



# **Barnardo's NI Response to The Early Learning and Childcare Strategy Consultation**

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. In the past year we worked with approximately 18,000 children, young people and families across more than 45 different services and programmes. We are a leading provider of schools-based support, reaching more than 32,000 children in schools across the UK and Ireland through our NI-managed social and emotional literacy programmes. We deliver a wide range of services, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. Our response is informed by our long experience delivering a wide breadth of services throughout Northern Ireland, including services that support infants, children, and young people's emotional health and wellbeing throughout their formative years. Through our Sure Start services, Barnardo's NI supports parents in caring for their children, promoting children's health and enhancing positive parenting skills. Sure Start aims to improve a child's ability to learn by encouraging stimulating play and improving language and communication skills.

We know that the first 1,001 days of a child's life lay the foundations for resilient physical and mental wellbeing, shaping brain development, and affecting lifelong health, behaviour, and learning. As part of the Stronger from the Start Coalition, Barnardo's NI strongly advocates for protecting and promoting early learning and emotional wellbeing for infants and children; you can read our 2026 Manifesto here<sup>1</sup>.

We also know that childcare settings are key spaces for children to learn and grow in a safe environment, and enables families, parents, and caregivers to access services and employment. The Anti-Poverty Strategy Group's recommendations paper calls for "a new Executive Early Education and Childcare Strategy, targeting families in poverty, which will provide accessible, affordable, high quality, flexible and sustainable childcare", which must be fully costed and resourced, with ambitious targets, to ensure parents can access and afford the high-quality

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/northern-ireland/influencing/stronger-from-the-start#:~:text=Stronger%20from%20the%20Start%20is,and%20improve%20infant%20mental%20health.>



childcare they need to work, or to access education and training, while supporting providers to deliver this sustainably and flexibly<sup>2</sup>.

## **Overall Direction and Strategic Approach**

With this context, Barnardo's NI is concerned that the proposed Early Learning and Childcare Strategy fails to meet the fundamental structures for a successful Strategy that will provide the crucial interventions and investments for children, families, and the early learning and childcare workforce. There are no costings attached to the proposed actions, a lack of clarity on how proposals will be delivered in practice, and a lack of detail on prioritisation and sequencing of actions. This creates significant uncertainty about whether the necessary resources will be available and about the sustainability of existing programmes without a clear, long-term funding model.

## **Theme 1- Supporting Children in Their Early Years**

Concerningly, the draft Strategy proposes to remove legislative protection criteria for socioeconomically disadvantaged families in the admissions process for pre-school places. The Department for Education has told us that the proposal for full-time pre-school provision would negate the need for the social disadvantage criteria. However, we are concerned that the lack of dedicated funding for this provision, as well as the lack of agreed actions and timelines, would see socioeconomically disadvantaged children and families losing these protections as they wait for full implementation of universal provision. Any removal of protections for working class and disadvantaged children and their families must be seriously considered in line with the current financial climate, along with agreed actions by the Executive, and strong accountability mechanisms to ensure that families are not punished by this proposal.

We welcome the proposed actions under Objective 1.2 that would see funding boosts to enable Sure Start programmes to meet rising needs and the recognition that these programmes need to be expanded geographically. Access to Sure Start currently excludes thousands of children in poverty who happen to live outside designated wards. Sure Start funding should be transitioned to a model that follows the needs of the child. Instead of funding based on postcodes, resources should be allocated based on the actual number of children living in low-income

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/research/anti-poverty-strategy-group-recommendations-paper>

households, ensuring that services can reach vulnerable families in rural or complex areas. However, we also recognise that programmes like Sure Start, Pathway, and Toy Box cannot be substituted for universal, full-time early years provision, especially given the current financial and geographic constraints.

Finally, we would also like to see greater recognition of early years learning reflected in this Strategy. Early years education, play, and support can and is delivered through a multitude of different programmes and settings outside of childcare. Early years support should be accessible to all children and families, regardless of whether they use childcare. Babies/infants deserve a whole system response to protect and promote their early emotional wellbeing. The Stronger from the Start Coalition, in our 2026 Manifesto, calls for an infrastructure of resourced, evidenced and high-quality services to ensure all babies, young children and their families can access the right support at the right time to protect and promote their early emotional wellbeing and brain development<sup>3</sup>.

## **Theme 2- Supporting Families/Carers with their Children's Learning and Childcare Costs**

Barnardo's NI welcomes the focus on the rising costs of childcare; however, we are concerned that proposals within the draft Strategy will not provide support for the most disadvantaged families. The Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS) was designed to help working parents afford childcare costs, but some parents and children are ineligible for this support. Specifically, families who claim Universal Credit or Childcare Vouchers cannot avail of the Childcare Subsidy Scheme- the most recent figures released by the Department for Communities show that there are over 94,370 households with children receiving Universal Credit, and of those households<sup>4</sup>with children, there are 9,080 households in receipt of the Childcare Element of Universal Credit in May 2025, this is an increase of 28%, 2,570 households over the past 2 years<sup>(2023)</sup>. This means that over 94,000 families will continue to be ineligible for additional childcare support, and the Strategy does not account for these families who are already facing poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. The Strategy must address the interaction between childcare subsidies and the wider benefits system, and the potential unintended impacts on eligibility for other supports.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/northern-ireland/influencing/stronger-from-the-start#:~:text=Stronger%20from%20the%20Start%20is,and%20improve%20infant%20mental%20health.>

<sup>4</sup> [https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/universal-credit-publication-may-2025.html#Key\\_points](https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/universal-credit-publication-may-2025.html#Key_points)

### **Theme 3- Supporting the Early Years Sector and Workforce**

The sustainability and capacity of the Early Learning and Childcare sector is integral to long-term, quality childcare provision. Investment that recognises the skills and value of the workforce will ensure that staff are rewarded for their work and must invest in improving the quality of provision, supporting childcare providers to be sustainable, and enhancing pay and conditions for the workforce, ensuring it is properly valued<sup>5</sup>. This is especially true for the community and voluntary sector, and other community-based early learning and childcare provision.

