



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Childcare Strategy: Early Years Briefing

13 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Childcare Strategy: Early Years Briefing

13 February 2013

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Paul Givan
Mr Alex Maskey
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms Siobhán Fitzpatrick	Early Years
Ms Pauline Walmsley	Early Years

The Deputy Chairperson: We are delighted to have the Early Years organisation with us today to discuss the childcare strategy. We have Siobhán Fitzpatrick, chief executive; and Pauline Walmsley, director of knowledge exchange. Thank you very much indeed for waiting patiently, ladies.

Ms Siobhán Fitzpatrick (Early Years): Thanks very much. Not at all.

The Deputy Chairperson: A number of issues have been raised. I know that integration between the early years strategy and the childcare strategy is a major issue. We look forward to hearing from you on those issues today.

Ms Fitzpatrick: Thank you very much. I will take you through the paper, and then Pauline and I will answer any questions. I do not want to repeat some of the issues that have been covered, but I want to pick up on those and perhaps provide some solutions.

First of all, we have to say that we welcome the focus, but we are disappointed —

The Deputy Chairperson: Siobhán, do you want to take a short moment to give us the background and scope of your organisation, just for anybody who might not be aware of that? It would be useful.

Ms Fitzpatrick: Sure; OK.

Early Years, the organisation for young children, was established in Northern Ireland in 1965, with the initial aim of meeting the needs of preschool children. Over the years, we have developed into an organisation that caters for the needs of children from nought to 12.

Our organisation has 1,200 members in Northern Ireland and a growing membership on the island of Ireland, with over 200 members implementing HighScope in the Republic of Ireland. We service 30,000 children and families every day. We directly employ 200 staff in the organisation, and 10,000 people are indirectly involved and employed at a part-time and full-time level in the sector across Northern Ireland.

Over many years, we have focused on growing the quality of provision. Indeed, there was a reference earlier to rural childcare provision. We had a lead role in developing the rural childcare strategy with the previous Agriculture Minister and, indeed, we would like to refer the Committee to that strategy in the response. I think that we came up with a number of solutions in the strategy that could feed into the childcare strategy.

We have a particular focus on and interest in providing integrated cross-community early childhood services that combine care and education. Indeed, we will come back to that in respect of the response.

Latterly, given our work in Northern Ireland, we have been able to grow our international market by sharing best practice from here with regions across the world.

Is that enough background information?

The Deputy Chairperson: Absolutely; yes.

Ms Fitzpatrick: Our position is that we welcome the focus, albeit that I think we have lost 10 years. The last strategy ended in 2004, and since that time, we have really lost the lead while, as we heard earlier, other regions in the UK and our near neighbours in the Republic of Ireland have grasped the nettle and developed comprehensive integrated approaches to childcare and education. Indeed, that is one of the frustrations for our organisation.

At the end of the consultation, we had the Learning to Learn framework, which looks at education for children from nought to six. We feel that if we are to develop a comprehensive childcare strategy, we need to combine care and education. Indeed, that is the recommendation from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). If countries are to develop integrated childcare, you cannot separate out care and education, and the benefits to the child from the benefits to the parent. You have to combine them, and by doing so, you get economic, social and educational benefits, and you address another big issue that, I think, is a real one for the Committee: child poverty. High-quality childcare and education will significantly reduce child poverty rates to, the OECD says, the extent of about 10%.

Again, reiterating some of the earlier discussion, for a number of years, we have called for a statutory footing through a childcare and education Act for Northern Ireland. Other jurisdictions have such a statutory footing, as do other countries across Europe. The only way in which they have significantly addressed the issue is by having it based in legislation.

There have been a number of documents. OECD has focused on the issue for many years, and its document 'Starting Strong' was referred to earlier. Last year, the European Commission came out with a report on childcare in education. The 'Report Card' from UNICEF also focused on what nations need to do to address childcare.

In many ways, we complicate matters. Most countries that have addressed the issue have grasped the nettle by creating one lead Department, without abdication from other Departments, and that lead Department is accountable to a Minister who drives the targets for quality, the number of places and investment. That would be a big move for us, if childcare and education were located in one Department.

In most European countries, that responsibility is either in the health or education system. Given the lead from our organisation on the early learning strategy, education would be the preferred place. The Education Department has responsibility for preschool and Sure Start, and if it took responsibility for childcare, it could be a seamless service. Indeed, it has responsibility for schools, so it could create a seamless integrated childcare service.

The Deputy Chairperson: Siobhán, is there a bit of tension there? I frequently hear the phrase from the Department of Education, for example, that preschool education is not childcare. Is there tension there in getting past that barrier?

