

# Make a Difference for Young Children



**Early Years – the organisation for young children is the largest voluntary organisation working with and for all young children in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We are a non-profit making, member-based, organisation and during 2016 celebrated 50 years of working to promote and develop high quality, evidence-informed, cross community early childhood services for young children, their families and communities.**

Our vision is that children are strong, competent and visible in their communities; physically and emotionally healthy; eager and able to learn; and respectful of difference. Members of Early Years across the statutory, community, voluntary and independent sectors, in addition to employing over 6,500 staff directly and providing a significant social and economic benefit, support the childcare and early education needs of over 32,000 children on a daily basis. Early Years also is involved at various Lead, Accountable body, Management Board, Committee and employer levels in ten Sure Start projects, supporting children 0-4 and their families, across the region.

Early Years appreciates the significant challenges faced by the Westminster and devolved administrations in the current economic and political climates. However, Northern Ireland presently is a region without a finalised, agreed 2017-18 budget, Executive Childcare Strategy, Social Strategy, Investment Strategy, Economic Strategy or Children and Young People's Strategy. We strongly contend that NOW is the key opportunity to seize upon opportunities to work and think differently and to maximise on evidence-based excellence and innovation through a clear focus on early care and education that progresses up through the educational, health and wellbeing, training and employability pathways. Such investments also have the potential to evidence significant return rate savings through the avoidance of remedial interventions having to be made in later life phases.

This is a vital opportunity for us to make our voices heard on the importance of the early childhood sector to young children, their families, their communities, wider society and the regional economy. The following are some of the key issues regarding early childhood education and care here. Please make your local candidates aware of the following to encourage them to press for action and **MAKE A REAL DIFFERENCE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN.**

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## WE NEED:

- An Early Education and Care Act for Northern Ireland that would provide a clear legislative requirement for the financing, supervision and co-ordination of the delivery of all education and care services for young children by the voluntary, independent and statutory sectors.
- The development and implementation of a robustly resourced and monitored Northern Ireland Executive 'Care and Early Childhood Development Strategy', aligned with other such key devolved, Westminster and international initiatives as relating to parental leave; the review of Sure Start; proposed extensions to childcare provision in England; early intervention; Children's Services Co-operation; and a shared, prosperous society, that expressly meets the needs and requirements of all children from birth, their families and all childcare and early education providers.
- An adequately resourced and supported training, qualifications and professional development strategy for the entire workforce across sectors working with young children which recognises the experience many staff will already possess in order to bring Northern Ireland into line with other regions of the United Kingdom and Europe.
- A common, cross-departmental and agency approach to funding, inspection, registration and access to child and family support services for providers offering early childhood services which addresses present imbalances between statutory and non-statutory places and reflects the present ability of the statutory and the voluntary and independent sectors to deliver high quality provision.
- The development of funding which adequately provides for and sustains high quality early childhood services in areas of greatest need.
- The introduction of a formally recognised, fair, flexible approach towards the school starting age in Northern Ireland, which has the lowest compulsory school starting age in Europe.
- The integration of a child rights and participation focus in all policy sectors, initiatives, legislative and non-legislative work, in recognition of the UNCRC, Sustainable Development Goal commitments and other European Commission recommendations.
- In recognition of the long-term and intergenerational impact of conflict on communities in this region, express incorporation into such policy initiatives and legislative and non-legislative work of the essential role of Early Childhood Development towards peace building and a shared, inclusive and united future.

For further information please visit  
[www.early-years.org](http://www.early-years.org)