



## Development Department

Your reference

Our reference

Date 28/10/2010

Being dealt with by: David Purchase

Tel: 02890 320202 ext 3792

The Early Years Team  
Department of Education  
Rathgael House  
Balloo Road  
Rathgill  
Bangor  
BT19 7PR

Dear Early Years Team,

### **Re. Early Years Matter Consultation**

Please find below our comments in response to your invitation to comment on your Early Years Strategy.

Please note that the views expressed in this response are subject to final ratification by full council on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2010. Unfortunately, the timescales and the timing of this consultation have made it impossible to submit a ratified response.

### **Provisional Response**

We broadly approve of the objectives and actions outlined in the draft strategy and we believe there are many opportunities for working together to improve early year support in Belfast. In particular, we would also like to draw your attention to the work we do with early years children and their parents through our Community Services centres and staff. We also have a Children and Young People unit and 18 staff in the Play Team. Our Centres and initiatives are based in areas with the most need of support and so may provide opportunities for shared services and improved access, which would support your work under objective 2.

Regarding specific early years support, following a review Council's services – "Review of Belfast City Council Play Service" – in early 2009, it was agreed that Council should withdraw from pre-school provision on the basis of other bodies being better placed to lead on and resource such provision. However we are still very much involved in play services and our early pilot programmes are showing encouraging outputs, with such programmes extending the geographic scope of the service, targeting new groups and introducing innovative play methodologies. We are also working hard to provide skills to local parents so that they can create self sustaining play support activities in local communities.

Please contact us if you would like to know more about our services or the report mentioned above.

With regard to your draft strategy, we have provided specific feedback to your consultation questionnaire at the end of this letter. We also have some general observations, which I have listed overleaf:



- 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.

Yours sincerely

David

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## EARLY YEARS (0-6) STRATEGY

### CONSULTATION RESPONSE

Name: \_\_\_David Purchase\_\_\_\_\_

Organisation: \_Belfast City Council\_\_\_\_\_

Contact Tel No: \_\_\_02890 320202 ext 3792\_\_\_\_\_

School Ref No: \_\_\_\_\_ (if applicable)

Who are you responding on behalf of (please tick as appropriate):

As a Parent:

A School/Playgroup:

An Organisation:

Did you undertake a consultation of  
Members of your organisation?

yes



## Vision and Aims

It is the purpose of the draft Strategy to define a framework for DE policy and to set out key objectives and actions for future development and improvement. Research and evidence gathered in the development of the Strategy identified the four main priorities indicated above. Based on the evidence and research considered the draft Strategy sets out as its vision:

- *To enable every child to develop to their full potential by giving each one the best start possible.*

**Question 1** - *Is this the right vision? Is it an appropriate vision for an early years strategy?*

Yes

No

Please add any comments you have:

Based on existing policy and practice, and on the research, the draft sets out its 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.*

In achieving these aims the Department will seek to engage stakeholders involved in early years provision.

**Question 2** - *Do you agree that the aims are appropriate?*

Yes

No



Please add any comments you have:

## Objectives

In support of the aims and to ensure effective policy making and implementation four key objectives have been defined. For further information on the rationale behind the objectives please see Annex 2 of the draft early Years (0-6) Strategy.

The draft Strategy elaborates on the objectives in terms of what the Department of Education needs to address and what it needs to do under each objective.

## Quality of Provision

***Objective One: To improve the quality of early years provision thereby promoting better learning outcomes for children by the end of the Foundation Stage, especially in language and number; and in the children's personal and social development, emotional well-being and readiness to learn.***

The draft Strategy identifies the following matters which DE needs to address:

- an increased focus upon outcomes by the end of the Foundation Stage especially to raise standards in language and number;
- closure of the gap between those children who are least school ready and those who are most ready;
- provision for those working with children of a common framework for child development across the years 0-6 (taking account of relevant guidance) accompanied by appropriate milestones, the implications for learning and standards and quality indicators against which the provision can be quality assured;
- promotion of the early identification of developmental delays, especially in relation to language and other barriers to learning;
- greater focus on identified special or additional needs and disadvantage to ensure that relevant provision is targeted to provide help to those children who need it most; and
- strengthening the links, on an area basis, between early years providers (from birth to six years of age) at points of transition (currently Sure Start (0-4), pre-



school (3-4) and Foundation Stage (4-6), to ensure progression in learning and development and the exchange of relevant information.

