

Manifesto 2016 – Elaboration on key calls

An Early Education and Care Act

In June 2015 Minister O'Dowd indicated within a response to an Assembly Question (AQW 47991/11-15) his intention to bring forward an Early Years Education and Learning Bill before the end of the current Assembly mandate. We certainly hope that this can still be progressed by the next Minister and department. A statutory basis for the financing, supervision and coordination of the delivery of all education and care services by the voluntary, community and statutory sectors has been one of the long-standing calls by Early Years.

A Northern Ireland Executive 'Care and Early Childhood Development Strategy'

Our view is that the term 'Childcare' as a title for the draft Executive Childcare Strategy document is now outdated in terms of thinking based upon what all the evidence points towards and that a better title would be "A Care and Early Childhood Development Strategy"

With the upcoming transfer of the childcare unit and childcare responsibilities to the Department of Education it is hoped, given the department's present responsibilities for pre-school provision, development and implementation of the Learning to Learn Framework, Sure Start, Special Educational Needs, youth services and Traveller inclusion in education, a continuity of care and education across key transitional stages can be established.

This could then effectively draw in other relevant departments across employment, regional and rural development, training, health and social policy issues as involved in such particular phases. Across the world where this has happened there has been the development of more coherent, integrated strategies and indeed better investment for children, especially young children. Our view is that the Department of Education is best fitted to take the lead in this area given the Department's current and future responsibilities.

A common approach to funding, inspection, regulation and access to support services

Equally, we see enormous opportunities, with the above shift of responsibilities to DE and the announcements by Minister Hamilton towards the end of last year in relation to structural reforms to the health system, to review the nature, role, remit and responsibilities of care, early education and early childhood development in this region. A need for the current unacceptable inconsistencies experienced in approaches to inspections, ratios, usage of the minimum standards guidance, registration and regulation in areas to be adequately addressed has been an issue consistently raised by our member providers.

This could include and highlight such areas as the importance of streamlining the inspection, ratio and regulation systems (presently involving such bodies as Trusts, DHSSPS, ETI and the Charity Commission in relevant circumstances) so that for the future there is greater synergy in one system with clear read across to all settings that provide care and development opportunities for children.

Such approaches to early education, care and childhood development would also reflect and align with a number of UNCRC articles, UN Sustainable Development Goals incorporated in 'Transforming Our World - the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' and other European Commission early childhood recommendations.

Supporting and acknowledging the workforce

In terms of responsibilities around training, employment and learning the manifesto references and calls for a much more creative and innovative approach to, and recognition of, the childcare workforce and professional development than present that reflects what the workforce in turn brings to the education and care of children and also incorporates and overhauls how vocational and academic training, the profession and career development are addressed in schools, institutions and colleges.

The manifesto also calls for an adequately resourced and supported training, qualifications and professional development strategy, like other regions of the UK and Europe, for *the entire workforce across sectors* working with young children that also recognises the experience many staff will already possess, so such costs of quality childcare are not reflected in increased fees.