. This is particularly evident for children with additional needs, where access to suitable provision remains significantly limited. Parents report high and rising childcare costs, limited availability of places, and significant barriers to accessing suitable provision, with many reducing working hours or leaving employment altogether as a result.<sup>1</sup>

The Strategy represents an important opportunity to address these challenges. However, this will require a stronger focus on delivery, including a clearly articulated and costed implementation plan, sustained investment in workforce and infrastructure, and a more explicit commitment to equitable access and inclusion. Without sustained investment and a stronger focus on equality, there is a risk that the Strategy will improve access for some children while leaving others behind – particularly those with additional needs.

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<sup>1</sup> RSM (2023), Review of Childcare Services in Northern Ireland: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/RSM%20%282023%29%20DE%20Review%20of%20Childcare%20Services%20in%20NI%20-%20Final%20Report.PDF>

## **From Ambition to Delivery**

The draft Strategy sets out a clear and ambitious vision for the future of early learning and childcare in Northern Ireland. The move towards a more integrated system, including the development of a 0–6 Early Years Framework, is particularly welcome and reflects a growing recognition of the importance of the early years in shaping long-term outcomes for children.

Engagement through the Children’s Policy Forum highlighted broad support for this direction of travel, with Members welcoming the emphasis on integration, standardisation and early intervention. There was also recognition of the effort made to engage stakeholders in shaping the proposals.

However, this support is accompanied by a consistent concern that the Strategy is not yet sufficiently developed in terms of delivery. Members raised questions regarding how proposals will be implemented in practice, including the absence of detail on delivery models, governance arrangements and prioritisation of actions. There is also uncertainty regarding the availability of funding and how resources will be allocated over time. The level of investment required to deliver the full ambition of the Strategy is significant, and current indications suggest a gap between ambition and available funding. Without clarity on how this gap will be addressed, there is a risk that implementation becomes conditional rather than guaranteed.

This gap between ambition and delivery is a critical issue. Without a clearly defined implementation framework, including timelines, responsibilities and measurable outcomes, there is a risk that the Strategy will not achieve the transformational change it sets out to deliver. This should include clear prioritisation and sequencing of actions, ensuring that critical measures are delivered within a timeframe that reflects current pressures on families and providers.

## **Affordability, Access and Inequality**

The Strategy rightly identifies affordability as a central issue. However, parental evidence demonstrates that the scale of the challenge is significant and deeply felt. Parents report being under considerable financial pressure, with childcare costs representing a substantial proportion of household income. In some cases, these costs are forcing parents to reduce working hours or leave employment altogether.

At the same time, access to suitable childcare is not simply a question of cost. Parents consistently highlight difficulties in finding available and appropriate provision. Issues highlighted include a lack of places, limited flexibility in hours,

and challenges in securing provision for multiple children. These issues are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where availability is more limited and choice is constrained. In some areas, particularly those experiencing higher levels of disadvantage, the childcare market does not operate effectively, with limited independent provision and greater reliance on social economy models to fill gaps in provision.

There are also concerns regarding the design of affordability measures. While the expansion of subsidy schemes is welcome, there is a risk that these do not fully reach those most in need. Parental evidence highlights that support can be difficult to access in practice, particularly where families are required to pay costs upfront and claim back later. There are also concerns regarding interactions with the wider benefits system, where additional support for childcare may affect eligibility for other forms of assistance or create complexity that discourages uptake. As a result, some of the families who would benefit most from support may be least able to access it. Affordability and access to suitable childcare are closely interconnected. Addressing one without the other will not be sufficient. It will also be important to ensure parity of support and recognition across statutory, voluntary, community and independent provision, so that children's experiences are not shaped by the type of setting they attend. The Strategy must therefore take a broader, more integrated approach to ensuring that childcare is not only affordable, but accessible and appropriate for all families.