*Question 3 - Are these the key issues for DE to address?*

Yes

No



*Question 4 - Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to improve quality of provision?*

The Council endorses the priority area of improving the provision and quality of service above and welcomes the opportunity to explore the potential for greater partnership working in the future with DE. The Council through the provision and programming of Community Centres, Community Initiatives, Play Schemes, quality parks and open spaces and leisure environments provide perfect places and opportunities for play for young children. The Council provides various indoor and outdoor play facilities for young children (0 – 6 years old) offering access to opportunities to educate, develop knowledge and understanding of the natural environment and promoting physical and mental health and wellbeing. We would be interested in the development of a common framework and keen to input into its development.

The draft Strategy proposes that DE will undertake the following actions:

- (i) DE will take steps to improve outcomes at the end of Foundation Stage by the following actions:-
  - a. DE will commission ETI to work with the HSCTs, ESA, and others to set out the milestones to be expected in a child's development up to the end of the Foundation Stage and to identify best practice to achieve them. These will focus particularly on physical, personal, social and emotional development, intellectual and language and numeracy development and will promote more effective progression for children;
  - b. DE and DHSSPS will commission ETI, Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and HSCT to develop a Quality Framework



for the registration and evaluation of early years provision. The Framework will comprise a broad outline of child development and the key milestones, the implications of these for quality learning provision along with the DHSSPS Minimum Standards and the ETI quality indicators to guide self-evaluation and regulation and inspection;

- c. In light of the work set out especially at b. above, DE will require ESA to review the pre-school curriculum and advise DE on how it should be updated to ensure a coherent and complementary approach across the early years;
  - d. DE in collaboration with DHSSPS and HSCTs, will address issues of underperformance or inadequate provision in pre-school settings and in the Foundation stage, identified through inspection, to ensure that the highest standards are achieved and maintained; and
  - e. DE will seek to identify an appropriate mechanism to capture progression in child development and learning linked to the milestones developed by ETI.
- (ii) DE will develop a co-ordinated approach to early years provision to ensure smooth transitions with appropriate exchanges of information at the different stages through the following actions:-
- a. DE will commission research and evaluation from ETI and other sources to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of provision and of the transitions into pre-school and primary school; it will focus in particular, on the assessment of the children's development and progression in learning, provision for SEN, the transfer of information and the continuity of the curriculum;
  - b. DE will commission ESA to address, on an area basis, the issues relating to two year olds in nursery provision and to reception classes in primary schools to ensure that provision is age appropriate;
  - c. DE will work with DHSSPS to develop a mechanism (drawing on existing data sources where appropriate) by which key information



can be shared more effectively so that relevant agencies can access the most up-to-date information on the child with a view to addressing any identified areas of difficulty; and

- d. DE will work with DHSSPS to promote the use of the Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) assessment tool across children's services as a comprehensive single means of assessing recording and communicating across agencies to improve the early identification of difficulties and appropriate interventions.

*Question 5 - Do you agree with the actions proposed?*

Yes

No



Please add any comments you have about the actions proposed:

Will the research in ii a) considering 'learning' in the wider context e.g. the play provision activities we have previously referred to.

*Question 6 - What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?*

### **The Role of Parents and Carers**

***Objective Two: 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.***

The draft Strategy identifies the following matters which DE needs to address:

- . the quality of communication with parents;
- . the engagement with parents in support of their child's learning and development so that they can fulfil their key role as the first educators of





their children and to strengthen the partnership between parents and early years staff;

- . the need to work with parents of children in funded provision to address any barriers to learning their children face, including SEN;
- . the impact of the health, care and learning services provided to parents in disadvantaged areas through Sure Start Programmes; and
- . the incorporation of play-based learning, including access to outdoor play, in early years provision, recognising that play is a vital part of the informal learning in early childhood.

