

Manifesto 2017 – Elaboration on key calls

An Early Education and Care Act

In June 2015 the then Education Minister, John 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 2011-16 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the term 'Childcare' as a title for any Executive released early care and education related strategic document is now outdated in terms of thinking based upon what all the evidence points towards and that a better title would be "A Care and Early Childhood Development Strategy"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 transfer last year of early childhood care policy responsibilities to the Department of Education (DE) it is hoped, given the department's other responsibilities for pre-school provision, 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 approach could then effectively draw in other relevant departmental responsibilities relating to early intervention, employment, regional and rural development, justice, training, health and social policy issues. 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.

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

We see enormous opportunities, with the above shift of policy responsibilities to DE and the announcements 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 and between 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, the Department of Health, the Education Training Inspectorate 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

The manifesto references and calls for greater recognition of, and a much more creative and innovative approach to, the early childhood care and education workforce, training and professional development than present that reflects what the workforce in turn brings to the education and care of children 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.