These challenges are not isolated issues but reflect deeper structural problems within the system. Families do not experience childcare, education, health and social care as separate systems; they experience the gaps between them. In practice, this can mean families being required to navigate multiple services with different eligibility criteria, referral pathways and points of access, often without clear guidance or coordination. Where provision is fragmented or misaligned, families may be unable to access the support they need at the right time, even where services exist. This is particularly evident for children with additional needs, where a lack of coordination between services can result in delays, gaps in provision, or families being unable to access suitable childcare altogether. The Strategy therefore needs to take a whole-system approach, ensuring that different elements of provision are aligned and work together in practice. In this context, there is a risk that current proposals may reduce costs for some families without addressing the structural barriers that prevent others from accessing childcare at all.

## **Children with Additional Needs**

The most consistent and significant concern emerging from both member organisations and parental evidence relates to provision for children with additional needs. In practice, this is the clearest test of whether the Strategy will

deliver equitable outcomes. Current evidence, including findings from the Department of Education’s Review of Childcare Services in Northern Ireland, suggests that the system is not meeting the needs of these children, with many families unable to access suitable provision and, in some cases, forced to leave employment as a result.<sup>2</sup>

Parental evidence indicates that children are frequently unable to access suitable childcare provision, with some settings unable to meet complex needs and others lacking the necessary staffing or expertise. In many cases, this results in families being unable to access childcare at all, with parents – most often mothers – leaving employment as a consequence.<sup>3</sup>

Members echoed these concerns, highlighting a lack of specialist provision, insufficient funding to reflect the complexity of need, and fragmentation between education, health and childcare systems. There is also evidence that existing specialist provision is not always fully utilised, pointing to challenges in referral pathways and system coordination rather than capacity alone; and some Members raised concerns that more standardised models of provision may not be appropriate for all children, particularly those requiring more flexible or specialist support.

This points to a more fundamental issue: that the current system is not designed in a way that adequately supports inclusion. CiNI believes that inclusion must be a central design principle of the Strategy. This requires a more explicit focus on aligning childcare provision with SEN reform and early intervention systems, investing in specialist provision and workforce capacity, and ensuring that models of provision are flexible and responsive to individual needs. Without this, there is a risk that the Strategy will improve access for some children while leaving others behind.

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<sup>2</sup> RSM (2023), Review of Childcare Services in Northern Ireland: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/RSM%20%282023%29%20DE%20Review%20of%20Childcare%20Services%20in%20NI%20-%20Final%20Report.PDF>

<sup>3</sup> ONS (2022), Families and the Labour Market: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2021>; Centre for Progressive Policy (2021), Women in the Labour Market: <https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/women-in-the-labour-market-2>; Centre for Progressive Policy (2023), Growing Pains: The Economic Costs of a Failing Childcare System: [https://www.progressive-policy.net/downloads/files/PPP\\_Growing-Pains-Report- March-2023\\_SP.pdf?utm](https://www.progressive-policy.net/downloads/files/PPP_Growing-Pains-Report- March-2023_SP.pdf?utm); Institute for Public Policy Research (2014), Childmind the Gap: Reforming Childcare to Support Mothers into Work: [https://ippr-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/childmind-the-gap\\_Feb2014\\_11899.pdf?dm=1702047222](https://ippr-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/childmind-the-gap_Feb2014_11899.pdf?dm=1702047222); Oxera (2024), Women and Work: The Impact of Childcare Support: <https://www.oxera.com/insights/agenda/articles/women-and-work-the-impact-of-childcare-support/?utm>

## **Workforce, Sustainability and System Capacity**

The challenges outlined above cannot be addressed without considering the capacity and sustainability of the sector itself. The sustainability of the early years workforce is a critical issue that underpins the entire Strategy. Members consistently highlighted challenges in recruitment and retention, driven by low pay, limited career progression and competition from other sectors. These challenges are already impacting the availability of provision and are likely to intensify as demand increases.