Ms Fitzpatrick: I think that we have made that tension, but, everywhere else in the world, there is recognition that education begins at birth and that education and care are inseparable. I do not think that the Department of Education would say that it does not care for children in schools; it does. Unfortunately, however, it is fixated with this narrow focus on education; that is its only concern. I think that it is a real weakness in the Learning to Learn strategy. Indeed, I think that others will say that it is a weakness and that it then makes a weakness for the childcare strategy.

There are a couple of things that I think we need to get right in developing childcare. The first is the focus on parental leave. We have moved a long way recently in assuring at least up to six months' leave. We need to create a Northern Ireland-wide plan that prioritises not only disadvantaged children but childcare for working parents. Again, across Europe, priority is given to childcare places for parents who work as well as for those who do not. I think that that is where we have had tensions in the community in the past. People who work feel as though they are disadvantaged. We should create a double priority.

In the past, I think that we have depended too much on not subsidising providers. We have subsidised the demand side, not the supply side. That happens across Europe. Indeed, in the Republic of Ireland, 50,000 new childcare places were created when the Government agreed to subsidise the supply side as well as providing the tax incentives on the demand side.

We are missing the Barcelona targets, which are for the nought-to-three age group, and we really need to think about that. There was a commitment that, by 2000, 33% of children aged nought to three would be in high-quality childcare services.

The Deputy Chairperson: Where are we roughly in comparison to that 33%?

Ms Fitzpatrick: We looked at that in our state of the sector report, and we are not even at 14% of children under three.

The Deputy Chairperson: Was that target for the year 2000?

Ms Fitzpatrick: Yes. The European Commission picked up last year that countries are not meeting that target.

There is another area that we have failed miserably to look at and could have an enormous benefit for the Northern Ireland economy. The other regions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland have focused on a workforce strategy and a transformation fund to create a profession and an employment area in childcare that people can aspire to. At the minute, because of the system and lack of strategy, in the main, people are working in childcare, which is one of the most important areas for children's development, at barely above the minimum wage. We have called, over a number of years, for a detailed transformation fund to raise the qualification bar and improve remuneration, and we could create more employment in Northern Ireland. At the moment, 10,000 people are employed in the childcare sector, and that is a significant contributor to the local economy. It could be an awful lot more. Most other countries in Europe do not see childcare as a deficit and a demand on economy but see it as a competitive investment and an opportunity for growth. We need to increase the level of GDP expenditure on childcare. At the minute, in Northern Ireland, that is well below the minimum recommendation of 1% GDP. Most European countries spend the same amount of money as Britain does on childcare but get an awful lot more quality, access, cover, information, services and take-up.

The point was made in the earlier discussion about the link between the social security system and childcare. I had the opportunity a couple of weeks ago to visit Belgium, where that link happens at source. For low-income unemployed and new migrant families, their point of information is through social security, which links them with the childcare providers so that parents can go back to training and employment and get a route out of poverty and into employment. On the supply side, services are supported by the federal Government and also at local municipality level with an opportunity for local municipalities to top up what they are given. We feel that if Northern Ireland developed a lead Department and an integrated strategy combining care and education within a legislative framework,

we could be a region that, instead of being at the tail end of the UK and Europe, could lead the way. We are a small region, and it should not be as complicated as we have made it.

The Deputy Chairperson: Siobhán, thanks very much for that valuable contribution. Both submissions today have been extremely helpful, and you are moving us towards solutions. It is stark to consider the comments that we have lost 10 years of government provision in direction and resourcing of childcare in Northern Ireland. We have missed, by some way, targets set for the year 2000. You are obviously feeding that detailed information and ideas that you have through the consultation process, and we hope that OFMDFM takes all those constructive suggestions on board, but, by all means, as we mentioned earlier today, please feel free to summarise those key recommendations and we will endeavour to include that in any response that we make.

John, do you want to ask a question?

Mr McCallister: Thanks, Deputy Chair. I agree with your comments, and it is good to see both Pauline and Siobhán again. I have had the privilege of speaking at your conferences on a couple of occasions, so you know that I am certainly very committed to early intervention and anything we can do on that. I have a couple of points on your presentation. How do you see subsidies on the supply side working? Is that direct subsidy from, effectively, the state or the Government per child, or is that some sort of help in getting someone set up through whatever investment they need to make to their home or wherever they were adapting? How does that work?