*Question 7 - Are these the key issues for DE to address?*

Yes

No

*Question 8 - Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to recognise and respect the role of parents and to raise the level of engagement?*

The Council endorses the areas outlined above particularly the last two points. The Council already works in partnership internally (Parks and Leisure and Community Services) and externally with local crèches, early years and schools in providing access to junior play equipment within our playgrounds. For example the Department facilitates specific projects i.e. 'Come and Play' project which aims to encourage children to spend more time playing outside.

The Council also provide various programmes and activities geared towards toward parents and toddlers. Mother and toddler swims are offered within some of our Leisure Centres and the Leisure Development Unit in partnership with BCSDN are currently developing a parent & toddler programme to promote physical activity and health wellbeing.

The draft Strategy proposes that DE will undertake the following actions:



- (i) DE will promote close and collaborative working between parents and early years providers to assist their vital role in supporting their children's learning by the following actions:-
- a. DE through ESA will 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 become involved in the removal of barriers to learning. This programme will take full account of existing good practice;
  - b. DE will ensure the effective provision of information and advice to parents on the availability of early years services and will collaborate with DHSSPS in the Families Matter Strategy; and
  - c. DE will consult with parents in order to ensure that their views are incorporated into policy formulation. ESA and other appropriate bodies (including Sure Start) will consult with parents on the development of early childhood services.
- (ii) DE will build support for parents in areas of disadvantage by working with partners to support the capacity of parents to assist with their children's learning by the following actions:-
- a. DE will seek to expand the reach of Sure Start and the Programme for Two Year Olds to improve support for children and families living in areas of highest disadvantage;
  - b. 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; and
  - c. DE will promote the importance of regular attendance in early years settings.

Question 9 - *Do you agree with the actions proposed?*

Yes

No



Please add any comments you have about the actions proposed:

Our new Play Service schemes aim to give local parents skills to run their own local play facilities. The DE's strategy could benefit from this network of contacts and access to parents of children in areas of higher need.

*Question 10 - What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?*

### **Equity and Access**

***Objective Three: To improve equity and access to early years provision.***

The draft Strategy identifies the following matters which DE needs to address:

- a. the funding issues between providers in relation to pre-school provision raised in the Chief Inspector's Report 2006-08 and the need to ensure that resources are used as effectively as possible to improve services;
- b. 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;
- c. the provision of appropriate Irish-medium education as appropriate for those who wish to avail of it;
- d. the developmental Programme for Two Year Olds and their parents in areas of disadvantage, particularly linked to Sure Start;
- e. the delivery of early years provision that is appropriate to age and stage of development and aligns with best practice; and
- f. the identification and dissemination of good practice across early years provision for children with additional or special needs.

*Question 11 - Are these the key issues for DE to address?*

Yes

No



*Question 12 - Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to improve equity and access to early years provision? If so, what are they?*

As well as access to parents and children who are most in need mentioned earlier, the Council is planning to launch an Anti Poverty Strategy soon. There may be scope for linking some of our work to action d) above.

The draft Strategy proposes that DE will undertake the following actions:

- (i) DE will increase the skills of the workforce in DE funded early years settings by promoting a higher level of qualifications and wider access to professional development through the following actions:-
  - a. DE, with DEL, ESA, and other relevant bodies, will work towards raising the minimum level of qualifications for those working in all DE funded early years settings, including Sure Start, to an NVQ level 3; the minimum level of qualification for the leader-in-charge will be raised to NVQ level 4 or above;
  - b. ESA will secure or procure an “early years leadership programme” and provide access to it for those currently in leadership in funded pre-school provision;
  - c. ESA, working in conjunction with ETI, will identify and disseminate ‘best practice’ drawing from both statutory and voluntary/private funded early years provision to promote quality across the entire early years workforce; and
  - d. DE will seek to support the non-statutory sector through capacity building to ensure they can benefit fully from the opportunities offered by the SEN policy.
- (ii) DE will take steps to address issues of access to early years provision by the following actions:-
  - a. DE will consider changes to the funding mechanisms to address the equality issues in pre-school education taking account of resource constraints;



