



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Consultation: Early Years Matter Strategy
Date:	10 November 2010
Reporting Officer:	John McGrillen, Director of Development, ext 3470
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Relevant Background Information

The Council has been invited to respond to Department of Education NI's (DENI) draft strategy for children's early years (age 0-6). This policy aims to "value and respect the early years of a child's life, while also laying the foundations of and removing barriers to learning so that each child can develop as a successful learner; and achieve positive outcomes for children by supporting their development through high quality, child-centred and family-focused services, ensuring greater equality of access."

The target audience for the consultation is:

Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided schools;
Education and Library Boards;
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment; and
Teachers' Unions.

Key Objectives of the strategy

The strategy has four key objectives, shown below:

- to improve the quality of early years provision thereby promoting for children better learning outcomes by the end of the Foundation Stage especially in language and number; and also in the child's personal and social development, physical and cognitive development, emotional well-being and readiness to learn;
 - This will be achieved by working with stakeholders to develop and agree key educational milestones; developing a quality framework to assess early year provision; reviewing and updating the pre-school curriculum, and identifying poor provision by inspection.
 - Additionally, DENI will commission research to assess the quality and

effectiveness of provision and of the transition from pre-school to primary education; reviewing issues relating to two-year olds in nursery provision on an area basis; developing means of sharing key information between agencies; and promoting the use of the 'Understanding the Needs of Children' assessment tool.

- to recognise and respect the role of parents of young children and to raise the level of engagement by DE (and its partners) with families and communities;
 - This will be achieved by a family programme in funded pre-school provision to raise awareness among parents; ensuring the effectiveness of available advice; and consulting with parents to inform policy development.
 - Additionally, DENI will expand the reach of the existing 'Sure Start' and programme for Two Year Olds; work with Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in the development of Play & Leisure; and promote the importance of regular attendance in early years' settings.
- to improve equity of access to quality early years provision;
 - This will be achieved by raising the minimum standard of qualification for funded early years staff; developing an 'early years leadership programme' for leaders in pre-school provision; identifying and disseminating best practice; and capacity building support in the non-statutory sector.
 - Additionally, DENI will review the funding mechanism to address any equality issues; develop a mechanism to manage the allocation of pre-school places; ensure that all voluntary and private pre-schools who are funded through the Pre-School Expansion Programme work within the SEN framework; improve access to Irish-medium pre-school provision; seek to expand provision for two year olds; and maintain part-time provision with the statutory pre-school sector (any changes to such provision will be based on criteria linked to access and to disadvantage).
- to encourage greater collaboration among key partners to promote greater integration in service delivery.

Additional Factors to consider

The strategy highlights 5 major factors affecting the development of the strategy. These are shown below:

- there can be no assumption, at this point, of substantial new resources becoming available - it may be a case of making better use of existing resources so the Department will need to ensure that all interventions are effective and appropriate;
- the reorganisation of education and health under RPA offers an opportunity to do things differently and to remove some institutional barriers;
- the Strategy will have to complement the Minister's policies including literacy and numeracy, SEN and inclusion, newcomer children and the Review of Irish-medium Education;
- it will have to take into account new and emerging relevant Executive policies - for example, childcare, disability discrimination and play and leisure; and
- strong partnerships will be central to success eg the relationship between DE and DHSSPS in relation to policy; the relationship between ESA and relevant health bodies in terms of delivery; the involvement of parents, communities and others with the statutory agencies.

Elements for success

Some of the key elements required to ensure implementation are:

- Ministerial and Executive endorsement to make early years services a priority;
- broad stakeholder involvement and participation to promote public engagement

- for implementation of the recommendations;
- partnership between departments and providers to make best use of funding and support;
 - ensuring early years policies are complementary with other related policies;
 - detailed action plans to facilitate implementation of the recommendations, identifying division of responsibilities, allocation of resources and the likely time-frame; and
 - strategic use of public campaigns to draw attention to early years

The full proposal is attached as appendix 2.

The questions within the consultation relate to whether we agree with each objective and outline actions or not. As the emphasis in the consultation document is on the top level actions rather than specific detail, the responses we have gathered have also focused on general issues. In particular, we have made reference to the “Review of Belfast City Council Play Service” and subsequent changes to our play service provision.

Key Issues

Please refer to the attachment for the full draft response. In general we feel the aims and objectives of the strategy are reasonable though we have raised some concerns. These are listed below:

- There is not enough information in the strategy to understand how resources will be reallocated. It has been mentioned that some programmes will be expanded yet also that there is likely to be no additional resources. This implies cuts will be made elsewhere.
- Mention is made of the importance with key partners but it would be helpful to see how this is going to be achieved and to see some input from them in the strategy. We feel there are many opportunities for working with our Children and Young People unit and Play Team.
- It would be useful to see a clear vision of how the DE see the two arms of statutory and non-statutory provision developing.
- There is a suggestion that the strategy focuses on years 3 and above. It would be useful to see how ‘early’ early years will be supported and how this links with the Health Service.

Resource Implications

There are no resource costs associated with this consultation response.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to :

- Approve the basic content and structure of the draft consultation response (appendix 1) and;
- To suggest additional comments to include in the response to DENI.

Decision Tracking

Subject to approval, the Draft response, together with any additional suggestions will be returned to the DENI by the 30 November 2010.

Timeframe: 30 November 2010

Reporting Officer: Barbary Cook

Key Abbreviations

DENI – Department of Education NI

DE – Department of Education

OFMDFM - Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister

SEN – Special Education Needs

ESA – Education & Skills Authority

Documents Attached

Appendix 1 – Draft Consultation Response – Early Years Matter

Appendix 2 – Early Years Strategy