Early Years (0-6) Strategy

Consultation Response

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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? ☐
Introduction

This Consultation Response Document, prepared by the Department of Education, draws on and complements, but is not intended to replace, the draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy. To understand more fully the context within which this consultation is taking place you should read the full draft Strategy document, and supporting evidence paper, which are available from:

The Early Years Team
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
Rathgill
Bangor
BT19 7PR
☎02891279892
Email: DE.EarlyYearsTeam@deni.gov.uk

Or from the Department of Education website at www.deni.gov.uk

The closing date for responses to be with the Department is 30 November 2010. Responses must be forwarded to the postal or email address above.
Overview

The Department of Education (DE) recognises that the early years in a child’s life are a vitally important time. It is during these early months and years of life that a significant level of children’s learning takes place, first relationships are made, concepts are developed and the foundations of language and all later skills and learning are laid.

The aim of the new Strategy is to set out a vision and plan for ensuring better outcomes for children by improving the provision and quality of services to the youngest children, their parents and families for the next 5 years. The draft Strategy is a high level document that sets out the direction for travel that will link the range of early years’ services for children (0-4) from Education and Health with the new Foundation Stage in the first years of Primary School. It will reflect the drive for cohesion in the policies and services affecting early years so that children and parents get the best outcomes possible.

The draft Strategy, complemented by the evidence paper, seeks to:

- define a framework for the policy direction of DE within the wider approach of the Executive to children’s policy; and
- set out key objectives and strategic actions for future development and improvement.

The document sets out a context for the draft Strategy, in both the international perspective and in respect of the position here, in terms of:

- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC);
The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports on early childhood education;
The relevant PSA targets set by the Assembly;
The Children (NI) Order 1995;
The cross-departmental ten year Children and Young People’s Strategy 2006-16 “Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge”;
DHSSPS’ “Families Matter: Supporting Families”;
The delivery of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP) and Sure Start services, including the Sure Start Programme for two Year Olds.

From this consideration, the document sets out a vision, aims and objectives for the Strategy, within the context of four key priority areas which are:

I. Quality of provision and outcomes;
II. The role of parents and carers is vital;
III. Equity of access; and
IV. The importance of more effective linkages in the delivery of services.

These form the bedrock of the draft Strategy and it is on these in particular that views will be welcomed.

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?

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<th>Yes</th>
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Please add any comments you have:

While overall this reflects the right vision for children, Barnardo’s NI is concerned that it is not reflected throughout the rest of the Strategy. The bulk of the document seems to focus on children aged 3 – 6 and on their attainments as learners. For an early years strategy to be effective it needs to recognise that learning starts before birth and that from pre-natal through to six years is a critical time in a child’s life. The support that parents and children need during this time cannot be simply focused on literacy and numeracy attainment. Indeed, even if the overall goal is to improve literacy and numeracy attainment this will not be achieved by such a singular focus. It can only be achieved when the range of circumstances and support that influence children’s learning are seen as an overall part of their life.

It is essential for an early years strategy to be effective that it recognises the need to support parents and children from pre-natal through to six years old and that it is integrated so that it can focus on health, attachment, emotional well being, learning through play and more formal learning.

The Strategy currently does not reflect this and needs to be much more cross-departmental. It also is unclear on how parents who are not in Sure Start areas or in funded provision will be supported. This undermines the basic vision as it seems to suggest the vision will only apply to children in these areas and not all children.
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:

The main aim seems to be that each child will be a successful learner and that the services will be child centred. However, this is not reflected in the body of the Strategy. Experience has clearly indicated that enabling children to be successful learners is not simply about formal learning, regardless of how early a stage. It requires a much more holistic and individual approach to each child. It also requires active and respectful engagement with a child’s family as this is ultimately one of the biggest influences on how children learn.

The Strategy does not convey a strong sense of seeking to engage parents
nor does it reflect the work already being undertaken by many services, statutory, voluntary and community, in terms of parental engagement and support.

The aims set out above almost seem to be contradictory or at the very least the Strategy has not clearly identified how they will be achieved. There is at the core of the Strategy a contradiction between an Early Years Strategy which needs to be pre-natal to six years old and fully integrated with a focus on early intervention; and an Early Education or Learner Strategy that is focused on 3 - 6 year olds and with a narrow educational remit.

Barnardo’s NI believes that it is only a full Early Years Strategy with a clear focus on early intervention and the engagement and support of parents that can deliver improvements overall for young children, but also more successful learners.

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

These are some of the areas for DE to address. Others that should be considered are:

- The need for fully integrated approaches and services across education, health and social care, to ensure children get the range of support they need.