- b. ESA and the HSCTs will devise a mechanism through the existing partnership structures, to manage the allocation of pre-school places on an area basis and to ensure that provision is age-appropriate;
- c. Given that early years provision is offered through small units and that some pre-school children still take up reception places in primary school. ESA will introduce an area-based approach to the planning, delivery and support of early years provision to ensure that knowledge, expertise, good practice and resources are shared more widely across the providers and that provision is age appropriate;
- d. All voluntary and private pre-school providers who are funded through the Pre-School Expansion Programme will be required to work within the revised SEN framework;
- e. ESA will provide access to development and to informed advice and expertise from the full range of pupil support services for staff in funded pre-school settings. This support will be managed through the 'area-based' area approach referred to above;
- f. DE will develop proposals to improve access to Irish-medium pre-school provision;
- g. DE will 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; and
- h. DE will seek to expand provision for two year olds.

*Question 13 - Do you agree with the actions proposed?*

Yes

No

Please add any comments you have about the actions proposed:



Likewise the Council agrees with the statement of expanding the provision for two year olds and in particular for (0-6 years old). The department will take cognisance of this age group when developing its future strategies and plans (i.e. pitches strategy, leisure strategy and participation plan).

*Question 14 - What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?*

### **Collaboration and Integration**

***Objective Four: To encourage greater collaboration among key partners to promote greater integration in service delivery.***

The draft Strategy identifies the following matters which DE needs to address:

- . the primary focus of interventions must remain, at all levels, on the child and their needs;
- . better involvement among the key partners particularly education, health and social care, to ensure a more joined-up and integrated approach, especially in relation to early intervention strategies; and
- . the contribution of early years provision to the wider Executive consideration of childcare policy.

*Question 15 - Are these the key issues for DE to address?*

Yes

No



*Question 16 - Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to encourage greater collaboration among key partners to promote greater integration in service delivery? If so, what are they?*

The draft Strategy proposes that DE will undertake the following actions:



- (i) DE will seek to develop and promote collaborative partnerships both within and outside government to ensure that a coherent view is taken of the needs of the child by the following actions:-
- a. DE will contribute to the Executive's actions for children in relation to the early years and will work with other departments to embed these in the next Programme for Government, including the development of relevant Public Service Agreement targets;
  - b. DE will require ESA and the Public Health Agency to develop more integrated provision in the delivery of its early years services;
  - c. ESA and the Health and Social Care Board/Public Health Agency will work together on evaluation and sharing of data; and
  - d. DE and DHSSPS will explore the optimum use of existing accommodation to promote greater integration of services.
- (ii) DE and DHSSPS will work through ESA and the Health and Social Care Board/Public Health Agency to develop the most effective structures for the collaborative regional planning of services and how best to develop more integrated services in early years provision by the following actions:-
- a. DE will commission ETI to inspect and report on the quality of the learning provision in all early years settings; DE will consult with DHSSPS, on how the HSCT regulatory function should align with the quality improvement role of ETI to ensure the highest possible standards of provision set out in the proposed quality framework;
  - b. DE will collaborate with DHSSPS to improve health and social and educational outcomes for children and their families. DE intends to address issues around speech and language provision and health and social well-being; and
  - c. in order to promote issues of healthy eating and nutrition, DE will expand the remit of its current nutrition associates who currently work with ETI in primary schools, to work in pre-school settings.



Question 17 - Do you agree with the actions proposed?

Yes

No

Please add any comments you have about the actions proposed:

Our Sports Development Unit and Parks Outreach staff engage with local communities in the design and delivery of various programmes and projects. Belfast Zoo provides an outreach service from September to March when they carry out preschool visits out to nursery schools, play schools, parent and toddler groups etc. to look at animals, their colour, patterns, texture, movements and any sounds they might make and also food habits. In relation to point (ii) c above and in terms of promoting issues of healthy eating and nutrition, parks outreach managers within the Council organise small educational workshops with young children of (4 – 6) years of age which involves:

- Planting up window boxes with vegetables
- Nature trails and scavenger hunts.

In relation to point (i) d the Council is keen to explore future partnership opportunities with the DE.

Question 18 - What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?

### **Additional Comments**

If you have any additional comments you wish to make about the draft Strategy please use the box below.