

Information Briefing



Issue No 5 - January 2008

Welcome to the latest edition of the Early Years Information Briefing for the early childhood sector. This is one in a series of briefing papers which will be issued for Early Years staff and members.

EARLY YEARS WELCOME ASSEMBLY MOVES TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN

Early Years - the organisation for young children - has welcomed an all party motion in the Assembly calling on the Executive to maintain and further develop its support for young children. The Assembly debate recognised investment in early years intervention and prevention, noting the work of Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg calls on the Executive to support funding for children's issues.

The motion proposed by the All Party Working Group on Children and Young People, debated on the 14th January 2008, was supported by representatives of the DUP, Sinn Fein, the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP, Alliance and the PUP. The motion reads:

That this Assembly notes the work of Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg on government investment with young children; urges the Executive to take note of the outcomes from this work, and to invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, through Executive Programme Funds, the Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package, and the Supporting Families Package.

The hour and a half debate focused on a range of children's issues calling for children's needs to be addressed by alterations in the draft budget, especially as the removal of the Children's Fund in March 2008 will leave many children's programmes and organisations in financial difficulty.

Early Years have been campaigning for the Executive to further invest in early childhood services and believe a Transformation Fund, to ensure early years staff are qualified to graduate level is a key first step in this process.

A symposium organised by Early Years in November 2007, Prof. Heckman, whose work was noted in the debate demonstrated how an investment of £1 in early childhood services can yield a return of up to £17 over time, helping our population to become better learners, more creative, more adaptable in their attitude to life, more likely to live a healthy lifestyle and to be more law abiding. Investment in early childhood services and in the staff providing them will significantly enhance the quality of life for our youngest children and pay dividends for the future of Northern Ireland.

Early Years welcomed the Assembly debate on this important issue and in particular that the potential of Prof. Heckman's work has been so fully recognised. We hope the debate will influence the

Early Years - the organisation for young children

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| 6c Wildflower Way Boucher Road | Belfast | Co. Antrim | United Kingdom | BT12 6TA

Tel: +44 (0)28 9066 2825 | Website: www.early-years.org

forthcoming decisions on the Draft Budget and that both policy and spending priorities takes account of Prof. Heckman's evidence.

EARLY YEARS RESPONSE TO PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT AND BUDGET

The Early Years response to the government's consultation on the draft programme for government was submitted in December 2007. Early Years welcomed many of the objectives outlined within the draft budget but highlighted many areas that could be strengthened to support the needs of young children and achieve the objectives outlined in the Draft Programme for Government and Draft Budget. Early Years highlighted areas of the draft programme that could be supported by better early years provision and put forward research and objectives to support this.

Early Years were disappointed that support for the training and development of the early years workforce through a Transformation Fund was not outlined within the draft budget. The introduction of a Transformation Fund achieved cross party support in a motion debated in the Assembly and is discussed in greater detail within the response to the draft budget document available at www.early-years.org.

Key responses to specific items in the draft programme for government

- **Increased productivity** - Early Years believes the community and voluntary sector has a vital role to play in delivering the necessary training and skills development that will ensure a productive workforce that is able to meet new productivity challenges. This is particularly important in terms of early investment in education as research shows that the investments made in early childhood programs have far greater gains to be had when children are younger.
- **Skills gap** - Skills that were felt to be lacking were talking and listening skills – customer handling, planning and organising, team working and problem solving. These speaking and listening skills, and the skill of interacting with people is not learnt at primary school or secondary school, these skills are learnt at a young age and through positive parenting skills. Investment in early years – from conception to age five – will yield the return of improved behaviour and increased educational attainment, or, as economists say, better human capital, one of the key components to increasing gross domestic product and growth.
- **Economic inactivity levels** - Affordable, accessible childcare is one of the most frequently cited reasons for women not returning to work. Childcare has to meet the needs of both parents and children. It has to be flexible in delivery to meet the working patterns of parents including early morning and late night working, as well as parents working part-time. Rural families and rural areas face particular difficulties in accessing appropriate child care services. Early Years believe a robust integrated child care and early education strategy is needed to overcome the barriers to economic inactivity. This is of particular importance to rural families, single parents, parents with very young children and children with a disability.
- **Implementation of the Revised Curriculum** - All education research shows that high-quality education in the early years yields the highest return in terms of economic and social capital. There is clear evidence that the longer a child spends in pre-school, where they are taking part in age appropriate learning activities, the better the outcomes for the child. Thus children who

have two or more years in pre-school show better outcomes than children spending one year. Early Years calls for a commitment to funding 20 hours of preschool education for 2 years before children commence formal education. This would bring Northern Ireland in line with the rest of the U.K and leading countries who have signed the Convention on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

- **Additional support for teaching principals** - The Northern Ireland Executive now has an unprecedented opportunity to develop the educational attainment, economic productivity, and public health of its population through a programme of investment in young children aged 0-6 years. Science, over the last ten years, including psychology, biology, neuroscience and economics all point to the presence of a critical and sensitive period in human development, that of the early years or early childhood. The Nobel Laureate, Prof James Heckman confirms not only the social desirability, but also the economic prudence of such an investment programme.
- **Children in Care** - In a recent analysis of studies both in the US and UK Jane Waldfogel (2005) found that both parental care and early years care and education play a central role in helping or hindering children's development in early childhood. It is important therefore to look at effective ways of supporting parents through the early years services they come into contact with to underpin the notion that *'parenting is the most important influence on outcomes for children'* (DfES 2004).
- **Projects of area-based interventions for children and young people** - Early Years is pleased to see support for exemplar area based programmes which will improve long term outcomes for children. We believe such support could lead to significant new evidence based approaches to children's policy and practice in Northern Ireland. Early Years strongly supports the implementation of a Play Policy for Northern Ireland. Having been closely involved in developing the draft Play policy we believe it is vital that it is implemented soon in order to meet the goals of benefitting children's physical health and encouraging social skills.