- A focus on children aged 0 – 3 and their needs, given the focus on learning for 3 – 6 year olds already in the Strategy.

- A clearer focus on increasing quality, access and provision for children 0 – 6 years old and building on existing statutory, voluntary and community provision to take this forward.

- How will the Strategy address the current inequality in the roll out of the Programme for Two Year Olds and if this is to be further developed would resources not be better placed in implementing a model that works with parents and child rather than promoting group care for such young children? The Two year Old programme is only available in Sure Start areas and surely it is important that parents in other areas and children in for example day nurseries and also disabled children, have access to good practice and additional programmes.
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:

Barnardo’s NI is concerned that many of the actions identified are dependent on ESA and yet there is no clear indication of when this will be in place. In view of this, are there any alternative arrangements?

Barnardo’s NI works with at least 8,000 children, young people and their families every year. Many of these children are aged 0 – 6 and many will need extra support to enable them to reach their full potential.

We are concerned that the Strategy fails to take the voluntary and community sector providers into account as full partners, many of whom are delivering the kinds of programmes and activities that the Strategy describes. For example, Barnardo’s have implemented and rigorously assessed the Incredible Years programme which has produced statistically significant improvements in parent and child interaction.

We also have a pilot Ready To Learn Programme working across nine schools with primary one children and we are comparing outcomes with seven schools who are operating as a control group. This represents a significant investment of £2m in early educational attainment and any Strategy should factor in and take account of the role of the sector in developing, piloting and investing in new initiatives.
It is also an issue of concern to Barnardo’s NI that there is no mention of child or parental choice within the Strategy.

It is also the case that improving school readiness requires a much broader focus than simply literacy and numeracy. Parent and child interaction and relationships, as well as parents knowing the skills of first educator, are critical.

While a universal child development tool would be welcome it is important that it is holistic. It must take account of children with additional needs who may not measure easily against a standard set of targets.

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

It seems essential to Barnardo’s NI that the Strategy must be broader and be a full early years strategy as opposed to an early attainment strategy. It must also be clearly cross-departmental and cross-sectoral.

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?
There is already a substantial amount of work focused on engaging parents and it is important that the Strategy builds on what is currently in existence and does not duplicate existing programmes.

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.
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:

While Barnardo’s NI recognises the importance of regular attendance at early years settings we would emphasise that this must be achieved by engaging parents and children and not through compulsory attendance.

It is unclear what is meant by extending the reach of Sure Start. Is this the geographical spread or based on age? It is also something of a concern that unlike other devolved administrations and England we have failed to undertake a national evaluation of our Sure Start programmes since their
implementation and therefore cannot adequately assess their levels of effectiveness or where adjustment may be required. A national evaluation is imperative, given its central role in the Strategy, as well as an ongoing annual assessment of outcomes.

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 preschool 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?
There are many significant elements to good quality early years interventions that are not simply a matter of attainment. Good quality early years intervention takes account of children’s social, emotional and intellectual development and there are clear models of good practice in all sectors.

It is essential that the Strategy takes the models of best practice from across different sectors, based on their outcomes and effectiveness, and invests in them.

It is also clear that having 2 year olds in nursery settings is not age and stage appropriate and needs to be addressed within the Strategy.

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:

We welcome the commitment to addressing the disparity in funding between different sectors and view this as critical in ensuring a variety of choice and provision.

Barnardo’s NI also believes that provision should be of a comparable standard. However, we would question how effectiveness is to be measured and think it is critical to ensuring improved outcomes.

We welcome the focus on workforce development and on ensuring that working in early years is a recognised and valued profession.
Barnardo’s NI is supportive of parental choice and the support given to parents who choose Irish Medium Education. However, it is also important that early years support is given to parents and children for whom English is not their first language as this can create a barrier to children’s learning and it is important that this is addressed.

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:

We welcome the commitment to work in partnership with other government departments and with other sectors and organisations. Barnardo's NI remains concerned however that this partnership approach is not reflected within the detail of the Strategy.

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.
Barnardo’s NI welcome the Early Years Strategy and believe it is critical that we focus resources and intervention in the earliest years of a child’s life to prevent children failing to achieve their full potential and developing difficulties later in life.

However, we do not believe that the Strategy as currently devised will deliver to this objective. The Strategy is too focused on 3 – 6 year olds and too focused on learning attainments.

We believe that the Strategy needs to be a Northern Ireland Executive Strategy that includes the range of government departments with an influence on early years and early development. It must also fully include the voluntary and community sector and recognise their key role in engaging and interacting with parents and children.

The Strategy also needs to consider what has been proven to be effective in delivering to better outcomes for children in their early years, and where new initiatives are introduced these must be assessed in terms of their effectiveness.