I was also very interested in your point that GB spends a significant amount in childcare, but we are not getting the quality that we see in the rest of Europe, so it is not just about money. We definitely need a strategy to look at why we are not getting the quality out of the money that we are investing. Northern Ireland does seem to be very far behind. If I picked your figures up right then, as the Deputy Chair mentioned, we are less than halfway towards a target that is 13 years out of date. It is hardly an impressive recommendation, by any stretch of the imagination. I am very keen to know how you see that subsidy on the supply side working.

Ms Fitzpatrick: I have a couple of examples, John. In the Republic of Ireland, they have been quite innovative. They have subsidised and invested in capital development. They have subsidised 50% capital for the private sector. They have created incentives to bring childminders into the regulated system by giving them a tax allowance of up to £10,000 for child-minding in their own home. Across Europe, Governments, because they see childcare as an investment, will subsidise on the salary side.

We have been very conscious of minimum standards and regulations, and there is a big debate at the moment about ratios, but, across Europe, and, indeed, in Australia and New Zealand, Governments have regulated what people can charge for childcare. We have never thought of that. It is a way to maintain a certain standard, but also to ensure that childcare does not become unaffordable. We heard figures today, and, indeed, we have examples in our research of parents sometimes paying the equivalent of a second mortgage for childcare provision. I will give you the example of Belgium, which does subsidise heavily — €30 a week for high-quality services for the nought to three-year-olds. That is tailored to the income levels of families. That is the model across Europe.

I often think that we look at the wrong things around quality, and have been focused on registration issues such as ratios, size of room or whether you have a cot room, rather than thinking about what the outcome is for children. The European Commission links quality with reduction in poverty. Those are the types of things that I think we should be looking at.

Mr McCallister: Do you think that we are, in some ways, if possible, over-regulated, or focusing in the wrong areas like that? How do we change the mindset here? We need to have a strategy or legislation that addresses how to change that. We tend to be focused on the physical things, such as making sure —

Ms Fitzpatrick: And, dare I say it, there is a tick-box mentality. As long as you can measure something, it is easy to regulate, but that approach does not focus on best outcomes for children. Across Europe and the rest of the world, the focus is more on the outcome rather than on a mechanical or technical approach.

Mr McCallister: Yes; you look at, maybe, the qualifications of the person; what they are going to be doing; and what bits of play or interactive activities are involved. That goes back to the comment that was made about a film club not being childcare. It has been interesting to hear how we change that

mentality and move away from the tick-box mindset. I think that you see that tick-box mentality in so many areas of government in which we need to change thinking.

Ms Pauline Walmsley (Early Years): It is also about viewing the child holistically. It is about their care, education, and social and emotional development being equally important.

Ms Fitzpatrick: The other critically important area is the type of society that we want to have. Sweden, New Zealand and other countries want an equal society, and we know from all the research that one of the best ways of creating equality, reducing poverty and improving the life chances for children is to invest early and well in really high-quality services. We talk about it an awful lot and, as I said earlier, we complicate ways of delivery when there are simpler ways to provide this than those that we use.

The Deputy Chairperson: I fully agree, Siobhán. The Programme for Government has a widespread suite of aims that include policies for a robust childcare provision, tackling child poverty, access to employment, gender equality and economic growth. I am grateful that the Chair has taken the lead in engaging robustly with the sector on this particular issue, which is one of the most important faced by our government.

Do members have any other comments or are they happy to conclude the session?

Ms Fitzpatrick: Can I just pick up on the fund that is available?

The Deputy Chairperson: Yes.

Ms Fitzpatrick: To reinforce the point that has been made: it has been called a childcare fund, but it is available, at this stage, only to Departments. Many organisations wish to bid for the funding, but that has not been possible to date. There is an information deficit for parents. We would like to see some priority being given, if the fund opens, to that type of strategy. Our colleagues, again, in the Republic and the UK, have been able to develop a childcare app that, at the touch of a button, makes available the type of information that parents need when they need it. We think that the childcare fund could be made available for that.

The Deputy Chairperson: If the Committee agree, we could write to the Department to ask when that childcare fund will be opened to applications from non-departmental bodies, and we will get that information back to you.

Ms Fitzpatrick: That would be very helpful. Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson: The app idea is really interesting. I was recently at another briefing, which heard that the Scottish Government have an app for information on emergencies such as flooding. It seems to be leading the way on the use of applications to get information out.

Ms Fitzpatrick: We have worked with colleagues in Scotland and England on the development of a childcare app, and we would be keen to see it made available here. We also have some sector information that the Committee may find useful, and we will share our detailed response with you.

The Deputy Chairperson: We are grateful that Early Years and Employers for Childcare representatives were here today. I hope that we can continue our conversations with the organisations. Thank you.