The draft Strategy should place greater emphasis on investing in and supporting early learning and childcare services within a community-based model that sees strategic investment that goes directly to the sites most needed. Profit-making, private childcare businesses will continue to increase fees in line with inflation and rising costs, which will see more families priced out of childcare and more affordable childcare provision forced to raise their prices and cut back on staff pay, education, and training.

### **Lack of Support for Newcomer Families and Families Seeking Sanctuary**

The Anti-Poverty Strategy Group, in its Recommendations Paper, were clear that an Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy should “Give specific consideration to the needs of lone parent families, families who have a child with a disability, families living in a rural area, migrant families, and those from an ethnic minority background, including families who have no recourse to public funds and therefore may be unable to access financial support with the cost of registered childcare” and that staff within childcare settings should receive cultural competency and equality and human rights training<sup>6</sup>.

Barnardo’s NI provides targeted support for children and families seeking sanctuary, including linking them with local services such as health and education, and supporting with housing needs and other practical support. Our families have told us about the challenges they face when they try to access services for their children, particularly regarding childcare. There is a gap in

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/research/anti-poverty-strategy-group-recommendations-paper>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/research/anti-poverty-strategy-group-recommendations-paper>



Northern Ireland's service provision for these families, which we do not see reflected in this Strategy.

Where information is posted and shared does not always include the needs of families seeking sanctuary- temporary accommodation, frequent relocation, and isolation causes families to miss out on opportunities to not only access services, but to also find out about what supports they can avail of. Any information awareness campaigns must consider how our newcomer families are accessing support information. This also includes information accessible in a range of languages and locations.

Available supports are not always accessible either- families in the asylum process do not have the same time or availability for early learning and childcare services that are not intentionally designed to cater to all family circumstances. There are also language barriers where settings do not include translation services or materials.

We also need to see early learning and childcare services designed with intentional inclusion for families with a diverse cultural and linguistic background, as well as providing trauma-informed support and learning to facilitate the parent-practitioner relationship.

## **Recommendations**

As part of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group, Barnardo's NI was clear with our list of recommendations for an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy:

- There should be a new funding model, directly funding childcare providers to offer an allocation of fully funded or subsidised early education and childcare to all families, targeted particularly when childcare is likely to be of most cost to parents and of greatest benefit to children. Public funding must support a move towards a system where overall access is fair, affordable, flexible, and high-quality for all, with specific actions targeting families on low incomes.
- The new funding model must invest in improving the quality of provision, supporting childcare providers to be sustainable, and enhancing pay and conditions for the workforce, ensuring it is properly valued. This model should address the additional costs of childcare provision for disabled children.

- Appropriate school-age childcare should be available for families, facilitating a wide range of parental working patterns, both wrapping around the school day and during holidays.
- Flexible and affordable childcare should be available for families where parents work atypical hours and shift patterns.
- Ensure all parents are aware of the financial support they are entitled to with registered childcare costs, and that those not in paid employment because they are caring for their children know about National Insurance credits.
- Cut the five-week wait for Universal Credit, and pay the childcare element directly to childcare providers, as with the new expanded ADF for upfront childcare costs.
- Expand provision and availability of childcare for older children, particularly those who have a disability or additional needs.
- Ensure sufficient and disability-sensitive childcare as a statutory duty
- Staff within childcare settings should receive cultural competency, equality, and human rights training.
- Recognise the role of grandparents in providing informal childcare, including raising awareness of Specified Adult Childcare Credits, which can count towards their state pension entitlement if they leave work early.
- Give specific consideration to the needs of lone parent families, families who have a child with a disability, families living in a rural area, migrant families, and those from an ethnic minority background, including families who have no recourse to public funds and therefore may be unable to access financial support with the cost of registered childcare.

The Stronger from the Start Coalition also includes several recommendations for Workforce and Service Development for Early Years provision

- Develop and fund an infant & early childhood workforce strategy
- Recognise the importance of and prioritise commissioning around the first 1001 days.

- Ensure the DE Early Years standardisation enables sector-wide understanding of responsive relationships and brain development.
- Focus on baby and infants' rights to a nurturing and responsive environment within the Early Learning and Childcare strategy
- Recognise the importance of the early years' workforce, including job security and appropriate remuneration.
- Develop and resource a regional model for early emotional wellbeing with a range of universal, targeted and specialist support.
- Ensure services are accessible and effective. They must be locally available, high-quality, culturally appropriate as well as evidence and trauma-informed, neuroinclusive and relationship focused.
- Enable services to understand behaviour as communication and therefore identify potential indicators of early stress and trauma (i.e. capacity building model).
- Ensure the regional minimum standards includes consideration of early emotional wellbeing, brain development and early relationships.

We also encourage the Executive to refer to the Women's Policy Group's Childcare Strategy Checklist<sup>7</sup>, which outlines their key priorities for a successful and meaningful Childcare Strategy. This includes access to high quality childcare that meets children's educational and developmental needs in a safe, nurturing environment; childcare settings be enabled to deliver high quality, sustainable, accessible childcare across a range of settings; specific support for community-based childcare; addressing the gender pay gap and access to affordable, flexible childcare; childcare workforce be valued and supported through proper investment in skills development and career progression.

*For further information, please contact:*

**Meg Stith**, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, Barnardo's NI-  
[megan.stith@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:megan.stith@barnardos.org.uk)

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.wrda.net/childcare-for-all>