Parents also raised concerns regarding workforce capacity and quality, particularly in relation to the ability of staff to support children with additional needs. At the same time, there are clear constraints in relation to infrastructure and capacity. Providers report operating at or near capacity, with limited ability to expand due to the absence of capital investment. Provision has reduced or, in some cases, providers have withdrawn from the market.<sup>4</sup>

These issues are closely interconnected. Expanding access to childcare without addressing workforce and infrastructure constraints risks placing further pressure on an already stretched system. The level of transformation set out in the Strategy will not be achievable without sustained and multi-year public investment. This includes not only revenue investment, but a clear capital investment strategy to support the expansion of provision in areas of unmet need. Without this, there is a risk that the success of the Strategy becomes conditional, with progress dependent on future funding decisions rather than a clearly deliverable plan.

These workforce challenges are particularly significant in the context of inclusion, where supporting children with additional needs requires higher levels of skill, confidence and staffing capacity. Policy commitments such as payment of the Real Living Wage must also be accompanied by sustained funding to ensure they are deliverable in practice.

## **Designing a System that Works for Families**

A recurring theme across both Member and parental evidence is the risk of unintended consequences. While there is support for measures such as standardisation of pre-school provision, there are concerns that these may not meet the needs of all children and families.

Parents highlighted that full-time pre-school provision, while beneficial, does not address the broader need for flexible and wraparound childcare.

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<sup>4</sup> RSM (2023), Review of Childcare Services in Northern Ireland: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/RSM%20%282023%29%20DE%20Review%20of%20Childcare%20Services%20in%20NI%20-%20Final%20Report.PDF>

Members also raised concerns regarding the potential impact on parental choice and the availability of provision for younger children.

These concerns point to the importance of system design. The Strategy must ensure that reforms are flexible and responsive, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. Evidence from Members highlights a need to carefully assess potential unintended consequences of reform, including impacts on the sustainability of existing provision, parental choice and the availability of developmentally appropriate services for younger children. The Strategy must also consider how different elements of the system interact, including education, childcare, health and social care. For example, some Members highlighted instances where existing policies operate in tension, such as the placement of younger children in nursery settings in ways that may undermine targeted early intervention provision.

There is also a clear need for immediate action alongside longer-term reform. Parents emphasised the urgency of the current situation, with many families struggling to access and afford childcare in the present. In CiNI's view, the role of family and parenting support should also be recognised as a core component of early learning and childcare, particularly in supporting children's development in the earliest years.

## **Conclusion**

The Early Learning and Childcare Strategy represents a significant opportunity to transform provision in Northern Ireland. The ambition is welcomed, and there is strong support for the direction of travel. However, the evidence from both Members and parents is clear: the current system is under strain, and without a stronger focus on delivery, investment and inclusion, the Strategy risks falling short of meeting its objectives.

The test of the Strategy will not be its ambition, but its ability to improve the everyday experiences of children and families – particularly those who currently face the greatest barriers to access. Achieving this will require a clear, costed and deliverable plan, alongside sustained investment and a system that is designed to meet the needs of all children.

At its core, the Strategy must ensure that all children – not just some – are able to access high-quality, inclusive early learning and childcare provision that supports them to thrive. In the context of constrained resources, it will be particularly important to prioritise actions that address the most significant barriers currently faced by children and families, especially those who are currently excluded from accessing suitable provision.

In order to realise the ambition of the Strategy, CiNI recommends that the final Strategy should:

- provide a clearly defined and costed implementation plan, including timelines, responsibilities and measurable outcomes;
- prioritise investment in early intervention and targeted support for children and families experiencing disadvantage, ensuring that resources are directed towards those with the greatest need;
- develop a clear and resourced plan for inclusion, including specialist provision, workforce training and support, and alignment with SEN reform and early intervention systems;
- ensure that the inclusion plan breaks down barriers to external support, referral pathways and the current distinction between statutory and non-statutory providers;
- ensure that affordability measures are designed to minimise barriers to access, including addressing upfront costs and interactions with the benefits system;
- address workforce challenges through a comprehensive workforce strategy, including pay, conditions and training;
- introduce a capital investment strategy to support the expansion of provision and address capacity constraints, particularly in areas of unmet need; and
- strengthen the evidence base underpinning the Strategy, including improved data collection on access, affordability and participation across different groups of children, particularly those with additional needs.